



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The Open Question Argument

Verbeek, B.J.E.; Bruce M, Barbone S

Citation

Verbeek, B. J. E. (2011). The Open Question Argument. In B. S. Bruce M (Ed.), *Just the Arguments: 100 of the Most Important Arguments in Western Philosophy* (pp. 237-239). New York: Wiley. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17862>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17862>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Moore's Open Question Argument

Bruno Verbeek

Moore, George E. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903.

Frankena, W. K. "The Naturalistic Fallacy." *Mind* 48, no. 192 (1939): 464-77.

Smith, Michael. *The Moral Problem*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994.

The open question argument was first formulated by G. E. Moore in his *Principia Ethica* (1903). It marks the beginning of a branch of ethical theory now referred to as metaethics. One of the central problems in metaethics – or indeed the central problem for this sub-discipline – is an analysis of the central concepts and terms in ethics, such as 'ought' and 'good'. Moore argued that the property of goodness is an undefinable property. The reason, according to Moore, is that goodness is a simple, unanalyzable property. So-called "real definitions" of 'good', which attempt to define 'good' in terms of a kind with specific characteristics, will fail. Anyone who claims to give a definition of 'goodness' is attributing goodness to something rather than identifying what goodness is. Moral naturalists, i.e., those philosophers who believe that moral properties exist and can be studied by the sciences, are particularly guilty of this fallacy – hence the name "naturalistic fallacy." As a result, the argument is typically invoked to reject moral naturalism. However, Moore is quick to point out that theists who claim that good is what God commands are prone to the same fallacy. (NB: A common misunderstanding is to think that the naturalistic fallacy is the invalid inference of an "ought" statement from factual ["is"] premises.)

The test that Moore proposed to determine whether an attempt at defining 'good' is correct and not an attribution in disguise is the so-called "Open Question Argument." The basic idea is that a correct definition of a term cannot be rephrased as a question without betraying conceptual incompetence. For example, the definition of a 'bachelor' is "unmarried man of the maritable age." If I rephrase this definition as an open question ('Is a bachelor an unmarried man of the maritable age?'), it shows that I don't know what a bachelor is (or 'man' or 'married', etc.). However, suppose somebody offers the following definition of 'good': "the property we refer to as 'good' is the property of being pleasurable," or "good is pleasurable" for short. If you rephrase this as an open question: "Is good pleasurable?" this does not indicate that I don't know what 'good' or what 'pleasurable' is. I am asking a meaningful question. This demonstrates, according to Moore, that the proposed definition is (at best) in fact an attribution of goodness to all pleasurable things.

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 any one who does not already know it, what yellow is, so you 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. [Moore, 7]

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; its being made with regard to 'good' marks it as something quite specific, and this specific mistake deserves a name because it is so common. [Moore, 13]

The general form of the Open Question Argument is the following:

P1. Suppose that the predicate 'good' is synonymous with some other predicate N (e.g., 'pleasurable').

P2. 'X has the property N' will mean 'X is good'.

C1. Anybody who would ask whether an X with property N is good, would *ipso facto* betray conceptual confusion. She is unaware what 'good' means (symmetry of identity, P2).

P3. However, for every N it is always an open question whether an X with property N is good. It is a meaningful question that does not demonstrate conceptual confusion.

P4. If for every N it is always an open question whether an X with property N is good, then 'N' cannot be synonymous with 'good'.

C2. 'N' cannot be synonymous with 'good' (*modus ponens*, P3, P4).

P5. If N cannot be synonymous with 'good', then only 'good' can be synonymous with 'good', therefore, good is a simple (primitive) concept and cannot be defined.

C3. Only 'good' can be synonymous with 'good', therefore, good is a simple (primitive) concept and cannot be defined (*modus ponens*, C2, P5).

The open question argument is a very influential argument. It has motivated very diverse metaethical theories, such as non-cognitivism, intuitionism, and anti-realist theories. It still figures prominently in virtually all textbooks on metaethics. However, the general opinion by now is that the argument does not work against naturalism. First, because it insufficiently distinguishes between conceptual or semantic naturalism (where "good" is defined in natural terms) and metaphysical naturalism (where "good" is analyzed as a natural kind, much like "water" is analyzed as H₂O).

The open question argument works perhaps against the first kind of naturalism but not the second kind of naturalism, and this is the kind of naturalism most moral naturalists defend. Secondly, it is by no means obvious that somebody who rephrases a definition as a question is conceptually confused. Some correct definitions are extremely complex, e.g., 'knowledge is justified true belief'. Suppose this were correct; it still is not dead-obvious to any competent speaker of English (Smith). Third, the argument in a deep sense begs the question against the naturalist (Frankena).