

University of Michigan Law School

University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository

Articles

Faculty Scholarship

2003


How to Be a Moorean

Donald H. Regan

University of Michigan Law School, donregan@umich.edu

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/articles/743>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/articles>

 Part of the [Jurisprudence Commons](#), and the [Law and Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Regan, Donald H. "How to Be a Moorean." *Ethics* 113, no. 3 (2003): 651-77.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact mlaw.repository@umich.edu.

How to Be a Moorean*

Donald H. Regan

G. E. Moore's position in the moral philosophy canon is paradoxical. On the one hand, he is widely regarded as the most influential moral philosopher of the twentieth century. On the other hand, his most characteristic doctrines are now more often ridiculed than defended or even discussed seriously. I shall discuss briefly a number of Moorean topics—the nonnaturalness of “good,” the open question argument, the relation of the right and the good, whether fundamental value is intrinsic, and the role of beauty—hoping to explain how a philosophically informed person could actually be a Moorean even today.¹

I. THE NONNATURALNESS OF “GOOD” AND TRANSCENDENTAL MOOREANISM

Moore claimed that “good” was a nonnatural property.² A century later, philosophers steeped in naturalism find this incredible, or incompre-

* I am grateful to the other participants in the conference at Georgia State University that this article was written for, and especially to Carl Wellman. Thanks also to Kit Wellman for organizing the conference, and to the editors of *Ethics*.

1. It should be said, as part of any general appreciation of *Principia Ethica*, that its appeal is not solely intellectual. George Santayana, who was ultimately not sympathetic to the substance of Moore's view, described Mooreanism as a “strangely unreal and strangely personal religion,” “noble and pathetic [because Moore's Good was not causally efficacious in the world as Plato's was],” a “clear dramatic expression of . . . a most pure and heroic human spirit”; *The Winds of Doctrine and Platonism and the Spiritual Life* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), p. 153 (discussing the Mooreanism of the early Bertrand Russell). John Maynard Keynes, who was under Moore's spell during his time as an active Apostle, remained sympathetic to Moore's doctrine years later when he wrote a memoir suffused with gentle, nostalgic irony: “It seems to me looking back, that this religion of ours was a very good one to grow up under. It remains nearer the truth than any other that I know. . . . It is still my religion under the surface”; *Essays and Sketches in Biography* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 248.

2. For example, G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), sec. 26. Since there are now two versions of *Principia* in wide use, which have the same text but different pagination (the other being the “revised edition” of 1993, also from Cambridge, with additional materials); and since Moore's sections average less than

Ethics 113 (April 2003): 651–677

© 2003 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 0014-1704/2003/11303-0008\$10.00

hensible. Part of the problem may be simply misinterpretation. We now distinguish between “concepts” and “properties” in a way that Moore did not, at least not explicitly. Implicitly, Moore arguably recognized that “good” in some sense determines a natural property, as we understand properties: he recognized unambiguously that “*the good*” could be described in naturalistic terms.³ But what Moore was centrally concerned with, and what he thought was nonnatural, was something we would now be more likely to think of as the *concept* “good.” Still, property or concept, Moore thought that the nonnatural “good” was something we could have knowledge of. That raises problems about the metaphysical status of “good” and about how we have epistemological access to it—and these are the problems that make most contemporary philosophers reject Moore’s “good.”

What prompted Moore to adopt such a problematic view? In part, he may not have realized in 1903 how problematic it was. He suggests in *Principia Ethica* that everyone has his (Moore’s) concept of “good,” if they can just clear their heads of conceptual confusion and see that this is the case.⁴ Later attempts to spell out just what sort of a property good was brought home to him some of the difficulties.⁵ But if Moore’s “good” is an extreme solution, that is because it is the solution to an extreme problem—a problem I shall call “the moral predicament.” The description of the moral predicament that follows is only hinted at by Moore—for example, when he says, “Just as, by reflection on our perceptual and sensory experience, we become aware of the distinction between truth and falsehood, so it is by reflection on our experiences of feeling and willing that we become aware of ethical distinctions.”⁶ But it seems clear to me that the background for Moore’s theory is an understanding of the moral predicament along the following lines.

We humans began (whether we speak phylogenetically about the human species or ontogenetically about the human individual) as insensate creatures too primitive even to be thought of as having drives. As we evolved or developed, we became creatures with sufficiently elaborated internal directive mechanisms so that we could be said to have drives. Next we added some degree of consciousness and sufficient internal machinery for representing particular goals of our drives so that

two pages; I shall cite *Principia Ethica* only by section number and subsection where applicable.

3. *Ibid.*, sec. 9.

4. *Ibid.*, sec. 13(2).

5. G. E. Moore, “The Conception of Intrinsic Value,” in *Philosophical Studies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), pp. 273–75, and “A Reply to My Critics,” in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1942), pp. 590–92.

6. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, sec. 79.

we could be thought of as having desires. Even before we had desires, we had to have some mechanism for arbitrating between conflicting drives in particular circumstances, and any such mechanism can be thought of as a sort of higher-order drive. Once we have desires—roughly drives plus consciousness—we can have more, and more complex, higher-order desires, which recalibrate the feedback mechanisms associated with particular desires in light of experience, or which amplify some desires, or perhaps extirpate others that create too many conflicts.

We might be tempted to describe the phenomena involving higher-order desires in more subjective language, saying we can revise, or adopt, or reject specific desires on the basis of more general desires and factual information; we can weigh desires against each other; we can formulate maximal consistent sets of desires; and so on. But we should not be deceived by the connotations of such a subjective description. Once we have developed to the point I have described, we are very complex behavioral mechanisms. But we are not yet agents. As Christine Korsgaard has argued, if our behavior is entirely a consequence of brute desires, then it is not really ours.⁷ We are mechanisms generating behavior; we are not agents who choose and execute actions. It does not matter that we have higher-order desires as well as first-order desires. Higher-order desires are a specific sort of desire, with a specific sort of object, but they are still (at least in the form we have been supposing so far) just brute desires, involving the same sort of arbitrariness, from the point of view of morality or of critical practical reason, that is a feature of brute first-order desires. If the mere possession of first-order desires is not a sufficient ground for agency, then neither is the mere possession of higher-order desires.⁸

What does it take to make us agents? One thing it takes is a generalized critical stance vis-à-vis our desires. Even as complex behavioral mechanisms, we already engage in a sort of criticism of our desires, when we revise or rank lower-order desires in light of higher-order desires. We already ask questions which can be formulated in terms of whether particular (lower-order) desires are sensible, worth pursuing, justified. It is a natural step to ask the same question about our higher-order desires and, ultimately, our highest-order desires. That is, we ask whether our highest-order desires are sensible, worth pursuing, justified—or, if we are procedurally more coherentist, whether our whole constellation of desires is sensible, worth pursuing, justified. This is what I shall refer to as the “desire-transcending question.” We must ask the

7. Christine Korsgaard, “The Normativity of Instrumental Reason,” in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, ed. Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), pp. 233–34.

8. See Gary Watson, “Free Agency,” *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975): 205–20, reprinted in *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 105–9.

desire-transcending question if we are to be agents. We cannot simply take our naturalistically given motivational system for granted, as the ultimate standard for action. I do not say we must ask the desire-transcending question before every action. But recognizing its relevance in principle, and trying to confront it sometimes, are essential if we are to regard ourselves as more than very complex behavior machines. (I do not mean this to be an abstruse point or a striking discovery; I take myself to be merely making explicit a feature of our commonsense notion of agency.)

