

# Simply Good: A Defense of the *Principia*

Miles Tucker

Preprint—Please Cite the Published Version (*Utilitas*  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820817000292>)

**Abstract:** Moore’s moral program is increasingly unpopular. Judith Jarvis Thomson’s attack has been especially influential; she says the Moorean project fails because “there is no such thing as goodness.” I argue that her objection does not succeed: while Thomson is correct that the kind of generic goodness she targets is incoherent, it is not, I believe, the kind of goodness central to the *Principia*. Still, Moore’s critics will resist. Some reply that we cannot understand Moorean goodness without generic goodness. Others claim that even if Moore does not need Thomson’s concept, he still requires the objectionable notion of absolute goodness. I undermine both these replies. I first show that we may dispense with generic goodness without losing Moorean intrinsic goodness. After, I argue that though intrinsic goodness is indeed a kind of absolute goodness, the objections marshaled against the concept are unsound.

**Keywords:** axiology, intrinsic value, G.E. Moore, Judith Jarvis Thomson

G.E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* is an ambitious work. Moore hopes to understand normative ethics through axiology; he identifies one fundamental value concept—intrinsic goodness—and provides accounts of rightness of action and excellence of character in terms of it.<sup>1</sup> Moore’s view is well known: he says we act *rightly* when we make the world as good as we can, and that we are *virtuous* when we are disposed to perform right actions. There is, then, a structure to normative ethics: axiology first, deontology second, and virtue theory third.

As even its most ardent opponents admit, there is something attractive about Moore’s project.<sup>2</sup> But its popularity is fading. Most critics attempt to halt the project after it gets started: they accept Moore’s conception of goodness, but reject the significance he gives it.<sup>3</sup> However, increasingly, philosophers hope to stop the project at its beginning. In her

---

<sup>1</sup> See Moore (1993: 192, 196-197, 219-220).

<sup>2</sup> In her (1985), Foot says: “It is remarkable how [Moorean] utilitarianism tends to haunt even those of us who will not believe in it. It is as if we for ever feel that it must be right, although we insist that it is wrong.” In her (1997) Thomson also says that she finds Moore’s project powerful and attractive—shortly before arguing that it is incoherent.

<sup>3</sup> Most attention has been paid to Moore’s ideal utilitarian account of right action and its allegedly unacceptable consequences. For discussion of perhaps the most powerful objections to the theory and an attractive Moorean reply, see Feldman (1995).

influential (1997) and elsewhere, Judith Jarvis Thomson claims that Moore's account goes wrong because "there is no such thing as goodness." Her arguments build upon Geach's work: she says that facts about the adjective 'good' give us reason to reject the concept at the heart of Moore's system.

I am a Moorean—I think there is still promise in the project of the *Principia*. I hope to defend my position; I want to show that, despite its popularity, Thomson's objection does not undermine the Moorean program. This is because Thomson's target is not Moore's *intrinsic goodness* but rather *generic goodness*. And this concept is not needed, I believe, to construct Moore's system.

Still, Moore's critics are unlikely to accept defeat. Some note that most accounts of intrinsic goodness seem to appeal to a generic notion of goodness—including Moore's own account. And if this is true, then some version of Thomson's argument may make contact with the Moorean project after all. Others claim that though Moore does not require the concept of generic goodness, he does require the similar concept of absolute goodness or goodness *simpliciter*. And this notion, they claim, is just as objectionable.

I hope to defuse these concerns. I first show how we may dispense with generic goodness without losing intrinsic goodness. And while I accept that Moorean intrinsic goodness is a kind of absolute goodness, I argue that the objections marshaled against the concept are unsound.

### §1: Thomson's Attack

Thomson claims that Moore's system is built upon a naïve concept of goodness. She writes:

Moore's story begins with the good. Some things are good, Moore said, and some things are not good; so there is such a property as goodness—all good things have it and all things that are not good lack it ... The second part of the story flows from the first: there being such a property as goodness, there is also such a relation as being better than, or *betterness*... Moore's story then concludes: the right is analyzable in terms of the relation betterness. Thus for it to be the case that Alfred ought to do a thing at a time is for it to be the case that the world will be better if he does the thing

than it will be if he does any of the other things it is open to him to do at the time.  
(1997: 274).

Since the kind of goodness Thomson speaks of is undifferentiated or generic, let us call it *generic goodness*.<sup>4</sup> She characterizes this notion by appealing to three principles, each of which she claims Moore endorsed. First, as Thomson says above, generic goodness is the property all good things have in common.<sup>5</sup> Thus any good thing, whether it be a good act, a good dryer, or a good lesson, is generically good. Second, generic goodness is the property we attribute to a thing when we say ‘that’s good,’ without a qualifier like ‘to eat’ or ‘as an example’—it is the property of being “just plain good.”<sup>6</sup>

Third and finally, on Thomson’s interpretation, Moore is a kind of axiological monist: he denies that there are many kinds of goodness. Rather, everything that is good in any respect is good because it possesses this property of generic goodness. Thomson writes:

[According to Moore] for a thing to be a good person is for it to possess the properties being good and being a person, for a thing to be a good tennis player is for it to possess the properties being good and being a tennis player, and for a thing to be a good toaster is for it to possess the properties being good and being a toaster. More generally, for a thing to be good in a respect is for it to possess the properties being good and being the relevant kind. (2008: 3)<sup>7</sup>

But, Thomson says, there is an immediate problem: there is no such thing as generic goodness; the concept is, she claims, unintelligible. Thus Moore’s project is “incoherent from the outset.”<sup>8</sup>

I do not want to examine Thomson’s case against generic goodness now. For the sake of argument, I am willing to simply agree—I admit that there is no such thing as generic

---

<sup>4</sup> In using this terminology I follow Zimmerman (2001: 19).

<sup>5</sup> This is stated also in her (1994: 8), (2003a: 17) and (2008: 2).

