

## A “want of clearness” in § 13 of Moore’s *Principia Ethica*

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## Introduction

In George Edward Moore’s seminal *Principia Ethica*, there is arguably no paragraph more important than § 13, a rather late addition to a manuscript Moore had been working on for several years. It is this new paragraph where Moore ultimately comes to terms with how to argue for his long held view that “‘good’ is indefinable”.<sup>1</sup> Moore had made previous attempts at establishing this proposition in his 1898 London lectures “The Elements of Ethics”.<sup>2</sup> When he reworked his notes these lectures formed the bulk of the first three chapters of what would later become *Principia Ethica*.<sup>3</sup> But only in § 13, added in 1902 and not anticipated in the *Elements*, was Moore’s argument for the indefinability of “good” advanced in its final form.<sup>4</sup>

§ 13 contains the much lauded *open question argument*, the classic statement of which reads: “Whatever definition be offered, it may be always asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good.”<sup>5</sup> The open question argument became Moore’s chief illustration of the *naturalistic fallacy* he so notoriously charged opponents with.<sup>6</sup> Today, the argument is still widely discussed and continues to perplex its interpreters.<sup>7</sup> In this talk, I shall focus on the line of thought that lead Moore to his argument and which seems to have escaped the attention it deserves.

Moore’s reasoning is complicated. It becomes clear, however, that he was not concerned with the word good and its many senses but with the *concept* of moral goodness. Later in his life he admitted that his line of argument was “a mass of confusions far too numerous for me to expose them all”. Yet the idea that the concept of goodness was somehow peculiar remained, in his view, of “cardinal importance”.<sup>8</sup> The subject matter of ethics thus constituted

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<sup>1</sup> Moore 1903, 69. Cf. for the opposed view, e.g., Tredwell 1962, 53ff.

<sup>2</sup> Moore 1898

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Moore 1942a & Rosenbaum 1969, 224.

<sup>4</sup> Baldwin 1993, xiii. Also, cf. Rosenbaum 1969, 225.

<sup>5</sup> Moore 1903, 67. Cf. Feldman 2005, 23f.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Preti 2019, 54ff.; Rosati 2019, 177ff.; Frankena 1939, 30f.

<sup>7</sup> Cf., e.g., FitzPatrick 2019; Strandberg 2004; Altman 2004; Darwall 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Moore 1922, 3

an early, if not the first, field for the application of Moore's conception of conceptual analysis, that very conception which *Cooper Harold Langford* would so aptly criticise many years later.

Moore's approach, I shall claim, displays the self-inflicted error of conflating the *semantics* of an expression with its *pragmatics*.<sup>9</sup> By this token, § 13 gives rise to two different philosophical problems which are usually discussed independently of one another: On the one hand we have *the problem of moral obligation*, on the other there is *the paradox of analysis*. Since it is the same kind of reasoning that brought these puzzles about they can be solved in the same way: Distinguishing between semantics and pragmatics—of valuing in the first case and explaining in the second—solves the problem of moral obligation and dispels the air of paradox with regard to philosophical analysis. Moore's excessively liberal talk of "sense" and "meaning" blurred that. It lumped together what an informed view must distinguish as categorically distinct. Moore thus initiated, and even embarked upon, something akin to the quest for the Holy Grail: The search for a *semantic* solution of the moral problem,<sup>10</sup> and a *semantic* solution for the paradox of analysis.<sup>11</sup> But this, as we shall see, is unattainable.

### 1. The semantics-pragmatics divide: What it is and why it matters

In *Principia Ethica*, Moore would make a habit out of distinguishing various "senses" or "meanings" of various expressions. He probably started with distinguishing senses of the word "natural". Soon, however, he would turn to the word "good". But he would not stop there: In later passages he would distinguish senses of "could" and "possible", and the list is far from complete.

Moore's talk of "sense" or "meaning" is too unrefined as to credit him with a fully fledged conception of semantics. This is not a reproach: The classic tripartite distinction between the theory of *form*, the theory of *meaning*, and the theory of *use*—or for short: *syntax*, *semantics*, and *pragmatics*—was established only decades later. However, *Charles Morris* in 1938 did not *invent* this distinction.<sup>12</sup> He rather found it in the workings of natural language. So, in principle there is no reason why Moore could not have found it too.

