

Moore 1903, *Principia Ethica*, Ch. 1

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*Question 1***What is the subject matter of Ethics, according to Moore?**

Often mistakenly assumed to be the evaluation of *conduct*. But that means we're asking about *good* conduct, and we can apply 'good' to other things as well.

Leads to: Ethics as "the general enquiry into what is good" (54)

What meanings may be given to the question 'what is good?'

Meaning 1: "What *particular* things are good?"

- This is *not*. what Ethics is concerned with, for it does not focus on *particular* matters of fact.
- However a complete Ethics, once supplemented with the non-ethical facts, should determine answers to all such particular questions (55).

"This, and that, and that are good" would be a (partial) answer to this sort of question.

Hence Ethics differs from e.g. astronomy and geography

Meaning 2: "What *kinds* of things are good?"

- "Books are good" would be a partial (though false) answer to this question (56).
- This question belongs to **Casuistry**, which is part of the ideal ethical theory. This is because it is *not* concerned with particulars, unlike Meaning 1.
- Ethics could not be complete without it; but it can only be fruitfully pursued once we figure out the background ethical principles.

What are the true ethical generics?

"Casuistry aims at discovering what actions are good, *whenever they occur*" (56).

****Meaning 3**: We might ask "not only what thing or things are good, but how 'good' is to be defined" (57).

This is the question Moore is interested in; it is the fundamental question of ethics (58).

What meanings may be given to the question 'How is good to be defined?'

Meaning 4: A *merely verbal* question.

- Moore does not care about this question.

"How do people use the word 'good'?"

****Meaning 5**: "What I want to discover is the *nature* of that object or idea [i.e. goodness]" (58, emphasis added).

Moore wants a so-called "*real definition*."

- Answer: "Good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked 'how is good to be defined?' my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it" (58).

- But Moore thinks the correctness of this (non-)answer is very important. For one, it shows that "propositions about the good are all of them synthetic, and never analytic..." (58)

Objection: His chief analogy with 'good' is 'yellow'; yet "All yellow things are colored" is an analytic truth. Why couldn't there be any wrt 'good'?

Explicating Moore's answer:

- "The most important sense of 'definition' is that in which a definition states what are the parts which invariably compose a certain whole; and in this sense 'good' has no definition because it is simple and has no parts" (61).
- 'Yellow' refers to a simple, indefinable property.
- Moore thinks that real definitions can only be given for words that denote *complex* objects, like 'horse'.
 - Once you define 'horse' into its constituent properties, and reduce these in turn to their simplest terms, what remains is "simply something which you think of or perceive, and to anyone who cannot think or perceive of them, you can never, by any definition, make their nature known" (59).
 - **Objection:** Seems to presuppose a foundationalist epistemology/philosophy of language in which we start with some basic concepts/ideas/data, and then work our way up. You might think, instead, that the meanings of expressions are determined holistically.
- Example of Webster's definition of horse. Three ways to understand it.
 - 1) "Arbitrary verbal definition."
 - This is *not* the sense of definability that Moore means to deny.
 - 2) "Verbal definition proper."
 - Also not what Moore means to deny, "for certainly it is possible to discover how people use a word" (60).
 - 3) Real definition (I think).

[By 'definition'] we may mean that a certain object, which we all of us know, is composed in a certain manner: that it has four legs [etc...], all of them arranged in definite relations to one another. It is in this sense that I deny good to be definable. I say that it is not composed of any parts, which we can substitute for it in our minds when we are thinking of it." (60)

 - **First question:** Is Moore deliberately avoiding meta-linguistic expressions, or is he just sloppy with use/mention?
 - **Second question:** How are we to understand the contrast with 'horse'? Psychologically, it is just false that I could substitute "four-legged quadruped..." (or any other definition)

Examples that support this view: 'electron' and 'set.' Theoretical terms than cannot be reduced to familiar, basic notions, but which people come to understand by seeing how they work within the broader theory.

"A hoofed quadruped of the genus Equus."