<sup>6</sup> She writes in her (2003a: 17): “[Goodness] is the property that we would be ascribing to a thing—whether an event or anything else—if we said of it ‘That’s good’; and that is the property such that we are asking whether a thing possesses it when we ask about the thing ‘Is it good?’” See also her (2003b: 72) and (2008: 7).

<sup>7</sup> This is suggested also in her (1994: 8). It is worth noting that Thomson takes the principle to have broader application than may be apparent here; she assumes that, for Moore, whenever a thing is good in *any respect*—whether it is a good *as a* toaster, or good *at* heating the room, or good *for* your diet—this is because it possesses the property of generic goodness. See her (2008: 3-6).

<sup>8</sup> See also Thomson (1994: 8), (1997: 275), (2003b: 72), and (2008: 3-7).

goodness; nothing that all and only good things have in common. But I want to show that, even given this, Thomson's argument against the Moorean position does not succeed.

## §2: A Distinction: Intrinsic Value and Generic Value

Generic goodness is a strange property. Thomson's third principle guarantees that it attaches to anything that is good *in any respect*. It therefore necessarily attaches to everything that exists. Assume for *reductio* that there is something that fails to be good in any respect. Then this thing would be a good counterexample to the thesis that everything is generically good. It would thus be good in some respect, and would therefore be generically good.<sup>9</sup> For similar reasons, everything is generically bad.

We may conclude that generic value does not come in amounts—for a thing cannot possess both a positive and negative amount of the same kind of value. But if this is so, then it is unclear how generic goodness could be maximized—and thus unclear how the concept could possibly do what Moore hoped. If, as Thomson claims, this was the notion Moore was concerned with, then he has made a profound mistake.

But does Moore's system truly depend upon the concept of generic goodness? Thomson's interpretation is grounded in just one passage, which she cites each time she discusses Moore's program:<sup>10</sup>

Ethics is undoubtedly concerned with the question what good conduct is; but, being concerned with this, it obviously does not start at the beginning, unless it is prepared to tell us what is good as well as what is conduct. For 'good conduct' is a complex notion: all conduct is not good; for some is certainly bad and some may be indifferent. And on the other hand, other things, beside conduct, may be good; and if they are so, then, 'good' denotes some property, that is common to them and to conduct... (1993: 54)

I agree with Thomson: this passage *does* suggest that Moore was interested in some generic kind of goodness. But granting this does not justify Thomson's interpretation of the Moorean project. She needs to show that generic goodness is the notion of importance for Moore; that

---

<sup>9</sup> I suspect Thomson would accept this argument: she reasons similarly in her (2008: 10).

<sup>10</sup> See her (1994: 8), (1997: 273), and (2008: 2). She paraphrases this same passage in her (2003a) and (2003b) but does not provide a citation.

it is the concept the *Principia* is dedicated to understanding; that it is the concept he invokes in his accounts of right action and virtuous character. But she does not provide evidence for these claims. And they are, I believe, mistaken.

Consider the second preface to the *Principia*. Moore writes:

[I]t cannot be too emphatically insisted that the predicate which...I call 'good,' and which I declare to be indefinable, is only *one* of the predicates for which the word 'good' is commonly used to stand... (1993: 3)

He then declares:

[T]he predicate I am concerned with is *that* sense of the word 'good' which has to do with the conceptions of 'right' and 'wrong,' a relation, which makes it *the* sense which is of the most fundamental importance for Ethics. Let us call that predicate G. (1993: 5)

Finally, Moore states what he thinks is most important about G:

It now only remains to try to say, as clearly as I can, what it is that I am really anxious to say about G...*G is a property which depends only on the intrinsic nature of the things which possess it.* (1993: 21-22)

This, I believe, makes it clear that Moore was sensitive to the fact that there are many kinds of goodness; he was not a monist in the way Thomson suggests. Rather, he wanted to pick out a particular kind of goodness, a kind of goodness he was eager to characterize. And this is the kind of goodness that depends only on the intrinsic properties of a thing—*intrinsic* goodness.<sup>11</sup> When he uses 'good' without a qualifier it is this kind of value—not generic value—that he hopes to express.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, Moore repeatedly makes plain that it is intrinsic goodness that is fundamental to his moral program. In the first chapter of the *Principia*, Moore states what he takes to be the

---

<sup>11</sup> I thus assume with Moore that the intrinsic value of a thing supervenes on its intrinsic features. I recognize this position is disputed; see e.g. Korsgaard (1983), Kagan (1998), Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2000). A defense of supervenience would, I fear, take us too far afield, but for an attractive Moorean reply see Zimmerman (2001: 33-39, 60-64), Bradley (2002), and Tucker (2016).

<sup>12</sup> See also Moore (1993: 68): "Every one does in fact understand the question 'Is this good?'...It has a distinct meaning for him, even though he may not recognise in what respect it is distinct. Whenever he thinks of 'intrinsic value,' or 'intrinsic worth,' or says that a thing 'ought to exist,' he has before his mind the unique object—the unique property of things—which I mean by 'good.'"

dual concerns of ethics: first, the nature and bearers of instrumental value, or value as a means, and second, the nature and bearers of intrinsic value, or value as an end. He writes, boldly:

The primary and peculiar business of Ethics, the determination what things have intrinsic value and in what degrees, has received no adequate treatment at all. (1993:78)

This is, of course, *too* bold. But we are concerned only with the subject of Moorean moral philosophy. And as this and other passages make clear, the subject of Moorean moral philosophy is intrinsic goodness.<sup>13</sup> This is why Moore speaks so often, and so carefully, about the nature of intrinsic value; this is why he tries to understand the relations between the intrinsic value of a whole and the intrinsic values of its parts; this is why he spends chapter after chapter examining—and dismissing—views about what things are intrinsically good.

