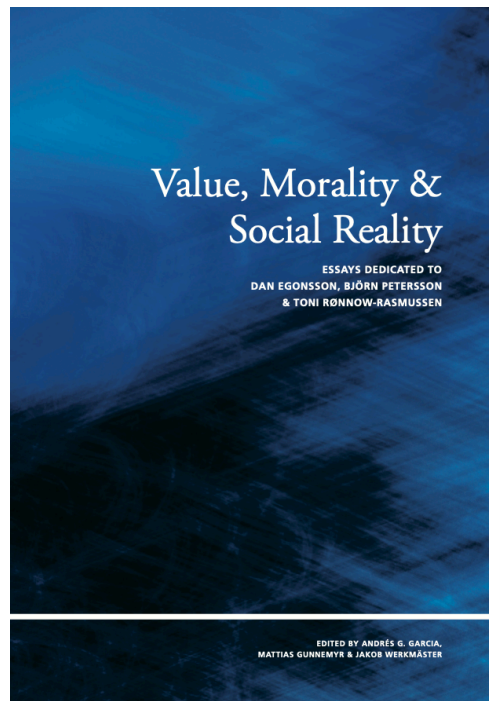


In Defence of Mooreanism

Jonas Olson

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In Defence of Mooreanism

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Abstract. In his recent book *The Value Gap* (2021), Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen defends a pluralist view of final goodness and goodness-for, according to which neither concept is analysable in terms of the other. In this paper I defend a specific version of monism, namely so-called ‘Mooreanism’, according to which goodness-for is analysable partly in terms of final goodness. Rønnow-Rasmussen offers three purported counterexamples to Mooreanism. I argue that Mooreanism can accommodate two of them. The third is more problematic, but this is in the end not a decisive objection.

1. Introduction

In his recent book *The Value Gap* (2021), Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen argues that there is a fundamental gap between final goodness and goodness-for (a person or some other kind of entity). A plausible theory of value should therefore be in a crucial sense pluralist rather than monist. As Rønnow-Rasmussen explains, ‘[w]e are value pluralists (or at least dualists) if we believe that ‘good’ and ‘good for’ denote two kinds of value neither of which can be understood in terms of the other.’¹ Monist views do not recognize a fundamental gap and attempt either to analyse final goodness in terms of goodness-for, or goodness-for in terms of final goodness, or, more radically to eliminate the one in favour of the other. Rønnow-Rasmussen calls the view that takes final goodness to be fundamental ‘Mooreanism’, because of its close affinities with some claims G. E. Moore made in his seminal work *Principia Ethica* (1993 [1903]).²

¹ Rønnow-Rasmussen 2021: 24.

² ‘What then is meant by “my own good”? In what sense can a thing be good *for me*? It is obvious, if we reflect, that the only thing which can belong to me, which can be *mine*, is something which is good,

No version of monism is tenable, according to Rønnow-Rasmussen. In this paper, I shall defend Mooreanism against his criticism. The gist of the criticism of monist views is that ‘they must on purely formal grounds renounce certain value claims as being nonsensical.’³ This criticism rests on a methodological principle of substantive neutrality, according to which no formal view of value—whether monist or pluralist—should rule out coherent substantive views about value.⁴ It is not entirely clear whether Rønnow-Rasmussen intends this principle to state a necessary condition of adequacy or merely a desideratum. I shall return to this point in section 4.

Rønnow-Rasmussen’s challenge to Mooreanism takes the shape of three examples of substantive evaluative claims about goodness-for, which Mooreanism allegedly fails to make sense of. I shall argue that in at least two of the three cases, Mooreanism can make good sense of the claims. While the third case is more debatable, it is in the end not a decisive challenge to Mooreanism. All of this will be dealt with in section 4. Before I get there, I shall make some further points about Mooreanism in section 2, and in section 3 I shall formulate a version of Mooreanism to use for the illustrative purpose of showing how Mooreans can handle Rønnow-Rasmussen’s counterexamples.

2. Kinds of Mooreanism

Rønnow-Rasmussen distinguishes between Radical Mooreanism and Mooreanism, accordingly:

Radical Mooreanism: ‘Final goodness-for’ expresses either an incoherent value notion or one that can (and should) be replaced entirely by the non-relational notion of what is finally good.

