

Lecture Notes 1 : Is-Ought and Moral Naturalism

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Glaucon's conventionalism and the *Euthyphro* problem.

Is-Ought

Justice is, at least in part, a normative term: it tells us how things ought to be, not how things are. Syllogisms such as this one:

(1) Punching B causes B pain.

∴ (2) Punching B is bad.

are invalid. Claims like (1) are descriptive, claims like (2) are evaluative.

What we need is the addition of an evaluative major premise:

(1) Punching B causes B pain.

(3) Causing pain is bad.

∴ (2) Punching B is bad.

Hume's law:

There is no valid argument in which all the premises are non-evaluative and in which the conclusion is evaluative.

Moorean Naturalism

A property is natural if and only if it is 'the subject-matter of the natural sciences and also of psychology'. (Moore 1993, 92)

(4) x is [pleasant, satisfies desires, guarantees social stability, ...].

∴ (5) x is good.

The Open Question Argument (OQA)

Closed questions: 'is x, who is a bachelor, unmarried?' (answer in virtue of meaning of terms) vs.

Open questions: 'is x, which is a chair, yellow?'

(6) 'is x, which is N, good?'

where N is some natural property, or set of natural properties.

The Naturalistic Fallacy

Moore claims that:

- (7) All questions like (6) are open, and infers:
- (8) Any and all attempts to define goodness in terms of *N* are fallacious.

Is this really a *naturalistic* fallacy?

Moore thinks he shows the good is indefinable, like 'yellow', or logical connectives '&' and '¬'. If he is right, then his argument does not extend to properties in *N alone*. Consider:

- (9) 'is sleep, which the Gods command, good?'

Is this really a *fallacy*?

Inference from (4) to (5) invalid. But uncharitable to call any argument missing major premise a fallacy.

This argument is valid:

- (10) If something is [pleasant, satisfies desires, guarantees social stability,...] then it is good.
 - (4) x is [pleasant, satisfies desires, guarantees social stability].
- ∴ (6) x is good.

Moore's OQA purports to show that 'is' in (10) cannot express an *identity* condition.

What's a 'definition'?

Moore (1993, 72) writes: 'when a definition is correct, the very meaning of the terms decide it.'
But what about:

- (11) Water is H₂O.

In other words, this question is open:

- (12) 'is x, which is water, H₂O?'

Study questions

Does Moore's OQA argument refute naturalism?
Can you derive an 'ought' from an 'is'?

Further Reading

Fisher, A. *Metaethics*, Ch. 1.
Frankena, W. *Ethics*, Ch. 6.