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35 | Moore's Open Question Argument Reconsidered: Remarks on an Ontological Reading

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1. Introduction

Metaethics is a relatively young discipline: George Edward Moore is generally considered to be its founder, although of course at least implicitly philosophers before him were tackling metaethical questions, such as for example Duns Scotus. Because of this rather short history of, as it were, explicit metaethics, an account of metaethics can proceed historically, showing how the discipline unfolded. This method has the advantage that the positions produced got fine-tuned gradually – augmenting initially often blunt claims. On the other hand, these positions did not appear out of nowhere, but were intricately connected to larger philosophical trends. This latter point needs to be stressed, because it might be of some importance for contemporary discussions to see where their questions originated in. More often than not, debates in philosophy take quite unexpected turns and a reminder of the historical origin, though of course insufficient to solve theoretical questions, may provide something like an opportunity to refocus the discussions.

Moore's *Principia Ethica* presents what one might call a package of metaethics and normative ethics. After examining goodness as such,

Moore gives an account of things which are actually good and hence worth pursuing, thus drawing on the twofold possibility of answering the question: "what is good?" In both respects his influence was enormous: apart from launching explicit metaethics as a field of philosophical inquiry, the Bloomsbury group took Moore's normative principles as a manifesto of what they held dear.

As far as metaethics is concerned, one of the most famous and yet controversial contributions he has made is the so-called open question argument or, better, classical open question argument ("COQA"), since it has been reconfigured many times ever since. Typically, this argument is interpreted as being an argument about conceptual analysis and language. In my opinion, however, this view is a result of the linguistic turn metaethical discussions took after Moore. Moore himself rather had an ontological point in mind (and little concern with concepts). In what follows, I shall give an outline of this hypothesis, and although my account will by no means be conclusive, I hope at least to be able to indicate the beginning of a promising story. I will proceed as follows: first I shall indicate how Moore is typically understood, and what objections Moore faces on this interpretation. Then I will try to elucidate my ontological reading and show, how it can save Moore from these objections.

2. The standard reading of the COQA

The COQA is predominantly interpreted in the following way: it allegedly purports to show that "good" cannot be defined, since concerning every suggested *definiens* it may legitimately be asked, whether it is really good. This suggests that Moore is trying to make a point about the concept of good and about language, in particular about the 'intuitions' (although this term can of course be misleading in virtue of the intuitionist moral epistemology Moore is committed to) of competent speakers of a language.

2.1 Outline

To get a more detailed account of this reading, we may turn to Alexander Miller's (2003: 13-15) formalization of the argument: For the sake of convenience, I am using a slightly simplified version:[1]

1. Suppose the predicate "good" is synonymous with or analytically equivalent to a naturalistic or metaphysical predicate, N.
2. Then it would be part of the meaning of the claim that "x is N" that "x is good".
3. But then, someone who seriously asked whether a certain b which is N is also good would show a serious conceptual confusion.
4. But for any given natural or metaphysical property it is always an open question whether a thing that has this property, is also good.
5. Then it cannot be the case that good is synonymous with N, and hence:
6. The property N cannot be identical to good as a matter of conceptual necessity.

2.2 Classical objections

That Miller is not alone in reading Moore this way can be seen by considering the three classic objections raised against him which presuppose this interpretation. These objections have also been conveniently summarized by Miller (2003: 15-18), whose account I summarize even further:

i) Frankena (1938) claimed that Moore's argument is unsound because it commits a *petitio principii*. That is to say, it begs the crucial question at issue. According to Frankena, premise 4, above, is correct only if definitional naturalism is wrong; so Moore cannot use 4) to prove 6). This

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[1] In sections 2.1 and 2.2 I am using material from (Ertl 2007) in which I examined attempts to revive naturalism despite the claims of the COQA; to this end I followed Miller's rendering because it has clearly been the more influential reading.

is quite a strong objection, and Moore does not really seem to have a good reply to it.

ii) According to another strand of criticism, Moore's COQA presupposes the paradox of analysis, according to which it is impossible for an analysis to be both correct and interesting. But this assumption is wrong, according to these critics: they claim that mathematics, for instance, consists of analytical, yet in some cases highly interesting, and, for that matter, informative propositions. Another argument against the "no interesting analysis thesis" is the claim that implicit and explicit conceptual knowledge may be different. Many of us can be said to have certain concepts without being able to state the rules of their application. What analysis does may often be nothing other than making implicit knowledge explicit, and hence it could very well be correct and interesting.

iii) According to the third line of objection, Moore fails to do justice to the distinction between sense and reference, arguably one of Frege's most important insights. In virtue of this distinction, "N" and "good" may have the same referent, but not the same sense. So even if we cannot define "good" in terms of "N", good and N may nevertheless be the same entity, i.e. in this case, the same property.

iv) There is a fourth objection, which is independent of the linguistic reading: according to this objection Moore's COQA fails to rule out the possibility that goodness itself is natural, but primitive, i.e. undefinable.

