



# Ethics // Spring 2026

## Handout 11

### Moral value: Moore

**§5. 'GOOD'.** Ethics, as a systematic enquiry, is supposed to give reasons for judging  $x$  good. But these reasons can't be given before we clarify the concept of good. Moore, therefore, will engage in a conceptual analysis of 'good'. Does this mean, by the way, that people can't judge certain things good or bad correctly? that people have no correct ethical judgements before they have conducted this conceptual analysis? No, of course they can. But they can't *justify* their judgements. 58 57

*Remark 1* (Common sense). To connect this last remark to other areas of Moore's philosophy: people's commonsensical judgements are true. In fact, their being commonsensical is a sign of their truth. But this leaves wide open the proper analysis of these judgements (propositions). This is a familiar distinction. 'Antibiotics treat pneumonia': you may believe, commonsensically, the truth of this proposition, but you might be totally ignorant what pneumonia really is, what antibiotics really are, or how one 'treats' the other. Your latter ignorance is a conceptual ignorance that doesn't prevent you from having commonsensical medical knowledge.

**§6. THE PROJECT.** Moore begins by outlining the special philosophical interest in ethics. It is not to give a list of things that are good (casuistry). It is to conduct a conceptual investigation into the idea of 'good'. Moore immediately formulates his own answer: good is indefinable. It cannot be explicated as something else. He also previews the later discussion by rejecting possible explications of good as something pleasant or desired. 58

**§7. SIMPLICITY.** Good, Moore will argue, is a simple entity. You can't dissolve it into something more primitive. This is unlike a thing like horse that, of course, is composed of some entities standing in relations with each other. Good has no parts, no internal structure. 59

**§8. KINDS OF DEFINITION.** Moore says that he's not after a verbal definition. He will not survey the usage of 'good' in English. Instead, he will try to give a 'real definition' in terms of the elements that compose good. In fact, he'll say that there is no such definition, that good is, in this sense, indefinable. 60

**§10. NATURALISTIC FALLACY.** Why, actually, should it be that good has no definition? The answer given so far as is that it is simple. But why is *this* so? Moore now says that this is so because good is an 'object of thought' which enables definitions to be made. It is a condition of the possibility of such definitions. 61

Another example of such indefinable quality is yellow. You might think that its concept can be decomposed into 'eye stimulations by light waves of a certain length'. But, Moore says, we perceive yellow, not eye stimulations. There can be no reduction of yellow to more basic qualities. All we can say is that all yellow things produce a certain stimulation. There is correlation between two qualities, that is, but no reduction. 62

*Remark 2.* The discussion of yellow previews the larger doctrine shared by Moore and Russell about the fundamental, irreducible qualities of 'sense-data'.

The same, Moore says, is with good. Some theorists observed (or claimed to observe) a uniform correlation whereby objects that, for example, are pleasant are also good. They inferred fallaciously that good *is* pleasant, and that the former can be defined through the latter. This is the 'naturalistic fallacy'. Now we can see, if we follow Moore, why it is a fallacy, but is it 'naturalistic'? The reason presumably is that the candidate properties in these fallacious definitions, as understood by their authors, are all natural properties. We also get a hint how Moore thinks about good: it is an irreducible, non-natural property. 62

Similarly, Moore says that the fallacy is a confusion of good with a natural object. Further, even if good *were* a natural object, identifying it with pleasure would still be a fallacy, though not 'naturalistic'. 65

**§11. FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE FALLACY.** Moore argues that the position of ‘naturalistic ethicists’ may be reconstructed in two ways. One theorist says that good = X, the other says that good = Y. Well, perhaps their disagreement is really about whether X = Y. But then this entails nothing about the nature of good. 63

Or perhaps they make observations about how ‘good’ is used in language. But, Moore exclaims, we are not after how people use certain words! We want to know what is that thing that we are talking about! 64

*Question 3.* Reflect on Moore’s last complaint further.

In a seemingly unrelated remark, Moore also says that the proposition ‘Pleasure is good’ is far from trivial. Thus it can’t mean ‘Pleasure is pleasure’. But it has to mean that, if we wish to define good as pleasure (for example). In other words, ‘Pleasure is good’ is synthetic, not analytic. So we can’t analyse (define) good as pleasure. 64 58

**§13. THE OPEN QUESTION GAMBIT.** If good is not an indefinable simple, then there are two possibilities to consider: that it is a complex of some sort, or that it has no meaning (reality) at all. But suppose you say, ‘I take pleasure in slicing people.’ Surely I can intelligibly ask, ‘Is it good to slice people?’ So there is a *further* question about goodness that the statement about pleasures and desires does not necessarily answer. This, Moore thinks, should be a general situation. Whatever analytic equivalence good = X I produce, you can always ask, ‘But is X good?’ 66 67

By the same token, to argue that good is unreal is not an option. Everyone understands the question, ‘Is X good?’ Everyone is ‘constantly aware of this notion.’ 68

*Question 4.* Reflect on the viability of the Open Question gambit.

**§36. HEDONISM.** The prevalence of Hedonism is *not* evidence of its truth: it is explained by the naturalistic fallacy. Pleasure has been held to be the sole good because it has seemed to be involved in the *definition* of ‘good’. 111

Why the confusion? It is easy to notice that we are pleased with things. It is difficult to distinguish: 112

- (11-1) a. *approving* a thing (having a certain unique ethical predicate in mind), as opposed to:
- b. *being pleased with* a thing (a natural psychological state).

