

Moore's Open Question Maneuvering

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I. Metaethical Preliminaries

I consider metaethics to be a sub-branch of moral philosophy. Some of the most central questions in metaethical inquiry include the following:

- What are the natures of the meanings of moral terms?
- If there are such things as moral properties (rightness, wrongness, goodness, badness, etc.), what are their natures?

II. Moore's First Open Question Target: Metathetical Naturalism

Metaethical Naturalism: Fundamental moral predicates can be defined exclusively by way of some combination of purely naturalistic expressions. Moral properties are natural properties.

III. Moore's Contributions to the Metaethical Dialectic

Within §13 of *Principia Ethica* is contained Moore's most famous Open Question Arguments, and these arguments against metaethical naturalism have provoked puzzlement and controversy among philosophers ever since their inception. Several of Moore's contemporaries defended various forms of metaethical nonnaturalism—a doctrine Moore himself endorsed—by appeal to Open Question Arguments.¹

Metaethical Nonnaturalism: Fundamental moral predicates cannot be defined exclusively by way of some combination of purely naturalistic or metaphysical expressions. Moral properties are nonnatural properties.²

To this day, some contemporary cognitivists embrace the force of Moore's Open Question Arguments against metaethical naturalism.³ And noncognitivists (those who believe that moral terms do not have semantic meaning components)—as well as those who defend various hybrid accounts of moral terminology—have traditionally used Open Question Arguments to fuel their own emotivist, prescriptivist, and expressivist metaethical programs.⁴

¹ Ross (1930), pp. 8, 92-94, and his (1939), p. 27; the concluding chapter of Broad's (1930), Broad (1985), pp. 265f; and Ewing (1953), pp. 90f. Interestingly, Bertrand Russell found the Open Question Arguments very persuasive yet never explicitly committed himself in print to metaethical nonnaturalism. But perhaps the early Russell should be classified with the metaethical nonnaturalists nonetheless, for he admitted that he didn't disagree with anything in Chapter I of *Principia Ethica*. See his reviews of *Principia Ethica*—(1903) and (1904)—for details. Russell would later change his mind, finding metaethical noncognitivism more attractive than Moore's preferred position. Also see Kolnai (1980) for a slightly more contemporary metaethical nonnaturalist who has been influenced by Moore's Open Question Argument.

² Moore was unsuccessful in attempts to articulate this view and to distinguish natural properties from nonnatural properties. Moore admits as much on p. 13 of his "Preface to the 2nd Edition" of *Principia Ethica*: "But my attempts to define 'natural property' are hopelessly confused," implying that his attempts to distinguish natural from nonnatural properties are equally confused.

³ Horgan, T. and Timmons, M. (1992a) and (1992b), Gampel (1997), Lewy (1970), and, possibly, Prior (1949) and Rosati (1995).

⁴ Ayer uses an Open Question Argument to motivate emotivism in Ayer (1952), pp. 104f. While disputing that Moore's Open Question Arguments entail the impossibility of analytic reductions of fundamental ethical terms, Stevenson uses an Open Question Argument to establish that there is an emotive meaning component of such terms that cannot be captured by their analytic definitions; see Stevenson (1944), pp. 272f, and his (1963), pp. 15, 30, 134. Hare adopts an altered version of an Open Question Argument to bolster a prescriptivist metaethical program in his (1952), pp. 81-92. And recent writers use Moore's arguments to block metaethical quasi-realism and metaethical expressivism from naturalistic attacks. See Blackburn (1984), pp. 167-171, and his (1998), pp. 14f. Also see Gibbard (1984), pp. 200-206, as well as his (1985), p. 6, and his (1990), pp. 11, 16-17, 19-22, 118, and 186.

IV. Sturgeon's Interpretation

“Moore assumes (a) that each of the theories under attack will provide an explicit reductive identification for moral properties, such as “Goodness = conformity to the nature of the universe” or “Goodness = pleasure”; (b) that such property-identifications can be true only if the terms flanking the identity sign are synonymous for a competent speaker; and (c) that the terms can be shown *not* to be synonymous by the mere fact that a competent speaker could conceivably doubt the identity statement—by the fact, that is, that it remains an “open question” whether the identification is correct. Thus both simple doctrines fail simply on the grounds that doubt about them is imaginable.” Sturgeon (1992)

G=P: goodness = pleasure

1. It is possible that a competent speaker doubts that goodness is identical to pleasure.
2. It is not possible that a competent speaker doubts that pleasure is identical to pleasure.
3. If (1) and (2), then the proposition that goodness is identical to pleasure is not identical to the proposition that pleasure is identical to pleasure.
4. If the proposition that goodness is identical to pleasure is not identical to the proposition that pleasure is identical to pleasure, then goodness is not identical to pleasure.
5. Thus, goodness is not identical to pleasure.

