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Good, God, and the open-question argument

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Abstract: In *Finite and Infinite Goods*, Robert Adams defends his metaphysical account that good is resemblance to God via an 'open-question' intuition. It is, however, unclear what this intuition amounts to. I give two possible readings: one based on the semantic framework Adams employs, and another based on Adams's account of humankind's epistemological limitations. I argue that neither of these readings achieves Adams's advertised aim.

Introduction

G. E. Moore famously argued via an 'open-question' challenge (notice that I will talk about 'challenge' rather than 'argument'; this is less misleading, given that Moore doesn't provide any distinct premises and conclusion) that any account that attempts to define 'good' commits a fallacy.[1] If it is true that say, good is pleasure, then 'good' must mean 'pleasure'. Moreover if 'good' means 'pleasure', then when questioned about whether something we call 'pleasurable' is indeed 'good', the answer ought to be obvious to us. We are meant to respond: 'Well, of course it is good; that is what ''good'' means!' However, Moore continues, we don't find such questions obvious. When asked, we remain ambivalent; we feel that we ought to leave our options open. In other words, for any proposed identity with 'good', we find questions concerning that identity open. So, Moore concludes, 'good' can't be defined, which in turn means that the *property* good is simple; good is good and that is the end of the matter.[2]

Of course, this clearly isn't the end of the matter, for Moore or for subsequent writers; and, as any undergraduate will tell you, Moore's argument is highly problematic and rightly rejected. Yet, as many philosophers have noted, there is something curious about the open-question discussion.[3] Although Moore is wrong in his reasoning, given the ongoing discussion of his argument in the literature, he seems to have been on to something.[4] Typically, what this 'something' amounts to is broadly categorized as the normativity of good.

How we should understand this, though, is not clear; maybe it has something to do with the connection between moral judgement and motivation? Or maybe it has something to do with the connection between moral judgement and practical reason?[5] It is not the aim of this paper either to rehearse all the problems with Moore's presentation of the argument – for example, the paradox of analysis, or Moore's assumption that property identity requires a priori meaning equivalence – or to discuss how the argument is best presented. The aim of the paper is to discuss one recent use of the open-question challenge and show that it fails in its advertised aim.

Transcendence vindicated

Richard Adams uses open-question intuitions as the starting point for the metaphysical view he presents in *Finite and Infinite Goods*.[6] Specifically, he claims that once we have realized that there is a 'truth behind' Moore's challenge – what he calls the 'critical stance' – and that to respect this truth must be part of any account of good, his own position becomes attractive.

As I discuss below, it is not completely clear how Adams intends the critical stance to be read; however, I will at first assume what is arguably the most obvious reading. This is how Adams describes the critical stance: 'For any natural, empirically identifiable property or type of action that we or others may regard as good … we are committed to leave it *always* open in principle to raise evaluative or normative questions by asking whether that property or action type is *really* good.'[7] So how can Adams's account respect this critical stance? Well, quite easily, as it turns out. Adams claims that *good is resemblance to God* and that, given that God is by definition beyond human knowledge – He is transcendent – we can never know which properties or action types do, in fact, resemble God. Our knowledge of the transcendent is always imperfect and fragmentary. But if this is the case it must *always* be open in principle to raise evaluative or normative questions by asking whether that property or action-type is really good.

On the other hand, the naturalist is committed to holding that because we *can* discover their chosen natural property – for instance, discover what is pleasurable – they close questions concerning whether some property or action-type is really good. To put the point simply: for Adams there is a truth in Moore's open-question challenge – the critical stance – and an account which holds good as transcendent can respect this, whereas an account which holds good as a natural property cannot.

The details

A way into the details of Adams's account is via a worry. If it is an open question whether good is in fact resemblance to God, then arguably 'good'

cannot mean 'resemblance to God'. But isn't this exactly what Adams is claiming? Hence, Adams seems to have made a mistake in believing the open-question challenge is an ally. However, Adams has made no such mistake.

