IS "GOOD" INDEFINABLE FOR THE SAME REASON THAT TERMS LIKE "YELLOW" OR "BITTER" OR "PLEASURE" ARE INDEFINABLE?

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The question used as the title of this paper is unanswerable. The purpose of this paper is to explain this phenomenon. Though the question is obviously tied to the philosophy of G. E. Moore and his proposal that "good" is simple, this is not intended to be a research paper, but instead to be a "suggestive" paper. What will be given is a few, it is hoped orginal, thoughts on the way what has been termed the "open question" argument illustrates the simplicity or lack of simplicity, and hence the indefinability, of "good."

It is not the "open question" or "argument against the naturalistic fallacy" as actually given by Moore that is of interest here, that is, the point is not to attack or defend Moore, but only to investigate the nature of "good" and its possible description or definition. Thus, the argument may be given in its clearest and simplest form, as follows: true definitions are always tautologous, such as, "All bachelors are unmarried men." A question about bachelors, then, formulated as, "Are all bachelors unmarried men?", is the same as asking, "Are all bachelors bachelors?" This is meaningless, trivial, and may be referred to as a "closed question," for "bachelor" *means* "unmarried man," and the question is self-answering.

A question which was not tautologous, but meaningful, would be such that the subject and predicate terms of the question could not be, or at least could not be known to be, interchangeable. Such a question would be, e.g., "Is Joe Doaks an atheist?" for nothing in the concept of Joe Doaks can be developed to necessitate his being an atheist. Also just such a question, according to Moore and others, is, "Is pleasure (or whatever it may be) after all good?"[1] That no other quality may be equated with good, that all questions about good in relation to any other quality are meaningful or "open," is taken as an indication that "good" is simple and therefore indefinable, on the assumption or persuasion that such a thing actually exists. Just as is the case of such terms as "yellow" or "bitter" or even "pleasure," the term or concept it signifies cannot be further analysed nor may anything really be said about it or to describe it, other than by analogy.

The validity of such an argument and definition has been the subject of much discussion, and many objections have been raised. One of the most troublesome concerns the nature of the fallacy involved in the "naturalistic fallacy." Moore and others seem to think that some sort of metaphysical quality or entity, that is, some *nonnatural* quality, could be considered to be the nature of "good." However, any such definition seems also open to the "open question" problem, even if not naturalistic. The only solution, it seems, is to argue that "good" is *in no way* definable, thus leading to the strong suspicion that it has no meaning at all, i.e., emotivism in ethics. The alternative to this "definistic" (rather than "naturalistic") fallacy would be to admit that the fallacy lies with the naturalism, not the definability, and to destroy the validity of the "open question" itself, as same-form arguments could be made which *were* true, as opposed to the only contingently untrue naturalistic definitions.

A third possibility, after considering 1) the term "good" to be meaningless or 2) the argument itself to be invalid, is that many people, on Moore's own terms, would answer, "Yes,"to the question, "Is pleasure (or " self-realization" or "progress," etc.) good?" It would seem that the Moorean argument simply is not telling against a great many people, in fact, against just those people whom Moore should be trying to prove incorrect or mistaken in their definition of "good."

Another plausible consideration often brought against Moore is that, by his own terms, "good" is truly only an adjective. By what terms, then, or in what manner, may an adjective be defined? It seems plausible that at least most adjectives, as well, perhaps, as other types of terms, cannot be defined in isolation, but only in context. One may not be able to define "good" *sans phrase*, but one *can* define a "good car," "good teacher," or even "good man," and probably define them naturalistically, as well.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it has been pointed out that the "open question" argument is not conclusive. All that has been shown is that all naturalistic definitions of "good" which have hitherto been proposed or of which one can currently conceive do not work. It has not been shown that *any* naturalistic definition, or naturalistic definition itself, is impossible. Naturalistic definition of the "good" is "as yet unfounded," it is not proven impossible.[2]

Each of the above problems is worthy of book length studies, rather than such cursory reviews. In some ways, however, perhaps all of them have failed to get at exactly *why* the "open question" argument fails to prove "good" simple and indefinable. Perhaps more illumination of "good" could be provided if emphasis was placed on the problematic nature of the defining process itself, rather than arguing the plausibility of various definitions of "good." It may be that "good" is indefinable not because of its "simplicity" nor its "meaninglessness," but becasue of the nature and complexity of "definition" itself, at least as proposed for "good."