The Generalized Version of the Argument

6. For any natural property N, it is possible that a competent speaker doubts that goodness is identical to N.
7. For any natural property N, it is not possible that a competent speaker doubts that N is identical to N.
8. If (6) and (7), then for any natural property N, the proposition that goodness is identical to N is not identical to the proposition that N is identical to N.
9. If for any natural property N, the proposition that goodness is identical to N is not identical to the proposition that N is identical to N, then for any natural property N, goodness is not identical to N.
10. Thus, for any natural property N, goodness is not identical to N.

V. Moore's Message

“It is very natural to make the mistake of supposing that what is universally true is of such a nature that its negation would be self-contradictory: the importance which has been assigned to analytic propositions in the history of philosophy shews how what seems to be a universal ethical principle is in fact an identical proposition; that, if for example, whatever is called ‘good’ seems to be pleasant, the proposition ‘Pleasure is the good’ does not assert a connection between two different notions, but involves only one, that of pleasure, which is easily recognised as a distinct entity. But whoever will attentively consider with himself what is actually before his mind when he asks the question ‘Is pleasure (or whatever it may be) after all good?’ can easily satisfy himself that he is not merely wondering whether pleasure is pleasant. And if he will try this experiment with each suggested definition in succession, he may become expert enough to recognise that in every case he has before his mind a unique object, with regard to the connection of which with any other object, a distinct question may be asked. Every one does in fact understand the question ‘Is this good?’ When he thinks of it, his state of mind is different from what it would be, were he asked ‘Is this pleasant, or desired, or approved?’ It has a distinct meaning for him, even though he may not recognise in what respect it is distinct.” (From §13 in *PE*)

GP: $\forall x(x \text{ is good} \supset x \text{ is pleasant})$.

P=G: The notion of pleasure is identical to the notion of goodness.

BH: $x \text{ is good} =df. x \text{ is pleasant}$

“Now, pleasure is in *itself* a good: nay, even setting aside immunity from pain, the only good: pain is in itself an evil; and, indeed, without exception, the only evil; or else the words good and evil have no meaning. And this is alike true of every sort of pain, and of every sort of pleasure.” Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*

Q1: Is pleasure pleasant?

Q2: Is pleasure good?

How should the term ‘pleasure’ in these questions be interpreted?

Q1’: Is the notion of pleasure (or: the property pleasantness) pleasant?

Q2’: Is the notion of pleasure (or: the property pleasantness) good? [“Property” or “Self-Predication Interpretation”]

Q1’’: Are all pleasant things pleasant?

Q2’’: Are all pleasant things good?

Is water wet?

Is chocolate tasty?

Is sugar sweet?

[“Nominative Counterpart of the Predicate” Interpretation]

A. Second set of questions in §13 of *PE*

B. From the “Preface to the 2nd Edition” of *Principia Ethica*:

“ . . . what I really mean to assert is that G is not identical with any predicate of *this particular* class, or that propositions which assert of predicates of *this* class, that what has them has G, are non-tautologous. They suggest, in fact, that G is not identical with any predicates, which are, *in a certain respect*, like ‘is a state of pleasure’ and ‘is desired’—that it is not identical with any predicates of *this sort*. . .” (1993b), p. 11.

A question is **open** just in case either (i) it is possible for a person to have a complete understanding of its meaning without knowing the correct answer to it or (ii) it makes sense as something to say as an expression of genuine doubt.⁵

“But whoever will attentively consider with himself what is actually before his mind when he asks the question ‘Is pleasure (or whatever it may be) after all good?’ can easily satisfy himself that he is not merely wondering whether pleasure is pleasant.” (§13 of *PE*)

1. Q1’’ is not open.
2. Q2’’ is open.
3. If (1) and (2), then Q1’’ differs in meaning from Q2’’.
4. If Q1’’ differs in meaning from Q2’’, then BH is false.
5. Therefore, BH is false.

