

THE OPEN QUESTION ARGUMENT AND THE POSSIBILITY OF REDUCTIONISM*

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In this paper I am interested in which reductionist positions are blocked, and on what grounds, by the Open Question Argument (OQA) both historically and by its contemporary guises. I single out four most salient interpretations of the OQA and analyze their impact on the possibility of reductionist theories of evaluative properties. It will be suggested that the OQA poses a serious threat to semantic naturalism about moral terms, but does not block the possibility of metaphysical ethical naturalism (though possibly condemns it to a certain schizophrenia).

Keywords: *Open Question Argument, reductionism, ethical naturalism, normativity.*

The Open Question Argument: Why Does It Still Matter

The so-called father of metaethics, George Edward Moore, at the beginning of last century has formulated an Open Question (OQ from here on; and OQA to stand for the Open Question Argument) which to this day requires metaethicists to find their relation to it, if not to answer it. The OQA has determined much of the agenda of contemporary metaethics. Originally in pursuit of securing stable basis for morality, it has, however, opened space for non-cognitivism and scepticism. Directed against ethical naturalism, it posed a challenge to any de-

scriptivist account of moral properties: do moral judgements describe anything at all, if so, how is it possible and to what kind of reality do they refer? Moral phenomenology suggests that moral judgements do have descriptive (as well as prescriptive) character. But, taken seriously, the OQA at least restricts the range of plausible descriptivist moral theories.

Therefore, since the OQA is potentially harmful to descriptivist theories broadly construed, it is the possibility and form of these theories in the presence of the OQA that we will concentrate on. Whatever function the OQA can be understood to have played in the past and to play now, it is antireductionist in its essence. In this paper I will be most interested in which reductionist positions does the OQA block (both historically and in its contemporary guises) and on

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what grounds. In other words, what is the OQA understood to amount to and what does it, so understood, serve to refute. I will purport to give a (perhaps not exhaustive) classification of its (most salient) antireductionist uses and outline its impact onto the possibility of reductionist theories of evaluative properties and evaluative terms.

Before getting to it, a couple of remarks are due. One should have in mind that “non-moral” (in its sense of “non-evaluative”) and “natural”, following common practice in contemporary literature, will be used synonymously. However, it does not mean that whereas “non-moral” properties are understood to be “natural” properties, accordingly “moral” properties should be understood to be “non-natural”, as such usage would beg the question. Besides, one should not get confused about our shifting from analysis or definition of goodness to that of moral properties in general. It is well known that Moore himself was talking about the irreducibility of the term “good”, whereas “right” and other moral concepts were supposed to be reducible to “good”. However, today we mostly talk about the possibility of reduction of all the moral terms, not just about that of “good”. The more so, some authors prefer to disambiguate “good” and choose to limit their research to “non-moral good” (evaluative term), whereas others concentrate primarily on “moral good”, others still do not make the distinction. For better or worse, I will not differentiate between them, unless noted.

The Original OQA: Against the Analytic Semantic Naturalism

In order to understand the role of the OQA in Moore’s anti-naturalist and anti-reduc-

tionist enterprise, I believe it to be handy to use the reconstruction of the famous Moore’s argument by Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons. They formulate two main claims, constituting analytic ethical naturalism¹ as:

Metaphysical ethical naturalism (MN): ‘There are moral properties (and facts); and these are identical with natural properties (and facts).’

Analytic semantic naturalism (ASN): ‘Fundamental moral terms like “good” have analytically true naturalistic definitions.’ (Horgan and Timmons 2006: 180)

They propose that semantic naturalist thesis and metaphysical naturalist thesis were supposed to be, as they say, “a package deal” in virtue of a synonymy criterion of property identity. The latter should be understood as a claim that “two property referring expressions refer to the same property if and only if those expressions are synonymous – i.e. have the same meaning” (Horgan and Timmons 2006: 180). Thus, according to them, the truth of semantic thesis being necessary for the truth of metaphysical thesis, Moore’s refuting semantic thesis would be sufficient for refutation of the metaphysical thesis. If ASN is true, then statements identifying goodness of some object with some natural property have to be analytically true. In other words, a competent language user would know its truth *a priori*. Therefore, if one demonstrated that the competent speakers could not determine

¹ Naturalism, especially semantic naturalism, is primarily to be understood as a reductive position; this meaning will be mostly had in mind, except when prompted otherwise by the context or noted explicitly, as, for example, while discussing the fourth interpretation of the OQA, where non-reductive naturalism will come into play.

truth of such statements *a priori*, this would suffice not just to prove the falsity of ASN, but also the falsity of the MN.

