

**G. E. MOORE ON THE VALUES OF WHOLE AND
PARTS : A CRITIQUE**

This paper is an attempt to maintain the view that Moore's thesis "A whole may possess the property of good in a degree different from that which is obtained by summing the degrees in which the parts possess it"¹ is unsustainable within his framework of ethics.

G. E. Moore in his book *Principia Ethica* advocates the following thesis :

Thesis—1

"The peculiarity of Ethics is not that it investigates assertions about human conduct, but that it investigates assertions about that property of things which is denoted by the term 'good' and the converse property denoted by the term 'bad'."

Thesis—2

"This property, by reference to which the subject matter of Ethics must be defined, is itself simple, indefinable intrinsic and non-natural."

Thesis—3

"All assertions about its relation to other things are of two, and only two kinds : they either assert in what degree things themselves possess this property or else they assert causal relations between other things and those which possess it."

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Thesis—4

“ In considering the different degree in which things themselves possess this property, we have to take account of the fact that a whole may possess it in a degree different from that which is obtained by summing the degrees in which its parts possess it. ”

The problem that arises with regard to these theses is this : Are they mutually consistent theses ? As for Moore's stand is concerned answer is positive. But to my mind it seems that the answer should be negative. In order to show how these theses of Moore are not mutually consistent let me begin the discourse with the thesis (2).

The thesis (2) asserts that for Moore good is a simple, indefinable, intrinsic and non-natural property. Good is a simple property. This account Moore maintains on the ground of unanalysability. He says that good is a simple property because it has no components and whatsoever has no components is unanalysable. Since good is an unanalysable property, we cannot reduce it further to some other properties. It is an irreducible property. From this point of view, the term 'good', on Moore's account, is a primitive term and all other terms are definable in terms of it. Besides the characteristic of simplicity Moore also maintains, as it is clear from thesis (2), that good is an indefinable property. This account he maintains again on the basis of unanalysability. For him to define is to analyse (in genuine sense). Good admits no analysis; therefore, he says, it is indefinable. Further, Moore advocates the indefinability characteristic of good; therefore, according to him, any attempt to define indefinable property of good is to commit a fallacy which he calls the naturalistic fallacy.

The characteristics of simplicity and indefinability of good are, thus, on Moore's account, grounded in the notion of unanalysability. Good is a simple and undefinable property because it is incapable of further analysis. Let us admit that Moore's characterizations of good, that is, simplicity and indefinability are correct on the basis of unanalysability. But the moment we accept Moore's view along with his theses of (3) and (4), we find they generate the following difficulties.

If the property of good is a simple property, as Moore advocates it to be, and all simple properties, by definition, have no component (on account of which they are incapable of further analysis), then the property of good, it follows, cannot have (in the logical sense) the property of degree which the theses of (3) and (4) advocate. For the simple reason, that the property of degree admits analysis of good which possesses it in terms of quantity; but this is incompatible with the property of simplicity of good. This is absolutely true in the light of their definitions. We cannot say that things themselves may possess the property of good in different degree but good itself has no degree. For, to say this means to make a contradictory statement which is always false. How can things themselves possess good in different degree unless good itself varies in degree? Good can vary in degrees only when it differs in quantity and its difference in quantity is not possible unless there is a difference in its constituents. To say this does not mean that a property which admits of constituents always differs in its degree. It merely means that if a property has no constituent, it cannot vary in degree. But to admit this means to reject the property of simplicity which the thesis (2) advocates. For, the moment we admit that good has constituents which justifies its being different in degree from case to case, it follows that the property of good is capable of further analysis which its property of

simplicity denies. This shows that both the properties (i.e., the property of simplicity and the property of degree) cannot be attributed to the property of good since the attribution of one property to it implies the negation of other property. This is true in the light of their definitions. If what I have said is true, it is evident that the theses of (2), (3) and (4) are not mutually consistent, since they ascribe incompatible properties to the property of good. As a result, Moore's account of good becomes unsustainable.

Further, if it is true that the notion of degree admits by its own definition analysis in terms of quantity, which I believe it does, then the property of good cannot be said to be an indefinable property as Moore claims it to be. Because, whatever is capable of analysis, according to him, is definable and good becomes capable of analysis by virtue of its degree characteristic. Moore cannot hold this view that good itself has no degree characteristic because to say this means to admit that theses of (3) and (4) are false. Putting the same thing in different words, since the notion of degree is incompatible with the notion of indefinability and since the notion of indefinability is grounded in the notion of unanalysability, the notion of degree is incompatible with the notion of indefinability. And this means Moore's account of indefinability of good is untenable along with its degree characteristic. Moore's account of indefinability of good is also untenable on his this line of argument. If good is indefinable because it has no synonyms or there is nothing whatsoever which could be substituted for good, as Moore advocates it to be, it remains no longer a peculiar property of good at all by reference to which the subject matter of Ethics must be defined. Its peculiarity ceases because any notion or property which, has no synonyms is indefinable, and on this count notion of good ceases to be peculiar.