From one perspective, as I have suggested, asking the desire-transcending question is a natural, gradual extension of our previous “critical” questioning of desires—a small, but ineluctable step. From another perspective, of course, it is a leap into the abyss. We previously answered questions about any particular desire by reference to other desires; we have now asked a question that cannot be answered that way. Nor, alas, can we unask the question. Once we have raised the desire-transcending question, it will not go away. We can deflect our attention from it, but we cannot defuse it while remaining agents. In principle, we need some Archimedean standpoint outside all of our brute desires (of whatever order) if we are to choose our actions.

In other words, if we are to regard ourselves as agents, we need the Good—or at least we need some concept that will present the same metaphysical and epistemological difficulties as the Good, because it must constitute a standard for our will which is grounded independently of our desires. Plato saw the same predicament as Moore and came up with his Form of the Good. Kant saw the same predicament also.⁹ Kant tried to do without the good, Platonic or Moorean, by locating ultimate value in our rational nature. His argument for the value of rational nature, as developed by Korsgaard and Allen Wood, is explicitly transcendental: we must believe in the value of rational nature if we are to

9. The trio of Plato, Kant, and Moore may seem strange: Plato and Moore are an obvious pairing, while Kant is in some respects their polar opposite. But no other philosopher is as vehement as these three in their rejection of brute desire as an ultimate ground for moral action. There is an affinity in the trio’s positive doctrines as well: Plato gave us two central ideas, (1) that agency is self-government by reason and (2) that reason is a faculty oriented to the Good. Kant developed more fully than anyone else after Plato the first idea, that agency is self-government by reason. Moore developed more fully than anyone else after Plato the second idea, that reason is oriented to the Good. Of course, the situation is not perfectly symmetric. Moore concentrated on Plato’s second idea, but I am confident that in essence he accepted the first idea as well. Kant, while developing Plato’s first idea, resoundingly rejected the second. But I think Kant’s rejection of the Good was a mistake, as I explain in Donald H. Regan, “The Value of Rational Nature,” *Ethics* 112 (January 2002): 267–91.

regard ourselves as agents.¹⁰ I think the transcendental approach is correct; I have just been sketching a transcendental argument myself. But as I have explained elsewhere, Kant's transcendental argument for the value of rational nature is unsatisfactory; what we actually need for Kant's purposes is Moore's "good."¹¹

So, I think the best the Moorean can do, at least for now, is to adopt a Kantian stance on agency. The Moorean should adopt a "two perspectives" view and treat belief in the Good as a belief for practical purposes only. Can we interpret Moore himself this way? Moore clearly did not have this sort of possibility in mind explicitly. But on the question of how it fits with his general understanding, the evidence is mixed. On the one hand, Moore analogizes "good" to "yellow," which suggests that "good" exists for speculative, not just for practical, reason.¹² This may be why Korsgaard can complain that for the "substantive realist" such as Moore, "We have normative concepts because we've spotted some normative entities, as it were wafting by. . . . Ethics is really a theoretical or epistemological subject."¹³ We do have the concept "yellow" because we spot yellow wafting by; if "good" is like "yellow," it seems that good must waft by as well.

And yet, Moore does not suggest that we just spot normative entities wafting by. He suggests that we discover normative entities by taking a critical approach to our desires in connection with the question what to do. "Just as, by reflection on our perceptual and sensory experience, we become aware of the distinction between truth and falsehood, so it is by reflection on our experiences of feeling and willing that we become aware of ethical distinctions. . . . It is only *because* we will or feel things

10. Christine Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 106–32, and *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 122–25. Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 121–32.

11. Regan, "The Value of Rational Nature." Incidentally, modern philosophers of a consequentialist bent agree with Moore in rejecting Kant, but they tend to prefer "good for" to "good" as the fundamental normative concept—partly, I suspect, because it seems that "good for" is less prey to the metaphysical and epistemological difficulties. But this is an illusion. Of course we can describe whatever we think is "good for" an agent in naturalistic terms, and to a considerable extent we may think it is obvious what the relevant naturalistic description is. But so can we describe "the good" in Moore's scheme in naturalistic terms. What we cannot capture in naturalistic terms is the fundamental idea that what we so describe, whether under the rubric "good" or the rubric "good for," is to be aimed at. That is what creates the difficulties. I hope to explain more fully why we cannot replace "good" with "good for" in a contribution to *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, ed. R. Jay Wallace, Philip Pettit, Samuel Scheffler, and Michael Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

12. For example, Moore, *Principia Ethica*, secs. 7, 10. Of course, the point of the analogy, in context, is the simplicity of the concepts.

13. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 44.

in a certain way, that we ever come to think them good; . . . willing is a necessary condition for the cognition of goodness.”¹⁴ This passage both distinguishes the practical realm from the purely speculative and grounds our normative thinking in a critical stance on our practical impulses. Here “good” is more like “true” than like “yellow,” and the concept of “truth” is not something wafting in the air. We might even suggest that the transcendental approach to “good” is an apt realization of the idea that “good” is a nonnatural property. “Good” is nonnatural because it is not accessible to speculative reason; it is a property (for practical purposes) because we are compelled to posit a standard for our will which is external to our inclinations, as truth is an external standard for our speculative beliefs.

Suppose Moore adopted the transcendental argument for the existence of Good and with it the Kantian “two perspectives” approach. Would he still be a moral realist? Well, yes, for practical purposes. Perhaps we need to distinguish between “full-blooded” moral realists, who are realists about normative concepts for both practical and speculative purposes (like Plato), and “weak” moral realists, who are moral realists for practical purposes only. Moore no doubt thought of himself (at least in 1903) as a full-blooded moral realist, but perhaps he should be content to be a weak moral realist instead. Even a weak moral realist believes in an external moral reality—it’s just that he believes in it only for practical purposes, or from the practical standpoint. It must be emphasized that belief from the practical standpoint is not second-class belief. Our nature as agents is every bit as fundamental to who we are as our nature as theorists, perhaps more fundamental. If we must believe in the Good from the practical standpoint, but we cannot believe in it from the theoretical, that is a serious diremption of our natures. But it is not a reason for regarding the Good as a fairy tale unless we are prepared to regard our agency the same way.

In his response to Stevenson in his *Library of Living Philosophers* volume, Moore concedes that Stevenson might be right—that perhaps our moral claims have no ultimate grounding beyond our emotional commitments.¹⁵ This is not the weak moral realist view—it concedes more to Stevenson than a weak moral realist would. But it is a retreat from confident, full-blooded moral realism. It is significant that Moore makes this qualified concession to emotivism but makes none whatever to naturalism. Naturalism says we can have an account of agency that is completely adequate for all purposes—including first-person practical purposes—in naturalistic terms. Moore was never tempted to believe that this might be right. But by 1942 Moore was prepared to concede

14. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, sec. 79.

15. Moore, “A Reply to My Critics,” pp. 545, 554.

that the Good might be an illusion—in which case there can be no adequate first-person account of agency, period. I am suggesting that all Moore should have conceded is that the Good might not exist for speculative reason.

