

Principia Ethica

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If the academic philosopher would be in need of a patron saint, who would be more qualified than G.E.Moore to uphold that position? Not only was he eminently saintly in his apparition, kind, considerate and blessed with an innocence that could admit no truly evil thought. He was also an exemplary representative of the profession. Meticulous and precise with an ambition of utmost clarity banning as far as possible any ambiguity or confusion. This comes of course with a not so small a dose of pedantry, but that is inevitable, as is the narrowing of focus. As a professional philosopher he is suspicious of meta-physics and allergic to cant, he writes at length, not out of laziness but out of conscientiousness. Anyone professing to write on matters philosophical could learn a great deal from him, especially as to exposition and attitude, after all he is an impeccable professional. Yet, and this might sadly be characteristic of academic philosophers as a whole, any really exciting contribution to philosophy cannot be expected of them. For that they are too sane and erudite and thus too timid. And as to Moore, he was at the right time at the right place and exerted for a few charming decades an influence out of proportion to his gifts and contributions, which somewhat maliciously could be characterized as glorified Common Sense. But after all, why begrudge him that, such innocent success after all.

Principia Ethica is his major work. It generated a lot of attention and admiration in its days, and is still often referred to, but I suspect, seldom read. What is it all about? Putting Ethics on a firm scientific basis and thereby engaging in polite polemics against mistaken predecessors. That part takes up almost the lions share of the work, and as it engages names like Spencer, Sidgwick and J.S.Mill, people (with the possible exception of the last) who no longer figure prominently, and thus gives to the work a slightly dated air. The basic question that he addresses is what is Good. On one hand he asserts that we must know exactly what we mean by Good in order to make any headway with Ethics at all and to be sure that we are answering the right questions; on the other hand he claims that Good is an indefinable notion, a primitive as we would say now, and cannot be explained. The attempts to do so anyway, and to reduce goodness to something else, is to fall into what Moore repeatedly rejects as the Naturalistic Fallacy. Thus we have to resort to a common Intuition as to the nature of Good, something with which Moore does not seem entirely comfortable with, especially since he has scientific ambitions for his quest. Instead he intimates that although we cannot argue backwards from Good we can argue forward and in this way exhibit self-conflicting views of those who entertain mistaken ideas of Goodness.

As to Goodness we have according to Moore to make a firm distinction between what is merely good as a means to an end, and what is intrinsically good. The former depends on time and circumstances, and can thus not attain the level of a scientific law, while the former is eternal, and must form the basis for any exploration of what is Good, after all the ultimate ambition of any conduct aiming at the Good. Furthermore the kinds of things

which we consider Good are usually highly complex things that are made up of several components, each of which might not be so Good, maybe even indifferent or evil. Now the goodness of the whole is not just a sum of the goodness of its parts, but often something much more. Two indifferent things by themselves can combine to something of high worth, as an example he takes the consciousness of beauty, each of them useless by themselves and only enhanced by mutual combination. Thus in particular it is meaningless to try and locate goodness in any specific location of a complex entity. That one component is indifferent does not mean that the goodness resides in the rest. This is of course all sound (with no fury), Moore is clearly talking about emergent qualities, of different levels of organizations in which the qualities at one level have no counterpart at lower ones. Moore searches for a term, and what naturally presents itself - namely 'organic', has to many connotations to Hegel to make him comfortable.

There are many theories of Ethics, all of which try to base Ethics on something else, be it nature or metaphysical concepts. This all involve explaining the Good in terms of other things, and thus in particular to be able to formulate criteria for goodness. But this is of course to commit the deadly sin of the Naturalist Fallacy in the eyes of Moore. As to Good being adhering to the Natural and finding its most articulate expression in Spencer's interpretation of Darwin Natural Selection, Moore dismisses rather swiftly. He notes correctly, that there is no inherent trend in evolution of constantly ascending, evolution could as well induce a regress¹. However, the naturalistic interpretation of Goodness has in recent years had a renaissance through naturalists such as Wilson, Hamilton and Dawkins, proposing a theory how selection can reward altruism². His main argument is against Hedonism, especially as it has been explained by J.S.Mill. The Hedonist Creed can be summarized in that pleasure (including the absence of pain) is the ultimate end, and its attainment being identical with Happiness and the Good. Although Moore does not have any quarrel with the practical consequences of Hedonism, he takes exception to the way it is being argued and supported by reason, and as his tract is not so much a practical guide to conduct, as a systematic scientific exploration as to its basis, it is natural that he will concentrate on the intellectual underpinnings. To do so his strategy is to carry on the reasoning of Mill and show that it leads to contradictions and nonsense. First he engages in scholastic hair-splitting and inspired by a dialog of Plato³, separates pleasure from consciousness. Can unconscious pleasure be a good thing after all? Now this seems a bit disingenuous, after all is not pleasure (as well as pain) one of the fruits of consciousness and neither makes any sense without it? But of course it is a well-known gambit by academic philosophers to introduce spurious distinctions into an argument. More seriously

¹ As is actually the case with the evolution of parasites

² In all fairness one should note that at the end of his famous book 'The Selfish Gene' its author explicitly formulates an ethic credo which transcends that of evolution, by making an appeal to literally break out of the prison in which the 'selfishness' of genes have trapped us into. It is possible though that the author may in later years have recanted to some extent, finding his appeal overly sentimental.

