

Philosophical Ethics: On G.E. Moore's Notion Of Good As An Indefinable Non-Natural Property**MOORE AND GOOD**

G.E. Moore insisted that if you relish a pleasure the pleasure is good but it does not follow that goodness is the pleasure. If justice is good it does not follow that goodness is justice. Substitute love or anything at all for justice and the same problem happens. This is the famous open question argument that Moore gave in his Principia Ethica.

So it becomes impossible to work out why say justice or love are to be valued. But the question of why is an extremely important one. The question is valuable but we don't know why. The conclusion of Moore is that value cannot be defined but just experienced. Your intuition tells you what to value. Your head or science cannot.

GOOD AND OBLIGATORY GOOD

Moore promoted the idea that goodness is a "non-natural property. What does that mean? That we know it by intuition and not by reason or science or anything else. We know it when we see it. His view is that though an action will have good elements, it does not mean that the action taken as a whole is good.

A process of elimination helps to support this view.

Good is not just pleasure.

It is not just a concept that we or I desire.

It is not just what is useful.

He said that liking something, desiring it or finding it useful has nothing to do with proving it is good. It is intelligible to ask if any good action really is good.

You will notice that good is unavoidable. Every action has some good in it and there is no avoiding it. The question is, is the action good overall? Does that make it obligatory?

And if it is a fact that action x is good, there is nothing about this that means we are obligated to do it. The naturalistic fallacy that Moore talks about means that you are saying that something being good makes it obligatory. It would be counter-intuitive to argue that just because it is a pleasure to eat carrot cake that it is obligatory to.

The process of elimination forces us to admit that we know what is good or ought to be done when we see it. It is about what we see.

I agree with Moore in this because obligation should not be necessary. We must do good spontaneously. An obligation implies force and threatens punishment if you don't comply. That is not good. The best person does good because it is beautiful and not because it is the rule. Obligatory good is incoherent.

GOD

If morality is based on and proceeds from intuition then it is not about God or anything.

A really good God will have the qualities we see as good. But it would be immoral to say the only thing that matters is this being. Our sense that love and beauty and justice are intrinsic values matters 100%. God cannot matter at all.

Morality is about good that you are obligated to do. Morality is based on intuition not God or religion. The following is hypothetical. If you have to destroy God to have a moral intuition then destroy God if there is no other way. It is obvious that if you have to kill God to save a baby then kill him. The notion that God and morality are somehow the same is ridiculous. And paradoxically, it is immoral!

WHY DO WE DESIRE THE GOOD?

Intuitionists argue that moral goodness is more than just usefulness or pleasure but that these help us see what is morally good.

But it is plain that we do not desire the moral good because of our intuition but because of the good things, pleasure and usefulness, that come with it. For example, you do not drink alcohol because you see it as somehow ethical but for the pleasure. How useful intuitionism is is not made clear by Moore. It is not very useful at all.

THE DANGER

For Moore, that which is intrinsically valuable or moral is simply ineffable. It cannot be defined but simply experienced and intuited. He argued that enjoying something is good but that that does not mean that good is enjoying something.

Intuitionism leaves you with no way to convince those who claim that what your intuition says is good is wrong. If morality is not about what is useful or enjoyable then how do you know it is morality? Your answer will be, "There is no way to know. I just know it. I don't know how I know it." But if you do that, what is to stop the next person arguing that he knows that robbing banks to raise money to kill drug dealers is right? What if your intuition says the morality you intuit need not be the same as what the next person intuits?

ought AND IS

If some action is good that does not imply you ought to do it.

Moore denied that ought implies is and said that it is a fallacy to think that what is morally good means that which is simply pleasant or useful or desirable.

Moore however held that to be moral, you must have moral goals. You may be unable to intuit that your action really is right but you will be able to intuit that the desired results are right. Moore was a consequentialist - for him morality is about having good goals. So the ethics is no good for telling you what specific action is right but it can only look at the intended outcome of the action. It asks if the goals of the action are good.

Our actions always involve means and ends. The means is what you do to accomplish something. What you are doing the action for is the end. Another word for end is goal. Some such as Ralph McInerny say that the doctrine that an ought does not imply an is forgets that the two are inseparable. They are two sides of the same coin. For example, the ought is about the function you have or something has. A clock ought to keep the time. The clock ought to keep the time because it is a clock. You ought to eat. You ought to eat because you are a human person. Your function is to be alive so you have to eat.

SCEPTICISM

Moore considered the argument that there is no evidence that the commonsense knowledge of the world that we claim makes sense. Many believe that the material world is an illusion or that it might be. He raised one hand saying, "Here is one hand". Then he lifted the other saying, "Here is another." He argued that those who question the reality of two hands are going by intuition when it makes more sense to follow the commonsense intuition that there are in fact two hands. What has this got to do with his ethics? Ethics has to start with the commonsense intuition that the world and you and other people are real. That is what matters even more than love can. Love is not possible without the intuition. So when ethics is based on an intuition that is another reason for arguing for intuitionism. It makes intuitionism a fact.

CONCLUSIONS

There is something appealing and right about a morality that is based on you spontaneously seeing that something is right instead of having to use God and other things to try and work it out. Intuitionism is superior to everything else in that sense.

But it is not very useful. The intuitionist cannot have a right to punish or control a person who says, true or false, that they intuit that murdering children is morally neutral or even right. If your morality is based on intuition that means you have to let others intuit morality differently.

But useful or not, if it is right it is right.

APPENDIX

Moore's paradox gives us a puzzle. Here it is, "It is raining but I do not believe it is raining." The problem is that the sentence is inconsistent but there is no logical contradiction between "It is raining" and "I don't believe that it is raining." To me the puzzle is consistent. It shows how one can fail to believe a fact.