G. E. MOORE

Irreducible Ethical Truths

G. E. Moore, a British philosopher who lived from 1873 to 1958, was a founder of analytic philosophy and a champion of common sense. His work in ethics, which focused on what "good" means and on how we can know that something is good, set the stage for further controversies.

According to Moore, we ought always to do whatever will have the best total consequences. To determine our duty in concrete situations, we need to know, through empirical investigation, the consequences of our actions; and we also need to know, through moral intuition, what kinds of things are good in themselves. The notion of "good," which is central to ethics, is objective but indefinable; it is an error to define "good" in terms like "desired" or "socially approved." Instead, "good" just means "good" – and the basic moral principles about good are self-evident truths.

As you read the selection, ask yourself whether Moore succeeds in showing that "good" is an objective irreducible concept. What are the pros and cons of basing ethics on moral intuitions?

The questions of ethics

I have tried to distinguish two questions which moral philosophers have almost always confused: What kind of things ought to exist for their own sakes? and What kind of actions ought we to perform? I have tried to show what it is that we ask about a thing, when we ask whether it ought to exist for its own sake, is good in itself or has intrinsic value; and what it is that we ask about an action, when we ask whether we ought to do it.

Once we recognize the meaning of the questions, it becomes plain what reasons are relevant to them. For the first question, no evidence can be adduced: from no other truth can they be inferred. We can guard against error only by taking care, that we have before our minds that question, and not some other. As for the second question, any answer to it is capable of evidence and argument; but so many considerations are relevant to its truth as to make certainty impossible. Such evidence must consist of truths about the results of the action – causal truths – plus ethical truths of our first or self-evident class. Any other kind of evidence is irrelevant.

To express that ethical propositions of my first class are incapable of
idence, I have sometimes called them "Intuitions." When I call such propo-
ions "Intuitions," I mean that they are incapable of evidence; I imply
thing as to our cognition of them.

How to define "good"

w "good" is to be defined is the most fundamental question in Ethics. If I
asked "How is good to be defined?" my answer is that it cannot be
fined. Disappointing as this answer may appear, it is of great importance.
amounts to this: That propositions about the good are synthetic and never
alytic;[1] and that is no trivial matter. And the same thing may be expressed
saying that nobody can foist upon us such an axiom as that "Pleasure is
only good" or that "The good is the desired" on the pretense that this is
very meaning of the word.
"Good" is a simple notion, just as "yellow" is; as you cannot explain to
who does not already know it what yellow is, so you cannot explain
at good is. Definitions of the kind that I was asking for, which describe
nature of the object or notion denoted by a word, are only possible when
object or notion is complex. You can give a definition of a horse, because
orse has different properties and qualities. When you have reduced a horse
its simplest terms, then you can no longer define those terms. They are
ply which you think of or perceive, and to one who cannot think of or
ceive them, you can never, by any definition, make their nature known.
low and good are notions of that simple kind, out of which definitions are
posed and with which the power of defining ceases.
'Good" is incapable of definition, in the most important sense. The most
ortant sense of "definition" is that in which a definition states what parts
iriably compose a certain whole; and in this sense "good" has no defini-
because it is simple and has no parts. It is one of those innumerable
cts of thought which are incapable of definition, because they are the
nate terms by which whatever is capable of definition must be defined.
t there must be such terms is obvious; since we cannot define everything.
re is, therefore, no intrinsic difficulty in the contention that "good"
tes a simple and indefinable quality.
onsider yellow. We may try to define it by its physical equivalent; we
state what light-vibrations must stimulate the normal eye, in order that
may perceive it. But those light-vibrations are not what we mean by
w. Indeed we should never have been able to discover their existence,
ss we had first been struck by the difference of quality between different
rs. Those vibrations are what corresponds in space to the yellow which
erceive.

The naturalistic fallacy

All things which are good may be also something else, just as all things which
are yellow produce a certain kind of light vibration. Ethics aims at discover-
ing those other properties which are good. But many philosophers have
thought that when they named these other properties they were defining
good; that these properties were entirely the same with goodness. This view I
call the "naturalistic fallacy."

Such philosophers do not agree among themselves. One will affirm that
good is pleasure, another that good is that which is desired; and each will
argue to prove that the other is wrong. But how is that possible? One says
that good is nothing but the object of desire, and tries to prove that it is not
pleasure. But from his assertion, that good just means the object of desire,
one of two things must follow as regards his proof:

1. He may be trying to prove that the object of desire is not pleasure.
    But then where is his Ethics? The position is merely a psycho-
    logical one.

