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A FREGEAN RESPONSE TO MOORE AND ALTMAN

by

SEAN S. MARTIN

Under the direction of Andrew Altman

ABSTRACT

In this paper I give a thorough account of the history of the open question argument. I have provide Moore's original impetus for it and its traditional formulation. I then examine the Cornell Realists' objection to that original formulation and showed that their objection does indeed show the open question argument to be incorrect in its conclusions. Having presented the history of the open question argument and having assessed the most challenging objections to it, I turn to Andrew Altman's powerful reconstruction of the open question argument in order to see how well, if at all, it sidesteps the objections leveled against the classical formulation. I then argue that while Altman does present the most coherent defense of the open question argument available, I conclude that insofar as he has rested upon a commitment to Carnap's philosophy of language over a Fregean semantic and an untenable rendering of post-Kripkean philosophy of language as it concerns rigid designation, we must reject his reformulation. Given that rigid designation itself undermines Altman's position, I conclude that the open question is still in need of a defense before it can regain its position as a major player in the discipline of ethics.

INDEX WORDS: Homeostatic cluster, Open question argument, Andrew Altman, Fregean semantic, Kripkean rigid designation

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SEAN S. MARTIN

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Sean Swain Martin

2011

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INTRODUCTION

In his *Principia Ethica*, G.E. Moore provides the following argument:

> The hypothesis that disagreement about the meaning of good is disagreement with regard to the correct analysis of a given whole, may be most plainly seen to be incorrect by consideration of the fact that, whatever definition be offered, it may be always asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good.[1]

This famous passage, which has come to be known as the open question argument, led to a major shift in the understanding of ethics. It looked like the days of Utilitarianism and other naturalistic conceptions of ethics had come to an end. Anyone who held that good was simply whatever provided the greatest utility for the largest group of people could now simply be refuted thus: "*x* provides the greatest utility for the largest group of people, but is *x* good?" The fact that this question seems *prima facie* to be a meaningful one was thought enough to show that Utilitarianism, insofar as it defined good in that way, was false.

However, as philosophy has progressed over the past century, many believe that the open question argument relies on a fundamental misunderstanding of language. Nicholas Sturgeon argues that Moore makes the mistake of assuming that for identity statements to be true, the subject and the predicate must be synonymous with one another. In support, Sturgeon offers water and H_2O as well as heat and molecular motion as examples, from Putnam and Kripke, of predicates that are clearly identical with one another, but never have and do not now function as synonyms within our semantic landscape. Thus, Sturgeon concludes, if this is true of water and heat and their corresponding reductive definitions from the sciences, then why should we follow Moore in assuming this must be true of ethics?[2] Accordingly, even though 'good' is not

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[1] Moore, G.E. *Principia Ethica*. (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1993) p.67.

[2] Sturgeon, Nicholas. "Moore On Ethical Naturalism." *Ethics* Vol. 113 (University of Chicago: Chicago, 2003) 533.

synonymous with 'provides the greatest utility' and it might seem that 'x provides the greatest utility but is it good?' is an open question, the question would be closed if 'good' rigidly designated the property of maximizing utility.

Sturgeon alludes to a fairly accepted view of language in which it would indeed be claimed that the term 'water' rigidly designates the molecular structure H_2O. If this were true, then it would imply that the term 'water' refers to H_2O *necessarily*, and therefore any question of the sort, "*x* is water, but is *x* H_2O?" would actually be a closed question despite the fact that the two terms are not synonyms of each other. The parallel here should be obvious. The question is whether *good* rigidly designates some natural property or set of natural properties, thus causing the open question argument to fail.

In this paper I will demonstrate why the Cornell Realists like Sturgeon are correct to think that the open question argument does indeed fail. I will examine Moore's original construal of the argument and any later work that seeks to revive it. Having presented the strongest possible case for the open question argument, I will then demonstrate why it simply cannot stand up to the attacks that have been levied against it. This will involve first describing the historical context within which Moore provides his argument, reviewing the effect his argument has had on the discipline of ethics, providing a coherent picture of the critiques levied against Moore, examining the responses of some current Mooreans who feel that these critiques are not quite as damning as assumed by much of the field, and then finally demonstrating that these responses can only be valid given a semantic framework that is at the very least suspect. Only after I have presented this information will I be able to demonstrate why these reconstructions of Moore's open question argument cannot be thought to escape the critiques raised by the Cornell Realists.

I. THE HISTORY OF THE OPEN QUESTION ARGUMENT

I.I The Prevailing Ethic of the Time

In 1903, G.E. Moore in his groundbreaking book *Principia Ethica*, argued, in effect, that all previous conceptions of ethics rested upon faulty assumptions concerning the nature of *goodness* and were, therefore, misleading and incorrect. The study of ethics during the time leading up to Moore's work had been primarily dominated by the Utilitarianism of Mill and Bentham. This view was basically the conjunction of two propositions:

1. An act is right iff it produces more good consequences than any alternative act open to the agent.
2. Happiness and happiness alone is good.[3]

or,

3. Utility and utility alone is good.[4]

Moore actually found this base level conception of Utilitarianism to be at least heading in the right direction;[5] in fact, the positive thesis that he puts forth in his work is a form of Consequentialism. However, it had become commonplace to couple Utilitarianism with the view that Hume and several other modern thinkers were essentially correct in one important aspect of their philosophies. This was that a certain skepticism was necessary to philosophy when it came to metaphysical claims. To borrow an example from Moore, if one were to ask Hume, "What is a horse?" he would say, "A horse is a horse (of course, of course,)" and that would be the end of

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[3] Soames, Scott. *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century Volume 1: The Dawn of Analysis*. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2003) p. 36.

