Ethics // Spring 2026

Handout 12

Intrinsic value: Moore II

§112. Method. What is the good? Moore has spent five chapters telling us what it is not. It is not pleasure. It is not the satisfaction of desire. It is not what nature makes us pursue, nor what reason commands us to will. Having ruthlessly cleared the field, he now has to say something positive. What he says is both simpler and stranger than anything his predecessors had offered. His rather dense, but also famous, discussion of intrinsic value is summarised in Figure 1. Let's unpack this further.

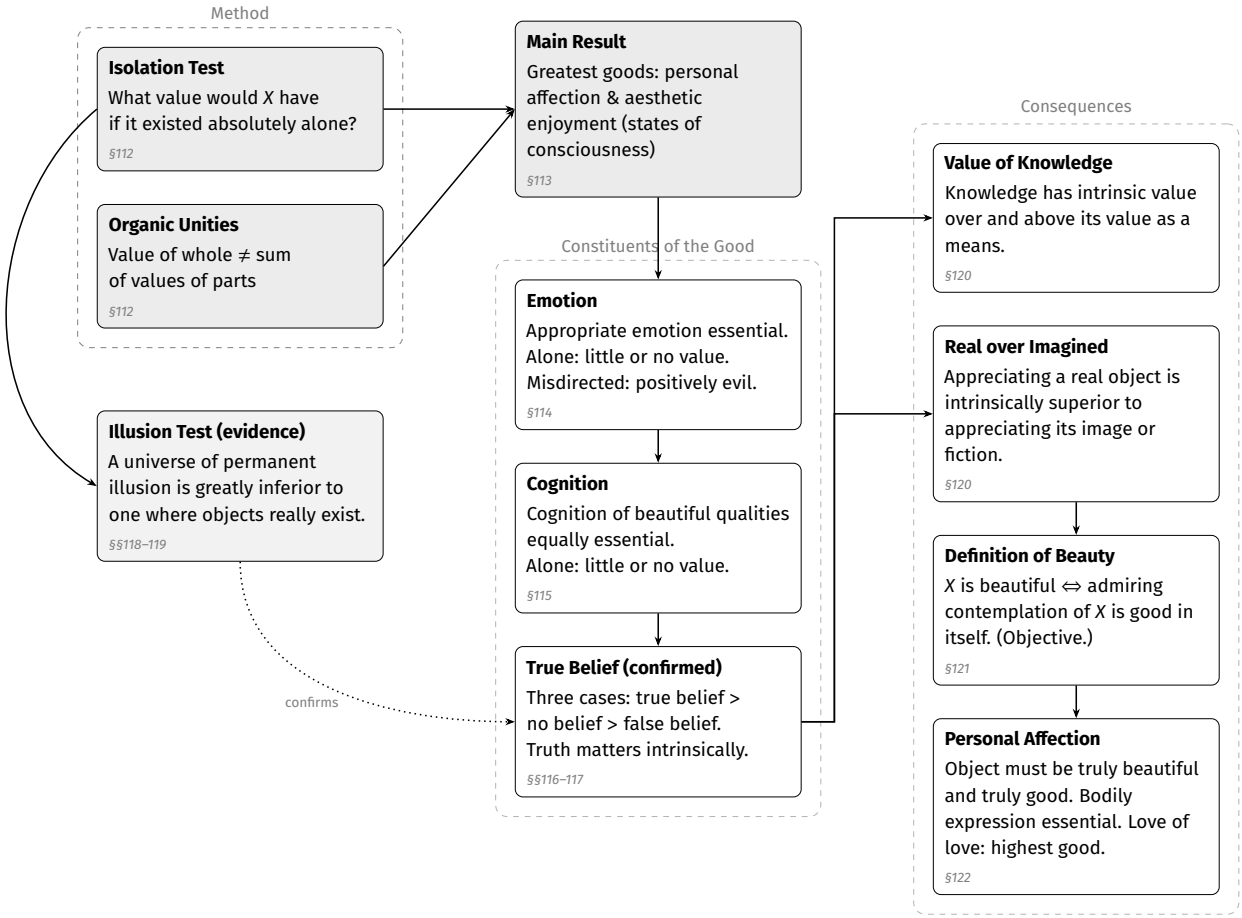

Figure 1: Summary of the Ideal chapter

The question is: what things have intrinsic value, and in what degrees? Moore's procedure for answering it is disarmingly direct. Take the thing you are evaluating. Strip away everything else. 236
Imagine it existing alone in the universe, with nothing beside it. Now ask: would its existence be good?

This is the isolation test, and it has a double role. First, it separates intrinsic from instrumental value. Things we cannot do without (civilised society, bodily health, sufficient income) can seem obviously good until you imagine them existing alone, at which point their worthlessness as ends becomes apparent. They are good for something. Isolated, they are good for nothing.

Second, and more importantly, the test exposes what Moore calls the principle of ' organic unities '. The value of a whole need not equal the sum of the values of its parts. A constituent that seems enormously valuable when considered in isolation may contribute very little to the whole of which it forms a part. Conversely, and this is Moore's central move, a constituent with negligible value in isolation may be absolutely essential to a whole of very great value.

§113. Main result. Applying the isolation test, Moore finds that by far the most valuable things we 237
know or can imagine are certain states of consciousness, namely, the pleasures of human intercourse (=personal affection) and the enjoyment of beautiful objects (=aesthetic enjoyment).

These are the rational ultimate end of human action and the sole criterion of social progress. 238
They are not valuable because they contain pleasure: the mere existence of a beautiful object, unless contemplated, has negligible value compared with the consciousness of it. This is presented as a self-evident claim. See references to *Philebus* and *Nicomachean Ethics* in the *Elements of Ethics* (provided additionally).

§114. Aesthetic emotion. Moore turns to the analysis of aesthetic appreciation (the case of personal affection introduces additional complications he wishes to defer). The analysis identifies two essential constituents, but neither has significant value in isolation.

