

## Unit II: Moore on the simplicity and indefinability of goodness

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### 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 claim that goodness is simple and indefinable

“‘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)

### 3.1 Simple and complex properties

The project of analysis: giving the natures of properties and objects in terms of other properties and objects. Why the project of analysis apparently implies that there will be some simple, indefinable properties.

The analogy 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. Appeal to experience to establish this.

What are some possible examples of complex properties, which can be defined? Possible examples: the property of being a horse (§8); bachelorhood; water.

### 3.2 The ‘open question argument’

Moore’s three alternatives: 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. Moore claims that goodness is a simple and undefinable property because, for any analysis A of goodness, it remains an ‘open question’ whether A is good.
2. Moore claims that goodness is a simple and undefinable property because, for any proposed analysis A of goodness, the claim that A is A is different from the claim that A is good.

### 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.

### 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. The definability of good has implications for what should count as evidence for the goodness of a thing. (end of §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.

A mathematical analogy.

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.

The relationship between physical properties and goodness; why the open question argument does not show that goodness is nonnatural on a strong reading of ‘non-natural.’ Return to Moore’s analogy with the simplicity and indefinability of colors. Moore’s view of the relationship between goodness and natural properties, and what he may have meant by ‘non-natural.’

## 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 indefinable property.

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

## 6 Objections to consequentialism

### 6.1 *Conflicts between consequentialism and intuitions about duties*

Consideration of Ross’s criticisms of Moore’s consequentialism.

#### 6.1.1 *Duties not to harm others*

#### 6.1.2 *Duties of justice*

#### 6.1.3 *Duties of special relation*

### 6.2 *Permissible acts which are not morally required*

Why this category of actions poses a problem for consequentialism, as formulated above.