Objective goodness and Aristotle’s dilemma

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1. The dilemma

A dilemma often puzzles those who contemplate there being a property of goodness in a robust, objective sense in the spirit of G.E. Moore: 1

If (a) whatever (intrinsic) goodness there is in the world exists as a property which supervenes on the natures of certain things, e.g., pleasure or honor, then the things’ natures seem deprived of any direct role in explaining the goodness of things, which seems wrong. Yet if (b) whatever goodness exists does not supervene on the natures but exists wholly within them, then since some of the natures have, qua good things, nothing in common, a fortiori the natures have no property of goodness in common. If goodness is a property then either (a) or (b), hence no property of goodness exists.

Call this “Aristotle’s dilemma” after Aristotle’s expression of it. 2 I argue that the moral objectivist (as I call the proponent of a Moorean property of intrinsic goodness) can escape Aristotle’s dilemma. My solution works through either fork (a) or fork (b), depending on how a metaphysical issue is resolved. My solution is that the relevant relation between the property of goodness and the properties comprising the natures of good things is a species of entailment. To say that property A entails property B is short for saying that the statement that x has A entails the statement that x has B. This conditional is itself true in virtue of the natures of A and B in a way I shall discuss.

I interpret supervenience to obtain only between ontologically independent entities, so that a complex property is not supervened on by its parts. I use “entailment” not in the narrow sense of strict logical implication, but in the broader sense of conceptual necessitation. While entailment in this broader sense is a relation whose instances are knowable a priori, statements asserting these instances may be either analytic or synthetic. I take a statement to be analytic if its logical form, as revealed by the meanings or
meaningful uses of its terms, reveals its truth-value, and synthetic otherwise; I take *a priori* knowledge of a statement to rest essentially on a correct understanding of the meanings or meaningful uses of the statement’s terms.

Thus there may be different kinds of entailment. To escape Aristotle’s dilemma, the moral objectivist specifies that moral entailment is of the same general kind as the entailment by which necessarily a red thing is colored. Perhaps the resemblance between color entailment (as I call it) and moral entailment is not perfect, but the moral objectivist need only hold that the two kinds of entailment are alike in whatever common aspect of their structures allows them to escape dilemmas of the form of Aristotle’s.³ Such an aspect exists (at least in color entailment) because, given that coloredness exists, Aristotle’s dilemma cannot be used to prove the nonexistence of the property of coloredness.

Thus, I follow the time-honored strategy of seeking out respectable siblings for a shady proposed entity. Goodness resembles other entities in various ways. Goodness and its negative twin (or negative half), badness, together make up the whole of an intensity continuum, just as do the properties of heat and coldness. Goodness and humans, like pleasure and humans, are such that necessarily humans who grasp the concept of goodness (or pleasure) have some positive disposition toward goodness (or pleasure), though not necessarily to the exclusion of a simultaneous negative disposition toward goodness (or pleasure). And goodness and coloredness are alike in that they are determinable properties, by which I mean (at least) that they cannot be instantiated in the absence of the instantiation of one of a range of other, determinate properties, such as pleasure and redness, in virtue of whose instantiation the determinable property in question is also instantiated.

My defense of this solution to Aristotle’s dilemma has two parts: first, an explanation of how I interpret coloredness, and how the property thus interpreted, hence also goodness, escapes Aristotle’s dilemma; and second, a discussion of some metaphysical objections to the existence of properties such as goodness and coloredness which ontically express the unity of ranges of less controversial properties.

### 2. Goodness and coloredness

I interpret coloredness in such a way as to avoid some relevant disanalogies between goodness and coloredness as the latter is sometimes interpreted. The first disanalogy stems from the view that determinate colors are relative, dyadic properties, so that what is, say, red to me may be brown or