Further, *pace* Thomson, I do not believe that Moore invokes the notion of generic goodness in his account of right action. Rather, his account appeals only to the notion of intrinsic goodness.<sup>14</sup> “An action is right,” he says, “only if no action, which the agent could have done instead, would have had intrinsically better results: while an action is wrong, only if the agent *could* have done some other action instead whose total results would have been intrinsically better.”<sup>15</sup>

Of course, those attracted to Thomson’s position may reply that Moore equated intrinsic and generic value. But there is no textual evidence to support this claim. And there is significant evidence against it. Recall that something is generically good if it is good in *any way*. But consider one of the other types of value Moore speaks of: extrinsic goodness, the kind of goodness something has in virtue of its extrinsic properties. When things are good in this way, they are, *a fortiori*, good in some way. So extrinsic goods are generically good. But we cannot, on pain of contradiction, maintain that this is because of their intrinsic features. Thus, to claim that Moore conflated intrinsic and generic value would be to accuse of him of contradicting himself. Without textual evidence, we should, I believe, avoid such accusations.

I therefore reject Thomson’s argument. I think that the fundamental notion of Moorean moral philosophy is intrinsic goodness, not generic goodness. And I think that

---

<sup>13</sup> See Zimmerman (2001: 18-19) for a brief argument to the same effect.

<sup>14</sup> This is, I believe, the orthodox interpretation. See e.g. Feldman (1986: 3), Driver (2014), Shafer-Landau (2010: 117-121), Shaw (2005: xvi-xvii) and Zimmerman (2008: 2-3), among many others.

<sup>15</sup> See his (2005: 30).

Moore did not conflate these notions.

### §3: Intrinsic Goodness without Generic Goodness

I suspect Thomson is aware of this objection. But she does not address it until her (2008) and restricts her response to a footnote:

I am sure that some readers will say that there is another, and better, alternative at the bottom of the barrel, namely that the property [Moore] takes “good” to stand for is...intrinsic goodness. We might well suppose [this kind of goodness] to be nonderivative goodness... *This does seem to be what Moore had in mind when he used the term in Principia.* So understood, however there is no such property as intrinsic goodness if there is no such property as [generic] goodness. (2008: 16).<sup>16</sup>

This is a surprising admission: Thomson has argued in her (1994), (1997), (2003a), (2003b), and in her (2008)—up to this point—that Moore’s project fails because his fundamental notion, generic goodness, is illegitimate.<sup>17</sup> But if the Moorean project does not make use of this notion, as Thomson seems to suggest, then it is unclear how her objection may succeed.

However, Thomson clearly believes that there is some tie between intrinsic goodness and generic goodness—without the latter, the former cannot exist. But we are not given an argument for this claim. Still, we might be able to fill in this lacuna. Consider Thomson’s suggestion:

*Non-Derivation:* Something is intrinsically good just in case its goodness is non-derivative.

What kind of goodness is being invoked on the right hand side of this biconditional? No qualifier appears. It cannot be intrinsic goodness: this would render the principle circular. Nor can it be instrumental goodness, or goodness as a means: such value is always derivative. So, we might think, this mysterious kind of goodness must be generic goodness. What else could it be?

---

<sup>16</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>17</sup> Admittedly, Thomson does provide a very brief discussion of this objection in an appendix to her (2003b). However it is unclear that she accepts the concern, as she does here.

This problem may appear unique to Thomson's non-derivation account. But it is not: Nearly all accounts of intrinsic goodness seem to invoke some unexplained kind of goodness. In the *Ethics* we read:

By saying that a thing is intrinsically good it means that it would be a good thing that the thing in question should exist, even if it existed *quite alone*. (2005: 32)

Let us understand this principle as a biconditional. Then we will say:

*Isolation*: Something is intrinsically good just in case it would still be good, even if it were the only thing that existed.

The kind of goodness on the right hand side of this biconditional is not specified. But it is not qualified in any way, either. So, even friends of Moore admit that it may be generic goodness.<sup>18</sup>

But if this is true of Moore's isolation principle, then it is likely true of the rest of the Moorean principles about intrinsic value, all of which invoke this unexplained concept of goodness. So it seems that Thomson's strategy may succeed: by attacking generic goodness, she has attacked intrinsic goodness too.

However, I believe that we should not understand Moore's principles in terms of generic goodness; such interpretations render the principles absurd. Begin with Moore's isolation principle. If we understand it in terms of generic goodness, we will say:

*Generic Isolation*: Something is intrinsically good just in case it would still be generically good, even if it were the only thing that existed.

But this principle is indefensible.<sup>19</sup> Everything is such that, if it were the only thing that existed, then it would be generically good. This is because generic goodness is the property that *all things that are good in any way* have in common. Thus to be generically good, a thing must simply be good *in some way or another*. So imagine anything, and then imagine it existing all alone. Such a thing would then be a good example of a thing that exists all alone. It would therefore be good in some way, and thus generically good. So this thing, whatever it is, will be intrinsically good.

---

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Zimmerman (2001: 19).

<sup>19</sup> In his illuminating (1998), Feldman makes a similar point with regard to an understanding of these principles that appeals to *overall value*. And, indeed, my solution here mirrors Feldman's.

Similar problems will infect Moore's other principles. Consider the necessity principle: it says that something is intrinsically good just in case it is necessarily good.<sup>20</sup> If we formulate this claim in terms of generic goodness, we obtain:

*Generic Necessity:* Something is intrinsically good just in case it is necessarily generically good.

But, as I have argued, a thing cannot fail to be generically good, since a thing cannot fail to be good *in some way*.

We should not accept an interpretation of the Moorean principles that makes them absurd. So we should not understand these principles in terms of Thomson's notion of generic goodness. Rather, we can endorse a different version of the Moorean claims; we use the principles to differentiate between *kinds of value*. We say:

*Intrinsic Isolation:* If something is intrinsically good, then it would continue to be intrinsically good, even if it were the only thing that existed. But this is not true of other kinds of goodness.

