

INTRODUCTION

# 20<sup>th</sup>C Philosophy

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## 2. Moore on Value



Last week

- Moore as a champion of ‘common sense’

We needn't *defend* our knowledge of commonsense propositions but rather *analyse* the propositions involved and *explain* the provenance of this knowledge

- Moore on the existence of external world:

Moore's analysis of external objects as mind-independent objects

### Moore's famous anti-skeptical argument

The potential defectiveness of the argument (e.g. is it *question-begging*?)

- Moore on perception

## Arguments for the mediatory role of sense data in perception

Moore's (unfounded?) concerns about a tension between this view and ordinary knowledge claims

Today

- We turn to Moore's seminal\* discussion of ethical claims offered in his *Principia Ethica*

\*<sup>c</sup>20<sup>th</sup>C British ethical theory is unintelligible without reference to *Principia Ethica*' (Baldwin 1990)

- It follows a similar pattern to his discussion of claims about external objects

Assumption: some of our ethical claims (e.g. ‘Torturing babies for fun is wrong’) are true and known to be so

Worries: (a) how should these claims be analysed and (b) how might we know them to be true?

- His answer to (b) turns out to hinge crucially on his answer to (a)

## Two types of ethical question

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### THE GENERAL PICTURE

- Ethics seeks in the first instance to provide **general claims** regarding the moral properties of different types of things (e.g. 'Something is good only if it promotes the survival of the species')
- These then enable us to make **particular claims** about the moral properties of particular things (e.g. 'What you did to Samuel was wrong')
- Key concern: the nature of the **reasons** one could hold for believing a given moral claim
- This, in Moore's view, depends on whether the claim pertains to the moral properties of:
  - (A) potential *consequences* of actions (e.g. 'x is good in itself'), or
  - (B) *actions* themselves (e.g. 'We ought to do x')

### Evidence for B-claims

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- With respect to B-claims, Moore tells us:

Any legitimate argument to a B-claim must ultimately contain as premises both (i) a *causal claim* concerning the consequences of the relevant action(s) and (ii) an *A-claim* concerning the intrinsic value of these consequences

- Example:

You shouldn't pinch your younger brother because that will make him upset and someone's being upset is bad

### Evidence for B-claims (ctd.)

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- Moore therefore regards B-claims as being *less fundamental* than A-claims.
- He subscribes to a form of **consequentialism**, claiming elsewhere that one ought to do that which results in the greatest good among available options

## Evidence for A-claims

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- What then regarding these crucial A-claims?
- Moore offers a simple response:

Any legitimate argument to an A-claim must contain *another A-claim* among its premises

- In other words: there can be no purely non-evaluative evidence for the truth of A-claims
- Upshot 1: ethical inquiry is **irreducible** to other forms of inquiry. In particular, it is irreducible to natural science (he dubbed the denial of this claim the **naturalistic fallacy**)
- Upshot 2: unless we countenance an infinite regress of reasons, some A-claims must be, if evident, **self-evident**

## Evidence for A-claims

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- Moore appears to think his claim regarding A-claims follows straightforwardly from the fact that  
(Intrinsic) goodness is **undefinable**
- Indeed, he tells us:  
*'it is impossible that, till the answer to [how goodness is to be defined] be known, any one should know what is the evidence for any ethical judgment whatsoever.'*
- Three questions
  - Q1 What does Moore mean by 'goodness is undefinable'?
  - Q2 Why does Moore think that goodness is undefinable?
  - Q3 Why does Moore think that the undefinability of goodness implies that A-claims can only be inferred from other A-claims?

## DEFINITIONS

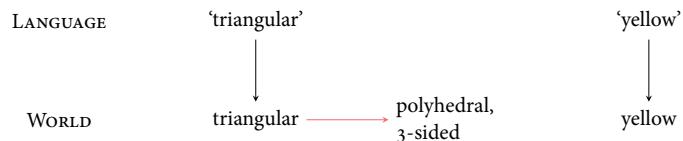
## Predicate adjectives, meaning and properties

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- What does Moore mean by 'goodness is undefinable'?
- For Moore, the meaning of predicate adjectives such as 'good', 'yellow', 'rectangular' is a **property** or **concept** that they denote
- Denotation is determined by 'proper usage, as established by custom'
- In some cases the property denoted is **simple**; in other cases it is **complex**, composed of, i.e. analysable into, constituent properties and relations between them

## Two kinds of definition

- The proposed view in a picture:



- This supports two salient senses of 'definition':

Nominal definitions of words: specifying the property denoted by a word (word-world relation)

Real definitions of properties/concepts (analyses): specifying the component properties of a complex property (world-world relation)

## Two kinds of definition (ctd.)

- Moore takes nominal definitions to concern the lexicographer and real definitions to concern the philosopher:

'My business is solely with that object or idea, which I hold, rightly or wrongly, that the word is generally used to stand for.' 'I am not anxious to discuss whether I am right in thinking that it is so used.' 'What I want to discover is the nature of that object or idea, and about this I am extremely anxious to arrive at an agreement.'

