Morton White

TOWARD REUNION IN PHILOSOPHY

The Naturalistic Fallacy and the Nature of Goodness

1. *From existence to decision*

The suggestion that some nonethical terms are more closely linked with ethical terms than might be supposed can only be helpful if we have some insight into the way in which ethical terms behave. One rarely finds that the behavior of *any* kind of term is similarly viewed by all philosophers, so that one seldom communicates or is immediately persuasive when one says that a term of one kind behaves like one of another and rather distant kind. One must face the disconcerting fact that for every philosopher who might develop some sense of illumination upon hearing it said that 'analytic' is more like 'good' than it is like 'table', there are several who are dubious or depressed at the thought. The second response is especially characteristic of those analytic philosophers who have avoided ethics as though it were a poor relative in the philosophical family. I am fully aware of this sort of attitude, but not as impressed as some by the successes of other branches of philosophy. And so I turn to ethics for illumination, not so much for direct illumination as for the kind of indirect lighting which comes when one sees that the reasons for our difficulties in defining analyticity and meaningfulness might be very like the reasons for a similar situation in ethics. And since I think that reflection on ethical questions should lead us to recognize that there is something important in the view that 'good' and 'right' are not "descriptive", I begin with a consideration of the most influential source of this view in the twentieth century, the *Principia Ethica* of Moore.

It might be said that far from providing an alternative to platonism and other inadequate theories of existence, necessity, and meaning, Moore's doctrine is the ethical counterpart of the episte-

mologies we have rejected. For after all, platonistic theorists of understanding and the a priori postulate meanings as entities we grasp when we understand, while Moore postulates nonnatural characteristics as the entities we ascribe to things when we evaluate. Therefore, far from throwing light on the problems we have wrestled with, Moore's view, it might be said, is full of the same kind of darkness and dormitive virtue. If all this were said, I should agree but then add that we who approach Moore's *Principia Ethica* today should be well inoculated against the kind of hypostatizing that produced meanings, sense-data, natural properties, and nonnatural properties as ways of accounting for understanding, perceiving, describing, and evaluating respectively. In the end we shall be forced to reject Moore's account of evaluation but not without having gained insight into some of its peculiarities, peculiarities which are like those involved in the application of 'analytic', 'synonymous', 'clear', and 'meaningful'. The very fact that 'analytic' and 'good' have both driven some philosophers to platonistic extremes and the very fact that both of them have been so resistant to definitional treatment suggest that the cause and cure might be similar in both cases.

The history of analytic ethics in the twentieth century follows a pattern that reflects parallel tendencies in epistemology and metaphysics. For just as philosophers in the age of existence introduce attributes or meanings in order to account for the fact of understanding, so these same philosophers marked out a special kind of attribute—the nonnatural attribute—in a similar effort to account for evaluation. And just as epistemologists of the linguistic age hoped to solve the problem of the a priori and the a posteriori by appealing to notions of analyticity and empirical meaningfulness that would apply to language as ordinarily used, so writers on ethics of this period appealed to the notion of emotive meaning in order to characterize ethical language. But there is a third phase of ethical philosophy in which philosophers have developed doubts about both anti-naturalism and orthodox positivism and which may be called the ethics of decision. In this chapter we shall examine the platonistic, anti-naturalistic ethical views of the early Moore; in the next we shall turn to those of orthodox positivism; and after that we shall begin to consider the problems and issues of the most recent period of ethical philosophy with an eye on

the wider issues that are common to ethics and the more general notions of the philosophy of language.

2. *Moore's ethical views and his philosophical method*

Moore's main doctrine as set forth in *Principia Ethica* achieved enormous influence, in part because it was the most powerfully defended ethical theory in the history of analytic philosophy. Stated briefly, it is the view that goodness is a simple, nonnatural attribute. While the early Russell was concerned to show that there are such things as attributes, Moore's main contribution to the theory of attributes as universals consisted in emphasizing three divisions within the genus: one between so-called natural attributes and nonnatural attributes, another between simple and complex attributes, and a third between intrinsic and nonintrinsic attributes. Just as Russell's supposition that attributes exist was the result of his view that they are the things we grasp when we understand general terms, so Moore's supposition that nonnatural attributes exist was the result of *his* view that we *ascribe* a peculiar kind of property, a nonnatural property, when we evaluate. In both cases a queer entity is offered in explication or explanation of what is undeniable, namely that we do understand and that we do evaluate. But in Moore's case as in Russell's, a mode of explanation is introduced which is more obscure than that which it is supposed to analyze, account for, or illuminate. Once again an epistemological or metalinguistic fact is wrongly thought to be clarified by an appeal to dubious ontology.

In considering Moore's view we can take advantage of some of the logical and semantic points introduced in earlier chapters, since Moore is one of the most logically and semantically minded theorists in the history of ethics, and his work has had more influence than that of any philosopher in pushing moral philosophy in a semantical direction. It is perhaps the best example of a tendency on the part of analytic philosophers to concentrate on the meanings of terms, except for one ironic twist. While the aim of analytic philosophy as conceived by Moore is to *produce* analyses of the meanings of terms, it was Moore's point in *Principia Ethica* that the meaning or connotation of 'good' is an unusual attribute and incapable of analysis.

It might be added parenthetically that the fate of many other

attributes or concepts is similar in Moore's philosophy. So many are either unanalyzable or not analyzed that one is bound to suspect that there is something about Moore's conception of his task that makes it extraordinarily difficult or even impossible of achievement. So often the examples of successful analyses arrived at by Moore's method are relatively uninteresting ("To be a brother is to be a male sibling"), and so often when he applied it to more philosophical words like 'good', 'material object', and 'analytic', it was peculiarly prone to stall. Whether for the same reason in all cases is difficult to say. One is tempted to say that the notion of identity of meaning involved in Moore's view of analysis was so obscure that one would never know when a successful analysis had been achieved, but then we cannot deny that to be a brother *is* to be a male sibling. One is tempted to say that all the words which resisted moorean analysis were of the same kind, i.e., "normative", and therefore that all of Moore's unanalyzed and unanalyzable terms were such for reasons like that involved in the case of 'good', but this would swell the list of "normative" terms beyond all reason. One is tempted to say that the search for synonyms is doomed just because, as Nelson Goodman has argued, no two terms are ever exactly alike in meaning,[1] and therefore that it is not surprising that the only successful analyses to which Moore could point were those of Russell and Frege, who really did not look for synonyms but only for extensional equivalents. One is tempted to say all of these things and more in diagnosis of Moore's long list of unanalyzed and/or unanalyzable terms, and there is probably a bit of truth in all of them. But since we are not concerned here with the whole of Moore's philosophy, we need not stop to consider them. Here we are concerned only with Moore's views on the word 'good' or, as he would prefer to say, on the attribute, property, or characteristic of being good.

Unlike vixenhood, which is both natural and complex, goodness is neither according to Moore. Stated in this way his thesis is rather straightforward. It requires elucidation and argumentation but nothing comparable to what has been stirred up by Moore's use of the phrase 'naturalistic fallacy' to describe what his opponents commit. Philosophers don't mind being contradicted, but

[1] "On Likeness of Meaning" in Linsky, *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language.*

understandable pride forces them to bridle when charged with a *fallacy.* That charge is best understood after a few introductory remarks on Moore's fundamental concern in ethics.