And:

*Intrinsic Necessity:* If something is intrinsically good, then it is necessarily intrinsically good. But this is not true of other kinds of goodness.<sup>21 22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> This principle is perhaps most clearly stated in Moore's (1922: 260-261).

<sup>21</sup> I say only that if something is intrinsically good then it is necessarily intrinsically good, not that something is intrinsically good just in case it is necessarily intrinsically good (and similarly for the isolation principle.) But this omission is only stylistic. The sufficient condition is not informative and may therefore be left unsaid: I believe that it is true, but trivial, that if something is necessarily intrinsically good, then it is intrinsically good.

<sup>22</sup> Feldman provides similar modifications for Moore's supervenience principle in his (1998).

These principles are defensible and attractive; they show us how intrinsic goodness differs from other sorts of goodness. And they make no appeal to Thomson's notion of generic value.<sup>23 24</sup>

Further, if we wish, we can reformulate Thomson's principle in the same way:

*Intrinsic Non-derivation:* Intrinsic goodness is non-derivative: if something is intrinsically good, then it is not intrinsically good because something else has value. But this is not true of other kinds of goodness.

Admittedly, it is unclear that the principle is true when stated so strongly. We should perhaps say instead that intrinsic goodness is *one* kind of non-derivative value, not that it is the *only* kind. But this should not worry us: the original version of Thomson's principle has this same consequence. Further, the non-derivation principle is not stated or defended in Moore's work. Thus, even if Thomson's suggestion were to be rejected entirely, this need not damage the Moorean project.

I conclude that the Moorean may explicate the concept of intrinsic goodness without appealing to the notion of generic goodness. He may, therefore, avoid this second version of Thomson's objection.

#### §4: A New Challenge: Absolute Goodness and the Moorean System

Thomson's challenge appeals to a particular interpretation of the *Principia*. I have claimed that we should reject this interpretation—generic goodness is not the fundamental notion of Moorean moral philosophy, nor is it required to understand Moore's primary concept, intrinsic goodness. And yet many have been attracted to Thomson's conclusions;

---

<sup>23</sup> In saying these principles are defensible, I do not mean that they are true in this form. In fact, I suspect the best form of the Moorean view will weaken these claims; it will say that these principles specify features of intrinsic value that are individually necessary but only jointly sufficient. (Thus, according to the view I prefer, we say only that if something has intrinsic value, then it has that value intrinsically, necessarily, and in isolation. But this is not so of other kinds of value.) However, regardless, I believe that these principles as stated are *close* to the truth, consistent with Moore's intent, and provide an excellent place to begin formulating a powerful Moorean view about the concept of intrinsic goodness.

<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that these principles are not supposed to be *definitions*: for the Moorean, intrinsic value is a conceptual primitive. Rather, they are only supposed to help us grasp the primitive Moore employs, and to show how it differs from other concepts. I explain this further in §4.

they believe there is something deeply wrong with Moore’s system.<sup>25</sup> What grounds their conviction?

I believe their worry is not truly about generic goodness, as Thomson has described it. Rather, I think their concern is about a similar concept: the notion of *absolute goodness* or *goodness simpliciter*.

The concept is understood negatively. Many goods are valuable in relation to some particular, or universal: they are good *for* a particular person or purpose, or good *as* a member of a kind. We attribute relational value to a thing when we say, for example, that it is good *for Jones*, or good *for cutting the lawn*, or a good *as an umbrella*. But the value of some goods is not relative to a person, purpose, or kind. Such things are valuable *absolutely*; they are good *simpliciter*. Aristotle said such goods are valuable “without qualification”<sup>26</sup>, Ross that they are good “*sans phrase*,”<sup>27</sup> Sidgwick that they are valuable “from the point of view of the universe.”<sup>28</sup>

The concepts of absolute and generic value are similar. Indeed, Arneson (2010), Kloksiem (2011), and Rowland (2016) (among many others) simply identify Thomson’s notion with the concept of absolute value. But this is a mistake. Generic goodness is supposed to be (i) the property all good things have in common; (ii) the property of being “just plain good”, and (iii) the property that makes a thing good in any respect. The tension between these three principles renders the concept incoherent: because everything is good in some respect, everything is both generically good and generically bad—and thus everything is “just plain good” and “just plain bad.” But this is absurd.

Absolute goodness is what remains of the concept of generic goodness if we remove this incoherence. It answers only to Thomson’s second principle: to be good absolutely is to be (simply) good. But the other claims do not hold: goodness *simpliciter* is not the property all things that are in any way good have in common—to be a good prison is not to be good without qualification. And thus *a fortiori* a good prison cannot be good *because* it is good absolutely. So the third principle fails as well.

---

<sup>25</sup> Kraut (2011) and Foot (1985), (2001) are perhaps most prominent. But see also Nussbaum (2003), Brännmark (2009), and Freiman (2014), among many others.

<sup>26</sup> See Aristotle (2002: 137, 1152b).

<sup>27</sup> See Ross (2002: 102).

<sup>28</sup> See Sidgwick (1981: 382). We might claim that, though these philosophers all use similar language, they are not targeting the same property; see Kraut (2011: 10-11, 209-212) for discussion. This is perhaps true—but even if these philosophers have subtly distinct concepts in mind, these differences will not be relevant here.

Once we separate these two notions, we gain access to a third version of Thomson's challenge. We join Foot (1985) and Kraut (2011); we claim that Moore's system cannot be generated without the notion of absolute goodness. But we insist that the notion be rejected; we say that nothing is (simply) good—a thing can only be good relationally.

