Moore's Open Question Argument : An Examination

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[**Abstract:** In *Principia Ethica*, Moore claims that good is a simple, non-natural and indefinable quality which cannot be analyzed into its constituent parts. Still, if someone tries to define "good" by identifying it with some natural or non-natural property, her definition will involve an open question or a series of open questions: is that property really good. If, for a definition of a term, there is a scope of an open question like this, then, according to Moore, that definition is not a genuine definition of that term. This is what is called Open Question Argument (OQA). However, in the present paper, I argue that Moore's OQA fails to establish the idea that "good" is indefinable. To support my view, I discuss three objections against OQA, namely the *petitio principii* objection, the paradox of analysis objection and the sense-reference objection. In the *pititio principii* objection it has been shown that the strategy of OQA is , in fact, fallacious. And, in the paradox of analysis objection and the sense-reference objection, it has been shown that despite the presence of open questions, an analysis of "good" may be informative and correct analysis of the term in question. Hence, that analysis may be treated as a proper analysis of "good". That proves that "good" is not indefinable, though Moore thought it to be so. In this way I show that Moore's OQA fails to prove that "good" is indefinable.]

In our ordinary language we address something as good to praise it. For example, we say "a good job", "a good lady", "a good weather" and so on. However, when we use the term "good" to praise something, we never think what the term "good" really mean. George Edward Moore (1873-1958), in his *Principia Ethica,* devotes himself into the inquiry of : "what is good?" and "how is good to be defined?" After a lot of philosophical reflections he finds that the term "good" involves a simple, non-natural and indefinable quality and hence cannot be defined at all. Moore presents his well-known Open Question Argument (OQA) to prove that "good" is indefinable. By his OQA Moore shows that one cannot provide a successful definition of

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"good" by analyzing the properties involved in it. Still, if one tries to define "good", one's definition will involve the open question: whether this property is really good or not. In this paper, at first, I will discuss the OQA and then evaluate whether or not Moore's OQA succeeds in showing that "good" is indefinable.

In order to have a proper understanding of OQA, we need to know what Moore actually means by his statement that 'good' is simple, non-natural and indefinable quality. Moore considers 'good' as simple property which does not have any other property as constituent. Complex properties, by contrast, have such constituent parts. Moore uses the analogy between 'good' and 'yellow' to explain the simplicity of goodness. He says that 'yellow' is a simple notion and one cannot explain what 'yellow' is to another who does not already know it. Similarly, 'good' is a simple notion and one cannot explain it to another unless the other person knows already what 'good' is.[1] Not only is it simple, it is non-natural. Moore thinks that a natural object is an object that is capable of existing in time by itself, *e.g.* a piece of stone, our mind etc. By contrast, a non-natural property is something which cannot be conceived as existing in time by itself. He describes these features of natural and non-natural properties in the following way:

> If we consider whether any object is of such a nature that it may be said to exist now, to have existed, or to be about to exist, then we may know that that object is a natural object, and that nothing, of which this is not true, is a natural object. Thus, for instance, of our minds we should say that they did exist yesterday, that they do exist to-day, and probably will exist in a minute or two. We shall say that we had thoughts yesterday, which have ceased to exist now, although their effects may remain: and in so far as those thoughts did exist, they too are natural objects. There is, indeed, no difficulty about the objects themselves, in the sense in which I have just used the term. ... Can we imagine good as existing by itself in time, and not merely as a property of some natural object? For myself, I cannot so imagine it...[2]

This simple and non-natural property, 'good', as we have seen, is indefinable. But what does Moore mean by the term definition? He says:

> Definitions of the kind that I was asking for, definitions which describe the real nature of the object or notion denoted by a word, and which do not merely tell us what the word is used to mean, are only possible when the object or notion in question is something complex. You can give a definition of a horse, because a horse has many different properties and qualities, all of which you can enumerate.[3]