What had to do the job for Moore was the OQA. The form of the Open Question was such: “*x* has a natural property *N*, but is it good?” This question, according to Moore, remains open, it is not getting closed *a priori* by an affirmative answer, a trivial “yes”. Upon reflection a competent language user still finds the question intelligible, it does not amount for her to a question: “*x* has a natural property *N*, but does it have a natural property *N*?” Thus OQ (applicable with respect to every natural property *N*) serves to underthrow analytic ethical naturalism.

Moore’s own conclusion from this argument was that goodness was a simple, indefinable and non-natural property. However, it is not the only conclusion that can be drawn from his argument. Those who did accept Moore’s argument but found his non-naturalism unpalatable (because of suspicious ontology and epistemology) could choose several moves. They could conclude that moral language is not primarily or essentially descriptive of any reality, whether natural or non-natural, hence turning to non-cognitivism about moral judgements. Others could turn to skepticism concerning the possibility of existence of and cognitive paths to such particular moral properties. However, as noted, I will be more interested in the possibility of those theories which are striving to preserve the descriptive character of the moral judgements (therefore, also some kind of moral reality they describe) after Moore’s OQA, so let us turn to them.

Looking just at this reconstruction of Moore’s argument, at its *negative* part

(what it rejects, not what conclusion about “good” Moore makes), we see OQA being directed against the ASN, analytic semantic naturalism, the now outdated semantic position². Based on that, we can acknowledge the historical significance of the OQA and reserve it a strictly historical role. This should be acceptable even to a contemporary reductionist naturalist as he or she does not embrace such a semantic theory. On this reading, what Moore has primarily demonstrated, was that *such* a semantic theory and, thus, such a *semantic* naturalist analysis of moral property terms is defective (and so because of its connection with a respective metaphysical thesis, it casts a shadow on the latter as well). Indeed, Stephen Ball endorses this interpretation: “historically, the main tradition of ethical naturalism has in fact presented itself as a semantic theory which gives a reportive definition of the actual meanings of ethical terms in ordinary language. ... this at any rate is clearly the sort of theory that Moore himself, and others who have endorsed his argument, have intended to refute with OQ” (Ball 1988: 198).

Under this interpretation of OQA in its original form, there is no tension between the *negative* part of the Moorean enterprise and what contemporary naturalist theorists, primarily the so-called synthetic naturalists, are up to. Then, the original OQA simply does not apply to the new versions of semantic naturalism, and Moorean position seems to be fully compatible with the post-Kripkean semantic theories of the natural kind terms and proper names. As Ball puts

² After Kripke’s work on necessity and identity, the synonymy criterion of property identity that ASN relied on, fell out of favour.

it, “Moore does not deny the truth of all statements about what activities or experiences are good; the claim is only that all such statements are ‘synthetic and never analytic’” (Ball 1988: 198), i.e., Moore does not deny that the extensions of the two terms are the same. And, certainly, the link between the analytic semantic naturalism and the metaphysical naturalism – synonymy criterion of property identity – being cut, metaphysical ethical naturalism is safe from the original OQA as well.

The OQA As a Blank Model Against Ethical Naturalism

Horgan and Timmons, willing to reuse the OQA against a variant of contemporary ethical naturalism, accordingly, have to formulate its contemporary version³. And it’s a significant modification they introduce: the new OQ has built into it “the appropriate empirical hypothesis about causal regulation” (Horgan and Timmons 2006: 186), i.e., the appropriate element of the naturalist semantic theory called causal ethical naturalism⁴ that they purport to overthrow. Horgan and Timmons treat OQ as a form, or a pattern, of a question which is distinguishable from the semantic theory which fills it⁵. The latter

can be replaced by some other – depending on the semantic theory one is purporting to overthrow as inapplicable for moral property terms. What is important to them concerning the original OQ, is the same supposition as Moore’s that the OQ can be answered by competent speakers just in virtue of their mastery of language. Actually, synthetic naturalists also rely on the supposition that intuitions of speakers provide evidence about semantics. So it is this common supposition that enables Horgan and Timmons to use the OQ for criticizing synthetic naturalists: they will show that those intuitions, which synthetic naturalists trust, leave the OQ about morality open whereas they close the OQ about non-moral properties.

