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Introduction to G.E. Moore's Principia Ethica

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN *Principia Ethica* appeared, in 1903, it became something of a sacred text for the Cambridge-educated elite—Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, John Maynard Keynes—who, along with Virginia Woolf, would form the core of the Bloomsbury Group. In a letter of October 11, 1903, Strachey confesses to Moore that he is “carried away” by *Principia*, which inaugurates, for him, “the beginning of the Age of Reason.” Moore’s critique of convention, his caustic dismissal of his philosophical predecessors, and the relentless rigor of his method promised a revolution in morality commensurate with the modernist transformation of art and literature. *Principia Ethica* shifted the study of ethics away from normative questions to issues of “metaethics,” the study of ethical concepts. Realism vs. relativism, the relation of goodness to rightness, and the logic of moral argument would come to dominate philosophical ethics for the next century, even when Moore’s philosophical heirs differed from him in their conclusions. In this sense, Moore established the methods and issues that would define Anglo-American reasoning about ethics from W. D. Ross (1877-1971) to Elizabeth Anscombe (1919-2001) to John Rawls (1921-2002) to Bernard Williams (1929-2003).

George Edward Moore didn’t intend to be a philosopher. He was born in 1873, the fifth of what would eventually be eight children of devout evangelical parents. About the time he was twelve years old, Moore himself went through an “ultra-evangelical” period, though, according to his autobiography, “long before I left school, I was, to use a word then popular, a complete Agnostic.” Moore and his

brothers attended Dulwich Academy in the London suburbs. He excelled at Greek and Latin, and it was as a Classics scholar that Moore went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1892. But by the end of his freshman year his new friend Bertrand Russell was urging Moore to take up philosophy. Moore was elected to the secret Cambridge Conversazione Society, more commonly known as the Apostles, the elite of the intellectual community at Cambridge. Russell describes Moore's début as "perfectly wonderful. . . . He looked like Newton and Satan rolled into one, each at the supreme moment of his life." In 1898 he was elected to a six-year fellowship at Trinity. In 1925 Moore was appointed Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge, a position which he held until his retirement in 1939. He continued to write and lecture regularly until his death in 1958. In the early 1960s, Moore was fondly, if comically, captured by Jonathan Miller, in the voice of Bertrand Russell, as part of *Beyond the Fringe*, the satirical revue made up, in addition to Miller, of Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, and Alan Bennett.

Principia is an audacious work. The very title evokes Isaac Newton's *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* of 1687, the founding document of modern physics (Russell and Whitehead would do the same in their own *Principia Mathematica*, the first volume of which would appear in 1910). Moore's famous first sentence is a withering condemnation of his predecessors:

It appears to me that in Ethics, as in all other philosophical studies, the difficulties and disagreements, of which its history is full, are mainly due to a very simple cause: namely to attempt to answer questions, without first discovering precisely *what* question it is which you desire to answer.

Moore's method came variously to be known as "conceptual analysis," "linguistic analysis," and "ordinary language philosophy." Moore himself disdained these labels, but there is little doubt that, as a recent commentator puts it, "the effect of Moore's position was to turn the kind of philosophy done by some of his teachers on its head."

One thing Moore *isn't* doing is semantics. Early on he insists that "verbal questions are properly left to the writers of dictionaries and other persons interested in literature; philosophy, as we shall see, has no concern with them." While he will discuss the definition of "good" at some length, his "business is not with its proper use, as established by custom." If language matters to philosophy, it is not in the way it matters to linguists and lexicographer.

What we need, Moore begins, is "to distinguish clearly two kinds of questions. . . . These two questions may be expressed, the first in the form: What kind of things ought to exist for their own sakes? The second in the form: What kind of actions ought we to perform?" Surprisingly, once you understand the first question, it turns out that there are no practical reasons that justify a judgment that something is good for its own sake. The only reason for believing a certain sort of thing ought to exist, just because of what it is, is the immediate awareness of the goodness of the thing. If you attempted to offer a justification—"because it helps others," "because it alleviates pain," even "because it proclaims the glory of God"—you would be shifting the reason why it should exist away from what it is to what it does. But that is the domain of the second question.