The semantics-pragmatics divide is part of Morris's tripartite distinction. Let us illustrate it with the help of an example. Imagine someone said "I will be back tomorrow." With regard to this utterance we can distinguish at least three different things:

- (a) The *sentence* uttered, *i.e.*, a well-formed sequence to be contrasted, for example, against the ungrammatical sequence "\*be tomorrow will back I";

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Austin 1962 & Grice 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Cf., *e.g.*, Hare 1952.

<sup>11</sup> Cf., *e.g.*, Balaguer & Horgan 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Morris 1938, 48

- (b) The (literal) *meaning* of the sentence uttered, which meaning is the same as that of “Je reviendrai demain” in French or “Ich komme morgen wieder” in German;
- (c) The *use* said utterance is put to under the given circumstances by the respective user.

Now, it is important to remember that in order to detect a categorical *contrast* you need not agree on the exact nature of the categories contrasted. This was most notably established when *Plato* analysed the logical structure of the smallest and most elementary units of speech.<sup>13</sup> Recall that in his *Sophist*, Plato grouped expressions like “Socrates” and “Theaetetus” together in one category and “walks”, “runs”, and “sleeps” in another, noting that exclusively stringing together expressions of one group only could never result in anything but a mere list. Only joining expressions from different groups, like, e.g., “Socrates walks” or “Theaetetus sits” would form a statement. Plato called expressions of the first group *ὀνόματα* (*onómata*) and those of the second *ρήματα* (*rhémata*). His suggestion is sometimes rendered as the claim that in order to get the most elementary unit of speech we must be “blending verbs with names”.<sup>14</sup> However, this illustrates our point precisely: There is no unanimous consent to call all and only that a *name* which Plato calls *ὄνομα*, or a *verb* what he calls *ῥήμα*. But this dispute need not carry over to the categorical contrast Plato perceived: We may and must agree with Plato that the elementary unit of speech, which, borrowing from *Bertrand Russell*,<sup>15</sup> we could call the *atomic proposition*, is logically complex. From the point of view of *categorical grammar*, as established by *Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz* and popularised by *David Lewis*,<sup>16</sup> it is composed of expressions pertaining to different logical types.<sup>17</sup>

The point of these remarks is, of course, to apply the very same insight to the topic at hand: There is and always was considerable disagreement as to what semantics really is.<sup>18</sup> The situation is no different with regard to pragmatics.<sup>19</sup> For instance, when *Peter Strawson* took a shot at Russell by criticising that “‘referring’ is not something an expression does; it is something that someone can use an expression to do”<sup>20</sup> some retorted that Strawson was missing the point: For this criticism “to be relevant to Russell’s theory, [presupposition] would have to be a semantic property, not merely a pragmatic one.”<sup>21</sup> Clearly, we cannot hope to set such matters straight merely in passing. Luckily, this is not even necessary. It suffices to establish that semantics and pragmatics are categorically distinct, and in order to achieve that

<sup>13</sup> *Sophist* 261d4–262e3

<sup>14</sup> This is Rowe’s rendering of *Sophist* 262c5.

<sup>15</sup> Russell 1918, 207f.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Ajdukiewicz 1935, 3ff.; Lewis 1970, 20ff.

<sup>17</sup> Frege re-established a functional analysis of the atomic proposition in his 1879, § 9 & 1891, 31. Apparently, he was unaware of Plato’s findings of about 350 BC. Ajdukiewicz, in turn, seems to have been unaware that via *Edmund Husserl*, *Stanisław Lesniewski*, *Rudolf Carnap*, and others he was ultimately drawing on Frege.

<sup>18</sup> Cf., e.g., Borg 2004 & 2012; Recanati 2004 & 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Cf., e.g., Szabó 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Strawson 1950, 326

<sup>21</sup> Bach 1994, 98

it is not necessary to agree on precise and undisputed definitions of the terms “semantics” and “pragmatics”.

