



Introduction to G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* Ali Reda

It appears to me that in Ethics, as in all other philosophical studies, the difficulties and disagreements, of which its history is full, are mainly due to a very simple cause: namely to the attempt to answer questions, without first discovering precisely what question it is which you desire to answer.

All ethical questions fall under one or other of three classes:

1. What is good?
2. What things are good in themselves or has an intrinsic value?
3. What kind of actions ought we to perform or what is the right action to do? (Practical Ethics)

Moore argues that a great part of the vast disagreements prevalent in Ethics is to be attributed to failure in analysis and in differentiation between the 3 questions. Unless we know what good means, unless we know what is meant by that notion in itself, as distinct from what is meant by any other notion:

1. We shall not be able to tell when we are dealing with Good and when we are dealing with something else, which is perhaps like it in some aspects, but not the same.
2. We can never know on what evidence an ethical proposition rests. We cannot favor one judgment that this or that is good, or be against another judgment that this or that is bad.

By the use of conceptions which involve both that of intrinsic value and that of causal relation, as if they involved intrinsic value only, philosophers found in answering questions 2 and 3, an adequate definition of Ethics and not that they are defined by the fact that they predicate a single unique objective concept. This what Moore calls the "Naturalistic Fallacy", i.e equating a property with a thing that has a relation to this property, ex. this property possess the thing (Good possess pleasure so Good is pleasure) or equating a means with a property as an end (an action which is a means to pleasure is Good so Good is pleasure). Accordingly we face two problems with Philosophers' ethical systems:

1. Confusing Question 1 with Question 2 in which the casual relation is "Possession"
2. Confusing Question 1 with Question 3 in which the causal relation is "means"

The source of this confusion, is that Good is undefinable. Good is a simple notion, just as yellow is a simple notion; that it isn't composed of any parts, which we can substitute for it in our minds when we are thinking of it because they are the ultimate terms of reference to which whatever is capable of definition must be defined, there is no relevant evidence whatever which can be cited from any other truth, except themselves alone. Therefore, we cannot define "good" by explaining it in other words, we can only point to an action or a thing and say "That is good." It can only be shown. We can only show a sighted person a piece of yellow paper and say "That is yellow." So just as you cannot explain "what yellow is" to anyone who does not already

know what a color is, you cannot also explain what good is. So Good is self-evident. By saying that a proposition is self-evident, we mean emphatically that its appearing so to us, is not the reason why it is true: for we mean that it has absolutely no reason.

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 show that those light-vibrations are not themselves what we mean by yellow. They are not what we perceive. The most we can be entitled to say of those vibrations is that they are what corresponds in space to the yellow which we actually perceive.

And there must be an indefinite number of such undefinable terms; since we cannot define anything except by an analysis, which when carried as far as it will go, refers us to something, which is simply different from anything else, and which by that ultimate difference explains the peculiarity of the whole which we are defining: for every whole contains some parts which are common to other wholes also.

Every one does in fact understand the question "Is this good"? When he thinks of it, his state of mind is different from what it would be, were he asked Is this pleasant, or desired, or approved? It has a distinct meaning for him, even though he may not recognize in what respect it is distinct.

Moore proposes a method to know what degree of value a thing has in itself, is that we should see it as if it existed in absolute isolation, stripped of all its usual accompaniments.

The First Problem (Equating a Property With a Thing That Possess This Property)

One philosopher, for instance, will affirm that good is pleasure so we need to choose actions which maximizes our pleasure, another may say, that good is that which is desired so we need to choose actions which fulfills our desires; and each of these will argue eagerly to prove that the other is wrong with no result because if good is defined as something else, it becomes pragmatic in nature or more specifically relativistic, then it is impossible either to prove that any other definition is wrong or even to deny such definition. If we were bound to hold that everything which was yellow, meant exactly the same thing as yellow. We should find we had to hold that an a yellow piece of paper is exactly the same thing as a lemon or any yellow thing you like. *We could prove any number of absurdities.*

He then discusses a few concepts that show the mistakes of the philosophers whose ethical statements fall in the category of the first problem.

Organic Unity

It has just been said that what has intrinsic value is the existence of the whole, and that this includes the existence of the part; and from this it would seem a natural inference that the existence of the part has intrinsic value. But the inference would be as false as if we were to conclude that, because the number of two stones was two, each of the stones was also two or in reverse all the parts of a picture may be meaningless unless they are put together thus makes the whole meaningful. We may admit, indeed, that when a particular thing is a part of a whole, it does possess a predicate which it would not otherwise possess, that it is a part of the whole. Thus, to take a typical example, if an arm be cut off from the human body, we still call it an arm. Yet an arm, when it is a part of the body, undoubtedly differs from a dead arm.

