

COVERT AND OVERT SYNONYMY: BRANDT
AND MOORE AND THE 'NATURALISTIC FALLACY'

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Richard Brandt contends that Moore's arguments against ethical naturalism are not only defective in detail but are fundamentally and irredeemably defective.¹ This argument indeed has force and has been widely accepted. I shall argue that it is not decisive and that there is a plausible reading of Moore's argument which it does not undermine.

The battle is waged around Moore's open-question argument. Brandt's argument against it can be broken down into two distinct but related arguments. Brandt argues that two terms might pass Moore's test even if they do not have the same meaning. An unwary person might assert 'Is every unmarried male a bachelor?' to be a senseless self-answering question because he thought 'If he is an unmarried male, then he is a bachelor' is analytic. However, it clearly is not, for divorced males, widowers and Roman Catholic priests are not bachelors but they are adult unmarried males. What is probably analytic is this: 'If a man is not a priest and is adult, undivorced, unwidowed and unmarried, then he is a bachelor'. And if it is indeed analytic, to ask whether such males are bachelors is to ask a senseless self-answering question.

This argument of Brandt's against Moore will not do, for there is no reason to claim that Moore is arguing that passing the open-question test is a necessary *and* sufficient or even a sufficient condition for correctly claiming that two terms have the same meaning. To make his argument against ethical naturalism work, Moore need only be understood to be claiming that passing the open-question test is a *necessary* condition. Moore should be understood as claiming that if anyone says of any naturalistic property or non-ethical property that it is good that his statement is synthetic and never analytic. It is Moore's claim that the words standing for the non-ethical property in question are *not identical* in meaning with 'good'. He uses the open-question argument to show this. In doing this he only commits himself to claiming that if one can legitimately

press the open-question, then we are justified in believing that the property word in question is *not* identical with 'good'.

He need not at all claim that when the test is passed, so that the question is seen to be a closed question, that the words must be identical in meaning. He only need claim that they cannot be identical in meaning unless the test is passed. Since this is so, this part of Brandt's argument fails.

Brandt, however, has another argument which threatens to undermine Moore's open-question argument. Brandt is denying that two terms or expressions must be so used that it is a *necessary* condition for their being identical in meaning or overlapping in meaning that questions formed by using them as subject and predicate be self-answering. Brandt gives us a case where two expressions *may* have the same meaning even though to ask if one has the same meaning as the other is not a senseless self-answering question. But here, as with certain statements of which we are not sure whether to classify as analytic or synthetic, we simply do not know, because *ex hypothesi* we are not in a position to know, what to say. We cannot say in such a context whether there is or is not an identity in meaning between the two expressions. They may have the same meaning but in such a situation we are in doubt whether they do have the same meaning. It is tempting to believe that we could cease doubting only on the condition that we had good reason to believe that the question asked according to Moore's prescription is not open, i.e., is senseless and self-answering. However, as Brandt points out, we might still doubt that they have the same meaning even then.

Moore, however, should not be understood as claiming that if the question according to his prescription is not open, then the expressions have the same meaning. He need be understood as claiming no more than that *only* if the question is *not* an open one can there be an identity in meaning between the two expressions. If the question is a closed question, we might still doubt that the expressions had the same meaning. With respect to any proposed definition, we would have good grounds for doubting its correctness if we knew that in Moore's manner it admitted of an open-question.

We are sure that 'Is what people generally approve of good?', 'Is pleasure good?', 'Is what is desired desirable?', 'Is aiding the struggle for survival good?', are *not* self-answering questions. Thus we know such expressions are not equivalent. Only when we recognize, *after careful*

reflection, that our question is *not* an open-question can we be justified in saying that the two terms have the same meaning. But we are never able justifiably to say that about any naturalistic definition of 'good' so we are never justified in claiming that 'good' is naturalistically definable.

Brandt could and indeed would still argue that all the same the terms may still be synonymous. We, he could agree, are indeed not justified in saying they are synonymous when we do not know what to say when the open-question is pressed; but we are also not justified in denying with certainty that they are synonymous. Moore's argument does not provide a *proof* of their non-synonymy, for we cannot be certain that they are not, after all, *covertly* synonymous. Thus Moore has not presented an open and shut case against ethical naturalism.

Moore could and, on my view, should concede that the open-question test cannot prove two expressions have the same meaning. Brandt does indeed show that two terms or expressions *may* have the same meaning even if we are *not sure*, when they are used as subject and predicate in a 'question', whether or not the question is an open-question. Yet the open-question argument, Moore could counter, remains effective if it justifiably makes the following negative points: (1) only if our question is not actually an open-question can it be the case that the expressions have the same meaning, and (2) only if we have *grounds* for believing the question to be a closed one – a senseless, self-answering question – can we have *grounds* for asserting that the expressions in question have the same meaning. Moore could then go on to assert that for any of the naturalistic definitions offered we have no *grounds* for believing that a question so formed by the use of them is a closed-question. All such questions seem, even after careful examination, to be open-questions. Since this is so, we have good, though not absolutely conclusive, grounds for rejecting them as adequate definitions of 'good'.

