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## **ON THE CONCEPTUAL DISCONTINUITY BETWEEN MORAL NORMATIVITY AND FACTUALITY: A REPLY TO BRITO**

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**ABSTRACT:** Brito (2010) proposes a naturalistic analysis of morality, disagreeing with some authors who postulate an insurmountable is-ought gap. Here, we present his main arguments and advance some criticisms to them. Brito's strategy consists in grounding the normative notion of ought on volitive notions, like "will" and "want". In his perspective, to reach the moral level, a will has to be directed to itself and to all other wills. We try to show that this strategy fails, since moral normativity cannot be grounded on subjective phenomena, regardless of the contents of these phenomena. We also show some incoherence in Brito's ideas about the possibility of is-ought reduction, as he seems to advocate that it is not possible to reduce "ought" to "is" while he also proposes the reduction of oughts to facts about volition.

**KEYWORDS:** Normativity. Is-ought gap. Morality. Naturalistic fallacy. Naturalism.

**RESUMO:** Brito (2010) propõe uma análise naturalista da moralidade, discordando de alguns autores que postulam uma lacuna intransponível de is-dever. Aqui, apresentamos seus principais argumentos e avançamos algumas críticas a eles. A estratégia de Brito consiste em fundamentar a noção normativa do dever em noções volitivas, como "vontade" e "querer". Em sua perspectiva, para alcançar o nível moral, a vontade tem de ser dirigida a si mesma e a todas as outras vontades. Tentamos mostrar que essa estratégia falha, já que a normatividade moral não pode ser fundamentada em fenômenos subjetivos, independentemente do conteúdo desses fenômenos. Mostramos também alguma incoerência nas ideias de Brito sobre a possibilidade da redução do is-dever, como ele parece defender que não é possível reduzir o "deveria" ao "é", ao mesmo tempo que propõe a redução dos valores aos fatos sobre a volição.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Normatividade. É-dever lacuna. Moralidade. Falácia naturalista. Naturalismo.

## 1. Introduction

It must be as unjustified to say “we should eat animals, because people eat meat” as to deduce “war is a good thing” from “there is a natural tendency for conflicts in human beings”. Some inferences involving “ought” statements have dubious validity. The arguments above are fallacies because they try to make a logical transition from a factual statement to some evaluative one.

As we cannot infer from an empirical fact any necessary relation, it is also illegitimate to deduce from a state of affairs some moral value. As with other logical fallacies we should pay attention to this form of transition which makes some arguments logically fragile. In the examples above, there seem to be a sharp conceptual gap between empirical facts and normative values.

Hume, in the beginning of the book III of his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), points out that systems of moral philosophy, at some point, move from premises linked by “is” to conclusions with statements composed by “ought”. This is the so-called “is-ought” fallacy that challenges naturalistic accounts in moral philosophy, in particular, and any cognitivism at large. The strong philosophical consequence which might be drawn is that no ethical or indeed evaluative conclusion may be validly inferred from any collection of factual premises, apparently dooming any naturalistic strategy to ground values on facts. One could never deduce an “ought” from an “is”.

Another influent way of stating the fact-value gap was advanced by Moore in 1903. According to him, the good is a simple concept, accessible exclusively through special intuitions. Consequently, Moore maintains that it is not possible to define ethical terms on the basis of non-ethical expressions, as it is not possible to offer a definition of ‘good’ at all, even in moral terms. Trying to elaborate such definitions is to commit what Moore called the naturalistic fallacy.

Despite Hume’s and Moore’s considerations, some philosophers try to overcome the arguably inviolable barrier in deducing “ought” from “is”<sup>1</sup>. This sort of naturalization could be

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Hudson (1969) for an important collection of essays on the is-ought problem and related themes.

carried on by appropriately describing some important natural facts about human beings, be them facts about particular features of human organism, mind and behavior or the evolutionary processes that explain these features.

Brito's paper (2010) aims at bridging the gap between moral values and empirical facts, or better, between is-statements and ought-statements, through the use of volitional notions, like “want”, “will” and “desire”<sup>2</sup>. In the next section, we introduce Brito’s ideas and, after that, we show the problems we see in them.