Premise (2) is tricky, and subsequently, much more controversial than premise (1). Reflection upon Q2’’, Moore assures us, should somehow indicate the openness of the question. An understanding of its meaning doesn’t force

⁵ The concept of an open question has been described in a number of very similar ways. A question is an *open question* iff: “it is possible for a person to understand its meaning fully without knowing the correct answer” (Feldman 1978, p. 202); “it is possible for someone to completely understand the question, yet not know its answer” (Horgan and Timmons 1992b, p. 155); “it is not answerable merely by reference to a priori, analytic truths based on the meanings of the words involved” (Gampel 1997, p. 148); it is possible to doubt an affirmative answer to the question (Brink 1989, 152-153); “it makes sense as something to say in a serious discussion, as an expression of genuine doubt” (Lewis 1989, p. 130). And Stephen Ball captures the notion of an *open question* in this way: “The insight of Moore’s argument is that no matter what a naturalist takes P to be, one can recognize that a given x has P and yet still reasonably ask whether x is good or morally right—that is, this remains an ‘open question’” (Ball 1988, p. 197).

Other commentators on Moore’s Open Question Arguments—including Moore himself in his (1993b)—have eschewed discussion of open questions altogether, preferring to work with the similar, if not identical, concept of a “significant” question (or statement) instead. Most interpretations of Moore’s “significance” involve the concept of a contradiction or a tautology. For example, the question “Are all pleasant things good?” comes out as significant according to many interpreters just in case a negative answer to the question doesn’t imply a contradiction. This sort of employment of the notion of a significant question (or statement) in the construction of Moore’s arguments can be found in Prior (1949), p. 2; Ewing (1953), p. 91; White (1958), p. 126; and Putnam (1981), p. 206. Hancock (1960) distinguishes three notions of significance (the second being very similar to the notion employed by the other “significance” interpreters), suggesting that none of them will serve to establish Moore’s anti-naturalist conclusions.

us to provide an affirmative response to it *in the same way* that the trivial Q1'' does. In fact, philosophers have provided negative responses to Q2''.

Premise (3), though not immune from attack, is fairly plausible. It rests upon the principle that two questions differing with respect to which meaning-related properties they instantiate, differ in meaning. If Q2'' has the property of being open, something that Q1'' obviously lacks, then the two questions must have different meanings.

Premise (4) is justified by a substitution principle. The only difference between the two questions is that the second instance of the term 'pleasant' in Q1'' is substituted with the term 'good' in Q2''. Thus, assuming a straightforward principle of compositionality, if there's any difference in meaning between the two questions, it must be due to a difference in meaning between the terms 'pleasant' and 'good'. And any difference here obviously entails the falsity of BH.

Compositionality Slogan: "The meaning of a sentence (or question) is a function of the meanings of its parts."

Open Question Thesis: A sound Open Question Argument can be constructed against any naturalist interpretation of the fundamental ethical predicate(s).

VII. Rebuttal Points

1. Did Moore ever believe the predicate 'x is good' to be amenable to analysis? Synonyms, NEC, SUP, and shedding light on the concept. An interesting fact is that Moore believed the greatest goods to be pleasures of rational intercourse and aesthetic pleasures. Despite that, he continued to reject the claim that the concept of pleasure plays any salient role in the analysis (or explication) of the concept of intrinsic value.
2. Response to Gressis' "Open Question" Argument—It has nothing to do with open (and closed) questions, which suggests to me that it shouldn't be considered to be anyone's Open Question Argument. On my interpretation of Moore, Open Questions Arguments are utilized—in part—to support something like premise (1) of Gressis' argument. Also consider that other utilizers of OQAs aren't non-naturalists, though their mode of reasoning was similar to Moore's: Emotivists, Prescriptivists, Expressivists, Quasi-Realists, and a host of contemporary cognitivists including Horgan, Timmons, Gampel, and others.