Mooreanism: ‘Final goodness-for’ expresses either an incoherent value notion or a derivative notion that is ultimately dependent on the non-derivative notion of what is finally good.⁵

One might think that Radical Mooreanism implies Mooreanism, but this is not obviously so for at least two reasons. First, the view that one ‘value notion’ can and

and not the fact that it is good. When, therefore, I talk of anything I get as “my own good”, I must mean either that the thing I get is good, or that my possessing it is good. In both cases it is only the thing or the possession of it which is *mine*, and not *the goodness* of that thing or the possession.’ (Moore 1993 [1903]: 150, italics in original).

³ Rønnow-Rasmussen 2021: 26.

⁴ Rønnow-Rasmussen 2021: 26, 37.

⁵ Rønnow-Rasmussen 2021: 34, *Final* goodness-for is to be contrasted with *instrumental* goodness-for. What is instrumentally good-for is that which is conducive to goodness-for.

should be replaced by another does not have to be based on the view that the one is ultimately dependent on, or derived from, the other. Second, while Mooreanism implies that final goodness is non-derivative, Radical Mooreanism does not (provided that final goodness being non-relational does not imply its being non-derivative).⁶

It will be useful to anchor the two versions of Mooreanism in the recent debate on value theory, and to identify representatives of each. I take Tom Hurka (2021) to be a Radical Moorean and Guy Fletcher (2012) to be a Moorean. Hurka argues that ‘there’s no philosophically useful understanding of “good for” and related terms that’s *both* evaluative rather than merely descriptive or naturalistic *and* irreducible to other evaluative concepts, in particular “simply good”’.⁷ Thus far, Hurka’s view seems compatible with both versions of Mooreanism. But since he adds that there is ‘no understanding [of “good for”] on which it makes a substantive contribution to ethics’⁸ and that ‘it would serve clarity if philosophers used only [the] phrase [“simply good”]’⁹, I take him to be a defender of Radical Mooreanism. (Hurka uses the phrase ‘simply good’ to express roughly the same concept as Moore and others following him called ‘intrinsic goodness’ and that many philosophers nowadays call ‘final goodness’.¹⁰)

In contrast to Hurka, Fletcher thinks that the property of good for ‘does normative work’ in generating normative reasons.¹¹ But Fletcher also defends a so-called ‘locative’ analysis of what it is for something to be good for a person. The details of the analysis need not concern us here. What is important to notice is that one of its necessary conditions for something, G, being good for a person, is that G is ‘non-instrumentally’, or finally, good.¹² Hence, G’s being good for a person would seem to be ‘ultimately dependent on’ G’s being finally good. This makes it apt to interpret Fletcher’s locative analysis of goodness-for as a version of (non-radical) Mooreanism.¹³

⁶ I am indebted to Jens Johansson for the second point.

⁷ Hurka 2021: 804, emphases preserved.

⁸ Hurka 2021: 804.

⁹ Hurka 2021: 821.

¹⁰ Mooreans (in the sense of ‘Mooreanism’ relevant to this paper) take different views on whether final goodness can only depend on properties intrinsic to what is finally good, and may therefore differ over whether ‘intrinsic goodness’, ‘final goodness’, ‘goodness *simpliciter*’, or some other phrase is to be preferred. For discussion, see, e.g., Rønnow-Rasmussen 2015.

¹¹ Fletcher 2012: 17.

¹² The other two necessary conditions—that together with the first are jointly sufficient—for G being non-instrumentally good for X are that ‘G has properties that generate, or would generate, agent-relative reasons for X to hold pro-attitudes towards G for its own sake, [and that] G is essentially related to X.’ (Fletcher 2018: 3)

¹³ Fletcher claims, however, that the locative analysis retains all of its merits even if the property of being good for does no work in generating normative reasons (2018: 17). The locative analysis might thus be consistent with Radical Mooreanism.

Another notable feature of the locative analysis is that Fletcher offers it not as a conceptual analysis, but as a metaphysical analysis of the property of being good for.¹⁴ This point is relevant to Rønnow-Rasmussen's general charge that Mooreanism, *qua* monist view, must renounce apparently coherent substantive claims about goodness-for as 'nonsensical' (see section 1). If Mooreans analyse the property of being good for—but not the concept of goodness-for—partly in terms of final goodness and if Rønnow-Rasmussen is right that there are some substantive claims about what is good for that they cannot affirm, it is not obvious that they have to renounce these claims as nonsensical rather than simply false. However, it is clear that for an analysis of goodness to renounce a substantive view about what is good on purely 'formal' grounds is also to violate Rønnow-Rasmussen's methodological principle of substantive neutrality.