These objections are quite serious: as far as i) is concerned, some critics have tried to come to Moore's rescue by adding the premise that internalism holds. According to internalism, making a moral judgment and being motivated to perform a certain action are instrinsically connected. The question is, then, whether a competent speaker can imagine an agent, possibly him/herself, making a judgment about a certain action, such as "X is N", without being motivated to do X. The problem with this is that on the one hand internalism is highly controversial, but even if it is true, this line of arguing is most probably not what Moore himself had in mind, so that, if anything, this move can only be part of a rational reconstruction of

the COQA. With regard to ii) there seems hardly any prospect of how Moore, on this reading, could escape from its grip. Concerning iii) it has often been claimed that this objection does not find the right target in Moore, since he allegedly only aims at *definitional naturalism*, leaving the possibility of *synthetic naturalism* open, e.g. that the pertinent identity statement is empirical rather than conceptual. But if the COQA really left the possibility of this form of naturalism open, that would have to be seen as a serious weakness, insofar as in this case the concern with conceptual questions would itself be beside the point, since it would make us prone to overlook a crucial constitutive point. In other words, our concepts would have to be taken as in an important sense inadequate. Finally, as to (iv), it has been suggested that Moore rules out this possibility only later in the text of the *Principia Ethica*, drawing on considerations of what is nowadays called supervenience. But again the whole tenor of the paragraphs (i.e. §§1-14) under consideration suggests that he is not prepared to take goodness as something natural at all.

In short, these objections are most probably fatal for the COQA, if this argument is understood in the traditional way. But far from taking this as a reason to abandon the COQA, I suggest to give up the traditional reading instead; there are just too many objections for the linguistic reading to be correct. Moore must have had something different in view, as far as the aim or function of the COQA is concerned.

3. Ontology and the COQA

But let us see, whether we can have some indication by Moore himself whether the linguistic reading is correct, irrespective of the objections it provokes: A closer look quickly reveals that this cannot be what he was aiming at primarily. There are at least two clear signs for this: 1) he explicitly denies that he is concerned with stipulative and lexical definitions and what he says rather suggests that he had something like real definitions in mind, but real definitions are concerned with the entities themselves. 2) Moreover, the Butlerian motto of the entire book, "everything is what it is and not another thing", clearly hints at considerations on the constitutive level.

3.1 Real definitions and property identity

Hence plausibly, for him, a real definition or at any rate the definition he cares about, can only be given for complex entities, and since he is concerned with a special kind of entities, namely properties, of complex properties accordingly. A typical example of a complex property would be a property accountable in terms of *genus proximum* and *differentia specifica*, such as humanness or being human. This property is analysable into its components "being rational" and "being an animal". In this vein, as §13 makes clear, the open question argument is supposed to show that goodness is not a complex property, but rather a simple property, hence cannot be analysed and therefore not defined either.

Simplicity, however, is not just a matter of not being accountable in terms of *genus proximum* and *differentia specifica* for Moore. Given what he says in the unpublished preface to a planned second edition of the *Principia Ethica* (Moore 1993: 6-16), elucidating the truism of the Butlerian motto and looking back on the second half of §13, Moore obviously thought the COQA can rule out property identity *tout court* as far as goodness is concerned. Property identity is a hotly contested issue, insofar as there is no agreement as to the identity conditions of properties, i.e. the necessary and sufficient conditions for property x and property y to be one and the same property. Put rather non-technically, what the COQA is meant to guarantee is that the property goodness is not identical with any property we have encountered or may encounter in other contexts (apart from ethics) and under a different description which marks it out as a property.

As we know from Frege and Kripke, there can be aposteriori identity statements in that empirical evidence can establish the identity of reference of expressions with different sense. Traditionally, of course, these aposteriori identity statements concern concrete objects, but given that we can refer to properties nothing precludes the assumption that something similar is true in this case. For Moore accordingly, simplicity also means, to put it metaphorically, that there is no second side or second face of the property, which is goodness. Conversely, the case where it has such a second side, looking at which we can get hold of it, is covered by complexity in his opinion. Having two or more faces is just a case of being

complex. Moore insists, moreover, that the following scenario can be ruled out: the expression "good" is just another (senseless) tag for a property other than goodness and goodness itself does not exist. He thinks that we have epistemic contact with goodness and that its existence conditions are fulfilled. Hence, what we need to look for in the pertinent paragraphs of the *Principia Ethica* are passages, which give evidence of what identity conditions for properties Moore had in mind.

We get a clue about what precisely he is aiming at on the constitutive level by looking at §12, which strongly suggests that what we are concerned with are properties and objects insofar as they instantiate properties: Moore points out that property ascription is not the same as property identification; that one object can have many properties and that this does not mean the properties are identical; that if one object (token) has a certain property, this does not mean that this property is identical with the type of which the object in question is a token. Something can be a simple property and plainly nevertheless be a property of an object. Although he sometimes uses the term "to mean" in this context, that must have an ontological sense here, which corresponds to the notion of a real definition. In this sense we may ask what it means to be human, without having considerations of language in mind.