3. *Ethics and analysis*

The fundamental question of ethics from Moore's viewpoint is 'What is good?' Even in electing this as the *fundamental* question, Moore adopted a certain position in the history of ethical controversy, but we are not here interested in the contrast between him and those philosophers who might take as fundamental the question 'What is right conduct?' Since so many ethical philosophers elevate rightness to the position Moore gave to goodness and then claim that rightness is a simple, nonnatural attribute, we can see how both disputants in this quarrel illustrate a *type* of thinking that overarches their differences about the logical order of *rightness* and *goodness*, a type of thinking that asserts and tries to prove the existence of simple nonnatural attributes.

As we have seen, Moore's raising the question 'What is good?' is in a sense a rhetorical device, for we do not get an answer to the question from him. His main point is that we *can't* get an answer to this question if it is construed as philosophers ought to construe it, that is to say, as a request for a definition. In asking 'What is good?' the philosopher is not asking for an example of goodness as he might ask for an example of manhood and expect a specific man's name in reply; nor is he asking the kind of question which might be answered by saying 'Books are good', for this is still not a definition. The first construal of the question merely elicits the name of a single concrete example, like Socrates, while the second elicits a class of examples, like books. Moore is interested in neither of these. Nor is he satisfied with an answer that does better than 'books' in a certain respect, that is to say, one that presents an adjective or noun true of all and only good things, much as 'featherless biped' is said to be true of all and only men. That wouldn't do either because it would fail to express the *connotation* of 'good', much as 'featherless biped' fails to express the connotation of 'man' in spite of covering all the examples. What Moore thinks a philosopher *should* produce in reply is an expression which bears to 'good' the relation that 'rational animal' is sometimes said to bear

to 'man' or 'male sibling' to 'brother'—*if he could*. But Moore's chief point is that he *can't* produce this; he *can't* find an expression which will serve in the definiens of 'good' by expressing the connotation of 'good' in the way that 'rational animal' expresses the connotation of 'man', and this inability to do so is the linguistic expression of the simplicity of goodness.

The philosopher's inability to do for 'good' what he is able to do for other words like 'man' or 'brother' or 'vixen' is thought to be a reflection of something deeper. Hence Moore's answer to his own fundamental question is "that good is good and that is the end of the matter". In other words, that which the adjective 'good' expresses or connotes cannot be defined. I use the words 'expresses' and 'connotes' because the words Moore uses may be misunderstood. Moore talks about the word 'good' "standing for" and even "denoting" the "object" or "idea" *good*, but I can interpret him more easily by thinking of the object or idea which moral philosophers *want* to analyze (but which turns out to be unanalyzable according to Moore's view) as *the attribute of being good*, hence as that which is *connoted* by the word 'good' in the millian semantics. It is essential, therefore, to realize the degree to which Moore opposed what might be called a linguistic view of philosophical analysis. In *Principia Ethica* he is not trying to give one word's meaning in other words. He says so explicitly. For one thing, he says, if he had wanted to do that he would have considered how people do in fact use the word 'good'. He adds that it would be foolish of course to use the word 'good' for something which it did not usually express, and so he says: "I shall, therefore, use the word in the sense in which I think it is ordinarily used; but at the same time I am not anxious to discuss whether I am right in thinking that it is so used. My business is solely with that object or idea, which I hold, rightly or wrongly, that the word is generally used to stand for. What I want to discover is the nature of that object or idea, and about this I am extremely anxious to arrive at an agreement."[2] Moore is really interested not in the question 'What is good?' but rather in 'What is goodness?' For this reason, it is as

[2] *Principia Ethica*, p. 6. Like all students of the naturalistic fallacy, I am indebted to William K. Frankena's important article "The Naturalistic Fallacy," *Mind*, vol. 48 (1939); reprinted in Sellars and Hospers, *Readings in Ethical Theory* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1952).

misleading for him to ask, 'What is good?' as it would be to ask, 'What is true?' when one meant to ask, 'What is truth?'

The *analysandum* or the thing to be analyzed in Moore's case is neither the word 'good' nor the class of good things. We have already seen that it is not the verbal expression 'good'; let us now see why it is not the class of good things. First of all Moore says: " 'Good,' . . . if we mean by it that quality which we assert to belong to a thing, when we say that the thing is good, is incapable of any definition, in the most important sense of that word."[3] This I take as unmistakable support for the view that the entity in question is an attribute or a *quality*. But then he distinguishes between this attribute and an entity which he calls "*the* good". *The good*, he says, might be definable. "I suppose it may be granted that 'good' is an adjective," he says. "Well," he continues, " 'the good,' 'that which is good,' must therefore be the substantive to which the adjective 'good' will apply: it must be the whole of that to which the adjective will apply, and the adjective must *always* truly apply to it. But if it is that to which the adjective will apply, it must be something different from that adjective itself; and the whole of that something different, whatever it is, will be our definition of *the* good."[4] Now in spite of certain difficulties produced by this last passage, I suggest that *the* good may be thought of as the class of good things, i.e., as the extension of 'good', and that Moore may be thought to maintain that the class of good things may be identical with the class of, say, things conducive to pleasure, and in this sense we might say that *the class* of good things might be definable. I fail to see any other clear interpretation of "the good" or "the whole" to which the adjective good "applies".

This interpretation is further supported when Moore compares goodness with yellowness and says (in effect) that just as we can't define yellowness by saying that it's the attribute of emitting or reflecting light of 5,893 Ängstrom units, so we can't define goodness analogously. We may find other properties which are possessed by all and only good things, just as we can find that the property of emitting or reflecting light of 5,893 Ängstrom units is possessed by all yellow objects, but that's another matter. Moore grants that

[3] Moore, *Principia*, p. 9.
[4] *Idem.*

these other properties might be named, but goes on to say: "far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good; that these properties, in fact, were not simply 'other,' but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call the 'naturalistic fallacy' and of it I shall now endeavor to dispose."[5]

4. *The naturalistic fallacy*

According to one interpretation of Moore's words, we commit the naturalistic fallacy in passing from the statement that the class of good things is identical with the class of things conducive to pleasure to the statement that the attribute of being good is identical with the attribute of being conducive to pleasure. But this fallacy, which we may call '(M)', is merely a special case of the mistake of inferring that attributes are identical from the fact that corresponding classes are identical. It is therefore a mistake which is not peculiar to ethics, for it is one recognized by most philosophers who distinguish between classes and attributes. As we have seen, two classes can be identical even when the corresponding attributes are distinct; the class of featherless bipeds is identical with the class of men while the attribute of being a featherless biped is not identical with the attribute of being a man, and though we are told on good authority that the class of creatures having hearts is identical with the class of creatures having kidneys, no one would maintain that the attribute of having a kidney is identical with the attribute of having a heart.

It should be repeated that mistake (M) is a mistake *in inference*, having nothing to do with the fact that the terms in question are ethical or not. One can make it no matter what terms or kinds of terms appear in putative premise or conclusion. And if one restricts one's self to saying that only errors in inference are fallacies, then the *mere assertion* that goodness is identical with, say, the attribute of being conducive to pleasure is no more a fallacy than is the assertion that the attribute of having a kidney is identical with the attribute of having a heart. Both may be *false* assertions, but it is not customary to say that anyone who asserts a false proposition is committing a fallacy in making that assertion. The most

[5] *Ibid.,* p. 10.

we are likely to say is that if a man has made a false assertion of the identity of attributes like some of those mentioned, then he should not be tempted to support it with an argument that would be fallacious in the manner indicated.