II. THE OPEN QUESTION ARGUMENT

Properly understood, the open question argument is Moore's positive argument for the nonnaturalness of "good"—and it is a very powerful argument. Ironically, Moore himself may not have grasped perfectly in 1903 how the argument worked and what it proved. Moore's style makes it hard to find canonical statements of his arguments, but here is a sample: "The hypothesis that disagreement about the meaning of good is disagreement with regard to the correct analysis of a given whole, may be most plainly seen to be incorrect by consideration of the fact that, whatever definition be offered, it may always be asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good. . . . [Thus, if we consider the proposal that 'good' means 'desired to be desired'] the mere fact that we understand very well what is meant by doubting [the proposed equivalence], shews clearly that we have two different notions before our minds."¹⁶

As this passage suggests, Moore's explicit focus was on whether "good" could be given an analysis, whether it could be defined in other terms. And his argument seems to be that if we can doubt the identity of two concepts, that proves they are different. But, as has often been noted, that would threaten the whole project of conceptual analysis. What Moore must mean is not just that we are able to entertain genuine doubt but that when we focus on the doubt, it does not go away, and we eventually see clearly that it is not going to go away—that the concepts are in fact different. This does seem to be a technique by which we could establish, for example, that "good" does not mean "desired to be desired." But as it stands, it is a technique we would need to apply to each proposed definition of "good" seriatim. Moore goes on to suggest that after we have applied the technique to a few cases, we will see that the result will be the same in all possible cases when a definition of good is suggested. But why exactly is that? How is it that we learn from the inadequacy of some finite number of proposed definitions of "good" that no definition at all will work?

So far as I can see, Moore's only answer is that as we acquire expertise by trying successive definitions, we just come to see that "good" is unanalyzable.¹⁷ But a much better answer is to hand. Trying out a few definitions of "good"—such as "is pleasant," "is desired," "is desired to

16. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, sec. 13(1).

17. *Ibid.*, sec. 13(2).

be desired”—makes us realize not just that these definitions all fail but also why they fail and therefore why any other definition like them will fail: “good” is a normative concept and these are descriptive concepts; and normative and descriptive concepts are different in kind. Remembering our basic story about agency, “good” must be the sort of concept whose essence is to ground answers to “What to do?” Descriptive concepts will of course be relevant, but descriptive concepts do not have that essential relation to action.

Notice that if what the open question argument proves is that “good” is not a descriptive concept, then it does not prove that “good” is not complex. “Good” could be normative but be definable, for example, in terms of “right,” or “good for,” or “virtuous,” or even “beautiful.” Furthermore, the failure of any number of proposed normative definitions would not establish that the next normative definition would fail also; the mechanism I described above for realizing that “no definition like this will work” is not applicable to normative definitions. (Why then does a Moorean believe “good” is not complex? Just because no definition yet suggested in terms of another normative concept produces as plausible a picture of the moral universe as the picture which takes “good” as foundational.) Notice also that if what the open question argument proves is that “good” is not a descriptive concept, this explains why the open question argument is not rendered irrelevant by our loss of faith in the analytic/synthetic distinction. Moore’s point is not primarily about traditional analysis—the project of deciding whether two concepts of the same kind are the same. Moore’s point is about the distinction between two kinds of concept. Recent attacks on the normative/descriptive distinction are more relevant to Moore’s project, but those attacks are by no means so persuasive as Quine’s arguments against the analytic/synthetic distinction.

Moore finally makes the “difference in kind” claim explicitly in “The Conception of Intrinsic Value,” published in 1922.¹⁸ He first argues himself into the paradoxical position that value properties (*a*) are “properties” and (*b*) are “intrinsic” (they depend solely on the intrinsic properties of the things that possess them), but (*c*) are nevertheless not “intrinsic properties.” He then tries to explain this by saying what I think he should have said all along. He suggests that “good” is different in kind from a true intrinsic property like “is a state containing more pleasure than pain” and that “beautiful” is similarly different in kind from the intrinsic property “yellow.” Lamenting his inability to specify this difference in kind to his own satisfaction, he says, “I can only vaguely express the kind of difference I feel there to be by saying that intrinsic

18. Moore, “The Conception of Intrinsic Value,” pp. 273–75.

properties seem to *describe* the intrinsic nature of what possesses them in a sense in which predicates of value never do.”¹⁹

The descriptive/evaluative distinction is indeed hard to pin down. To begin to see the difficulty, notice that on a Moorean understanding of “good,” “good” can function as a descriptive property. To have a crude example, if my wife asks me which of two books she should pack for me to read on a trip, I could answer by saying, “Pack the good one.” If one book is good and the other bad, this answer gives a definite direction. She might make a mistake and bring the wrong book, but so she might also if I said, using purely descriptive terms to pick out the desired book, “Pack the one I started last night.” Moorean “good” partitions the world in the same way as standard descriptive properties do.²⁰ This suggests that “good” might be just another descriptive property. Furthermore, if supervenience holds, then any partitioning induced by “good,” not just on the actual world but on all possible worlds, can be duplicated by some (probably complex) descriptive property other than “good.”²¹ This suggests that “good” is not only descriptive, but expendable.

The reason “good” is neither descriptive nor expendable is that it signals a different way of looking at the world from the way signaled by the ordinary use of descriptive property terms. It is one thing to look at the world and see what is there. It is another thing to consider possibilities for the future and recognize which of them should be realized. Descriptive terms are the stuff of the first project; “good” is the stuff of the second.²² Moore might have done better not to talk about good as a “property” at all, since assigning properties is normally part of the project of description. The agent who is considering what to do, even

19. *Ibid.*, p. 274. Moore still found this suggested distinction both plausible and hard to elucidate further in 1942; see “A Reply to My Critics,” pp. 590–92.

20. Indeed, this is true on any cognitivist understanding of “good”—but I do not want to prejudge whether Moore’s view is best thought of as cognitivist. I have often thought that perhaps Mooreans should not claim to be cognitivists: they should refer to themselves as “realist noncognitivists” or some such: “noncognitivists” to emphasize that goodness is not just another aspect of the way things (descriptively) are; “realist” to emphasize that there are correct and incorrect views about goodness and that the difference is underwritten by something more than our attitudes and practices. Or maybe Mooreans are cognitivists after all: they are “cognitivist irrealists,” since they think we can cognize non-descriptive “facts.” The point of these dual oxymorons is just to unsettle the standard assumption that only judgments about the way the world descriptively is can be correct or incorrect. No change in terminology solves any fundamental problem, but some such change might encourage a clearer focus on the real issues.

21. See Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), pp. 122–25.

22. “Good” may also be part of looking at what is there and deciding how much of it is worthy of admiration (see Sec. V below); but this is more akin to choosing among possibilities than to simply saying what is there.

if she poses the question to herself in terms of “good,” does not look out at the world and see there *in the world* anything not seen by an agent whose only concern is description. But what the first agent sees, she sees in light of a different question. She sees some things as to-be-promoted and others as to-be-discouraged. And she thinks there is a correct pattern of application of these gerundives, independent of her seeing. She thinks some things *are* to-be-promoted and others *are* to-be-discouraged. This independence of her seeing is what makes the “property” language appealing. But neither to-be-promotedness nor to-be-discouragedness is best thought of as a new property of the things they belong to; they do not add to the descriptive facts about those things. They are gerundive “facts” concerning the things just as they independently descriptively are.

Indeed, to hypostatize this to-be-promotedness gives rise to a well-known puzzle that is often invoked against Moore: if “good” is just another property in the world, why should the agent who sees it be moved by it? This is the first step in what threatens to be an infinite regress like the one Lewis Carroll constructs in the discussion of *modus ponens* between Achilles and the Tortoise.²³ We find ourselves operating with the property “good,” which is intended to give direction to the agent; we concretize it in the world; then we wonder why the agent should care about this concrete property; we may be tempted to invent another property, “good+,” to explain that; and so on, and on. Carroll taught us that a rule of inference, if we can just follow it, is worth an infinity of premises. Similarly, one nonhypostatized “to-be-promoted,” apprehended as a guide to action, is worth an infinity of concretized evaluative properties.