## **2. Brito’s naturalistic proposal**

Brito (2010) defends a naturalistic position about morals without engaging in any moral realism. A moral realist advocates the existence of positive moral facts in the world which ground our moral judgments. Brito goes against that view but not against the possibility of naturalizing morality. He then critically discusses some arguments related to the naturalistic fallacy, particularly presented by Macintyre (1969), Zimmermann (1962) and Searle (1964). Brito intends to show some aspects which are, according to him, correct in their contributions and, in spite of the good points on them, he aims at showing that they do not overcome the leading difficulty.

To advance some tenets in the connections between values and facts through the notion of will, Brito asks what is there in the ought which is not present in the will. In other words, the question which should be raised is: what makes the difference between the moral duty and the mere expression of a desire or interest, for instance? In fact, a legitimate naturalistic strategy to overcome the is-ought barrier should be to explain in which sense we could derive an obligation from a will in order to give the latter the characteristic moral force of the former.

The core of Brito’s naturalistic attempt to ground morality on will is presented through considerations on the following sentences:

(D) I want that action X be done.

(E) Action X ought be done.

(F) I want action X done under whatever circumstances of the wills of people involved, including my own.

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<sup>2</sup> Respectively, “querer”, “vontade” and “desejo” in Portuguese. Brito (2010) seems to treat these nouns as equivalent. For the sake of argument, our exposition follows the same strategy.

(G) I want that everybody else wants that action X be done.

For Brito, (F) and (G) are correct analysis of E. Accordingly, the moral ought (G) should be taken as equivalent to wanting to do X while also wanting all other people to want X to be done (Brito, 2010, p. 224).

Brito then explains that morality is constituted by different wills that want to be dominant over others. As a result, the moral obligation, for him, is the will which wants to be dominant, a will which wants to be the will of others, that is, a will which wants to impose itself to others. The moral will is the will which is reflexive but also concerns other people. For Brito, this particular kind of desire should be able to project itself to a general plan, where members of the moral community interacts and influence each other in a special way. Brito defends then that this kind of general desire that projects itself to others can be taken as the ground of morality in a naturalistic point of view.

### 3. Criticism

We start with what may be the first and most prominent problem in Brito's analysis, its understanding of moral ought in terms of will, expressed in (G) above. It is not difficult to find examples that go against that idea. For instance, consider a tyrant who not only wants to enslave and torture every person alive, but also wants everybody to want to be enslaved and tortured. This seems to be a clear example of immoral desire, but, according to Brito, the tyrant is guided by a moral ought. Consider also a thief who is caught robbing victim Y and tries to justify himself by appealing to Brito's normative considerations. It is hard to imagine somebody who would accept "I wanted everybody else, including Y, to want me to rob Y" as an acceptable justification.

The strangeness of these examples suggests that important conceptual distinctions between *will/want/desire* and *ought* might have been ignored in Brito's analysis. In a relevant sense, want and ought can be distinguished based on their different connections with the subjective perspective of the individuals. One may hold that what a person wants to do is restricted to the subjective realm. With regard to the logic of volitional notions, there is no rigid link between a person's will and the real conditions in which the person is inserted. There is a difference between what are *the real conditions* in which a person is and the conditions *she*

*judges* to be involved with. Take the following example: If Peter says “I want to talk to the person who is with me in this room”, the desire exists regardless of the facts that Peter is alone there and that he took a doll for a person. Stating that the action intended was not possible would not make us think: “so, considering this fact, Peter was not really desiring to talk to someone”. The desire is real even if the facts it presupposes do not stand.

On the other hand, what a person ought to do is not a mere subjective issue, because it depends on the real relevant contexts in a more deep way. Unlike desire, obligation is something about what one can say “I thought I had an obligation, but this facts about my objective conditions proved I was mistaken”. This could happen in the following example: John thinks that he owes Peter five reais, because he remembers that Peter lent him this amount and he wants to be a reliable person. But John’s memory failed and Peter did not really lent him money. In this case, John does not have, nor did have, any obligation, notwithstanding his confused mental states and his desire to give some money back to Peter. John is acting like he had an obligation, but he has none.