The way synthetic naturalists demonstrate that, for example, “water” for humans rigidly designates H₂O is through the Twin Earth thought experiment: competent speakers’ intuitions supposedly provide evidence in favour of the contention. Therefore, if “good” functioned in the same way as “water” did, then the Moral Twin Earth scenario would yield the same results. However, in the moral case, the intuitions show to the contrary: it seems that Earthlings and Twin Earthlings are not just talking at cross purposes as in the “water” case, they are not in a silly, but in a genuine disagreement, so the disagreement is not about meanings or references of moral terms, but about moral beliefs and theory (Horgan and Timmons 2006: 189–190). Horgan and Timmons incorporate these results into a new version of Moorean argument against the new moral naturalist theory, and conclude that “although causal regulation may well coincide with – or even constitute – reference

³ “This new strain of ethical naturalism entirely avoids Moore’s open question argument, since any force that that argument has is only good against ASN, and ASN is no part of new wave ethical naturalism” (Horgan and Timmons 2006: 184). They are arguing primarily against Richard N. Boyd.

⁴ Its essence of which is such: “Each moral term *t* rigidly designates the natural property *N* that uniquely causally regulates the use of *t* by humans” (Horgan and Timmons 2006: 184).

⁵ We will see that some other contemporary theorists do not distinguish them.

For an example of how Horgan and Timmons’ OQ differs from the original, see 2006: 186.

for certain terms (e.g., names and physical natural-kind terms), we claim that for *moral* terms anyway, causal regulation does not coincide with reference. I.e., moral terms do not refer to the natural properties that (we are supposing) causally regulate their use by humans” (Horgan and Timmons 2006: 185). It means that such a semantic theory is not applicable for defining *moral* properties.

Besides, because of the link between the semantic and metaphysical levels, i.e. the causal theory of reference of moral terms employed in the synthetic naturalist conception, this argument, by showing the falsity of semantic ethical naturalism, shows the falsity of metaphysical ethical naturalism as well.

But their argument seeks to establish even more than the failure of this particular semantic theory, the causal semantic naturalism. Horgan and Timmons claim to have proposed “a *recipe* for thought experiments”: supposedly, it is possible to construct an analogous thought experiment to theirs against any variant of synthetic semantic naturalism⁶. And that amounts to saying that, in virtue of treating OQ as a blank form, distinguishable from its content, i.e. semantic theory, they have proposed a recipe or a model of OQA for rejecting any form of synthetic semantic naturalism and metaphysical ethical naturalism. Certainly,

⁶ “Synthetic semantic naturalism: Fundamental moral terms like “good” have synthetic naturalistic definitions” (Horgan and Timmons: 190). The various semantic views can be classified as its variants in virtue of certain structural elements: “(i) moral terms bear some relation R to certain natural properties that collectively satisfy some specific normative moral theory T, and (ii) moral terms supposedly *refer* to the natural properties to which they bear this relation R” (Horgan and Timmons: 191).

in so far as such theories suppose that semantics and metaphysics are connected (and they are according to Horgan and Timmons’ definition of synthetic semantic naturalist theories).

It is perhaps obvious that Horgan and Timmons needed Moorean OQA just in order to be able to reject the *metaphysical* ethical naturalism. The inapplicability of causal *semantic* naturalism to moral terms would have been sufficiently demonstrated by Moral Twin Earth thought experiment. Or by using for that purpose the classical R. M. Hare’s cannibal island example, as, e.g., Michael Smith does (1994: 33-35).

However, defeating metaphysical naturalism may be more complicated than that. As Smith notices while discussing plausibility of a certain type of analyses of colour concepts, proving a failure of these analyses does not demonstrate that the problem lies with the world and so that there are no colours, instead, it is clear that the analyses are defective. And so we can say the same about the moral case: metaphysical naturalism is surely not vindicated by causal semantic analysis, but it is proved false (if only inductively) only if this type of naturalism holds that the plausibility or possibility of a reductive definition of moral properties is *necessary* for a plausible ethical naturalist theory.

For example, one of the so-called Cornell Realists, Nicholas L. Sturgeon, defends an antireductionist naturalist position. He believes that an ethical naturalist does not need to preoccupy oneself with the possibility of reductive naturalistic definitions of moral terms⁷. The reality and the nature

⁷ E.g., this is one of his arguments: “If there are (as there appear to be) any continuous physical param-

of moral properties are vindicated by other means, e.g., such as arguing that moral facts are a necessary part of our best explanations, that they are ineliminable. Thus, to him semantic ethical reductionism is not necessary for the truth of the metaphysical ethical naturalism, and so the new OQA has no grip over his theoretical position.