3. A(n) (Over)simplified Moorean Analysis of Goodness-for

To investigate whether Mooreanism can handle Rønnow-Rasmussen's purported counterexamples, let us for the sake of illustration adopt a simplified Moorean analysis of goodness-for. Taking a cue from one of Hurka's suggestions, let us say that for something, G, to be good for a person, *a*, is for G to be finally good and appropriately related to *a*.¹⁵ The question of what it is to be 'appropriately related' to *a* is a difficult one that will receive no definite answer here. Suffice it to say that it is an independently plausible assumption that something is good for a person only if it is appropriately related to the person. And I infer from this that any account of goodness-for that aspires to be fully explanatory should tell us something about what it is to be appropriately related to a person.

For illustrative purposes, we can once again follow Hurka, who adopts Peter Railton's suggestion that, necessarily, whatever is good for a person is such that the person finds (or would find, if she were to reflect) it compelling or attractive; it finds (or would find) a 'resonance' in the attitudes of the person.¹⁶ We can then say that for G to be good for a person *a*, is for G to be finally good and to resonate with *a*'s attitudes. Let us add to the proposal that whatever is *bad* for a person is such that the person finds it repelling or unattractive; it finds (or would find) a 'dissonance' in the attitudes of the person. We can then say that for G to be *bad* for *a*, is for G to be finally bad and to dissonate with *a*'s attitudes. We can also say that whatever does not resonate or dissonate with *a*'s attitudes is neutral for *a*, regardless of

¹⁴ Fletcher 2012: 5.

¹⁵ Hurka 2021: 806.

¹⁶ Hurka 2021: 811; Railton 2003: 47.

whether it is finally good, bad, or neutral. The analysis is related to Fletcher's locative analysis but clearly simpler than it, and quite possibly oversimplified, but it will serve our illustrative purpose well.

No doubt, the analysis would have to be qualified in several ways to be ultimately defensible. For example, the attitudes in question should presumably be suitably idealized. I assume that this can be done in a way that is consistent with taking internal resonance to be a naturalistic relation, which is Railton's idea. If this assumption holds, the simplified analysis is a version of Mooreanism that analyses goodness-for in terms of final value and a naturalistic condition. Something would also have to be said about degrees of goodness-for and how the Moorean analysis accounts for them. For simplicity's sake, I shall assume that while meeting the resonance/dissonance condition is necessary for something's being good/bad for a person, *how* good or bad for a person something is, is determined entirely by its final goodness or badness. Degree of resonance or dissonance is thus not relevant to degree of goodness-for. This is very likely an oversimplification, but to repeat, I do not mean for the analysis to be ultimately defensible. I intend to use it merely as a kind of proxy, to investigate whether Mooreanism can respond to Rønnow-Rasmussen's purported counterexamples.

4. Rønnow-Rasmussen's Counterexamples to Mooreanism

The order in which I consider the purported examples of Mooreanism does not follow Rønnow-Rasmussen's. I begin with the two I believe can be accommodated by Mooreanism, and take the more troublesome example last.

4.1 Counterexample I: Final Goodness and Goodness-for: Overall and *Pro Tanto*

Just as something can be finally good (or bad) *overall*, or *all things considered*, it can be finally good (bad) *pro tanto*, or *in some respect*. When we evaluate a state of affairs, such as the current state of the world, we can focus either on its final goodness (badness) overall or on its final goodness (badness) *pro tanto*. The same distinction applies to evaluations in terms of goodness-for (and badness-for); when we evaluate whether something is good (bad) for a person, we can focus either on its overall goodness (badness) for the person, or on its *pro tanto* goodness (badness) for the person. Now consider the following claim:

- (I) The world is overall good, but it is overall bad for *a*.¹⁷

¹⁷ Rønnow-Rasmussen 2021: 40.

This looks problematic to Mooreanism, since it appears that Mooreans must take the world's being overall bad for *a* to consist partly in its being overall finally bad, whereas claim (I) implies that the world is overall finally good! Given our (over)simplified version of Mooreanism about goodness-for, stated in the previous subsection, I suggest that Mooreans can offer the following interpretation of claim (I): The world in its entirety is all things considered finally good (rather than bad or neutral) but the proper parts of it that meet with resonance or dissonance in *a*'s attitudes are all things considered finally bad (rather than good or neutral), making the worlds in its entirety overall bad for *a*.¹⁸

This is a Moorean rendering of what claim (I) amounts to that seems to me fully intelligible.¹⁹

It presupposes that not everything about the world that is finally good (bad) meets the relevant resonance (dissonance) condition. I take this to be an innocuous presupposition, since it is independently plausible that there are many parts of the world that are finally good without being good for a person, *a*, because *a* lacks the relevant attitudes (or would lack the relevant idealized attitudes). Indeed, it is plausible that not everything about the world, but only some of its proper parts, *can* resonate or dissonate with *a*'s attitudes, regardless of their final value. Among things or events that cannot resonate or dissonate with *a*'s attitudes are things and events that *a* cannot be aware of, for example, because they are too remote from *a*, spatially, temporally, or psychologically.