- Goodness *is*, in his view, definable is the first sense: 'good' denotes a property
- Goodness *is not*, in his view, definable in the second: the property that 'good' denotes is simple rather than complex

## Two kinds of definition (ctd.)

- Upshot: no general ethical claim of the form 'For all  $x$ , if  $x$  is  $D$ , then  $x$  is good', where ' $D$ ' denotes a complex property, is true by mere definition of goodness

## THE OPEN QUESTION ARGUMENT

## A reconstruction of the argument

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- Why does Moore think goodness is undefinable? A standard reconstruction of his ‘Open Question’ argument:
  - (1) For any predicate adjective ‘*D*’, if ‘for all *x*, *x* is good iff *x* is *D*’ is a true definition of goodness, then ‘good’ and ‘*D*’ are inter-substitutable in any sentence without changing its meaning
  - (2) For any predicate adjective ‘*D*’ that denotes a complex property, ‘Granted that *x* is *D*, is *x* good?’ does not have the same meaning as ‘Granted that *x* is good, is *x* good?’ (since a person who knew the meanings of these two sentences could rationally regard the former, but not the latter, as an *open question*, a question whose answer he or she suspends judgment on)

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  - (3) There exists no predicate adjective ‘*D*’ such that ‘*D*’ denotes a complex property and is such that ‘for all *x*, *x* is good iff *x* is *D*’ is a true definition of goodness (from (1) and (2))

## The argument as given in *Principia Ethica*

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- What precedes actually looks a little different from what Moore actually says:

‘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 consideration of the fact that, whatever definition be offered, it may be always asked, with significance, *of the complex so defined*, whether *it is itself* good.’
- Here the complaint seems to be that ‘Is being *D* good?’ is an open question, whereas ‘Is being good good?’ is not.
- Does this boil down to the same thing? If not, is it a better complaint? A worse one?

## Some worries for Moore

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- As pointed out to Moore by Russell, the OQ argument also applies to Moore’s claim that, by definition, what one ought to do is that which produces the greatest good
- Another worry (Langford 1942) is that Moore’s position makes it hard to see the point in the enterprise of analysis:

Assume that ‘For all *x*, *x* is *F* iff *x* is *G*’ gives a correct analysis of *G*-ness

It then follows from Moore’s assumption (1) that ‘*x* is *F* iff *x* is *G*’ has the same meaning as ‘*x* is *G* iff *x* is *G*’

Since the latter is uninformative, so too must be the former.

So analyses are either incorrect or uninformative (the *Paradox of Analysis*).

## UNDEFINABILITY AND EVIDENCE

## Our final question

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- Why does Moore think that his claim about A-statements follows from his claim about undefinability?
- More specifically, why does he think that we can get from (1) to (2) below?
  - (1) There exists no predicate ' $D$ ' such that ' $D$ ' denotes a complex property and is such that 'For all  $x$ ,  $x$  is good iff  $x$  is  $D$ ' is a true definition of goodness
  - (2) There exists no predicate ' $D$ ' such that ' $D$ ' denotes a complex property and is such that the truth of ' $n$  is  $D$ ' would constitute evidence for the truth of ' $n$  is good'

## Evidence and logical implication

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- Moore's standards of evidence are not as high as they could be: **logical implication** (in the modern sense) is *not* required
  - If it were, his thesis about A-statements would not even require his undefinability thesis
  - This is because, more generally:

For any name ' $n$ ' and predicates ' $F$ ' and ' $D$ ', ' $n$  is  $D$ ' does not logically imply ' $n$  is  $F$ '
  - Indeed, logical implication is understood as a guarantee of truth on the basis of **logical form** alone
  - In particular, if one can make a **uniform substitution** of the non-logical terms in the premises and the conclusion, such that the premises then come out true and the conclusion false, then the premises do not logically imply the conclusion

## Evidence and logical implication (ctd)

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- In the case of interest, such a substitution will always be possible
- To illustrate, consider:

'Handing the money back will make the victim happy. Therefore handing the money back is right.'
- The premise can be seen to fail to logically imply the conclusion by the following substitution:

'Handing the money back will make the victim happy. Therefore handing the money back *will make him turn into a donkey*'

## Evidence and analytic implication

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- Soames suggests that Moore has in mind a requirement of **'analytic' implication** that is slightly weaker than one of logical implication
  - His definition is along the lines of:

A set of premises  $P$  analytically implies a conclusion  $C$  iff it logically implies  $C$  in conjunction with some set of true definitions
  - This could perhaps help explain Moore's focus on definability, since ' $n$  is  $D$ ' analytically implies ' $n$  is good' if (but also *only if*??) good is definable in terms of  $D$

## A worry for Moore?

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- Soames thinks, however, that analytic implication remains *too stringent* a requirement
- The following inference, he says, should be acceptable, on the grounds that it is *knowable a priori* that the truth of premise would guarantee the truth of its conclusion:

‘*n* is chartreuse. Therefore, *n* is coloured.’
- However, according to Soames, ‘chartreuse isn’t defined in terms of colored, and colored isn’t defined in terms of chartreuse’ and hence the premise will fail to analytically imply the conclusion

## A worry for Moore? (ctd)

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- His argument:

One can know what it is for something to be colored without knowing all the colors, or even knowing that all the colors can be gotten from certain primary colors. In light of this, it is plausible to suppose that we could establish that the predicate colored cannot be defined, in Moore’s strict sense of definition, using any relevant word or phrase *D* mentioning individual colors.’
- What do you reckon?

## Next week: Russell on definite descriptions

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- Required:
  - Soames, S. *DoA*, Ch 5. (Final section optional, although interesting.)
- Recommended:
  - Lycan, W. 2000: *The Philosophy of Language: A contemporary Introduction (Second Edition)*. London & New York: Routledge. Ch1 & Ch 2, up to p. 19.
  - Russell, B. 1910: Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 11, pp. 108–128.
  - Russell, B. 1919: *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*. London: Allen & Unwin. Reprinted in 1993 by Dover Publications. Ch 16 ‘Descriptions’.

## References

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- Baldwin, T. 1990: *G. E. Moore*. Routledge, London.
- Langford, C.H. 1942: The Notion of Analysis in Moore’s Philosophy. In P.A. Schilpp *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore, 3rd ed.*, La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, pp. 321–42.
- Moore, G.E. 1903: *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Revised edition, 1993.