The first constituent is appropriate emotion. Bare cognition of beautiful qualities (=seeing that 238
they are there and knowing them to be beautiful) is insufficient for the highest aesthetic praise. The appreciator must also feel the beauty, have an emotion appropriate to the qualities cognised. But this 239
emotional element, considered by itself, can hardly be thought to have any great value at all. If the same emotion is directed towards an ugly object, the resulting state of consciousness is often positively bad in a high degree. The emotion is not valuable in itself: it gets value from the whole of which it forms a part.

§115. Cognition of beauty. Here comes the second constituent. What's the cognitive element here though? Not the perception of the whole object, but rather consciousness of those qualities in the object that are beautiful.

Example 1 (Fifth Symphony). What value should we attribute to the proper emotional response to 240
Beethoven's Fifth Symphony if that emotion were entirely unaccompanied by any awareness of the notes, or of the melodic and harmonic relations between them? Moore's answer: very little. The cognitive element is equally essential, and equally without value in isolation. Together, however, the appropriate combination of emotion and cognition constitutes a major good, possibly a very great one. This is organic unity in action: neither part is worth much alone, but the whole greatly exceeds the sum of its parts.

§§116–120. True belief. So far Moore has two necessary constituents of the good: appropriate emotion and cognition of beautiful qualities. He elaborates on this a bit more, but the details may here be skipped.

Anyway, he now asks whether there is a third. Does it matter whether the object of the appreciation 241
actually exists? Is a true belief in the reality of the object itself a component of intrinsic value?

Moore distinguishes three cases: 242

> Case 1: Emotion and cognition are present, and the appreciator truly believes that the beautiful qualities he cognises really exist. This is the appreciation of beautiful landscapes and of beautiful (also real) minds.
>
> Case 2: Emotion and cognition are present, but there is no belief either way about whether the object exists. This is the pleasure of imagination: the appreciation of fictional characters, of landscape painting, of representational art generally.
>
> Case 3: Emotion and cognition are present, but the belief in the existence of the beautiful qualities is false. This is misdirected affection (e.g., loving someone for virtues they do not possess). Moore adds bluntly that the love of God may belong here too.