It might be said that the notion of simplicity is not opposed to the notion of degree. Difference in degree is not a constituent part of the property which admits of it. A simple property can differ in degree and a complex one may not differ in degree. 'Red' is, for example, a simple property but it does differ in degree. Whereas 'triangularity' is a complex property, it does not differ in degree. Its degree always remains the same. If this is true, it can very well be said that Moore's theses are quite consistent and sustainable because the property of good may have the property of simplicity even if it differs in degree. Its difference in degree does not negate its being simple. My humble submission against this view is that it has no strength because of the following reasons.

First of all, nowhere is it said that difference in degree is a constituent part of the property which admits of it. What is argued is that nothing can possess good in different degree unless good itself varies in degree. Good can vary in degree only when there is difference in its quantity, and this is not possible unless there is a difference in the constituent of the property which admits of degree. To say this does not mean that difference in degree is one of the constituents of the property which admits of degree. Secondly, it is the notion of 'degree' that admits of analysis, not the notion of 'difference in degree'. So a property which admits of degree is open to analysis irrespective of whether its degree changes or remains constant. The degree of triangularity, no doubt, does not change but it does not mean that it admits no analysis. Its degree is perfectly analysable in terms of the degree of its angles of which it is composed. As a matter of fact, it is also done so. Above all, nowhere is it said that it is the notion of 'difference in degree' that admits of analysis. What is argued is that it is the notion of 'degree' which admits of analysis of the property which possesses it. If

what I have said is true, as I strongly believe it to be so, it leads to the thesis that the property of red, the so called simple property, is not in fact a simple property at all, since it admits analysis in terms of quantity because of its degree characteristic. When I say this I do not mean that it admits analysis in terms of some other property or properties other than itself. What I mean is that its analysis is possible in terms of its different quantity. So is the case with good if good admits degree like red.

Let us come to the thesis (4). The thesis (4) asserts that the value of a whole bears no regular proportion to the sum of the values of its parts. A whole may possess, intrinsic value in a degree different from that which is obtained by summing the degrees in which the parts possess it. To be conscious of a beautiful object, for example, possesses greater amount of intrinsic value than the sum of the values of its parts; that is, the object and being conscious. Neither the intrinsic value of object, on Moore's account, gives the value of whole nor the intrinsic value of consciousness. The sum of their intrinsic values also do not give the values of a whole either, of which they form parts. As the values of a whole bear no regular proportion to the sum of the values of its parts, Moore says that the greatest error is committed if it is assumed that wherever two things form a whole, the value of that whole is merely a sum of the values of those two things. Here, the following points are worth noticing on this view :

- (i) The existence of part is a necessary condition for the existence of good constituted by the whole. In other words, the intrinsic value of a whole cannot conceivably exist unless the parts exist. Because what is asserted to have intrinsic value is the existence of the whole and the existence of the whole includes the existence of its parts.

This does not mean that the existence of part possesses the value of the whole. The value of a whole is not the value of its parts. What is true of a whole is not true of parts. Because whole is not a part of itself. The number of two stones, for example, is two but it does not mean that each of the stones is also two. So is the case with values of whole and parts. A whole formed from two bad things may have positive value. This is perfectly possible.

- (ii) The part of a valuable whole always retains exactly the same value when it is, as when it is not, a part of that whole. This means the existence of the value of part is independent of the value of a whole.

