

Topics in Metaethics: G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* – Responses and Ancestors

Course Description

G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903) is the starting-point of contemporary meta-ethics. In particular, two arguments have stirred much controversy: the so-called Naturalistic Fallacy and the Open Question Argument. Hardly anyone is convinced that Moore's arguments are compelling as they stand. And yet almost everyone thinks that, in formulating an ethical theory, one should bear in mind lessons learnt from thinking about Moore's views. In brief, Moore's proposal is that the property good cannot be defined, and that traditional definitions which identify good with a natural property such as 'pleasant' fail. Moore proposes the following thought experiment. Suppose someone says "The good is the pleasant. Now, X is pleasant." Then one can ask "But is X good?" – this question, Moore says, is 'open', even for the person who thinks that the good is the pleasant; it appears to be a question that one can plausibly ask. But if it is assumed that "the good is the pleasant," then it shouldn't be an open question.

Since Moore's *Principia Ethica* appeared, a number of questions have come into progressively sharper focus. Philosophers now distinguish, for example, between analytic and synthetic naturalism; they try to put into clearer terms what it means that a question is 'open'; whether there are cases in which the Open Question Argument does not indicate a failure to have offered a correct definition; they discuss what it means to classify a property as 'natural'; what it means to think that 'good' is unanalyzable or indefinable; and so on. There are a number of further ideas in Moore's book that have influenced contemporary meta-ethics tremendously. For example, there is Moore's notion of 'intrinsic goodness' which has been picked up by many philosophers, including those who otherwise disagree with Moore.

The seminar will consist of close readings of several sections of the *Principia Ethica*, combined with contemporary responses and discussions of central questions raised by Moore. It also includes interpretation of Plato's *Philebus*, which Moore seems to have thought of very highly, comparing his own views to those of Plato.

Requirements

Prerequisites: For all students who are not Philosophy graduate students: please email me before registering.

Presentation: One short (10 min.) presentation.

In-class participation: It is essential to do the readings prior to the class for which they are assigned. All students are expected to participate in in-class discussion.

Writing: None if you are done with requirements or if you are taking the class for R-credit. For students taking the class for E-credit, there are two options:

1. A term paper (15-20 pages). Please contact me about your topic no later than 3 weeks before the end of the semester. A draft must be submitted at the last class meeting. The paper is due a week after the last class meeting.
2. Two short papers (10 pages). Papers should either be response papers to individual readings, or engage with a question that is discussed in 2-3 readings. I'm happy to provide input on possible topics as we go along. The papers are due by the end October and at the last class meeting early December. If you would like to write two papers on closely related topics, please contact me for advice.

Outline of Readings and Topics

1: Moore, *Principia Ethica* Chapter I “The Subject Matter of Ethics”

Defining the good

The Naturalistic Fallacy

The Open Question Argument

Additional Readings:

Robert Audi, “Intuition, Inference, and Rational Disagreement in Ethics,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11 (2008): 475-492.

2: Some Influential Responses

William Frankena, “The Naturalistic Fallacy,” *Mind* 48 (1973): 464-477.

Connie S. Rosati, “Agency and the Open Question Argument,” *Ethics* 113 (2003): 490-527.

Nicholas L. Sturgeon, “Moore on Ethical Naturalism,” *Ethics* 113 (2003): 528-556.

3: Scanlon and Moore

T. Scanlon, Chapters “Reasons” and “Values” in *What We Owe To Each Other* (2000). [Robbie Kubala]

Jonathan Dancy, “What do reasons do?” in *Metaethics After Moore*, eds. Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, (OUP 2006). [Carolyn Perry]

Philip Stratton-Lake and Brad Hooker, “Scanlon versus Moore on Goodness,” in *Metaethics After Moore* (OUP 2006).

Additional Readings:

G.E. Moore, “The Conception of Intrinsic Value” (1922) <<http://www.ditext.com/moore/intrinsic.html>>

Stephen Darwall, “Moore, Normativity, and Intrinsic Value,” *Ethics* 113 (2003): 468-

T. Scanlon, “Metaphysics and Morals” (2003)

Michael J. Zimmermann, “The Good and the Right” (2007)

Sam Scheffler, “Valuing,” *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T. M. Scanlon*, R. Jay Wallace, Rahul Kumar, and Samuel Freeman, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 23-42.

4: What kind of property is “good”?

Peter Geach, “Good and Evil,” *Analysis* 17 (1956): 32-42 <<http://fair-use.org/peter-t-geach/good-and-evil>>

Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defense of Conceptual Analysis* (1998) (selections from chapters 4 and 5) [Nicholas Engel]

Stephen Yablo, “Red, Bitter, Best,” <<http://www.mit.edu/~yablo/rbb.html>>

5: The property “good”, continued

Horgan & Timmons, “Troubles on Moral Twin Earth: Moral Queerness Revived,” *Synthese* 92 (1992): 221-260.

Brink, “Realism, Naturalism, and Moral Semantics” (2001)

6: Dispositional accounts of value and the property “what one desires to desire”

Michael Smith, David Lewis, and Mark Johnston, “Dispositional accounts of value” (1989)

7: What kind of property is “pleasant”?

M. Zimmermann, “On the Intrinsic Value of States of Pleasure,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 41 (1980): 26-45. [Ryan McElhany]

Thomas Nagel, *A View From Nowhere* (selections on pleasure and pain)

8: Plato's *Philebus* (selections I)

What is pleasure? [Giulia Bonasio]

9: Plato's *Philebus* (selections II)

Sabina Lovibond, "True and False Pleasures," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 90 (1989/90): 213-230. [Adam Johnson]

10. Plato's *Philebus* (selections III)

Is there a difference between the human good and the good? Does the property good supervene on properties like symmetry, order, proportionality? [Usha Nathan]

11: Moore on super-natural and metaphysical properties

Principia Ethica §§ 66-71 [Dorothy Chen]

12: Intrinsic Goodness

Stephen Darwall, "Moore, Normativity, and Intrinsic Value," *Ethics* 113 (2003): 468-489.

Christine Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness" [Ashraf Ahmed]

Robert Audi, "Intrinsic Value and Reasons for Action," in *Metaethics After Moore* (OUP 2006).