This challenge should be taken seriously. I believe it grounds many philosophers' suspicion of the Moorean project. And it is more plausible than the objections we have considered so far. While we can eliminate the connection between generic and intrinsic value, we cannot eliminate the connection between absolute and intrinsic value. This is because Moorean intrinsic goodness is a *kind* of absolute value—to say that something is intrinsically good in Moore's sense is not to say that it is good in relation to a particular kind, or that it is good *for* someone or something.<sup>29</sup> Moore seems to recognize this: in his arguments against the egoist, he notes that many believe that things can be intrinsically good *for a person*. But this is impossible, he claims: if a thing is intrinsically good in his sense, then it cannot be good relative to a person; it must be good “universally” or “absolutely.”

However, even here, we might object. We say that to be good absolutely is (i) to be good but (ii) not to be good in any particular way. However, we insist that intrinsic goodness *is* a particular way of being good.<sup>30</sup> We appeal to the claims of Zimmerman (2001:24) and others; we say that being intrinsically good is a way of being *ethically* good. We conclude that even if there is something objectionable about the concept of goodness *simpliciter*, this need not undermine Moore's moral system.<sup>31</sup>

But, though I am eager to support the Moorean position, I worry that this defense cannot succeed. Remember that to be good absolutely is simply to be good non-relationally.

---

<sup>29</sup> Indeed, some claim further that absolute goodness simply *is* intrinsic goodness. In his important (2012: 14), Kraut reasons that a thing can be good absolutely only if it is good non-relationally—that is, good in virtue of its non-relational properties. But a thing is good in virtue of its non-relational properties just in case it is good intrinsically. Thus intrinsic and absolute goodness are identical. I reject this argument; I think it relies on a kind of equivocation. To say that a thing is good non-relationally may mean (i) that it is good, but is not merely a good member of a kind, or good for a particular person or purpose—i.e. that it is good, but is not merely good *for a K* or (ii) that it is good in virtue of its non-relational (i.e. intrinsic) properties. These interpretations may come apart—to say that something is instrumentally good is not to say that it is good relative to some person or purpose, but instrumental goods do not have their value in virtue of their intrinsic features. Thus I think Kraut's argument unsound. However little will depend on this. Regardless of whether intrinsic goodness *is* absolute goodness as Kraut and others such as Arneson (2010) maintain, or is simply a *kind* of absolute goodness, as I believe, it is still true that, if there is reason to reject the concept of absolute goodness, then there is reason to reject the concept of intrinsic goodness.

<sup>30</sup> I am thankful to an anonymous referee for raising this concern.

<sup>31</sup> For further explication of this kind of reply see Zimmerman (2001: 18-29).

But to say that a thing is good relationally is *not* to say that it is good in some way. Rather, to be good relationally is to be good relative to some person, purpose, or kind. Thus the fact that intrinsic goodness is a particular way of being good does not show that it is a kind of relational goodness—and thus does not show that intrinsic goodness is not a sort of non-relational, or absolute, value.

Of course, we might insist instead that intrinsic goodness *is* a relational kind of value: to be intrinsically good is to be good relative to the kind *state of affairs*.<sup>32</sup> While Moore never made such claims we may think them consistent with his views—in claiming that intrinsic value is absolute, he seems to mean only that it is not relative to persons. Further the restriction that comes with this relativization appears acceptable: Moore did assume that only finely grained entities such as states of affairs could bear intrinsic value.

However here (perhaps surprisingly) I agree with Thomson: if something is a good member of its kind, this must be because the relevant kind somehow determines, or grounds, a set of standards. It is clear how this might happen with e.g. umbrellas. But, as Thomson (2008: 25-26) argues, it is not at all clear how this might happen with states of affairs, or other ontological categories such as worlds or outcomes. Further, there is an independent concern: if there are other kinds of value that only states of affairs may possess (such as instrumental value) then it is unclear how we can maintain that the intrinsic value of a thing is the value it has relative to the kind *states of affairs*.<sup>33</sup>

I therefore cannot convince myself that intrinsic value is a kind of relational value. Rather, I am inclined to agree with the critic: intrinsic goodness is a kind of absolute goodness.<sup>34</sup> But what might be wrong with the concept of absolute value?

---

<sup>32</sup> I understand an atomic state of affairs to be the instantiation of an  $n$ -place universal by  $n$ -many particulars (or the instantiation of a second order  $n$ -place universal by  $n$ -many first order universals, and so on). Complex states may be formed out of atomic states by conjunction or mereological sum. Conceptually, I take states of affairs to be *truth-makers* (rather than truth-bearers) as well the fundamental *relata* of the *causation* relation. However, for our purposes, most views about the nature of states of affairs will be acceptable. (For a critical discussion of alternatives, see Zimmerman (2001: 46-52).) Further, those who prefer to speak in terms of facts, propositions, events, or tropes, can likely translate. Though these ontological issues will have consequences for our conception of axiology further down the line, such issues will not, I think, be relevant here.

<sup>33</sup> Moore (and the tradition he began) understands instrumental value in terms of intrinsic value: the value a thing has as a means is determined by the intrinsic values of what it causes (or prevents). It is thus assumed that, because states of affairs are both the sole bearers of intrinsic value and the fundamental *relata* of the causation relation, states of affairs are also the sole bearers of instrumental value. For further explication of the concept of instrumental goodness, see Bradley (1998).

<sup>34</sup> Still I may be mistaken about this—and I would welcome such a result: I hope only for a defense of the Moorean view. However, I trust that those who believe that intrinsic value is relational will agree that it is worth

Many refer to Thomson's own argument—and to Geach's (1956), which inspires it.<sup>35</sup> However, as I have stressed, Thomson's concern is generic goodness. But, as we shall see, Thomson's argument applies easily to absolute goodness as well. (And indeed, in her most recent work, Thomson turns her previous arguments against the concept of goodness *simpliciter*.<sup>36</sup>) Further, Geach attacks absolute goodness directly in his (1956). So both may, I think, be understood as challenging the concept of non-relational value. And, given the influence of their arguments, their claims are worth examining carefully.

