

MOORE'S USE OF BUTLER'S MAXIM

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As anyone who has read *Principia Ethica*¹ knows, its first sentence is not of Moore's crafting but is a quote from Bishop Butler: "Everything is what it is, and not another thing." Because of its pride of place, it is natural to suppose that Moore thinks that Butler's Maxim sheds light on *Principia's* pages, is a beacon, as it were, directing us to that work's most important truths. It is not surprising, therefore, given the importance subsequent thinkers have placed on *Principia's* arguments regarding the naturalistic fallacy, that we should find a widespread conviction that the light from Butler's Maxim illuminates just these arguments in *Principia*. Thus, for example, G.J. Warnock, by way of interpreting Moore's understanding of the naturalistic fallacy, writes that

(some) philosophers have identified goodness with the properties of being pleased, or highly evolved, or conducive to "self-realization" – widely different doctrines, no doubt, but all alike mistaken, and mistaken in the same way. For – as we read on the title page of Moore's book – "everything is what it is and not another thing"; but these doctrines all allege that goodness is some property which, as a matter of fact, it is not.²

Thus are we invited by Warnock to believe that these doctrines violate Butler's Maxim and so, according to Moore, commit the naturalistic fallacy; and thus are we invited to believe that Moore's use of this Maxim has been disclosed to us.

Warnock is not alone in this regard. By interpreting Moore as he does, he follows in the tracks left by earlier critical commentators, most notably William Frankena, who, in his influential essay, "The Naturalistic Fallacy," by way of interpreting Moore's understanding of this fallacy, writes as follows:³

...(The definist fallacy (which, Frankena argues, is a more appropriate name for the fallacy Moore calls "naturalistic") is the process of confusing or identifying two properties, of defining one property by another, or of substituting one property for another..... (T)he fallacy is always simply that two properties are being treated as one....

This formulation of the definist fallacy explains or reflects the motto of *Principia Ethica*, borrowed from Bishop Butler: "Everything is what it is, and not another thing." It follows from this motto that goodness is what it is and not another thing. It follows that views which try to identify it with something else are making a mistake of an elementary sort. If the two properties really are two, then they simply are not identical.³

Now, it is not altogether clear what Frankena means when he says that this formulation of the definitist fallacy "explains or reflects" *Principia's* motto, but, read in context, what he writes seems to predate Warnock's views. Butler's Maxim, Frankena argues, implies that it is an "elementary" mistake to maintain that different things are the same thing. However, in Moore's view, according to Frankena, this is precisely what philosophers do, when they proffer various definitions of goodness: They take goodness, which is one thing (property), and say that it is identical with some *other* thing (property), a "mistake of an elementary sort" because, presumably, mistaken in point of fact. Thus are these definitions ruled out by Butler's Maxim, on Frankena's interpretation, and this Maxim (or "*Principia's* motto") is simultaneously explained and illustrated.

Frankena, then, like Warnock after him, would have us believe that Butler's Maxim is a central and distinctive feature of Moore's arguments against the definability of goodness. It is to these arguments in *Principia*, these writers imply, that we are to look, if we are to understand this work's motto. And the same is true even in the case of more sympathetic commentators: They, too, agree that Butler's Maxim finds its home in *Principia's* arguments regarding the definability of good. Thus, for example, A.N. Prior⁴ stages his more favorable discussion of these arguments against the backdrop of Butler's Maxim. So widespread and uncontested is this way of understanding the place and role of this Maxim in Moore's thought, in fact, that it is entirely appropriate to refer to it as "the received interpretation." In what follows I hope to show that, despite its apparent naturalness, the received interpretation is a misinterpretation. There is no evidence for it, I shall argue, and very good evidence against it.

I

To begin with, it is a plain fact that, throughout his lengthy discussion of the definability of goodness, Moore himself nowhere explicitly invokes Butler's Maxim. This is a fact that those who accept the received interpretation fail to mention, let alone explain. Indeed, Moore sometimes is given credit for invoking it anyway. Thus, Prior, again, in the course of his discussion of Moore's views on the naturalistic fallacy, writes that "Professor Moore's appeal to this truism (i.e., Butler's Maxim) ... (is) not...entirely pointless."⁵ And yet Moore, as already noted, does not

himself appeal to this “truism” in his discussion of the naturalistic fallacy. Of course this by itself does not show that Moore does not rely on Butler’s Maxim in the distinctive way the received interpretation maintains. Still, Moore’s reticence in this regard ought to occasion at least a glimmer of doubt, all the more so when we call to mind (Section IV, below) that Moore himself *does* explicitly appeal to Butler’s Maxim in *Principia* but in another context, one that is logically distinct from his arguments concerning the definability of goodness. Though what philosophers do or do not say is not always the surest guide to what they believe, or are committed to believing; and though I think this general truth happens to be demonstrably true in the particular case of Moore;⁶ nevertheless, those who would accept the received interpretation are at least required to explain why Moore does not appeal to Butler’s Maxim where their interpretation, if it were true, would naturally lead us to suppose that he would, but does appeal to it in a quite different connection. This is a requirement that advocates of this interpretation have failed to meet.

