

## 24.231 Ethics – Handout 2 Moore on Goodness

### Moore's Non-Naturalism

Moore's view is that moral judgments are true or false (and some are true), and that they are neither reducible to nor derivable from non-moral judgments (like empirical or scientific ones).

### Moore's Open Question Argument

Moore defends his non-naturalism by arguing that *good* couldn't be identical to any natural property, because any such identity claim seems to invite an "open question." Think about questions about *identity* - questions take the form "Is it true that X is (the same thing as) Y?" (The "is" involved is the "is" of identity, not the "is" of predication.) Open questions of the form "is X Y?" are questions whose answers are not settled by the *meaning* of X. If a question is open, we can ask "I agree this is X, but is it Y?" without seeming to be incompetent users of the words X and Y. (E.g., "I agree that's a female fox, but is it a vixen?" might seem to be a *closed* question, whereas "I agree I like to look at it, but is it beautiful?" might seem to be an *open* question – we might suspect someone who asks the former question of not knowing the meaning of the word *vixen*, but we wouldn't suspect someone who asks the latter question of not knowing the meaning of the word *beautiful*.)

Here are two claims on which Moore relies:

- (i) If it is an open question whether Xs are Y, then "X" does not have the same *meaning* as "Y."
- (ii) If "X" does not mean the same thing as "Y," then the things they refer to – the property of being an X and the property of being a Y – are not *identical*.

*How is Moore's argument supposed to work?*

Let's consider how the argument might work for the case of "beautiful" (the argument is adapted from an example of Elizabeth Ashford's):

Are beautiful paintings (just) paintings that I like to look at?

Let X= beautiful painting

Let Y=painting that I like to look at

1. It is an open question whether beautiful paintings are paintings that I like to look at. (Fact?)
2. If it is an open question whether Xs are Y, then "X" doesn't have the same meaning as "Y." (i)
3. Therefore, "beautiful painting" does not have the same meaning as "painting that I like to look at." (From 1 and 2)
4. If "X" does not mean the same thing as "Y," then the things they refer to – the property of being an X and the property of being a Y – are not identical. (ii)
5. Therefore, being a beautiful painting is not identical to (the same thing as) being a painting that I like to look at. (From 4 and 5)

But should we accept the crucial premises 2 and 4? That is, should we accept (i) and (ii), above?

- Can we think of any cases where it seems like “X” and “Y” *mean* the same thing, but we can still sensibly ask whether Xs are Ys? If so, then (i) is false.
- Can we think of any cases where it seems like “X” and “Y” have *different meanings*, but refer to the same thing – that is, where X is identical to Y? If so, then (ii) is false.

There may be an ambiguity here. Consider two interpretations of “meaning the same thing:” according to the *first* interpretation, two sentences “mean the same thing” if they express the very same thought, involving all the same ideas (philosophers sometimes call this kind of meaning “sense”). According to the *second* interpretation, two sentences “mean the same thing” if they talk about the same objects and ascribe the same properties to them (philosophers sometimes call this kind of meaning “reference”).

If we interpret “meaning” in (i) and (ii) as “sense,” then (ii) seems false. “Water” and “H<sub>2</sub>O” have different *senses*, but refer to the same (identical) thing.

But if we interpret “meaning” in (i) and (ii) as “reference,” then (i) seems false (“Water” and “H<sub>2</sub>O” have the same reference, but it at least once was an open question whether water was H<sub>2</sub>O, even for competent users of the terms: users who knew their senses – that is, knew that water was a clear, potable, odorless liquid that fills our lakes and streams, etc, and knew that H<sub>2</sub>O was a substance composed of oxygen atoms each bonded to two hydrogen atoms.

However, if we interpret “meaning” in (i) as “sense,” and “meaning” in (ii) as “reference,” then we’re guilty of what philosophers call *equivocation* – the Open Question Argument is no longer valid, as it’s conclusion no longer follows logically from its premises.

Water=H<sub>2</sub>O is an example of a non-analytic property identity: of a case where two words have different “senses”, but the same “reference” – they refer to the same thing. Perhaps we could discover a non-analytic property identity between say, goodness and pleasurable.

*Replies:*

Well, we might think one difference between the *pleasurable/good* case and the *water/H<sub>2</sub>O* case is that our concept of water seems “gappy” – it seems like it had a hole waiting to be filled: before we knew about H<sub>2</sub>O, we thought water was “the substance, *whatever it is*, that runs in our rivers, falls from the sky when it rains, fills our lakes and oceans, is odorless and potable, etc.” There was a gap in our concept that needed filling, and empirical investigation filled it with H<sub>2</sub>O. But, we might say, *good* doesn’t seem gappy in the same way. (But: was *water* obviously gappy? Is *good* obviously not gappy? One suggestion: perhaps *good* refers to *that property, whatever it is, more of which in a society leads to social stability*. However, isn’t this gappy definition itself vulnerable to the Open Question Argument?)

We might also say: it seems alright to say that *water*=H<sub>2</sub>O, because we can see how investigating the world might allow us to fill in the gap in our concept of *water* with H<sub>2</sub>O. But we don’t think that about *good* – while investigating the world might teach us a lot about pleasure, it doesn’t seem like it could ever teach us that *pleasurable*=*good*. It couldn’t teach us that because no amount of empirical research will give us access to what *good* is. How could we run tests to determine that *good* is identical to *pleasurable*? (But: isn’t this begging the question against the naturalist/reductivist?)

In the end, we may just have to fall back on our initial intuition: no natural property – none of the properties we could discover through the empirical sciences, say – could be identical to *good* because no natural properties have “to-be-doneness” built into them. To attribute any natural property to a thing is only to make claims about what *is* the case; it isn’t to make any claim about what *ought* to be the case.

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