[4] Or any other predicate of which one is interested in the maximization of that predicate.

[5] Moore is going to question very heavily the idea that "happiness and happiness alone is good."

the matter.[6] In other words, we do not need to look to the heavens for some Platonic form, "horseness," because more than likely there is not one. Even if there were, it would be irrelevant because we are familiar with horses; we see horses; we *know* what horses *are*.[7] Many preceding Moore wanted to make a similar assertion about *good*. To them, *goodness* is not some*thing* up *there*; it is something found in our world, something with which we are familiar, something we recognize as being at work around us. Thus in answering the question, "What is *good*?" many answered by pointing to something they could, in some sense, *see* in the world. For some that was happiness, utility, or pleasure to name a few.[8] Therefore, it was not just that these philosophers thought that, for instance, pleasure and pleasure alone had the property of being good, but that pleasure and pleasure alone *was* good, that is, was *identical* to good.

Moore, although intrigued by a base level Consequentialism, found the commitments of those who held the type of Consequentialism previously described to be seriously problematic for two reasons. The first is what Moore refers to as the naturalistic fallacy. This fallacy is committed, according to Moore, when the *is* of predication is confused with the *is* of identity. By claiming that pleasure is identical with *good*, he believes that this fallacy is being committed because this assertion is being supported, explicitly or implicitly, by the fact that pleasure is generally recognized as having the property *good*. In other words, the naturalistic fallacy is in thinking that because pleasure is *a* good, that it is identical with *good*. Given the scope of this paper, I will not be entertaining the validity of such an argument or any reconstruction of it; my

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[6] Moore, p. 58, "If I am asked, 'What is good?' my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter."

[7] Whether or not Hume was committed to such a skeptical view of metaphysics is one that I find slightly suspect but given that this was the way in which Hume was understood and this was the role he played in history of thought, I leave this very interesting question for further discussions.

[8] This question should not be confused with the related but very different question, "What things are good?"

attention will be on the second of Moore's objections, which is the open question argument.[9]

I.II The Traditional Open Question Argument

The open question argument, as presented by Moore, can best be demonstrated by reflecting on the question, "Is pleasure itself good?" It should be obvious that what we mean when asking this question is something much more meaningful than whether or not pleasure is pleasant. Moore claims that this intuition will follow with any definition that we might be tempted to use in our efforts to define good. He goes on to say that this intuition derives from the fact that when we ask a question of the type, "Is pleasure good?" we have an idea of some thing - *good* - and are inquiring about how pleasure stands in relation to it. This, he argues, is rather different from our intention in asking questions of the sort, "Is this pleasant?" It will feel different to us because we each have a distinct, personal meaning for things like pleasure or whatever other particular we happen upon. With good, we have the sense of asking after something much different and much less tied to our own sensibilities.[10]

Essentially, Moore argues that every time we have the belief that something is pleasurable, it is still an open question as to whether or not that thing is good. But if we are identifying pleasure (or whatever it happens to be) with good, then by simply having an answer to the first question, "Is *x* pleasurable?" the answer to the second question, "Is *x* good?" should be trivially true as well. However, even if both are true in any given situation, or even in every situation, the second is never trivially true; it is always informative. From this, we should, in

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[9] It should be noted that the separation of the naturalistic fallacy and the open question argument into two independent arguments is something that is often debated, not only in terms of whether or not one leads to the other, but also in regard to Moore's own intention to these "two" arguments. That being said, the Cornell Realists seem to deal with them separately as do most of their critiques, so, given the goals of this paper, I will proceed under that assumption.

[10] Moore, p. 68.

Moore's mind, deduce that *good* is not identical to any natural property, i.e. any property that designates any mental or physical state. Although it may turn out that only one natural property ever instantiates the property *good*, *good* would still be a non-natural property in so far as it does not designate any mental or physical state. Essentially, "if some ethical theory says good is identical to being something that one desires to desire, then the open question would be whether something that one desires to desire is good. The question can be open, the argument goes, only if the initial identification of good is mistaken, because a correct identification would mean that the question is about the truth of a tautology and no such question is open."[11, 12]

I.III The Effect of the Open Question Argument

In light of Moore's persuasive argument, the field of ethics began to shift to accommodate what is most accepted to be a clearly right intuition about the nature of good. After all, if it is true that "Whatever natural property NP you fix on, it is an open question whether things that have NP also have goodness,"[13] entails "there is no natural property NP such that NP is identical with the property goodness,"[14] then one must either hold that goodness is non-natural, which is the option Moore takes, or that what is actually meant by the word *good*, is very different from what has been traditionally thought *good* means. This latter option was the one to which many philosophers chose to turn. This is most clearly seen in the ethical positions

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[11] Altman, Andrew. "Breathing Life Into a Dead Argument: G.E. Moore and the Open Question Argument." *Philosophical Studies* Vol. 117 (Kluwer: The Netherlands, 2004) p. 396-397.