Adam's account of his proposed identity is highly sophisticated. It starts from the fairly uncontroversial claim that property identity doesn't require a priori meaning equivalence. Just consider the claim that water is H_2O; accepting this doesn't commit one to the belief that 'water' means 'H_2O'. So nothing follows about property identity from that fact that two terms are not synonymous. Thus, even if we can meaningfully question whether 'good' means 'resemblance to God', this does not commit us to any ontological claim about good. However, to sustain these claims Adams requires a sophisticated semantic account. He finds one such account in Richard Boyd's moral realism.[8]

Boyd takes his cue from theoretical identity claims. He claims that to understand say, 'water', is to grasp the characteristics of water which fix the reference of 'water', and that once this reference is discovered a posteriori, it can be claimed that water is, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, identical with that referent. So, for Boyd, the way to be a moral realist is to acknowledge that to understand 'good' is to grasp the characteristics of good which fix the reference of 'good'. Once this reference is discovered a posteriori we can claim that good is, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, identical with that referent. Boyd claims that, as it turns out, the 'moral scientist' will discover that the referent is some homeostatic cluster of natural properties.[9]

Adams thinks that the semantic approach is correct even though he denies the ontological conclusions of Boyd's account; good for Adams is not a homeostatic cluster of natural properties, good is not a *natural* kind at all. As Adams writes:

> As good is not a natural kind in the way that water is, the meaning of the word 'good' does not direct us to anything like a chemical structure. And we cannot assume that causal interaction with concrete samples will fix the reference of 'good' in the same way that the reference of 'water' is fixed.[10]

However, Adams does argue that the meaning of the word 'good' maybe related to the nature of good in something like the way that has been proposed for natural kinds. By which he means that what is given by the meaning or use of 'good' is a role that the nature of good is to play; and, if there is a single candidate that best fills the role, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, that will be the nature of the good. Adams's first task then must be to characterize the reference-fixing nature of good. However, he suggests this is an impossible task, given the multiple contexts in which 'good' is used. Consequently, Adams concerns himself with contexts in which 'good' is naturally interpreted as *excellence*. He then seeks to give the features of 'good' understood as excellence which fix the reference of 'good', and ascertain what, if anything has these features.

Adams gives arguments for these characteristics, but these are not needed for this paper.[11] All that we require is a description of them. For Adams, good as understood as excellence is: (1) not a feature of states of affairs; (2) objective; (3) good for us to love, admire, and want to be related to; and (4) something we typically *recognize* as excellent. These are the features that fix the reference of 'good' as understood as excellence, and Adams thinks that the property of resembling God best fits this role. For him, if it is good to love or admire a thing then this is because that thing resembles God; resembling God is objective and as far as something resembles God, we can conclude that if that thing were loved and admired, then it would be good.

Thus, via a modern semantic account Adams has argued that as a matter of metaphysical necessity good is resemblance to God, and that 'good' does not mean 'resemblance to God'. Moreover, that as such his account is superior to a naturalistic position because it alone can respect the critical stance.

The problem

For the reader of *Finite and Infinite Goods* – well, to me at least – it is confusing as to what Adams takes the critical stance to be.[12] I outline two options and argue that neither support good as resemblance to God.

First, given the complex semantic framework employed by Adams, one might think that he takes open questions to be open in virtue of the synthetic yet necessary identity claim he employs. That he adopts the semantic framework he does precisely because of open-question worries, and that he thinks that what the open-question challenge highlights is that property identity does not require a priori meaning equivalence. On this reading, Adams can respect the critical stance because there is nothing in the meaning of 'resembling God' which dictates an answer to the question 'Is *x*, which resembles God, good?'

However, if this is what Adams is saying, then he is in no better position than a naturalist adopting the *same* semantic framework. For it is the semantic framework which allows Adams to keep questions open in this way and not his ontological commitments. Hence, if Adams intends the critical stance to convey intuitions about meaning, if the power of the critical stance lies in the fact that we ought to always be able to ask meaningfully whether 'X' *means* 'Y', then it does not decide between Adams's account and a naturalistic position which adopts a similar semantic framework, for example, Boyd's.[13]

Second and perhaps more in accord with the text, the critical stance could be read like this. The statement that 'good is resemblance to God' respects the critical stance because we simply don't know what, in fact, resembles God. We may say that, for example, loving your neighbour or keeping the Ten Commandments is good, but whether it *is* is an open question because we don't know whether this type of action does, in fact, resemble God because God is

beyond our knowledge. In contrast, the statement that good is pleasure is closed because we do know what, in fact, is pleasurable. For instance, the question of whether giving money to charity is good is closed because we know that this would give us pleasure. Thus, on this reading *it is not the identity claim* that 'good is resemblance to God' that is open but the further question about a particular property or action-type resembling God.

Let us assume that a 'full-information' naturalistic account of good is correct. Such a position might roughly be characterized:

> Φ-ing is good for an agent, if that agent fully informed and fully rational would desire Φ.