VII. Responses to Various "Open Question" Concerns

"How does Moore know that it is never self-contradictory to deny sentences of the form 'Whatever is F [for some allegedly non-ethical expression 'F'] is good'? To say this is, after all, only another way of saying that 'F's are good' is not analytic. And this is precisely what the naturalist affirms. The hedonist, for example, will surely have no trouble with Moore's argument; having defined 'good' as 'pleasant' and holding that 'Whatever is pleasant is good' is analytic, he will simply reply that in point of fact it is self-contradictory to say that something is pleasant and yet not good. Moore would have no answer; at the very most his argument only pushes the dispute back a step, without doing anything to settle it." Hancock (1960)

"Every one does in fact understand the question 'Is this good?' When he thinks of it, his state of mind is different from what it would be, were he asked 'Is this pleasant, or desired, or approved?' It has a distinct meaning for him, even though he may not recognise in what respect it is distinct." (§13 of *PE*)

"But whoever will attentively consider with himself what is actually before his mind when he asks the question 'Is pleasure (or whatever it may be) after all good?' can easily satisfy himself that he is not merely wondering whether pleasure is pleasant." (§13 of *PE*)

The Open Question Phenomenon: The reason(s) that have influenced Moore and his sympathizers to deem questions like Q2'' to be open.

"Reacting against the apriorism of both the positivists and the ordinary-language philosophers, U. T. Place (1956) and J. J. C. Smart (1959) offered myriad instances of the a posteriori identification of properties: clouds, with

masses of tiny water droplets; water itself, with H₂O; lightning, with electrical discharge; temperature, with mean molecular kinetic energy; genes, with segments of DNA molecules; and so forth. Each of these identities was discovered empirically; none has anything to do with the synonymy of terms; each leaves “open questions” with a vengeance. An argument precisely parallel to Moore’s would show that clouds, water, lightning, temperature, and genes were nonnatural phenomena also. . . . I suppose that this is what comes of thinking of properties as predicate meanings, pure and simple. In any case, the Open Question Argument simply fails; it is bankrupt.” Lycan (1988): 200-1

Q3: Is anything that is water something that is water?

Q4: Is anything that is water something that is H₂O?

1. Q3 is not open.
2. Q4 is open.
3. If (1) and (2), then Q1 differs in meaning from Q2.
4. If Q1 differs in meaning from Q2, then the meaning of the predicate ‘x is water’ is not identical to the meaning of the predicate ‘x is H₂O’.
5. Therefore, the meaning of the predicate ‘x is water’ is not identical to the meaning of the predicate ‘x is H₂O’.

That the predicates ‘x is water’ and ‘x is H₂O’ differ in meaning but designate the same property serves as ammunition sufficient to undermine Moore’s Open Question strategies according to the invalidity critics. If ‘x is H₂O’ picks out a natural property and ‘x is water’ picks out the same property that ‘x is H₂O’ does, then, despite the differences between the meanings of the two predicates, no one should be led to believe that ‘x is water’ designates a *nonnatural* property.

Analogously, the invalidity critics argue that while we might have yet to discover the natural property that the predicate ‘x is good’ designates—and subsequently, a naturalistic predicate that might also be used to pick out that property—we have no reason to believe that ‘x is good’ picks out anything but a natural property.⁶ Here, the invalidity critics rest their case, concluding that Moore is unjustified in making his metaphysical “leap” from differences in meaning between ethical and apparently nonethical predicates to differences in the properties that those predicates designate.

The central assumption employed by the invalidity critics is that the predicate ‘x is water’ is suitably analogous to the predicate ‘x is good’. So, for example, if it could be shown that the predicate ‘x is good’ is not a natural kind predicate, then much of the force of the invalidity charge would be sapped.⁷

Here’s a reason to believe that ‘x is good’ is not a natural kind predicate: there is practically no agreement among competent language users about which of the items with which we are acquainted are included in the extension of ‘x is good’. Philosophers, among others, engage in heated disputes over which criterion identifies the extension of ‘x is good’. The same cannot be said about natural kind predicates. It’s doubtful that scientists argue over whether a sample of liquid is H₂O or whether a sample rock is gold. We’re all familiar with their superficial qualities, and we have reliable tests to adjudicate problematic samples. Molecular structure and atomic weight, respectively, serve as adequate extension identifying criteria for these predicates. To even suggest that a group of scientists can discover the “underlying essence” of goodness through a series of experiments—and thereby settle some of our moral disputes—appears misguided.

Furthermore, the referential intentions revealed through our use of natural kind terms are significantly different from those involved with our usage of ethical terminology. Eric Gampel, a contemporary critic of the invalidity charge, claims that *causal specification* is an essential characteristic of the referential intentions associated with our use of natural kind terminology:

⁶ This also seems to be the received view of a new breed of metaethical naturalists. See Sturgeon (1985), Boyd (1988), Brink (1989), Railton (1989), and Copp (1991).

