

Moore on the simplicity and indefinability of goodness

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1	The preface to Moore's <i>Principia</i> : Moore's consequentialism	1
2	Three senses of the question 'What is good?'	2
3	Moore's argument that goodness is simple and indefinable	2
	3.1 Simple and complex properties	2
	3.2 The 'open question argument'	3
	3.3 The naturalistic fallacy	4
	3.4 Moore's conclusions	5
	3.5 Moore's answer to the second sense of the question, 'What is good?' .	5
4	Different senses of 'indefinable'	5
5	Geach's criticism: 'good' is not a predicate adjective	6

1 The preface to Moore's *Principia*: Moore's consequentialism

In the preface to *Principia Ethica* (not assigned), Moore distinguishes between two different kinds of ethical claims: claims about what things are good, and claims about what actions we ought to perform. He endorses a particular view about the relationship between these two kinds of claims, which is sometimes called 'consequentialism':

An act is right if and only if it produces more good than any other available action.

Moore's view was that of these two kinds of ethical properties: the property of a state of affairs being good, and of an act being right – the former was the more fundamental.

The distinction between things which are good 'in themselves' and things which are good as a means to some other good.

Given these views, the fundamental question of ethics is: What is good?

2 Three senses of the question ‘What is good?’

1. The sense relevant to casuistry: which actions are good ones?
2. A sense relevant to ethics, considered as a ‘more general’ form of casuistry: saying what properties invariably accompany goodness.
3. The definitional sense: what is the *definition* of good?

Three kinds of definitions: (i) arbitrary verbal definition; (ii) verbal definition proper; (iii) definitions of properties rather than words — real definition (§8).

3 Moore’s argument that goodness is simple and indefinable

Moore’s view is that

“‘Good,’ then, if we mean by it that quality which we assert to belong to a thing, which we say that the thing is good, is incapable of any definition.”
(§10)

What we want to understand is, first, what he means by this and, second, why he thinks this.

3.1 Simple and complex properties

Begin with the distinction between simple and complex properties. Moore’s plausible idea is that some ‘properties’ are really just complexes of other, more basic properties. He gives the property of being a horse as an example of such a property:

“... when we define horse ... we may mean something much more important. We may mean that a certain object, which we all of us know, is composed in a certain manner: that it has four legs, a head, a heart, a liver, etc. etc. all of them arranged in definite relations to one another ... We might think just as clearly and correctly about a horse, if we thought of all its parts and their arrangement instead of thinking of the whole ...” (§8)

There are some misleading aspects of this quote — the proposed definition of the property of being a horse is very implausible (if a horse loses a leg, does it thereby become a member of a new species?) and Moore talks about defining a certain object rather than defining the property. But the basic idea is clear enough: the property of being a horse just is, is identical to, a certain combination of more basic properties.

Moore contrasts the property of being a horse with yellowness:

“Consider yellow, for example. We may try to define it, by describing its physical equivalent; we may state what kind of light-vibrations must stimulate the normal eye, in order that we may perceive it. But a moment’s reflection is sufficient to shew that those light-vibrations are not themselves what we mean by yellow. *They* are not what we perceive. Indeed, we should never have been able to discover their existence, unless we had first been struck by the patent difference of quality between the different colours.” (§10)

Moore’s idea is that we can say what yellow is, in sense (2) of that question (see above). We can say what properties invariably accompany yellowness: e.g., dispositions to emit certain light-vibrations. But we cannot say what the nature of the property of being yellow is: and this is because the color is a simple property, which is not analyzable.

Consider the following properties, and whether they are definable, in Moore’s sense: the property of being a bachelor; being a quark; being water; being president of the United States; being a chair.

3.2 *The ‘open question argument’*

Given the distinction between definable (complex) and indefinable (simple) properties, we have three possible views about goodness: either (i) goodness is a simple undefinable property, (ii) it is a complex, definable property, or (iii) the word ‘good’ is meaningless, and ‘there is no such subject as Ethics.’ (§13)

Moore dismisses (iii).

