

MOORE'S ACCOUNTS OF 'RIGHT'

MOORE often is credited with implying the view that the meaning of evaluative or normative concepts is distinct from the criteria invoked to justify evaluative or normative judgments. A second view, to the effect that definitions cannot be evaluative or moral assertions, is attributed to him less frequently. In this paper, I shall argue that, while these views seem to be implied by much of what Moore says in *Principia Ethica*, Moore was not himself uniformly successful in observing their prohibitions. In particular, I shall argue that his account of 'Right' in *Principia* involved the very confusions which he seems to imply others should avoid. Against this backdrop, however, his subsequent treatment of 'right' in his *Ethics*, as well as his retrospective remarks about the relationships between 'good' and 'right' in his "A Reply to My Critics", can be interpreted as both predictable and necessary. If the argument developed in this paper is sound, the explanation of Moore's abandonment of his earlier account of 'right' is not, as he says, merely because that account is "paradoxical", but lies, instead, in a latent inconsistency between his *Principia* account of this predicate and other principles implied in that work.

I. "The Meaning Thesis"

In its most general form, the view that the meaning of evaluative or normative concepts is distinct from the criteria invoked to justify evaluative or normative judgments can be expressed as follows. If the criterion for judging that something has a certain value, V, is that it have the "value making characteristics" a, b, c, then the *meaning* of statements of the form "X is V" cannot be "X has characteristics a, b, c". For, if it were, it would then become impossible to support or give reasons for statements of the form "X is V" by proffering statements of the form "X has characteristics a, b, c", since, *ex hypothesi*, "X is V" would mean "X has characteristics a, b, c", and the latter, rather than

supporting or providing reasons for accepting the former, would be merely an alternative way of saying the same thing. A sufficient condition, therefore, for someone's confusing meaning and criteria, assuming they are distinct, is that "V is C" is set forth as a definition of "V", and, at the same time, statements of the form "X is C" are offered in support of or as reasons for accepting statements of the form "X is V". For brevity's sake, I shall refer to the view that meaning and criteria are distinct, in the way just indicated, as the "Meaning Thesis".

The basis for attributing acceptance of the Meaning Thesis to Moore is to be found in his general indictment of "naturalism", which, he says, "offers no reason at all, far less any valid reason, for any ethical principle whatever".¹ As illustrative of this general deficiency, he cites the following example.

It is easy to see that if we start with a definition of right conduct as conduct conducive to general happiness; then, knowing that right conduct is universally conduct conducive to the good, we very easily arrive at the result that the good is general happiness (*Principia*, p. 20).

Such a procedure, Moore implies, "offers no reason, far less any valid reason", for (in this case) the particular ethical principle that "The good is general happiness". And if we ask why this is so, at least part of the answer implied by Moore seems to be, "Because such a procedure involves confusing meaning and criteria". Attention to what Moore says reveals that he is not here objecting to a definition of good *per se*, but to a particular and, in his opinion, spurious basis for defining it in a certain way. And it is the *basis* that he is attacking, not simply the definition that follows from it. It is the *basis* which provides "no good reason" for the ethical principle that "The good is general happiness". For if "right conduct" is defined as "conduct conducive to general happiness", no utilitarian could ever support judgments of the form "X is right" by making judgments of the form "X is conducive to general happiness", since, *ex hypothesi*, judgments of

¹ G. E. Moore. *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1902), p. 20. Hereafter references to *Principia* will be bracketed in the body of the essay.

the latter form would express the *same* thing as judgments of the former, and could not, therefore, be set forth as *reasons* for accepting them. Yet, Moore implies, it cannot be denied that utilitarians *do* offer such ‘reasons’; and they are, therefore, guilty of violating the Meaning Thesis. Indeed, it is because “naturalism” exploits this confusion, according to Moore, that it “deludes the mind into accepting ethical principles, which are false; and in this it is contrary to every aim of Ethics”, the aim of Ethics being “not only to obtain true results, but also to find valid reasons for them” (*Ibid.*).

The truth of the Meaning Thesis, if it is true, does not clearly entail the truth of the view that it is impossible to define value or normative concepts. For it is perhaps possible to construct definitions that do not involve confusing meaning and criteria. In any event, this is not an issue that calls for attempted resolution on this occasion. Nor need we here debate the merits of interpretations of Moore that identify this confusion with the commission of “the naturalistic fallacy”. For present purposes, it is sufficient to maintain that Moore implied the Meaning Thesis and that he was generally disposed to reject any definition of a normative or value concept that involved this confusion.