In counter-response, critics of Mooreanism might want to modify claim (I) accordingly

- (I*) The proper parts of the world that meet with resonance or dissonance in *a*'s attitudes are overall finally good, but they are overall bad for *a*.²⁰

While claim (I*) might look more troubling than claim (I), the scenario it expresses is also compatible with our proxy version of Mooreanism. To see this, suppose that the relevant proper part of the world, *L* (*a*'s life, let us say), dissonates with *a*'s attitudes. (In other words, *a* is a gloomy character, discontent with her life.) Suppose also that in *L*, the final goodness outweighs the final badness, rendering *L* all things considered finally good. Since the things or episodes in *L* that are finally good do not resonate with *a*'s attitudes, however, they are not good for *a*. Suppose also that

¹⁸ I shall not try to give ontological precision to my talk of the 'world' and its 'proper parts'. Since it is independently plausible that we can talk of the final value of the world in its entirety and about the final values of some of its proper parts, the onus to give such precision is no more on Mooreans than on pluralists like Rønnow-Rasmussen.

¹⁹ I take my proposed Moorean rendering of claim (I) to be an instance of what Rønnow-Rasmussen calls the 'localization manoeuvre'. Rønnow-Rasmussen discusses and rejects a different instance of the localization manoeuvre that seems to me less plausible (2021: 41-43).

²⁰ I am indebted to Jens Johansson for this suggestion.

L contains things or episodes that are finally bad. Those things or episodes dissonate with *a*'s attitudes (since they are included in *L*, which, according to our previous assumption, dissonates with *a*'s attitudes). They are consequently bad for *a*. *L* thus contains some things and episodes that are bad for *a* and no things or episodes that are good for *a*. It seems a fair conclusion that *L* is bad for *a*, all things considered, although *L* is finally good, all things considered.

4.2 Counterexample II: The Intuition of Neutrality

The next challenge for Mooreans comes from the field of population axiology. According to the 'intuition of neutrality', there is a positive range of wellbeing, such that adding to a population a person whose level of wellbeing is within that range is morally neutral.²¹ Put in terms of value, the intuition of neutrality can be formulated accordingly:

- (II) There is a positive range of wellbeing, such that adding to a population a person whose level of wellbeing is within that range does not increase the final value overall of that population.

In other words, although the person's life has positive wellbeing, and is to that extent good for her, adding her life to a population does not add to the final value overall of the population. Accommodating this intuition seems like a challenge to Mooreans, for recall that according to our (over)simplified version of Mooreanism, something's being good for a person implies that it is also finally good. If we assume that final value is strictly additive, to the effect that the final value of a whole equals the sum of the added final values of its proper parts, it is easy to agree with Rønnow-Rasmussen that '[m]onist[s] will need to be quite inventive ... [t]o make proper sense of this intuition'.²²

However, while some monists will have to struggle to accommodate the intuition of neutrality, Mooreans will not have to stretch their inventiveness far beyond their chief source of inspiration. It is a familiar implication of Moore's doctrine of organic unities that the final value of a whole (on the whole) need *not* equal the sum of the final values of its proper parts.²³ For example, the final value overall of a population need not equal the final values of the individual lives comprising that population. The doctrine of organic unities thus allows that adding to a population a life, or several lives, whose levels of wellbeing are within the neutral range does not increase the overall final value of the population. None of this is in conflict with the claims that such a life is finally good, and that it is good for the person whose life it

²¹ Broome 2004: 143-5.

²² Rønnow-Rasmussen 2021: 44.

²³ Moore 1993 [1903]: 81-5.

is. Moore's doctrine of organic unities thus provides Mooreanism with the principled resources to make proper sense of the intuition of neutrality.

4.3 Counterexample III: The Totality of Good

Now, consider the following claim:

- (III) Causing the totality of good for a person is itself the totality of good.²⁴

By 'the totality of good', Rønnow-Rasmussen means 'all the goodness there is'.²⁵ I take it that the kind of goodness in question can be either goodness-for or final goodness, so we can talk about the totality of goodness for a person, just as we can talk about the totality of final goodness.