But do we really need the nonhypostatized “to be promoted” at all? Could we not just say the agent responds to the descriptive facts on which the to-be-promotedness supervenes? I think not. Imagine that Alice rescues a stranger from a burning building. We naturally think that Alice has acted as a moral agent, that she has done well and deserves admiration. But unless she saved the stranger because she saw the person’s life as to-be-preserved (or something along those general lines), she did not act as an agent at all. It is not enough merely to have observed that the stranger was threatened by the fire and to have reacted by saving the stranger; it is not enough to have responded reflexively to the descriptive facts purely as such. It is not enough even to have acted on the basis of a standing, but unexamined, disposition or desire to rescue people from burning buildings. A trained rescue dog might have done that. The agent does something different from the rescue dog. Specifically, the agent responds to the normative significance of the

23. Lewis Carroll, “What the Tortoise Said to Achilles,” *Mind* 4 (1895): 278–80.

descriptive facts. The agent can, and the dog cannot, recognize, and close, an “open question.”²⁴

III. THE RIGHT AND THE GOOD

In *Principia Ethica* Moore famously claims that “right” means “productive of the best possible consequences.”²⁵ “Right” is defined in terms of “good.” By the time of *Ethics*, he had receded from this view. He still believed, of course, that the right thing to do was whatever had the best consequences. But the connection between “right” and “good” was no longer analytic; it was synthetic a priori.²⁶ To my mind, the *Principia* thesis is closer to the truth.

Remember our story about the nature of the moral predicament. The agent has a choice to make, and she needs to decide “what to do.” Suppose for simplicity that the consequences of each possible choice are perfectly known. In this situation, the agent sees before her a set of possible future courses of the world (either completely specified or specified insofar as her choice makes any difference), and she must choose between them. Notice that some action of her own is the beginning point of, and is included in, each of those future courses. Her action is part of the course of the world whose value is in question. It is sometimes said that consequentialists cannot take into account the intrinsic value of actions, because the “consequences” include only things that happen after the action and as a result of it. It is not clear to me that the most natural meaning of “consequences” in this context

24. I borrowed this example from Frank Jackson, who comments: “What we should aim at is not doing what is right *qua* what is right. I should rescue someone from a fire because if I don’t they will die, not because that is the right thing to do. . . . What ought to motivate us . . . is not the moral status of our actions *per se*, but the goods that confer that moral status” (Jackson, p. 141). It may seem at first that Jackson is saying we can just respond to the descriptive facts, without reference to anything like “to-be-preservedness.” If that is what he is saying, I disagree. But that is not the precise claim he makes. What he says is that the agent should not be thinking about the rightness or wrongness of her own action *per se*. The agent should be thinking instead about the goods her action achieves. I fully agree that the agent does not focus on the rightness of her own action (see Sec. III below). My point is that to be an agent, she must be thinking about the goods her action achieves *qua* “good.” At some point in the conference discussion it was suggested that pressing the open question is sometimes captious. If we are told that some act would save many innocent lives at trivial cost, it would take a lunatic to ask, “Ah, yes, but is that good?” In practice, true. But it remains the case that there is a deep difference in principle between the claim that the act would save many lives at trivial cost and the claim that that is a valuable outcome. And there is a deep difference in principle between a life-saving machine and an agent who recognizes the value of the lives and saves them on that account. This difference of principle, which it is more important to remember in more controversial contexts, is what the open question argument reminds us of.

25. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, secs. 17, 89.

26. G. E. Moore, *Ethics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), pp. 107–8.

is so limited, but if it is, then “consequentialist” is simply a misleading label for many of those who are tagged with it and who use it of themselves. Someone who believes that the agent should choose the most valuable future course of the world can and should take into account the intrinsic value, if any, of the action that begins each course. Incidentally, it is clear that Moore both attributed intrinsic value to actions and wanted to take that intrinsic value into account in choosing what to do.²⁷ I shall therefore stipulate that a “consequentialist,” as I use the term, takes into account any intrinsic value that may be possessed by actions.²⁸

So, our agent faces a range of possible future courses of the world, each beginning with an action of her own, and she must choose among them. Choosing an action amounts to choosing a course of the world, and conversely choosing a course of the world amounts to choosing an action. The question “What action to do?” is precisely the same in its practical force as the question “Which course of the world to choose?” Furthermore, because the agent is committed to looking beyond her naturalistically given motivational system, the question “Which course of the world to choose?” becomes in effect, “Which course of the world is to be chosen?” But surely the course of the world that is to be chosen is the course of the world that, in Moore’s phrase, ought most to exist for its own sake²⁹—in other words, the course of the world that would be best. In sum, what the agent ought to do is to choose the action with the best “consequences.” This sort of argument is sometimes derided as an inappropriate reliance on “maximizing” rationality, which is thought to have a nasty, calculating air. But I hardly see what the objection can be here, that is supposed to justify a pejorative epithet. I have not used the word “rational” or “rationality” or “maximize.” I have merely described the agent’s situation as it appears to her and then made an argument, admittedly leading up to the word “best,” about what the situation requires of her.³⁰

Moving to a different objection, it may seem that allowing actions to have intrinsic value is a cheat, an ad hoc attempt to shoehorn something like deontological value into a context where it does not belong.

27. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, sec. 17.

28. Similarly, to avoid a different possible objection to the narrowness of “consequences,” I shall stipulate that a consequentialist, as I understand the notion, can take into account the value of organic unities that are brought into existence by an action or its (future) consequences, even though some elements of the organic whole exist in the past.

29. *Ibid.*, preface.

30. Notice also that the argument is perfectly consistent with allowing significance to distributional concerns, or any similar considerations, if we think they affect the value of the world as an organic whole.

But in fact, Moore's general principles about what is valuable lead naturally and directly to the conclusion that actions have intrinsic value, as I shall explain in Section V. Be that as it may, the deontologist could still say that merely granting actions intrinsic value does not really capture the deontological intuition. Consequentialism, even if it recognizes intrinsic value in actions, deals in "state-of-affairs" value; and it makes all reasons for action, which must be grounded in state-of-affairs value, what I shall call "state-of-affairs reasons." For the consequentialist, any reason to do an action, even if it is based on the intrinsic value of the action itself, is fundamentally a reason why the action should happen, rather than a reason which bears directly and unmediatedly on why the agent should *do* it.

The deontologist has a point here: I think we can form a conception of a pure "action reason," which speaks directly to what is to be *done, here and now*, and which is not mediated by any thought about the value of any state of affairs. However, I think we would be ill advised to formulate our practical principles in terms of such action reasons; the consequentialist does well to avoid them. Consider. A great virtue of state-of-affairs reasons is that their force is transmitted over causal connections. Thus, if I have a state-of-affairs reason not to have a high-cholesterol dessert (whether because of the bad consequences for my arteries or because of the intrinsic disvalue of an act of intemperance), I also have a state-of-affairs reason not to get myself into a situation where I am likely to have such a dessert. The consequences of having the dessert, and the having the dessert itself (considered as a state of affairs), are both consequences of the earlier act which leads to temptation. However, if the reason for not having the dessert is a pure action reason, a reason not to *do the act* of eating the dessert that is independent of any consideration about the value of any state of affairs, including the action itself, then from the fact that I have reason not to have the dessert, when faced with the here-and-now choice about it, it does not follow at all that I have reason to avoid doing what will get me into the tempting situation.

