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Moore and the Profile of Goodness in *Principia Ethica*

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I. Introductory remarks

In Ertl (2009) I outlined a reading of Moore's (1993: §§1-14) account of goodness which takes it to be concerned with issues of property identity, and not at all, or at least not primarily, with questions of conceptual analysis. Simply put, the core idea is that since, in Moore's opinion, there is a plurality of intrinsically good things, and since in the appropriate circumstances everything can be good, goodness is not necessarily co-extensive with any natural property. Since necessary co-extension appears to be at least a necessary condition for property identity, goodness is *a fortiori* not identical to any of those natural properties.¹

¹ In his influential and widely read book, Frank Jackson (1998: 118–125) tried to show the exact opposite to what Moore tried to achieve on this reading, namely that all ethical properties are what he calls “descriptive properties”. In his argument, Jackson draws on the claim that the ethical globally supervenes on the descriptive. Timothy Williamson (2001) has objected that Jackson's conception of supervenience is not strong enough to deliver the desired result and that a stronger conception, which would deliver it, is contentious. In addition to this, Jackson's own reading of Moore is rather typical and, possibly, anachronistic in that he takes Moore to argue for the claim that without the ethical vocabulary language would not be rich enough to ascribe the properties we ascribe using ethical terms (loc. cit. 121).

This reading has important consequences for understanding the device of an open question, which is of course at the very centre of Moore's reasoning. Along the lines of this reading, such an idea is primarily concerned with methodology. If, in Moore's opinion, we were to start our ethical investigation with a "real" definition (in the classical sense of the term, i.e. giving the real essence) which identifies goodness with a natural property, we would be forced to pre-empt certain results, which only careful investigations in normative ethics can provide. For example, we would rule out from the outset, although it should at this point of the investigation still be an open question, that there can be intrinsically good things, and things which are sometimes good and sometimes bad. This in turn shows that, for Moore, meta-ethics and normative ethics must be treated in tandem, so that a conception of philosophy which bans all first order questions of morality from its domain (such as the one Ayer had in mind) is completely alien to Moore's approach.

As further enquiries have revealed, there is a second dimension in Moore's reasoning regarding goodness which draws on its ontological profile rather than on its extension. This dimension of the overall argument, though only partially successful in establishing the claim that goodness is not identical to any natural property, can provide an important hint for establishing criteria for distinguishing natural and non-natural properties in the first place. Moreover, it can be shown that the strategy of drawing on the extension of goodness can also be used to establish that goodness is not identical to any non-natural property either.

In the following paper, I will try to outline this second dimension in Moore's argument.

II. Moore's account of goodness

One plausible way of reading Moore is that he subscribes to the existence of abstract objects (although in his own terminology 'existence' is not the right term, but this is a different issue). There are of course several types of abstract objects apart from properties such as natural kinds to which Moore very frequently alludes in his examples.

Properties need not be instantiated to 'exist' (in their peculiar mode of

being) and he thinks they can be the intentional objects of certain cognitive operations; insofar as they are intentional objects, they are notions. Against this background, Moore tried to show two things, namely that goodness is a simple property, and that it is not a natural property. He thought, and took it for granted, that we are acquainted with the property goodness, and he tried to argue that goodness is not identical to a property we are familiar with from other contexts, namely the natural sciences and psychology.

For Moore, abstract objects can have genuine parts in which case they are complex objects, or they can have no genuine parts in which case they are simple objects. Crucially, for Moore, analysis is an account of the parts of an object and their relationship; in the case of natural kinds, it is an account of the essential properties. In this vein, analysis is an enterprise in ontology, and does not, or at least not primarily, concern concepts

1. The basic idea

What is difficult to grasp is his close and rather puzzling association of simplicity and non-identity. Conversely, he associates complexity, analyzability and identity of goodness with a natural property. An analogy to perception may help to explain the point at issue here: we can first focus on individual concrete objects and then turn to properties: let us assume we are acquainted with a person who regularly passes by under our window at 4 o'clock, maybe somebody trying to imitate what he (wrongly) thought to be the habit of Immanuel Kant. Let us assume we recognize this person by the rather peculiar way he walks. Now imagine that at a concert, somebody in front of us attracts our attention by being all too noisy in the intervals between different movements of a symphony, coughing too loudly, or even coughing in *pianissimo* passages within individual movements. At the end of the concert, we see the familiar way of walking and we suddenly realize that the man who disturbed the enjoyment of music is identical to the one who passes beneath our window every day. Here our man is obviously a complex entity, insofar as he has parts and insofar as he has many different properties, such as having a peculiar walk and being a "concert cougher". Insofar as we identify him as the concert cougher, we in a sense identify him metonymically, as it were, taking his property of being a concert cougher as *pars pro toto*, a part standing for the whole.

The complexity Moore has in mind with regard to properties also has to

do with their having parts, but it is not immediately clear what parts of a property could be. Moore's own example is that of a horse, which is a little confusing and misleading here since horse is a natural kind and not a property. Moore does not give an example of a complex property, but of a different kind of abstract objects. A better example, construed on Moore's behalf, might be being divisible by 6, which can be taken to be the complex property of being divisible by 2 and being divisible by 3. An even better example might be equiangularity and equilaterality of triangles. Here we have the situation that these properties are necessarily coextensive, but clearly the intuition is that, although there is only one property, one can distinguish different features, or indeed parts, of it.²

This being granted it is still far from clear as to why, if goodness were identical to a property we are familiar with from other contexts, it would have to be complex. Here the analogy to perception comes into play. In a sense it is only fair to draw on this analogy since Moore subscribes to an intuitionist epistemology, albeit only for the ethical principles; this intuitionism has often been heavily criticised as well, but possibly it is not as bad as many critics take it to be. What is particularly important in this analogy for our purposes is the idea of what one could call metonymic identification.