The major problem that is fundamental to the definition of "good" is

the definition of the term "is" in the question, "Is pleasure (for instance) good?" Surely, more is meant here than, "Can pleasure (itself) be described as good?", or, "Is 'good' pleasurable?" One is being asked, since the answer to both of the above is obviously in the affirmative, if pleasure *equals* or "*is identical*" with "good." The problem has shifted from the definition of "good" to that of "identity." After Hume, surely it can be taken for granted that a strict identity is implausible and, worse, useless. The only strict identity is of the nature of "$a = a$," which would read in this case, "Is pleasure pleasure?", or, "Is good good?" Even if one stipulatively defines "a" as equivalent or identical to "b," so that "$a = b$," surely there is still a sense in which the identity is no longer strict, for the letter "a" does not even look like the letter "b." (Ask anyone unaware of the stipulation if "a" is strictly identical with "b," and surely they will answer negatively.) Even though one can *say* that the Morning Star is identical with the Evening Star, and both identical with the planet Venus, what one really means here is "the same as" in a loose, equivocal sense, for the Evening Star certainly *means* something different, in some ways, from the Morning Star or Venus. In this respect, *only* the Evening Star is identical with the Evening Star.

As regards "good" and "pleasure," the Mooreans have declared them to be co-extensive, but not identical, with each other. In this same respect, one could justifiably declare the Morning and Evening Stars to be co-extensive, but not identical, with each other. Yet, surely, in another sense, they *are* identical. Thus, one might very well confuse the two or possibly more levels or meanings of "identity," and answer *either* "Yes" or "No" or *both* to the question, "Is pleasure good?"

Another problem of identity arises not only from the failure to specify the meaning of "identity" but also from the inability to specify, even ostensively, any *one* meaning of either "pleasure" or "good," or "yellow," for that matter. Aside from the trivial problem of the use of the supposedly simple term "yellow" to describe "cowardness" as well as a color, exactly what color is "yellow"; that shade or this shade or this shade or that shade over there? When does orange become more red than yellow? Is a deep yellow or pale yellow either a "truer" yellow than the other? Apparently not, for if so one would not need to refer to them as "deep" or "pale." Thus "pleasure" and "good" could be identical in themselves (if there are such things at all) but specific instances might be of different "shades" and not *themselves* strictly identical.

Other than the problem of identity, the "open question" argument also involves a problem which may be called "Hesitation." It has long ago been said that Moore's argument will not work against a true hedonist, for he will simply answer "Yes" to the question, "Is pleasure good?" Nor would

there seem to be any point in arguing with someone who would immediately answer "No," for he *already* agrees with Moore. If one can't argue with those who agree with him, nor with those who disagree, who is left that the argument is supposed to reach? Only the agreement of those who are undecided or who have not yet reflected upon the problem is worthy of being sought. It is just their "hesitation" that makes them plausible candidates for argument; immediate answers on either side eliminate the need for argument. However, if all that is required is self-reflection or introspection in order to decide whether or not "good" is indefinable, then again argument is superfluous. One simply "looks" and agrees either with the description of "good" given by the hedonist or with that given by Moore. Moore *doesn't* simply *describe*, but *argues* (the title is the "open question" *argument* or the "*argument* against the naturalistic fallacy") that "pleasure" does not equal "good." For it to *be* an argument he must say that "hesitation" alone, not necessarily a negation, is all that is necessary to deny the equality. Yet surely this cannot be valid, for one may truly hesitate, sincerely not know pleasure and good to be identical, and yet later come to decide they are, after all, identical. Thus mere hesitation cannot be considered a criterion for the validity of the argument, yet there *is* no other criterion.

Several further problems deal with the nature of the "open question" itself. Suppose, for instance, that one formulates the argument negatively, in the following manner: "Is it the case that pleasure is *not* good?" This seems also to be an "open question," not tautologous. Does this mean that pleasure *is* "good," as the contrary to this supposedly faulty definition? Either one has two contradictory definitions, i.e., "Pleasure *is not* identical with 'good,'" and "Pleasure *is* identical with 'good,'" arising out of the same argument, or the argument itself is useless. There are no criteria, at least none have been proposed, as to which of the two definitions is a proper, or *the* proper, use of the argument.