[12] While I am focused on the negative aspect of Moore's argument regarding the non-naturalness of 'good,' it should be noted that Moore's more positive project is to correlate non-naturalness with indefinability.

[13] Thompson, Judith Jarvis. "The Legacy of Principia." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 41 (Memphis State University: Memphis, 2003) p. 62.

[14] Ibid.

of many of the logical positivists.

Logical positivism holds (at least something relevantly close to) that "a sentence had literal meaning if and only if the proposition it expressed was either analytic or empirically verifiable."[15] It should be easy to see that an unverifiable, non-natural good, is something that just does not fit within a positivist schema. Thus many of the positivists turned away from the idea that *good* refers to any object at all, metaphysical or otherwise. C.L. Stevenson writes that in trying to answer ethical questions, we are essentially asking, "'Is there a needle in that haystack?' without even knowing just what a needle is."[16] A. J. Ayer, who led the charge toward a positivist conception of ethics, thought that this was precisely the problem. Ayer admits that to define *good* in terms of some natural property not only commits the naturalistic fallacy but also falls prey to the open question argument as well. He claims that there is a problem when trying to analyze the concept good, but he holds that "the reason why [good is] unanalysable [*sic*] is that [it is a mere pseudo-concept]. The presence of an ethical symbol [i.e. good or any other symbol] in a proposition adds nothing to its *factual* content"[17] [emphasis and interpolation added]. So in essence, what Ayer is holding out as our way to save ethics is to deny that the addition of an ethical term changes the literal meaning of the sentence. For instance, if I were to claim, "It was a good action for you to help the elderly person across the street," I would be saying literally nothing different from, "You helped the elderly person across the street." However, where Ayer feels that the ethical concept comes in is at the level of emotive meaning. The function of the word 'good' in the statement, "It was a good action for you to help the elderly

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[15] Ayer, A.J. *Language, Truth and Logic*. (New York: Dover, 1952) p. 5.

[16] Stevenson, C.L. "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms." ed. Ayer, A.J. *Logical Positivism*. (The Free press: New York, 1959) p. 264.

[17] Ibid., 30

person across the street," is to simply provide an emotive context to the statement, "You helped the elderly person across the street." It would be as if I had said, "You helped the elderly person across the street," in a particular tone of approval and respect. Ayer felt that such a move allowed us to continue using language like *good* without having to turn to Moore's position that *good* is an unanalyzable, non-natural *something*, and sacrifice his logical positivism.

II. THE OPEN QUESTION ARGUMENT AND THE CORNELL REALISTS

II.I The Turn From Logical Positivism

Ayer's conception of ethics, which came to be known as Expressivism, had much influence and was hugely formative in the work of C.L. Stevenson and R.M. Hare. However, much of the philosophical community found themselves unsatisfied with Ayer and the positivists' account of ethical language; and as interest in Logical Positivism began to wane, many began to pursue other options. As it became more and more apparent that the positivists' framework was untenable, fear of metaphysics and *queer* metaphysical entities began to lessen as well.

The move toward accepting goodness as a non-natural property has become a viable option once again and many recent philosophers have begun doing just that. However, there is a new trend in Ethics where many who "resist Moore's Conclusion [that goodness is non-natural] have instead accepted Moore's Premise [i.e. that there is such a property goodness] and rejected the open question argument"[18] (interpolation added). Geoffrey Sayre-McCord writes, "Famously, Moore himself drew radical conclusions from this [i.e. that good is non-natural] concerning the metaphysics of morals. In particular, he held that our moral terms, given that

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[18] Thompson, fn. 1

they are meaningful, must refer to non-natural properties that depend in some way on, but are not one with, the natural properties discoverable by science. I have worries about the sort of metaphysics advanced by Moore, but I think that Moore was on the right track, more or less, in holding that our moral terms are indefinable"[19] (interpolation added). It is this worry about Moore's metaphysical commitments coupled with the intuition that ethical terms like *good* are indefinable, which leads Sayre-McCord and his contemporaries, known as the Cornell Realists, to offer a third option as a way of dealing with the open question argument.

II.II The Cornell Realists' Better Way

The Cornell Realists, in trying to develop a conception of ethics and an analysis of ethical terms that neither requires the strange metaphysical commitments of Moore nor leaves us with something as counterintuitive as the positivists' Expressivism, noticed that certain developments in the philosophy of language could be construed to provide a framework for ethical language. Saul Kripke famously argued that a correct philosophy of language must include the following three propositions: "(i) that a name is a "rigid designator", denoting the same entity at each possible world in which it denotes anything at all; (ii) that therefore an identity statement consisting of two names flanking the identity predicate is *necessarily* true if true at all; and (iii) that therefore some necessary truths are empirical, rather than being knowable *a priori*."[20] An example of Kripke's rigid designation would be the name *water* and the substance H_2O. Given that at some point in the past someone looked at the wet substance in a pond and said, "That stuff is water," and society began to use *water* to refer to *that wet stuff*, the term *water* rigidly

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[19] Sayre-McCord, Geoffrey. "'Good' On Twin Earth." *Philosophical Issues* Vol. 8, Truth. (Ridgeview Publishing Company: Atascadero, 1997) p. 268.