2. Or the discussion is verbal. When A says "Good means pleasant"
    and B says "Good means desired," they may merely wish to assert
    that most people have used the word for what is pleasant and for
    what is desired respectively. And this is not a whit more an ethical
    discussion than the last was. They are anxious to persuade us that
    what they call good is what we ought to do. "Do act so, because
    the word 'good' is used to denote such actions": such, on this
    view, would be their teaching. How perfectly absurd is the reason!
    "You are to do this, because most people use a certain word to
    denote such conduct." – My dear sirs, what we want to know
    from you as ethical teachers, is not how people use a word; what
    we want to know is what is good. When people say "Pleasure is
    good," we cannot believe that they merely mean "Pleasure is
    pleasure."

Pleasure is indefinable. We can describe its relations to other things, but
define it we cannot. If anybody tried to define pleasure as any other natural
object, for instance, that pleasure means the sensation of red, we should
laugh at him. Well, that would be the same fallacy which I have called the
naturalistic fallacy. When I say "I am pleased," I do not mean that "I" am
the same thing as "having pleasure." And similarly "pleasure is good" does
not mean that "pleasure" is the same thing as "good." When a man confuses
two natural objects with one another, there is no reason to call the fallacy
naturalistic. But if he confuses "good," which is not a natural object, with

any natural object, then there is a reason for calling that a naturalistic fallacy. Even if good were a natural object, that would not alter the nature of the fallacy. Only the name which I have called it would not be so appropriate. It does not matter what we call it, provided we recognize it. It is to be met with in almost every book on Ethics. It is a very simple fallacy. When we say that an apple is yellow, that does not bind us to hold that "apple" means nothing else than "yellow." Why, then, should it be different with "good"? There is no sense in saying that pleasure is good, unless good is something different from pleasure.

If "good" does not denotes something simple and indefinable, only two alternatives are possible: either it is a complex; or else it means nothing at all, and there is no such subject as Ethics. Both of these may be dismissed by a simple appeal to facts.

1. Whatever definition be offered, it may always be asked significantly of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good.[2] For instance, one might think that to be good means what we desire to desire. Now it may be true that what we desire to desire is always good; but it is doubtful whether this is the case, and the fact that we understand what is meant by doubting it, shows that we have two different notions before our minds.

2. The same consideration is sufficient to dismiss the hypothesis that "good" has no meaning. It is natural to suppose that "Pleasure is the good" does not assert a connection between two different notions, but involves only one, that of pleasure. But one who asks "Is pleasure good?" is not wondering whether pleasure is pleasure. And if he try this with each suggested definition, he will recognize that good is a unique object and we can ask how it connects with other objects. "Is this good?" is different from "Is this pleasant, or desired?" and has a distinct meaning.

Good," then, is indefinable.

Our first conclusion as to the subject-matter of Ethics is, then, that there is simple, indefinable, unanalyzable object of thought by reference to which it must be defined.

Study questions

1. What does Moore see as the two basic questions of Ethics? What is the proper method for arriving at answers to these questions?
2. How can we guard against errors about self-evident moral truths?
3. How is "good" to be defined?
4. Why do there have to be indefinable terms and simple properties? Can our visual term "yellow" be defined in terms of "giving such and such a wavelength of light"?
5. What is the naturalistic fallacy?
6. If naturalism were true, how could we argue from how people use words to how we ought to live?
7. How would Moore criticize the attempt to define "good" as, for example, "what we desire to desire"? Explain his reasoning here.

For further study

This selection has excerpts, sometimes simplified in wording, from George Edward Moore's *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), pages vii–x and 1–21. For more on his views, see the rest of this work and his *Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), which deals more with his view that our duties consist in trying to maximize good consequences. Harry Gensler's *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) discusses Moore's intuitionism in Chapter 4 and his consequentialism in Chapter 10.

Related readings in this anthology include Ross (who defends Moore's intuitionism but criticizes his consequentialism – which our selection does not emphasize); and Ayer and Mackie (who agree that "good" cannot be defined descriptively but see it as expressing emotions instead of something objective).

Notes

1. An "analytic" statement (like "All bachelors are unmarried") is one that is necessarily true because of the meaning of words. Moore claims that statements about the good cannot be analytic.
2. This is Moore's influential "open question argument." Here is another example of how it works. Suppose that someone claims that "good" means "socially approved." We can still significantly ask "Are socially approved things necessarily good?" – and we can consistently answer "no." Hence "socially approved" and "good" do not mean the same thing.