It is not entirely clear to me what claim (III) amounts to, but here is an interpretation of it that seems inconsistent with Mooreanism: The act of causing all the goodness there is for a person is the sole bearer of final value. This strikes me as a peculiar substantive evaluation. I shall say more about why presently. Setting such questions and concerns aside for a moment, I agree with Rønnow-Rasmussen that '[a] Moorean cannot make sense' of the evaluation expressed in claim (III).²⁶ The reason why should be clear. According to our Moorean analysis of goodness-for, something's being good for a person implies its being finally good. So, the act of causing the totality of (or indeed some) good for a person cannot be the *sole* bearer of final value. It must also be that that which is caused—i.e., that which is good for the person in question—is a bearer of final value.

What can Mooreans say in response, given that they accept that claim (III) is a coherent substantive evaluation with which it makes sense to agree or disagree? Recall Rønnow-Rasmussen's methodological principle of substantive neutrality (section 1), according to which analyses of value should not rule out coherent substantive evaluations on purely 'formal' grounds. This sounds fair enough, but it is not clear whether Rønnow-Rasmussen views the principle as a necessary condition of adequacy or merely as a desideratum. Some of what he says (e.g., on p. 26) suggests the former. If that is plausible, Mooreans will have to concede defeat: any plausible analysis of goodness-for must make sense of claims such as (III), but Mooreanism fails to do so.

On the other hand, Rønnow-Rasmussen at one point at least calls the methodological principle of substantive neutrality a 'core desideratum'.²⁷ If it is merely a desideratum, the failure of Mooreanism to accommodate claim (III) is not

²⁴ Rønnow-Rasmussen 2021: 43.

²⁵ Rønnow-Rasmussen 2021: 43.

²⁶ Rønnow-Rasmussen 2021: 43.

²⁷ Rønnow-Rasmussen 2021: 37.

sufficient ground for rejection. It seems to me that a moderately holistic approach to value analyses will view the methodological principle as merely a desideratum. Rønnow-Rasmussen claims that a theory of value must meet it in order to be adequate²⁸, but he also holds that ‘whatever position we arrive at regarding the dualist/monist issue, our conclusion is bound to have repercussions ... for many substantive views about what is in fact valuable’.²⁹ If he is right about the latter, as I believe he is, a moderately holistic approach to value analysis seems called for.

As I have indicated, the interpretation of claim (III) that Mooreans cannot make sense of is a rather exotic and contrived evaluation. Why would the act of causing all (why all?) the goodness for a person be the only thing of final value? What about causing only some goodness for a person? What about bringing about, but not *causing*, states that are good for a person or finally good? Moreover, if ‘a person’ in claim (III) does not pick out a particular person, the question arises why causing the totality of goodness for a random person is the only bearer of final value; why would it not be finally good to cause (some) goodness for other people too? If ‘a person’ in claim (III) means a particular person—Toni, say—the claim seems absurd. Although Toni is a very nice person and a highly supportive supervisor, it is far from plausible that causing the totality of goodness for him is the only thing of final value.³⁰

Therefore, Mooreanism’s failure to accommodate claim III does not seem like a great cost. Matters had been different, had Mooreanism been forced to renounce as incoherent or false a substantive evaluative view that is intuitively compelling, or at least generally recognised as such. Claim (III) does not fall into that category.

Conclusion

For all I have said, Mooreanism may in the end be less plausible than pluralism. But establishing that it is requires us to look beyond Rønnow-Rasmussen’s three purported counterexamples. Mooreanism has the resources to respond adequately to two of them. It might not be able to accommodate the third one, but I conclude that this is not a decisive objection.³¹

²⁸ Rønnow-Rasmussen 2021: 37.

²⁹ Rønnow-Rasmussen 2021: 31.

³⁰ Francesco Orsi suggested that (III) might be a less exotic evaluation if the person in question is God. But the view that causing the totality of good for God is itself the totality of God would seem to rule out God’s own goodness. Moreover, since it seems exotic to propose that one can cause any changes in God’s condition, the proposal that one can cause *the totality of good* for God seems highly exotic.

³¹ I am grateful to Krister Bykvist, Jens Johansson, Francesco Orsi, and Caj Strandberg for their helpful comments on earlier versions. A grant from the Research Council (grant no 2019-02-828) is gratefully acknowledged.

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