[20] Horgan, Terence and Timmons, Mark. "Troubles on Moral Twin Earth: Moral Queerness Revived." *Synthese* Vol. 92 (Kluwer: The Netherlands, 1992) p. 224.

designates water. So, then, if one were to find a world in which there were a substance that lacked most of the properties of water but were composed of two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen, that substance would be water. Likewise, if one were to find a world in which there were a substance that had most of the properties of water, yet was not composed of two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen, then that substance would not be water, even if the denizens of that world called it "water."

What the Cornell Realists are suggesting is that we run a Moorean open question argument on the claim that water is H_2O. It would go something like the following: the claim being made is that water is identical to H_2O. This being the case, any question of the type, "I know that *x* is water, but is *x* H_2O?" should be closed. However, the previous question is not closed, because *water* and H_2O do not function linguistically as synonyms. Thus, the conclusion that logically follows is that water is not identical to H_2O. But, of course, that turns out to be false and is, in any case, not knowable on the basis of linguistic intuitions about whether a question is open or closed. In other words, there is *a posteriori* work to be done in order to discover that what we are referencing when we talk about water has a certain molecular structure. This is because the claim that water is H_2O is not knowable *a priori*; it takes (in this case) scientific research and discovery to find that out. However, it is still true that water necessarily is H_2O.

After having seen how the open question fares with the water example, the Cornell Realists made the same move with *goodness*. One of the realists, Richard Boyd, in presenting what seems to be the most promising realist strategy of defining good, makes the claim that "there are a number of important human goods [e.g. physical and medical needs, friendship, love, etc.]…Under a wide variety of (actual and possible) circumstances these human goods (or

rather instances of the satisfaction of them) are homeostatically clustered…Moral goodness is *defined* by this cluster of goods and the homeostatic mechanisms which unify them."[21] If anyone were to run an open question argument on the previous analysis of *good*, the contention would be that a situation similar to the water example would arise. For the proposition, "Goodness is a certain kind of homeostatic cluster *w*," the question, "I know that *y* is an instance of homeostatic cluster *w*, but is *y* good?" is indeed open. It is open because the proposition, "Goodness is a certain kind of homeostatic cluster *w*" is only knowable *a posteriori* and thus it is possible for someone (in this case, almost everyone) to go around using the term *good* to rigidly designate a certain homeostatic cluster and have no idea that this is indeed the case. Even though the Moorean question is open, goodness would still be identical to good. Here, the Cornell Realists claim, is an instance of *good* defined in terms of natural properties that is not undermined by the open question argument.

III. A POSSIBLE RESPONSE TO THE CORNELL REASLISTS

III.I Reconstructing the Open Question Argument

Even given what appears to be such a convincing objection against the open question argument, there are those who think that the Cornell Realists have declared victory too soon. Some philosophers do want to admit that if something like a homeostatic cluster property construction of the concept *goodness* is right then the traditional open question argument can indeed be undermined. However, these philosophers ask us to focus on the word 'traditional' in the claim and then raise the question, "Do we have any real reason to assume that the open question argument should be framed in the traditional way?" And to this question, they would

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[21] Boyd, Richard. "How to be a Moral Realist." ed. Sayre-McCord, Geoffrey. *Essays on Moral Realism*. (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1988) p. 203.

offer a resounding, "No." Andrew Altman provides what he believes is at least one of the constructions of the open question argument Moore had in mind but that has been largely neglected by the philosophical community. He notes that the open question argument holds that the property good simply cannot be predicated of itself, the idea being that the question, "Is *good* good?" would be akin to the question, "Is largeness large?" In virtue of their categories, questions concerning the goodness of good itself or the largeness of large itself (the yellowness of yellow, the clearness of clarity, etc.), despite following all the correct syntactic rules, break the rules of semantics in such a way that the questions are literally meaningless. One simply cannot ask after the self-predication of properties in this way.[22]

What Altman has suggested is that the open question should not be construed (or should not only be construed) as searching for whether or not a question about some property or other is *good* is a tautology, but rather as searching for whether the question can be understood at all. If the open question argument is construed in this way, then when it is applied to the Cornell Realists' views concerning good and homeostatic cluster properties a significantly different result occurs. The question, according to Altman, "I know that *y* is an instance of homeostatic cluster *w*, but is *y* good?" is an *intelligible* question, one that expects either a yes or no answer. But, as pointed out by Altman in the excerpt above, if good were defined as being a certain homeostatic cluster *y*, then the previous question would simply be, "Is good good?" which, in Altman's view, is a meaningless question. Since the first question is meaningful, the homeostatic cluster alluded to cannot be thought of as identical to good. Therefore, the open question argument continues to be an effective demonstration of why naturalistic conceptions of morality just cannot work. To attempt to find a palatable answer to Altman's criticism, we must

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[22] Altman, p. 398.

now turn our attention to the philosophy of language Altman is employing and ask whether this philosophical system makes sense in its own right, which leads us to a discussion of Frege and Carnap.