Therefore, Horgan and Timmons' OQA serves as an antireductionist argument against semantic reductionist ethical naturalism, but not necessarily succeeds to demonstrate faultiness of metaphysical ethical naturalism. Indeed, its main message is the same as that of the OQA by

eters, then there are continuum many physical states of the world, but there are at most countably many predicates in any language, including that of even ideal physics; so there are more physical properties than there are physical expressions to represent them. Thus, although physicalism arguably entails that biological and psychological properties (and ethical properties, too, if there are any) are physical, nothing follows about whether we have any but biological, or psychological, or ethical terminology for representing these particular physical properties" (Sturgeon 2006: 127).

Certainly, such a position of Sturgeon is then criticized or at least not endorsed by some other metaphysical realists. For example, Frank Jackson believes that "if we ... refuse to advance any kind of analysis, we are, it seems to me, ducking what is, in David Armstrong's term, a compulsory question for metaphysical descriptivists in ethics. We are refusing to come clean on what aspects of descriptive nature make true, or determine without remainder, accounts given in ethical terms" (Jackson 1998: 147). Jackson insists that serious metaphysicians aspire for completeness concerning any subject matter and so that they do conceptual analyses: "conceptual analysis is the very business of addressing when and whether a story told in one vocabulary is made true by one told in some allegedly more fundamental vocabulary" (Jackson 1998: 28).

If Jackson was right, the new OQA would threaten any form of naturalism and Sturgeon would not avoid it. However, it can be doubted if Jackson's own preferred semantic analysis of moral terms is necessarily linked with metaphysical naturalism: it may be that plausibility of metaphysical naturalism and that of semantic naturalism have to be vindicated separately anyway (see van Roojen 1996, also further in this text).

Moore: these reductionist semantic theories are not suitable for *moral* property terms. Even if Horgan and Timmons are right that their model would be able to overthrow all possible variants of synthetic ethical naturalism, metaphysical ethical naturalism can survive by cutting its link to reductive semantic theory.

The OQ(A) As a Linguistic Test for the Meaning of Moral Property Terms

Other theorists, such as, for example, Ball (1988), Frank Snare (2006), Caj Strandberg (2004), treat Moore's OQA as expressive of a certain view on meaning of terms. In that case the OQ test is defended in its almost original form, i.e. not modified, without substantial changes, but reinforced, clarified or restricted. It certainly is restricted in scope: it is not to be used to reject metaphysical ethical naturalism. It is reinforced, for example, by explicating what it means for the OQ to be "intelligible", it is clarified which evaluative properties we talk about to guarantee that the openness of the question does not issue from ambiguity of terms, etc.

These theorists rely on Moore's trust in competent language users' intuitive ability to track if some definition is expressive of the very essence of the moral property, thus, they rely on his theory of the meaning of moral terms. Moore has thought that synthetic statements can never give "the very meaning of the word": "Moore can deny that 'water' and 'H₂O' have the same meaning without denying that water is H₂O, since he clearly and explicitly ... is construing 'meaning' in such a way that two expres-

sions can have different meanings even though their extensions are synthetically the same” (Ball 1988: 198). It is definitely true that Moore would endorse such a position on the meaning of moral property terms, but I should note here that I remain neutral (unlike Ball) on whether Moore would apply the same linguistic theory to the meaning of “water”. So this means that Moore’s core conception of his linguistic views, the conception of meaning (or at least of the meaning of moral terms), is such that the meaning of the word is expressive of the thing’s very essence, and that essence is transparent to language users⁸.

Meanwhile, to paraphrase Horgan and Timmons, the Cornell Realists believe that the real nature or essence of the property denoted by a term is revealed by synthetic definitions (those formed after discovering the identity relations empirically, not by reflection), and not by analytic definitions that express meaning connections. Synthetic naturalists claim that this is as true for moral properties as for natural kinds.

To put the difference in other words several authors (Miller 2003: 162-3; Horgan and Timmons 2006: 194 n. 6) refer to Locke’s distinction between *real* and *nominal* essence. Alexander Miller, in order to illustrate how Cornell Realists treat

definitions of moral properties as analogous to definitions of natural properties, claims: “Kripke and Putnam suggest that we should not take the description of gold’s nominal essence to give the meaning of ‘gold’; rather we should see that description as fixing the reference of the term ‘gold’” (Miller 2003: 163). As Ball notes, Putnam reminds Kripke’s lesson about distinction between apriority and necessity (essence) and claims, supposedly against Moore, that from the fact that two terms are not perfect synonyms “nothing follows about the essence of goodness” (Putnam *apud* Ball 1988: 200).

Regardless of whether this debate in terms of “essence” sounds palatable or not, it indicates there being a clash on the meaning of “meaning”, a clash on how the basis for “definition” is to be determined. In other words, here we trace two differing positions on the meaning of “meaning”, or, more importantly for our purposes here, an argument on which of them suits moral properties better⁹.