Let us return to some clear examples for the particular *use* of an utterance under given circumstances by a given user. For instance, as used by *Romeo*, at the break of dawn, the utterance of “I will be back tomorrow” will most likely amount to a *promise* made to his beloved *Juliet*. However, Scottish hard man *Jimmy Boyle*, the debt collector later turned artist, probably was making a *threat* to the poor soul who did not pay up in time when he would utter the very same words. Examples like these led *John Langshaw Austin* to discern different *speech-acts* made by utterances.<sup>22</sup> But there is more. As *Paul Grice* showed,<sup>23</sup> utterances may be used quite generally to convey something implicitly or indirectly. This also applies in our case. For example, when Zoey’s father tried to teach her parallel parking and in the course of it sighed “I will be back tomorrow” his utterance may have conveyed indirectly what he could have plainly said by uttering: “This will take forever...”.

Hopefully, these were good enough characterisations. Austin’s *speech-act theory* and Grice’s *theory of conversational implicature* are regarded as groundbreaking contributions to pragmatics. But even if they were not: Note that what has to be invoked in order to explain the speech-act made or the message indirectly conveyed is *categorically* distinct from what is needed in order to understand the semantics of “I will be back tomorrow”. While grasping the meaning of a sentence is a matter of *knowledge of language*, understanding the use of an utterance under given circumstances by a given user goes far *beyond*. It may well call for quite contingent, utterly mundane pieces of information: Knowledge as diverse and scattered as that of Shakespeare’s plays, the late ‘60s Glasgow mob, and ABC’s hilarious sitcom *Black-ish*. Quite generally, use cannot be explained save by reference to communicative intentions of users. Pragmatics therefore necessarily incorporates an essential intentional element absent in the semantics of the expressions used. *Quod erat demonstrandum*: Pragmatics and semantics are *categorically distinct*.

## 2. The problem of moral obligation and the open question argument

The first of the problems Moore incurred by misapplying the semantics-pragmatics divide concerns the nature of the good. We must ask ourselves: Why is Moore so obsessed with the indefinability of good? Why with its simplicity? Why with its not being reducible to some natural or physical feature of things? It is instructive to note that before Moore begins his “general enquiry into what is good” he remarks that ethics is “undoubtedly concerned with the question what good conduct is”.<sup>24</sup> It is only because he finds that this way of approaching ethics “does not start at the beginning” that he turns to the question “what is good?” which then leads to the train of thought we are presently considering.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Austin 1962

<sup>23</sup> Grice 1989, 275

<sup>24</sup> Moore 1903, 54

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

This way of addressing the problem brings *Ludwig Wittgenstein's* worry to mind: "It is so difficult to find the beginning. Or, better: it is difficult to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back."<sup>26</sup> Still, we must put Moore's remarks into context. What is good concerns him in order to understand *moral conduct*. And this in turn, concerns him not because he merely wants to know why it is that man acts morally. It is not the problem of *moral motivation* that fuels his research—Moore does not want to investigate *man*. Rather, he wishes to understand how what is good *compels* man to act in a moral way. As I see it, this is the question of *moral obligation*, and Moore, much like Plato (whom he does not really seem to understand) ultimately wants to trace it back to the nature of the *Good* (with a capital "G").<sup>27</sup>

Compare this with Plato's views as expounded in his *Protagoras*. There, Socrates tells us "that knowledge is something noble and able to govern man, and that whoever learns what is good and what is bad will never be swayed by anything to act otherwise than as knowledge bids."<sup>28</sup> Thus, according to Plato we are not *free* to do what is good. It is the *Good* that compels us to do accordingly. For Plato, knowledge of the Good is not a faculty of man. It is merely an *openness* for letting the Good shine its light upon you. Of course, this is more of a metaphysical picture than anything else. It is not even an argument. But this is precisely why this view is so hard to explain, and taking Moore to be struggling with an, let us say, *analytic Platonism* along these lines makes the course of his considerations much more tractable. It goes without saying that such an "analytic Platonism" is, of course, shaped by concerns quite different from those of Plato. It is more or less arrived at if you, *firstly*, adhere to the is/ought distinction, *secondly*, opt for foundationalism in ethics, and, *thirdly*, assume that true moral judgements are made true by what they are about.<sup>29</sup> But unless this is not taken as a reduction to any assertion about reality the results are not much different. Hence, Moore's brand of *intuitionism* differs from Plato more in letter than in spirit.