Both philosophers proceed linguistically. We first note that there is a distinction between logically predicative and logically attributive adjective types. Geach writes:

I shall say that in a phrase 'an A B' ('A' being an adjective and 'B' being a noun) 'A' is a (logically) predicative adjective if the predication 'is an A B' splits up logically into a pair of predications 'is a B' and 'is A'; otherwise I shall say that 'A' is a (logically) attributive adjective. (1956: 33)

Thus an adjective is logically predicative if its attributions can be split; it is logically attributive if they cannot. So 'red', Geach says, is logically predicative: 'this is a red book' splits into 'this is a book' and 'this is red.' But 'big' is logically attributive: 'this is a big flea' does not mean 'this is a flea' and 'this is big.'<sup>37</sup> This shows, Geach says, that there is no property of being just plain big. Similarly with 'heavy', 'fast', and 'strong,' as well as many other adjectives.

We next argue that 'good' is a logically attributive adjective. Geach asks us to consider sentences like 'this is a good car': this cannot be split, he says, into 'this is a car' and 'this is good.'<sup>38</sup> Thomson gives different examples; she asks us to consider sentences like 'he is a good

---

considering how we might defend the Moorean project if intrinsic value *were*, as I believe, a kind of absolute goodness. If nothing else, this would be dialectically important: if we can show that the Moorean project could succeed, even if intrinsic value is non-relational, then we may gain a stronger reply to those who reject the Moorean system on such grounds.

<sup>35</sup> There are, of course, other concerns about the notion of absolute goodness—for summary and discussion, see Kloksiem (2011) and Rowland (2016). However, the Thomson/Geach objection is, I believe, the most powerful and influential; it will therefore be my primary concern in what follows.

<sup>36</sup> See her (2008: 14-15).

<sup>37</sup> In fact, there is a worry, even here. Consider 'big.' Geach claims that it is logically attributive because 'this is a big flea' does not entail 'this is big.' But if 'big' expresses the same property in 'this is a big flea' and 'this is big,' then it seems the entailment holds. Alternatively, if 'big' means something different in each occurrence, then entailment fails only because of equivocation. The same seems true of the other examples given—including 'good.' However, for the sake of argument, I will ignore these concerns.

<sup>38</sup> See Geach (1956: 33-34).

tennis player,’ ‘she is a good chess player,’ and ‘it is a good toaster.’<sup>39</sup> In each case, she claims, these sentences cannot be divided. And we can provide more forceful examples: consider ‘he is a good criminal’ or ‘it is a good prison.’

We conclude that nothing is (simply) good; that, as Geach says, “even when ‘good’...stands by itself as a predicate, and is thus *grammatically* predicative, some substantive has to be understood; there is no such thing as being just good or bad, there is only being a good or bad so-and-so. (1956: 34).”<sup>40</sup>

But, though the major premise and conclusion are clear, the inference is not: how does the proposition that ‘good’ is logically attributive entail the proposition that there is no such thing as goodness *simpliciter*? Perhaps the idea is this: if there is such a property as absolute goodness, then it must be expressible in English. And if absolute goodness is expressible in English, then it must be expressed by sentences like ‘S is good.’ In such sentences ‘good’ stands alone and is thus grammatically predicative. But, as Geach notes above, when a logically attributive adjective is used predicatively, it must be understood as a disguised attributive. Thus sentences like ‘S is good’ are incomplete; to fill them in, “some substantive has to be understood.” We conclude that ‘good’ cannot be used to express the property of being (simply) good; it can only express the property of being good in relation to something else.

Though I accept much of this argument, I believe it fails at a critical juncture. Let us say that a grammatically predicative use of an adjective is *genuinely predicative* when it is not simply a disguised attributive construction. Geach assumes that if an adjective type is logically attributive, then it cannot be employed in a way that is genuinely predicative; its predicative uses must be understood attributively.<sup>41</sup> But nothing in the argument given guarantees this. To

---

<sup>39</sup> See her (2008: 4-6).

<sup>40</sup> Emphasis mine. Thomson claims that this is slightly too strong; see her (1997: 277-278). However, the difference between the conclusion Thomson prefers and what Geach suggests here will not be relevant.

<sup>41</sup> Though Geach provides no support for this assumption, a standard rationale is available. The argument is analogical: it first claims that when an adjective is logically predicative (like ‘red’), the truth conditions of its *grammatically* attributive uses (like ‘A is a red car’) should be understood in predicative terms; thus ‘A is a red car’ is true just in case A is red and A is a car. Similarly, if some adjective is *logically* attributive, then the truth conditions for its *grammatically* predicative uses should be understood attributively. Thus ‘B is good’ is true just in case B is good relative to the referent of the contextually supplied substantive. (I am thankful to XXX for making this clear to me.) However, ultimately, I think this rationale should be rejected. Consider ‘red’: some things are simply red, as Thomson and Geach claim. Others are not (simply) red, but are red-for-hair, red-for-a-face, red-for-an-apple and so on (see Zimmerman (2001: 22)). If we accept the rationale given, we must conclude that ‘red’ cannot be used both predicatively and attributively; it thus cannot express both the property of being (simply) red

say that an adjective is logically attributive is to claim only that *some* of its attributions cannot be split.<sup>42</sup> But this does not entail that *no* attributions of that adjective can be split, nor does it require that every grammatically predicative use of the adjective be understood as a disguised attributive.

Further, Geach's assumption is independently implausible—as Thomson admits in her most recent work.<sup>43</sup> Consider 'famous,' she asks. To say that someone is a famous philosopher is not to say that they are famous, and a philosopher. Thus 'famous' is logically attributive; some of its attributions cannot be split. But not every grammatically predicative use of 'famous' must be understood as a disguised attributive. After all, some people, like President Obama, *are* famous *simpliciter*: to say that Obama is famous is not to say that he is famous relative to some kind; he is (simply) famous.<sup>44</sup> Thus, though it is logically attributive, 'famous' can be used in a way that is genuinely predicative; when so employed, it expresses the property of being (simply) famous.