Thus, it is plain that, for Moore, a successful definition of a given object or property is an analysis that tells us about the constituent parts, properties and qualities of that given object or property. So, this sort of definitions might be called *definition by property analysis*. And, as Moore believes that 'good' is a simple property having no other property as its constituent part, it is obvious that "good" is unanalyzable, and hence, indefinable. Moore's OQA is devised to prove that one cannot provide a successful definition of "good" by analyzing its property since it does not have any property at all as its part. Thus some philosophers propose to define "good" by identifying it (good) with a simple property like pleasure. Moore claims that this proposed definition is not successful to define "good" either. For, if someone tries to define "good", his definition will involve open-questions (actually a series of open-questions) and hence that will not be a successful definition of "good".

The Open Question Argument (OQA)

Moore's OQA is closely related to his worry about naturalistic fallacy.[4] Naturalists often define moral properties like 'good' in terms of some natural properties. Now, if "good" is defined by some natural property, say *N*, then, according to Moore, it will always be possible for a competent user of the moral language to ask, without any conceptual confusion, whether *N* is really good. That is, in those cases, there is always a scope of bringing up, conceptually, open-questions about whether or not 'good' is co-instantiated with the natural property mentioned in the definiens. Such a scope of open-questions indicates that the given definition is mistaken, because a correct definition would mean that any question about the truth of the definition would involve a tautology and hence such a question would not be an open but a closed question.[5] Moore formulates OQA in the following well-known passage:

> To take, for instance, one of the more plausible, because one of the more complicated, of such proposed definitions, it may easily be thought, at first sight, that to be good may mean to be that which we desire to desire. Thus if we apply this definition to a particular instance and say "When we think that A is good, we are thinking that A is one of the things which we desire to desire," our proposition may seem quite plausible. But, if we carry the investigation further, and ask ourselves "Is it good to desire to desire A?" it is apparent, on a little reflection, that this question is itself as intelligible, as the original question "Is A good?" – that we are, in fact, now asking for exactly the same information about the desire to desire A, for which we formerly asked with regard to A itself. But it is also apparent that the meaning of this second question cannot be correctly analysed

> into "Is the desire to desire A one of the things which we desire to desire?": we have not before our minds anything so complicated as the question "Do we desire to desire to desire A?" Moreover any one can easily convince himself by inspection that the predicate of this proposition – "good" – is positively different from the notion of "desiring to desire" which enters into its subject: "That we should desire to desire A is good" is not merely equivalent to "That A should be good is good." It may indeed be true that what we desire to desire is always also good; perhaps, even the converse may be true: but it is very doubtful whether this is the case, and the mere fact that we understand very well what is meant by doubting it, shows clearly that we have two different notions before our minds.[6]

Here, Moore's argument is the following: if there is a proposed definition of "good" where the definiens involves some natural properties, *e.g.* 'desire to desire', one should ask "is whatever is mentioned in the definiens (*e.g.* desire to desire) good?" Now, if one finds this question intelligible or significant, then the question is an open-question which indicates that the definiendum and the definiens do not express the same meaning. Hence the analysis is not a correct analysis, and consequently, the proposed definition is unsuccessful. Few more examples might help us understand the OQA strategy:

> (1a). Pleasure is good.
> (2a). What we desire to desire is good.
> If "good" is synonymous with "pleasure" or "what we desire to desire", we get:
> (1b). Pleasure is pleasure.
> (2b). What we desire to desire is what we desire to desire."

However, (1a) and (1b) do not express the same thought. For, (1a) have the cognitive value which is different from the cognitive value of (1b). Here, (1b) is trivial whereas (1a) is informative. Similarly, (2a) and (2b) express different thoughts. We know that pleasure is pleasure or what we desire to desire is what we desire to desire are a priori by their nature. On the other hand, (1a) and (2a) are informative. In these cases, the following open questions may be raised: is pleasure good? or is what we desire to desire good? Such questions are intelligible or significant. We have to examine the world to see whether pleasure is good or not and whether what we desire to desire is good or not. That means that we have to discover whether pleasure

is good or not through experience. So, one can easily doubt whether pleasure is really good. On the contrary, there is no doubt whether pleasure is pleasure. Thus "good" and "pleasure" cannot be used interchangeably. In other words, good cannot be identical to pleasure or what we desire to desire. Hence, the proposed analysis or definition is not a correct analysis or definition of "good". The same explanation is true of any other attempt to define "good" by any other natural property. In this way the Open Question Argument tries to show that "good" is actually indefinable. The whole argument can be restated in the following argumentative way:

