



Moore's Open-Question Argument in Moral Philosophy and its Challenge of the Analytical Paradox

Hossein Vale* | Reza Naghavi**

Received: 00/00/2018 | Accepted: 00/00/2019

Abstract

The open-question argument is a connecting point in contemporary Analytical Ethics, in response to which many new views were addressed as positive or negative reactions to this argument. In this article, we strive to study and critique the open-question argument and its semantic suppositions and to show that this argument is an application of paradox of analysis and descriptive theory of meaning on ethical concepts. According to the paradox of analysis, the constituents of things contribute to their concepts and therefore, the real definitions which include the constituents elements are tautological and lack new information. Going forward, we address the semantic views of Frege, logical positivism, Suhrovardi-Locke and Kripke-Putnam in order to resolve the paradox of analysis and show that none of these views can be applied to ethical concepts and cannot be considered as a satisfactory answer to open-argument paradox. Finally, we have explained that another solution can be suggested for the paradox of analysis by taking inspiration from the Kripke-Putnam theory and linguistic inspiration. According to this solution, the primary reference of ethical terms to external instances happens without the mediation of concepts and through common intuitions of the linguistics and the precise concept of these terms is gradually addressed and formed in the process of analysis and by considering primary intuitions.

Keywords

the Open-Question Argument, the paradox of analysis, good, intuition, Kripke, Moore.

* Assistant professor, Department of philosophy, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Shahid beheshti University, Tehran, Iran | Wale2ir@yahoo.com

** PhD student of philosophy of religion, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran (corresponding author) | rezataghavi94@gmail.com



Introduction

George Edward Moore, in the book *Foundations of Ethics*, attacks the definability of ethical concepts (good and bad) by resorting to the open-question argument and claims that good and bad of concepts is mutually exclusive and are not definable through any other concept because if good was equivalent to another concept (a) and definable through it, then the predication of the concept of good on 'a' would be tautological and the negation of good from 'a' would be contradictory; whereas this claim is intuitably false and the negation of good from another concept would not result in contradiction. Therefore questions like "is a good?" are always open. This argument is based on a particular perception of the essence of a definition which is known as "the paradox of analysis" in terminology. Going forward we will address the semantic suppositions of the paradox of analysis and its solutions.

Summary

According to the paradox of analysis, philosophical analyses which seek to breakdown a subject to its simple parts, are always either tautological and lack new information (if they were able to correctly breakdown the subject to its simple parts) or are false (if they performed this action correctly). This issue has a long record in the history of philosophy and philosophers like Plato (in the treatise of *Meno*), Avicenna (in *Remarks and Admonitions*), Ayer (in *Language, Truth and Logic*) etc. have discussed it. In this study, possible solutions for the paradox of analysis have been evaluated using a philosophical analysis method (intuition and the contradiction of intuition) and ultimately, we suggest a solution that is apparently more in sync with our linguistic intuitions. It seems that the paradox of analysis is based on a particular understanding of the descriptive theory of meaning, according to which, the constituents of things contributes to their concept and therefore, philosophical analyses which seek to analyze and breakdown subjects to their constituents, will be tautological only if some premises are true.

In the works of philosophers various solutions for the paradox of analysis can be found. Some, relying in Ferge's distinction between meaning and referent, claim that philosophical analyses (good = pleasure) seek to explain that there is a conflict and instantial unity between the two sides of equality and these two concepts represent a single matter. Apparently this solution is unacceptable because philosophical analyses seek to analyze concepts not to explain instantial unity between different concepts.

Another solution which has been presented by philosophers like Ayer and Avicenna, is that in philosophical analyses the two sides of equality are equivalent both conceptually and instantially and the difference between them is solely in their compendiousness and detailness and it this very difference is

enough to convert them to premises that provide new information. This solution is also unjustifiable because it doesn't explain how we attain our ambiguous and capsulative concepts.

Sohravardi and Jon Locke have defended another understanding of the descriptive theory and claim that the concepts of terms are determined through the apparent attributes of their referents. For example, the concept of good is determined through attributes like creating practical motivation; whereas in philosophical analysis we predicate good's essential attributes to it. Therefore, philosophical analyses like "good = pleasure" are not tautological. Due to Kripkean objections to the descriptive theory of meaning, this solution is also not satisfactory.

Some have relied on Kripke's causal-historical theory in regards to meaning and referent and have strived to show that philosophical analyses can be compound and provide new information; because, according to this view, none of the essential or non-essential attributes of things contribute to their concepts. Miller too, by resorting to the distinction between tactful knowledge and propositional knowledge, claims that before philosophical analysis we can only use a term without knowing its precise definition; but after philosophical analysis we gain propositional knowledge regarding the intended term and can recognize its constituents.

It seems that the Miller and Kripkean solution is stronger and taking inspiration from them, one can suggest another solution for this paradox which is free of the deficiencies and ambiguities of these two views. In this solution, the primary reference of the terms to external instances takes place not through causal-historical chain but rather, through our intuitional and pre-conceptual perception regarding the way of applying these terms. According to Wittgenstein, it is through living within a moral linguistic game and moral intuitions that we generally learn how to use these terms and then by making these intuitional cases the intended meaning, we will strive discover adequate necessary and sufficient (constituents) conditions. Therefore, before the philosophical analysis of a concept, it does not exist even in an abstract way and dormant state; rather, it is created and addressed gradually in the process of analysis. Accordingly, philosophical analyses seek to explain the necessary and sufficient conditions of their subject; they are compound premises that express metaphysical necessity and are not analytical premises that express logical necessity.

Main References

- Ayer, A. J. (1971). *Language, Truth, and Logic*. Penguin Group.
- Baldwin, T. (Ed.). (1999). *G. E. Moore: The Arguments of the Philosophers* (1 edition). London: Routledge

- Beany, M. (2013). *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Analytic Philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
- Fisher, A. (2011). *Metaethics: an Introduction*. Acumen.
- Frege, G. (1948). Sense and Reference. *Philosophical Review*, 57(3), 209-230. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2181485>.
- Miller, A. (2003). *an introduction to contemporary metaethics*. Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishing Ltd, First published.
- Miller, A. (2007). *philosophy of language*. Routledge
- Moore, J. A. (1388 AP). *Principa Ethics*. Translated in to Persian as: Mabani-i Akhlaq , by Gholam Hossein Tavakoli and Ali Asgari Yazdi. Tehran: Samt Publications.
- Avicenna (Ibn Sina). (1393 AP). *Al-Isharat wa al-Tanbihat* (Remarks and Admonitions), logic. Research by Vesam Khatavi. Qom: Matbu'at Dini Publications