Of course we normally think that we do have reason to avoid temptation to act imprudently or immorally, and I am not denying that we have such reasons. What I am saying is that insofar as the reason not to do the primary act is a pure action reason, any reason to avoid temptation must be not only distinct but totally logically independent. It is a completely separate question. The pure action reason has force here and now (i.e., in the here and now of the choice about that action), and it has force nowhere else. Similarly, if the only reason against some wrongdoing is a pure action reason, it makes perfect sense for an agent to be glad (for whatever other reasons) that she did the action in the past or to hope (for whatever other reasons) that she will do it in the

future, even though the doing was or will be unambiguously wrong. My point is not just that this may make sense on balance; my point is that the existence of the pure action reason does not count in any way against such time-displaced attitudes. One might try to avoid this paradox by bringing in concerns about character, or the like, but that would bring in state-of-affairs reasons again—in addition to raising other puzzles about how our actions affect our characters, as opposed to manifesting them.

In sum, state-of-affairs reasons capture many features of our ordinary way of thinking better than pure action reasons. They even capture better some features of our thinking that may seem primarily associated with deontological values. It is not such a bad thing that consequentialism, in valuing or devaluing actions, treats them as states of affairs.

If we are once persuaded to operate only with state-of-affairs reasons, then it becomes plausible to claim that “right” really does mean “productive of best consequences.” I take it that “right” means “what there is most reason to do.” But if we are committed to all reasons being state-of-affairs reasons, then saying that an action is what there is most reason to do seems virtually the same as saying that it is what results in the best state of affairs. Notice also a consequence of this: the agent who is concerned only with state-of-affairs reasons in effect regards herself as transparent. She has alternative actions to choose between, but there is no judgment she needs to make regarding her choosing except the judgment about what choice will produce the best future state of the world, starting with the action itself considered as a state of affairs. “Rightness” disappears from the first-person point of view.

IV. IS VALUE INTRINSIC?

One of Moore’s most famous doctrines is that the fundamental value named by “good” is intrinsic: the value of a thing is determined solely by its intrinsic nature.³¹ Many people have criticized this doctrine, arguing that the value of a thing depends not just on its intrinsic nature, but on the context in which it exists. It is undeniable, of course, that some sorts of value depend on context: instrumental value depends on the causal milieu in which a thing occurs; constitutive value, or value as a part, depends on whether other things exist with which to form a significant whole. But a simple regress argument (which I will spell out in a moment, probably unnecessarily) shows that neither instrumental value nor constitutive value can be fundamental. There is still the possibility, however, that the fundamental form of value (noninstrumental,

31. This is implicit throughout *Principia Ethica*, and it is required by Moore’s “method of isolation” for ascertaining intrinsic value (*Principia Ethica*, secs. 53, 112). The most explicit statement of the thesis is in “The Conception of Intrinsic Value.”

nonconstitutive value) is essentially contextual—that the value of a thing can vary with the context in which it occurs, even though the thing does not form an organic whole with anything in that context. (There could still be organic wholes, of course, each with its own contextually varying value.) So, the question is posed: is foundational value intrinsic or contextual?

I am inclined to think there is a genuine ontological issue here, but I don't know the answer. What I mainly want to point out is that the Moorean can live with either answer. The denial of contextual value is not essential to Moore's overall view. This may sound implausible, given the prominence of Moore's assertions that value is intrinsic. But on consideration, I think we can see that what is essential to Moore's view is not the claim that value is intrinsic but, rather, a number of more specific theses that are entailed by that claim but that do not jointly entail it. For example, it is essential for Moore that (*a*) instrumental value is not fundamental, and (*b*) constitutive value is not fundamental, and (*c*) fundamental value is not subjective. But these essential theses do not exclude the possibility of an objective, noninstrumental, nonconstitutive, fundamental contextual value.³² Moore never directly addresses the possibility of this sort of contextual value, and he gives no reason for rejecting it. Perhaps he would have argued that whenever we seem to see contextual variation in value, the phenomena are really best accounted for in terms of organic unities—I'll come back to that. But in truth, Moore seems to assume implicitly that he must claim that value is intrinsic in order to guarantee the more particular theses I have distinguished—and most particularly, in order to guarantee that fundamental value is objective. Once we see that contextual value can be noninstrumental, nonconstitutive, and fully objective, there is no obvious reason to reject the possibility that fundamental value is essentially contextual.

Of course, if value is contextual, we cannot in general ascertain value by Moore's "method of isolation." But if we have the capacity to intuit the value of a thing in isolation, it seems we could equally have the capacity to intuit its value in any specified context, if that is how value exists. The "method" would no longer involve isolation, but the crucial operation of intuition could be much the same. To the extent that Moore's real point is that we must intuit fundamental value and that we must take care to specify precisely what it is we mean to be intuiting the value of—that point is fully preserved. To be sure, "what we mean to be intuiting the value of" must now refer, not to an object

32. Conversely, the proponent of contextual value can endorse (and to my mind, should endorse) the essential Moorean theses that fundamental value is noninstrumental, nonconstitutive, and objective.

in the abstract, but to an object in a context. Still, it is not clear that Moore has any reason to reject this. I think one final motivation for Moore's attachment to intrinsic value is a desire to be able to attach a single definite value to each particular thing. But as we shall see, this desire has its analogue in the mind-set of the contextualist—and what I want to argue in the remainder of this section is that the desire to attach a single definite value to each particular thing (whether in isolation or in context) is an *ignis fatuus*. Not that it can't be done; but it can't be done in a way that connects up directly with reasons for action.

To get some further perspective on the choice between intrinsic and contextual value, let us start again, this time with a quick look at some other sorts of value. Instrumental value, the value that something has in virtue of its causal consequences, may well be the sort of value that we think about most in daily decision making; and by a sort of Gresham's law of deliberative considerations, this persistent focus on instrumental value threatens to distract us from ever seriously investigating intrinsic value (or alternatively, fundamental contextual value). So it is important to make the point that instrumental value cannot be fundamental; there can be no instrumental value without some kind of noninstrumental value. If something has value because of its consequences, then the consequences must be valuable; if their value is instrumental, then they must have further valuable consequences; eventually, something must be valuable on grounds other than its consequences, else we have an infinite regress. So, when we deliberate about instrumental value, we cannot help but be relying indirectly on propositions about some noninstrumental value, which is fundamental. For Moore, this fundamental noninstrumental value was intrinsic value; but notice that nothing in the argument just given favors intrinsic value over contextual value for the role.

In my view, "instrumental value" should not really be thought of as a species of value at all. To say something is instrumentally valuable is to say that it has valuable consequences; recognizing that the thing has valuable consequences need not commit us to calling the thing itself valuable in any way. If we call the thing by a phrase that suggests it is valuable, that is a courtesy title. Or perhaps it is a bit more than a courtesy: deliberation may be facilitated in practice by talking about "instrumental value," which functions as a stand-in for the real, non-instrumental value that underlies it. We want there to be a connection between reasons and value. Instead of saying (carefully and accurately) that the reason for promoting or preserving something is the noninstrumental value it produces as a consequence, it is convenient to speak of the reason as being the thing's own "instrumental value."

Much the same can be said about "constitutive value" or "value as

a part”—the value that something has because of its role in constituting a valuable whole. Just as instrumental value cannot exist unless something has noninstrumental value, so constitutive value cannot exist unless something (in this case, some whole) has nonconstitutive value. The regress argument is the same; and once again, the nonconstitutive value which is truly fundamental could be either intrinsic or contextual. As with instrumental value, we should not think of “constitutive value” as really a species of value at all. It is a courtesy title and perhaps a useful shorthand in deliberation. Like instrumental value, “constitutive value” can be used as a stand-in for the nonconstitutive value that underlies it; we may find it convenient to speak of a thing’s constitutive value as being the reason for promoting or preserving it.