For the sake of accuracy, we have to say that Brito himself recognizes the importance of distinguishing the public sphere of morality from the sphere of subjective desire, when he states that a merely factual description of our desires cannot be used to explain the special kind of commitment presupposed in a moral will. He draws then the following conclusion: The subjective will should project itself to a general level (“se projetar para um plano geral”), a level where the moral normativity is possible. (2013, p. 224). Further on that same page, Brito also states that without the possibility of public evaluation the factual could not gain any moral status.

Our tentative clarification, until now, has approached only desire in general and not the specific kind of desire presented in (G). Thereby, it did not yet show any major problem in Brito’s proposal. Brito could claim that subjective wills do not entail oughts, but wills directed to other wills do the job, after all, moral ought seems to be closely related to the influence of other people over the individual.

We have now to show that Brito’s appeal to other people’s wills is not sufficient to entail moral oughts. According to the terminology of the rule-following debate (Miller and Wright, 2002), to hold that the existence of a plurality of individuals is necessary for the existence of an X is to adopt a communitarian view of X. As communities effectively function like sources of moral criteria, it is attractive to examine them when investigating morality. In communities it is

easy to find the independent standard that limits the arbitrariness of the individual desires and makes normativity possible.

However, Brito's analysis advances an unusual kind of moral communitarianism. Community is present in (G) only in an indirect way, as content of certain kind of will. This is why, we think, it cannot serve as source of moral criteria. This point can be clarified if we evoke some reflections of the *Private Language Argument*, an influent sequence of paragraphs of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (henceforth PI). A central statement in PI is that 'S is following a rule' is not the same thing as 'S thinks S is following a rule'. Interpreting 'rule' broadly, as any evaluative parameter, or criterion of correction, this statement highlights the public, non subjective character of the evaluative patterns. In other words, to work as a real criteria, like a moral criteria, the candidate cannot be restricted to mere personal impressions. If the criteria are identified, not with independent parameters, but with how things look like for the individual and for her subjective desires, the normative character collapses: "One would like to say: whatever is going to seem correct to me is correct. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'correct'" (PI §258).

In thinking about Brito's proposal in this context, Wittgenstein would probably say that an individual has first-person authority over his own desires but not over his own oughts. This means that what people say about their own desires is usually taken as the criteria of their desires. The same reasoning does not apply to oughts. What people say they want does not imply any kind of moral ought without appeal to conditions external to their subjective states. Contrary to Brito's analysis, it does not matter, for this issue, that the want has as object or content the wants of other people. Analogously, it is important to note that if one imagines a document, this mental object does not become a valid document because one also imagines it registered in a notary's office. In the same vein, we can say that trying to ground morality totally on the desires of the individuals is how trying to confirm the information given by a newspaper copy checking over another copy of the same edition, like in Wittgenstein's famous example (PI, 265).

Imagine, further, a person who took a drug and came to have delirium and hallucinations. According to Brito, if this individual develops, in her frenzy, desires about the desires of others, just like specified in (G), she is acquiring moral obligations. And, if the effect of the drugs pass, taking away that desires, the obligations also disappear. This awkward scenario shows that

morality can be absent even when the condition proposed in G is being fulfilled, what means that (G) does not provides a *sufficient condition of morality*.

Consider another case. Peter won a car. But he does not know too much about how society functions and never heard about car taxes. Consequently, he has no desire, not even a weak intention, of paying those taxes. Does that imply that Peter has not the ought of paying them? No, it seems. This situation shows that one can have a moral obligation related to something even lacking any desire of doing this something.

A further example, focused on the communitarian restriction: John is very religious and has a daughter. He has a lot of responsibilities as a father, of course. But in his conception people of other religions are hopelessly mean and are already destined to eternal damnation. For this reason, he only cares about the desires of his fellows, being not, in any moment, concerned about what everybody else wants. The condition postulated by Brito is absent, nonetheless John has parental obligations. So, we can conclude that (G) does not present a *necessary condition of morality*.