⁷ Stephen Ball makes this point in his (1988):

[T]he objection is otiose if there is a more fundamental disanalogy between ethics and science: namely, if there is, in ethics, no further basis, beyond conceptual or linguistic considerations, for so identifying moral properties with, or “reducing” them synthetically to, natural or physicalistic ones. (202)

“[W]e intend to refer to an individual or kind which competent users understand primarily in terms of its causal role: as the thing I *see* over there, the thing whose name has been *passed on* to me, or the kind which is *causally responsible* for certain observable features (certain sensations of heat, or clearness and drinkability).”⁸

Contemplating the invalidity critics’ claim that ethical terms are causally regulated⁹ by certain natural properties, Gampel writes:

“[W]e are not normally intending to pick out such a causally regulative kind in our references to goodness and other moral kinds—if we were, then the discovery of the causal kind would answer our moral questions, and refute the moral skeptic. So while the primary purpose of our talk of water, temperature, and other natural kinds is to identify things that play certain causal roles in our lives, the same cannot be said about our use of ethical terms.”¹⁰

I stand in complete agreement with Gampel here.¹¹ These differences in referential intentions provide an adequate explanation for why the extension of ‘x is good’ is disputable in a way that the extensions of natural kind predicates are not. We intend to be meaning something different with our ethical terminology from what we intend to be meaning with our natural kind terminology.¹² The predicate ‘x is good’ is not used to pick out a so-called natural kind. Thus, no non-analytic (or *synthetic*) reduction of the fundamental moral predicate(s) appears possible.¹³

Metaethical Transcendentalism: Fundamental moral predicates can be defined exclusively by way of some combination of purely metaphysical (or “transcendental”) expressions. Moral properties are metaphysical (or “transcendental”) properties.¹⁴

2nd Open Question Thesis: A sound Open Question Argument can be constructed against any metaphysical interpretation of the fundamental ethical predicate(s).

Metaethical Noncognitivism: Moral predicates have no (semantic) meanings. Moral predicates do not designate properties in the same way that other predicates do.

⁸ Gampel (1997), pp. 156-7.

⁹ To say that ethical (or moral) terms are *causally regulated* by natural properties just means that “for moral terms, just as for names and natural kind terms, reference is a matter of there being certain causal connections between the use of moral terms and the relevant natural properties.” Horgan and Timmons (1992b).

See Boyd (1988), Horgan and Timmons (1992b), and Gampel (1997) for details.

¹⁰ Gampel (1997), p. 159.

¹¹ Thomas Baldwin makes a claim very similar to Gampel’s in his (1990), pp. 93-96.

¹² Eric Gampel reiterates this point in the conclusion of his interesting (1997):

We use ethical terms in non-rigid ways, taking the ordinary methods for assessing the evaluative status of acts and things, with their appeal to ordinary normative criteria, to be decisive, not intending to defer to what some other method (science) might discover about the actual samples we have found (if any). Given these prior referential intentions, the open question argument can stand as a serious challenge to ethical naturalism, despite the success of the naturalist strategy of synthetic a posteriori reduction in other areas. (161)

¹³ Other contemporary critics of the invalidity charge agree that moral predicates are not, in many respects, analogous to rigidly designating natural kind predicates. Horgan and Timmons, in their (1992a) and (1992b), use “Moral Twin Earth” thought experiments to pump certain semantic intuitions that cast doubt upon the claim that moral terms are analogous to natural kind terms.

Horgan and Timmons also make the following interesting observation:

Also, even if one grants causal regulation of moral terms by natural properties, it is still quite contentious whether any *single* natural property causally regulates the use of ‘good’ for humankind in general; likewise for other moral terms. (1992b), p. 175.

Given the heated disputes over which criteria identify the extensions of our moral predicates, Horgan and Timmons appear to be right on the mark here.