It is only by keeping clearly in mind the fact that these are different kinds of mistakes with which Moore charges his opponents, and by disentangling the charges, that we can come to understand something of the controversy that followed the appearance of his book. Let us examine (M), the inferential kind of mistake, a little further. In other parts of his book Moore lists fallacious inferences that are similar to the one discussed above in a very important respect; he generalizes the mistake even beyond that of inferring the identity of attributes from the corresponding identity of classes. Thus he considers the case of a man who would conclude from the statement 'I am having the sensation of pleasure' the statement 'I am the same thing as having pleasure'. But if this is an example of the same fallacy for Moore, we must broaden our description of the fallacious inference. We cannot describe *this* as a mistake of kind (M), simply because the conclusion here, though an identity-statement, is not a statement of the identity of *attributes,* and the premise is not a statement of the identity of classes. There are times when Moore illustrates the fallacy he has in mind by citing someone who infers the statement 'I am the same as pleased' from 'I am pleased', and here we may describe the fallacy as that of moving from an assertion of predication to a corresponding assertion of identity, parallel to concluding that Socrates is the same as the property of being a man from the fact that he is a man. But if we ask ourselves what the mistake in (M) has in common with *this* mistake, one can only say that both fallacious inferences are inferences in which an identity statement is wrongly inferred from some other statement that might be thought of as entailing that identity statement.

It is important to bear in mind that the *basic,* non-inferential mistake for Moore is that of confusing one entity with another. And this is the most important charge aimed at a philosopher who says (a) *that goodness is identical with being conducive to pleasure.* But since Moore recognizes that there might be some other proposition which the philosopher *might* think of as implying (a),

like (b) *that the class of good things is identical with the class of things conducive to pleasure,* Moore warns against committing the fallacy of *inferring* (a) from (b).

It must be insisted, however, that sometimes Moore speaks of the naturalistic fallacy as the fallacy of inferring statements like (a) from statements like (b), and sometimes he speaks of it as the fallacy of identifying things like goodness with things other than itself. Now these are closely related mistakes from a logical point of view but they are distinct, for a man might confuse goodness with being conducive to pleasure without giving any reason at all. Such a man would be identifying two discernibles according to Moore, and therefore committing a fallacy in one of Moore's senses of the word 'fallacy', but he would not be committing a fallacy of inference like that schematized in (M) above.

5. The same fallacy outside of ethics

As we have seen, the mistake of identifying discernibles, like the mistake of inferring false identity-statements from premises that don't imply these identity statements, is very general and applies to cases other than those in which ethical terms or so-called natural predicates are involved. Moore puts this point most clearly in the following passage, in which he explains the relevance of the word 'naturalistic'.

"If I were to imagine that when I said 'I am pleased,' I meant that I was exactly the same thing as 'pleased,' I should not indeed call that a naturalistic fallacy, although it would be the same fallacy as I have called naturalistic with reference to Ethics. The reason of this is obvious enough. When a man confuses two natural objects with one another, defining the one by the other, if for instance he confuses himself, who is one natural object, with 'pleased' or with 'pleasure' which are others, then there is no reason to call the fallacy naturalistic. But if he confuses 'good,' which is not in the same sense a natural object, with any natural object whatever, then there is a reason for calling that a naturalistic fallacy; its being made with regard to 'good' marks it as something quite specific, and this specific mistake deserves a name because it is so common. As for the reasons why good is not to be considered a natural

object, they may be reserved for discussion in another place. But, for the present, it is sufficient to notice this: Even if it were a natural object, that would not alter the nature of the fallacy nor diminish its importance one whit. All that I have said about it would remain quite equally true: only the name which I have called it would not be so appropriate as I think it is."[6]

All of this makes the general outline of Moore's position on the naturalistic fallacy clear. Goodness cannot be identified with any natural characteristic. The naturalistic fallacy in its inferential form consists in making mistake (M) schematized earlier; the naturalistic fallacy in its non-inferential form consists in identifying goodness with a natural quality. Therefore the non-inferential form of the naturalistic fallacy consists in confusing a nonnatural object with a natural object. But there are other species of the same confusion, namely, confusing one natural object with another natural object, and confusing one nonnatural object with another nonnatural object. Each such confusion, of course, might be arrived at by specious reasoning of the kind outlined in (M), but Moore prefers to concentrate on that kind and to label the inferential fallacy involved the "naturalistic fallacy", under conditions indicated in the last quotation from *Principia Ethica.*

6. The simplicity of goodness

Turning now from the comparatively obvious point that (M) is a mistake, and that distinct things are not to be confused, we must examine what is another one of Moore's most important contentions: that goodness is simple. The contention that goodness is simple performs a function very much like some of the other statements about platonic entities we have already examined. That is to say, it is intended as some sort of explanation of a metalinguistic fact: the fact that Moore could not define the word 'good' to his own satisfaction. The simplicity of goodness is supposed to explain a human failure. And yet plainly in one sense one can always define *the word* 'good'. One can always say, 'I define the word 'good' as short for 'conducive to pleasure' ', or what not. The situation here is quite similar to that involved in the case of

6 *Ibid.,* pp. 13–14.

'analytic' as described in a previous chapter. Construed in one way, definition is partly a process of uttering the words 'is defined as' or 'is a definition' at the right time and in the right place, and being undefined or primitive is a state in which terms find themselves when this linguistic process has not been performed. Being unmarried is a similar state.

The introduction of the notion *indefinable,* which allegedly transcends the question of what linguistic decisions have been made, impels philosophers to speak of simple attributes. If we identify the definability of an expression with our power to *call* it definitionally equivalent to some other expression, then clearly no expression is indefinable so long as our powers of speech hold out. But it is plain that definability is not construed in this way by those who think as Moore did. They think of being definable as something that might better be called 'correctly definable', for they tend to say that whereas we can always write '*Df*' beside certain equivalences, as in 'Man = Featherless Biped *Df*', not all such definitions are *correct* definitions, because a correct definition is one in which the definiens at least has the same connotation as the definiendum. Understood in this way, the thesis that the word 'good' is indefinable amounts to the thesis that no man can *correctly* say that he has defined the word 'good'. Reason: 'Good' is synonymous with no logically complex predicate. Reason for *this:* The word 'good' expresses the attribute *goodness,* which is simple. But now the question arises: Can we know that an attribute is simple in a way that really explains our failure to find a "correct" definition? In other words, if we have not been able to turn up a definitional equivalent for a word which is synonymous with that word by presystematic standards, does the "discovery" that the word expresses a simple attribute really explain our failure? I don't think so. I think that the effort to account for the indefinability of linguistic expressions by reference to the simplicity of meanings is on a par with the effort to account for the understandability of a term by saying that it has a meaning, and with the effort to say that being true by virtue of relations between meanings accounts for being a priori. Once again, an ontological or semantic explanation is offered which is of no use whatsoever.

Both here and in the case of those who advise us to construct

definitions of 'analytic' that reflect analyticities in ordinary discourse, philosophers operate with the same stereotype or model. They think that the maker of analytic statements and definitions must somehow mirror analyticities and synonymies which hold in ordinary discourse, and then these are in turn thought to be the reflections of deeper relations between meanings. This is expressed in one of Moore's more important statements, one in which he explicitly reveals the closeness between the notions of indefinability and analyticity and implicitly reveals his inability to clarify the word 'simple' as applied to attributes in a purely nonlinguistic way.