If this is correct, then we may claim the battle won. We join Ross (2002: 65); we claim that 'good' is like 'famous': it has both genuinely predicative and genuinely attributive uses.<sup>45</sup> Geach's argument fails.

But though Thomson accepts that some logically attributive adjectives may have genuinely predicative uses, she urges us to resist the analogy between 'good' and 'famous':

What assures us that "famous" does have this second [i.e. genuinely predicative] use is that we know what the property of being (simply) famous *is*—it is the property of being (simply) well known. (2008: 14)

---

*and* the properties of being red-for-hair, and so on. If we agree with Thomson and Geach also that a property exists only if it can be expressed, then we must say that either there is no such thing as being (simply) red or no such thing as being red-for-hair, etc. Neither is plausible. The concern is, of course, general: Thomson's argument about 'famous' below shows much the same problem.

<sup>42</sup> Note that if we say instead that 'good' is logically attributive only if *every* sentence of the form 'X is a good K' does not entail that 'X is good' and 'X is a K,' then simply providing a few examples where entailment fails, as Geach and Thomson do, would be insufficient to establish the premise.

<sup>43</sup> See her (2008: 14).

<sup>44</sup> We might think that Thomson has given up too easily; she should insist that logically attributive predicates can never be used in a way that is genuinely predicative. Thus we say that, e.g., though Obama is a famous *person*, he is not famous *simpliciter*. But this claim is in tension with Thomson's own position, as it is unclear how the kind *person* in any way determines the relevant standards for being famous. Further, even if this is good enough for 'famous,' it seems inadequate for other adjectives (see fn. 41).

<sup>45</sup> See his (2003: 65).

But, she claims, we do not know what the property of being (simply) good is. She examines three options: goodness *simpliciter* might be (i) the property of being “*prima facie* ought making”; (ii) the property of being “good in some respect or other” or (iii) “our old friend, the property [generic] goodness.”<sup>46</sup> She rejects all three—correctly, I believe—and concludes that there is no such thing as being (simply) good.

I think, however, that we should not be persuaded by Thomson’s reply. Her defense abandons the argument given: Geach and Thomson (up to this point) have told us that there is no such thing as absolute goodness because ‘good’ cannot be used in a way that is genuinely predicative. Thomson now tells us that ‘good’ cannot be used in a way that is genuinely predicative, because there is no such property as absolute goodness. We cannot accept both possibilities.

Further, I believe we have already answered Thomson’s charge—to be absolutely good is simply to possess non-relational value. If there are many kinds of non-relational value, as I believe, then we may think of absolute goodness as a general concept that particular notions like intrinsic goodness and instrumental goodness fall under.

Thomson may object; she may demand that we define the species of value that fall under the concept we have described—or, at least, that we define the fundamental concept that falls under it, intrinsic goodness (as she does in her (2003b: 79) and (2008: 16)). But this demand is unacceptable: Moorean intrinsic goodness is a primitive.<sup>47 48</sup>

Of course the skeptic may claim that he cannot grasp Moore’s concept. But for those of us who do not already agree with Thomson, this objection is likely to ring hollow. We use the concept frequently: we ask about the intrinsic values of our lives; about the intrinsic values of our actions; about the intrinsic value of the world.<sup>49</sup> We think that certain events—like the

---

<sup>46</sup> See her (2008: 15-17).

<sup>47</sup> Moore makes this plain repeatedly; he writes in his (1993: 58): “If I am asked ‘What is good?’ my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked ‘How is good to be defined?’ my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it.” See also his (1993: 61, 69, 72, 89, 111).

<sup>48</sup> Of course, some might take up this challenge; Mooreans such as Ewing (2012), Chisholm (1981), Lemos (1994) and Zimmerman (2001) advance analyses of the notion of intrinsic goodness. But this is not a reply available to Moore himself: he insists that intrinsic goodness is a conceptual primitive.

<sup>49</sup> Admittedly, we do not use the term ‘intrinsic value’ much outside of axiology. Moore’s critics may thus respond that it is a technical term with no pre-theoretical application. But the fact that we do not use the phrase ‘intrinsic value’ does not mean that we do not employ the concept. When we ask e.g. whether the world is a good place, we are not wondering whether the world is good for some purpose, or good for ourselves. Rather, I think we are wondering whether it is good in itself. And we may ask similar questions about our lives, and our actions. Thus we do, I think, make use of the concept of intrinsic value outside of philosophy—even if we do not employ the term.

suffering brought on by natural disasters—are bad in themselves and that others—like innocent pleasures—are good. Such claims are hardly unintelligible.

Further, not only is Moore's primitive familiar, but he has taken great pains to describe it. Schaffer writes:

Everyone needs their primitives. Anytime one introduces a primitive one has to say what work it does. This means introducing axioms. These axioms characterize the inferential connection between the primitive and nearby notions. Some axioms characterize *internal connections* between the primitive and itself, such as when one stipulates that a proposed primitive binary relation is transitive. And some axioms characterize *external connections* to surrounding concepts (without these the proposed primitive would be an idle wheel). This much should be uncontroversial.<sup>50</sup>

Moore does as he is asked: he states a number of principles that govern the nature of intrinsic value—he explains that it supervenes upon intrinsic non-moral features, that it persists in isolation, and that it attaches necessarily to its bearers. He also shows how intrinsic goodness is related to other moral concepts—and (in giving his supervenience claim) how it is related to non-moral concepts as well. He thus satisfies the basic constraints on introducing a primitive.

As Schaffer suggests, we should accept—or reject—Moore's primitive based on the work it can do. This, in turn, involves an evaluation of the overall Moorean program. Thomson's strategy is therefore backwards: we should not reject Moore's system because we are skeptical of the notion of intrinsic value. Rather, we should be skeptical of the notion of intrinsic value only if we have reason to reject Moore's system.<sup>51</sup> And Thomson has given us no such reason.