II. “*The Definition Thesis*”

Associated with, but distinct from, the Meaning Thesis, is another view attributed to Moore, one which I shall refer to as “The Definition Thesis”. This is the thesis, to use Nakhnikian’s formulation,² that “no definition can be an evaluative or moral assertion”. Now, to characterize what is meant by “an evaluative or moral assertion” is notoriously difficult, but something needs to be said to give at least a working understanding of how I shall be using these expressions in this paper.

In his paper on Moore’s “naturalistic fallacy”, Nakhnikian maintains³ that

² George Nakhnikian. “On the Naturalistic Fallacy,” included in *Morality and the Language of Conduct*, edited by Hector-Neri Castaneda and George Nakhnikian, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), p. 152.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

... a moral assertion must satisfy at least two conditions. It must mention an identifiable action and say of it either that it ought to be done or that it ought not to be done. Moreover, it must be capable of being construed as an answer to: 'In these circumstances, ought I to do or ought I not do such and such?'

This account of what it is to be a "moral assertion" is satisfactory up to a point. As it stands, however, it (1) leaves unclarified what many have sensed to be the distinctive flavor of the moral 'ought'—(many so-called "prudential maxims" would satisfy Nakhnikian's two conditions); and (2) it is overly restrictive, in that so-called "fundamental moral principles" would fail to qualify as moral assertions.

Concerning the first deficiency, some of Nakhnikian's earlier remarks may be sufficient to overcome this. For example, in contrasting "linguistic rules" with "moral assertions", he says⁴

Definitions are relative to language. Whenever we invoke, report or stipulate a definition, we let it be known that *if* or *as* one wants to speak correctly in a given language, one must use a certain expression in that language in accordance with the very same rules by which one uses another expression (of that or of another language). No moral assertion relates to a language in this way. A moral assertion formulates an unconditional requirement or an unconditional prohibition to do a certain act (153).

Now, if this is what a "moral assertion" is taken to "formulate", one could then distinguish between a moral 'ought' and a prudential 'ought' on the grounds that the former, but not the latter, formulates "an unconditional requirement or an unconditional prohibition to do a certain act". For it is only *if* or *as* one desires a certain objective that one has a prudential obligation to do a certain action. Accordingly, when Nakhnikian uses "ought or ought not to do" in the statement of his conditions, he should perhaps be understood to be using it in its "unconditional" sense.

As for the second deficiency of Nakhnikian's account—namely,

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

that it is overly restrictive—there is no way of remedying it along the same lines as the preceding. For it is not the case that his account, in this regard, can be remedied by the simple expedient of clarifying a key concept that figures in his statement of it; it is, rather, that his account involves an artificially narrow conception of what it is to be a “moral assertion”. For how else are we to classify such basic claims as, e.g., “One ought always to do what maximizes human happiness” or “One ought always to do that action which accords with God’s will”, when not tacitly tautological, except as “moral assertions”? Certainly they formulate an unconditional requirement that we act in a certain way, and differ from less general formulations only in their lack of specificity—i.e., they do not “mention an identifiable action”, such as “Thou shalt not kill”. But perhaps Nakhnikian had a conception of “identifiable action”, vague enough in itself, which would accommodate this objection. Since, however, he remained silent on this point, it is worthwhile adding a third condition to those he listed, to make it explicit that so-called “fundamental ethical principles” qualify as “moral assertions”. Thus, an assertion will be said to qualify as a moral assertion if it satisfies the conditions listed by Nakhnikian, *or* if it sets forth a basis in terms of which all of our moral obligations are to be determined by specifying what it is that makes *any* action unconditionally obligatory. “One ought always act so as to maximize human happiness”, accordingly, which seems to fail to meet either of Nakhnikian’s conditions, would, on the present account, qualify as a “moral assertion”.

It is when understood to include views of this latter scope that Moore can be said to imply the Definition Thesis with regard to “moral assertions”. And he implies this same thesis, if I understand him correctly, in the case of “evaluative assertions”, or assertions which, to use Nakhnikian’s characterization, “mention an identifiable entity and ascribe merit to it or rank it in order of merit to something else”.

That Moore implied the Definition Thesis with respect to evaluative assertions can be inferred from much of what he says relative to the alleged indefinability of ‘good’. Early in *Principia*, for example, he says:

... propositions about the good are all of them synthetic and never analytic... if I am right, then nobody can foist upon us such an axiom as that 'Pleasure is the only good' or that 'The good is the desired' on the pretence that this is 'the very meaning of the word' (*Principia*, p. 7).

