

# Handout for G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica*

## Summary of the Problem and the Intendent Solution

**Problem:** According to G.E. Moore, much of the ethical philosophy prior to his own has suffered from a lack of clear and rigorous thinking. Moore sees his project in *Principia Ethica* as rectifying this problem, and this is precisely the problem he sets out to solve in Chapter 1. He intends to solve this problem by introducing the concept of the “naturalistic fallacy” and explaining how this fallacy has led his predecessors astray. By introducing the “naturalistic fallacy”, Moore hopes to provide future philosophers with the tools to avoid this fallacy and therefore make actual progress in ethical philosophy.

**Solution:** Moore’s solution is to first identify and explain the **naturalistic fallacy**. Once this fallacy has been brought to light, Moore will explain how this fallacy has led to a lack of progress in moral philosophy. By identifying this fallacy, Moore hopes to provide the tools necessary to avoid it.

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## What is the Naturalistic Fallacy?

**The Naturalistic Fallacy:** In the context of ethics, the naturalistic fallacy is the mistake of identifying the property of goodness with any natural property. The term “natural property” refers to a property that is part of the natural world and can be studied by methods of empirical science. Examples of natural properties include the property of being blue, the property of being 2 feet in length, or the property of being 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

Moore explains the naturalistic fallacy by way of an analogy:

When a man confuses two natural objects with one another, defining the one by the other, if for instance, he confuses himself, who is one natural object, with ‘pleased’ or with ‘pleasure’ which are others, then there is no reason to call the fallacy naturalistic. But if he confuses ‘good’, which is not in the same sense a natural object, with any natural object whatever, then there is a reason for calling that a naturalistic fallacy...(page 65)

Here is another way of explaining the naturalistic fallacy. It is the mistake of equating the property of being good with any property that is definable. Moore thinks that we have a basic, immediate intuition of goodness. We cannot define goodness in terms of any other property, because the property of goodness is not complex. It is what Moore calls a “simple notion”.

Moore explains:

Let us consider what it is such philosophers say. And first it is to be noticed that they do not agree among themselves. They not only say that they are right as to what good is, but they endeavor to prove that other people who say that it is something else, are wrong. One, for instance, will affirm that good is pleasure, another, perhaps, that good is that which is desired; and each of these will argue eagerly to prove that the other is wrong. But how is that possible? One of them says that good is nothing but the object of desire, and at the same time tries to prove that it is not pleasure. (page 62)

Moore thinks that the property of goodness is like the property of yellowness. Yellowness is a simple notion. We have a basic, immediate intuition of yellowness. We cannot define it in terms of any other property. We might try to define it by talking about the physics of light. We might say that the color yellow is identical to light waves with a wavelength of between 570 and 590 nanometers. But this would not be correct. It is not how we perceive yellow. We perceive yellow directly. We do not perceive yellow by way of perceiving wavelengths first.

Moore thinks that goodness is not a natural property. This means that we cannot give a definition of goodness by identifying goodness with some natural property. This is precisely what Moore accuses many of his predecessors of doing. Some have said that goodness is identical to the property of being pleasurable. Others have said that goodness is identical to the property of being desired. Moore thinks that all of these attempts to define goodness fail.

Moore thinks that we have a basic, immediate intuition of the property of goodness. We do not need to define it. In fact, we cannot define it. This is because the property of goodness is not identical to any natural property. It is not identical to the property of being pleasurable. It is not identical to the property of being desired. It is not identical to any other property.

Moore writes:

If I am asked 'What is good?' my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked 'How is good to be defined?' my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it. But disappointing as these answers may appear, they are of the very last importance. (page 58)

Moore thinks that the naturalistic fallacy has been a serious problem in the history of ethics:

It is a very simple fallacy indeed. When we say that an orange is yellow, we do not think our statement binds us to hold that 'orange' means nothing else than 'yellow,' or that nothing can be yellow but an orange...Why, then, should it be different with 'good'? Why, if good is good and indefinable, should I be held to deny that pleasure is good? Is there any difficulty in holding both to be true at once? On the contrary, there is no meaning in saying that pleasure is good, unless good is something different from pleasure. (page 66)

Moore thinks that we should avoid the naturalistic fallacy. We should not try to define goodness. We should simply accept that goodness is a basic, indefinable property. Moore thinks that this is

the key to making progress in ethics.

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## Two Kinds of Ethical Judgments

Moore states that there are two, and only two, kinds of ethical judgments.

- **Judgments of intrinsic value:** These judgments state that a thing is good in itself. For example, the judgment “pleasure is good” is a judgment of intrinsic value. It states that pleasure has the property of goodness.
- **Causal judgments:** These judgments state that a thing is good as a means to something else. For example, the judgment “exercise is good” is a causal judgment. It states that exercise is a means to health, and that health is good in itself.

Moore thinks that it is important to distinguish between these two kinds of judgments. He thinks that many ethical philosophers have confused them. For example, some philosophers have argued that we should do what is good as a means to happiness. But Moore thinks that this is a mistake. He thinks that we should do what is good in itself.

Moore also thinks that it is important to distinguish between intrinsic value and causal relation. He thinks that many ethical philosophers have confused these two concepts. For example, some philosophers have argued that something is good because it is possible. But Moore thinks that this is a mistake. He thinks that something is good in itself, regardless of whether it is possible.

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## Organic Wholes / Emergent Value

Moore also discusses the concept of **organic wholes**. An organic whole is a whole whose value is not equal to the sum of the values of its parts. For example, a beautiful painting is an organic whole. The value of the painting is not equal to the sum of the values of the canvas, the paint, and the brushstrokes. The value of the painting is greater than the sum of the values of its parts.

Moore thinks that the concept of organic wholes is important for ethics. He thinks that many ethical philosophers have ignored this concept. For example, some philosophers have argued that the value of a society is equal to the sum of the values of its members. But Moore thinks that this is a mistake. He thinks that the value of a society can be greater than the sum of the values of its members.