Ordinary language reinforces the confusion: ‘I want this’, ‘I like this’, and ‘I care about this’ are constantly used as equivalents for ‘I think this good.’ 113

**THE ARGUMENT OF §§90–100.** Here is an outline of the practical dimension of Moorean ethics. We’ll have to unpack these claims a bit.

Section(s)	Main claim
§ 90	Four consequences of the causal definition of duty.
§ 91	Absolute duties unprovable; humbler probabilistic task remains.
§ 92	‘Possible’ action = no known cause would prevent it if conceived.
§§ 93–94	Establishing even a probability is enormously difficult (a) & (b).
§ 95	Common-sense rules defensible via two characteristics (c).
§ 96	Some rules are only conditionally defensible.
§ 97	Legal/social sanctions are additional justifications, not merely motives.
§ 98	Proposed but unpractised rules face three structural defects.
§ 99	Individual judgment: always follow established rules; exceptions unjustifiable (d).
§ 100	Actions without provable general utility: direct intrinsic-value judgment ( $\beta$ ).

**DUTY.** Moore’s theory defines duty as whatever action will produce the most good in the Universe. But this does not by itself generate any particular moral rules. So the question in §§95–98 is: which moral rules, if any, can be given a consequentialist justification robust enough to count as a genuine ethical result? Moore’s answer: distinguish two classes of commonly recognised rules and draw consequences for what Ethics can and cannot establish across different times and places.

**§95. UNIVERSALLY DEFENSIBLE RULES.** Moore argues that a consequentialist defence is possible for most rules ‘most universally recognised by Common Sense’. That’s because of two claims:

- (11-2) In any known state of society, a general observance of them would be good as a means. The conditions on which their utility depends—the tendency to preserve and propagate life and the desire for property—are so universal and strong that it would be impossible to remove them. 207
- (11-3) Since they can be recommended as a means to something which is itself only a necessary condition for the existence of any great good, they can be defended independently of correct views on the primary ethical question what is good in itself. 208

So these rules do not require Moore’s theory of intrinsic value. Any ethical view which accepts that civilised society is a precondition for great goods will support them.

*Example 5 (Murder).* In this case, the argument is not that killing is intrinsically wrong. It is that most people strongly desire to live, so a society permitting murder generates widespread insecurity, and the energy absorbed by that insecurity could be spent on positive goods. This argument is conditional: it holds only so long as most people desire to continue living. If pessimism were true (=human life is evil), the argument would not go through.

**§96. NON-UNIVERSALLY DEFENSIBLE RULES.** Well, some rules ‘presuppose the existence of conditions which cannot be fairly assumed to be so universally necessary’:

*Example 6 (Chastity).* The standard utilitarian defence of chastity presupposes sentiments such as conjugal jealousy and paternal affection. These sentiments are strong and general in known societies, and for those societies the defence is valid. On the other hand, it is not difficult to imagine a civilised society existing without these sentiments (just look around yourselves!). In such a society, if chastity were still to be defended, we would have to show that violation of the rules produced evils other than those due to the assumed sentiments. Then we would have to conduct an examination into what is good and bad in itself ‘far more thorough than any ethical writer has ever offered to us’.

So what presents itself as a universal Common Sense rule may in fact be a rule whose authority is local and contingent. See Table 1.

	Type I: universally defensible	Type II: non-universally defensible
Utility depends on	universal human conditions	contingent social sentiments
Holds across	all known states of society	particular states of society
Defence requires	no view on intrinsic good	examination of intrinsic good
Examples	murder, promises, industry	rules of chastity

Table 1: Two types of rules

**§98. IN DEFENCE OF COMMON SENSE.** But what of social improvement and introduction of moral rules hitherto not practiced in the society. Well:

- (11-4) The actions they advocate are very commonly impossible for most individuals to perform by any volition, requiring a peculiar disposition given to few and which cannot even be acquired. 209
- (11-5) The proposed good effects are not possible because the conditions necessary for their existence are not sufficiently general: a rule which would produce good effects if human nature were different is advocated as if its general observance would produce the same effects now. 210

(11-6) The usefulness of the rule depends on conditions likely to change, or of which the change would be easy and more desirable than observance of the rule—or which the general observance of the rule would itself destroy. 210

(11-7) It seems doubtful whether Ethics can establish the utility of any rules other than those generally practised. 210

In other words: whether a generally unobserved rule would, if generally observed, be desirable, cannot affect the question of how any individual ought to act: he cannot bring about its general observance, and the fact that it would be generally useful gives him no reason to observe it alone.

**RELATIVISM?** If Common Sense morality varies across times and places, does Moore's position imply moral relativism?

I think not. Variation in moral rules, as I understand Moore, reflects variation in causal circumstances, not variation in what is intrinsically valuable. Goodness is a simple, non-natural property: what has intrinsic value does not depend on what any society believes or what social conditions obtain. Two societies in different causal situations may correctly follow different rules while, if they reasoned correctly, agreeing on what is good as an end.

What *does* vary is the answer to the question:

(11-8) Which action, in these circumstances, will produce the most good?

That question has different correct answers in different circumstances. What does *not* vary, however, is the standard against which those answers are measured.