

# THE ABSOLUTENESS OF INTRINSIC VALUE. A CRITIQUE OF THE ‘PRINCIPLE OF UNIVERSALITY.’

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*“There is nothing you can know that isn’t known  
there is nothing you can see that isn’t shown..”*  
The Beatles

## Abstract

*Moore’s account of the relation between his theory of intrinsic value as an unnatural, etc. property, and the so-called ‘principle of universality’ seems to be considered quite uncontroversial. In opposition with this assumption, this paper argues that, given Moore’s theory of value, the ‘principle of universality’ is a non-sequitur. In other words, there is no reason to believe, on Moorean grounds, that if something has value, then it has it universally. In positive terms, intrinsic value is ‘absolute’, meaning completely independent from the natural features of the world. There is no contradiction in thinking ‘goodness’ ‘ingressing’ on the natural features that constitute, say, a murder. This outcome rules out the possibility to establish ethics as a science: there are no universally true ethical judgments. Even if a judgment of value remains true over time, then it is so only de facto.*

## Introduction

The core of G.E. Moore’s ethical theory is twofold. In fact, it is constituted by the relation between the famous defense of the characterization of ‘goodness’ as a real, simple, indefinable, non-natural property and the so-called ‘principle of universality’, which, in its most general terms, sketches the task of ethics by stating that if it is the case that some thing has the property of being good, then it has it ‘under whichever sky’.

This paper attacks exactly the *relation* between the two traits above, in the attempt to show that if we accept the cogency of the first aspect of Moore’s theory, that is, his characterization of ‘intrinsic value’, then the ‘principle of universality’ is a *non sequitur*. This project acquires its relevance by the following consideration: while it is easy, in the rather extensive body of philosophical literature on Moore, to come across critiques of the cogency of the argument by which Moore wants to show that his thesis about the nature of ‘goodness’ is correct (i.e., the appeal to the

‘naturalistic fallacy’), the relation between that first trait and the ‘principle of universality’ seems to be considered somehow uncontroversial.

As we shall see, the ‘principle of universality’ implies that there is an ‘essential’ relation between the natural properties of some thing and its having (or not having) the property of being intrinsically valuable. But, as I also try to show, it turns out to be extremely difficult (if not impossible) to identify which natural properties *must actually be obtained* in order to allow the presence of intrinsic value. Thus, to argue against the legitimacy of inferring the ‘principle of universality’ from Moore’s characterization of intrinsic value amounts to the positive claim that Moore’s theory of intrinsic value is really committed to a completely different outcome: precisely, it is committed to the apparently counterintuitive idea that intrinsic value ‘ingresses’ or ‘supervenes’ on objects and events *independently from their natural properties*.

The above claim is not a tentative denial of the fact that intrinsic value ‘goes together’ with certain kinds of things and events rather than others (which moreover would entail the suggestion that we are generally if not systematically wrong about our judgments concerning intrinsic value). Instead, the claim means that if it is true that intrinsic value does ‘go together’ with certain kinds of things and events rather than others, then it is so only *as a matter of contingent fact*. From a metaphysical point of view, such ‘independency’ or ‘absoluteness’ of intrinsic value with respect to the natural properties of objects and events leaves open the possibility for intrinsic value to go together with things having different and even opposite natural properties.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part contains a brief reconstruction of the Moorean ethical project, chiefly with respect to his major work *Principia Ethica*. The second part addresses and critiques two different attempts to show, on Moorean grounds, that the ‘principle of universality’ is sound. The critique revolves around the fact that it seems impossible to identify the kind of evidence that is necessary in order to validate the principle. Finally, I shall analyze a late essay of Moore’s, in which the English philosopher takes pains in trying to identify the nature of the allegedly essential relation between certain natural properties and the ingression of intrinsic value, and ultimately fails. I take this attempt and its failure to be signs of the awareness, on the part of Moore, of the difficulty at stake.

## **Moore’s Argument**

Let’s introduce our discussion with some general considerations about the notion of ‘intrinsic value’.