So in considering the different degrees in which things themselves possess a property, we have to take account of the fact that a whole may possess it in a degree different from that which is obtained by summing the degrees in which its parts possess it. This what Moore calls the principle of Organic Unity.

I'll give an example related to Theodicy, courage and compassion seem to involve essentially a cognition of something evil or ugly. In the case of courage the object of the cognition may be any kind of evil; in the case of compassion, the proper object is pain. These virtues involve a hatred of what is evil or ugly and if so, there are admirable things, which may be lost, if there were no cognition of evil. Once we recognize the principle of organic unities, any objection to this conclusion, founded on the supposed fact that the other elements of such states have no value in themselves, must disappear. It might be the case that the existence of evil was necessary, not merely as a means, but analytically, to the existence of the greatest good. But we have no reason to think that this is the case in any instance whatever. So the right action entails the suppression of some evil impulse, is necessary to explain the plausibility of the view that virtue consists in the control of passion by reason. Accordingly, the truth seems to be that, whenever a strong moral emotion is excited by the idea of rightness, this emotion is accompanied by a vague cognition of the kind of evils usually suppressed or avoided by the actions which most frequently occur to us as instances of duty; and that the emotion is directed towards this evil quality. We may, conclude that the specific moral emotion owes almost all its intrinsic value to the fact that it includes a cognition of evils accompanied by a hatred of them.

The Open Question Argument

For it is the business of Ethics, I must insist, not only to obtain true results, but also to find valid reasons for them. The direct object of Ethics is knowledge and not practice; and any one who uses the naturalistic fallacy has certainly not fulfilled this first object, however correct his practical principles may be.

Moore proposed a test, to see whether goodness is identical to X, he called it The Open Question Argument which depends on our common sense and that Good is self-evident.

X is not identical to goodness if the question, "Is X good?" is open.

Applying it in a few examples:

1. The question, "Is pleasure good?" is open and meaningful. It makes sense to wonder about this.
2. The question, "Is pleasure pleasure?" seems settled and pointless. It doesn't make sense to wonder about this; the answer is trivially "yes."

The Second Problem (Equating a Property With a Thing That is a Means to This Property)

It is plain, that any answer to the third question is capable of proof or disproof, the kind which is capable of exact definition. Such evidence must contain propositions of two kinds only: it must consist of truths with regard to the results of the action in question of causal truths and universal ethical truths of our self-evident class, but philosophers have always missed the first part.

1. The existence of the means has no intrinsic value; and its utter annihilation would leave the value of that which it is now necessary to secure entirely unchanged.
2. Whatever definition we reach through this notion, will always be false because we limit the scope of "Goodness" to conduct only. Good conduct is a complex notion:

all conduct is not good; for some is certainly bad and some may be indifferent. And on the other hand, other things, beside conduct, may be good; and if they are so, then, good denotes some property, that is common to them and conduct; and if we examine good conduct alone of all good things, then we shall be in danger of mistaking for this property, some property which is not shared by those other things. So we will always have a wrong definition.

3. It is wrong to even claim that we can judge that a thing is good as a means is universally true, because:
 1. An action may be said to be impossible solely because the idea of doing it does not occur to us. In this sense, then, the alternatives which do actually occur to a man would be the only possible alternatives; and the best of these would be the best possible action under the circumstances.
 2. We are making a judgment with regard to its causal relations: we judge both that it will have a particular kind of effect, and that that effect will be good in itself. We cannot even discover hypothetical laws of the form Exactly this action will always, under these conditions, produce exactly that effect.
 3. We require to know that a given action will produce a certain effect, under whatever circumstances it occurs. But this is certainly impossible. It is certain that in different circumstances the same action may produce effects that are utterly different in all respects upon which the value of the effects depends.
 4. Hence we can never be entitled to more than a generalization—to a proposition of the form This result generally follows this kind of action; and even this generalization will only be true, if the circumstances under which the action occurs are generally the same. This is in fact the case, to a great extent, within any one particular age and state of society. But, when we take other ages into account, in many most important cases the normal circumstances of a given kind of action will be so different, that the generalization which is true for one will not be true for another.
 5. We require to know not only that one good effect will be produced, but that, among all subsequent events affected by the action in question, the balance of good will be greater than if any other possible action had been performed. In this respect ethical judgments about the effects of action involve a difficulty and a complication far greater than that involved in the establishment of scientific laws. For the latter we need only consider a single effect; for the former it is essential to consider not only this, but the effects of that effect, and so on as far as our view throughout an infinite future.
 6. There is certainly no more than a probability that what is better in regard to its immediate effects will also be better on the whole. An ethical law has the nature not of a scientific law but of a scientific prediction: and the latter is always merely probable, although the probability may be very great.
 7. Since it is impossible to establish that any kind of action will produce a better total result than its alternative in all cases, it follows that in some cases the neglect of an established rule will probably be the best course of action possible.
 8. Virtues, are habitual dispositions to perform actions which are duties, or which would be duties if a volition were sufficient on the part of most men to ensure their performance. And duties are a particular class of those actions, of which the performance has, at least generally, better total results than the omission. They are, that is to say, actions generally good as means: but not all such actions are duties; the name is confined to that particular class which it is often difficult to perform, because there are strong temptations to the contrary. We must be able to prove that the disposition or action in question is generally better as a means than any alternatives possible and likely to occur; and this we shall only