1. For any natural property N, it is possible that a competent user of the moral language can intelligibly or significantly ask whether N is 'good'.

2. For any natural property N, it is NOT possible that a competent user of the moral language can intelligibly or significantly ask whether N is N.

3. If (1) and (2), then for any natural property N, the proposition 'N is good' is not identical to the proposition 'N is N'.

4. If for any natural property N, the proposition 'N is good' is not identical to the proposition 'N is N', then for any natural property N, 'good' is not identical to N.

5. Thus, for any natural property N, 'good' is not identical to N.

6. Thus, 'good' cannot be analyzed by N.

7. Therefore, 'good' cannot be defined by N (by the definition of the *definition by property analysis*)

Here, it is important to note that although in the above discussion the OQA is sketched in a way that if any one try to define "good" by any natural property, then there will be a scope of open-question and hence his definition of "good" won't be a successful one. But that is not the whole story about the OQA. Moore actually goes far. He, rather, claims that "good" is not definable at all, not even in terms of non-natural properties, such as metaphysical properties, *e.g.* approval by God, divine commandments etc. He says:

> The hypothesis that disagreement about the meaning of good is disagreement with regard to the correct analysis of a given whole, may be most plainly seen to be incorrect by consideration of the fact that, whatever definition be offered, it may be always asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good.[7]

That means that if we try to define "good" in terms of any natural, non-natural, supernatural property, we will face the same problem. That is, there

cannot be any successful reductive definition of "good" (the only possible definition of "good" is "good is good") since whatever definition be offered, a competent user of the moral language will find the corresponding question intelligible and significant. That is why some commentators comment that the real target of Moore's OQA is reductionism rather than naturalism.[8] Whether naturalists or reductionists are the real target of Moore's OQA, the main prey of the OQA is undoubtedly any definition of "good" (other than the definition 'good is good') because the basic aim of the OQA is to show that "good" is indefinable property.

Moore's OQA receives huge criticisms from naturalists and reductionists. In this paper we cannot address most of those criticisms. But we will discuss three of them which are considered as the most important criticisms against the OQA. These are: (1) The *petitio* objection which claims that Moore's OQA begs the question against definists, *e.g.* naturalists, reductionists or anyone who offers a definition of "good". (2) The paradox of analysis objection which complains that the OQA is not compatible with the *solution* to the paradox. (3) The sense-reference objection that shows that such analyses which involve the so-called open-questions can still be correct (and informative too) analyses of their definiendums. Now, let us examine these objections.

First, consider the charge of *petitio*. The OQA points that reductionists identify some property, P, as identical with good. But, it is always an open-question whether or not P is identical with good. Thus P cannot be identical with good, and hence, by using P one cannot give a proper analysis or a successful definition of "good". The objectors find this method purely question begging. One cannot ask the question whether P is good unless one denies the analysis that "P is good". That is, before one asks the question whether a property is good, one must know that "good" is actually indefinable and the given analysis or definition which involves the property in question is mistaken.[9] Thus, the OQA first denies the truth of the initial analysis or definition, and then disproves it. In other words, Moore first rejects the definition or analysis of "good", and then, on the basis of that rejection he, by his OQA, disproves that definition or analysis of "good". Thus, it begs the question against the reductionist-definist whose proposed definition or analysis is on the table. Of course, a Moorean might argue that the OQA does not beg the question against the reductionist-definist, because the relevant open-question does not directly claim that the reductionist-definist's definition is false. What it claims is that there seems to be a valid question relevant to the proposed definition or analysis. This valid question is an open-question. Although this open-question finally disproves the truth of the proposed definition, it primarily does not

contradict the position of the reductionist-definist whose definition of "good" is under scrutiny, provided that the reductionist-definist also finds the question intelligible or significant.[10] And, Moore believes that as a competent user of the moral language a reductionist-definist must find the question intelligible and significant. Thus, the OQA, according to the Moorean analysis, disproves the truth of any definition of "good" without begging the question against the reductionist-definist's initial position.