First, the meaning of intrinsic value is such that if something is intrinsically good (that is, valuable), it is not intrinsically bad or indifferent. Then, if something is intrinsically bad, it is not intrinsically good or indifferent. Second, intrinsic of value is, *in primis* at least, a non-relational property. This means that we cannot infer

from the fact that something is intrinsically valuable the truth of the other fact that that something is intrinsically valuable to me (or, of course, to anyone else). The third basic idea is a cognitivist one: we know, in one way or the other, that something has intrinsic value; we can 'see' it. Fourth, intrinsic value is identical to itself, and therefore it is distinct from anything else. The 'things' from which intrinsic value must be distinguished more carefully seem to be the so-called 'natural properties,' like 'being pleasurable.' Obviously, this does not deny the possibility for something being pleasurable to have the property of being intrinsically good. This idea starts to suggest the characterization of the property of intrinsic value as non-natural. Finally, the existence or the obtaining of intrinsic value is not dependent on any psychological state that is related to intrinsic value. A psychological state, for example, can be related to intrinsic value by having it as an object, or because it is 'caused' by the occurrence of something being intrinsically valuable.

The fourth point, which suggests the non-naturalness of intrinsic value, can be said to be a consequence of the basic argument that Moore himself says is to be found at the core of *Principia Ethica* (Moore, 1903). An important part of this work is dedicated to the exposition of the many instantiations of the 'naturalistic fallacy'. Moore's text allows at least three different interpretations (Baldwin, 1990: p. 70) of this fallacy: the fallacy may consist in (a) define goodness, which is supposed to be unanalyzable; (b) identify goodness with some other property *simpliciter* (Ambrose and Lazerowitz, 1970), and (c) identify goodness with some natural or metaphysical property. The first interpretation is the more controversial, at least to the extent that Moore does define the property of goodness as 'what ought to exist for its own sake' (White and Moore, 1958).<sup>1</sup> We shall soon return to these problems while discussing Moore's project in greater detail.

As it is clear, each of these 'basic ideas' above can be said to be arguable or ambiguous; for example, we shall see that Moore binds very strictly the occurrence of the property of intrinsic value to the natural features of the world; even if this does not amount to an identification of intrinsic value with those natural properties, the occurrence of intrinsic value depends (or 'supervenes') on those natural properties. So, with regard to the fifth basic idea, and given that psychological states can be said to belong to the natural world, one may ask why it is so important to protect the independence of the occurrence of intrinsic value from certain psychological states.<sup>2</sup> In any case the point seems to be that a discussion concerning intrinsic value cannot avoid those basic concepts as a starting point (Lemos, 1994).

Let's us finally focus only on three salient points of Moore philosophy. Namely the centrality of the question "What is good?", the problem of the relation that intrinsic value entertains with the natural features of the world and the 'principle of universality'.

At the very beginning of his major work, Moore says that the first question that ethics has to try to answer is: "What kind of things ought to exist for their own sake?" (Moore, 1903: p. 8). Then he makes explicit that the only useful criterion for

answering such question is to finally find a satisfactory answer to the even more fundamental question: 'what is good (that is, what ought to exist for its own sake)?' In fact, "it is impossible that, till the answer to this question be known, any one should know what is the evidence for any ethical judgment whatsoever" (Moore, 1903: p.6). Therefore he adds: "My business is solely with that object or idea, which I hold, rightly or wrongly, that the word [i.e. "good"] is generally used to stand for" (Moore, 1903: p. 6).

Moore's answer to that question is famous and can be condensed in few lines: when we say that something is good we are not predicating an identity.<sup>3</sup> For example, when we say that something is good, we are not predicating an identity between the thing and the goodness. This means that goodness cannot be defined in terms of the thing, and viceversa. Moreover, given that we can reproduce this argument for every thing that is good, we have to conclude that there is nothing in terms of which goodness can be defined (Hutchinson, 2001).<sup>4</sup> So, propositions of the form above (i.e., ethical judgments) are synthetical and the property they predicate is a simple and indefinable notion.

The basic idea is that when we say that something is good, we are neither saying that good is identical to that something nor that they are connected by some necessary logical implication.<sup>5</sup> Rather, we are saying that some thing and the property of being good do go together. Moore emphatically writes: "everybody is constantly aware of this notion, although he may never become aware at all that it is different from other notions of which he is also aware" (Moore, 1903: p. 17).