Moore's verdict is that these three cases are not of equal value: 243

(12-1) Case 1 > Case 2 > Case 3.

The truth of the belief makes a difference to the intrinsic value of the whole, not merely to its consequences, not merely to its usefulness as a guide to action, but to its value considered purely as a state of affairs.

Remark 2. Not to quarrel over aesthetics, but Moore's reasons are occasionally grotesque: ' we think 243
that the world would be improved if we could substitute for the best works of representative art real objects equally beautiful. ' This strikes me as an absurdly idiotic sentiment of an aesthetic philistine.

Moore warns us against two confusions. First: to explain the superiority of Case 1 by pointing out 244
that true beliefs are more useful than false ones. That is no doubt correct, but it is entirely beside the
point. Moore is not making a claim about means. Second: to suppose that Case 1 is better simply 245
because the existence of a beautiful object is itself a good thing, so the world of Case 1 contains more
goods. Again, true but beside the point. Moore is asking about the value of the whole constituted by
the appreciation, not about the total value of the universe in which it occurs.

To settle the matter, Moore applies the isolation test a second time. Imagine a person who enjoys, 246
throughout eternity, the contemplation of scenery as beautiful and intercourse with persons as admirable
as can be imagined. But every single object of his cognition is entirely unreal. Compare this universe
with one in which the objects really exist. Moore's verdict is unequivocal: the first universe is greatly
inferior. And it is inferior not only because it lacks the additional goods of the objects' existence, but
for a further reason, the mere fact that the beliefs are false diminishes the value of the appreciative 246
states themselves.

Hence knowledge has intrinsic value, over and above its value as an instrument. And the appreciation 248
of a real object is intrinsically superior to the appreciation of an equally beautiful imagined one.

§121. Definition of beauty. A consequence for aesthetics follows. The naturalistic fallacy 249
has been committed here just as in ethics. Beauty has been defined as that which generates certain
aesthetic feelings/judgements. Hence, on that view, taste is merely subjective, and the same thing can
be both beautiful and not beautiful depending on who is looking at it or judging it.

Moore's alternative: a thing is beautiful if and only if the admiring contemplation of it is good in 250
itself. Whether something is beautiful is therefore an objective question. It is not a question about the
feelings it happens to excite in particular persons, but a question about whether the whole of which it is
the object has intrinsic value. Disagreements about beauty are, on this account, disagreements about
a matter of fact. They may be very difficult to resolve, but they are not merely disagreements in taste.

This definition also explains something that might otherwise seem puzzling: why beautiful objects 250
are overwhelmingly material objects. Material objects have, in themselves, little or no intrinsic value.
But they are essential constituents of the most valuable wholes we know. In that capacity they are, or
may be, beautiful.

§122. Personal affection. This is more complex than pure aesthetic enjoyment because the
object is not merely beautiful but good in itself. All three constituents established for aesthetic 251
appreciation (appropriate emotion, cognition of truly beautiful qualities, true belief in their existence)
are equally required. But here the object must also be truly good.

Moore's analysis yields a striking claim. The appreciation of a person's mental qualities, considered 252
in isolation, is probably not even as valuable as the appreciation of mere corporeal beauty. Its importance
lies not in any high degree of intrinsic value it possesses by itself, but in the immense superiority of
the whole in which it is combined with an appreciation of the appropriate corporeal expression of
those qualities. You cannot properly love a mind without loving the body through which it expresses
itself.

And the highest form of personal affection is neither the love of beauty nor the love of goodness
taken separately, but the love of another person's love: the appreciation of someone's appreciation of
persons. The most valuable thing we can contemplate is a mind appropriately oriented towards what
is genuinely valuable. That is the summit of the Ideal.