Ultimately, then, Moore seeks to clarify, albeit in a very unique approach, what compels us to act morally. This can help to understand his initial reaction. Right at the outset of his investigation Moore says:<sup>30</sup> "If I am asked 'What is good?' my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter." And although he regards this as "a disappointing answer [...] of the very last importance"<sup>31</sup> what must appear *right* to him is that it is the Good itself that accounts for moral conduct. This is what he thinks is right about "metaphysical ethics".<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Wittgenstein 1969, § 471

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Baldwin 1990, 72: "Throughout *PE* Moore describes goodness as the property of that which 'ought to be' or 'ought to exist for its own sake'"

<sup>28</sup> *Protagoras* 352c

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Brink 1989, 3: "Most intuitionists accepted three metaethical claims: a realist or cognitivist commitment to the existence of moral facts and moral truths whose existence and nature are independent of our moral thinking, a foundationalist epistemology according to which our moral knowledge is based ultimately on self-evident moral truths, and a radically nonreductive metaphysics of moral facts and properties, known as nonnaturalism, according to which moral facts and properties are metaphysically independent of, for example, natural facts and properties and so are *sui generis*."

<sup>30</sup> Moore 1903, 58

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Moore 1903, 161–165.

This is why he takes any attempt at looking for a different elucidation as doomed to result in misapprehending the nature of the Good, i.e., in committing the naturalistic fallacy.

Against this background we now can point to where Moore's project went off the rails. Let us use his own example: "The good is good." Must we not notice that such an utterance is most probably being put to a very different use from common uses of talk of the good? He who states that courage is good and lying is bad morally *praises* courage and morally *condemns* lying. But he, like Moore, who states that the good is good and, presumably, that the bad is bad neither morally praises nor morally condemns anything. Quite generally, praise and blame are not matters of the *meaning* of "good" or "bad". Rather, they are matters of the *use* of utterances, which most likely will contain some of these terms although this is not even necessary.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, enquiry into the *semantics* of "good" or the *concept* of goodness, understood as the sense expressed by that term, cannot elucidate moral praise or blame. But since it is virtually impossible to judge someone's moral conduct without reverting to the fact that it is taken to be correctly so praised or blamed if and only if it is good or bad, severing ties between our practice of praise and blame and the domain of ethics is likely to result in a glass bead game too detached from reality to be of any use at all.

Actually, seen from this angle, the open question argument is necessarily sound. But Moore got the reason wrong: Yes, any definition of the good is necessarily deficient. But no, this is not due to the semantics of "good".<sup>34</sup> *Rather*, it is true since what is taken to be good manifests itself in someone's valuing it, and evidently, you can neither predict nor define what people praise or value. Here lurks a descendant of the classical *Euthyphro* dilemma, which we may think of as the eternal clash between objectivism and subjectivism. Like most philosophers, Moore was a moral objectivist. *Hobbesian* insights into the subjective and relative nature of value and the good, and the essential role of the *use* of moral statements, were, unfortunately, beyond him.<sup>35</sup>

### 3. The paradox of analysis and the informativeness of truisms

The second problem Moore incurred by misapplying the semantics-pragmatics divide concerns the nature of analysis. Obviously, Moore's views on analysis are tied to his long struggle with explaining what he found so intriguing about the indefinability of "good". But Moore went on to analyse, or refrain from analysing, a great deal more. Still, it is instructive to scrutinise his views concerning philosophical analysis on the canvas of their origin, which is precisely the discussion we have finished just now.

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<sup>33</sup> Someone who utters "I see you have taken out the garbage!" can, under given circumstances, give voice to the highest praise. However, he might as well do the exact opposite.

<sup>34</sup> *Pace* Brink 1989, 151f. & 162.

<sup>35</sup> *Cf.* Hobbes 1651, I.6.7: "For these words of good, evil, and contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: there being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common rule of good and evil, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves". *Cf.* also Hobbes 1651, I.15.14: "The value of all things contracted for, is measured by the appetite of the contractors: and therefore the just value, is that which they be contented to give."

When Langford criticised Moore in the Schilpp volume devoted to him Moore immediately retreated into a defensive crouch. Langford had pointed out that “any examination of Professor Moore’s philosophical position would be incomplete without a discussion of his notion of analysis”.<sup>36</sup> He mentioned the need for distinguishing between “giving analyses” and “making use of the notion of analysis” and went on to explicitly refer to our example: “When [Moore] tells us that the notion of the good is unanalyzable, he is making use of the notion of analysis.” But what is it that Langford found wanting? His criticism is as brief as it is devastating:

Let us call what is to be analyzed the analysandum, and let us call that which does the analyzing the analysans. The analysis then states an appropriate relation of equivalence between the analysandum and the analysans. And the paradox of analysis is to the effect that, if the verbal expression representing the analysandum has the same meaning as the verbal expression representing the analysans, the analysis states a bare identity and is trivial; but if the two verbal expressions do not have the same meaning, the analysis is incorrect.<sup>37</sup>

This condensed passage has given birth to a philosophical problem arguably unresolved to the present day. The reason is most likely that virtually all serious modern commentators follow Langford in accepting that the so-called paradox has to be dealt with on the *semantic* turf.<sup>38</sup> A key role was played by the charge of triviality. It scared almost everyone into accepting some variant of the second horn of the alleged dilemma. So, despite Moore’s prime example “To be a brother is to be a male sibling”<sup>39</sup> and others in a similar vein, like, e.g., “Bachelors are unmarried men” or “A vixen is a female fox”, many commentators have abandoned the requirement that the expression for the analysandum and that for the analysans be synonymous.<sup>40</sup> But that does not in the least alter the fact that Moore’s paradigmatic examples *can* be used to give a proper conceptual analysis and that “brother”, “bachelor”, and “vixen” *are* synonymous to their mentioned counterparts. If we wanted to forget *that* we would have to look the other way. Apparently however, Moore was so taken aback that he did not know how to respond properly:

I think that, in order to explain the fact that, even if ‘To be a brother is the same thing as to be a male sibling’ is true, yet nevertheless the statement is not the same as the statement ‘To be a brother is to be a brother’, one must suppose that both statements are in some sense about the expressions used as well as about the concept of being a brother. But in what sense they are about the expressions used I cannot see clearly; and therefore I cannot give any clear solution to the puzzle.<sup>41</sup>

In this passage, Moore half-heartedly suggested distinguishing between two different statements, one being informative and the other one not. Here, statements are sentences, i.e., expressions. Moore contemplated their having the same sense while being composed of

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<sup>36</sup> Langford 1942, 321

<sup>37</sup> Langford 1942, 323

<sup>38</sup> Frege 1892, 42f. & 1914, 207–211 avoids the shortcomings of later theorists

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Moore 1942, 665.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Ackerman 1981, 314.

<sup>41</sup> Moore 1942b, 666

different part-expressions. What he did not consider was the difference in use one would make of them. Because of that, he did not manage to find a way out.

Obviously, something went very wrong. In order to avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater we need to rethink matters. We need to ask ourselves what it is to be informative and what this property applies to. It will help to recall the common wisdom that actions speak louder than words. Outside the narrow confines of the present discussion it is long acknowledged that what is informative is what someone does rather than what the words he uses convey. This is most strikingly so in cases where what is literally said amounts to a mere tautology. Think of what happened to the chief priests of the Jews: When they told Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but, ‘He said, “I am the King of the Jews”” Pilate answered “What I have written, I have written”. Surely, this was *very* informative: It may have scared the chief priests off from picking a fight with him whose sword they had hanging over their heads. Likewise, what I *do* when I say that a vixen is a female fox may be informative even though the same concept is expressed twice over. Giving the analysis brings the components of that concept to the fore, which components the complex expression for the analysans presents better than the expression for the analysandum.<sup>42</sup>

Ironically, Moore once acknowledged a very similar point. Commenting on *Principia Ethica* he wrote: „It seems to me clear that it is sometimes neither silly nor useless to enunciate a mere tautology.“<sup>43</sup> Well, it is not. And that holds the key to understanding that is the *giving* of an analysis rather than the meaning of the expressions involved that makes the analysis informative. Had Moore only held fast to his own view he might not have been so rash to succumb to Langford’s criticism: The paradox of analysis is a paradox only if you want to explain what pertains to the *use* of an expression by the *meaning* of that expression instead. As a consequence, there cannot be a solution for that “paradox” within semantics. But more importantly, there is no paradox in the first place once we look at the broader picture and do not ignore the semantics-pragmatics divide.

