

George Edward Moore (1875-1958)

### Naturalistic fallacy:

deduction of an *ought* from an *is* - David Hume (1711-1776)

in order to define good (value) someone uses natural (ontological, metaphysical) properties :  
hedonism, utilitarianism, ethical rationalism

the naturalistic fallacy consists in identifying the simple notion which we mean by 'good' with some other notion

According to Moore:

1. We should distinguish between moral and non-moral properties
2. "Good" is a simple notion
3. It is impossible to define "good"; only complex things can be defined
4. To recognise the naturalistic fallacy one must use "the open question argument": "for any definition of "good"—"good(ness) is X"—it makes sense to ask whether goodness *really is* X, and whether X *really is* good. For instance, if we say "goodness is pleasure," it makes sense to ask, "is goodness really pleasure?" and "is pleasure truly good?" (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy).
5. But, we can feel good I recognise it in this way.
6. Moore is a representative of intuitionism in ethics.
7. It is impossible to define "good" but it is possible to define good things.
8. The question "What does 'good' mean?" is primary and basic for all ethics.

"Principia ethica" (1903)

"§ 7.

Let us, then, consider this your position. **My point is that good is a simple notion, just as yellow is a simple notion; that, just as you cannot, by any manner of means, explain to anyone who does not already know it, what yellow is, so cannot explain what good is.** Definitions of the kind that I was asking for, definitions which describe the real nature of the object or notion denoted by a word, and which do not merely tell us what the word is used to mean, are only possible when the object or notion in question is something complex. **You can give a definition of a horse, because a horse has many different properties and qualities, all of which you can enumerate. But when you have enumerated them all, when you have reduced a horse to his simplest terms, you can no longer define those terms. They are simply something which you think of or perceive, and to anyone who cannot think of or perceive them, you can never, by any definition, make their nature known.** It may perhaps be objected to this that we are able to describe to others, objects which they have never seen or thought of. We can, for instance, make a man understand what a chimera is, although he has never heard of one or seen one. You can tell him that it is an animal with a lioness's head and body, with a goat's head growing from the middle of its back, and with a snake in place of its tail. But here the object which you are describing is a complex object; it is entirely composed of parts, with which we are all perfectly familiar—a snake, a goat, a lioness; and we know, too, the manner in which those parts are to be put together, because we know what is meant by the middle of a

lioness's back, and where her tail is wont to grow. **And so it is with all objects not previously known, which we are able to define: they are all complex; all composed of parts, which may themselves, in the first instance, be capable of similar definition, but which must in the end be reducible to simplest parts, which can no longer be defined. But yellow and good, we say, are not complex: they are notions of that simple kind, out of which definitions are composed and with which the power of further defining ceases. (§ 7 ¶ 1)**"

"§ 10.

Good, then, if we mean by it that quality which we assert to belong to a thing, when we say that the thing is good, is incapable of any definition, in the most important sense of that word. The most important sense of definition is that in which a definition states what are the parts which invariably compose a certain whole; and in this sense good has no definition because it is simple and has no parts. It is one of those innumerable objects of thought which are themselves incapable of definition, because they are the ultimate terms of reference to which whatever is capable of definition must be defined. That there must be an indefinite number of such terms is obvious, on reflection; since we cannot define anything except by an analysis, which, when carried as far as it will go, refers us to something, which is simply different from anything else, and which by that ultimate difference explains the peculiarity of the whole which we are defining: for every whole contains some parts which are common to other wholes also. There is, therefore, no intrinsic difficulty in the contention that good denotes a simple and indefinable quality. There are many other instances of such qualities.<sup>1)</sup>"

**"Consider yellow, for example. We may try to define it, by describing its physical equivalent; we may state what kind of light-vibrations must stimulate the normal eye, in order that we may perceive it. But a moment's reflection is sufficient to shew that those light-vibrations are not themselves what we mean by yellow.** They are not what we perceive. Indeed, we should never have been able to discover their existence, unless we had first been struck by the patent difference of quality between the different colours. The most we can be entitled to say of those vibrations is that they are what corresponds in space to the yellow which we actually perceive. (§ 10 ¶ 2)"

**"Yet a mistake of this simple kind has commonly been made about good. It may be true that all things which are good are also something else, just as it is true that all things which are yellow produce a certain kind of vibration in the light. And it is a fact, that Ethics aims at discovering what are those other properties belonging to all things which are good. But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good; that these properties, in fact, were simply not other, but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call the naturalistic fallacy and of it I shall now endeavour to dispose. (§ 10 ¶ 3)".**

"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.** Supposing the orange is also sweet! Does that bind us to say that sweet is exactly the same thing as yellow, that sweet must be defined as yellow? And supposing it be recognised that yellow just means yellow and nothing else whatever, does that make it any more difficult to hold that oranges are yellow? Most certainly it does not: on the contrary, it would be absolutely meaningless to say that oranges were yellow unless yellow did in the end mean just yellow and nothing else whatever— unless it was absolutely indefinable. We should not get any very clear notion about things, which are yellow—we should not get very far with our science, if we were

bound to hold that everything which was yellow, meant exactly the same thing as yellow. We should find we had to hold that an orange was exactly the same thing as a stool, a piece of paper, a lemon, anything you like. We could prove any number of absurdities; but should we be the nearer to the truth? 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. It is absolutely useless, so far as Ethics is concerned, to prove, as Mr Spencer tries to do, that increase of pleasure coincides with increase of life, unless good means something different from either life or pleasure. He might just as well try to prove that an orange is yellow by shewing that it is always wrapped up in paper. (§ 12 ¶ 1)”

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951): A Letter on Ethics:

“Used in this way these expressions don't present any difficult or deep problems. But this is not how Ethics uses them. Supposing that I could play tennis and one of you saw me playing and said "Well, you play pretty badly" and suppose I answered "I know, I'm playing pretty badly but I don't want to play any better," all the other man could say would be "Ah, then that's all right." But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said, "You're behaving like a beast" and then I were to say "I know I behave badly, but then I don't want to behave any better," could he then say "Ah, then that's all right"? Certainly not; he would say "Well, you ought to want to behave better." Here you have an absolute judgment of value, whereas the first instance was one of relative judgment.

The essence of this difference seems to be obviously this: Every judgment of relative value is a mere statement of facts and can therefore be put in such a form that it loses all the appearance of a judgment of value: Instead of saying "This is the right way to Granchester," I could equally well have said, "This is the right way you have to go if you want to get to Granchester in the shortest time"; "This man is a good runner" simply means that he runs a certain number of miles in a certain number of minutes, etc. Now what I wish to contend is that, although all judgments of relative value can be shown to be mere statement of facts, no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgment of absolute value. [...]

Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it. ”

“That we cannot write a scientific book, the subject matter of which could be intrinsically sublime and above all other subject matters. I can only describe my feeling by the metaphor, that, **if a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world.** Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, natural meaning and sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water and if I were to pour out a gallon over it . . . ”