"If I am asked 'What is good?' my answer is that good is good and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked, 'How is good to be defined?' my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it. But disappointing as these answers may appear, they are of the very last importance. To readers who are familiar with philosophic terminology, I can express their importance by saying that they amount to this: That propositions about the good are all of them synthetic and never analytic; and that is plainly no trivial matter. And the same thing may be expressed more popularly, by saying that, if I am right, then nobody can foist upon us such an axiom as that 'Pleasure is the only good' or that 'The good is the desired' on the pretence that this is 'the very meaning of the word.' "[7]

Recalling my interpretation of "the good" as the class of good things and hence of "the desired" as the class of desired things, we may take the last sentence of this passage as implying *not* that the statement 'The class of good things is identical with the class of desired things' is *false* but rather that it is not analytic. And Moore's point, generalized, is that *no* statement of class-identity *of this sort* is analytic. He expresses his point by saying that all propositions about the good are synthetic, without realizing, or perhaps because he doesn't believe—it doesn't matter—that 'The good is the good' (or 'The class of good things is identical with the class of good things') is about the good and analytic. But this lapse, if lapse it is, is not important; for that matter, Moore didn't have in mind the more general, tricky complaint that since the good is the class of

[7] *Ibid.,* pp. 6–7.

good things, we can produce an analytic proposition about *the good* by substituting 'the class of good things' for the variables in any theorem of the algebra of classes. What he had in mind were the nonformal identities involved in traditional definition, and he was saying, as I interpret him, that no statement of the form 'The good is the ——', where the blank is replaced by a logically complex predicate not containing 'good', is analytic. 'The class of vixens is identical with the class of female foxes', or alternatively in Moore-like language, 'The vixen is the female fox', *is* analytic, and so we may say that 'vixen' *is* definable from this viewpoint because 'female fox' is a logically complex expression. But according to Moore, the analogous things are just not true of *goodness*, the good, and 'good'.

What I wish to bring out by this is the fact that the substitution of so-called philosophic terminology like 'analytic' and 'synthetic' does not really clarify Moore's statement that the word 'good' is indefinable, nor, and this is more important, does it somehow eliminate *his* need to appeal to the notion of simplicity as applied to attributes. The very fact that 'The good is the good' is analytic (which Moore didn't seem to realize) makes it impossible for Moore to distinguish 'good' from other predicates by saying that *no* proposition about *the good* is analytic. And if his point should be re-formulated by saying that no proposition about the good which contains a grammatically complex predicate in place of the blank in 'The good is the ——' is analytic, we should have to remember that according to Moore's view the important thing is not grammatical complexity but rather something that might be called logical complexity, which applies to attributes rather than to linguistic expressions.

Moreover, Moore cannot seriously appeal to Bishop Butler's aphorism: "Everything is what it is, and not another thing." For the attribute of being a brother is what it is and not another thing, and yet the statement 'The attribute of being a brother is identical with the attribute of being a male sibling' is presumably true. Unfortunately Moore does sometimes speak as though he could seriously use Butler at this point, but that is probably the result of his own conviction that all of the complex attributes he can think of are such that their names when put for the blank in 'Goodness is

identical with ——' yield false statements. The fact is that once Moore has abandoned the purely factual, metalinguistic way of stating the thesis, namely ' 'Good' has no complex synonyms', he is in danger of oscillating between the extreme of Butlerian triviality and that of absurdity. Thus the formulation 'No attribute which is other than goodness is identical with goodness' is trivial, for something analogous is true of *all* attributes; while the formulation 'No attribute is identical with goodness' is absurd because goodness is identical with goodness. A formulation (in the "material mode") which avoids this is 'No complex attribute is identical with goodness', but this is hardly an advance on 'Goodness is not complex', which, in turn, hardly merits the title of being a clarification of 'Goodness is simple'. In the end, therefore, our efforts *to clarify* what Moore means by saying that goodness is simple—whether they abandon the material mode for the formal mode or not—seem inadequate to convey his point. In the end Moore seems forced to attribute simplicity to attributes in an absolute, nonlinguistic way, which simplicity he offers as the explanation of our inability to define the term 'good'. It would appear that we must *see* that goodness is simple, just as we must *see* that certain things are good. Not only is goodness simple but simplicity is too! Simple is simple and that is the end of the matter.

This upshot should not be surprising to us. For after all, our reflections in previous chapters have led us to despair about attempted clarifications of 'analytic', 'meaningful', etc., and, as we shall see, 'simple' is very much in their company. The philosopher who asks us to look at meanings in order to see that they are identical and in this way see why there is a priori knowledge usually supplies no criterion for the identity of meanings; the physician who asks us to *see* that opium has the dormitive virtue usually gives no criterion for detecting whether anything has the dormitive virtue; and the philosopher who invites us to see the simplicity of attributes in order to understand why certain expressions are indefinable is equally uncommunicative.

7. *The attempt at proving the indefinability of goodness*

To inveigh against appealing to the simplicity of attributes is not to deny that some terms are *un*defined. And if applied to *terms*

rather than attributes, the word 'simple' is merely another way of saying 'not defined in the system'. But it is absurd to ask of a given undefined term what there is about it that makes it undefined other than the fact that it is called such. Saying 'This is undefined' at the beginning is performatory in Austin's sense, and much like 'I take this as undefined'. We may go on to dispute the wisdom of calling a term undefined and thereby making it undefined, but that is like disputing the wisdom of a minister's refusing to marry a certain couple.

In maintaining that Moore does not really give any analysis of the notion of simplicity as applied to attributes, we must face the fact that he tries to *prove* that goodness is simple. It is very rare to find proofs in philosophy where undefined terms are involved, and for this reason we have reason to be suspicious of his proof.

The *locus classicus* of his argument is in Section 13 of *Principia Ethica*. There Moore tries to show that there are only two alternative views to the one he maintains and that both of these are false. The two alternatives to the view (1) that goodness is simple are (2) that goodness is not simple and (3) that the word 'good' means nothing at all. Stated in other terms, the three exclusive and exhaustive alternatives contemplated by Moore are (1) that the predicate, i.e., the linguistic expression 'good', cannot be defined even though it connotes an attribute; (2) that the predicate 'good' *can* be defined (and a fortiori does connote an attribute); (3) that the predicate 'good' is without meaning, i.e., connotes no attribute (nor for that matter, any sense at all). I now turn to his refutation of (2) and (3) whereby he hopes to establish (1), the only remaining possibility.

The possibilities are stated by Moore in such a way as to cause confusion after some of our millian and fregean formulations, so we must explain and comment on Moore's terminology in order to avoid more difficulty than is necessary. For example, Moore says: "If it is not the case that 'good' *denotes* [my italics] something simple and indefinable, only two alternatives are possible: either it is a complex, a given whole, about the correct analysis of which there may be disagreement; or else it means nothing at all."[8] Therefore we must remind ourselves of our decision to speak of

8 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

the quality or attribute under discussion as what is *connoted* by the linguistic expression 'good' and not as that which is *denoted* by it. If we were to select any one entity as that which is *denoted* by the adjective 'good', it should be the class of good things or *the good*.