III.II Rabbit Trails in the Philosophy of Language

III.II.I Frege's Theory of Language

To correctly understand Frege's work, we must begin with the understanding that he was writing in response to the Kantian framework that dominated his time. Kant was very much interested in the experiential aspect of semantics in that, in his mind, expressions "will mean something only insofar as, and to the extent that, they relate to human mental processes."[23] So for example, to understand pain one must experience pain. And when pain is discussed, it is inexorably tied to that experience of pain and the individual's feelings about it, how they process it, etc. This understanding of concepts is called the chemical theory of representation. The idea is that we build concepts out of more basic constituents, experiences (Kant calls these 'representations') being the most basic, which fit together like a collage to bring forth a single, coherent picture. Logical analysis consists in dissecting concepts back into their seminal parts so that we can gain a more distinct understanding of them and therefore the concept as a whole.[24] When it comes to semantics for Kant, then, statements are composed of different parts that have different functions but that come together to give a picture of the whole idea. These parts can be thought of as the parts of speech that we learned in grade school, i.e. subjects, predicates,

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[23] Coffa, Alberto J. *The Semantic Tradition from Kant to Carnap to the Vienna Station*. (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1991) 9.

[24] Kant gives the example of looking up at the Milky Way and seeing a band of light. However, if we look at the Milky Way through a telescope, we can more clearly see the myriad of stars that make up the Milky Way and so have a better understanding of what the Milky Way is.

conjunctions, etc. Leibniz followed this model as well. In his system, categorical propositions have a subject, predicate, copula, quality, and quantity. For example, in the statement, "That man is tall," *man* and *tall* are what Leibniz referred to as the terms, i.e. the subject and predicate; *is* is of course the copula; the quality is affirmative, and the quantity is singular.[25]

Just as with Leibniz, Kant saw that propositions could be broken down into these components to give a better understanding of the proposition as a whole, e.g. we understand "the pious man is happy" better in virtue of understanding what a man is, what a pious man is, what it means to be happy, etc. However, Frege was not very pleased with this conception of semantics and so formed a new framework for linguistic analysis. Having become concerned that traditional semantics handed down from Kant allowed for too much vagueness in what Frege required to be a precise process, he begin to formulate his own new semantic framework. In a recent paper, Richard Heck and Robert May neatly explain that Frege decided that to best maintain precision in his project, language should be thought of, not in terms of subject and predicate, but of object and function.[26] Frege clarified what is meant by "object and function" with his example of the proposition "Socrates is mortal." 'Socrates' should not be thought of in terms of *subject* but rather in terms of an *object* in that it is a kind of thing and it denotes a category. Additionally 'Socrates' is not simply an *object* but is an object of a certain kind, e.g. person, Greek, etc. The *function* is "'the part that remains invariant in the expression' when we replace 'Socrates' by other names, such as 'Plato' or 'Thales.'"[27] This construction allows us to think of 'Socrates' as a member of a kind of whom all of its members can be used in its place

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[25] Ibid., 62.

[26] Heck, Richard G. and May, Robert. "Frege's Contribution to Philosophy of Language." Forthcoming in the *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language*, ed. Lepore, E. and Smith, B. 1-2.

[27] Ibid., 4

without disturbing the truth-value of the proposition. And further, in providing a form that is "both absolute and exhaustive," Frege claimed that "[sentences] denote either the True or the False, and it is these objects that are the values of concept-functions."[28] It is in this way that Frege and Carnap most significantly part ways. Frege claims that 'True' and 'False' exhaust the options for the truth-values of sentences whereas Carnap suggests that some syntactically correct sentences can in fact be meaningless instead of true or false.

III.II.II Carnap and the Metaphysician

Carnap, in his paper "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through the Logical Analysis of Language," provides a cento from Heidegger as a clear example of vacuous philosophical writing:

> What is to be investigated is being only and – *nothing* else; being alone and further – *nothing*; solely being, and beyond being – *nothing*. *What about this Nothing? …Does the Nothing exist only because the Not, i.e. the Negation, exists?* Or is it the other way around? *Does Negation and the Not exist only because the Nothing exists?* …We assert: *the Nothing is prior to the Not and the Negation*…Where do we seek the Nothing? How do we find the Nothing…We know the Nothing…*Anxiety reveals the Nothing*…That for which and because of which we were anxious, was 'really' – nothing . Indeed: the Nothing itself – as such – was present…*What about this Nothing? – The Nothing itself nothings*.[29]

For Carnap, and probably for many others, this passage asserts nothing of which it could be said that it is either true or false. This is because Carnap wants to argue that Heidegger is breaking semantic rules by positing the term 'nothing' as a denoting term. Carnap gives the following example of how language without these semantic rules leads to nonsense:

1. Meaningful Sentences of Ordinary Language

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[28] Ibid., 10

[29] Carnap, Rudolf. "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through the Logical Analysis of Language." Ayer, A.J. *Logical Positivism* (The Free Press: New York, 1959) 69.

A. What is outside? Ou(?)

Rain is outside. Ou(r)[30]

This example of ordinary language seems fine. In fact this is how we speak all the time and no one would say that this is meaningless; however:

2. Transition from Sense to Nonsense in Ordinary Language

A. What is outside? Ou(?)

Nothing is outside. Ou(no)[31]

This also seems to reflect how we normally speak, but Carnap has a serious problem with this construction. It would appear that given the sentence Ou(no), we could render it to read, "There is an *x* such that *x* is outside and *x* is equivalent to nothing." Given this rendering, we could be tempted, as Heidegger evidently was, to say that there is *a* nothing. And if we allow this, then we are off to the races with bizarre Heideggerian questions of the sort, "What about this nothing? Where do we find this nothing? etc." Carnap suggests that instead of allowing, "What is outside? Nothing is outside," we should instead use the following:

3. Logically Correct Language

A. There is nothing (does not exist anything) which is outside. $\sim\forall x.Ou(x)$[32]

Carnap claims that with the first two constructions we could ask the following questions, "What about this rain?" and "What about this nothing?" respectively. However, Carnap argues that with the third construal, there is no way even to form an analogous question. If we were to try to make it fit into the formula of the two previous questions, we might end up with something like, "What about this not existing anything?" And this seems to be a question of which not even

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30 Ibid., 70.