II

It should next be noted that the truth of Butler’s Maxim is logically irrelevant to the issue of the definability of goodness, given Moore’s understanding of definition in *Principia* – given, that is, the view that a definition of *x* consists of an analysis of *x*’s parts and their relations (see *Principia*, Chapter 1, especially pp. 6–8), a view of definition that entails that a “complex,” such as horse, is definable, while a “simple,” such as goodness, is not. For if, as Butler’s Maxim declares, *everything* is what it is (and not another thing), then horse is what it is (and not another thing) just as goodness is what it is (and not another thing). The fact that horse is “complex” and goodness “simple” makes no difference. Thus, whereas questions of definition do, on Moore’s view, turn on the simplicity or complexity of the *definiens*, Butler’s Maxim, considered by itself, has nothing in particular to do with questions of simplicity or complexity, nor, therefore, with definability or indefinability. Before we add yet another voice to the received interpretation, therefore, we ought to demand a careful argument that explains how it is that Butler’s Maxim directs us just to those parts of *Principia* in which the definability of goodness is contested. *Perhaps* such an argument can be given. That question remains open at this point. But this much does not: The received interpretation cannot be defended by arguing that Butler’s Maxim applies to indefinable simples, such as goodness, but not to definable complexes, such as horse. It applies to *everything*, including, incidentally, every natural as well as every nonnatural property: They, too, are what they are, and not another thing.⁷

It is, therefore, no argument for the received interpretation that, in response to the question, How is good to be defined? Moore replies: "Good is good, and that is the end of the matter" (*Principia*, p. 6). Moore's answer shows only that he regards goodness as unanalyzable. And it is the *simplicity* of goodness, not its being-what-it-is that, on Moore's view, underlies its indefinability. To interpret Moore otherwise – to interpret him so that it is its being-what-it-is that renders goodness indefinable – would be to commit him to the view that *nothing* is definable, since *everything* is-what-it-is. But even granting that Moore is not altogether perspicuous in what, in *Principia*, he writes on the topic of definition, such an interpretation would be as uncharitable as it is unfounded.

III

Butler's Maxim is ambiguous. It can be understood in such a way that violations of it constitute *factual* mistakes. On this interpretation, in other words, it is a factual error to say that different things are the same thing – for example, that the planet closest to the earth is the planet closest to Neptune. Whatever the genesis of such a mistake, and in whatever context it might arise, the *kind* of mistake that is made, given this interpretation (which I shall refer to as "the factual sense"), is always empirical in character: Two things which, as a matter of fact, are different are being falsely regarded as if, as a matter of fact, they are the same. But Butler's Maxim also can be understood in such a way (what I shall call "the logical sense") that violations of it are necessarily, not factually, false. On this interpretation, that is, what the Maxim rules out is stating, or implying, that the same thing both is and is not what it is (for example, that Mars both is and is not the closest planet to the earth). On this interpretation, in short, what Butler's Maxim rules out is not factual mistakes but contradictions. We are never to say, we are never to imply, what is logically impossible.

Let us ask, then, given the ambiguity of *Principia's* motto, in what sense, the factual or the logical, it is understood by those who accept the received interpretation. What they say, I think, leaves little room for doubt. Thus Warnock, for example, in the passage quoted in this essay's initial paragraph, says that those who identify goodness with some other property hold, according to Warnock's interpretation of Moore, "that goodness is some property which, *as a matter of fact*, it is not" (my emphasis). And Frankena, not surprisingly, concurs – indeed, goes to considerable length to argue the point that, so far as Moore's arguments are concerned, it is a *factual* question, as to whether goodness is identical with any other property, an issue that, in his words, "concerns the awareness or discernment of qualities and relations... (an issue that) cannot be decided by

the use of the notion of a fallacy.” Now, so far as present purposes are concerned, there need be no quarrel with the diagnosis of the naturalistic fallacy advanced by Warnock and Frankena: This fallacy, let us suppose, involves making a *factual* mistake by identifying two properties that are not the same. Where the quarrel lies is with their further thesis, that this diagnosis, to use Frankena’s words, “explains or reflects” Butler’s Maxim, as it is understood in *Principia*. Clearly, we have reason to accept this thesis and, relatedly, the received interpretation of *Principia*’s motto, only if we have good reason to read Moore as understanding Butler’s Maxim *in the factual sense*. In the preceding, I have argued the modest point that no good reason has been given to support this way of reading Moore. What I now wish to argue is the more important point that we have quite good reason to read him differently.