Of course, this sort of approach is controversial. The point though is this: it *is* an open question whether a property or type of action is, in fact, what I would desire if I were fully informed and fully rational. A naturalist adopting the full-information account is not committed to claiming that we could know what being fully informed and fully rational would bring with it, in terms of what we *would* judge to be good. We just don't know whether, for instance, my driving a truck of grain through Iraq is what my fully informed and fully rational self would desire? So it would be an open question to us whether driving a truck of grain through Iraq is what my fully informed and fully rational self would desire. As such it seems that this naturalist position can respect this reading of the critical stance.

Of course, we could say that on some reading of 'knowledge' we can know what my fully informed self would desire. We 'know' that my fully informed and fully rational self would, for instance, desire to drive a truck of grain through Iraq. Well, maybe, but then I see no reason why on this revised reading of 'knowledge' we cannot say that driving a truck through Iraq is what would resemble God. This renders Adams's critical stance unable to decide between good as what resembles God, and good as that which we would desire if fully informed and rational. In relation to what would be desired by a fully informed and fully rational agent and what resembles God we are in exactly the same epistemological position. Notice that it is not enough for Adams to claim that the difference is that it is not conceptually possible to know what resembles God whereas it is conceptually possible to know what fully informed and rational agents would desire. This will not help, for we cannot, as a matter of fact, know a posteriori which action-types will be desired by an ideal agent.

Even if we concede that Adams can demonstrate that we can know what our idealized selves would desire, and that we can't *in the same sense* of 'know', know whether something resembles God, and concede that he can show that the same is true for *all* naturalist accounts, there are still other *non-naturalistic* accounts that will pose a problem. For instance, Moore's account which holds good to be a non-natural property that is only knowable through intuition. On Moore's

account – and on other non-naturalistic accounts – good is unknowable a posteriori, which is precisely what Adams claims, according to this second reading of the critical stance, is the key advantage of his account.

(Notice that Adams must be committed to saying that the questions: 'Is keeping the Ten Commandments good?'; 'Is loving God with all your heart, mind and soul, good?'; 'Is asking for forgiveness, good?', are open. They must be, as we cannot know a posteriori whether these types of actions resemble God. If we did, and these questions were closed, then Adams's position would, in respect to this second reading of the critical stance, be in no better position than the naturalist account I have considered.)

Therefore, Adams is faced with two options. Either he thinks questions concerning his account are open because of the semantic framework he adopts. Or he thinks that questions concerning his account are open because we can't know what, in fact, resembles God. Concerning the former, naturalists can and do adopt exactly the same framework and hence can also respect the critical stance.[14] Concerning the latter, the critical stance cannot decide between good as resemblance to God and good as that which we would desire, were we fully informed and rational; because we just don't know a posteriori what types of action would be desired by ourselves fully informed and fully rational. Moreover, I suggested that if we decided that, for all intents and purposes, we could possibly know which action-types would be desired by ourselves fully informed and fully rational, and hence defend Adams's second reading of the critical stance, then on this same 'intents-and-purposes' reading of 'knowledge' we could know what resembles God. Hence, Adams's second reading of the critical stance fails. I conclude then that the critical stance does not achieve what Adams wants it to.

I propose that the open-question challenge has got nothing to do with how much we know. If there is any power in the critical stance it is in the fact that *even if* we knew that Φ-ing would give us pleasure, or that Φ-ing is what we would desire when fully informed, or that Φ-ing resembles God, it still remains an open question whether Φ-ing is, in fact, good. Of course, how we account for this 'openness' is another question.[15]

Notes

1. George Edward Moore *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903).
2. *Ibid.*, 6.
3. For example, S. Darwall, A. Gibbard and P. Railton 'Toward *Fin de siecle* ethics: some trends', in *idem* (eds) *Moral Discourse and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3–47.
4. For example, Connie Rosati 'Agency and the open question argument', *Ethics*, **113** (2003), 490–527.
5. For instance one might argue: (a) that moral judgement as a matter of conceptual necessity motivates; and (b) that we recognize that it is always open for people whether the obtaining of a natural property motivates. Hence, (c) moral judgements cannot be identical to judgements about natural properties obtaining.

6. Robert Adams *Finite and Infinite Goods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
7. *Ibid.*, 78.
8. Richard Boyd 'How to be a moral realist', in Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton *Moral Discourse and Practice*, 105–135.
9. *Ibid.*, 124–127.
10. Adams *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 16.
11. *Ibid.*, 17–23.
12. Maybe it must always be an open question whether *x resembles y* because, perhaps, resemblance depends on variable contexts of interpretation. If this is true then *any* account – natural or non-natural – which employs the notion of resemblance, will respect the critical stance.
13. Boyd 'How to be a moral realist'.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Thanks to David Bain, Daniel Barnes, Peter Byrne, and for the comments of an anonymous referee for *Religious Studies*.