So it is this debate about the “meaning”, or at least “meaning of moral terms”, that the contemporary and already mentioned Mooreans take part in treating the original OQ as a linguistic test. Advocates of this

⁸ For Moore himself this essence can be expressed neither by synthetic definitions nor by *a priori* definitions. And it is transparent to the users in virtue of their ability to directly perceive it. One should be aware that here there may be differences between Moore’s views and contemporary Moorean views as to why the competent speakers should be trusted, I will not go into that. Accordingly, with this in mind one should be able to decide if criticisms by Putnam and the like that apply to these views are addressed to Moore or to his contemporary adherents. We will come back to Moore’s original views later in the text.

⁹ Again, even if synthetic naturalists give examples of definitions of natural kinds, I am not sure that their opponents need to claim that their understanding of “meaning” applies to natural kinds as well. The Mooreans may rest content with claiming that until a good basis is provided for holding moral property terms to function the same way as natural kind terms do or that a reductive definition of moral terms in natural terms is forthcoming, their theory of meaning applies to moral property terms. Briefly, I do not think the adherents to the OQA need to claim that only one theory of meaning is appropriate for different kinds of terms. Why so, I will shortly mention in the text.

function of the OQ believe that even if Moore's argument does not succeed in refuting ethical naturalism in general, the OQ had been and still can be given an important role of determining the meaning of terms for moral properties. As Ball puts it, "There is no reason to suppose that what people think they can imagine, or 'have before their minds,' cannot be useful in testing theories of meaning – if not theories of metaphysics ... There is – something common-sensical, after all, about testing theories of word meaning by the linguistic behavior and attitudes of native speakers; indeed, there is otherwise some problem as to the sense in which 'theories' of meaning are to be tested at all" (Ball 1988: 207).

This view is such that language is to be treated as belonging to the people who use it in order to communicate. And the people who know how to use it, necessarily have a knowledge *how*, not a knowledge *that*. These people may differ in their more specific knowledge of the world, but in order to successfully communicate with each other they have to have a certain common basis of knowledge in virtue of which they count as competent language users. Strandberg claims that "analytic truths, then, can be said to work as fixed points in language: they guarantee that we talk about the same things and the same properties of things in different circumstances, and that we do this from a common epistemological basis ensuring mutual understanding" (Strandberg 2004: 184). Therefore, this position in some cases separates language and metaphysics, and contends that in the case of language, the criterion of adequacy of a theory is the actual functioning of that language as represented by practices of the competent lan-

guage users' society. Ball's asking for some other criterion of adequacy and thus shifting the burden of proof to the opponents, when talking about morality does make sense. Besides, according to the Mooreans, the OQ is a theoretically immaculate test, not subject to circularity¹⁰.

The question whether this kind of semantic theory is a plausible theory of the meaning of the natural kind terms, is to be tackled elsewhere. However, advocates of the synthetic *a posteriori* definitions usually answer that their definitions of moral properties can or are to be revisionary, reforming, expressive of mature folk morality, not of the actual folk morality. Analytic functionalists, for example, acknowledge the importance of folk definitions of moral properties, but only at the first stage of the process of determining the referents of the moral terms.

However, in such a case these theoreticians owe us an explanation on what grounds can we expect this revision to be forthcoming: why should we believe moral properties to be like the properties of natural kinds and how such an analysis for determining which natural properties are which moral properties is possible. I.e. perhaps there is no way to form the scientifically informed definition and so the folk defini-

¹⁰ For example, Snare: "... I know this, not because I have already accepted some other meta-ethical theory from which this is a derived result, but simply and purely because I know English and that just isn't the way I speak. Indeed I could have told you that much without any meta-ethical theory at all" (Snare: 64). "I have argued that, if the open question argument is construed as based on a linguistic test where the appeal is not to one's meta-ethical theory but to one's native understanding (knowing-how knowledge) of the language, the argument is not circular (Snare 2006: 65). Also, Strandberg 2004: 189, Ball 1988: 209.

tions cannot be given up? There are reasons for asking that.

First of all, Smith argues in favour of non-reductive summary-style analysis of moral terms, because, according to him, network-style reductive (i.e. functionalist) analyses face a permutation problem. As the terms in question are tightly interconnected, “the success of a network analysis depends on an assumption ... that, when we strip out all mention of the terms that we want analysed from the statement of the relevant platitudes there will still be enough left in the way of relational information to guarantee that there is a unique realization of the network of relations just in case the concepts we are analyzing really are instantiated” (Smith 1994: 48). However, there is no reason to believe such analyses will allow “to pick out a unique set of physical properties to identify” with the relevant moral properties (ibid.: 50). Smith’s own position, thus, is that network analyses of moral terms need not be reductive.

