

# **An Attempt to Defend the Open Question Argument**

Chen Xia

Graduate Research Colloquium

November 5, 2021

Abstract. G. E. Moore puts forward the Open Question Argument to show that moral properties cannot be reduced to natural or non-moral properties. As a famous non-naturalistic point of view, the Open Question Argument has received many criticisms. I think this view is still weighty in challenging naturalism and I will attempt to defend it.

## **I. Open Question Argument**

(This part is mainly from Mark van Roojen's handout)

### **<First Reconstruction of the OQA>**

Key sentence: "...whatever definition be offered, it may always be asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good." (G. E. Moore, Principia Ethica, 13)

1. When we ask, "Is that which we desire to desire good?" the question is meaningful or open. It expresses a question about which we may be in doubt. (Premise)
2. When we ask, "Is what we desire to desire what we desire to desire?" the question is closed and not meaningful. That is we don't express a genuine question we have about which we are in doubt. (Premise)
3. An analysis of a concept captures the contribution of that concept to the contents of thoughts in which they occur. (Premise)
4. If we analyze good or goodness as what we desire to desire, the question in 1 above should be analyzed as asking something equivalent to, "Is what we desire to desire what we desire to desire?" (From 1 and 3)
5. If one can meaningfully use a sentence to express a thought, one can meaningfully use any sentence which would be used in giving a correct analysis of the contents expressed by the first sentence to express the same thought. (Premise)
6. Thus, 'Is what we desire to desire what we desire to desire?' is not a correct analysis of 'Is what we desire to desire good?' (From 4 and 5)
7. Thus also, that such and such is good is not the same thought as the thought that such and such is what we desire. (From 3 and 6)

## <Second Reconstruction of the OQA>

Key sentence: "...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."

- A. Moore wonders whether pleasure is good. (Premise)
- B. When you wonder whether something is good you don't believe that it is good. (Premise)
- C. Moore does not believe pleasure is good. (From A & B)
- D. Moore believes that goodness is good. (Premise)
- E. So, goodness and pleasantness differ in respect of what Moore believes about them. (He believes that one is good, but he isn't sure about the other.)
- F. But by the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals, if X is identical with Y, then X and Y are indiscernible, that is they have all their properties in common. (Premise – sometimes known as *Leibniz's Law* or one of *Leibniz's Laws* – the *indiscernibility of identicals*.)
- G. Thus goodness and pleasantness are distinct. (From E & F)

## II. Criticisms of the OQA

(1) What is a meaningless question? Does analytic equivalency lead to meaninglessness? Can questions like "Is a bachelor a single man?" be meaningful?

Moore has several terms here: meaningful, open, intelligible. This incurs more worries since what these terms mean is not clear and people might understand these terms in different ways. For me, the question above is meaningful and intelligible, but it is not open.

(2) It is possible that two terms with different meanings can still have the same reference (i. e. water and H<sub>2</sub>O).

Earth vs. twin-earth:

a. On earth the stuff in our lakes, rivers and streams is composed of H<sub>2</sub>O. The use of the word 'water' is our current usage.

b. On Twin-earth stuff very much like water in its visible properties and in the roles it plays in the lives and experience of the inhabitants fills the lakes, rivers, and streams. However, the underlying chemical composition of the stuff is XYZ. People use the term 'water' to refer to the stuff in their lakes, rivers, and streams.

[It is a counter example showing that water and H<sub>2</sub>O have different meanings as well as different references.]

(3) It hastily generalizes from a few instances properties.

(4) The property of goodness itself can be considered a natural property.

A natural property is a property which is completely investigatable by natural science, meaning physics, psychology or the like.

## **Appendix**

G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 13

(1) 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 may be offered, it may always, be asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good. 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 to desire A? Moreover any one can easily convince himself by inspection that the predicate of this proposition—good—is positively different from 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 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, shews clearly that we have to different notions before our mind.