be able to prove for particular states of society; and this we shall only be able to prove for particular states of society: what is a virtue or a duty in one state of society may not be so in another.

It follows that universal propositions of which duty is predicate, so far from being self-evident, always require a proof, which it is beyond our present means of knowledge ever to give.

Judgments of intrinsic value have this superiority over judgments of means that, if once true, they are always true; whereas what is a means to a good effect in one case, will not be so in another.

Types of Ethical Theories

Moore distinguishes between theories which consider goodness to consist in relation to something which exists here and now, from those which do not. According to the former (Naturalistic Ethics), Ethics is an empirical or positive science: its conclusions could be all established by means of empirical observation and induction. But this is not the case with (Metaphysical Ethics).

Naturalistic Ethics

This method consists in substituting for good some one property of a natural object or of a collection of natural objects; and in thus replacing Ethics by some one of the natural sciences. In general the science thus substituted is one of the sciences specially concerned with man, owing to the general mistake of regarding the matter of Ethics as confined to human conduct. For example, Psychology has been the science substituted as by Mill's Utilitarianism. Moore doesn't deny that good is a property of certain natural objects but he says that good itself is not a natural property. It will always remain pertinent to ask, whether the feeling itself is good; and if so, then good cannot itself be identical with any feeling. Unlike pleasure for example, "do you feel pleasure?", this is the difference between a noun and adjective.

Well, my test for these too also concerns their existence in time. Can we imagine good as existing by itself in time, and not merely as a property of some natural object?

He examines one of the most famous of ethical maxims, which recommends a life according to nature, i.e we ought to do is live naturally. That was the principle of the Stoic Ethics and also reappears in Rousseau. By applying the Open Question test, it is always an open question whether anything that is natural is good, so they aren't the same. For example are we advised to imitate savages and beasts or that we should take a lesson from a cow?

That which reasoning would fairly lead a man to choose, cannot be had by creatures that don't reason.

Evolutionary Ethics

These doctrines maintain that, we ought to move in the direction of evolution simply because it is the direction of evolution. This is a classical (is - ought Problem by Hume), where "All items of knowledge are either based on logic or else on observation (matters of fact expressed in is statements), then "ought" statements (matters of value) do not seem to be known in either of

these two ways, we can't deduce "ought" statements from "is" statements. So morality doesn't have any objective standard.

It was very natural to suppose that evolution meant evolution from what was lower into what was higher. But this opens the door for arguments like the following one:

1. We had shown a tendency to survive the lower, such as the North American Indians. We can kill them more easily than they can kill us.
2. What we think higher may be in fact be lower, let's assume an alteration in the environment (the gradual cooling of the earth, for example), may be then a quite a different species from man, a species which we think infinitely lower, might survive us.
3. The judgment that evolution has been a progress is itself an independent ethical judgment; so we cannot use it as a datum from which to infer details. It can only rest on a belief that somehow the good simply means the side on which Nature is working, which is naturalistic fallacy.

So we can't even say that evolution is good or even a progress. Mr Spencer's main view is that pleasure is the sole good, and that to consider the direction of evolution is by far the best criterion of the way in which we shall get most of it. Mr Spencer commits three naturalistic fallacies:

1. By equating good with pleasure.
2. By equating good with whatever in the direction of evolution. For example higher or evolved with better.
3. By equating good with the acts conducive to life, in self or others, and bad those which directly or indirectly tend towards death.

Utilitarianism

Mill holds, that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to that end. The fallacy in this step is so obvious. The desirable means simply what ought to be desired. Desirable does indeed mean what it is good to desire; it is no longer plausible to say that our only test of that, is what is actually desired. Mill tells us that we ought to desire something (an ethical proposition), because we actually do desire it; and that is not an ethical proposition at all; it is a mere tautology. If desirable is to be identical with good, then it must bear one sense; and if it is to be identical with desired, then it must bear quite another sense.