Now the question at issue is, why does intrinsic value of a whole after all differ in degree from the sum of the values of its parts ? Why do two bad things may produce a whole with positive value ? Moore may say that the value of a whole differs in degree from the sum of the values of its parts, or two bad things may produce a whole with positive value because of their relationship. If this is so, the question again arises: what is the nature of that relationship ? The value of a whole cannot be said to be related to the value of part in the same sense in which whole is related to parts. The relation of whole to parts is one sort of analytic relation since the existence of whole includes in it the existence of parts. But the relation of the value of a whole to the value of its parts is not an analytic relation on Moore's account, since the value of a whole does not include in it the value of parts. Had it been so, the value of a whole formed from two bad things would not possibly have been positive. But since, according to Moore, a whole may have reverse value of parts, the value of a whole cannot be said to include, on his account, the value of parts. Saying this does not mean that the value of a whole can conceivably exist, on Moore's account, without the

existence of parts. The value of a whole, according to him, cannot conceivably exist without the existence of parts because what is asserted to have a value is the existence of a whole and the existence of a whole includes in it the existence of its parts. But, then, can we say that the relation of the value of a whole to the value of its parts is a causal one? This we also cannot say, because Moore himself denies it. He clearly says that the intrinsic value of a whole is not a causal product of the values of its parts. If the relation of the value of a whole to the value of its part cannot be said to be either analytic or causal, on Moore's account, then the same question remains. In what way are they then related? We also cannot say that their relation is contingent. Because to say this means to admit that the existence of the value of a whole can conceivably exist, on Moore's account, without the existence of the value of its parts, and the parts of a valuable whole do not retain the same value when they are not parts of that whole, which Moore himself denies. If the value of a whole cannot conceivably exist without the existence of its part and if part possesses an intrinsic value, the value of a whole cannot be separated from the value of its parts which form the whole, even if the value of the whole is different and distinct from the sum of the values of its parts or they possess just reverse values. This shows that the value of a whole is necessarily connected, in some sense, according to Moore, with the values of its parts although its converse is not true. The existence of the value of parts is possible without the existence of a whole. But unfortunately Moore nowhere makes this point clear that they are synthetically and necessarily related, which he should have done.

Besides, comparison between the values of a whole and the value of parts in terms of degree does arise only when it is accepted that value has degrees or else its possibility is completely ruled out. But to accept this view means to admit that good is

not a simple property. It has constituents. Because a property cannot differ in degrees unless it differs in quantity and difference in quantity is not possible unless there is a difference in the constituents of the property which admits of degree. This we have already seen earlier Moore's analogy of a beautiful object seems to me to be defective not on logical but epistemic ground. For, any sort of comparison between the value of a whole and the value of its parts is possible only when someone is aware of their values; otherwise not only the purpose of comparison is defeated but comparison itself is ruled out. In the given example it is impossible, to my mind, for anyone to know the value of a beautiful object separately without being conscious of it, because to know the value of a beautiful object means to be conscious of it. Knowledge of any sort, for that matter, without being conscious of it is logically impossible. This is true in the light of the nature of knowledge itself. As a result, it becomes impossible to maintain this view from the epistemic point of view that 'to be conscious of a beautiful object' has a greater intrinsic value than that of its part or parts. In other words, we cannot legitimately say, in the context of a beautiful object at least, that the whole possesses greater intrinsic value than the sum of the values of its parts when we do not know or can never know the values of its parts separately and distinctly. It is worth noting here that when I say 'it is impossible to know the value of a beautiful object separately without our being conscious of it', I do not mean to say that the object concerned has no value. It may have some value of its own. This is logically quite possible. But the knowledge of that value would never be possible without our being aware of it.

There remains one more notion which, I think, must not be omitted in a complete analysis of the problem, that is, the notion

of intrinsic value. Moore states the definition of intrinsic value in his paper entitled "The Conception of Intrinsic Value" in the following way :

"To say that a kind of value is 'intrinsic' means merely that the question whether a thing possesses it, depends solely on the intrinsic nature of the thing in question."³

Moore explains the above definition by saying that it involves two things:

- (i) "that it is impossible for what is strictly one and the same thing to possess that kind of value at one time, or in one set of circumstances and not to possess it at another."⁴
- (ii) "It is impossible that of the two exactly similar things one should possess it and the other not."⁵

It is quite clear from Moore's above statements that for him intrinsic value is not only necessarily connected with intrinsic properties of the thing which possesses it but also bears regular proportion to the intrinsic properties of that thing. Now, when we reflect on Moore's given account of intrinsic value, we find it generates the following problems:

If Moore's above-stated view is correct that intrinsic value depends solely on and varies in proportion to the properties of the thing which possesses it, then it follows that the value of good cannot be said to be an absolute value as he claims, since it does not exist on its own account. Its value and degree depend on the intrinsic properties of the thing which possesses it. If he says that good exists on its own account and its intrinsicness lies within it then it makes no sense for him to say, as he says, that it depends solely on and varies in proportion to the intrinsic

properties of the thing which possesses it. Moore cannot hold both the views in the same breath since the acceptance of one denies the other. But since, as a matter of fact, he does this, his theses cannot be said to be consistent. However, we cannot say that there is no distinction, on Moore's account, between intrinsic values and intrinsic properties of the thing which possesses it. Because he himself clearly maintains the distinction between them. This is quite obvious from his following passage.