¹⁴ What Moore intended the phrases ‘metaphysical property’ and ‘transcendental property’ to mean in Chapter IV of *Principia Ethica* isn’t perfectly clear. Moore tries to clear things up in his “Preface to the 2nd Edition”:

In the first of these passages I insist that G is not identical with any ‘natural object’; and in the second I add that it is not identical either (1) with any ‘natural property’, nor (2) with any property of a class, which I obviously think of as properties which have the same relation to ‘supersensible objects’ as ‘natural properties’ have to ‘natural objects’. It seems, then, as if what I was wishing to say was that G is not either (1) a ‘natural object’ or (2) a ‘natural property’ or (3) what I will now call a ‘metaphysical property,’ meaning by that a property which has the same relation to a ‘supersensible object’ as a ‘natural property’ has to a ‘natural object.’ (*Principia Ethica* (1993), p. 12)

Metaethical Nonnaturalism: Fundamental moral predicates cannot be defined exclusively by way of some combination of purely naturalistic or metaphysical expressions. Moral properties are nonnatural properties.¹⁵

Since Moore associated properties with the meanings of predicates,¹⁶ he inferred from his Open Question Theses that the property of goodness can be neither a natural nor a metaphysical property. And metaethical noncognitivism was a *non-starter* for Moore—an absurd position.¹⁷ With three of the four metaethical possibilities knocked out of consideration, Moore concluded metaethical nonnaturalism to be the only viable option—the property of goodness must be a nonnatural property. It is to this series of inferences, and not to the Open Question Arguments themselves, that the invalidity critics object.¹⁸

Let **intensions** of one-place predicates be functions from worlds (or possibilities) to classes of individuals.

The **character** of an expression type is the meaning component that determines how the intension of a token of that expression type is picked out; characters are functions from contexts to intensions.

Recent developments in two-dimensional semantics indicate that differences in meaning between the predicates ‘x is water’ and ‘x is H₂O’ can be attributed to differences in character (or some similar competing function).¹⁹ The characters of the predicates pick out the same intension from any utterance in our world. But perhaps an utterance of the predicate ‘x is water’ in a different world expresses a different intension from that expressed by an utterance of ‘x is H₂O’ in that world.

Imagine a Twin Earth type world where most everything is the same as it is in our world except that the stuff Twin Earthlings are able to pick out in virtue of the very same stereotypical, superficial qualities with which we are able to pick out water can’t be characterized as H₂O. From utterances of ‘x is water’ in that world, it might be the case that the character of the predicate selects an intension different from that which is selected by the character of ‘x is H₂O’ in that world. In this way perhaps, differences in meaning between the two predicates can be established as well as semantic differences between ethical and various nonethical terms *if* ethical terms are suitably analogous to the natural kind terms that are somewhat popularly believed to be amenable to a semantic analysis along the lines of a Kripke-Putnam causal theory of reference.

Let **moral relativism** be the view that at least some fundamental moral predicate contains an indexical meaning component and thus has an unstable character. In different contexts, the character of some fundamental moral predicate is capable of picking out different intensions.

Let **moral absolutism** be the view that no fundamental moral predicates are indexical; their characters are perfectly stable, each picking out the same intension from any context.

Which semantic value-selecting functions are associated with which words in our language are determined, in part, by the role that these terms plays in our linguistic community; meaning is determined in part by use.²⁰

¹⁵ Moore was unsuccessful in attempts to articulate this view and to distinguish natural properties from nonnatural properties. Moore admits as much on p. 13 of his “Preface to the 2nd Edition” of *Principia Ethica*: “But my attempts to define ‘natural property’ are hopelessly confused,” implying that his attempts to distinguish natural from nonnatural properties are equally confused.

¹⁶ See Moore (1899) and Moore (1993b).

¹⁷ Since Moore doesn’t present any arguments against metaethical noncognitivism in *Principia Ethica*, it might be objected that Moore begs the question against the metaethical noncognitivist. But any blame that might be attributed to Moore on the basis of this maneuvering should be mitigated—at least in part—by the fact that, at the dawn of the 20th Century, noncognitivist metaethical programs had yet to arrive on the philosophical scene. In fact, 20th Century noncognitivists have fueled their metaethical programs with Moore’s Open Question strategy against metaethical naturalism.

For those interested in Moore’s “refutation” of metaethical noncognitivism in §13 of *Principia Ethica*, here it is:

There are, in fact, only two serious alternatives to be considered, in order to establish the conclusion that ‘good’ does denote a simple and indefinable notion. It might possibly denote a complex, as ‘horse’ does; or it might have no meaning at all. Neither of these possibilities has, however, been clearly conceived and seriously maintained, as such, by those who presume to define good; and both may be dismissed by a simple appeal to facts.

Moore never gets to the task of displaying the facts that would render metaethical noncognitivism untenable.

¹⁸ Note that even this series of inferences can be captured in a perfectly *valid* argument. Perhaps a premise or two would be considered questionable by many, but the validity—or lack thereof—of Moore’s argumentation does not seem to be the important issue at hand.