But there is a problem concerning the assignment of constitutive value. (An analogous problem arises with instrumental value, if we try to allocate the value of some result to a multiplicity of contributing causes.) Suppose we ask, how much constitutive value does any particular part of a valuable whole have? We are now pulled in two directions. On the one hand, it is tempting to think that the value of a whole should equal the sum of the constitutive values of its parts. I shall call this the “summation constraint.” Notice that I am not suggesting that the value of the whole should be the sum of the intrinsic values (or more generally, the nonconstitutive values, which may be contextual) of the parts. Familiarity with Moore’s principle of organic unities has trained our intuitions beyond the point of finding that naïve view compelling. Even so, it might seem that the value of the whole surely should equal the sum of the values of the parts *as parts*, that is, the sum of their constitutive values. On the other hand, I have already suggested that if we find it useful to talk about constitutive value at all, it will be as a proxy in deliberation for the fundamental value that the presence of the part adds to the whole. From this perspective, we want the constitutive value of a thing to represent the strength of the reason (reflecting its role in the whole) for promoting or preserving it; I shall call this the “proxy value” of the part. Unfortunately, the summation constraint is inconsistent with the parts’ being assigned the appropriate proxy values.

Consider a very simple whole, which we assume actually exists. The whole consists of two identical and symmetrically disposed parts, neither of which has any intrinsic value (or nonconstitutive contextual value) at all. Call the value of the whole W . If we assume that the value of the whole must equal the sum of the constitutive values of the parts (the summation constraint), then by symmetry, each part must have a constitutive value of $W/2$. Now, suppose the question arises whether to preserve one of the parts from destruction (by some threat that would leave the other part unharmed). The choice is between preserving the threatened part and doing something else (with the same resources)

that creates some other value worth $\frac{3}{4}W$. If we compare this $\frac{3}{4}W$ to the constitutive value of the part, $W/2$, we will conclude that we should not preserve the part; we should create the other value instead. But that is obviously a mistake. If we lose this part, we lose the entire value of the whole, which is W . The right choice is to preserve the part, thereby achieving W instead of $\frac{3}{4}W$. The point is this: the proxy value of the part—the nonconstitutive value that it should be thought of as representing in our deliberation, the strength of the reason for preserving or adding it—is determined by its marginal contribution to the value of the whole, given the actual state of the facts about the existence or nonexistence of the other parts. There is no reason why this marginal contribution should equal any “value as a part” we might assign in any other way.

Indeed, in our example, there is no way, even if we ignore symmetry, that we can (a) assign values as parts consistently with the summation constraint and also (b) have each part’s assigned value equal its proxy value. In the example, the marginal contribution of each part is W . The sum of the marginal contributions is $2W$. (This is a numerical sum only; it has no real-world interpretation. We cannot build up the whole out of two steps each of which achieves value W , thus showing that the whole really has value $2W$, because the first step takes place against a background where neither part exists, and the first part posited makes a marginal contribution in that context of \emptyset . It remains true that when the whole exists, each part exists against a background in which the other exists; each part then makes a marginal contribution of W ; and the sum of those marginal contributions is $2W$.) If we require the values of the parts “as parts” to sum to W , then since the marginal contributions of the parts sum to $2W$, there must be at least one part whose value as a part is different from its marginal contribution. In other words, there must be at least one part whose value as a part does not reflect its proxy value, the strength of the reason for promoting or preserving it.

I hope I have not made unnecessarily heavy weather of what is really a very simple point: if we insist on assigning constitutive values subject to the summation constraint, then those constitutive values cannot correspond to the strength of the reasons for promoting or preserving the various parts. I have shown this for one case; it should be obvious that it is true for a huge range of similar cases; and I hope it is obvious (since I do not want to stop and argue) that something very similar is true in every case in which there is any point to talking about constitutive value. The obvious conclusion is: we should give up any notion that the value of the whole should equal the sum of the constitutive values of the parts.³³

33. Notice that despite a sort of family resemblance, I have not just been reestablishing

It might seem that we could keep the summation constraint and still get to where we want by (i) assigning values as parts consistently with the summation constraint and then (ii) saying that the reason for preserving any part is compounded out of its value as a part and its effect, by its presence or absence, on the values as parts of the other parts. In a sense, this is true: on the most natural understanding of the effect of one part on the value as a part of another part, this calculation will get us to the right result. Consider our example above, and suppose we assign to each part the constitutive value of $W/2$. Now, suppose the first part exists, and we are considering whether to create the second. If we create the second part, we add to the value of the whole $W/2$, the constitutive value of the second part itself. But we said in ii above that we must also consider the effect of adding the second part on the constitutive value of the first part. When the second part does not exist, the “whole” which exists is just the first part on its own; by hypothesis, the value of the first part on its own (which is also its “constitutive value” in the whole consisting solely of itself) is \emptyset . When the second part does exist, the “whole” which exists is the original two-part whole we described; and the value of the first part as a part of this whole is, by hypothesis, $W/2$. So, adding the second part increases the constitutive value of the first part from \emptyset to $W/2$. The total “value added” by creating the second part is $W/2$ (the constitutive value of the second part itself) + $W/2$ (the effect on the constitutive value of the first part) = W . This, as we already know, is the right result. So it appears that we have found a way to preserve the summation constraint and also make the strength of the reason for promoting or preserving any part come out to what it should be.

Yes, sort of. Actually, the method we have invented works too well. The reader can verify that in our simple example, any assignment of constitutive values to the parts of the two-part whole that satisfies the summation constraint (e.g., $\frac{3}{4}W$ for the first part and $\frac{1}{4}W$ for the second part) works just as well for generating the right proxy values. This suggests that the assignment of constitutive values is essentially arbitrary. The same is true even in multipart wholes: as long as the assignment of constitutive values within all wholes satisfies the summation constraint, any assignment at all will generate the same (correct) proxy values. Suppose there are n parts of a potential large whole. We want

the principle of organic unities. That principle says that the value of the whole need not be equal to the sum of the nonconstitutive values (intrinsic or contextual) of the parts. I assumed the principle of organic unities in my original description of the example, when I said that the value of the whole was W but neither part had any nonconstitutive value. It was a further claim that there is no way to assign values as parts so that (a) the values as parts sum to the value of the whole and (b) the value of each part reflects the strength of the reason for preserving it (or adding it as the last element).

to know whether, when all the parts but the k th exist, we should add the k th part. By our formula above, the reason for adding the k th part is the value of the k th part as a constitutive part of the large whole (represented as W_k), plus the sum of the differences the presence of the k th part makes to the constitutive value of each other part. Now, for each other part, we represent the constitutive value of the i th part in the larger whole as W_i , and we represent the constitutive value of the i th part in the smaller whole consisting of everything but the k th part as w_i . So, the total value added by creating the k th part is $W_k + \sum_{i \neq k} (W_i - w_i) = W_k + \sum_{i \neq k} W_i - \sum_{i \neq k} w_i = \sum_i W_i - \sum_{i \neq k} w_i$. But if the assignment of constitutive values within all wholes satisfies the summation constraint, then this last expression is just the value of the large whole (which includes the k th part) minus the value of the whole consisting of all the other parts—which does indeed represent the strength of the reason for adding the k th part.