What is actually a necessary condition of moral ought, as would be considered trivial by many, is the mere *capability* to want, and not the want itself. This modal distinction is decisive, since it makes sense to attribute to a person oughts related to something without the person having any particular desire related to this something, but makes no sense to attribute an ought to a being that is not *able* to want at all. It is only in this very modest way that we can say that desire is the ground of morals.

Most part of the problems we tried to show above is related to this: throughout the paper, Brito seems to be addressing primarily moral actions, not about moral oughts. We agree that we cannot know anything about moral oughts without knowing something about good and bad actions. But oughts, unlike actions, are abstract. The parallel is not perfect, but we can compare oughts to units of measurement and actions to the bodies they measure. Seeking to identify ought with a kind of will is like attributing to bodies properties that should be attributed only to the space they fill. Two different people, for instance, can have the same ought, but they accomplish it through different actions. When Brito refers to a person that has one or another kind of will, he is constructing, at best, an explanation about what is trying to conform to an ought, not an explanation about what is an ought itself. In fact, a difference should be made between the explanation of attempts to act rightly and the explanation of what is right.

Other important problem in Brito's paper is related to how he characterizes *naturalism*. This is a polysemic term in philosophy, and even inside the is-ought debate, it can assume more than one meaning. According to Brito (p. 225), naturalism is appealing because morality has to be inserted in the natural world. Naturalism in this passage seems to refer to the philosophical perspective that denies the existence of supernatural phenomena and adopts a scientific worldview.

Moore (1903), probably the most influential author in the is-ought debate and a very important one for Brito's paper as well, employed a different notion of naturalism. As suggested in the introduction of this work, the naturalism criticized in *Principia Ethica* is the attempt to define *the good* in non ethical terms. The anti-naturalist should hold that the moral level is not reducible to the factual level. Well, this is exactly what Brito's paper tries to do. He recognizes that Moore is correct about this point, either explaining it in terms of different levels (p. 224) or in terms of definition (p. 226). Then, in the Moorean sense, Brito is an anti-naturalist.

This terminological discrepancy is not, itself, a problem. Moore's and Brito's notions of naturalism are compatible. Several brands of philosophy combine a scientific worldview with the refusal of reducing some levels to others<sup>3</sup>. What is actually a problem is Brito explicitly refusing the possibility of reduction while also advancing (G) as an analysis of (E). Taking *analysis* as an attempt to show the logical equivalence between analysandum and analysans, Brito's proposal cannot be but a reduction; if we say that moral ought is equivalent to the kind of will described in (G), we are actually saying that the reduction is already made.

Brito's does not seem to be a successful reduction, because it involves the "projection" of the subjective will to the moral level. Subjective wills only acquire moral character when described in relation to something already moral, like in "the desire to do something good". Talking about other wills will hardly, without circularity, imply this moral character. In other words, if we want to explain morality in terms of wants, we should not presuppose a special moral want to do the service, in order to avoid a vicious circularity. The special want that projects itself to more general, normative levels does not explain oughts, it presupposes them. To avoid circularity, Brito should say how does this projection occur. As we has tried to evince, (G) does not accomplish it.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Dutra, 2015; O'Connor, 2015; Searle, 1992; Dennett, 1995.



### 3. Conclusions

Synthetically, we conclude that Brito's analysis does not supply a necessary nor a sufficient condition of moral ought and that proposing such an analysis is incoherent with the anti-reductionism he seems to advance. As a consequence, Brito's article seems to be undecided between trying to construe a bridge over the is-ought gap and recognizing that the gap can be crossed, say, by jumping.

We also have said that, in an important sense, it is possible to be a naturalist and to recognize the discontinuity between conceptual levels. It is important to emphasize this point because other kinds of discontinuity could come to the fore when the naturalistic fallacy is being debated. For instance, Brito often maintains that talking about a subjective will is to talk about facts but, in philosophy of action, some important authors recognize that there is a gap between mere movements (factual occurrences) and actions motivated by wills (Anscombe, 1957; Kenny, 1973; Mele, 1997). Maybe an interesting alternative for a naturalist like Brito is to accept not only the is-ought gap but the other relevant discontinuities present in our conceptual landscape.

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