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**What is “good”?**

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## An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
Athens Institute for Education and Research

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## **What is “good”?**

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### **Abstract**

“The first proposition of the Tractatus, with the assertion that the world is everything that is the case, has important philosophical consequences. The most important of these is that values are excluded from the world.” (Sluga 2011, 51)

How can we understand this with the philosophical consequences and the values? G.E. Moore should be considered in a first step for reading than Wittgensteins lecture about ethics.

Moore's ethic is described as ethical realism and he has an anti-position towards the naturalistic ethic. With ethical realism is meant, to reduce “good” is not possible and in Moore's consciousness “good” is not described by any defineable evaluative quality. He wins norms and consciences through the utilitarianism, where an act is than good, if the most best “good” might be won for all participians. In correlation towards this we do not know the consequences of our habits because they are too difficult. (Quante 2011,99) The naturalistic ethic is attacked by Moore in that way that in the theories of the naturalistic ethic “good” has a natural quality without desire and to be “good” means to have this quality. You can also “good” substitute through another quality. Moore has here an anti-position. (Quante 2011, 110)

Moore shows himself as a good rhetor, agitating with language games and mind games.

**Keywords:**

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### **G.E. Moore – defining “good” and the naturalistic fallacy**

Moore considers the using of the word “good” for a possible definition and he has fast the conclusion, that “good” is a simple notion like “yellow” and it’s not definable like a horse. “Good” is incapable of any definition because it has to be used for definitions. In corelation to this we have the question, if “good” exists as an unique universal or in its concrete circumstances. (Moore 1966, 9)

“It is one of those innumerable objects of thought which are themselves incapable of definition, because they are the ultimate terms by reference to which whatever is capable of definition must be defined.” (Moore 1966, 9/10)

Moore sees here different ways for treating the dilemma. On the one hand he suggestes a real definition for yellow, which you can’t find for “good” either. On the other hand he criticises the common way of philosophy doing the mistake of the naturalistic fallacy.

The real definition:

“Consider yellow for example. We may try to define it, by describing its physical equivalent; we may state what kind of light-vibration must stimulate the normal eye, in order that we may perceive it.”(Moore 1966, 10)

The naturalistic fallacy is characterised by Moore so: we shouldn’t use terms easily, for exampel an orange which is yellow and sweet shouldn’t bring us to the conclusion that sweet and yellow are equivalent.

“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’?” (Moore 1966, 14)

This has been the fault of earlier moral philosophers in a transmitting way. The naturalistic ethic shows no real reason for a scientific ethic, the naturalistic ethic is closer to be the cause of a missed ethic. (Moore 1966, 21) Moore shows an argument towards the hedonism to do the mistake of the naturalistic fallacy.

Moore’s ethic turns against the naturalistic fallacy and shows an anti-position there to and he tries to find different arguments for contradicting the naturalistic fallacy. In doing so he attacks common ethics bringing “good” in correlation with similar terms and trying to explain “good” with synonyms like “pleasure”, or “desire”. On the one hand you might explain “yellow” with a real definition because of using a physical equivalent but on the other hand you can’t do this in the same way with “good”.

To give a rundown of this remembers us towards the lexicography and convinces too less. One possibility would be to have a close look on the way of using words by the people. Which means how people are using the word “good” in general, because it doesn’t make sense defining words far away from their common meaning. Moore shows here himself as the common sense theoreticer as he is well known.

The past ethics weren’t able to do one thing, to confess that they really can’t say what is “good”.

“They are all so anxious to persuade us that what they call the good is what we really ought to do. ‘Do pray, act so, because the word “good” is

generally used to denote actions of this nature': such, on this view, would be the substance of their teaching. And in so far as they tell us how we ought to act, their teaching is truly ethical, as they mean it to be. But how perfectly absurd is the reason they would give for it! 'You are to do this, because most people use certain word to denote conduct such as this.' 'You are to say the thing is not, because most people call it lying.' That is an argument just as good! – My dear sirs, what we want to know from you as ethical teachers, is not how people use a word; it is not even, what kind of actions they approve, which the use of this word 'good' may certainly imply: what we want to know is simply what *is* good." (Moore 1966, 12)

### **Ludwig Wittgenstein**

Wittgenstein's lecture he presented 1929 in Cambridge is only extended over some pages. He starts in recurring onto Moore's Principia Ethica, ethic is the general investigation of the question what might be "good". Wittgenstein makes clear that he has a broad understanding of ethics, an ethics including aesthetics. Wittgenstein steps with his adjunct with Moore beyond Moore.