31 Ibid. We might more commonly construe this $\forall x.Ou(x)\cdot No(x)$.

32 Ibid.

Heidegger could make sense. So from this exercise, Carnap wants us to see that we should be using language that correctly accords with logic, e.g. ~∀x.Ou(x) rather than Ou(no) which seems to be logically absurd given that it posits that there is a thing that is not a thing.

It would appear that Carnap's argument against the metaphysics of Heidegger is one that not too many people would have a hard time swallowing. However, Carnap gives another example of what he sees as a meaningless statement. He begins by giving the sentence:

1. Caesar is and.[33]

It seems intuitive to view this sentence (actually, Carnap uses 'sequence of words') as meaningless in virtue of the fact that it breaks a syntactical rule by using the conjunction 'and' as an object. In other words, the rules of syntax require that the third position be occupied, not by a conjunction, but by a predicate, hence by a noun (with article) or by an adjective."[34] This type of construction is one that our syntactical rules simply do not allow, rendering this sentence totally devoid of meaning. However, Carnap goes on to make a much bolder claim with his next example:

2. Caesar is a prime number.

In this instance, Carnap wants to claim that (2), rather than true or false, is in fact meaningless in virtue of the fact that "'Prime Number' is a predicate of numbers; it can neither be affirmed nor denied of a person."[35] So in other words, Carnap wants to claim that a category mistake renders (what would be) a sentence meaningless. After all, in his view, if we were to say that (2) is meaningful and false, he believes we would be committing ourselves to the truth of "Caesar is divisible by another number," which seems just as meaningless as the first. The difficulty here is

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33 Ibid., 67.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 68.

that it is hard to see how (1) and (2) both end up in the same category, i.e. that of being meaningless, in virtue of the fact that (2) at least appears to make sense whereas (1) clearly does not. Perhaps Carnap is allowing a difference between (1) and (2) in that (2), although syntactically sound, is simply such a confused statement that no one would even try to assert it under any circumstances. In essence, (2) is too false for it to even hold on to whatever meaning it might have had. The same could be said of any number of "statements," e.g. "Celery is greener than a story," or "War is wider than the ocean." Carnap would ask, in working under the idea expressed by Moritz Schlick that "[everything] that can be expressed is knowable, and that is all that can be meaningfully asked about,"[36] what possibly could these statements mean? If there is no place for these sentences within our language, then they cannot be expressed and therefore cannot be meaningfully asked about. So use of these meaningless statements, for Carnap, is like the youth who tries to put the triangle block in the circle hole, forcing language to work in ways that it was never intended and it cannot be fixed until the pursuit is abandoned for putting these "blocks" in their proper place.

For Carnap and the Vienna Circle, the assertions of metaphysics are all category mistakes. Take, for instance, the claim that love is a universal. They would argue that love is not the type of thing that could have the term 'universal' predicated of it. In breaking semantic rules in this manner, metaphysics is rendered a vacuous discipline. Carnap suggested that we make the transition from what he referred to as the 'material mode,' which is the common way we think about language, to the 'formal mode,' which refers only to linguistic forms. Oswald Hanfling records an example from Carnap where he has someone making the statement, "Five is not a thing but a number." Carnap's insight was that this statement looks suspiciously like

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[36] Schlick, "Die Wende der Philosophie,"156.

statements in which we are ascribing properties; but in actuality, instead of attempting to ascribe some property to the *thing* five, we are, in fact, concerned about the *word* five. In his formal mode, the statement would be translated, "Five is not a thing word but a number word."[37] This example is to show us that if we begin thinking of terms as falling into certain categories and, in virtue of these categories, as having a limited number of predicates that could be applied to them, we would cease to have the confusion that the Vienna Circle saw infecting all of metaphysics. To return to our previous examples, we would say to the question "What about the Nothing?" that 'nothing' is not a 'thing-word' but something else entirely, making this question also a category mistake. And to the statement "Caesar is a prime number," we would perhaps say that 'Caesar' is a 'thing-word' (or person-word?) and that the predicate 'prime number' cannot be applied to it in virtue of the fact that it can only be applied to 'number-words.'

III.III Frege Over Carnap

It seems to me that there is a serious problem with Carnap's understanding of how we should view language, and that is that there is no motivation for the view independent from the project of eliminating metaphysics. If we accept Carnap's view then we must accept that metaphysics is vacuous. But if we already have reason to believe that metaphysics is not vacuous, then we have no motivation for committing to Carnap's semantics. Carnaps's argument rests on a circularity: if a person already believes that metaphysics affirms meaningless statements, then Carnap supplies them with the tools he or she needs to eradicate it from their philosophy; but if a person does not, then it is hard to see why one would chose Carnap's view over Frege's. Wittgenstein, for instance, had this to say about problems within his own linguistic

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[37] Hanfling, Oswald. *Logical Positivism*. (Columbia University Press: New York, 1981) 78.

system:

> My statements are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these statements; then he sees the world rightly.[38]

Carnap himself vehemently disagreed with such an approach in dealing with seeming self-contradictory problems of one's views, but there is an important parallel here. With Carnap's conception, we should ask ourselves why we climb the ladder in the first place if we are not already convinced that the conclusion to which it leads is how to "see the world rightly." In essence, there would appear to be very little Carnap could say to someone who responded to him by saying, "I like metaphysics, I think it is meaningful and I reject your account of language."