3. 2 Openness and necessary coextension

So far, we have only been talking about the aim or target of the COQA, not how the openness issue is supposed to work. Regarding the target, we have seen that Moore starts off with rather strong assumptions, namely that it is possible to argue directly about the constitutive level, and this seems to presuppose the 'existence' of the property goodness. Later, John Mackie's (1977: 30-35) point will be that this assumption is built into the ordinary concept of goodness. Yet, this only means that Moore was in a sense naïve to make this assumption; it does not mean that he carried out conceptual analysis and Mackie is perfectly clear about this, when he says Moore took "good" to be the "name of a property" (ibid. 32). That is to say, Mackie takes Moore to be a common sense philosopher in that he works on common sense assumptions rather then defending common sense. So the ontological reading is partly endorsed by Mackie, in part Mackie

contributed to the misreading of the COQA, insofar as he is talking about the common concept of morality or moral judgments, thus suggesting that Moore himself was investigating concepts.

As far as openness is concerned, an ontological reading seems to require the assumption that Moore needs to start with similarly strong ideas on the level of epistemology, such as: We have the capacity to understand the real 'nature' of a property. We might think that for Moore, a necessary condition for having understood this nature is certainty and that openness has to do with a lack of certainty. But then, the objection would have to be, that the possibility of property identity remains open, because we simply may have not grasped this alleged fact yet. To counter this objection it can be conceded that Moore does make strong epistemic assumption concerning our ability to discern the nature of entities directly. Nonetheless, openness does not seem to be connected to these considerations.

Going back to §13 in which Moore discusses the twofold target of the COQA, we also get an important clue about what he is really aiming at concerning openness. Here he makes it clear that for each possible candidate of a property to be identified with goodness there is *doubt regarding the coextension* of the properties and this for him *eo ipso* seems to undercut property identity, although he concedes the possibility that the properties may *in fact* be coextensive. This suggests that – apparently without further argument – he uses *necessary coextension* as a necessary identity criterion for properties. Thus, if there are doubts about coextension, he seems to say, the properties cannot be necessarily coextensive. But if they are not necessarily coextensive, they are not identical in the first place.

There are of course a number of missing premises, apart from the assumption that necessary coextension is a necessary identity criterion for properties, namely for example (i) that uncertainty undercuts necessity, and (ii) that there really is uncertainty. I am not going to speculate about how he can justify the first assumption, but about the second problem, there really may be a chance to bolster Moore's point by considerations regarding moral theory, namely along the lines of pluralist ideas à la David Ross (1930) or particularist ideas à la Jonathan Dancy (1993). First and

foremost, the claim about doubt is a factual point, but the question is of course whether we are justified in having doubts.

In this respect Moore's remark is crucial, that anything whatever may be good (§ 15). This remark suggests that for Moore, there cannot be any universal rules, which state that wherever there is an instantiation of a non-moral property there is also an instantiation of goodness. There are two possibilities of interpreting Moore here: a) we can interpret this claim in the sense of pluralism, and according to this position all we can say is that there is prima-facie goodness when a certain non-moral property is instantiated, but that through the presence of another non-natural property, goodness may after all fail to materialize; b) we can read this along particularist lines according to which moral relevance or, if you will, 'goodness relevance' is completely context dependent and that no universal rules apply as to which feature or which property instantiation is *morally* relevant and hence co-instantiates goodness in all circumstances.

With this in place we can return to the objections and see how Moore is faring on this reading. Ad 1) On this reading the *petitio principii* charge collapses, since what Moore is offering is rather something like a *reductio*. If there is property identity, there is necessary coextension. But, as we have seen, there is doubt as to whether there is coextension, hence coextension cannot be necessary, hence there cannot be property identity. It needs to be pointed out that there is no new case for a *petitio principii* charge here, since doubts about coextension do not presuppose the falsity of naturalism: rather, what is at issue here is that there are no general rules about the moral relevance of non-moral features *tout court*, natural or non-natural. Ad 2) On this reading objections 1 and 2 can be treated in the same vein. Moore does not assume the paradox of analysis, but the incompatibility of property identity and doubt about coextension. Ad 3) On this reading, 'synthetic' naturalism is not at all left untouched, rather it is the primary target of the argument. Ad 4) On this reading the option that goodness might be a primitive natural property is ruled out by the COQA. Recall, that this reading takes Moore to start with very strong assumptions. Moore not only seems to take the existence of goodness for granted, but also that insofar as goodness is goodness, it is not the object of the natural sciences and psychology. Were goodness identical to N, then of course goodness

insofar as it was N, would be the object of a natural science or psychology. Clearly, the COQA is meant to rule out this option. If there is a problem here, it concerns the assumption, not the argument.

So on this reading, the 'classical' set of objections can be answered. To be sure, this does not at all mean that the COQA is unproblematic. Rather it becomes clear that Mackie's objections are more pinpointed and hence the really threatening objections which of course also means that Mackie's strategy is an important indication that the ontological reading of the COQA is correct in the first place.

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