Since we do say that certain things are good in themselves, we must be reacting to an immediate awareness of goodness. Moore's term for this, taken from his teacher Henry Sidgwick, is "intuition." Moore is emphatically not attributing to himself, or to anyone, some occult or mystical ability. The contrasting term is "inference." When we infer something we move from various bits of evidence to a conclusion that was not immediately apparent. An intuition—he will subsequently use the example of colors—is immediately present, without need of inference. Look at a tomato, your hand, or the face of your friend; there is no inference here. Moore would say that you know what it is immediately.

Moore has no theory of where these intuitions come from or how we learn to recognize them. He is simply drawing out the implications of what we are committed to by the common-sense ways we talk about our world. Nothing about our intuitions guar-

antees their truth. As Moore puts it, "in every way in which it is possible to cognise a true proposition, it is also possible to cognise a false one." To say that something is true is to make a statement about the way the world is, however we happened to learn it. This is why Moore's view of ethics is a form of "realism."

The next thing to note is that good is simple; it has no parts. Since it has no parts, it is not capable of definition. Moore offers the analogy with "yellow." To say that yellow is a color isn't a definition. To say that it is a primary color merely locates it in a particular group of colors. We regularly perceive yellow, and most of us can identify the yellow things (as opposed, say, to the puce things) in our visual field immediately and with remarkable accuracy. "Good" works the same way. If someone offers a definition—"good" means "pleasant"—it is always legitimate to object that some things may be pleasant to some people, at some times, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they are good. The would-be definer has committed "the naturalistic fallacy."

Exposing the "naturalistic fallacy" is the heart of Moore's project. A philosophically illuminating definition picks out essential properties. To be pleased reports a psychological state, achieved by particular persons in particular ways. It's easy enough to see why it is confused with good; we often say of pleasant experiences that they are good. But when we're talking philosophically, "'Pleased' *means* nothing but having pleasure." We may not be able to define pleasure in any philosophically enlightening way, but any mature user of the language knows that "pleasure," or any other natural state you might want to substitute, is not *necessarily* "good."

Another way to put this is to say that it is always an open question whether some particular thing, or state, or activity is actually good. Moore considers "one of the more plausible, because one of the more complicated," philosophical attempts to define "good," namely "that to be good may mean to be that which we desire to desire." The idea here is that we often desire things we know we shouldn't. When we notice this, it's not uncommon to

think we should *really* want something else instead. This looks like distinguishing the real from the merely apparent good. "But," Moore notes:

if we carry the investigation further, and ask ourselves 'Is it good to desire to desire A?' it is apparent, on a little reflection, that this question is itself as intelligible as the original question 'Is A good?'—that we are, in fact, now asking for exactly the same information about the desire to desire A, for which we formerly asked with regard to A itself.

If it is always an open question whether or not desiring, loving, or any other imaginable act relating to anything is good for a particular person, at a particular time, then "good" can't be defined in the proposed terms. That needn't mean that particular states of affairs can't be good, only that they can't, philosophically speaking, *define* the term.

Armed with these weapons—good as the simple object of intuition, the naturalist fallacy, and the open question argument—Moore turns his sights on the regnant schools of ethical theory. The various versions of "naturalistic ethics typically commit the naturalistic fallacy in its crudest form. Post-Darwinians of various stripes identify the good with some physical, social, or psychological state, but it "will always remain pertinent to ask, whether the feeling itself is good; and if so, then good cannot itself be identical with any feeling." The Utilitarian John Stuart Mill "has made as naive and artless a use of the naturalistic fallacy as anybody could desire." But even worse says Moore, in a caustic satire on Mill, he has sold his "contemptible nonsense" to the public by trading on a confusion between means and ends:

And the public haven't noticed. Yet this is certainly what Mill has done. He has broken down the distinction between means and ends, upon the precise observance of which his Hedonism rests. And he has

been compelled to do this, because he has failed to distinguish 'end' in the sense of what is desirable, from 'end' in the sense of what is desired.

The Utilitarian maxim that the pleasure of the many should be maximized seems to be about what is actually desired, but this naturally leads critics to ask whether or not what would please the many is truly good.