Also, we must constantly keep Moore's use of the word 'whole' in mind. It may help unravel the motives underlying statements that might otherwise seem woollier than they are. We should recognize that a whole for Moore is something that has parts and is complex, and that therefore some word connected with it is definable; while an entity that is not a whole is partless and simple, and the word associated with *it* is indefinable. So far as one can make out, Moore construes *the good* as a whole. But then if we are right in construing the good as the class of all good things, we might be forced to regard classes as heaps and to think of their members as *parts* of them. The difficulties in this view are considerable, so perhaps it is wiser to construe the class of good things as a whole whose "parts" are classes into which it may be decomposed by discovering the boolean operations involved. Thus the class of fathers would contain as parts the class of males and the class of parents, and the boolean operation here would be class multiplication.

This gives a clue as to how we might construe Moore's statement that some *attributes*, namely the complex ones, are wholes, while others (the simple ones) are not. Surely attributes cannot be thought of as heaps, and therefore their complexity is probably like the complexity of classes when classes are not construed as heaps. The complexity of an attribute would then be the complexity it has relative to the attributes of which it is, so to speak, *logically* composed. The attribute of being a brother is logically (not spatially) composed of the attribute of being a male and the attribute of being a sibling, where the mode of composition is the operation of conjunction of attributes. (While all cases of analysis of attributes which follow the classic pattern of definition by *genus* and *differentia* or something like it will use conjunction, this is not necessary, of course.)

Having agreed that the complexity of an attribute or its wholeness is not a spatial matter, we may see the speciousness of the invidious distinction that Moore makes between 'good' and 'horse'.

This will serve as another clarifying observation preparatory to our consideration of Moore's rejection of alternatives (2) and (3) mentioned above. In defining 'horse', Moore says:

"We may mean that a certain object, which we all of us know, is composed in a certain manner: that it has four legs, a head, a heart, a liver, etc., etc., all of them arranged in definite relations to one another. It is in this sense that I deny good to be definable. I say that it is not composed of any parts, which we can substitute for it in our minds when we are thinking of it. We might think just as clearly and correctly about a horse, if we thought of all its parts and their arrangement instead of thinking of the whole: we could, I say, think how a horse differed from a donkey just as well, just as truly, in this way, as now we do, only not so easily; but there is nothing whatsoever which we could so substitute for good; and that is what I mean, when I say that good is indefinable."[9]

Now, what is *the whole* or the complex entity which *might* be invidiously compared with the simple attribute of being good, as a result of this discussion of the definability of the word 'horse'? One would have thought that it was *the attribute of being a horse* rather than anything as concrete as Bucephalus. And what is the complexity other than the *logical complexity* of this attribute that might distinguish it from goodness? To be a horse is to be an animal having four legs, a head, a heart, a liver, a tail, all arranged in a certain manner. Unfortunately the example is confusing because there are two kinds of complexity illustrated here that must be kept separate. First, the important kind of complexity which I have called the logical complexity of the attribute of being a horse, and second, the essentially irrelevant common spatial complexity of all concrete horses. The fact is that the sense in which *horsehood* is a complex attribute is also the sense in which certain properties of numbers are complex, and yet the complexity of, say, the property of being odd is no function of a supposed internal *spatial* arrangement of individual numbers like 1, 3, 5, 7, etc.; numbers have no spatial parts. Moreover, it might happen to be true that every good, concrete thing did possess one common structural arrangement without thereby affecting Moore's thesis, for the at-

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

tribute of having that structural arrangement might not be identical with the attribute of being good. I conclude that Moore's example of 'horse' is an unfortunate one just because it obscures the character of the complexity (and hence of the simplicity) of attributes dealt with in Moore's ethical theory.

8. *The attempt examined further*

With all of this out of the way we may now return to the alternatives (2) and (3) that Moore is obliged to refute in order to substantiate his thesis that goodness is logically simple. Against (2), or the view that 'good' can be defined, Moore argues that "whatever definition be offered, it may be always asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good."[10] Before proceeding any further we must mark a difficulty in this statement. Supposing, as we have, that the complex in question is an attribute like being conducive to pleasure, we may now ask what it means to say that that attribute, whether simple or complex, *is* good. Is this connected with asking (a), whether a certain abstract entity *possesses* goodness? Is it therefore like asking of *being conducive to pleasure* whether it *is* an attribute? Or is it tantamount to (b), asking of the attribute of being conducive to pleasure whether *it is identical with* goodness?

Without turning to Moore's actual example in support of his contention, it might be well to consider these two possibilities abstractly, as it were. First (a). If Moore is right, the proof of the indefinability of 'good' is the fact that whenever a definition of 'good' is offered, we may take the attribute expressed or connoted by the definiens, e.g., being conducive to pleasure, and now ask with significance "Is this attribute good?" The implication is that in the case of a definable word like 'vixen', we cannot significantly ask this or an analogous question of the attribute connoted by 'female fox', namely the attribute of being a female fox. But it seems obvious to me that *if we can ever ask such a question with significance*, we can ask it with equal significance in both of these cases. I conclude, therefore, that (a) will not accomplish what Moore wants it to accomplish, namely, a proof of the indefinability of 'good'.

Now let us consider alternative (b). Here the indefinability of

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

'good' is supposed to hinge on the fact that we can always ask *with significance* of any proposed *analysans* like *being conducive to pleasure*, not whether it *is* good, but whether it is *identical* with goodness. But then, in order to distinguish sharply between the unanalyzable goodness and, say, the analyzable vixenhood, Moore must say that we can *never* ask with significance of the complex attribute of being a female fox whether it is identical with the attribute of being a vixen. And yet if it could not be *asked* with significance whether being a vixen is identical with being a female fox, it could never be *asserted* with significance; and if it could never be asserted with significance, Moore's whole analytical enterprise would consist in asserting insignificant statements. One must conclude from this that Moore could not have proven the simplicity of goodness to his own satisfaction by either of the two versions of the argument we have just considered, and one cannot think of a third interpretation that does his argument more justice or puts it in a better light.

9. *Is goodness a nonnatural attribute?*

It remains to show that Moore did not *prove* the nonnaturalness of goodness. In his reply to C. D. Broad in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, Moore admits that his previously published statements on naturalness had been obscure, and he tries to throw more light on them, thus making that reply plus two pages in *Principia Ethica* and his essay "The Conception of Intrinsic Value"[11] the chief sources of his published views on this subject. We must make the most of these straws, as the point is central to analytic ethics in the twentieth century.

Of his views in *Principia Ethica*, Moore himself says: "I agree ... that in *Principia* I did not give any tenable explanation of what I meant by saying that 'good' was not a natural property."[12] Nevertheless, his views on the notion of natural property in that book, as well as the reasons for his change of attitude toward them, are sufficiently interesting to warrant a brief examination, particularly in a study in which it is maintained that an understanding of the historical background of contemporary problems can be illuminat-

11 Moore, *Philosophical Studies* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922), pp. 253–275.
12 "A Reply to My Critics," *Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, Schilpp, ed., p. 582.

ing. It reveals, among other things, the extent to which Moore's early views were dominated by an extreme platonism, in a sense more extreme than that of Russell in the *Problems of Philosophy*.

