

Phil 104, Monday, November 29, 2010
Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Ch. 1

Moore's question: What is good?

- *Not:* Which *things* are good? What is *the good*?
- *More like:* What does 'good' mean? But even this is misleading. We do not want a dictionary definition of the word, 'good,' an empirical generalization about how people use the word, 'good.'
- *So, better:* An account of nature of the idea itself, whether or not it is what most people use 'good' to denote. What is the quality that we judge something to have, when we judge it to be good? What is *goodness*?

The indefinability of goodness:

- Goodness is *indefinable*. It cannot be explained to anyone who does not already know what it is.
- This is because goodness is *simple*.
- Compare: yellowness.
- Contrast: being a horse, being a unicorn. These are complex, not simple. So we can define them by saying how the parts of which they are composed are related to one another.
- Contrast: the things *that are* good, e.g., intelligence. These things *may* be definable.
- *Why* should we agree that goodness is simple? Because of the...

The "open question" test:

A test of whether goodness is identical to X:

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

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

This is supposed to give us an argument that goodness is simple.

- If goodness is not simple, then either goodness is *complex* or 'good' is *meaningless*.
- The intelligibility of questions about goodness shows that 'good' is not meaningless.
- The open-question test shows goodness is not complex. For example, "Is what we desire to desire good?" does not mean: "Do we desire to desire what we desire to desire?"

But:

- Doesn't a similar argument suggest that good is not *simple*? Consider: "Is pleasure good?"
- Reply: "All of the complex candidates will fail the test, but not all of the *simple* candidates will fail."
- Why should we expect this? Isn't the *reason* to expect this, in effect, the *argument* that good is simple?
- In fact, Moore seems to suggest a complex candidate! For something to be *good* is for it to be the case that it *ought to exist*. Isn't *good* then complex, and *ought* the simple property special to ethics?

The “naturalistic fallacy”:

To claim that goodness *is* some “natural” property, such as experiencing pleasure or being desired.

What does Moore mean by ‘natural property’? He later explains:

- A property that is studied by the natural sciences, including psychology. (Which sciences are the *natural* ones?)
- A property that can itself exist in time. (Can, e.g., *having mass*, the property itself, exist in time?)

If we make the NF, then we accomplish nothing by claiming that being good is (e.g.) being desired. That’s just to claim that being desired is being desired.

Furthermore, there can be no interesting disagreement between philosophers who make the NF.

- “Goodness is being desired, not experiencing pleasure!”
- “No! Goodness is experiencing pleasure, not being desired.”

This is equivalent to:

- “Being desired is being desired, not experiencing pleasure!”
- “No! Experiencing pleasure is experiencing pleasure, not being desired!”

Both sides are (trivially) right, and they don’t disagree.

The open-question test is supposed to reveal that the NF *is* a fallacy: that goodness cannot be identified with any natural property.

Moore worries:

- The NF may lead people to accept *false* ethical principles.
- Even if the NF leads people to accept true ethical principles, still the NF offers *no valid reasons* for accepting them. It treats those principles as true by definition, when they are not.

What is the naturalistic fallacy?

Moore notes that there is a more *general* form of the NF, which is *not* limited to “natural” properties. For example, one might identify goodness with being pleasing to God.

So the fallacy is identifying goodness with *what* kind of property, exactly? A property that is... not identical with goodness?

- How is this a *fallacy*: a mistake of reasoning? Isn’t it just a false *conclusion*?
- How is this *helpful or informative*? Isn’t it a trivial point that it is a mistake to identify goodness with something which it is not?

Is the open-question test valid?

Can’t “Is X Y?” be open, even though what it is for something to be X *just is* for it to be Y?

- An *a priori* example: “Is a circle a plane figure in which every point is the same distance from a single point on the plane?”
- An *empirical* example: “Is water the substance with the molecular structure H₂O?”

The appeal?

What, then, gives Moore's ideas of the naturalistic fallacy and the open-question argument their appeal?

- Maybe the "fallacy" is that of identifying goodness with *a property that entails nothing about action or motivation, about what we are to do or want.*
- Maybe "Is pleasure *after all* good?" feels especially open, because we can wonder, "*Am I to do or to be moved to do anything about pleasure?*" Compare Hume on deducing an 'ought' from an 'is.'

Review Questions:

1. "Pleasure is what is good." Interpreted one way, this sentence, according to Moore, is not absurd, although perhaps false. Interpreted another way, it is, according to Moore, absurd. Explain.
2. What point is Moore making in the following passage:
 "If I were to imagine that when I said 'I am pleased,' I meant that I was exactly the same thing as 'pleased,' I should not indeed call that a naturalistic fallacy, although it would be the same fallacy as I have called naturalistic with reference to Ethics."