The whole object of Mill's book is to help us to discover what we ought to do; but in fact, by attempting to define the meaning of this ought, he has completely debarred himself from ever fulfilling that object: he has confined himself to telling us what we do do.

Mill's view that some pleasures are superior to others in quality, brings out the fact that if you say pleasure, you must mean pleasure: you must mean some one thing common to all different pleasures, which may exist in different degrees, but which cannot differ in kind. If as Mill claims that the kind of is to be taken into account, then you are no longer holding that pleasure alone is good as an end, since you imply that something else, something which is not present in all pleasures, is also good as an end.

The illustration I have given from colour expresses this point in its most acute form. It is plain that if you say Colour alone is good as an end, then you can give no possible reason for preferring one colour to another. Your only standard of good and bad will then be

colour; and since red and blue both conform equally to this, the only standard, you can have no other whereby to judge whether red is better than blue. It is true that you cannot have colour unless you also have one or all of the particular colours: they, therefore, if colour is the end, will all be good as means, but none of them can be better than another even as a means, far less can any one of them be regarded as an end in itself.

Hedonism

Then he criticizes another doctrine of Hedonism, which is Egoism, by pointing out that the Universal Good can't be private nor just belong to me. The only reason I can have for aiming at my own good, is that I should have something, which, if I have it, others cannot have. But if it is good absolutely that I should have it, then everyone else has as much reason for aiming at my having it, as I have myself, this leads to Altruism and not Egoism. Not all what I desire is Universal Good. A single man's happiness should be the sole good, and that also everybody's happiness should be the sole good, is a contradiction which cannot be solved by the assumption that the same conduct will secure both: it would be equally contradictory, however certain we were that that assumption was justified.

Everything must be either a part of universal good or else not good at all; there is no third alternative conception good for me.

Metaphysical Ethics

It is quite certain that two natural objects may exist; but it is equally certain that two itself does not exist and never can. Two and two are four. But that does not mean that either two or four exists. Yet it certainly means something.

These systems of Ethics are characterized by the fact that they describe the Supreme Good in metaphysical terms; and this has now to be explained as meaning that they describe it in terms of something which (they hold) does exist, but does not exist in Nature—in terms of a super-sensible reality or an eternal reality like Kant's Kingdom of Ends. The connection of goodness with will according to Kant's Categorical Imperative, is that what is good is always also willed in a certain way, and that what is willed in a certain way is always also good. Every truth must mean somehow that something exists; and since, unlike the empiricists, they recognize some truths which do not mean that anything exists here and now, these they think must mean that something exists not here and now. On the same principle, since good is a predicate which neither does nor can exist, they are bound to suppose that what it means to "belong to the real world", is that goodness is transcended or absorbed in reality.

The Problems with these systems are:

1. They do not recognize that the question What is good? is a different one from the question What is willed in a certain way?
2. Metaphysics may have a bearing on practical Ethics—on the question What ought we to do?—so far as it may be able to tell us what the future effects of our action will be: what it can no tell us is whether those effects are good or bad in themselves. Because they don't answer the question What is good in itself?
3. If it is true that the sole reality is an eternal, immutable Absolute, then it follows that no actions of ours can have any real effect, and hence that no practical proposition can be true.
4. If what is willed in a certain way were always also good, then the fact that a thing was so willed would be a criterion of its goodness. But we must in the first place be able to shew that certain things have one property goodness, and that the same things also have

the other property that they are willed in a certain way. And secondly we must be able to shew this in a very large number of instances, if we are to be entitled to claim any assent for the proposition that these two properties always accompany one another: even when this was shewn it would still be doubtful whether the inference from generally to always would be valid, and almost certain that this doubtful principle would be useless.

5. The supposition that when I say You ought to do this I must mean You are commanded to do this.

Beauty

In the last chapter, he discusses the idea of the appreciation of beauty, he says that by seeing the beauty of a thing we commonly mean the having an emotion towards its beautiful qualities; whereas in the seeing of its beautiful qualities we mean the actual cognition or consciousness of any or all of an object's beautiful qualities. In anything which is thought beautiful by any considerable number of persons, there is probably some beautiful quality; and differences of opinion seem to be far more often due to exclusive attention to different qualities in the same object, than to the error of supposing a quality that is ugly to be really beautiful. When an object, which some think beautiful, is denied to be so by others, the truth is usually that it lacks some beautiful quality or is deformed by some ugly one, which engage the exclusive attention of the critics.

© Ali Reda, 2015. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.

The original version of this text appeared at < <http://tehrig.blogspot.com/> >. Permission has been granted by the author for this text to be included on the Sophia Project.