Moore seems to be claiming that, if a statement of the form "X is good" is an evaluative assertion to the effect that X has positive merit in itself, it cannot be analytic or true by definition, whereas if a statement of the form "X is good" is analytic—(e.g., "Good is good")—it cannot be an evaluative assertion, in the sense explained. Since, therefore, a necessary condition of an assertion's being a definition is, for Moore, that it be analytically true, it follows that no definition of 'good', even if it could be defined, could qualify as an evaluative assertion as well.

The grounds for attributing the Definition Thesis to Moore, as this applies to moral assertions, are controversial. But in his discussion of what he takes to be Bentham's position, he argues as follows. If 'Right', by definition, is said to mean "conducive to general happiness", then the further claim that "general happiness is the right end of human action", "is not an ethical principle at all, but either . . . a proposition about the meaning of words, or else a proposition about the *nature* of general happiness" (*Principia*, p. 19). Now, what is relevant, for present purposes, is the clear implication that "General happiness is the right end of human action" cannot be *both* "a proposition about the meaning of words" *and* a moral assertion to the effect that a certain line of conduct is unconditionally obligatory; that is, Moore here seems to imply that statements of the form "X is right", if they are putative definitions of 'Right', cannot be moral assertions as well, whereas, if they are moral assertions, they cannot be true by definition. Thus, neither in the case of 'good' nor 'right', Moore seems to imply, can a definition be an evaluative or moral assertion.

Now, it deserves mention, again, that attributing the Definition Thesis to Moore does not entail that either 'good' or 'right' is indefinable. Indeed, Moore himself defined 'right', and conceded to Bentham the possibility of doing so (*Principia*, p. 18). All that the

Definition Thesis does rule out, both in the case of 'good' and 'right', is that *if* they are defined, it is illicit to make use of one's definition as, at the same time, a substantive evaluative or moral assertion.

III. Moore's *Principia* Account of 'Right'

It is, of course, one thing to espouse or imply a general principle, and quite another to observe it, and there are, I think, discernible delinquencies in Moore's observance of the Definition Thesis in his *Principia* treatment of 'right'. He writes:

What I wish to point out is that 'right' does and can mean nothing but 'cause of a good result,' and is thus identical with 'useful' (*Principia*, p. 147).

Now, it is clear from the above, as well as from other claims Moore makes, both in *Principia* and elsewhere,⁵ that he is here offering a definition of 'right', which, if correct, is tautological. As such, and given Moore's presumed endorsement of the Definition Thesis, it follows that Moore could not consistently regard "Right is the cause of good results" as asserting a substantive moral principle. But that Moore did so regard it is undeniable, not only when one ponders the claim that immediately follows his definition—namely, that "no action which is not *justified* by its results can be right"; but also when one reads the remainder of Chapter Five. When, for example, Moore observes that "most of the rules most universally recognized by common sense" (*Principia*, p. 156) can be defended as morally binding by reference to the good results brought into being by a strict observance of them, the status of "Right is the cause of a good result" is that of a moral assertion, not in the sense that it satisfies either of Nakhnikian's conditions—e.g., it fails to mention an "identifiable action"—but in the sense that it meets the third condition mentioned earlier—namely, it sets forth a basis for determining what our moral obligations are. In short, Moore seems to have held

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Cf., e.g., the passage in Moore's "A Reply to My Critics" cited below.

both that “ ‘Whatever is right is the cause of a good result’ is true as a definition of ‘Right’ ”, and “ ‘Whatever is right is the cause of a good result’ is a (true) moral assertion”. But if, as he seems to imply elsewhere, no definition can be a moral assertion, then his own definition could not function in a moral capacity as well.

IV. Moore's Later Account of 'Right'

At the very least, therefore, Moore's practice in *Principia* was at odds with the Definition Thesis. Faced with this latent inconsistency, Moore had the choice *either* to give up this Thesis, thereby allowing for the possibility that “Right is the cause of a good result” is both a definition and a moral assertion, *or*, retaining this Thesis, to modify his position with regard to “Right is the cause of a good result” in such a way that it formulated either a definition or a moral assertion, but not both. From what he says in *Ethics* and in other relevant publications that postdate the publication of *Principia*, there can be no doubt that his views developed along the lines of the latter alternative.

Thus, in *Ethics*, for example, it is unequivocally clear that Moore continued to entertain “Right is the cause of a good result” as a moral assertion. To cite just two illustrations of this: “It must always”, he writes,⁷ “be the duty of any being who had to choose between two actions, one of which he *knew* to have better total effects than the other, to choose the former”; and, again, “the question whether an action is right or wrong *always* depends on its *actual* consequences”.⁸ But that he did *not*, at the same time, continue to entertain “Right is the cause of a good result” as true as a definition of ‘Right’, is implicit in other remarks that he makes. He says, for example:⁹

An action is right, only if no action, which the agent could have done instead, would have had intrinsically better results; while an action is wrong, only if the agent *could* have done some other action instead whose total results would have been intrinsically better.