At the same time, Moore holds that a proposition like 'pleasure is good' can somehow be called a 'definition' of the good. This entails a distinction between a 'good' (the property) as an adjective and 'the good' as a noun that names 'that which is good'. So if we take, say, pleasure to be something on which the adjective 'good' is predicated, then "if it is that to which the adjective will apply, it must be something different from that adjective itself; and the whole of that something different, whatever it is, will be our definition of the good" (Moore, 1903: p. 9). Therefore Moore holds that the good is definable (in some loose sense), while the property 'good' is not.

This distinction is the last relevance for the very enterprise of ethics. In fact, as I have already recalled, the task of ethics is to answer the question: 'what kinds of things are good?' To the extent that I understand the arguments above, the task of ethics is to 'discover' the goods, that is, the things that have the property of being intrinsically valuable.

More precisely, the task of ethics is "to enumerate all true universal judgments, asserting that such and such a thing was good, whenever it occurred" (Moore, 1903: p. 21). According to Moore, then, proper ethical judgments aim to individuate a constant relation between the obtaining of a certain 'thing' and the supervenience of the property of intrinsic value on it.

As we have seen, Moore correctly notices that the only way to get rid of this

problem is to find an answer to the other question ‘what is good?’ Therefore, Moore calls this last question the ‘subject-matter’ of ethics. As we have also seen, his ‘disappointing’ answer is that ‘good is good’.

Moore makes also explicit that “if we start with the conviction that a definition of good can be found, we start with the conviction that good can mean nothing else than some one property of things; and our only business will then be to discover what that property is. But if we recognize that, so far as the meaning of good goes, anything whatever may be good, we start with a much more open mind” (Moore, 1903: p.20). The first part of this passage may be said to be puzzling: it seems in fact that Moore is saying that it is a bad start to assume that ‘good can mean nothing else than some one property of things’.

This passage can probably be interpreted as suggesting that it is wrong to identify goodness with some property of some thing insofar as we limit our consideration to its natural (or metaphysical) properties. In the interesting second part of the passage, Moore puts forth the idea that ‘good’, ‘so far as the meaning of good goes’, can (in principle) ‘go together’ with any thing.

Now, it is the task of ethics to indicate how this pure possibility is actually instantiated, which is to say, what ‘kinds of things’ do actually go together with that property. I think, on the one hand, that a radical understanding of ‘good’ along the lines of Moore’s characterization is likely to entail the impossibility of ‘proper’ (that is universal) ethical judgments and, on the other hand, that the task of ethics is merely empirical.<sup>6,7</sup> Therefore the proper task of ethics will be simply that of furnishing an account of the kinds of things that, as a matter of fact, in a certain spatio-temporal region, do have (accidentally) intrinsic value.

I shall address two different interpretations of the ‘principle of universality’ only after a careful consideration of the possible meaning of the ‘naturalistic fallacy’. Now, as it was already suggested, the ‘naturalistic fallacy’, on the one hand, is the fallacy that, according to Moore, “is to be met with in almost every book on Ethics” (Moore, 1903: p. 14).<sup>8</sup> In order to flesh out a reasonable account of the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ I am going to comment on one single, even though long, passage of Moore’s:

“...of course, ...when I say ‘I am pleased’, I do not mean that ‘I am the same thing as ‘having pleasure’. And similarly no difficulty need be found in my saying that ‘pleasure is good’ and yet not meaning that ‘pleasure’ is the same thing as ‘good’, that pleasure means good, and that good means pleasure. If I were to imagine that when I said ‘I am pleased’, I meant that I was exactly the same thing as ‘pleased’, I should not indeed call that a naturalistic fallacy, although it would be the same fallacy as I have called naturalistic with reference to ethics. The reason of this is obvious enough. When a man confuses two natural objects with one another, defining the one by the other, if for instance, he confuses himself, who is one natural object, with ‘pleased’ or with ‘pleasure’ which are others, then there is no reason to call the naturalistic fallacy. But if he confuses ‘good’,

which is not in the same sense a natural object, with any natural object whatever, then there is a reason for calling the naturalistic fallacy; it's being made with regard to 'good' marks it as something quite specific, and this specific mistake deserves a name because it is so common" (Moore, 1903: p. 13).