Wittgenstein suggests:

"And to make you see as clearly as possible what I take to be the subject matter of Ethics I will put before you a number of more or less synonymous expressions each of which could be substituted for the above definition, and by enumerating them I want to produce the same sort of effect which Galton produced when he took a number of photos of different faces on the same photographic plate in order to get the picture of the typical feature they all had in common." (Wittgenstein 1989, 10)

The difference between the ethics attacked by Moore and Wittgenstein's suggestion should be considered. Neither pleasure nor desire as the highest value should be assumed or brought into one line or should be founded, but that what is really good should be searched in the context of G.E. Moore. So Wittgenstein suggests that ethics is the enquiry of what is really important, what is valuable, the meaning of life, what makes life worth living or to investigate what's the right way of living, to convey which is commonly meant with "ethics".

#### *Relative (trivial) and absolute (ethical) sense*

Wittgenstein suggests now to use the terms in two different senses, relative and absolute sense. Relative sense means to serve a certain predetermined purpose, the absolute sense means to serve an ethical predetermined purpose.

So a good chair is a chair serving to a predetermined purpose, a good pianist, a musician playing pieces of a certain degree and a right street is a right street relative to a certain goal. So a tennis player might answer to the question why he is playing worse that he won't play any better. But thinking in moral categories it's much more difficult. If a man is criticized that he has a badly

behave he nearly can't say that he won't to have any better behaviour. Here we have an absolute judgement of value.

A relative value is a statement of facts, Wittgenstein declaims while absolute judgements beyond this. Facts can't be or imply a judgement of value.

A book where everything is described what has been happening won't content an ethical judgement. Even a contended murder, described in all details won't contend an ethical proposition. A real book on Ethics, and it's asked by ourselves if here is recurred in an implicit way on Moore again, would destroy all other books.

"But all the facts described would, as it were, stand on the same level and in the same way all propositions stand on the same level. There are no propositions which, in any absolute sense, are sublime, important or trivial." Wittgenstein 1989, 12

Emotions are described like in the following. Even our consciousnesses can't be good or evil in any ethical sense. The description of a murder might cause emotions, but these are simply facts but no ethics.

Our words used in the sciences are only able to express facts, only meaning and sense, but ethics is supernatural.

"Ethics if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water and if I were to pour out a gallon over it..." (Wittgenstein 1989, 13)

This has a correlation towards the *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, I will recur thereto in the following paper.

6.4.1 The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. In it there is no value – and if there were, it would be no value.

If there is a value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being so. For all happening and being-so is accidental.

What makes it non-accidental cannot lie in the world, for otherwise this would again be accidental.

It must lie outside the world.

#### *The wonder about the existence of the world*

If the absolute good, which does not exist, should be described, we are remembering examples, e.g., like holding a lecture about psychology of pleasure and bringing examples.

Maybe everybody has such an experience. Such an experience describes Wittgenstein for he himself as wondering about the existence of the world.

It means misusing language if you are wondering about this, because you can only be astonished about something that you can't imagine. Wittgenstein gives us here some examples. You can wonder about the size of a dog which is much bigger than any other one or a house you haven't been visiting for a long time and you thought that somebody has pulled it down. You can wonder about a chimera or if your neighbour suddenly grew the head of a lion and he began



to roar. You might wonder at anything and nothing but this makes only sense if I can imagine that it is not the case.

“But it is nonsense to say that I wonder at the existence of the world, because I cannot imagine it not existing” (Wittgenstein 1989, 15)

Also the use of language in the context of “safety” is handled in in that way, that the word “safety” is used when you’re secure, that nothing might happen to you. But this is similar to “astonishment” or “existence”.

Ethical or religious expressions, Wittgenstein continues, are misusing language in a similar way. They are using allegories, but it has to be possible to talk without any allegories.

“Now in our case as soon as as we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts.” (Wittgenstein 1989, 16/17)

Also so called miracles might be simply explained. Imagine an extraordinary event like this that our neighbour grew a lion’s head and begins to roar, a miracle also which has never ever happened. Now a physician is fetched, to explain the miracle in a scientific way and the miracle goes away. On the one hand every wonder might be explained in a scientifically investigation, so that ethical sentences were again no terms about ethics, it also won’t be miraculous in an absolute sense of that term. On the other hand we have used the word “miracle” in an absolute and in a relative sense. We realized something in the world or the world as a miracle. However Wittgenstein differs between the scientific way of considering the world and the way considering the world as miracle and he doesn’t prefer only the scientific way.

“This shows that it is absurd to say ‘Science has proved that there are no miracles.’ The truth is that the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle.” (Wittgenstein 1987, 17)

Sluga's estimate therefore might be right in his book “Wittgenstein”, that verbal expressions about ethics or religious terms are senseless, but Wittgenstein thinks that trying to do so has a great value.

“Wittgenstein admits that, looked at scientifically, the verbal expression of these experiences will be nonsense. But our attempts to put them into words, he concludes, aim nevertheless at something of greatest importance.” (Sluga 2011, 54)

### *Boundaries of language*

So the problem is, Wittgenstein discusses here, that the boundaries of my language are also the boundaries of my world. We can’t go beyond the meaningful language. You might try to run against the walls of the language if you want to write something about ethics or religion.

“My whole tendency and, I believe, the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. 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.” (Wittgenstein 1989, 19)

*Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*

How much the lecture is still influenced by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is evident, if you have a look on the equivalent ethical terms of the *Tractatus* and the lecture. Especially beginning with the sentences 6.4 you do find terms with similar expressions.

The sentence

6.4 All propositions are of equal value

introduces a series of ethical terms. Sentences of ethics are impossible, because sentences can't express anything higher. (6.42) and Ethics are impossible to be expressed. (6.421)

There might be also found an implicit correlation towards G.E. Moore in the *Tractatus*. When Moore states the rule “act always in the way that...” opposes, because moral philosophers weren't able to tell us what's the meaning of “good”, so considerations thereto might be found in the *Tractatus*, either.: 6.422 The first thought in setting up an ethical law of the form “thou shalt...” is And what if I do not do it.

Wittgenstein tries to find an answer, that following or not following implies an appropriate reward or punishment, which lies in the act itself.

As everyone knows Ludwig Wittgenstein recurs in the *Tractatus* to the mystical. Mystical is the existence of the world (6.44), impossible to be expressed, it has its place in the mystical (6.522) In opposition towards this the importance of scientific thinking in expressed in 6.53.

6.53 The right method of philosophy would be this. To say nothing except what can be said, i. e. The propositions of natural science, i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other – he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy – but it would be the only strictly correct method.

An Wittgenstein finished his first work as it is known with the sentence, that if you can't speak about anything you should be quite.

**End:**

Wittgenstein refers to Moore and supersedes him simultaneously. While Moore attacks and destroys common ethics, Wittgenstein has a close look on ethical and mystical sentences and shows us questionable arguments. There are no sentences with a higher value and also no ethical sentences, but the tryout of finding words has a high value, but it's also totally hopeless, because the boundaries of rational language can't be overstepped.

Looking back we remember the great moral philosophers. The eudaimonistic philosophy of Aristotle tries page over page decidedly to find a term of pleasure and a term of “good” not questioning what's the correlation between

the one and the other, even he oversteps an individual ethic. Kant argues at least that something is good if a human being has no pleasure in it. His individualistic moral is based on the good will, but because of bringing only describing examples, maybe we know what he means. But speaking in examples shows us the problem that even Kant comes to the boundaries of his language.

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