I conclude that the Moorean project survives all three versions of Thomson's challenge. His moral system may yet fail—but it does not fail in the way Thomson claims.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> See his (Unpublished: 2).

<sup>51</sup> Note however that this is a necessary—but not sufficient—reason to reject the concept. Even if Moore's system fails, the concept of intrinsic value may still be significant. Every great treatise in moral philosophy—including the works of Plato, Aristotle, and Kant—features discussion of what things are valuable intrinsically, and the notion of intrinsic value is still widely considered fundamental in axiology. Thus more work would need to be done to reject Moore's concept.

<sup>52</sup> Thomson sometimes advances a seemingly independent concern: she claims that it is not possible to answer questions about what things are intrinsically good (see e.g. her (2003b: 13)). And, admittedly, questions about what things are intrinsically good are more difficult to answer than questions about what things are good toasters, or umbrellas. But most questions in philosophy are difficult to answer; this does not make them bad questions (compare: what is knowledge? Or what are the fundamental ontological categories?).

## References

- Arneson, Richard. (2010) "Good, Period." *Analysis*: 70, 4: 731-744.
- Bradley, Ben. (1998) "Extrinsic Value." *Philosophical Studies*: 91: 109-126.
- . (2002) "Is Intrinsic Value Conditional?" *Philosophical Studies*: 107 (1): 23-44.
- Brännmark, Johan. (2009) "Goodness, Value, Reasons." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*: 12: 329-343.
- Chisholm, Roderick M. (1981) "Defining Intrinsic Value." *Analysis*: 41: 99-100.
- Driver, Julia. (2014) "The History of Utilitarianism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition) Ed. Zalta, Edward N.  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/utilitarianism-history/>
- Ewing, A.C. (2012) *The Definition of Good*. Routledge & Kegan Paul: Oxon.
- Feldman, Fred. (1986) *Doing the Best We Can*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- . (1995) "Adjusting Utility for Justice: A Consequentialist Reply to the Objection from Justice." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*: LV, 3: 567-585
- . (1998) "Hyperventilating about Intrinsic Value." *The Journal of Ethics*: 2: pp. 339-354.
- Foot, Philippa. (1985) "Utilitarianism and the Virtues." *Mind*: 94: 196–209.
- Freiman, Christopher. (2014) "Goodness and Moral Twin Earth." *Erkenntnis*: 79: 445-460.
- Geach, P.T. (1956) "Good and Evil." *Analysis*: 17, 2: 33-42.
- Kagan, Shelly. (1998) "Rethinking Intrinsic Value." *Journal of Ethics*: 2: 277-97.
- Klocksiam, Justin. (2011) "Perspective Neutral Intrinsic Value." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*: 92: pp. 323-337.
- Korsgaard, Christine. (1983) "Two Distinctions in Goodness." *The Philosophical Review*, 92, 2: 169-195.
- Kraut, Richard. (2011) *Against Absolute Goodness*. Oxford University Press: New York.
- Lemos, Noah. (1994) *Intrinsic Value: Concept and Warrant*. Cambridge University Press: New York.
- Moore, G.E. (1993) [1903] *Principia Ethica*. Ed. Baldwin, Thomas. Cambridge University Press:

New York.

—— (2005) [1912] *Ethics*. Ed. Shaw, William H. Oxford University Press: New York.

——. (1922) “The Conception of Intrinsic Value.” Reprinted in *Philosophical Studies*. [1951] Routledge & Kegan Paul: London: 253-275.

Nussbaum, Martha C. (2003) “Comment.” In *Goodness and Advice*. Ed. Gutman, Amy. Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey: 97-125.

Ross, W.D. (2002) [1930] *The Right and the Good*. Ed. Stratton-Lake, Phillip. Oxford University Press: New York.

Schaffer, Jonathan. (Unpublished) “It is the Business of Laws to Govern.”

Sidgwick, Henry. (1981) *The Methods of Ethics*. Hackett Publishing Company: Indianapolis, Indiana.

Shafer-Landau, Russ. (2010) *The Fundamentals of Ethics*. Oxford University Press: New York.

Shaw, William H. (2005) “Editor’s Introduction.” In G.E. Moore’s *Ethics*. Ed. Shaw, William. Ed. Shaw, William H. Oxford University Press: New York: vii-xxxix.

Sturgeon, Nicholas. (2010) “Normativity.” *Analysis*: 70, 4: 744-753.

Rabinowicz, Wlodek and Rønnow-Rasmussen, Toni. (2000) “A Distinction in Value: Intrinsic and For its Own Sake.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*: 100: 33-51.

Ross, W.D. (2002) [1930] *The Right and the Good*. Ed. Stratton-Lake, Phillip. Oxford University Press: New York.

Rowland, Richard. (2016) “In Defence of Good *Simpliciter*.” *Philosophical Studies*: 173, 5: 1371-1391.

Thomson, J. J. (1994) “Goodness and Utilitarianism.” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*: 67, 4: 7-21.

——. (1997) “The Right and the Good,” *Journal of Philosophy* 94: 273–98.

——. (2003a) *Goodness and Advice*. Ed. Gutman, Amy. Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey.

——. (2003b) “The Legacy of *Principia*.” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*: XLI: 62-82.

——. (2008) *Normativity*. Open Court Press: Chicago, Illinois.

Tucker, Miles. (2016) “The Pen, the Dress, and the Coat: A Confusion in Goodness.” *Philosophical Studies*: 173: 1911-1922.

Zimmerman, Michael. (2001) *The Nature of Intrinsic Value*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: Lanham, Maryland.

———. (2008) *Living with Uncertainty: The Moral Significance of Ignorance*. Cambridge University Press: New York.