³ In which one of the characters claim that the attainment of pleasure is all that is needed for happiness, and Socrates needles him and asks whether he would in that case willingly do away with wisdom and other condiments, and to the assent of the interviewee conclude that he would be reduced to that of a senseless oyster, to which the man is reacting with shame and utter embarrassment

though he catches Mill in his making the distinction of different kinds of pleasure, some obviously being higher than others, such as the contemplation of mental things as opposed to the indulgence in beastly lascivious satisfaction. But Moore argues, if pleasure is the ultimate good, there surely is only one kind of pleasure, and the only difference we can think of pertains to quantity not quality. In that case Bentham was more honest, speaking about the highest possible happiness to the highest number of people. As to the charge of egotism with which Hedonism is often subjected to, Moore has a rather tolerant attitude. He finds egoism in many ways rational, and besides Goodness being indivisible, the goodness to which the egoist strives is universal, the particular possession of which only happens to be specific to the agent. Thus the pleasure the egoist finds is as valuable as any other pleasure, pleasure as pleasure. No Mills confusion as to the nature of the Good is to confuse desire with what is desirable. Do we not sometimes desire a certain desire we do not have, and, even if it strains the mental capacity of a human to fully comprehend, could we not even at times desire to desire some particular desire?

In the least satisfying chapter in the book Moore discusses the metaphysical underpinnings of Goodness. One would naively think that he would consider Goodness as a Platonic abstraction on par with such basic facts that 'two plus two makes four' and thus impossible to pin down in the here and the now. Moore briefly touches upon the fallacy of equating Will with the Good, assuming that just as we can seek truth with our cognitive faculties, we can find the Good by our willing it, is a great mistake based on false analogies. This insight hardly impresses us. Furthermore he points out the obvious that the metaphysical world being eternal and hence beyond our influence, it cannot have any practical implications on our conduct, except possibly of course such metaphysical convictions of the Christians of a Heaven after death entrance to which can be contingent upon our terrestrial deeds. Such a literal belief in Christian Mythology does not behoove a professional philosopher.

But Ethics is about conduct and how should we live. Moore is neither interested, nor particularly capable of providing practical moral pointers. Formally at least he sees the Good not only as a basic undefinable entity but also as a quantifiable one, although he gives no indication as how this can be done. Thus in principle the worth of any action can be calculated by adding up all its consequences from here to infinity. This is a tall order indeed, but if we in addition not only desires to act well, but to act in the best possible way, we also need to make a similar calculation for any conceivable other action in order to get a basis for comparison. This is truly unfeasible and hence we have to set our goals lower. Instead of making a total computation we have to make a partial one, besides the effects of any action is bound to dissipate over time, the significant ramifications are mostly to be seen in the near future anyway. And instead of considering all possible alternative actions we restrict ourselves to the imaginable. All of this eerily, and also somewhat comically, reminds us of the calculations supposedly economic man does in order to maximize his financial gains. Now Moore hardly can think of those kinds of calculations in any literal terms, yet to be honest, something similar is what is bound to be going on when we try to weigh different alternatives against each other. And after all it pertains to the dilemma we always face, whether it is justified to commit a lesser evil in order to avoid a greater one. In short whether the ends may justify the means. It is a thorny question, because

after all any evil deed can be justified by any greater potential evil, be it so in the distant future, and taken literally it prevents us from censuring any act whatsoever⁴ Moore does not delve into those questions into any depth, although one may surmise that he does not agree with those who oppose the idea of the end justifying the means, but as to be expected he does not explicitly claim that they do. He is loftier and more 'philosophical' and keeps the discussion on a proper level. In particular in this context Moore denies that there is any real difference between duty and expediency, regardless of what we are motivated by, our conclusions are bound to be the same. On a psychological level there is a distinction. A duty is something we instinctively shirk and failure to execute it is more likely to have bad consequences to others not ourselves (except possibly at a much later date, but yourself in a distant future is almost like somebody else, whose welfare does not directly impinge on your immediate self), while expediency is something we naturally are prone to do, and the consequences are most likely to profit ourselves (thus our alacrity in their performance). Now a virtue is a propensity to perform duties, often an unconscious such. Now duties and hence virtues are means to an end, not ends in themselves, hence their value may very well vary over time and context. Thus in particular virtues are not universal. As another example of a means to an end with little if any intrinsic merit Moore takes up the case of freedom, one of the few startling examples that he provides in a tract which is singularly free of concrete examples. And here we may touch upon the greatest weakness of the work, its lack of empiricism. It is one thing to give general rules another to provoke the instincts and ingenuity of a reader by providing provocative examples. The abstract ethical rules are liable to become rather insipid and shirk the intrinsic complexity of the subject. Any progress on the subject of Ethics must be through the encounter with ambiguous situations, of which the 20th century has had its fill. It is only in the last chapter that the author starts to look at concrete manifestations of Goodness, thereby revealing his paucity of experience being the main blessings of a sheltered existence.