Moore seems to think that if goodness were complex, we would be familiar with one part of goodness (metonymically identified) in the context of natural sciences or psychology, and with another in ethics—recall that he started from the assumption that we are familiar with goodness in the context of ethics. From either perspectives we would not have it in full view, as it were, and from both perspective we would take the part as the whole. Going back to the example provided above, this would mean that we are familiar with equiangularity in the context of the study of angles, and with equilaterality from the study of lines.

Still, there are, of course, problems here—after all, the claim is not just that goodness is not identical with any property we are or can be familiar with, but that non-identity is global. Nonetheless, the prime intuition behind

² Some philosophers, such as Sober (1982), think that this example can undermine the idea that necessary coextension is an adequate identity criterion for properties, but the more natural conclusion seems to be to accept complexity with regard to properties.

Moore's thought is one thing, the argument he uses for establishing the non-identity thesis is quite another.

2. The structure of Moore's argument

The argument by means of which Moore tried to establish his claim that goodness is not identical to any property we can be familiar with from natural science and psychology is notoriously obscure. In our times of a resurgence in interest in meta-ethical questions, it is often thought as having to do with language and the competence of language users. Simply put, along the lines of this reading, Moore claims that for every possible definition of goodness a competent language user can question whether the alleged *definiens* is in fact good, without displaying a fundamental conceptual confusion. There are, however, various ways of spelling out this simple thought: This questioning at issue can refer to the predicate in terms of which goodness is allegedly defined. In this case the "is" in question can either be taken in a predicating sense (in which case we would be concerned with higher-order predication), or in an identifying sense. Alternatively, the questioning can refer to an object to which the predicate (in terms of which goodness can allegedly be defined) is ascribed. In this case, the "is" is the "is" of predication.

For all the sophistication of the more advanced forms of this reading, the text of the *Principia* itself does not really support such a view, and it seems as though Moore is directly concerned with the level of properties, with little or no concern of language users and their concepts at all. In this vein, Altman (2004) recently argued that Moore's point is the *different ontological profile* of the property of goodness compared with natural properties. This different profile, in Altman's opinion, concerns the ascription of goodness to other properties. While self-predication, i.e. the ascription of goodness to itself, does not seem to make any sense, it seems to make perfect sense to ascribe goodness to natural properties. By virtue of having a different profile and applying Leibniz's law of identity to properties (according to which indiscernability is a necessary condition for identity), goodness is not identical with any of such properties.

I think Altman is on the right track here, although I disagree with some of the details of his account. What I believe Moore wanted to say is this: If goodness is identical with a natural property, it must indeed have the same

ontological profile as these natural properties. Conversely, if it does not have the same ontological profile, it cannot be identical to any of these properties. The ontological profile, which Moore has in mind, however, is concerned with questions as to whether goodness can be an essential or merely an accidental property. Moreover, we have a firmly established set of principles with regard to these issues as far as the 'behaviour' of properties is concerned.

With regard to these principles, Moore can be taken as drawing on a reading of Aristotle's pertinent doctrines (in *Top.* 103b6-19) suggested by his ancient commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias.³ One of these principles rules out that a property can be an essential property of one entity, but a so-called separable property of another. A separable property is a property, which an entity can have at one time and can not have at another. Consequently, once a property is separable in at least one case, it is always an accidental property. Moreover, this is true even if there are objects, which always have this accidental property. Goodness, by contrast, seems to behave differently: in some cases it seems to be like an essential property, but in other cases it seems to be like a separable property. For Moore, goodness clearly has the marks of an accidental property, since there are things which can have and can not have this property.

Taking the Alexandrian principles to be valid for natural properties altogether, this rules out at least that goodness is identical to one of a special kind of natural properties, namely those, which are essential properties. To be sure, though, this profile is consistent with the situation that goodness is an accidental natural predicate, which some objects nevertheless always have, i.e. of which it is not separable so that it is mistakenly regarded as an essential property. In order to rule out this option of goodness being identical to accidental natural properties, a further consideration is needed and it is precisely at this point that the 'open question' considerations enter the picture, but these have been dealt with in Ertl (2009) already. To repeat: these considerations draw on necessary coextension as an at least necessary criterion for property identity.⁴

³. For an account of this and other readings of the Aristotelian principles regarding accidental properties, see Brunschwig (1991).

III. Concluding remarks

Uncovering the second dimension in Moore's overall argument for the simplicity and non-naturality of goodness not only reveals the sources he is drawing on, but can in addition show that he has the means to distinguish natural from non-natural properties in the first place. One plausible way of doing so might be to take those properties to be natural, for which certain Aristotelian metaphysical principles, among which is the one concerning the 'behaviour' of accidental properties, are valid, and to take those for which one of these principles is invalid as non-natural properties. Of course, further research is needed to identify precisely which of these principles are needed to provide a feasible distinction, but the approach sketched above can at least indicate a direction where to search for a solution of this issue of *Principia Ethica*.

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⁴ A further question in need of clarification is the connection between the methodological dimension of the 'open question' idea and the modality involved in the criteria of property identity and in the principles of property instantiation.