Second, Mark van Roojen (1996) poses perhaps an even more serious problem for analytic functionalism than Smith. Van Roojen suggests that there is a possibility that moral properties picked out by a functionalist analysis of moral terms are still non-natural, that is, functionalism is not necessarily connected to metaphysical naturalism. It is not apparent that “the property picked out by the description will be a natural property” (van Roojen 1996: 79), we “can secure reference to a thing without relying on every feature or property of that thing” (ibid.: 81). So the functionalist analysis cannot secure the possibility of *naturalistic* reduction, it does not “straight away vindicate ethical naturalism” (ibid.).

Then, functionalist analysis has merely methodological significance, but the reductive work, according to him, is done by their commitment to naturalism and to a reductive understanding of supervenience.

If the only means of proving that moral property terms are analyzable in the same way as terms for natural kinds is by Moral Twin Earth experiment, and it fails, defendants of the OQ as linguistic test are on the same, if not on better¹¹, grounds as semantic ethical naturalists are. Presupposition that our world is natural, and so moral properties, if they exist at all, have to be reductively natural, is clearly not sufficient here: moral properties may be neither natural nor non-natural (constructed) or irreducibly supervening on the natural ones. Besides, regardless of that, it does not follow that a naturalist definition of moral (even if natural) properties is possible and, moreover, that it is possible along the same lines as that of the properties of natural kinds.

Formally, this interpretation of OQA does not eliminate the possibility that some naturalistic analysis of moral property terms is correct as it cannot provide conclusive proof for that, but can only provide inductive support. Supposedly one should apply the test to each case separately and see if any of the proposed naturalistic reductions succeed. To establish an antireductionist result,

¹¹ For more disanalogies between the moral and the natural properties, see Zangwill 2005. Besides, under this reading the OQ would not be subject to charges of committing the masked man fallacy, nor to those of invalidity (e.g. Ball 1988: 208–209, Zangwill 2005: 126). This interpretation also seems to deal (e.g. Strandberg 2004: 186–190) with the Paradox of Analysis that the question is sometimes identified with (Jackson 1998: 150, Smith 1994: 37).

additional arguments are needed¹². Thus, a form of semantic ethical naturalism that would be immune to these criticisms should be able to answer the questions posed to it above. It would prove the OQA to rest on a faulty theory of meaning.

The OQ(A) As a Test for Normativity of Descriptivist Accounts

On the fourth reading, Moore's OQA is antireductionist in principle: it is understood to show that no naturalistic description or analysis can capture the essence of moral properties *completely*, there is always something *essential* left out. Thus, the essence of moral properties is not, contrary to the previous interpretation, captured by their actual descriptive definitions.

Moore's own position was that no definition whatsoever can be given of the moral properties (to be more exact, he was talking about goodness). They are indefinable. So one can define them neither by proposing their *a priori* nor *a posteriori* identity with natural terms. His explanation of why it is so is rather peculiar. Moore thinks of goodness in analogy with colours, but in a particular manner: "just as you cannot, by any manner of means, explain to any one who does not already know it, what yellow is, so

you cannot explain what good is" (Moore 1903/2006: 36). His reflections of whether you can define "yellow" by describing its physical equivalent are skeptical: "those light-vibrations are not themselves what we mean by yellow. *They* are not what we perceive" (Moore 1903/2006: 38). He claims that we can only think of or perceive the nature of "good" and "yellow", but not define it and so we cannot make it known to others who have no experience of them. So his analogy does not bring out the similarity of moral properties to natural properties with respect to the *a posteriori* knowledge of their essence, but the directly and so only privately perceivable nature of the two which is impossible to communicate linguistically. Nowadays, however, adherents to this antireductionist reading of OQA need to define what it is that is left out of the naturalistic definitions without positing suspicious ontology and epistemology that Moore made use of.