¹⁹ See Block and Stalnaker (1999), Chalmers (1996), Jackson (1998), and perhaps Davies and Humberstone (1981).

²⁰ See Lewis (1983c).

Ralph Wedgwood echoes these sentiments in his recent work on the semantics of ethical terms:

If the term's meaning is truth-conditional in this way, then the account must also explain why the term makes the contribution that it does to the truth conditions of sentences in which it appears (in more technical terms, why the term has the "semantic value" that it has). Since moral terms are predicates, we may also put this second point as follows: the semantic account must explain whether the moral term has the function of standing for a property or relation; and if the term has that function, the account must also explain what determines which property or relation (if any) the term stands for.²¹

The **role** of a term, *t*, very generally, is the set of semantic constraints placed upon *t* by a linguistic community, or perhaps in some cases by an individual, by way of the referential intentions utilized in the use of the term.

A **satisfier** of a role, *R*, is a pair of functions (character and intension) that adequately meets the semantic constraints established by *R*.

OQ1: A question is open just in case it is possible for a person to have a complete understanding of its meaning without knowing the correct answer to it.²²

OQ2: A question is open just in case it makes sense as something to say as an expression of genuine doubt.²³

An OQ2 interpretation seems perfectly capable of capturing the sense in which Q2 is open while Q1 is not. Q2 does seem to be something that makes sense to say as an expression of genuine doubt, whereas Q1 obviously doesn't. It's not at all obvious which among the available candidates is the satisfier (or, are the satisfiers) of the role of the predicate 'x is good'. In fact, as I mentioned in the last section, there is huge debate over what the role of the predicate even is. And even if the role of the predicate were nailed down, we might be less than 100% confident in our judgments concerning the nature(s) of the satisfier(s) of the role. Even if we were right about the relevant satisfier(s), we might, and most probably would, still harbor doubts. And the fact that most of us do—philosophers are constantly seeking out better possible candidates for the role—renders the question open.

This explanation of the Open Question phenomenon is consonant with C. L. Stevenson's view that to ask an open question "is to ask for *influence*," even though no appeal to noncognitive meaning components is being made.²⁴ Given some specification of the role of an ethical term, I might still ask for some influence concerning what the satisfier(s) of the role might be. In fact, I think that those engaged in normative ethics are busy arguing over whether some eligible candidate or other is or isn't a satisfier for the role of a specified ethical predicate.

The meanings of ethical terms can be distinguished from various nonethical terms by their distinct roles. Even if it turns out to be the case that certain ethical predicates are necessarily coextensive with various nonethical predicates, the fact that the very same intensions are picked out via different routes constitutes differences in meaning.

Moore shouldn't have concluded from his Open Question Arguments that ethical predicates pick out nonnatural properties, different in kind from the natural properties picked out by standard, descriptive predicates. On the assumption that some form of cognitivism is correct, ethical predicates have the same kinds of intensions—be they functions representing properties or properties themselves—that standard, descriptive predicates have; it's just that they're selected in different ways. I believe this explanation, combined with an account describing any noncognitivist meaning components that ethical terms might have, to be a very plausible explanation of the Open Question phenomenon in all of its guises.

Notice also that this explanation of the Open Question phenomenon should prove to be acceptable from a whole range of metaethical viewpoints. Relativists, causal theory of reference folks, and moral absolutists of every stripe can safely adopt the explanation. Their disputes concern the natures of the roles of ethical terms. "Open question" tensions have finally been eased.

Despite Moore's protests, the prospects of metaethical naturalism don't appear to be dampened by "open question" maneuvering. Moore has shown that the meanings of ethical predicates are not identical to the meanings of those like 'x is pleasant'. But if the proposed explanation of the Open

²¹ Wedgwood (2001), p. 5.

²² This appears to be the prevalent conception of an open question.

²³ This is David Lewis's version; see his (1989), p. 130. David Brink's version is very similar; see his (1989), pp. 152f.

²⁴ Stevenson (1963), p. 30.

Question phenomenon proves correct, then the intensions associated with a subset of such predicates might very well constitute *a part* of the meanings of various ethical predicates. Any successful naturalistic, semantic account of an ethical predicate will have to describe accurately the role and the satisfier(s) of the predicate in purely naturalistic terms. Neither Moore nor any of those influenced by his “open question” strategies has provided any serious reasons to suggest that this can’t be done.

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