"When I use 'horse' your are to understand me as meaning..."

"When most English speakers say 'horse' they mean..."

Otherwise we couldn't translate 'good' to/from other languages.

Contrast with 'horse'.

"...deny good to be definable" or
 "...deny 'good' to be definable"?

for 'horse' in my head and preserve cognitive significance. Is there some sort of claim to "in principle" substitutability, or something? Should we buy that?

What is the difference between *good* and *the good*?

Moore emphasizes that though 'good' is indefinable, *the good* is *not* indefinable (i.e. 'the good' is definable).

"The good" refers to the collection of all and only things that are good [I think]. So Moore's project is to figure out the extension (intension?) of 'good'; but not to define the latter.

Question 2

Why does Moore think 'good' is indefinable? What is 'the naturalistic fallacy', and why does Moore think it matters? Is it a fallacy?

The indefinability of 'good' is nothing remarkable; this is true for many predicates, like 'yellow.' Even if 'yellow' is extensionally equivalent to certain light-reflectance properties, we don't *identify* being yellow with having this property. Yet this is the very mistake one makes when one tries to define 'good' – the **naturalistic fallacy** (62).

Against the naturalistic fallacy:

- First, suppose we allow such definitions. What happens when two people dispute? "Good is pleasure" vs. "good is the object of desire", say. Either:
 - (1) The debate becomes *merely psychological*.
 - (2) The debate becomes *merely verbal*, about how 'good' is commonly used.
- Second: **Open question argument**.
 - Take 'desire to desire' as the definition:
 - (i) "Is it good to desire to desire A?" \neq "Do we desire to desire to desire A?"
 - (ii) "That we desire to desire A is good" \neq "that A is good is good."
 - take 'pleasure' as definition:
 - (iii) 'Is pleasure after all good?' \neq "Is pleasure pleasant?" (68)
 - Likewise, Moore says, for any other proposed definition of 'good'.

"If I did think so, I should not be writing on Ethics, for my main object is to help towards discovering that definition" (60).

Worry: Obvious way to carve between "All and only X are Y" and a definition of 'Y' is that the former can be done extensionally (e.g. all renates are cordates). But presumably proposals for 'the good' like 'pleasure is the good' will purport to provide a *necessary* connection, i.e. identical *intensions*. So the renate/cordate example doesn't help. Supposing, then that we can find a cluster of properties that is *co-intensional* with 'good', how is Moore to say we lack a definition? Cognitive significance? Is that fair?

"It may be true that all things which are good are *also* something else... but far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good..." (62).

E.g. about whether the object of desire is pleasure.

Even if we allow them to have this silly debate, ethical conclusions would not follow. "People use the word 'good' thus and so; therefore you ought to ϕ " is a non sequitur.

- *We cannot substitute in the defining complex for 'good' in a sentence and maintain synonymy; therefore the defining complex is not identical to goodness.*

Why does the naturalistic fallacy matter?

- E.g. Bentham commits it. If he hadn't, he would have had to search for other justifications for his utilitarianism. Regardless of whether he would have found them, his committal of the fallacy undermined his pursuit of Ethics, which is to gain *knowledge* of the correct ethical principles, not merely happening upon the correct ones.
- More generally, recognizing the fallacy leads one to have a more open mind about which ethical principles may be correct. You can't dismiss opponents as conceptually confused.

Is it a fallacy?

- Standard line, nowadays: No it is not, at least as Moore formulated it. We have become externalists about content, and have recognized new theories of reference. "Water is H₂O" provides a real definition, despite the fact that "This is H₂O, but is it water?" appears to be an open question in the same way as Moore's examples.
- Another way to gloss the diagnosis: Moore was right that questions about the definition of 'good' are "merely verbal"; we've just discovered that such questions can be quite difficult and important!

One way to put it: a question being *epistemically* "open" (in Moore's sense) does not imply that it is *metaphysically* open. Yet the latter conclusion is what Moore needs in order to get that 'good' cannot be given a real definition.