In this passage Moore seems to give us a tool to face the influential interpretation of the 'naturalistic fallacy' that Frankena (Ambrose and Lazerowitz, 1970) put forth; according to this interpretation, the 'naturalistic fallacy' amounts to the identification of the property 'good' with anything else; Frankena (Ambrose and Lazerowitz, 1970) argued that this can certainly be called a fallacy, to the extent that it is a fallacy to identify two things that (insofar as they are two) are non-identical. In the passage Moore anticipates this critique by identifying the mistake that we commit when we identify 'two natural objects with one another' and the one that the 'naturalistic fallacy' entails –namely, the wrong identification of two things. But, Moore continues, if we are to give a 'definition' of the 'naturalistic fallacy', then the error above is only the *genus proximum* in the definition itself; the 'specific difference' is brought about only by the fact that 'good' is not a natural object, as the objects with which the more general mistake is concerned are.

So the notion of 'good' as non-natural seems to be more basic, or, in other words, seems to come before the 'correct notion' of the 'naturalistic fallacy'. The 'naturalistic fallacy' entails the knowledge of the non-naturalness of intrinsic value (Hutchinson, 2001).<sup>9</sup> Now, Moore suggests different ways (at least three) in which we can flesh out this characterization of 'good' as non-natural. More precisely, Moore furnishes three different accounts of what can possibly mean to be a natural object: thus he is defying the property of 'non-naturalness' chiefly in a negative way.

For first, Moore defines a natural object as "something of which the existence is admittedly an object of experience" (Moore, 1903: p. 38). Secondly, he writes that the 'test' that permits recognition of the non-naturalness of good consists in the fact that we cannot conceive 'good' "as existing by itself in time, and not merely as a property of some natural object" (Moore, 1903: p. 41). The third reason is at the same time an explication of the second: if it seems intuitively true that we cannot conceive 'good' as existing by itself in time, it is also true that we do conceive the natural properties in such a way. In fact, the existence of the natural properties "does seem to me to be independent of the existence of those objects. They are, in fact, rather parts of which the object is made up than mere predicates which attach to it" (Moore, 1903: p. 41). Here Moore seems to be suggesting that the natural properties are independent to the extent that they do not need any further 'substance'. Moore does not say that the natural properties can be separated by the object and nonetheless continue to exist; rather, he says that, as a matter of fact, the properties that 'make up' an object are independent from it. The 'object' is not the 'substance' of the natural properties. On the contrary, 'good' does need a 'substance', which is to say that it depends on a substance. This substance is, usually, a natural object or, even better, the independent, substantial natural properties that constitute the object.<sup>10</sup>

## The Principle of Universality

Even though the 'principle of universality' has already appeared here and there in the section above, before turning to the discussion of two different interpretations of such principle, it is necessary to pause on Moore's extremely straightforward conception of the principle itself. Moore begins by noticing that "it has been pointed out that one difference between a judgment which asserts that a thing is good in itself, and a judgment which asserts that it is a means to good, consists in the fact that the first, if true of one instance of the thing in question, is necessarily true of all... Now it is certainly true that all judgments of intrinsic value are in this sense universals" (Moore, 1903: p. 27). Then he fleshes out the principle as follows: "The part of a valuable whole retains exactly the same value when it is, as when it is not, a part of that whole. If it had value under other circumstances, its value is not any greater, when it is part of a far more valuable whole; and if it had no value by itself, it has none still, however great be that of the whole of which it now forms a part" (Moore, 1903: p. 30).

Now, both the interpretations that we shall consider argue that the principle is sound. However, I think both the interpretations miss the point that I believe to be the most relevant, namely, given the absoluteness of intrinsic value, the very idea of the universality of the judgments concerning intrinsic is just a metaphysical assumption, or an unwarranted generalization.

In a nutshell, Sylvester's (Sylvester, 1990) interpretation of the 'principle of universality' runs as follows: whenever certain natural features occur, then intrinsic value ingresses. Coherently, Sylvester wishes to individuate a certain 'law-like' character in the ingression of intrinsic value in the world. He writes:

"I want to suggest a way of looking at Moore's conception of value ingression that may help to clarify his insistence upon the ontological independence of value, his resistance to naturalism, and at the same time his acceptance of the moral relevance of natural conditions. On Moore's account value does not enter into any situation arbitrarily, but it does so in very regular or law-like fashion... [...]... the connection between these natural conditions that permit the ingression of value and value itself, is one of determinate regularity" (Sylvester, 1990: p. 143).