What is the Ideal? This is the topic of the concluding chapter. He distinguishes between three levels. First is the Absolute Good, the most Good conceivable. Second the most Good possible, this is often presented as the Ultimate for Human ambition and the basis for the construction of various Utopias. On the third level he merely means things which are intrinsically good to a high degree. And as things good in themselves constitute the stable basis of ethics, it is a most fitting subject for conclusion. In this account he connects with the problem of goodness in complex entities, which he already introduced in the first chapter. In particular he also considers the reverse, evil complexes. He then makes the interesting observation that there is no symmetry between pleasure and pain. All things equal, the introduction of pleasure into an entity can only increase its goodness, while introduction of pain in an evil setting, far from enhancing the evil it moderates it. In the mind of Moore nothing worse is conceivable than the active enjoyment of evil, the

⁴ As a standard example the excesses of Stalin have traditionally been justified by the Socialist Paradise those paved the way for. In Lenin's phrase, you need to break eggs to make an omelet. Now the idea of a Socialist Paradise is no longer as fashionable as it once was, and Stalinism has to look around for other excuses. The idea of Utopian future justifying any deed in the present has been severely criticized in a tradition stemming from the 19th century and to some extent culminating in Poppers critique of the Closed Society.

tangible pleasure in the contemplation of ugly and horrible things. The more pleasure, the greater the depravity, thus incidentally making mincemeat of the assumption that pleasure is good by itself, let alone the sole Good there is according to the hedonists. Pain in such a setting would surely have an ameliorating effect, despite the fact that it is by itself an evil thing. Moore even flirts with the idea that a sufficient amount of pain could even tip the balances into the Good on the whole, but rejects it. Pain is too bad a thing by itself. Similarly some on the whole Good thing needs evil things in order to emerge. Courage is such a thing, and Compassion another. Without bad and evil things there would of course be neither an opportunity for Courage nor any occasion for Compassion. Does that mean that the world needs Evil things as well as Good things, (just like a drawing needs both black and white to emerge). Moore ponders it only to reject it. The world would be a better place would there be no need for either Courage and Compassion (and one suspects uncharitably that Moore, like many a philosopher, academic or not, might not possess any of them to any higher degree and thus not liable to miss their absence) to say nothing about Tragedy, how beautiful it may artistically be.

Now as two supreme examples of things Good in themselves Moore offers, somewhat defensively being somewhat embarrassed by their almost platitudinousness, the conscious pleasure of the contemplation of beautiful objects and the participation in human intercourse. What else is there to life? Of the two the first one is the simplest and gives the (possibly unintended) occasion for Moore to elaborate on his attitudes towards Art. To Moore there is an intimate connection between the Good and the Beautiful, the one is never really present without the other. On a metaphorical level I would say that the comparison has much to commend itself, how otherwise may we transcend the selfishness for extrinsic rewards that often underly our motivations to perform good deeds? The fascination with beauty is indeed a disinterested phenomenon, and it is far easier to think of something as being intrinsically beautiful than of something as intrinsically good, why otherwise would Christianity offer rewards for virtue, if not virtue would be its own reward⁵? But Moore tries to make the appreciation of beauty into an objective matter no longer residing in the eye of the beholder, by simply defining the contemplation of beauty as an intrinsically Good. Good being objective, otherwise there would be no Science of Ethics, make beauty objective as well, because the contemplation of something under the mistaken assumption that it is beautiful is not a Good thing. Furthermore in true scholastic spirit, Moore assumes that the addition of reality enhances Goodness. Thus a beautiful painting of a scenery is inferior to the scenery itself, would it exist⁶. For somebody with a more modern appreciation of art, this is highly suspect. However Moore also claims in the same vein that the Love for God would be even more worthwhile if God actually existed, on which we would be less prone to fault him. Incidentally is Moore a believer? One gets the feeling that belief would have come natural to him, as it did to his Quaker forefathers, and which he would have no qualms have accepted had he been born a generation or so earlier. But unfortunately at his time, believing in God was no longer fashionable, especially not in

⁵ Moore, however, claims as the observant reader has no doubt already noted, that virtue is in the nature of a means to an end? But that is but a technical objection.

⁶ This is of course also the ostensible position of Plato, who disparages the artists depictions as mere copies of copies, the latter being the manifestations of heavenly forms.

intellectual circles.

As to the pleasures of human intercourse Moore is somewhat more circumspect. It is not clear what exactly excites him so much, but of course he may not feel the need to be explicit. Interesting though are his speculations whether a purely spiritual appreciation of a fellow human would be superior to a normal one mixed with the material, something which has often been proposed. