How Do You Define Good ? : Revisiting Moore's indefinability of good

[1]Author   Tulumoni Baruah

             Associate Professor, Deptt. of Philosophy, Lakhimpur Girls' College

[2]Co-Author   Babyson Terang

             Assistant Professor, Deptt. of Philosophy, Lakhimpur Girls' College

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Every day, we face with the question of good and evil, truth and falsehood, beauty and the like. The problem of Good is one that governs the studies of Morality and Ethic. What is Good? "Good is good and that is the end of the matter" said Moore. Philosophers since ancient days try to bring out the perfect definition of "Good". To some "Good" is "pleasure" while to some it is "desirable", but Moore argued that "Good" is indefinable, unanalyzable and simple concept or object of thought. The un-analyzability and indefinability of Good is explained through his famous "naturalistic fallacy" and "open question argument". On the other spectrum, some philosophers thought good (ethical value) to be the emotional expression of the speaker, while others, to be the prescription given by the speaker to the hearer, still others holds it to be just a description. G. E. Moore holds that ethical value are intrinsic value, it is the speaker's intuition. Our findings agree to what Moore said more than a century ago that good is indefinable. We are digging deeper into the question why it is indefinable.

Keywords: Good, Indefinable, Open-question, Naturalistic-fallacy, Simple, Concept.

[1] Corresponding Author : Associate Professor, Deptt. of Philosophy, Lakhimpur Girls' College,
Email - tulumoni.baruah@rediffmail.com ,   Contact No. 9435520330
[2] Co-Author : Email - babysonterang@gmail.com , Contact No. 8472085005

INTRODUCTION

Generally, the word good is considered to be the opposite of evil (the absence of evil). Though good is a broad concept, it typically deals with an association of life, charity, continuity, happiness, love and justice. William Lillie called what is valuable as Good (Lillie, 1967). Thus in general, Good are those that are valuable, important, desirable, etc. for human's life.

In modern time, philosophical questions regarding good are subsumed into three major areas of studies: Meta-ethics (concerning nature of good), normative ethics (concerning how we ought to behave) and applied ethics (concerning particular moral issues). In this paper, we are going to discuss George Edwards Moore's concept of good from meta-ethical perspective. The methodology used in this paper is analytical and the sources are from secondary; books, e-books, journals, the internet, etc.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEM

This paper is a small attempt looking into the meta-ethical perspective of good concerning Moore's thought so that our students and academicians can appreciates the contribution he made to moral philosophy. Many philosophers of his time and in the post-modern era have criticized him that he did not try to define Good, here we will point out why Moore did not try to define the concept.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Problem of Analytic Ethics (Chakravarty, 1996) in the first chapter "G. E. Moore and the Indefinability of Good" writes for students and academicians that Moore is a non-naturalistic intuitionist who is against naturalistic philosophers of his time.

From the Philosophical Point of View (White, 2005) in the 40th chapter "Memories from G. E. Moore" brought forth the positive side of Moore. It shows that Moore was a pedagogical genius helping each person to philosophize for themselves. "Do your Philosophy yourself" is one of the greatest messages of Moore to younger generation.

Philosophy in the Twentieth Century (Ayer, 1982) in his second unit "The Revolt From Hegel" on G. E. Moore brings out the failure of Moore on his conception of 'analyse'. Moore's conception of analytic is too simple that it does not convey a proper definition.

GEORGE EDWARDS MOORE (1873-1958)

George Edwards Moore was an important and very influential British Philosopher. He was one among those who made Cambridge University the centre of what we called analytic philosophy. He thought plays a very powerful role in twentieth-century moral philosophy. Due to his strong and attractive personality, he could influence the philosophers of his time both by his teaching and by his comparatively slender stocks of published writings.

WHAT IS GOOD?

In his brilliantly crafted book, "Principia Ethica", which was published in 1903, the concept of "Good" was discussed analytically. Chakravarty (1996) stated that in his Principia Ethica, Moore sharply distinguishes between two questions of Ethics: (i) what is good? in the sense of "that which is good" and (ii) what is good? in the sense of

"Goodness". In the preface to his book, he has mentioned clearly that the difficulties and disagreement we face in the study of ethics are mainly due to a very simple cause: namely to the attempt to answer questions, without first discovering precisely what question it is which you desire to answer (Moore, 1903, pre. Para. 1). It is better not to answer to the question rather than answer falsely without knowing what exactly is the question then lead others astray. In this paper, we will try to explore how Moore responds to the former question.

Definition

The Oxford Dictionary of the meaning of definition is a statement of the exact meaning of the word. It is expressing of the word in other words without altering its meaning. But in Principia Ethica, Moore is not concern about the dictionary definition of the notion good.

Simple, unanalyzable and indefinable

Moore said that Good is a simple, unanalyzable and indefinable notion. By the meaning of 'good', he means the definition of 'good'. According to Moore, a definition 'state what are the parts which invariably compose a certain whole' and in this sense 'good' cannot be defined 'because it is simple and has no parts' (Chakravarty, 1996). It is evident that the object of definition in Moore's analysis is not the word 'good' but the meta-ethical entities 'goodness'. For something to be ontologically simple is for it to possess no parts, to admit of no division or distinction in its own constitution. Simple is not composed of other concepts, as a result of it, it cannot be analysed or broken down into constituents. Moore illustrates the situations by comparing 'good' to colours concept like "yellow" or "green". Colour concepts cannot be known by analytic description, but only by acquaintance (experience), that is direct cognition or intuition.

Thus, Moore was an intuitionist. Purported analyses of "good" in terms of concepts like "pleasure" or "desire", fail to capture what is meant by "good" just as a description or definition such as "yellow is a colour brighter than blue" fail to capture the essence of yellow (Chakravarty, 1996). The quality 'goodness' is simple so the word 'good' is simple. Good can be explained only to those who already know what good is.

Open Question Argument

"There are in fact only two serious alternatives to be considered in order to establish the conclusion that 'good' does denotes simple and indefinable notion. It might possibly denote a complex as 'horse' does or it might have no meaning at all (Moore, 2012). The reduction-ad-absurdum method to the above mentioned two alternatives became a guiding star in formulating his own theory. Open Question Argument is a philosophical argument specially associated with Moore in refuting the equating of the property of goodness with some non-ethical property. Open question argument is a matter in which the answer is not yet decided or is unable to be decided. Whether his claim was genuine or not is an open question. An open ended question is a question that cannot be answered with 'yes' or 'no' response, or with a static response. By putting forward an 'open question argument', he could easily reject the first alternative. Open question requires a synthetic response to the question being asked. The argument takes an inferential argument form "Modus Tollens" where ¬P is derived from P ⊃ Q and ¬Q. A concrete example:

P 1: If X is good, then the question "Is it true that X is good?" is meaningless.

P2: The question "Is it true that X is good?" is not meaningless.

∴   X is not good.

In the above argument, X is any natural but non-moral properties, say, pleasure, desire, etc.

Naturalistic Fallacy:

Moore was a proponent of ethical non-naturalism. Ethical non- naturalism is the meta-ethical doctrine which states that ethical statements express propositions that cannot be reduced to non-ethical statements in the similar way that ethical naturalism assumes.

But the question which is not open (closed question) can be answered by a simple 'yes' or 'no' response. These questions provide limited insight, but can easily be analysed to provide quantitative data. The open question argument claims that any attempts to identify morality with some set of observable natural properties will always be an open question. Moore further argued that if it is true, than moral facts cannot be reduced to natural properties and that therefore ethical naturalism is false. Put another way, what Moore is saying is that any attempt to define good in terms of a naturalistic property fails because all definition can be transformed into closed question.

Moore defends his non-naturalistic by arguing that good cannot be identical to any natural property. The open question argument is the heart of G. E. Moore's case against ethical naturalism. Ethical naturalism is the view that goodness, rightness, etc. are natural properties that can be investigated by natural sciences.

Moore's open question argument is closely linked with "Naturalistic Fallacy". In order to reject the view of naturalist, Moore introduced the notion of "Naturalistic Fallacy". According to Moore, the attempt to define good by identifying it with some other natural property, the result is the naturalistic fallacy. When we attempt to identify two

notions which are distinct, then the naturalistic fallacy arises. Moore uses the naturalistic fallacy as his main weapon in defending the autonomy of ethics and refuting the theories which assimilates the ethical property 'good' to any natural or metaphysical property.

CONCLUSION

From the above short analysis, we come to the conclusion that Good is a simple, unanalyzable and indefinable object of the mind which can be explained only to those who have already known it. Moore failed badly in his use of analytic as many philosophers pointed out, but we do find such serious matter since his purpose of definition is not the verbal definition but the nature of the notion good.

He does not try to define Good in order to keep himself in a safer side for his future philosophical thought and development. As Hartman (1965) wrote, "Good is indefinable, not because it is not clear; indeed, it could not be clear because it is not accessible to rational understanding (para. 1). It is the right thing to do at this moment. Let's re-sound Lutwit Wittgenstein famous line "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein, 1974). Moore often urges his companions and younger generation to do philosophy for themselves (White, 2004), so do we that how do you define this simple but paramount notion Good?

REFERENCES

1. Ayer, A. J. (1982). *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century.* 40 Museum Street, London: Unwin Paperbacks.
2. Ayer, A. (1991). A Defence of Empiricism. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement, 30*, 1-16. doi:10.1017/S1358246100007645
3. Chakravarty, D. D. (1996). *Problems of Analytic Ethics.* New Delhi: Omsons Publications,

T-7, Rajouri Garden, New Delhi-17.

4. Lillie, W. (1967). *An Introduction to Ethics*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Limited.

5. Lind, R. W. (1979). A Phenomenological Definition of "Good". *The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy, 10*(1), 107-115. Retrieved April 11, 2021, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/43155451

6. Moore, G. E. (2012). *Principia Ethica*. New York: Dover Publications, INC. Mineola, New York.

7. White, M. (2004). *From a philosophical point of view : Selected studies*. ProQuest E-book Central https://ebookcentral.proquest.com

8. Wittgenstein, L. (1974). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.* London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul.