Wittgenstein's Non-non-cognitivism

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Abstract
In what follows, we present one of the main starting points of naturalism in ethics: Geach's challenge against non-cognitivism. We try to find an answer to Geach's challenge in the notion of family resemblance applied to ethics. In doing so we recover a not much-discussed influence of Moore on Wittgenstein's conception of family resemblance, which leads us to define Wittgenstein as non-non-cognitivist in ethics.

1. Geach's challenge

Peter Geach's challenge against objectivism, consequentialism, and non-cognitivism has raised a wave of criticism and comments. The main core of his attack is the distinction between attributive ("a small book") and predicative ("this book is red") adjectives. The distinction goes beyond syntax: logically predicative adjectives (A is B) permit the split of the predication as "*x* is A and *x* is B," as, for instance: *x* is a book and *x* is red. Attributive adjectives, on the contrary, do not always permit this split: a small book does not necessarily imply that this is a book and this is small (think of *Principia Mathematica* which is a book, but anything but a small one).

Geach 1956, (followed by Philippa Foot and others) initiates a naturalistic trend in ethics, claiming that "good" has only attributive uses, which means that

[CLAIM-NAT] "*there is no such thing as being just good or bad,*
there is only being a good or bad so-and-so." (p. 34)

He makes a clear point about the necessarily attributive use of "good" with proper names. When we say: "John is good" we always have some intended sortal predicate in mind, such as "John is a good *pianist*", or else. And we cannot derive from it that John is both good (simpliciter) and a pianist. He may be a very bad person and a very good pianist. Without a sortal to which to attach "good" in an attributive use, we cannot understand a pseudo-predicative use of "good" with proper names. When we have no clear intended sortal, the nominal essence – in this case, "John is a good *man*" – supplies the covert sortal needed.

Trying to assimilate the concept of "good" to the concepts expressed by ordinary predicative adjectives implies a "dissolution of the concept into a mass of ambiguities" (p. 35). On the other hand, Geach claims that he can overcome the apparent alternative no theory seems to be able to avoid:

[CLAIM-ALT] "*It is mere prejudice to think that either all things called good must satisfy some one condition, or the term good is hopelessly ambiguous.*" (p.35)

He then presents and challenges two possible solutions – none of which can overcome the alternative – which represent the main metaethical options available at his time:
– For objectivists like Moore, "good" is something like an ordinary predicative attribute like "red" or "sweet". However, unlike "pleasurable" or any other natural attribute, "good" is a "simple and indefinable *non*-natural attribute". Since objectivists never give a coherent account of what a non-natural attribute is, "good" turns out to be "hopelessly ambiguous". Therefore, objectivists fall on the second horn of Geach's alternative. .
– For non-cognitivists, such as emotivists (in Geach's terms, the "Oxford moralists"), saying "this is a good book" is just a way to express appreciation and to recommend the book. But, Geach claims, when I call a man a "good burglar" I am not recommending him. Thus, being the object of appreciation cannot be the condition that all good things satisfy.

If we follow Moore – but reject non-natural or supernatural facts – we end up with a "hopelessly ambiguous" notion of the good. If, on the other hand, we identify goodness with "what an agent approves or recommends" - thus following non-cognitivism - we may well claim at first glance to have found the condition shared by all good things. However, on closer inspection, it is far from true that the mere fact of considering someone "a good *x*" implies recommending or approving them. Is there any way out of this unpalatable alternative?

Geach's proposal runs as follows: given that "good" has attributive uses only, then it represents a natural property and therefore can be described as such, recovering the idea that moral judgments are "descriptive". Therefore, he supports a renewed naturalistic view, where "good" expresses some condition to be fulfilled by good things *depending on the sort of thing they are*, i.e., that they fulfill the proper function of the kind of entity they are. Being "good" is therefore non-ambiguous, since it depends on what an entity objectively is. At the same time, it is not some sort of rigid condition all good things are supposed to satisfy, and even less a shared feature they all instantiate.

Geach's challenge has re-opened the path for Aristotelian naturalism in metaethics; a path which had been hinted at in Anscombe's 1958 *Modern Moral Philosophy*, and which has been fully developed by Philippa Foot, especially in her 1961 paper on *Goodness and Choice* and in *Natural Goodness* (2001). These attempts have suffered from several important criticisms: most importantly, they are accused to ground normativity in what has been labeled "first", as opposed to "second", nature (see, e.g., McDowell 1995; Annas 2005). However, in this paper, we do not aim to assess the merits and shortcomings of naturalism; rather, we want to propose a Wittgeinsteinian response to Geach's challenge in CLAIM (ALT).

Our response to the challenge is that there is a clear way out of the alternative between (1) all things called good must satisfy some unique condition, and (2) the term good is hopelessly ambiguous. However, this way out does not imply buying into Geach's naturalistic solution, provided in CLAIM (NAT), or other attempts to overcome the difficulty, such as defining special predicative uses of "good" or creating a new necessary-sufficient condition for the moral good.[1] Rather, the proposed solution derives from the meeting between George E. Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein and the treatment of "good" as a family resemblance predicate. One may wonder whether the Wittgensteinian solution we are proposing was not considered by Geach himself, and was partly at work in his proposal. Indeed, Geach (as well as his wife, G.E.M. Anscombe) were surely familiar with Wittgenstein's work. However, our solution highly relies on the recent publication of the complete set of Moore's notes on

[1] Most answers proposed to the challenge, (for a review, see Almotahari & Hosein 2015) attempt two kinds of solutions: (1) trying to show that there are predicative uses of "good" and Geach's analysis is therefore partial and it leaves open other possibilities, or (2) trying to find a stipulative definition of moral "good", as a new theoretical term inside a theory, as it is normally done in science.

Wittgensten's lectures - unavailable until recently - where Wittgenstein gives a much wider analysis of ethics and the good than in the short summary of Moore 1955. Besides, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by Anscombe, the connection between "good" and "family resemblances" is just hinted at in two lines at § 77, so that it just seems a side remark. On the other hand, the publication of Moore's notes shows the central importance of the discussion on ethics as one of the sources – or even the main source – of the idea of family resemblances. We claim that, although the term "family resemblance" is clearly derived from the German tradition, the particular Wittgensteinian development of the idea of family resemblances arises from the discussion on ethics in 1933 and the confrontation with the treatment of "good" in Moore's *Ethics*.

2. When Wittgenstein and Moore couldn't meet Geach's challenge

Wittgenstein met Moore in Cambridge and followed his lectures in 1911, the year before the publication of his book *Ethics*, which Moore preferred to his earlier work, *Principia Ethica* Although, after a while, Wittgenstein stopped attending Moore's lectures, the two continued to frequent each other assiduously, both because of their interest in philosophy and the shared passion for music, especially for Schubert. Brian McGuinness' book on the life of Wittgenstein gives a wide description of his encounter with Moore, that remained a constant friend also after his coming back to Cambridge after the first World War. While Wittgenstein attended Moore's lessons in 1911, Moore attended Wittgenstein's lectures in Cambridge in the years 1930-1933. Wittgenstein's philosophical connection with Moore on ethics has been partly overshadowed by the attention given by epistemological studies on Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, where he criticizes Moore's theses on idealism. But if we look carefully at the encounter of Wittgenstein and Moore in the thirties, we find a remarkable influence of Moore on Wittgenstein's ideas.

To understand this influence we need to consider the uncertainty with which Wittgenstein begins his considerations about the concept of family resemblance, a terminology that he took from the German philosophical environment, and particularly from Spengler, and its connection with Goethe's idea of the morphological method and the study of transitions from one feature of a plant/animal/colour to another (Andronico 1995). When he came back to Cambridge, he gave the only public talk in his life, the *Lecture on Ethics* in 1929. Here he starts quoting *Principia Ethica* and its definition of ethics as "the general enquiry into what is good". He then says that he will present a number of more or less synonymous expressions each of which could be substituted for the above definition. He suggests that the result will be similar to "the effect which Galton produced when he took a number of photos of different faces on the same photographic plate in order to get the picture of *the typical feature they all had in common*." (our underlining) By doing so he suggests that by looking through the row of synonyms, one may "see the characteristic features they all have in common."

As the reader can immediately see, the idea presented here is still far away from the idea of family resemblance presented in the *Philosophical Investigations*, where there is no characteristic set of features that is common to all instances. Instead, this presentation looks like the first alternative in CLAIM (ALT), which is to find something common to all things called "good". This solution sounds strange to the ears of those who are accustomed to the late discussion on family resemblances, as if Wittgenstein were at the time still uncertain on how to interpret the paradigm of Galton photos of different faces.

On the other hand, Moore 1912 may be considered as representing the second alternative proposed by Geach. In the last part of the book, Moore rejects the idea that there is some property in common to all and only uses of "good", and then claims that "there are an immense variety of different things, all of which are intrinsically good" (p. 129). But given that there is no characteristic necessary and sufficient to define what "intrinsic good" is, we might derive from Moore's

conclusion that "good" is hopelessly ambiguous, since its meaning depends on what factors we use to define something as "good".

Before Wittgenstein's lectures '31-33, both Wittgenstein and Moore seem therefore theoretically unable to face Geach's challenge: on the one hand, Wittgenstein seems to try to find some common characteristic of "good" through a naïf interpretation of family resemblance; on the other hand, Moore is offering nothing more than an ideal intrinsic "good", of which he gives nothing more than a series of homonymies.

Yet, it is exactly by putting together two different ideas, Wittgenstein's reference to family resemblance and Moore's rejection of any necessary and sufficient condition for defining "good", that we may find a new answer to Geach's challenge. And it is interesting to study the emergence of this answer from the notes taken by Moore at Wittgenstein's lectures.

3. A Moore+Wittgenstein answer to Geach's challenge

Although it is clear that Wittgenstein began fixing the idea of family resemblance in the "intermediate" period, it is not so clear how his particular assessment of the notion was formed. We need to look at the notes taken by Moore at Wittgenstein's lectures, with special attention to the discussion of ethical and aesthetical statements. We find wonderful help in the Stern, Roger, and Citron 2016 edition. Although other notes from Ambrose, King, or Smithies are interesting, we will give more relevance to Moore's notes both because more carefully taken (he was the only professor in the class) and because it appears that the lectures were addressed first of all to Moore himself (Stern 2013, 192).

On May term, 1933 (*CL* pages 307-355), Wittgenstein discusses topics related to meaning, and hints at his later ideas on language games, starting from the remark: "If we wanted to lay down rules for 'good' or 'beautiful' or 'game'; we should in different cases have to compare different games" (CL 324). It is very plausible that – having Moore among the attendants – Wittgenstein was brought to read his 1912 book on *Ethics*. In this case, he could have found one of the clearest views of a word whose meaning is not defined by necessary and sufficient conditions for its use, as Moore 1912 claims about "good":

> "there is no characteristic whatsoever which belongs to all things that are intrinsically *good* and only to them. (…) there are an immense variety of different things, all of which are intrinsically good; and though all these things may perhaps have some characteristic in common, their variety is so great that they have none, which, besides being common to them all, is also peculiar to them – that it is say, which never belongs to anything which is intrinsically bad or indifferent,"

In May 1933, Wittgenstein seems to follow Moore on that: "We can't find out meaning of "good", by looking for what all cases have in common" (CL 324). More specifically than Moore, however, Wittgenstein claims that having no necessary and sufficient condition of identity for "good" does not mean that there is no structure at all. He refers to Goethe's morphological method for analyzing the transition from one phenomenon to another, and something similar may happen with the term "good." This is attested by the claim that "it may be very difficult to find anything in common between 2 uses of "good", but there will be gradual *transitions* from one to the other, which take the place of something in common." (*CL* 325, our underlining). It looks like Wittgenstein for the first time puts together the Moorean idea of a term such as "good" whose instance may have nothing in common, and the idea of a method for explaining how we use the term "good" as a family resemblance predicate. Although the term "family resemblance" does not appear in the lectures, the notion is clearly expressed through the connection with the Goethian metaphors of "transitions."

The philosophical method and its comparison with ethics and the meaning of "good" are worked out in a more detailed way on May 9, 1933 (*CL* 327-334). In a short paper, we cannot

give a detailed analysis of these passages but a few relevant quotations may help show the importance of ethics and the meaning of "good" as one fundamental source of the idea of family resemblance. Wittgenstein takes first Ethics as a good example to clarify what his philosophical method is:

> "If I could talk about Ethics, connection would be clearer. I was recommending "descriptive method" = method which tells you various things in right order = order which impresses you, without pretending to thread them on historical thread." (*CL* 331).

The rejection of a historical view is a hidden reminder of Goethe's method, on which Wittgenstein gives some explicit remarks in these lessons. After presenting his general view of philosophy as a "descriptive method", Wittgenstein presents a very compact discussion of "good," which, together with other suggestions in the lectures, seems to provide an answer to Geach's challenge:

> One way of looking at Ethics is to say that meaning of "good" must be what is common to all things we call "good". So with "game": I said this was far too simple.
>
> And also that, though this is wrong, it doesn't follow that the right thing to say is that it has several different meanings: for there may be a connection, though not that of having anything in common.
>
> The idea that there must be one element, which all games have in common, is an old one; & e.g. underlies Plato's question "What is knowledge?" I have said "football, cricket & similar things" is a good answer to "What is a game", whereas Socrates says "No".
>
> This view of something common is connected with the view, that a quality like καλόν is an ingredient in beautiful things: & could be sort of caught in a bottle by itself, like an essence. (This is "essence" in medieval philosophy.) Pure goodness, like pure sugar. (…) (*CL* 332)

We see here almost everything we need to have the last view of Wittgenstein on family resemblance predicates, apparently derived by putting together the vision of Moore 1912 (no necessary and sufficient condition) and his intuitions about Spengler and Goethe (the method of presenting transitions). Let us comment on the quotation given above:
First, in there is the rejection of defining the meaning of "good" as something in common with all good things;
Second, even if there is nothing in common, this does not mean that the word has many different meanings or it is unavoidably ambiguous.
Third, notwithstanding the lack of a unique condition, there may be a connection among all the uses of the word "good".
Fourth, the question itself of "what is "good" brings about searching for an essence (one common element), while what we need is a description of different ways in which we use the term "good."
Fifth: This description, as suggested by previous quotations, aims at showing the "transitions" from one use of "good" to another.

This is an answer to Geach's alternative in CLAIM(ALT) between a term defined by some common characteristic of a hopelessly ambiguous term. The alternative is overcome by the idea that we may also think of "good" as a predicate whose meaning is given by the connections of different uses, practically an anticipation of family resemblance predicates.

From the 1933 lectures emerges that "good" works for Wittgenstein as the prototypical family resemblance predicate. A family resemblance predicate does not imply the existence of necessary and sufficient conditions, nor the presence of homonymous words with different meanings. But this does not entail a reduction to a naturalistic analysis of "good" as Geach

proposes. Instead, a family resemblance predicate is defined by the network of its examples, with properties that can be shown to be similar among some of the examples, although not common to all. The problem of how to evaluate the goodness of an action does not rely on the search for an essence, be it naturalistic or consequentialist, but – instead – on the clarification of the action in comparison with various similar cases of "good" actions. Certainly, this sounds like a particularistic view of ethics. Does this also amount to a non-cognitivist view of ethics?

Conclusion

Besides naturalistic and realistic interpretations, Wittgenstein's view on ethics – although with many critical reactions – has been often dubbed "non-cognitivist", since the first emotivist interpretations by the Vienna Circle until recent revivals such as Fisher 2008. Surely, Wittgenstein did not abandon the *Tractatus'* idea that there are no ethical facts to be judged true or false. Ethics does not belong to the realm of facts. But actions, which are neither true nor false, require justifications. This is a point where Wittgensien's analysis of ethical and esthetical judgments in the 1933 lectures immediately speaks against a non-cognitivist view of ethics.

Perissinotto 2020 claims that we can attribute to Wittgenstein a "liberal" naturalist view, based on the Aristotelian idea of "second nature", interpreted as the nature which arises with the development of a linguistic community. It seems to us that Wittgenstein's implicit rejection of Geach's bold naturalism expressed in CLAIM-NAT, as well as his peculiar solution to CLAIM-ALT, supports Perissinotto's reading with further evidence. Avoiding the idea of "ethical facts" does not amount to non-cognitivism, because judgments of human actions always require reasons and justifications, as aesthetic judgments do.

Wittgenstein often said that his remarks on aesthetics could be applied to ethics. In the 1933 lectures, he claims that "If you want to know how "beautiful" is used: ask what sort of discussion you could have as to whether a thing is so." (*CL* 335). He later makes the case of a discussion about a suggestion X gave to Brahms to begin his IV symphony with 2 introductory chords. Brahms refused, with a reason, and Wittgenstein asks: "What reason could be given for rejecting it? (…) What reasons could I give for being satisfied? They are in the nature of *further descriptions.* By making a person hear lots of different pieces by Brahms, you can make him see what he's driving at." (*CL* 351). The question, he specifies, does not concern the "feelings", coherently with the general attitude for which "[the] meaning of a word is defined by the way we use it, & therefore not by any feeling which we have, when we say it or hear it" (*CL* 364). Analogously in ethics we may look at different reasons for defining an action "good", analyzing different particular actions, and giving justifications. To give a justification is something cognitive, working in the realm of reason, although it does not require the logic of true and false, but the logic of justified or unjustified. Besides explicitly rejecting that ethical judgments, like aesthetical judgments, are just expressions of emotions, he strongly insists on a logic of justification that is intrinsic to the definition of a good human action. Providing further examples of justifications in aesthetics, Wittgenstein insists on showing justifications (reasons) as concerning not feelings, but the structure of the aesthetic action:

> Reason is of nature of Bach's "A piece mustn't slink away like a thief", e.g. you mustn't suddenly change from 4 parts to 3. "This is bad, because it does slink away." Are same sort of reasons given elsewhere except in Ethics? Yes; in philosophy. (*CL* 352)

From this last quotation, we may see that, again, like in the Tractatus, Aesthetics, Ethics, and philosophy converge, and they all deal with reasons (that is justifications, as suggested in *CL*

350). Since his stance is difficult to classify under a standard view (naturalist, objectivist, realist, consequentialist, non-cognitivist), we propose here a negative label of Wittgenstein as a "non-non-cognitivist". According to this view, Wittgenstein agrees with Geach on his criticism of non-cognitivism, but he rejects CLAIM-NAT through a different solution to CLAIM-ALT. Goether's morphological method as a "descriptive method" is the first step to clarifying ethical propositions as to what belongs to the realm of justification. But, without the influence of Moore's idea that there is no characteristic common to all instances of "good," the family resemblance metaphor might have been stuck to the naïf version of the *Lecture on Ethics*.

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