As far as I can see, the introduction of a 'determinate regularity' threatens the correct assumption of the 'ontological independence' of intrinsic value. Sylvester tries to avoid this problem by saying that the regularity that he has in mind is not a causal regularity strictly speaking: "The regularities we experience in the world today could very well change. A painter may not be able to mix pigments 100 years from today to produce what can be produced today. There may even be places in the universe where creatures like us could find no reliable value-inviting regularities. Value ingression occurs in those natural conditions that are receptive to its entry. Value looks only to the conditions that call for it" (Sylvester, 1990: p. 143-144).

The puzzling point here is that Sylvester, when writing about the possible 'change' of the regularities, is simply thinking, as his examples show, about the possible *non-existence* of the regularities that permit the ingression of intrinsic value. Therefore he is implicitly denying the possibility for intrinsic value to supervene upon regularities that are different from the ones we usually experience in our spatio-temporal region. This amounts to the affirmation of a (counterfactual) *dependence* of intrinsic value on certain (that is, the actual) regularities. Hence it seems, on the one hand, that Sylvester is committed to a theory that threatens my idea of the absoluteness of intrinsic value but, on the other hand, he is not furnishing any valid *reason* (letting aside, of course, the matter of fact, which I do not wish to deny, that intrinsic value does usually go together with certain natural properties rather than others) to accept the idea of the 'law-like regularity' of the 'ingression' of intrinsic value.

In a somewhat more complex fashion, Lemos (Lemos, 1994) tries to show that the principle can hold against certain counterarguments. Consider the state of affairs "A is pleased" to be good. Hence, according to the principle, this state of affairs is such that it will still be good whenever it will occur, even though, of course, it may be part of different 'organic unities' with different intrinsic values. The counterargument suggests that "the total fact overrides the prima facie goodness of the simpler fact that A is pleased" (Lemos, 1994: p. 42). This mere negation of the principle is supposed to be sustained by our intuitions with regard to certain situations: consider the case that an evil man lives a life accompanied by great pleasures. It seems that, in cases like these, we must reject the principle of universality and say that the fact that the man is pleased does *not* have intrinsic value. That is, the intrinsic value of the part (a man is pleased) is overridden by the negative value of the whole (an evil man is pleased).

Lemos defends the principle by recalling that the reason why we judge that total situation to be bad is precisely that we think the evil man to possess something *intrinsically valuable*. Hence Lemos concludes that the principle of universality is sound. Nonetheless, this argument furnishes no evidence against the possibility of the existence of a world in which the basic fact at stake has a negative or an indifferent intrinsic value. Of course, in fact, the psychological fact that we are accustomed to think that some things are intrinsically valuable cannot do the work of the evidence that is necessary in order to defend the 'principle of universality.'

I want to conclude this section underlying again that I am not simply suggesting some version of the 'problem of induction,' according to which we are not justified in inferring a universal judgment from a succession (no matter how long) of empirical judgments. I am suggesting that, given the absoluteness of intrinsic value, we are not justified even in inferring that a succession of identical judgments of value is some *instantiation of regularities*.<sup>11</sup> As far as I can see, the existence of such regularity is precisely what the principle of universality assumes. Perhaps it is possible to shed some light on this intuition by means of the following example. When we talk about causation we want to say that in the fact that the movement of a billiard ball is followed by the movement of another billiard ball there is *something*

*more* that the fact itself, namely, a ‘force;’ similarly, when we talk about intrinsic value it seems to me that we assume (inconsistently) that in the fact that ‘x is good’ there is something more than the fact itself, namely something that belongs to the ‘natural side’ of the judgment such that it ‘calls’ for the ingression of value.

## How to Determine Good

‘Good’ is a real property that is possessed by natural (or metaphysical) objects *independently* from the natural properties of the objects. On the one hand, Moore says that, after having answered the question ‘what is good,’ the task of ethics is simply to give an account of the things that, *as a matter of fact*, do have intrinsic value is true. On the other hand, the principle of universality seems to suggest that the task of ethics can be pursued with the help of some ‘rule.’ In certain respects, this rule is supposed to permit us to foresee the obtaining of intrinsic value.