I do not, however, find this Moorean reply against *petitio* objection convincing. I think that one cannot ask an open-question relevant to an analysis or definition without rejecting the initial definition or analysis. I cannot ask whether or not *x* is *y* without rejecting the assumption that "*x* is *y*". Such a question always involves a prior rejection of the initial assumption. As a competent user of language, I must know that it does not make any sense to ask "but is *x* really *y*?" after granting that "*x* is *y*". If I ask such an open-question after granting that "*x* is *y*", then I might not be a competent user of language. Similarly, a competent user of the moral language cannot ask an open-question against an analysis or definition of "good" without first rejecting the proposed analysis or definition. If one asks such an open-question after granting the proposed definition or analysis of "good", then, a tempestuous reductionist-definist may say, one is not a competent user of the moral language. Thus, we can affirm that the OQA commits the fallacy of *petitio principii* when it tries to prove that "good" is indefinable by showing that any definition of "good" involves open-questions.

Now consider the paradox of analysis objection. Some philosophers, such as Fumerton, Smith, Miller[11], suggest that the OQA is not compatible with the *solution* to the paradox of analysis. The paradox of analysis, roughly, states that an adequate analysis, in which the analysans and the analysandum are identical, is uninformative because one must know the meaning of analysans before one offers an analysis of the analysandum. That is to say, if an analysis is correct, then it is uninformative; and if an analysis is informative, then it is not correct. Smith formulates the paradox in the following way:

> The paradox is that, when we are looking for an analysis of a concept C, we are looking for a concept C* that will tell us something new and interesting about C, something we don't already know. The claims that C is analytically equivalent to C* must therefore be unobvious and informative in some way. But C* must also, on the other hand, really be analytically equivalent to C. C* must therefore some way already be contained in C. But in that case it cannot tell us something what we don't know

already, and cannot be informative. And that appears to be a contradiction.[12]

The OQA seems to support this paradox. The OQA suggests that if an analysis is correct, then there will be no scope of open-question to that analysis. A correct analysis can only involve closed-questions. In that sense, a correct analysis must be uninformative. Again, the OQA takes it to be a fact that a question relevant to an analysis is intelligible (*i.e.* open-question) is an indication of the incorrectness of that analysis. That means that the OQA supports the view that if an analysis is informative, then it is incorrect. In this way the OQA goes hand to hand with the paradox of analysis.

It would be a great advantage for the OQA if the paradox of analysis were a *real* paradox. But philosophers show that the paradox of analysis is in fact not a paradox at all.[13] In this paper there is no scope to discuss in details about how philosophers dissolve this paradox. But, here it needs to be mentioned that there are many analyses which are correct, yet informative—one can even ask open-questions to those analyses. An example of such an analysis might be the following one[14]:

(3) x is an uncle if and only if x is a male and has sibling who has a child.

This analysis is somewhat informative though an analysis like the following one which is equivalent to it might not be informative:

(4) x is an uncle if and only if x is an uncle.