IV

Highly significant to the debate at hand is the neglected fact that Moore himself does explicitly appeal to Butler’s Maxim in *Principia*, but not, as the received interpretation, if it were true, would make likely, in the course of his attack upon attempts to define goodness; rather, his appeal is made much later on, in Chapter VI, in the course of his repudiation of idealism, or, to speak more precisely, idealistic accounts of the qualities that are essential to those things that are known to be good. It is not unreasonable to assume, therefore, that if we are to gain some insight into how Moore himself understands and uses Butler’s Maxim, it is to these heretofore neglected pages that we should turn for needed guidance.

To set the stage: The issue that separates Moore and his idealistic opponents is not whether the appreciation of beauty is good; both are agreed that it is. The issue is, what this truth commits us to; in particular, whether it commits us to the view that those things we know to be beautiful have “material qualities.” The idealists say no. Moore is of another mind. Here, quoting at length, because of its importance for sound exegesis, is what he says:

The superiority of the spiritual over the material has, in a sense, been amply vindicated. But it does not follow, from this superiority, that a perfect state of things must be one, from which all material properties are rigidly excluded: on the contrary, if our conclusions are correct, it would seem to be the case that a state of things, in which they are included, must be vastly better than any conceivable state in which they were absent. In order to see that this is so, the chief thing necessary to be considered is *exactly what it is* which we declare to be good when we declare that the appreciation of beauty in Art and Nature is so. That this appreciation is good, the philosophers in question do not for the most part deny. But, if we admit it, then we should remember Butler’s maxim that: Everything is what it is, and not another thing. I have tried to show, and I think it is too evident to be disputed, that such appreciation is an organic unity, a complex whole; and that, in its most undoubted instances, part of what is included in

this whole is a *cognition of material qualities*, and particularly of a vast variety of what are called *secondary* qualities. If, then, it is *this* whole, which we know to be good, and not another thing, then we know that material qualities even though they be perfectly worthless in themselves, are yet essential constituents of what is far from worthless. What we know to be valuable is the apprehension of just these qualities, and not of any others; and, if we propose to subtract them from it, then what we have left is *not* that which we know to have value, but something else. And it must be noticed that this conclusion holds, even if my contention, that a true belief in the existence of these qualities adds to the value of the whole in which it is included, be disputed. We should then, indeed, be entitled to assert that the *existence* of a material world was wholly immaterial to perfection; but the fact that what we knew to be good was a cognition of *material qualities* (though purely imaginary), would still remain. It must then, be admitted on pain of self-contradiction – on pain of holding that things are not what they are, but something else – that a world, from which material qualities were wholly banished, would be a world which lacked many, if not all, of those things, which we know most certainly to be great good. (*Principia*, pp. 206–7)

Now, our present purpose lies only in clarifying the role of Butler's Maxim in Moore's thought, not in resolving the dispute between Moore and his idealist opponents. That Maxim, as noted earlier, is ambiguous, and, so far as the Maxim itself is concerned, it is an open question as to in what sense, the factual or the logical, Moore understands it. But while this is an open question, viewed in this perspective, it is a question that must be answered by paying due attention to when and how Moore appeals to Butler's Maxim. And when it is viewed in this perspective, the *answer* is not ambiguous: Moore clearly understands Butler's Maxim in the logical sense, the sense in which violations of it are self-contradictory or necessarily false, not simply false as a matter of fact. As the final sentence in the lengthy passage just quoted makes plain, his argument against the idealists is not that, but for an elementary factual error on their part, they would have a satisfactory view regarding the connection between material qualities and those things we know to be good. His argument is, rather, that their position comes to grief on *logical* grounds, implying, according to Moore, something that violates Butler's Maxim and so is, in his words, *self-contradictory*. One need not say – I do not say – that Moore was obliged to understand *Principia's* motto in the logical sense. He *could* have understood it in the factual sense, given its ambiguity. But the question is, Where does the evidence lie? – not, Where is it customary to assume that it lies? Once we attend to this question, I submit, the case for interpreting him as understanding Butler's Maxim in the logical sense is overwhelming.