⁷ G. E. Moore. *Ethics*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 105.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

And of this “very important proposition”, he says,¹⁰ “It certainly seems as if this proposition were not a mere tautology”. Less qualified are his remarks concerning ‘duty’ and ‘expediency’, where the latter is said to be equivalent to “producing the best consequences possible under the circumstances”. He says:¹¹

It is, indeed, quite plain, I think, that the meaning of the two words (‘duty’ and ‘expediency’) is *not* the same; for, if it were, then it would be a mere tautology to say that it is always our duty to do what will have the best consequences.

That, to the Moore of *Ethics*, it was *not* a “mere tautology” to say this, is implicit in the above and in the remainder of his argument in that work. But that, for the Moore of *Principia*, it *was* a “mere tautology” to say this, is the view implicit in that work. In *that* work, indeed, we are told that “if I ask whether an action is *really* my duty or *really* expedient, the predicate of which I question the applicability to the action in question is precisely the same” (*Principia*, p. 169).

This change in Moore’s position did not go unnoticed by his commentators nor by Moore himself. Sir David Ross, for example, citing some of the same and other relevant quotations, remarked upon “how much Professor Moore has changed his position”.¹² And Moore, in his “A Reply to My Critics”, had the characteristic grace to make light of his youthful impetuosity. “As a matter of historical fact”, he writes,¹³

I think that Mr. Bertrand Russell, in his review of *Principia*, pointed out that it was very paradoxical to say that ‘This is what I ought to do’ is merely a shorter way of saying ‘The Universe will be a better Universe if I do this than if I were to do instead anything else which I could do’; he suggested that this can hardly be true, and I was inclined to agree with him. Accordingly, in my *Ethics*, I refrained

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹² Sir David Ross, *The Right and the Good*. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1930), p. 11.

¹³ *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*. Edited by Paul A. Schilpp. (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1952), pp. 558-59.

from making this paradoxical assertion (although in *Principia*, p. 147, I had asserted that it was demonstrably certain!).

But for Moore to refer to his *Principia* view as "paradoxical" is as incomplete as an explanation of his changing it as is Ross' observation that it changed. If, however, we approach the problem of interpreting this change mindful of some other principles implied in *Principia*, the change is both explicable and necessary. For, given the Definition Thesis, Moore could not continue to maintain, except at the price of inconsistency, that "Right is the cause of a good result" is both a definition and a moral assertion. But this thesis, by itself, was impotent to decide *which* it is, assuming that it is one or the other as Moore did. It was the pervasive presence of the Meaning Thesis that can be supposed to have decided this. That is, Moore, once again, had a choice: *either* to treat "Right is the cause of a good result" as explicating the meaning of 'Right', in which case he could not consistently regard statements of the form "X causes good results", if true, as constituting reasons in support of statements of the form "X is right"; *or* to treat statements of the form "X causes good results", if true, as constituting reasons, and possibly conclusive reasons in support of statements of the form "X is right", in which case "Right is the cause of good results" could not be construed as explicating the meaning of 'Right'. Once again, Moore's ethical theory developed along the lines of the latter alternative. Thus, in *Ethics*, "X is right" and "X is the cause of a good result" are not treated as identical in meaning, but as logically equivalent.¹⁴ Consequently, whereas, in *Principia*, "X is right because it causes good results" had the status of a tautology, in *Ethics* it did not; in *Ethics* Moore could consistently maintain that it had the status of a significant, justificatory assertion, and he could consistently maintain this because assertions of logical equivalence are not definitions and cannot, therefore, be definitions which involve confusing meaning and criteria.

There are, therefore, if the preceding is sound, means of interpreting Moore's abandonment of the *Principia* account of

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 107. See, too, the reference to "A Reply to My Critics."

TOM REGAN

'Right' which have more explanatory force than the "paradoxical" character Moore imputed to it. Given both the Meaning Thesis and the Definition Thesis, and given Moore's assumption that statements of the form "X causes good results", if true, constitute (decisive) reasons in support of statements of the form "X is right", the "change" was necessary. It is this necessity that I have been endeavoring to explain. If sound, my account makes the development of Moore's thought more intelligible than it otherwise might be and teaches anew that a philosopher is not always his own best commentator.

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