In chapter four, having dispatched the various forms of "naturalistic ethics," Moore moves on to its "metaphysical" forms. The main protagonists here are the idealists, a loose group having its origins in Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and G. F. W. Hegel (1770-1831), with their British followers T. H. Green (1836-1882), F. H. Bradley (1846-1924), and Moore's teacher James M. E. McTaggart (1866-1925). Moore describes as "metaphysical" the ethical theories which ground their positions in "something supersensible which they inferred to exist, and which they held to be perfectly good." This commits the naturalistic fallacy, ironically, by denying that the physical world is really real and then identifying the good with metaphysical reality. This not only commits Moore's key fallacy, it also reduces our earthly strivings to mere means of attaining that ultimate ideal. But if the metaphysician "holds, not only that such an eternal reality exists, but also, as is commonly the case, that nothing else is real. . . then truly it will follow that nothing we can do will ever bring any good to pass." Metaphysical ethics, then, is not only fallacious in its foundations, but it reduces us to moral impotence.

Principia Ethica, through the first four chapters, is bracing stuff. It is also, if you enjoy philosophical invective (e.g., Mill's "contemptible nonsense") pretty funny. But for the denizens of what would become Bloomsbury, the best was last. Tom Regan records that, "writing to Leonard Woolf just after *Principia's* publication, Strachey enthuses about 'the last *two* chapters' (emphasis added), proclaiming 'glory alleluiah!'" At first blush it seems hard to derive from *Principia* "an ethic of individual liberation." Moore himself

insists that “no dutiful action can possibly have unique value in the sense that it is the sole thing of value in the world.” This seems to give us a very restricted and localized utilitarianism. Because we can never really know whether a particular act is a duty, “a virtue, if it is really a virtue, must be good as a *means*. . .but it is not *better* as a means than non-virtuous dispositions; it generally has no value in itself.” The ultimate end, if there is one, is irrelevant. There is no moral law. Virtue, philosophically speaking, is worthless.

And that, precisely, is where liberation lies. Moore provides Strachey and his friends the philosophical justification for their break with tradition, their disdain for middle-class morality, and their embrace of what the early twenty-first century has come to call alternative sexual lifestyles. The Bloomsberries (as Mary McCarthy would come to call them) called it “buggery.” “The arguments offered in defence of Common Sense morality,” writes Moore:

very often presuppose the existence of conditions, which cannot be fairly assumed to be so universally necessary as the tendency to continue life and to desire property. . .this, for instance, seems to be the case with most of the rules comprehended under the name of Chastity.”

Perhaps defenders of the middle-class *status quo* can't imagine any viable alternative, but that, Moore seems to suggest, is their problem. As for providing a proper Christian upbringing, deep devotion to the teachings of the church “may lead the believer to perform actions of which the actual consequences, supposing no such God to exist, may be much worse than he might otherwise have effected.” Since our duty is to encourage those acts that have some probability of bettering the whole, “we should hesitate to encourage the Love of God, in the absence of any proof that he exists.”

What, then, is intrinsically good? “By far the most valuable things, which we can know or can imagine,” writes Moore, “are certain states of consciousness, which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beauti-

ful objects." Such a conclusion, particularly coupled with Moore's reservations about God and chastity, might well have provoked Strachey's "alleluiah!" Moore's ideal dovetails precisely with the aesthetics of Clive Bell, Virginia Woolf's brother in law. The practical result was solidarity with like-minded friends. Everyone else was a philistine.

Almost eighty years later, Alasdair MacIntyre saw in this the rise of an elite, aestheticized, emotivism:

Keynes emphasised the rejection not only of the Benthamite version of utilitarianism and Christianity, but of all claims on behalf of social action conceived as a worthwhile end. What was left? The answer is: a highly impoverished view of how 'good' may be used.

On MacIntyre's account, Moore's assault on the tradition cut away so much of our ordinary moral vocabulary that the Bloomsberries, and the philosophical emotivists who were Moore's immediate academic heirs, found themselves unable to invoke anything beyond their own emotions and introspective judgments. What contemporary neo-conservatives decry as the erosion of civic virtue, and usually trace back to the 1960s, was, on this reading, already in evidence at the turn of the twentieth century. Liberation or solipsism? The question remains a matter of contentious debate, but for many of the figures who define English modernism, its theorist was G. E. Moore.

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