By "nature" Moore said he meant that which is the subject of the natural sciences and also of psychology. Nature includes all that has existed, does exist, or will exist in time, and therefore a stone would be a natural object, our minds are natural objects, our thoughts are natural objects. When we deal with entities of this kind, says Moore, we have little difficulty in defining what we mean by 'natural'. "But when we begin to consider the properties of objects, then I fear the problem is more difficult. Which among the properties of natural objects are natural properties and which are not?" And now I quote Moore's answer in full:

"Can we imagine 'good' as existing *by itself* in time, and not merely as a property of some natural object? For myself, I cannot so imagine it, whereas with the greater number of properties of objects—those which I call the natural properties—their existence does seem to me to be independent of the existence of those objects. They are, in fact, rather parts of which the object is made up than mere predicates which attach to it. If they were all taken away, no object would be left, not even a bare substance: *for they are in themselves substantial* [my italics] and give to the object all the substance that it has. But this is not so with good."[18]

Concerning this passage I wish to remark, first of all, that in holding that some *properties* are substantial, Moore not only departs from the view on universals advanced by Mill and discussed in Chapter IV above, but also from that of Russell in the *Problems of Philosophy* and from those more recently expressed by Ryle. Moore holds in *Principia* that some attributes are "substantial", whereas it was Mill's view that none are. Mill says:

"Attributes are never called Beings; nor are feelings. A being is that which excites feelings, and which possesses attributes. The soul is called a Being; God and angels are called Beings; but if we were to say, extension, colour, wisdom, virtue, are beings, we should perhaps be suspected of thinking with some of the ancients,

18 *Principia Ethica*, p. 41.

that the cardinal virtues are animals; or, at the least, of holding with the Platonic school the doctrine of self-existent Ideas, or with the followers of Epicurus that of Sensible Forms . . . We should be supposed, in short, to believe that Attributes are Substances." [14]

And in *Principia Ethica* Moore holds (in opposition to Russell in the *Problems*) that *the sense* in which *some* universals exist is precisely the sense in which physical objects exist. No distinction is made between different senses of the word 'exist' when it is applied to concrete entities and attributes, and therefore the multivocalism of Ryle is not adopted. Finally, it should be said that whereas it is possible to distinguish Moore's views on the simplicity of goodness from his views on its nonnaturalness, as we have throughout this chapter, at least some of his difficult statements on simplicity are illuminated (though not justified) by his reflections on nonnaturalness. I have in mind his discussion of the sense in which "a horse" is complex. We now see that it was his view that natural properties are substantial which permitted him to say that a concrete horse is made up of natural qualities *as parts.*

In 1942 Moore virtually surrendered the entire passage on the definition of "natural properties" in the *Principia* of 1903.

"I implied in *Principia*, p. 41, that the difference between those properties of natural objects which I called 'natural,' and 'good' which I declared *not* to be natural, was that all natural properties *could* exist in time *by themselves,* whereas the property which was that particular sense of the word 'good' with which I was concerned, could *not.* Mr. Broad says he does not believe that those properties of natural objects which I called 'natural,' e.g., the property of being brown or that of being round, in the sense in which a penny may be brown and round, could exist in time all by themselves, i.e. without being, at any time at which they did exist, properties of some natural object which also existed at that time and possessed them. I entirely agree with Mr. Broad as to this. I not only don't believe that such properties could exist in time by themselves; I feel perfectly sure that they could not. This suggestion which I made in *Principia* seems to me now to be utterly silly and preposterous. And I also agree with Mr. Broad that it is wrong to

14 Mill, *A System of Logic,* p. 31.

say, as I did say, of the natural properties of a thing that 'they are rather *parts* of which the thing is made up than mere predicates which attach to it'." [15]

Because of Moore's dim view of his treatment of natural properties in *Principia Ethica,* we must turn to his paper "The Conception of Intrinsic Value" and to *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* for further light. Both of these make clear that he regarded goodness not only as a simple, nonnatural property but also as an *intrinsic* one. They also shed further light on his notion of a natural characteristic.

10. *Goodness as an intrinsic, non-descriptive attribute*

Moore begins his paper on intrinsic value by saying that he will try to define more precisely the most important question at issue when it is disputed with regard to any value-property as to whether it is or is not a "subjective" property. And after pointing out by means of illustrations what he understands subjectivists to maintain, he tries to show that their most serious opponents are not those philosophers who contend for objectivism in the sense of maintaining merely that a value-property like goodness is not subjective, but those who maintain something stronger, namely, that goodness is *intrinsic* in a sense to be explained in the next paragraph. A subjectivist in esthetics—a closely allied subject—will maintain that "any statement of the form 'This is beautiful' merely expresses a psychological assertion to the effect that some particular individual or class of individuals either actually has, or would, under certain circumstances, have, a certain kind of mental attitude towards the thing in question". [16] But, Moore points out, in the case of goodness and beauty most philosophers who oppose subjectivism do not do so merely out of a desire to establish the non-subjective character of these attributes, but out of a desire to do that and more. The more consists in holding that these properties are intrinsic as well as objective. The reason why the battle lines haven't been clearly marked on this point, Moore says, is that almost all of the opponents of the view that goodness is intrinsic hold that it is subjective. In other words, the view that goodness is

15 *Philosophy of G. E. Moore,* pp. 581–582.
16 *Philosophical Studies,* p. 254.

both objective and nonintrinsic is held by very few people. But the fact that it is a possible view is illustrated by certain positions in ethics called "evolutionary". If a philosopher holds that "what is meant by saying that one type of human being A is 'better' than another type B, is merely that the course of evolution tends to increase the numbers of type A and to decrease those of type B",[17] he is holding that the relation of being better than is objective in the sense of not depending on mental attitudes of people; but he is, nevertheless, not maintaining that goodness is intrinsic as Moore does.

For Moore a property is intrinsic to whatever possesses it just in case the possession of it depends on the intrinsic nature of the thing which does possess it. Thus according to his view yellowness bears a relation R_1 to a yellow sense-datum which is such that whether the datum possesses yellowness depends exclusively on the intrinsic nature of that datum; and analogously goodness bears a relation R_2 to a good thing which is such that whether the good thing possesses it depends exclusively on the intrinsic nature of that good thing. However, there is a respect in which the relations R_1 and R_2 are *dissimilar*, and the dissimilarity is conveyed by the following abstract example. Suppose you had a sense-datum which possessed both the attribute of being yellow and the attribute of being beautiful, then although its yellowness and beauty would both be such that whether the datum possessed them depended exclusively on the intrinsic nature of the datum, someone who said that the datum was yellow would be *describing* it while someone who said that it was beautiful would not be describing it. This distinction between yellowness and beauty is most important.