In the same vein, if an "open question" is one which may be defined as "undecided" or "unsettled," it may be assumed that a closed question is the opposite, i.e., it *is* decided. It must be meant by "undecided," then, that the question has *more than one* possible answer. Yet the Mooreans treat the question, in saying that its openness can only mean that the definition is incorrect, as if it were in fact a closed question in a negative application, i.e., that the only possible answer is, "No." If the question were truly "open," it would seem necessary that it have the possibility of an eventual *positive* answer as well as that of a *negative* one. In other words, an "open question" entails only that the answer is not yet *clear*, not that it is either "No" or "Yes."

Another variation of the "open question" with interesting implications

is as follows: "Is the 'open question' argument a valid argument?" Surely, after the foregoing discussion, this must be regarded as an "open question" itself. This would mean, by Moore's own criteria, that the "open question" argument is *not* valid. The immediate answer to this objection is to declare that it makes the argument self-referential and this can't be done. The proposition that "All propositions are false," is indeed meaningful, i.e., what is being said has meaning for the hearer, but could only be meaningful if it didn't refer to itself. If it did refer to itself, it would be both true and false at the same time, or at least alternately. In the same way, the "open question" argument can't be self-referential, for it would then be asking for the validity of the criteria of validity, for "openness" is at least one of the criteria of validity, or the lack of it.

However, it seems that the same reply can be made in regard to the original "open question," "Is pleasure good?" If it is true, then it is asking "Is pleasure pleasurable?" and its supposed openness may derive from the "meaningless" self-reference of the terms. In other words, it may indeed be "closed," its apparent "openness" being due to its self reference on a different level of meaning or language. Either the "open question" may be turned on itself, or it is no use at all.

There is, perhaps, one other reply which should be considered. It might be argued that the term "argument" is not itself a "simple" term, as it may be analysed into components, e.g., premises and conclusions. "Validity," however, is a "simple" term and concept, being (supposedly) incapable of further analysis. For the "open question" argument to work, both predicate and subject terms must be "simple." Both *are* simple when they are the terms "pleasure" and "good," respectively, but not when the question refers to the argument itself.

Thus the discussion has come full circle. Once again it is being *asserted*, as it was at the beginning, that "good" is simple (and real) and therefore indefinable, other than in some strange ostensive sense, as are "yellow," "bitter," or "pleasure." Yet it has already been argued that even "yellow" is not strictly indentifiable, and the same argument could be given for "bitter" or "pleasure." Perhaps this can be made more clear. It has been demonstrated that there are "levels" of meaning in this regard, and more than different "contexts" are involved. Instead of merely saying "This is good," in terms of a car or a man or a pleasure, the term "good" itself may be applied differently or have different meanings in what may normally be called the same context.

Two examples may help. The use of the term "good" is like that of the term "priceless." Two paintings or diamonds may both be "priceless," and yet one still be *more valuable*, that is, *more priceless*, than the other. Thus "priceless" does not necessarily mean that an object has no price as such,

or that it is lacking in price, but rather that any particular price cannot be appropriately related to the object in question. Likewise, indefinability does not mean, necessarily, that "good" (or "bitter" or "yellow" or "pleasure") has no meaning (either in the sense of no referent *or* of the lack of definition in terms of further description or analysis of a "simple") but only that any given definition cannot be appropriately related.

Also, something may have "universality" without being "simple." For instance, the color purple may be said to have the status of a universal and yet is not simple, for it may be analysed into red and blue. A universal may be regarded as a "model" for its constituents, but it is not a simple thing itself. It is an "analogy for reference," not a "part of" the object in question.

"Good" may be universal, but it seems unlikely that it is simple. It is in this respect that it is maintained that the answer to the question voiced in the title can be "Yes" or "No" or both. "Good" is indeed indefinable in all probability, just as are "yellow" or "bitter" or "pleasure." It is not indefinable, however, because it is simple, and if it is maintained, as it is by the Mooreans, that the other terms and concepts *are* simple, then, obviously, it is not indefinable for the same reason. On the other hand, since it can be maintained that "yellow," etc,. are also not simple, but still indefinable, for the same reasons as given above for the indefinability of "good," then the answer is still "Yes." If one restricts himself to Moore's sense, the answer is "No;" if not, it is "Yes." Moore was right, probably, about the indefinability of "good" (as also were the emotivists, probably), but for the wrong reasons.

NOTES

[1] G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge at the University Press: New York, 1965), p. 16.

[2] Many of the ideas for this paper were derived from William K. Frankena, *Ethics* (Prentice-Hall, Inc.: Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963), especially pp. 79-88. On page 82 of that text, a list of further problems is included.

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