“ ... the kind of difference I feel there to be saying that intrinsic properties seem to describe the intrinsic nature of what possesses them in a sense in which predicates of value never do. If you could enumerate all the intrinsic properties a given thing possesses you would have given a complete description of it, and would not need to mention any predicates of value it possesses; whereas no description of a given thing could be complete which omitted any intrinsic property. ”⁶

It is quite natural and legitimate to expect that, since Moore admits that there is a distinction between the predicates of value and the intrinsic properties of the thing which possesses predicates of value, there must be some characteristic belonging to intrinsic properties which predicates of value never possess. But unfortunately Moore fails to identify such characteristic except that intrinsic properties seem to describe the intrinsic nature of what possesses them in a sense in which the predicates of value never do, and that seems to me to be least illuminating.

There is yet another difficulty. How can value of good be intrinsic unless good itself possesses intrinsic property? It cannot be said that the value of good is intrinsic but it has no intrinsic characteristic. Because to say this means to make an inconsistent

statement. But if the value of good possesses intrinsic property, as Moore believes it to be, then the question arises : In what way is the intrinsic property of good related to the intrinsic property of the thing which possesses it ? One thing is clear that the intrinsic property of good is quite different from the intrinsic property of the thing which possesses it, because the intrinsic property of the thing is a part of the thing but the intrinsic property of good is not a part of the thing that possesses it, on Moore's account, even if it depends solely on and varies in proportion to the intrinsic property of the thing which possesses it. The intrinsic property of good is a non-natural property. But the intrinsic property of the thing is a natural property of the thing. This is the reason why Moore says that the intrinsic properties of the thing describe the intrinsic nature of the things which possess them, but the predicates of value (i.e., the intrinsic property of good) never do so. So the greatest error will be committed if the intrinsic property of good is identified with the intrinsic property of the thing which possesses it, which he calls the naturalistic fallacy. Though the intrinsic value of good is quite different from the intrinsic property of the thing which possesses it, yet they are necessarily connected, on Moore's account. If any thing possesses intrinsic value at one time or in one set of circumstances, it always possesses it in exactly the same degree at all the times or in all sets of circumstances (whatever its degree may be). Not only the same thing possesses it under all circumstances in the same degree, but also anything exactly like it possesses the same degree of value under all circumstances. If this view is true, that the intrinsic property of good is necessarily connected with the intrinsic property of the thing which possesses it, then the question arises : In what way are they necessarily connected ? It is quite obvious that their connection is biconditional, because a thing may have

intrinsic property even if it does not possess intrinsic value of any sort. But this does not mean that the necessity involved in them is analytic. The intrinsic property of good cannot be said to be analytically connected, on Moore's account, with intrinsic property of the thing which possesses it either. Because to accept this means to admit that the intrinsic property of good is a natural property of a thing, which Moore always rejects. It also cannot be said that the necessity involved in them is causal, because Moore himself denies it. No statement of causal value for him is statement of intrinsic value. Statements of causal value are not universally true statements. The whole difficulty arises because Moore nowhere makes the point clear in what sense the intrinsic property of good is necessarily connected with the intrinsic property of the thing which possesses it. It appears to me from his discourse that Moore admits a synthetic a priori relation between them, though he does not say it explicitly. But if this view is correct, then it makes no sense for Moore to say that the intrinsic value of good depends solely on the intrinsic property of the thing which possesses it, unless he admits the other way round too. But he does not do this. For him the intrinsic property of the thing can conceivably exist without intrinsic value but intrinsic value cannot conceivably exist (even if it is conceptually different) without intrinsic property of the thing which possesses it, because what is asserted to have intrinsic value is the intrinsic property of the thing. Even if it is admitted that their relation is synthetic a priori, it does not follow that good is an intrinsic value just merely on account of the intrinsic property of the thing which possesses it, without itself being intrinsic. But if good has intrinsic property of its own, then it makes no sense for Moore to say that the intrinsic value of good depends on the intrinsic property of the thing which possesses it, even if they are synthetically and necessarily related.

We may, thus, conclude on the basis of above discussion that Moore's thesis are unsustainable, since they involve inconsistencies.

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NOTES

1. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge University Press (1903), Chapt. I, p. 36.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
3. G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Studies*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. (1922), p. 260.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 261.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 274.