So I wish to say that universal ethical judgments are *interpretations*: in other words, they imply that the occurrence of intrinsic value is in accord to a certain rule. I have made a distinction between value judgments that are based solely on the ‘absolute’ supervenience of intrinsic value on a certain object and value judgments that implicitly interpret that supervenience as an instantiation of some regularity. Given the ‘predictive’ nature of the second kind of judgments, it is possible to suspect that it is likely that we will be misled by them; for example, we may find ourselves in a situation similar to the following: on the one hand, intrinsic value may supervene on something different from what we are accustomed to and, on the other hand, our interpretative rule may suggest that we watch some other direction. This means that the second kind of judgments can be both ‘correct,’ that is, it can identify something that has intrinsic value and ‘incorrect,’ that is, it can predicate intrinsic value ‘blindly,’ relying simply on the application of the rule. In any case, these judgments, even when they are correct, imply a misunderstanding of the absoluteness of the occurrence of intrinsic value.

Spatio-temporal regions are likely to be constituted by the overlapping of these two different (the first immediate, the second derived) kinds of evidence. The question ‘what kinds of things have intrinsic value?’ can be translated into something like ‘what is the implicit rule of *our* interpretations?’ and this seems to be a question of a very different kind from the previous one. Echoing the famous (and deep) Heideggerian claim concerning technology, it may be the case that the ‘essence’ of our judgments concerning ‘good’ will turn out to be ‘nothing of good.’

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I propose an interpretation of paper Moore’s paper “The Conception of Intrinsic Value.” In this interpretation, this particular paper brings us *as near as possible* to being able to answer that question about the nature of the

relation between the natural world and intrinsic value.

In this paper Moore states the following concepts regarding natural and non-natural properties: *i)* 'good' is an unnatural property; *ii)* natural properties are *descriptive*; *iii)* 'good' also, somehow, describes something; *iv)* then, the natural properties seem to describe the 'intrinsic nature' of the thing they constitute in a sense in which predicates of value never do; *v)* intrinsic value 'depends' on the 'intrinsic nature' of what possesses it; *vi)* if two things have different predicates of value, then they have different 'intrinsic natures.' The sixth claim, that is, the conclusion that Moore draws from his premises, is a negative formulation of the 'principle of universality.' But, the interesting thing here is that the claims above begin to suggest the existence of a 'junction' between the natural properties and intrinsic value, namely that both are *descriptive*, even though in different ways. By saying that 'good' is somehow descriptive Moore links the non-naturalness of the property to what is natural.

Now let us consider this further statement: "If you could enumerate *all* the intrinsic [i.e., natural] properties a given thing possessed, you would have a *complete* description of it, and not mention any predicate of value it possessed; whereas no description of a given thing could be *complete* which omitted any intrinsic property."<sup>12</sup>

If we want to safeguard the coherency of thought expressed in Moore's paper, we have to say that the 'ingression' of intrinsic value depends on the intrinsic nature of the thing (which is described by the natural properties) only when the description by means of natural properties is incomplete. The 'ingression' of the predicate of value depends on some *partial* feature of natural properties; a partial set of natural properties describes the intrinsic nature of some thing only partially, that is, a partial set of natural properties (taken alone) leaves undecided the 'real' intrinsic nature of the thing they constitute. Nonetheless, different partial sets of natural properties permit the ingression of different non-natural properties.

It seems that his paper tries to answer the question about that 'something' which belongs to the natural object and it is such that 'calls' for a certain predicate of value somehow as follows: the ingression of a non-natural property *determines* or *decides* (lat.: *de-caedo*) the intrinsic nature of the thing, which is left undecided by the only partial set of natural properties. The non-natural property can be said to *describe formally* the thing; in other words, the non-natural property 'fills' the empty space that is entailed by the fact that no complete natural description of the thing is given.

Clearly the version of the principle of universality that Moore is presenting in this paper is such that it links very strictly the obtaining of intrinsic value with the natural properties: not only intrinsic value 'depends' on those properties, but also entertains with them a dialectical relation. When intrinsic value ingresses, not only we do see the value of the thing, but we also know something more about its intrinsic nature, which was supposed to be described by the natural properties.

The paper 'links' intrinsic value and the natural properties (i.e., it says that both are 'descriptive' properties), but it doesn't give a substantive answer to the question that asks for the intrinsic nature of the things that permit the ingression of a *positive* intrinsic value and for the intrinsic nature of the things that permit the ingression of a *negative* intrinsic value.