There is also a problem with this idea of deriving logical validity from a word's membership in a linguistic category. Remember that Carnap claimed that the 'sequence of words,' "Caesar is a prime number," is meaningless in virtue of the fact that 'Caesar' belongs to a different category than those words to which 'prime number' can be correctly predicated. However, there are many different categories to which we might be tempted to suggest 'Caesar' belongs. For example,[39] if we take the statement, "Jay, my brother, is an unfaithful husband," it would seem that we would be correct to think of this statement as both having meaning and being false. After all, 'Jay, my brother' is a member of the category 'husband' and the predicate 'unfaithful husband' can be predicated to the members of that category. However, I know Jay and I know that, in fact, he is a faithful husband. So now we have evidence that the statement above is indeed false. But in virtue of being a member of the category 'faithful husband,' we must not allow the phrase 'unfaithful husband' to be predicated to him. If we were to say that

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[38] Qtd. in Carnap, "Philosophy and Logical Syntax," 435.

[39] This example was brought to my attention by Jay Martin, who is my brother and a faithful husband.

"Jay, my brother, is an unfaithful husband," then we would in essence be asserting that "A faithful husband is an unfaithful husband." It seems, then, that depending on the context with which one views a word, e.g. in this case as a husband or a faithful husband, the same statement can in one case be meaningless which in another is simply false. I would argue that the same logic could be used to render "Caesar is a prime number" false instead of meaningless, keeping within Carnap's framework. After all, if I view 'Caesar' as an 'entity-word' and number as an 'entity- word,' then it becomes possible to predicate the same types of phrases to both which would include 'being a prime number.' Carnap may want to argue that our categories are restricted in some way; however, I cannot see how any such restriction would be anything more than arbitrary.

My last objection to Carnap returns to the example of "Caesar is a prime number." According to Carnap, "Caesar is a prime number," is meaningless. Even if we were to concede Carnap this point (which I am not wont to do), it appears that the sentence "Caesar is not a prime number," is meaningful and certainly *true* even by Carnap's standards! And the same follows for all category mistakes: "Love is a building" would be meaningless whereas "Love is not a building" would be true. I would argue that the reason that this is the case is that it is true both that Caesar is not identical to any member of the set of prime numbers and that love is not identical to any member of the set of all buildings. And I would contend that this is at least a common way of understanding how we reason.[40] However, if this is accurate, as I believe it is, then why can't we say the same for "Caesar is a prime number"? Caesar is not identical to any member of the set of prime numbers; therefore, it is false that Caesar is a prime number. In a

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[40] "Is there garlic in this soup?" just translates to "Is there anything in the set of all ingredients of this soup that is identical to garlic?" "Is Cheryl a girl scout" is simply shorthand for "Is there any member of the set of all girl scouts that is identical to Cheryl."

Fregean conception, we would say that the sentence "Caesar is a prime number" does not denote the True; therefore it is false, and every category mistake along with it.

III.IV Rejoinder to Altman

Keeping our discussion of Frege and Carnap in mind, it cannot be denied that Altman's construal of the open question argument is intriguing and even persuasive. However, I am worried about some of the commitments that come along with it. He makes the claim that the question, "Is *good* good?" although syntactically well-formed, is meaningless because it asks "about the self-predication of [a property] for which self-predication makes no sense."[41] This statement seems to be simply a restatement of Carnap's thesis that all category mistakes are not false but actually meaningless. But if we are not motivated towards Carnap's project of eradicating metaphysics, I find it difficult to see the motivation for accepting such a view of language in lieu of one more friendly to metaphysics, namely Frege's. So if we can make sense of both the questions "Is good good?" and "Is homeostatic cluster *x* good?" then we have no reason to accept Altman's conclusion.

III.V Altman's Rejoinder to the Rejoinder and a Rejoinder to that Rejoinder

Altman recognizes that someone might try to make such a move and so offers another critique from within a Fregean understanding of language. He claims that even if his critics wanted to argue that questions of the sort, "Is good good?" and, "Is largeness large?" can be answered, "No" instead of being assumed meaningless, there is still something importantly different about the way in which the answer is no. Propositions like, "Goodness is good" would

[41] Altman, p. 398.

not be just false, but would be necessarily false because goodness is just not the type of property that could be predicated of itself. The same is true of "Largeness is large." Largeness, Altman argues, is a property of physical objects and given that the property largeness is not a physical object, the proposition is necessarily false. He goes on to claim that even if we have concerns regarding his analysis of self-predication, his version of the argument could simply be modified so as to sidestep our concerns altogether. His proposal elegantly suggests that even if statements regarding the self-predication of *good* are in fact meaningful, we can understand them to be categorically false. Simply put, *good* is not the type of thing that could possibly be good, whereas any given natural property P is precisely the type of thing of which good can be predicated. Metaphysically, there is nothing about natural properties that would prevent them from being good, even if no natural property actually has good predicated of it. If this is correct, it would be an open question as to whether some natural property P is good, again given that there is nothing within the concept of natural properties that prevents it. But, Altman argues that the question, "Is good good?" would indeed be a closed question on account of this idea that *good*, in virtue of what kind of thing it is, cannot possibly be itself good. So, of course, given that *good* has some property that natural properties lack and not being able to have good predicated of it, by Leibniz's Law, Altman concludes that good cannot be identical to any natural property.[42]