His argument against (ii) is often called the ‘open question’ argument, and is (partly) contained in the following passage:

“The hypothesis that disagreement about the meaning of good is disagreement with regard to the correct analysis of a given whole, may be most plainly seen to be incorrect by coconsideration of the fact that, whatever definition be offered, it may always be asked . . . whether it is itself good.” (§13, (1))

Moore presents this as a problem for any possible proposed analysis of goodness. he then goes on to apply this claim to the case of the particular definition that to be good is to be desired to be desired:

“To take, for instance, one of the more plausible, because one of the more complicated, of such proposed definitions, it may easily be thought, at first sight, that to be good may mean to be that which we desire to desire. . . . But if we carry the investigation further, and ask ourselves ‘is it good to

desire to desire A?’ it is apparent, on a little reflection, that this question is itself as intelligible, as the original question ‘Is A good?’ ... But it is also apparent that the meaning of this second question cannot be correctly analyzed into ‘Is the desire to desire A one of the things which we desire to desire?’: we have not before our minds anything as complicated as the question ‘Do we desire to desire to desire to desire A?’ Moreover any one can easily convince himself by inspection that the predicate of this proposition — ‘good’ — is positively different from the notion of ‘desiring to desire’ which enters into its subject: ‘That we should desire to desire A is good’ is *not* merely equivalent to ‘That A should be good is good.’ ”

How should we understand this argument? A few (related) options:

1. Goodness is a simple and undefinable property because, for any analysis F of goodness, it is not clear whether F -ness is itself good.
2. Goodness is a simple and undefinable property because, for any proposed analysis F of goodness, the proposition that F -ness is good is distinct from the proposition that F -ness is F .
3. Goodness is a simple and undefinable property because, for any proposed analysis F of goodness, for any object x the proposition that x is good is distinct from the proposition that x is F .

Why the first version of the argument does not seem convincing.

In either the second or third version, the argument apparently relies on something like the following two principles:

1. ‘Given that x is F , is x good?’ is an open question.
 2. ‘Given that x is good, is x good?’ is not an open question.
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- C. ‘ x is F ’ and ‘ x is good’ express different propositions.

What must ‘open question’ mean for this argument to be valid?

‘ x is F ’ and ‘ x is good’ express different propositions.

 The property for which ‘ F ’ stands and the property for which ‘good’ stands are not identical.

What view of propositions is needed for this argument to be valid?

3.3 The naturalistic fallacy

Some ethicists have tried to define goodness. This is a *fallacy* because goodness is simple, and has no analysis; Moore claims that it is a *naturalistic* fallacy because the proposed definitions try to analyze goodness in natural terms. It is in this sense that Moore opposes ‘Naturalism.’

3.4 Moore's conclusions

1. Goodness is a simple, non-natural property.
2. As with yellowness, you can never explain to anyone who does not already know it what goodness is. (§7)
3. Implications for what should count as evidence for the goodness of a thing. (§5)

3.5 Moore's answer to the second sense of the question, 'What is good?'

Moore thinks that the definitional sense of this question is unanswerable; but he does give an answer to the question, 'What things are goods or ends in themselves?'

"Indeed, once the meaning of the question is clearly understood, the answer to it, in its main outlines, appears to be so obvious, that it runs the risk of seeming to be a platitude. . . . No one, probably, who has asked himself the question, has ever doubted that personal affection and the appreciation of what is beautiful in Art or Nature, are good in themselves; nor, if we consider strictly what things are worth having *purely for their own sakes*, does it appear probable that any one will think that anything else has *nearly* so great a value as the things that are included under these two heads. . . . What has not been recognized is that it is the ultimate and fundamental truth of moral philosophy." (§113)

Moore's basis for making this claim; the role of self-evidence.

4 Different senses of 'indefinable'

A few analogies to test whether Moore is justified in drawing the consequences he does from the claim that goodness is, in his sense, indefinable.

Two analogies: mathematical identities, and water/H₂O.

A disanalogy between the mathematical case and the ethical one: the idea of a complex definition, made up of a series of definitions.

The claim that we can give no 'proofs' – in a certain sense of 'proof' – of claims about goodness vs. the claim that we can give no evidence, or argument, for such claims. Compare the case of water.

The relationship between physical properties and goodness; does the open question argument show that goodness is nonnatural, in the sense that whether a thing is good is independent of all of its natural properties? Return to Moore's analogy with the simplicity and indefinability of colors.

5 Geach's criticism: 'good' is not a predicate adjective

The distinction between predicate adjectives (i.e., 'independent predicates') and attributive predicate modifiers. 'Yellow' as a possible example of the former, 'tall' as a possible example of the latter. An argument for regarding 'good' as falling into the latter camp, and the apparent conflict between this claim and Moore's view that goodness is a simple and undefinable property.

(For discussion, see Peter Geach, 'Good and Evil', in *Analysis* 17 (1956).)