In conclusion, the possibility of ethics (i.e., the possibility of identifying universal ethical judgments) is threatened precisely by Moore's theory of intrinsic value. This is so because that theory has the puzzling feature of not being able to avoid the possibility of intrinsic value 'ingressing' on things and events that can be completely different from those on which it 'usually' 'ingresses'. In this sense, the occurrence of intrinsic value is 'absolute'.

## Notes

1. This definition respects the basic *criteria* that Moore himself suggested for a correct definition, namely non-circularity and the fact that the *definiens* says something more than that the *definiendum* does.
2. This is even more true if we distinguish biological and psychological states by saying that psychological states supervene on the biological states; psychological states can thus be said to be unnatural states. I do not see the reason for a particular emphasis of the independence of 'good' from these kinds of states. On the other hand, the emphasis is probably simply meant to underline the fact that intrinsic value does not entertain any causal relation with those states. Obviously I agree with this interpretation.
3. With a pun, if we say that a friend of ours is a good tennis player, we do not mean that goodness plays tennis.
4. The reasoning that I have presented in the last paragraph is nothing but a sketchy version of the famous 'open question argument'. I am not addressing directly this important point. The 'open question argument' is the argument by which Moore tries to *prove* the truth of his characterization of 'good'. Here we can add the following notes: suppose to choose a certain definition for 'good', that is something that it can be substituted in all the propositions in which 'good' is a part. Then Moore claims that "whatever definition be offered, it may always be asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether is itself good". This fact suggests that the meaning of 'good' (and, one may want to argue, of every other meaning) cannot possibly be saturated by any definition. Some definitions may come closer than others to the meaning of 'good' (as perhaps 'intrinsic value' and 'what ought to exist for its own sake' do), but this meaning remains peculiar, and the better way to grasp it is exactly through the very term 'good'. As stated, the 'open question argument' seems to be particularly focused on the issue of the *undefinability* of 'good'.

5. As it is clear, the ‘principle of universality’ aims precisely at the identification of a certain necessary logical dependence. As I said at the very beginning, my purpose is to merely show why, given a theory like Moore’s, the ‘principle of universality’ is a *non sequitur*.

6. As it is clear, in this paper I am interested solely in what we might call the ‘first type’ of ethical judgments, which is to say those judgments that state that something is intrinsically valuable. There is a ‘second type’ that concerns the things that are judged to be ‘good as a means’. Of course, the comprehension of this second type depends on the comprehension of the first.

7. We may also say that ethics is bound to ‘describe accidents’.

8. As it well known, the exception to this omnipresence is the ethical theory of Sidgwick. Some also add Plato.

9. The ‘open question argument’, by which Moore tries to prove that the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ *really* is a fallacy is chiefly concerned with the problem of the indefinability of ‘good’, while nonnaturalness of ‘good’ remains somehow outside its focus. This is precisely because of the fact that the distinction between natural and nonnatural stems from the ontology that Moore developed in the years before the publishing of *Principia Ethica*. For an informed account of such development, see B. Hutchinson, *cit.*, chapter two.

10. Intrinsic value can ‘depend’ or ‘supervene’ on some metaphysical object as well.

11. Or, perhaps better, the same judgments of value when repeated at different times (i.e., “saving lives is good” at  $t_1$ ,  $t_2$ , etc.)

12. G.E. Moore, "The Conception of Intrinsic Value", *cit.*. At a first glance, this passage seems to deny the possibility for the nonnatural properties to *describe in a different way* what natural properties describe in a standard way. Moreover it seems to contradict the influential interpretation of White, who, while denying that ‘good’ is a descriptive quality, argued that, after having furnished a complete description of some thing by means of natural properties, there still remains to *evaluate* it.

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## **Biographical sketch**

Luca Comino is a native of Udine, Italy, and has an MA in philosophy from Georgia State University, Atlanta. He is currently working in Italy. He presented an earlier version of this paper for the Georgia Philosophical Society in 2002, as well as the paper *Authenticity and Death in Heidegger* at the Georgia Graduate Conference in 2003. Luca Comino has published several reviews in the online journal *Phronesis*, and a book of poems. He can be contacted by email at [lucadcom@tin.it](mailto:lucadcom@tin.it).