This verdict marks the undoing of the received interpretation. According to that interpretation, as explained earlier, Butler's Maxim is a central and distinctive feature of Moore's arguments against the definability of goodness – indeed, it is to just these arguments that *Principia's* motto points, this interpretation contends. However, if the preceding is sound, we now see that we have very good reason to deny this. For if, as Moore seems to maintain and as, for example, Warnock and Frankena interpret him,

what is wrong with any and all proposed definitions of goodness is that they all state that goodness is something which *in fact* it is not, then no putative definition of goodness violates Butler's Maxim, as Moore understands it. This is because violations of that Maxim, as Moore's dispute with the idealists shows, are not *in his view* just factually false; they are, he thinks, necessarily false because self-contradictory. Given, then, that Moore never disputes definitions of goodness on the grounds that they are self-contradictory, we have no reason to believe that, in *his view*, Butler's Maxim is central to his (Moore's) arguments concerning the definability of goodness. Despite appearances to the contrary, therefore; and in spite of the hold the received interpretation has had on succeeding generations of philosophers; it is time to have done with the view that Moore's arguments concerning the definability of goodness "explain or reflect" the way *he* understands that work's motto. The received interpretation of Butler's Maxim has no clothes.

V

One final point. If the foregoing is sound, then we might learn something both about how *Principia* ought to be read and why it has been read the way it has. As for the latter, the received interpretation's attempt to force Butler's Maxim, as understood by Moore, where it will not fit is symptomatic of supposing that the philosophically important parts of that book are those that deal with the definability of goodness and thus, in an attenuated sense at least, with "the language of morals." For if that is where readers are predisposed to think the philosophical action lies; and given the pride of place Moore accords Butler's Maxim; then these readers *will* see this Maxim pointing to the early chapters of *Principia*, where the question of the definability of goodness occupies center stage. Thus arises the received interpretation. But Butler's Maxim, as understood by Moore, does not point there, I have argued. It points in the very different direction of how to understand and account for the character of those things we know to be good. Accordingly, if, as seems reasonable to assume, and as even supporters of the received interpretation evidently agree, the pride of place accorded Butler's Maxim arguably directs us to what, in Moore's own view, are the philosophically most important truths in *Principia*, then we are to look, not, as the received interpretation implies, to its early chapters, but rather to the final chapter, on "The Ideal," a chapter which, as Mary Warnock suggests,⁸ some of those philosophers most influenced by *Principia* give little evidence that they have read. This is a pity, she maintains, for though Moore certainly was much exercised over the question of the definability of goodness, "(he) was not primarily

concerned to discuss the nature of moral words, not to analyse what does and does not constitute, in general, an ethical argument. His concern was simply to find out what things were good and what were bad.”⁹ It is to the discussion of these matters, I have argued, that Butler’s Maxim, when viewed in the light of the available contextual evidence, directs us. It is there that we shall find what Moore himself considers *Principia*’s most important truths. Perhaps coming to terms with the place and role of Butler’s Maxim in *Principia* might go some way toward teaching philosophers¹⁰ how to read this, Moore’s most important work.¹¹

NOTES

1. G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1960). Page references to this edition of *Principia* are included in the main body of the essay.
2. G.J. Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 6.
3. W.K. Frankena, “The Naturalistic Fallacy,” *Mind* 48 (1939); reprinted in Wilfrid Sellars and John Hospers, eds., *Readings in Ethical Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), p. 59.
4. Arthur N. Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1949), pp. 3ff.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
6. In an earlier essay, I have argued that what Moore says about his changing views regarding what makes rights acts right is not perspicuous. See “Moore’s Accounts of ‘Right’,” *Dialogue* II, no. 1 (1972).
7. Frankena recognizes this point but thinks it is grounds for objecting to Moore’s use of Butler’s Maxim, as he (Frankena) understands this. If what I argue in the present essay is correct, Frankena misunderstands this. The logical sense of Butler’s Maxim, explained in (IV), does not lead to the conclusion that “if Mr. Moore’s Motto...rules out any definitions, for example of ‘good,’ then it rules out all definitions of any term whatever” (“The Naturalistic Fallacy,” p. 59). What “Moore’s Motto” rules out are views, especially views regarding the nature of those things we know to be good, that are themselves, or that lead to what is, self-contradictory.
8. Mary Warnock, *Ethics Since 1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 11.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
10. Nonphilosophers seem not to have succumbed to the temptation to fix attention on *Principia*’s early chapters at the expense of giving serious attention to “The Ideal.” Just the opposite priorities are discernible in, for example, J.M. Keynes, *Two Memoirs* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1949). If the argument of the present essay is sound, those observing Keynes’ priorities are more in touch with the priorities of *Principia*’s author.
11. I want to thank Dale Jamieson, Peter Singer and Donald Van De Veer for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.