Brandt is indeed correct in claiming that terms *x* and *y* *may* be synonymous even though we are not aware that they are, for in our actual linguistic behaviour we may use them synonymously and still not be aware that we are so using them. Brandt is also correct in saying (a) that we may *believe* 'Is *x y*?' to be self-answering and it may not be, and (b) that 'Is *x y*?' may be self-answering and we may not *believe* it to be so or be *sure* that it is. Someone may doubt it and an examination of the lin-

guistic behaviour of normal native users of English may show him to be mistaken. But the force of Moore's argument is that we are not *justified* in believing that two expressions are identical in meaning until we know or have good grounds for believing that we cannot form an open-question by using them in the manner indicated. Moore is further claiming that none of the naturalistic definitions serve as a basis for forming self-answering questions. But they must licence such a self-answering question where they are subject and predicate if they are to be adequate definitions.

It seems that Brandt at most could claim either (1) that some complicated naturalistic definitions do not obviously fail to serve as a basis for non-open-questions and so *might* conceivably give a *definiens* which was identical with 'good', the *definiendum* or (2) that 'good', like 'statement', 'probable' and 'assertion', is too complex to meet such a test. If Brandt only argues for (1), then Moore could say that until the naturalistic definitions are made sufficiently precise so that we could know whether or not 'Is x y ?' is self-answering, we cannot know or have good grounds for believing that the proposed definitions are correct. If, on the one hand, they do not admit open-questions to be made with a juxtaposition of the *definiens* and the *definiendum*, we have a good but not sufficient reason for saying that they are identical in meaning or that they overlap in meaning in the way 'red' and 'coloured' do. If, on the other hand, open-questions rather than self-answering questions are formed by their juxtaposed use, then we are not justified in believing they are identical in meaning. Where we have an open-question we have no *right* to say the expressions in question are synonymous. If Brandt, in turn, argues only (2), Moore could say that since the test is a necessary condition for two terms being identical in meaning then if expressions cannot meet such a test they cannot properly be said to be synonymous. This, so as not to be a dogma, is in turn justified by how we would reject proposed definitions of these terms. If a definition of these terms were such that we could properly ask 'But is x (the *definiens*) really y (the *definiendum*)?' and if this were not known to be a self-answering question, then we would not accept the definition as giving the meaning of the *definiendum*, though it might offer some partial explanation of its meaning.

It might be objected that I assume that if we have grounds for believing that to be F is identical with G is analytic, that then we also have grounds

for believing that the question 'This is *G* but is it *F*?' is closed. But this 'assumption' is indeed a safe one. If I really do have good grounds for the first claim, then I have good grounds for the other as well. If, for example, I have conclusive grounds for believing 'Puppies are young dogs' is analytic, then I know in understanding that, that I cannot, if I understand what I am asking, ask 'Are puppies young dogs?' The same would hold for other analyticities, simple or complex.

Brandt's own criteria for checking the overt or covert synonymy of expressions actually meshes perfectly with Moore's procedure.² Brandt's criteria are as follows. We would say that two property expressions mean the same thing if and only if they are so used by the speaker in question that when he is called on seriously to judge whether for all actual and conceivable things or situations two expressions do have the same meaning, he in all such actual and conceivable situations either applies both expressions, applies neither or is in doubt about whether to apply *either*. Brandt's criteria indicate that there may be some undecidable cases but his criteria also indicate that he agrees with Moore that *if* two expressions have the same meaning and we know that they do, we cannot wonder if one expression applies and the other does not. But we can always wonder if this is so about any of the proposed naturalistic definitions.

In sum, in one way Brandt is right against Moore. Moore has not demonstrated that no naturalistic definition could possibly work; he has not even shown for some complicated naturalistic definitions – say the definitions implicit in an ideal observer theory – that such expressions *might* not be synonymous. But he has shown that for the simple naturalistic definitions, we have very good reasons for believing that they form open-questions. In addition he has shown that for the more complicated definitions, we have *no* very substantial grounds for believing that they can be used to form closed-questions. Moreover, Moore's argument shows us that if the question is really not a closed one, the terms cannot be synonymous and further since (1) we have no sound reasons for believing that *any* of the naturalistic definitions can be used to form closed-questions and since (2) we have every reason to believe that *many* of them do form open-questions, we have very good reasons for rejecting what Moore and many of his critics call ethical naturalism.

NOTES

¹ Richard Brandt, *Ethical Theory*, Prentice-Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1959, p. 165.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 160-61.