Again Altman presents us with what appears to be an excellent defense of the open question argument; however, I feel that it is still unsatisfactory. The essence of the argument, simply put, is that goodness is the type of property that necessarily could not be self-predicated, i.e. that the proposition "Good is good," is necessarily false, but some natural property, even if

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[42] Altman, p. 405-406.

the property *good* could not sensibly be predicated of it, would not be the type of property that necessarily could not be self-predicated. Given that goodness would have the difference with any natural property, goodness cannot be identical to any natural property and the open question argument is still alive and well. I have two hesitations, the first of which lies in Altman's assertion that "[any] given natural property, P, would be the sort of thing that could have 'good' truly predicated of it,"[43] and that "good would not be the sort of property that could have 'good' truly predicated of it."[44] But the problem lies in the fact that if at some point in the past, someone (or some group) pointed to some homeostatic cluster property and called it good, then *good* rigidly designates that homeostatic cluster, *not* just in this world but in *every* possible world. If this traditional understanding of rigid designation is correct, then whatever homeostatic cluster property is rigidly designated by *good* also necessarily cannot be itself good. If water necessarily has the property of being partially constituted by oxygen, then necessarily so does H_2O because water rigidly designates H_2O meaning that they are identical in all possible worlds. By the same logic, if the Cornell Realist is correct about *good* rigidly designating a certain homeostatic cluster property, then whatever is true of *good* is also true of that homeostatic cluster.

My second hesitation is in the claim that "good would not be the sort of property that could have 'good' truly predicated of it: the predication would always be false."[45] This seems to bring in through a backdoor Carnap and his "formal mode" of language. It appears to suggest that 'good' is (perhaps) an "idea-word" and that idea-words cannot be properly applied to idea-words, rendering the question, "Is good good?" necessarily answered negatively, but given that

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43 Ibid., interpolation added.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.

idea-words can be applied to (for instance) "natural property-words" the question, "Is homeostatic cluster property x good?" is only incidentally answered negatively. But if we address these questions within a Fregean model, it looks like the problem goes away. Frege, it seems, would translate the question, "Is good good?" into something like "Is there any member of the set of good things that is identical to good?" This would seem to be quite clearly answered negatively. He could then go on to ask the question, "Is there any possible world in which there is a member of the set of good things that is identical to good?" he would again answer negatively. In regard to the question, "Is homeostatic cluster property *x* good?" he would understand it as asking, "Is there any member of the set of all good things that is identical to homeostatic cluster property *x*?" and we would, presumably be free to answer this question negatively. And then if we were to go on to ask the question, "Is there a possible world in which there is a member of the set of all good things that is identical to homeostatic cluster property *x*?" it seems that, given rigid designation, we should be free to answer that question negatively as well. This is not because of the linguistic role that *good* and *homeostatic cluster property* are playing but because of the *type* of things we believe them to be, which also seems to be the type of analysis in which Moore himself was interested:

> A definition does indeed often mean the expressing of one word's meaning in other words. But this is not the sort of definition I am asking for. Such a definition can never be of ultimate importance in any study except lexicography. If I wanted that kind of definition I should have to consider in the first place how people generally used the word 'good'; but my business is not with its proper usage as established by custom[...]My business is solely with that object or idea, which I hold, rightly or wrongly, that the word is generally used to stand for. What I want to discover is the *nature of that object or idea*, and about this I am extremely anxious to arrive at an agreement.[46] (emphasis added and interpolation added).

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[46] Moore, p. 58.

After all, it seems apparent that *water* and H_2O are playing different linguistic roles,[47] but despite the different ways in which these two words are used linguistically, we understand them to reference the same *kind* of thing because they both rigidly designate the same thing. It seems that we are obligated to offer the Cornell Realists the courtesy of explaining the concepts 'good' and 'homeostatic cluster property *x*' in the same way. Therefore, the second formulation of the open question argument has been shown to be ineffective.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have given a thorough account of the history of the open question argument. I have provided Moore's original impetus for it and its traditional formulation. I then examined the Cornell Realists' objection to that original formulation and showed that their objection does indeed show the open question argument to be incorrect in its conclusions. Having presented the history of the open question argument and having assessed the most challenging objections to it, I turned to Andrew Altman's powerful reconstruction of the open question argument in order to see how well, if at all, it sidesteps the objections leveled against the classical formulation. I then argued that while Altman does present the most coherent defense of the open question argument available, I concluded that insofar as he has rested upon a commitment to Carnap's philosophy of language over a Fregean semantic and an untenable rendering of post-Kripkean philosophy of language as it concerns rigid designation, we must reject his reformulation. Given that rigid designation itself undermines Altman's position, I conclude that the open question is still in need of a defense before it can regain its position as a major player in the discipline of ethics.

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[47] For instance, we could understand water as a 'thing-word' and H_2O as a 'structure-word'.

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