Here, (3) and (4) are equivalent; and (3) states nothing that is not contained in (4). Thus, if (4) is correct—and it is obviously correct—then (3) must be correct. But we have seen before that (3) is informative. Thus, a correct analysis might be at the same time informative. Analogously, a definition or analysis of "good", *e.g.* "pleasure is good", might be correct even though it might be informative and might involve open-questions. That is, a naturalist might argue that:

(5) pleasure is good

does not contain anything that is not contained in

(6) pleasure is pleasure

though (5) might be informative and might involve open-questions. Now, (6) is obviously correct. Since (5) contains nothing that is not contained in (6), hence (5) is equivalent to (6). So, (5) is obviously correct. Thus, the presence of open-questions does not imply that a definition or analysis is not

a correct definition or analysis. In other words, there might be correct definitions of "good" despite the fact that those definitions may involve open-questions. In this way, the solution to the paradox of analysis works against Moore's OQA.

Gotolob Frege in his "On Sense and Reference" distinguishes between two different elements: sense and reference of a term. According to Frege a term expresses its sense and refers or denotes to its reference. By the sense of a term he means the mode of presentation of an object designated by that term. That means that the sense of a term is a way in which the object denoted by that term is presented.[15] Since some objects are presented to different individuals in different ways, the same term has different senses instead of having the same referent. In other words, two different senses can have the same referent. For example, "Hesperus" and "Phosphorus" denote the same object— the planet Venus. Thus, their referent is the same object, namely the planet Venus. On the other hand, Hesperus is presented to us as the brightest celestial object in the eastern horizon and Phosphorus is presented to us as the brightest celestial object in the western horizon. That is the sense of "Hesperus" is *the brightest celestial object in the eastern horizon* and the sense of "Phosphorus" is *the brightest celestial object in the western horizon*. Since "Hesperus" and "Phosphorus" have the same referent, we can infer that "Hesperus is Phosphorus", which states an identity relation between Hesperus and Phosphorus. This identity can only be discovered through experience. Moreover, a person who does not know this identity may easily ask whether Hesperus is really Phosphorus or not. That means that the identity between Hesperus and Phosphorus involves an open question or a series of open questions, *e.g.* "is Hesperus really Phosphorus?" and so on. Such open-questions will be intelligible and significant questions the answers of which can only be found through experience (that is, they involve *a posteriori* knowledge). Despite the presence of such open-questions the sentence "Hesperus is Phosphorus" is true. So it is clear that an open-question or a series of open questions does not deter any identity statement from being true.

Now return to our identity statement "pleasure is good". From the sense-reference distinction, we know that the same object can be presented to us in different ways. If we apply the sense- reference distinction to the identity between pleasure and good, we find that sometimes an object is presented to us in such a way that we call it pleasure and sometimes it is presented to us in such a way that we call it good. Thus, the property of being pleasure is identical with the property of being good, as they have the same referent. In other words, the property by which we define "pleasure" is identical with the property by which we define "good". This identity can be

discovered through experience. One can know that "good " and "pleasure" have the same referent like "Hesperus" and "Phosphorus" have the same referent, namely the planet Venus. Despite the possibility of raising open-question whether pleasure is really good or not, the identity statement "pleasure is good" can be true. The same is true in case of "good is what we desire to desire" and so on. So, a reductionist-definist can argue that the property by which he is defining "good" is identical to good though it might express a different sense than that of "good"; and by proper observation one can discover that the property in question and good are identical. Thus, it is clear that if a definition or analysis of "good" involves even some open-questions, it does not mean that the definition or analysis in question is incorrect or an unsuccessful attempt of establishing the identity between good and the property mentioned in the definition. As a result, Moore's Open Question Argument fails to show that good is indefinable.

From above discussions, we see, the first objection (the *petitio* objection) questions the validity of the OQA. It shows that the whole strategy of OQA is fallacious that commits the fallacy of *petitio principii*. The second (the paradox of analysis objection) and the third (the sense-reference objection) show that even if an analysis or definition of "good" involves open-questions, still the analysis can be informative and correct. In other words, an analysis of "good" may be a correct analysis of "good" which establishes an identity relation between "good" and the property mentioned in the analysans, despite the fact that such an analysis of "good" may involve some open-questions. That is, open-questions cannot block the possibility of proper analysis of "good". In other words "good" is definable and the OQA is not successful in this regard.

Notes and References:

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