But we see that the complicated calculation, involving the particular constitutive values, is pointless. The constitutive values drop out and leave us with the difference between the value of the initial whole and the value of the final whole. Any assignments at all of constitutive values within the various wholes, provided they satisfy the summation constraint, would produce the same results.³⁴ This strongly suggests that the assignment of values as parts is arbitrary and, therefore, meaningless. The irrelevance of the calculation in terms of the values as parts does not *entail* that the assigned values are meaningless. It could be that there is an essentially correct way to assign values to the parts even though any way would do equally well for purposes of deliberation about whether to preserve some part. In our original example, involving perfect symmetry between two parts, it might seem that the value of each part must be $W/2$. But even here, I think this is more than we can infer from the symmetry. What we can infer from the symmetry is that *if* there is such a thing as a meaningful allocation of value as parts, then in this case the parts must have equal value. But if the basic issue is whether there is any such thing as a meaningful, nonarbitrary value as a part, then the symmetry does not tell us that there is.

To me, it seems intuitively right that if we are really dealing with a significant whole, there will be no nonarbitrary way of allocating among the parts the extra value that comes from the wholeness. This

34. Notice that although the argument just given depends on assuming the summation constraint, it should not be taken as an argument for the fundamental importance of the summation constraint. If we have a procedure with a lot of loose gears—the arbitrary values as parts—we need something to regiment them in some way (here, the summation constraint). It remains true that the values that matter—the proxy values, the marginal contributions to overall value that the Rube Goldberg calculation succeeds in cranking out—do not themselves obey the summation constraint.

may make us uncomfortable. We want to be able to identify the value, even as a part of a whole, of each particular thing. The appeal of the summation constraint reflects this: we don't feel we have identified the value of each thing as a part unless the values in question add up to the value of the whole. (The proxy values, as we have seen, do not in general add up to the value of the whole, and they therefore seem unsuitable as the values of each thing.) But sometimes, I suggest, there is simply no such value of each particular thing to be found. I suspect this is why Moore seems to deny the existence of "value as a part,"³⁵ even though he would never think of denying that when we make a decision about whether to promote or preserve some thing, we should take into account its marginal effect on the value of any whole that it is or would be a part of. (Correspondingly, I suspect that Moore's insistence on the significance of the "intrinsic" value of a thing as determined by the method of isolation—even though the thing actually exists only in a whole and cannot be assigned any nonarbitrary value of its own as it exists—reflects a different response to the desire to have a definite value for each particular thing.)

It may seem that we have lingered unnecessarily over constitutive value; but what we have learned will prove helpful in understanding contextual value and in understanding just how the Moorean and the contextualist differ. Let us now turn to contextual value, beginning with an example. The contextualist might claim that the (nonmonetary) value of any individual Gutenberg Bible would be even greater than it is, if it were the only one extant. Since it is plausible to claim that the value in question here is objective; that it is not instrumental; and that it is not constitutive, because the set of surviving Gutenberg Bibles do not form an organic whole, it looks as if we have a kind of fundamental value which is not determined solely by the intrinsic nature of the object. In other words, we have a kind of fundamental value that is not intrinsic in Moore's sense; it is contextual. Notice that the regress argument, which shows the nonfundamentality of instrumental value and constitutive value, does not apply to contextual value. The contextual value of a thing depends on what else exists, but it does not depend on any other thing's having value (as instrumental value and constitutive value do), so the regress argument has no purchase.

Moore might retort that whenever the value of a thing depends on what else exists, that must be because the thing and at least some elements of its context form an organic unity. As one way of supporting this claim, Moore could just define an organic unity as any collection of objects, however disparate or seemingly unconnected, of which it is true that the value of the collection is different from the sum of the

35. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, sec. 19.

values of the individual objects in isolation. Sometimes it seems as if that is his intention.³⁶ But such a definition would seem to be a cheat; the phrases “organic unity” and “organic whole” promise a particular sort of explanation, which may of course be metaphorical to some degree, of how the extra value (positive or negative) comes into existence. This definition would undercut that promise. Furthermore, it seems that we can imagine genuine organic wholes in which the value of the whole is equal to the sum of the values of the parts in isolation, if there are separate positive and negative interaction values between the parts that cancel out.³⁷

Alternatively, Moore might try to argue case by case that whenever value appears to depend on context, there is an organic relationship somewhere in the background. With regard to the Bible example, Moore might ask, Why isn't the second Bible as valuable as the first? (Or more accurately, Why is either one of two Bibles less valuable than it would be if it were unique?) He might say that we need an explanation, and if there is to be any sort of explanation, only two general possibilities come to mind, both involving organic unities. First, it might be because the Bibles need to be appreciated to be valuable, and the second Bible, even though it is identical to the first (indeed, because it is identical to the first) does not generate a fully distinct appreciation, at least in any one viewer. The idea is that appreciation is essentially of types, even though it may be occasioned by tokens, so the proliferation of tokens creates no new appreciation. This explanation depends, obviously, on specific assumptions about the nature and value of the organic relation between viewer and object. The argument also would not apply when there were multiple viewers of multiple Bibles—but then it also might not seem quite so clear that each of two viewer/Bible complexes is worth less than it would be worth if it were unique. And if it still seems true that the second viewer/Bible complex is worth less than the first, that could be because the human species, and thus all of our combined acts of appreciation, form an organic unity. As to the second general possibility, we might just think that the universe is made better by variety. A single Bible does more for variety than either of two Bibles does. (Or, if what is valuable is the viewer/Bible complex, a single such complex does more for variety than either of two does.) This seems to depend on viewing the entire universe as an organic whole.³⁸

I am not claiming that Moore necessarily wins this argument about

36. For example, *ibid.*, sec. 20.

37. I owe this observation to Piétro Semifero.

38. Notice that we can believe that the entire universe is an organic whole without reverting to the idealistic holism Moore disdained, in which the parts have no independent reality at all.

whether we can have contextual variation in value without true organic unity. The believer in contextual value has on his side the initial plausibility of his view in many quite ordinary cases, such as the Bible example. Moore has on his side the impulse to explain contextual variation in value if possible and the fact that many candidate explanations depend on organic unities. There is more to be said on both sides. Since I have already suggested that the Moorean can live with either resolution of the issue, I shall not try to settle it. But it is worth saying a bit more about the comparison.

Suppose we conclude from the Bible example that value is fundamentally contextual, not intrinsic. If we are now faced with a decision about whether to preserve one of two extant Gutenberg Bibles, what do we do? We might start by ascertaining its value in context. But that is at most a start. We should not expect that the Bible's value in context will reflect the strength of the contextual-value-based reason for preserving it. The reason, of course, is that the presence or absence of this Bible affects the context, and thus the contextual value, of the other Bible. The overall reason for preserving the Bible (its marginal contribution to overall contextual value) depends both on its own contextual value and on its effects on the contextual value of the other Bible. This is now reminiscent of the last stage of our discussion of constitutive value. And there is a further parallel. One ground of the appeal of contextual value, I am sure, is that it seems to satisfy the summation constraint: the value of any collection of things is just the sum of the values of the individual things in context. But, continuing the parallel, the marginal contributions of the various elements to the overall value need not obey the summation constraint; they are different from the elements' values in context, as we have just noted. In fact, the formal parallelism between constitutive value and contextual value is complete. I argued that the assignment of constitutive values to parts of a whole was essentially arbitrary, and the parallelism suggests the same thesis about contextual value. But I also said in connection with constitutive value that even though the assignment of values was irrelevant in the sense that any assignment satisfying the summation constraint would result in the same calculated marginal contributions (and the same reasons for action), still, one could believe that there is one essentially correct assignment. And that is just what the contextualist will insist on, in some cases.