When Moore says that whether a datum possesses a certain property depends exclusively on the intrinsic nature of the datum, he implicitly denies that the datum's possession of yellowness depends on the causal constitution of the universe; he holds that if the datum were yellow it would be yellow in any universe, no matter what the causal laws of that universe. Moreover he asserts that any datum which is exactly like this one would also be yellow, whatever the constitution of the universe. "Suppose you take a particular patch of colour, which is yellow. We can, I think, say with

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 255–256.

certainty that any patch exactly like that one, *would* be yellow, even if it existed in a Universe in which causal laws were quite different from what they are in this one. We can say that any such patch *must* be yellow, quite unconditionally, whatever the circumstances, and whatever the causal laws. And it is in a sense similar to this, in respect of the fact that it is neither empirical nor causal, that I mean the 'must' to be understood, when I say that if a kind of value is to be 'intrinsic,' then, supposing a given thing possesses it in a certain degree, anything exactly like that thing *must* possess it in exactly the same degree. To say, of 'beauty' or 'goodness' that they are 'intrinsic' is only, therefore, to say that this thing which is obviously true of 'yellowness' and 'blueness' and 'redness' is true of them."[18]

It must be added that Moore understands the phrase 'is exactly alike' and the equivalent phrase 'is of the same intrinsic nature' in such a way that two things which are numerically different may nevertheless be exactly alike and of the same intrinsic nature. This is one reason why he cannot identify the 'must' as a logical 'must'. In speaking of it he says:

"But what precisely is meant by this unconditional 'must,' I must confess I don't know. The obvious thing to suggest is that it is the logical 'must,' which certainly is unconditional in just this sense: the kind of necessity, which we assert to hold, for instance, when we say that whatever is a right-angled triangle *must* be a triangle, or that whatever is yellow *must* be either yellow or blue. But I must say I cannot see that all unconditional necessity is of this nature. I do not see how it can be deduced from any logical law that, if a given patch of colour be yellow, then any patch which were exactly like the first would be yellow too. And similarly in our case of 'intrinsic' value, though I think it is true that beauty, for instance, is 'intrinsic,' I do not see how it can be deduced from any logical law, that if A is beautiful, anything that were exactly like A would be beautiful too, in exactly the same degree."[19]

We have now shown how Moore's conception of depending exclusively on the intrinsic nature of a thing leads him to invoke a

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 268–269.
19 *Ibid.*, pp. 271–272.

conception of "unconditional" necessity that is admittedly obscure; indeed, just as obscure as the notion of analyticity involved in Moore's theory of the simplicity of goodness. We may now consider the method whereby Moore tries to distinguish nonnatural intrinsic properties like goodness and beauty from those which are natural, like yellowness as applied to a sense-datum. At the end of his essay "The Conception of Intrinsic Value", Moore says that he can only "vaguely express" the kind of difference he senses between natural intrinsic properties and nonnatural intrinsic properties, by saying that the former "*describe* the intrinsic nature of what possesses them in a sense in which predicates of value [nonnatural intrinsic properties] never do".[20] And it is this lead that he continues to follow in his most recent reflections on the subject. He says that there is a sense of the word 'describe'—only one of the senses in which it is ordinarily used, he adds—"such that, in ascribing to a thing a property which is not a natural intrinsic property, you are not describing it *at all*, whereas, if you ascribe to a thing a natural intrinsic property, you always are describing it *to some extent*, though of course the description may be very vague and very far from complete".[21] We are told nothing more about the word "describe" in this connection, and although Moore does not provide a word for the activity that stands to nonnatural attributes as describing does to natural ones, one obvious candidate is 'evaluation'.

11. Conclusions

After this long examination of Moore's ethical doctrines, it might be desirable to summarize some of the results that bear on the main concerns of this book.

(a) *On simplicity.* First of all, the examination helps round out in a purely historical way the ontology of pre-positivistic platonism. Earlier we observed that one of the chief elements in that philosophy was its view that the mental activity called understanding is one in which we grasp meanings conceived as nonmental, nonphysical entities. Now, Moore's reflections in ethics add a number of distinctions within the class of attributes or meanings of general terms. Some of them are said to be simple and some of them com-

[20] *Ibid.,* p. 274.
[21] *Philosophy of G. E. Moore,* p. 590.

plex. And while in the course of his effort to say what he means by calling an attribute simple (in this case *goodness*), Moore adverts to the notion of analyticity, I do not think that this should obscure the fact that *he* did not think of the simplicity of goodness as a merely linguistic matter, as one might suppose by concentrating on one of his formulations and on the fact that analyticity is a property of verbal expressions. That is to say, I have tried to show that *in the end* the simplicity of goodness, for Moore, does not rest on the fact that no sentence of the form 'Good is ——', where the expression put for the blank does not contain 'good', is analytic, but rather on his supposed detection of the simple attribute of simplicity in goodness. But had Moore been more thoroughly linguistic in his emphasis and framed his thesis by exclusive reference to the metalinguistic notions of 'analytic' and 'definition', he would have been able to maintain no more than this: that in the ordinary ethical usage of 'good', he finds nothing that would justify our defining 'good' and much to justify the opposite course. In other words, once we abandon Moore's platonistic notion that we can look at a property like goodness with the mind's eye and *see* whether it possesses the property of simplicity, his metaphysical descriptivism, if I may call it that, cannot be transformed into a metalinguistic descriptivism. He should not, in my opinion, then reformulate his point by saying that the predicate 'good' is not synonymous with any complex predicate, chiefly because the word 'synonymous' is subject to all of the difficulties previously discussed.

What, then, is an alternative way of communicating Moore's thesis, on the assumption that it or something like it is communicable? I think the outline of an answer is this.

Although definability or indefinability is prima facie a question of whether or not something *can* be done, there is another way of looking at the matter which suggests that the 'able' ending of 'definable' is more like the ending of the word 'desirable' than is usually recognized. If we consider first the words 'defined' and 'undefined', we see that they may sometimes be used descriptively, insofar as we can say that if you want to know whether a term is defined or undefined, you look at the stipulations of the person who is building the system. If he says (in a performatory way), 'I define an ellipse as the locus of a point that moves so that the sum

of its undirected distances from two fixed points is equal to a constant', then you may say (descriptively) that the term 'ellipse' *is* defined in his system. If he says, as he might, 'I take the term 'point' as undefined', then you may say (descriptively) that the term 'point' is undefined. Now, it might happen that a term which is left undefined by a given logician, mathematician, or system-builder is in fact one that *might* be defined in terms of the other undefined terms of the system, in which case this could be called to the attention of the person building the system. An additional definition might then be advocated; someone might say, in effect, 'In your system it would be well to define so-and-so as such-and-such'. But if this is advised, grounds must be offered for the advice, and they may be offered in a sentence which is descriptive or factual by comparison with the sentence with which one does the defining ('I define so-and-so as such-and-such') and by comparison with the sentence in which one asserts the advisability of the defining ('It would be well to define so-and-so as such-and-such'). Some philosophers have held that the synonymy of the term defined and its defining phrase in ordinary language is the necessary and sufficient condition for the propriety of a definition; others have said that identity of extension is enough; still others, like Nelson Goodman, have proposed an even weaker condition as a basis for promulgating definitions of philosophical interest. The important point, however, is the fact that 'definable as' may mean something like 'justifiably or advisably defined as', if it is viewed in this light.

If, by contrast, we think of 'definable as' as meaning 'can be defined as' (or worse, as meaning 'must be defined as'), we are liable to forget that we *can* define a term in any way we choose, and we are liable to identify definability in a certain way with conditions that are more properly construed as *grounds* that are offered in justification of defining terms in that way. Now under certain conditions, being definable as such-and-such *may* be identified with conditions that might otherwise be viewed as grounds for defining a term as such-and-such, notably in metamathematics, where identity of extension may be the only consideration that weighs with the investigator, and where the definability of one expression in terms of another may therefore be treated simply as a matter of whether they have identical extension or denotation. But this is not the only view of the matter that may be taken, and moreover

its concentration on what is the case, rather than on what is justifiably done, is certainly not sufficient for answering the question 'Why should I build a system in which a, b, and c, are taken as undefined terms?' That is a question for a philosopher or philosophically minded mathematician (much as the critique of ends in ethics is a question for a philosopher). And what I urge in contrast to Moore is that the selection of certain terms as primitive cannot be satisfactorily based by a philosopher on the metaphysical "fact" that these terms express or connote simple attributes. A clearer kind of justification is needed, one which is fundamental in epistemology and the philosophy of language.