As Hare has put it in *The Language of Morals* (1952), to call something "good" is to commend it, and even if we commend that thing in virtue of its non-moral features, it does not mean that "good" denotes the natural features in virtue of which we commend it. I would be even more cautious here about "in virtue of its non-moral features": perhaps just partly because of them. Anyway, the thought behind this fourth Moorean position is that moral phenomenology that an adequate theory of moral terms needs to capture is twofold. On the one hand, we have to acknowledge that it implies there being a relation between moral properties and natural properties. On the other hand, moral terms are commending, or, as it is put today, "normative". Therefore, descriptivist

¹² For example, Strandberg claims: "Moore seems to have thought that the argument offers not just a test for individual analyses, but also generally shows that analytic reductionism is mistaken. The latter is obviously a much stronger claim and there is reason to take up a humble attitude towards efforts to prove it outright. But although no such straightforward proof may be available, it is plausible to argue that the claim that there is no correct reductive analysis of moral terms offers a better explanation of available evidence than does the contrary claim" (Strandberg 2004: 192-193).

theories, perhaps in virtue of being natural theories, usually leave the normativity out, and that is exactly what the OQ test is used to indicate. As Christine M. Korsgaard says, the force of the OQA is that of the normative question: “when the concept of the good is applied to a natural object, such as pleasure, we can still always ask whether we should really choose or pursue it” (Korsgaard 1996: 43). This position, however, is not in principle hostile to descriptivism about moral terms.

To take Connie Rosati, she believes that the OQA applies to naturalist accounts regardless of whether they give definitions of goodness that are *a priori* or *a posteriori*. However, contra Moore, she thinks that it is not a tool for undermining naturalism as such, it is an important tool for a naturalist herself, “a device for unearthing features of our ethical concepts, or better, of the properties our ethical terms express” (Rosati 2003: 501). And Rosati¹³ claims that certain “new naturalists”, such as Rawls, Brandt, Railton, and Lewis, do appreciate that despite its flaws, Moore’s OQA exposes a problem that any naturalist must address. While agreeing with the non-cognitivists that “earlier forms of definitional naturalism failed effectively to capture the expressive and recommending functions of evaluative terms” (Rosati 1995: 46), they deny that it indicates that evaluative property terms are not purely or primarily descriptive. They believe, according to Rosati, it possible to “construct a descriptive meaning for ‘good’ that secures its recommending and expressive functions

¹³ I have to note that Rosati talks about non-moral goodness (in its evaluative sense), however, I believe that the same applies to the extension of discussion on the moral goodness.

simply in virtue of the proposed descriptive content” (Rosati 1995: 46). What earlier forms of naturalism failed to capture (and in virtue of which judgements of goodness are recommending) is normativity. The OQA thus understood, applied to the earlier naturalist accounts, enables to see why the Moorean question remained open, what was that important element that was left out of those definitions and to include it into the new definition¹⁴.

However, Rosati claims that the new naturalist accounts fail as well. They do not manage to include into their definitions an essential element of normativity – that of an ideal of the person, or, as she later (in 2003) puts it, they “do not bear the proper relation to agency” (Rosati 2003: 521). And it is important because these accounts alienate the goodness from people, as if there was an unbridgeable gap between what people care about, what they want and seek, and what is good (here – even not to say “morally good”). Rosati is rather pessimistic, though not categorical, about the possibility for the naturalists to remedy their definitions “without abandoning their reductive

¹⁴ “The new naturalists have identified three specific questions, one or more of which were left open by past definitions of ‘good’: Does what is said to be good carry motivational force?; Does what is said to be good for a person reflect what that person most values?; Does what is said to be good for a person meet conditions of justification? They have attempted to construct an account of ‘good for a person’ that closes each question in turn, thereby closing the question whether something that satisfies the account is good for a person. They have not, of course, closed all questions about our multifaceted notion ‘good’ by closing these questions. But they have, if the new naturalists are right, shown how the narrower notion ‘good for a person’ can be at once fundamentally descriptive and normative. The worry that underlies the open question argument, as the new naturalists interpret it, has thus it seems been met” (Rosati 1995: 52).

program” in general, even if her criticism was directed to a particular kind of ethical naturalism. Moreover, at the very end of her later paper of 2003 she adds: “the argument poses a challenge for any effort to construct an account of personal good, not just for naturalism” (Rosati 2003: 527), and before: “what the argument really undermines is neither naturalistic accounts of good nor analyses of good, as Moore originally thought but, rather, accounts that do not fit with our agency” (Rosati 2003: 496).

I can only agree with Rosati’s latter remarks. The OQA poses a requirement for any *descriptivist* account of evaluative terms: plausible descriptivist accounts have to fit with our agency. However, the OQA poses an especially hard challenge for *reductive* ethical naturalist accounts. This version of OQA does not prove outright that no form of semantic naturalism can capture normativity: an additional argument would be needed to establish that conclusion. It only spreads pessimism about whether such argument can be given, based on the failures of the naturalist theories that exist so far and on an observation that it seems to be possible to ask the Moorean question about any naturalistic identification of evaluative property.