Here then is the situation between the believer in intrinsic value (the "intrinsicist") and the contextualist. Both believe in instances of "value interaction"—cases where the overall value of a collection of things is not the sum of the values of the individual things taken in isolation. The intrinsicist believes that all such cases involve organic unities and that in an organic unity, there is no nonarbitrary way to

allocate the overall value to the parts. The contextualist can also believe that there are some genuine organic unities, in which there is no non-arbitrary way to allocate the overall value to the parts. But the contextualist believes in addition that there are some instances of value interaction which are not organic unities and where there is a nonarbitrary allocation of the overall value to the interacting elements. Each element has its value in context, and these values add up to the overall value. So far as we are concerned with the dispute between the intrinsicist and the contextualist about the ontology of value, this is where I propose to leave it—up in the air.

Even without deciding between the intrinsicist and the contextualist, we have established two important points. (1) The Moorean can accept contextual value. The existence of contextual value is inconsistent with Moore's flat-out claim that value is intrinsic; but it is not inconsistent with the various particular theses subsumed under that claim that are actually essential to the Moorean position. (2) Both the contextualist and the intrinsicist are moved, in different ways, by the desire to always be able to assign some definite value to each particular thing. But on neither view does the value of each particular thing correspond to the strength of the reason for preserving or creating that thing in contexts of value interaction. Precisely because of the value interaction, no intuitively plausible approach to the value of the particular thing itself will guarantee such a correspondence.

V. THE ROLE OF BEAUTY

Chapter 6 of *Principia Ethica*, "The Ideal," was arguably the core of the project for Moore, but it has been relatively neglected by commentators. The sprawling chapter is a rich mine of arguments and insights—and it is impossible to summarize. A central theme is beauty, on which Moore builds a remarkable structure.

Moore famously defines the beautiful as "that of which the admiring contemplation is good in itself."³⁹ Right or wrong (and I think it is about right), this is a splendid conception. It makes beauty objective (because good is objective), while still giving the subject an indispensable role in the realization of its value. It puts beauty in the eye of the beholder, without allowing the beholder to determine what shall be beautiful there. There is even room for a sort of subjective variation: something may be beautiful in different degrees for different people, in the sense that their varying appreciations of it, or the varying appreciations of which they would be capable, realize different aspects of the possible value of contemplation of the object or realize it to different degrees.

Moore's definition of beauty turns out to include much more than

39. *Ibid.*, secs. 121, 124.

what we normally think of as “aesthetic” value. A crucial feature of Moore’s theory of the good is its recursive structure. There are first-level goods, such as someone’s admiring contemplation of a beautiful picture. Then there are second- and higher-level goods generated by the additional principle that the admiring contemplation of any good (at any level) is itself a good.⁴⁰ Similarly, hatred of any bad, such as pain, is a good; love of any bad is a bad; and hatred of any good is a bad. When this recursion principle is conjoined with Moore’s definition of beauty, it has the consequence that any (intrinsically) good thing is beautiful.

Indeed, although Moore tells us that “by far the most valuable things, which we know or can imagine, are . . . the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects,”⁴¹ it turns out that even the value of human relations is largely reducible to the appreciation of beauty. We appreciate not just others’ physical selves, but their mental capacities, which is to say, their attitudes and relations to other goods and bads.⁴² It is easy to get to third- and fourth-level goods when we are thinking about the value in personal relationships: one of the things I love about Sally, who is a nurse, may be her sympathy for the suffering of her patients. Here my love is a third-level good. One of the things I like about Ted may be how he notices and admires some special quality of Sally’s sympathy. Now we have a fourth-level good. The resulting structure may seem baroque at first, but I think it is actually realistic. C. S. Lewis has pointed out that one of the things friends do for us is to bring out the special qualities of other friends that we admire but that we would not see or activate on our own.⁴³

Beauty plays an absolutely central role in Moore’s scheme, but we have said enough to make it clear that he is not an aesthete in any narrow sense. Another example, aside from human relations, is this: Moore thinks that the admiring contemplation of actually existing beautiful properties, with the knowledge that they exist, is better than the admiring contemplation of the same properties merely imagined.⁴⁴ He infers from this that it is better to admire a natural scene than to admire a painting of the same scene.⁴⁵ This suggests a remarkably narrow view of how we appreciate representational art. Moore seems to assume that

40. For example, *ibid.*, preface, secs. 121, 122. So far as I know, Moore never states the general principle explicitly and directly, but it is implicit in much of the discussion of the Ideal in chap. 6. For a full modern development of the idea, see Thomas Hurka, *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

41. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, sec. 113.

42. *Ibid.*, sec. 122.

43. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Glasgow: Collins, 1960), pp. 58–59.

44. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, secs. 116–19.

45. *Ibid.*, secs. 118, 120.

when we view a representational painting, we essentially use it as a spur to imagination of the depicted scene as imagined-real, instead of appreciating the painting itself at all. (Perhaps this was not his considered view; it seems out of step with his acute observation elsewhere in chap. 6 about the distinction between the classical and romantic styles in art—that the former attempts to maximize the value of the arrangement of the parts in a work of art, while the latter attempts to maximize the value of some part.)⁴⁶

In the previous paragraph we mentioned a way in which knowledge contributes to the intrinsic value of certain wholes: knowledge greatly increases the value of the appreciation of beauty when the object of appreciation is an actual existent and is known to be so. This means that knowledge of beautiful existents is worth seeking. On the other hand, Moore recognizes no intrinsic “value of knowledge” as such.⁴⁷ This seems to me the correct view of the value of knowledge, provided we are careful to remember the unusually broad meaning of “beautiful” in Moore’s view, encompassing objects of appreciation ranging from virtuous characters to the basic laws of physics.

Moore’s view also deflects to some degree the modern criticism that consequentialist theories ignore other proper ways to respond to value besides acting on it (i.e., besides promoting it, or preserving it, or not destroying it). Moore recognizes a crucial role for admiration, both of the merely beautiful and of the good. It remains true that, *ceteris paribus*, we should promote the existence of beautiful things and promote the admiration of beautiful things that exist. But this seems correct; we should not expect the various modes of response to value to be hermetically sealed off from one another.

Finally, the structure of the beautiful and the good that we have been expounding suggests how we can account for the intrinsic value of actions in Moorean terms. I have already said that “consequentialism” should not be understood to exclude such value and that Moore in fact believes that actions can have intrinsic value. But we have said nothing as yet to account for their having it. It is easy to see how an action or activity that involves engagement with beauty here and now, such as flower arranging, has intrinsic value. The harder case is the sort of action that on its face is done solely for the value of its future consequences. But if I am doing the action for its consequences, I am aware of the consequences as objects of imagination, and I am aware of their value. To some degree, then, I am engaged in favorable contemplation of their goodness as I choose them. Indeed, if some good state of affairs presents itself as a possible consequence of my choice, the impulse to promote

46. *Ibid.*, sec. 129.

47. *Ibid.*, sec. 120.

it seems an inseparable aspect of my admiration for it. But the favorable contemplation of good objects is itself a good; hence this aspect of my action is intrinsically valuable. Notice that on this analysis, the intrinsic value of the action is determined by the intended consequences, not the actual consequences—which most people would say is as it should be.

Rather than trying to summarize, let me end as I began: I hope I have made a case that the doctrines of *Principia Ethica* still have philosophical life a century later.