Now I don't mean to say that this kind of justification is the same as that which is involved in the case of moral decisions in the usual sense, but it is very close. What I am saying is that to debate the defin*ability* of term 't' is to debate the advisability or justice or propriety (which word of that ilk to use will become of great moment to us later) of saying at some point 'I define 't' as short for 'r O s' '. The parallel between 'I define' and 'I promise' has been observed by Austin in this connection, and therefore the parallel I propose between definability and what might be called "promisability" should be evident. In the latter case we would ask ourselves, "Should I say 'I promise to do such-and-such'?" In the former, "Should I say 'I define so-and-so as such-and-such'?" Both questions are related in turn to questions like 'Should I *do* such-and-such?' where the doing is less verbal.

Now, in converting definability into a quasi-ethical question about whether we should *say* certain things on certain occasions, I have not said how such quasi-ethical questions are or should be settled. To that problem I shall turn later. But here I want only to record the conversion and to remark on the fact that I have, ironically enough, converted the apparently descriptive question of simplicity or definability of an ethical term into a quasi-ethical question which is not reducible to a metaphysical question about the properties or relations of attributes "out there". In doing so I not only illustrate one of the central theses of this book but also face the difficult task of analyzing the nature of these quasi-ethical decisions which concern the linguistic philosopher and epistemologist. That I will try to do in a later chapter.

(b) *On nonnaturalness.* In the later pages of the chapter we

saw that Moore added two other distinctions within the class of attributes or meanings of general terms. First, the distinction between an attribute which is intrinsic to a thing and an attribute which is not. This is of interest to us mainly for historical reasons, for it shows once again how important the notion of necessity—whether analytic or not—is in the philosophy of Moore. Just as he repairs to the idea of analyticity in trying to define the simplicity of goodness, so he must appeal to a nonlogical, nonanalytic species of necessity in calling it an intrinsic property.

Far more important for our purposes, however, is Moore's distinction between two kinds of intrinsic properties. In some cases he calls the intrinsic property which we grasp *natural*, because it is one that we ascribe in the course of describing a thing's intrinsic nature; in some cases he calls it *nonnatural*, because it is one that we ascribe in the course of *evaluating* a thing. It is also important to observe that Moore rejects his earlier, more metaphysical characterization of natural properties as "silly and preposterous" and replaces it by a characterization in which he makes reference to the activity of *describing*. For this reason, the ontology of intensional platonism is portrayable by reference to three kinds of activity: an attribute is what we grasp when we understand a general term; a natural attribute is what we ascribe to something when we describe it; a nonnatural attribute is what we ascribe to something when we evaluate it.

Moore's revision of his characterization of nonnatural attributes completes a certain tendency in twentieth-century analytic philosophy and prepares the way for another. In saying that a natural attribute is one that is ascribed in the course of a description, in saying that a nonnatural attribute is one that is ascribed in the course of an evaluation, in saying that an attribute is what we grasp in the course of understanding, a philosopher implies that we all have some kind of common-sense familiarity with understanding, description, and evaluation and that these are, in a sense, the fundamental data of philosophy. In his latest phase Moore implies that describing is, after all, a more clearly understood activity than the notion of naturalness which he defines in terms of it. I suggest, therefore, that the belief that we *improve* our situation by asserting the existence of entities like nonnatural attributes is misguided.

I suggest that the postulation of attributes, natural or otherwise, simple or otherwise, in no way clarifies these mental or linguistic activities, and I have already tried to show that their existence is not logically implied by the fact that we engage in these activities.

Under the circumstances, a philosopher may take one of two courses. One is to deny heroically and foolishly that understanding, description, and evaluation take place and that they are distinguishable human activities. If correct, this denial would dissolve any epistemological "proof" of the existence of meanings, natural attributes, and nonnatural attributes, and it would remove the need for postulating them as the things we grasp in the course of understanding, description, and evaluation. But it would also be absurd. Another alternative is to accept the fact that we do sometimes understand, describe, and evaluate, but that the existence of queer entities is not demanded by nor does it illuminate these important human activities. In this book I adopt the second course, and I point out that the need or desirability of asserting the existence of nonnatural characteristics is eliminated once we refuse to postulate the existence of *any* characteristics. As soon as we give up the view that understanding requires universals, or that the assertion of singular statements involves us in ascribing a property, then there is no need to treat description and evaluation as species of the ascription of properties. A man who understands a term is one who uses it in a certain way; a man who describes an object applies general terms to it in a certain way; a man who evaluates an object applies general terms in another way; a man who defines a term does certain things with that term; a man who does not define a term but understands it uses it another way. This is the outline of another way of philosophizing about these mental activities. I espouse it, of course, with the realization that we must say something more about these activities, but in the conviction that we had even better do without any further philosophical "analyses" of them than accept unilluminating, occult ontological explanations of them.

Finally, I should like to say that our examination of Moore's ethical views has not contributed directly to the solution of the epistemological problems we brought to this chapter. Instead, it has shown that Moore's notions of naturalness and simplicity are

themselves in need of a similar kind of clarification. But it has also confirmed the belief that some of the fundamental problems of philosophy arise in connection with human activities like understanding, evaluation, defining, knowing without recourse to experience, and describing. And it has helped us see that far from being perfect tools for philosophizing about ethical terms, they are themselves in need of illumination. In the following chapter we will examine certain positivistic efforts to make up some of the deficiencies in Moore's treatment of ethical terms while salvaging some of his insights. We shall be forced to reject some of these devices, but it should be said that the program of this book is very similar, and, indeed, that one of the chief problems of philosophy is to give an account of the differences and connections between description and evaluation without resorting to attributes—natural or nonnatural, simple or complex, intrinsic or extrinsic.

Semantics and Ethical Discourse

1. *Moore and the ethics of logical positivism*

Moore's ethical views have had enormous impact on analytically minded philosophers, even on positivists and empiricists who can not tolerate nonnatural qualities. Indeed, the most typical tendencies in positivistic ethics grow out of acceptance of a positivistic theory of knowledge and a sympathy with certain of Moore's ethical doctrines. On the one hand certain positivists say that all knowledge may be conveyed in statements which are either analytic or synthetic, and on the other they accept Moore's conclusion that 'good' is not a descriptive predicate. And if 'good' is not a descriptive predicate, it follows that so-called ethical sentences in which it figures in an essential way are not descriptive either. But if they are not descriptive sentences they cannot be synthetic for a positivist, since he equates the descriptive and the synthetic. Moreover, if they cannot be deduced from the truths of formal logic by putting synonyms for synonyms, they are not analytic, and it is presumed that they are not self-contradictory because they cannot be derived from the contradictories of logical truths by this same process. How, then, shall we classify ethical sentences?

Moore's attempt to provide a place for them is regarded with deep suspicion by positivists because he is willing to say that in ethical judgment we ascribe a nonnatural quality to things. But his doctrine on this point is treated in a manner distinctly different from that in which the positivists treat the comparable doctrine of the synthetic a priori. The positivist says that there *is* no example of a synthetic a priori proposition and that all alleged examples of its kind are mistakenly categorized by kantians, since the examples they offer are either a posteriori (and hence not a priori) or analytic (and hence not synthetic). But ethical sentences are tougher cus-