Rosati’s “new [semantic] naturalists” seem to possibly include (moral) realists as well as (moral) constructivists¹⁵. The formal definitions of goodness given by the “new naturalists” are supposed to enable *a posteriori* identification of natural property (or properties) with the property of goodness. However, reductionists go further

expecting to be able on that basis to form a reforming naturalistic definition of goodness. Non-reductionists can treat the formal definition as *the* definition or *the* analysis rejecting the possibility to define goodness in natural property terms.

The reasons for such scepticism or reluctance may differ, though. A metaphysical ethical naturalist may think this, for example, because of the multiple realizability of moral properties (as, say, it is unlikely that moral properties are necessitated by one and only natural property under different circumstances, etc.). A metaphysical naturalist, but not a metaphysical *ethical* naturalist (a constructivist) may think so because moral properties are not necessitated by natural properties at all; e.g., the formal definition “picks out” different natural properties under different circumstances.

In the case of naturalist ethical theories normativity seems to be lost between the impersonal identification of goodness with a certain natural property and the first-personal question about goodness of a certain thing in the natural world. One has a feeling that a person is not asking for scientific tools for identifying goodness in the natural world, but is asking to justify why a certain natural thing with certain natural properties is worth pursuing. If a reductive natural ethical theory cannot explain and justify at the same time, it seems that a reductionist needs to deny that normativity is an essential feature or as essential as the descriptive character of moral terms. Whereas this OQA favours those descriptivist accounts of moral properties that capture normativity in virtue of being non-reductive – regardless of their being realist (metaphysical ethical naturalists) or constructivist.

¹⁵ Rawls, for example, is usually conceived as such.

Conclusions

In this paper I have singled out four interpretations of the OQA: one historical and three contemporary. In its original version the OQA targeted the analytic semantic naturalism, and, because of its links to metaphysical naturalism, ethical naturalism in general. The least it has demonstrated was the defectiveness of such a semantic theory for the analysis of moral property terms. As nowadays the once popular semantic position is abandoned, we can reserve the original OQA a historical role. However, if the OQA is treated as a blank form that can be filled with different content, that is, with a different semantic theory, it can be used against the contemporary forms of ethical naturalism – both semantic and metaphysical. Still another use of the OQ(A) is to treat it as a linguistic test for determining the meaning of moral property terms while not purporting to overthrow the metaphysical naturalism. The fourth interpretation of the OQ(A) treats it as a test for whether descriptivist accounts of evaluative terms manage to incorporate normativity. Challenging any descriptivist account it thus casts serious doubt on the possibility of an adequate reductive naturalistic account.

Two observations follow from the above analysis. First, one can note that the theories that use the OQA are to pose it only

under the supposition that the competence of language users is empirically, hence always inconclusively, relevant for settling semantic questions. In so far as it is shared by their adversaries, the Mooreans are able to use the OQA against them, and in so far as their opponents reject or restrict this supposition, they can ask for their criteria of adequacy of semantic theory for moral terms. One can suspect that in the sphere of morality it is more difficult to shed this supposition and that is why the OQA persists and semantic ethical reductionism is not likely to succeed.

Second, even in its first two versions, the OQA seems to strongly suggest (again, not to prove conclusively) that reductive semantic naturalist theories are not applicable to evaluative/moral properties. Metaphysical ethical naturalism seems to be able to survive more easily by other means as it is not vindicated by semantic ethical naturalism anyway, whereas its links to semantic naturalism can be harmful when faced with the OQA. Therefore, it seems that the OQA poses threat to semantic naturalism in its reductive form. However, it does not block the possibility of metaphysical ethical naturalism, though perhaps condemns it for a certain schizophrenia: if one is a reductive metaphysical ethical naturalist, moral language and moral reality differ. What seems to benefit is constructivism.

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ATVIROJO KLAUSIMO ARGUMENTAS IR REDUKTYVIZMO GALIMYBĖ

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S a n t r a u k a

Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kokių reduktvizmo formų galimybę blokuoja vadinamasis atvirojo klausimo argumentas (AKA) – tiek savo istoriniu, tiek šiandieniais pavaldais – ir kokių pagrindų. Išskirtos keturios svarbiausios AKA interpretacijos ir išanalizuotas jų poveikis vertinamųjų savybių reduktivist-

nių teorijų galimybei. Teigiu, jog AKA kelia didelę grėsmę semantiniam etiniam natūralizmui, tačiau ne metafiziniam etiniam natūralizmui (nors ir pasmerkia jį tam tikrai „šizofrenijai“).

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: atvirojo klausimo argumentas, reduktvizmas, etinis natūralizmas, normatyvumas.

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