## Conclusion

Put in a nutshell, it is the pragmatics of valuing and explaining rather than any semantic properties of expressions that will make us to truly understand the nature of the good and the nature of analysis. Moore, however, indulged in an all-encompassing “umbrella talk” of senses of sense and meanings of meaning. So maybe he did not see the wood for the trees. This is unfortunate since, basically, his practice of conceptual analysis is sound. So is his suggestion that the nature of the good is peculiar. It is just that he should have focused on how we *do* things with words rather than on what these words *mean*.

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<sup>42</sup> In essence, this is the pragmatic analogue to Carnap’s *intensional isomorphism*. Cf. Carnap 1949, 350.

<sup>43</sup> Moore 1922, 8



In his § 13 of *Principia Ethica*, Moore lamented a “want of clearness”.<sup>44</sup> In retrospect, he did not spare himself from the very same criticism. Yet it seems he never really came to see the real source of his “mass of confusions”. A perhaps unusual analogy to what is uncontroversial outside philosophy may help to illuminate the problem:

Value is [...] nothing inherent in goods, no property of them, nor an independent thing existing by itself. It is a judgment [...] men make about the importance of the goods at their disposal for the maintenance of their lives and well-being. Hence value does not exist outside the consciousness of men. [...] Objectification of the value of goods, which is entirely subjective in nature, has nevertheless contributed very greatly to confusion about the basic principles of our science.<sup>45</sup>

At the time Moore was writing, *Carl Menger's* insights into the subjective nature of value had already become a commonplace in economic theory. Menger's views had swept away value objectivism, the dominating theory since *Aristotle*, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, *Adam Smith* and *David Ricardo*, simply because subjectivism became indispensable for explaining cooperation, trade, and prices, i.e., all the things the newly rigorous science of economics professed to deal with. Of course, such issues were too mundane from the perspective of moral philosophy. The relevance of such considerations would surely have been swiftly dismissed. But should it have been? After all, despite what they say economists are ultimately concerned with human action. And what you hold dear need not be an economic good. So, it is the nature of the *good* that makes economic goods subjective, not the nature of *economics*. Understood correctly, value theory is blind with regard to the particular field it is applied to.

Imagine a competition of figure skating. Anna Shcherbakova has just completed her routine. Three judges award her 9 points, three award her 8 points and three 10, resulting in a very good 81 points. Now enter Euthyphro:<sup>46</sup> Did the judges so value her program because it was worth 81 points? Or was it worth 81 points because that is how the judges valued it? The objectivist must claim that the value of the program was inherent in it.<sup>47</sup> So six judges were mistaken and should be corrected. But this is not how we think of figure skating. The subjectivist will claim that the value of the program merely reflects the judgements of the judges: Their *judging* constitutes the program's value. This is a difficult lesson for moral objectivists. And it seems that the unwillingness to take it into account may perhaps explain part of the fact that Moore was so reluctant to grant the uses of moral value statements the importance they seem to deserve. This, of course, was instrumental in putting him where Langford cornered him. Making use of the semantics-pragmatics divide would have saved Moore. But maybe it would have come at too high a price.

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<sup>44</sup> Moore 1903, 67

<sup>45</sup> Menger 1871, 120f.

<sup>46</sup> *Euthyphro* 9e

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Sayre-McCord 1988, 20: “Underlying objectivism is the sense, well articulated by Ross, that ‘it is surely a strange reversal of the natural order of thought to say that our admiring an action either is, or is what necessitates, its being good. We think of its goodness as what we admire in it, and as something it would have even if no one admired it, something that it has in itself’”

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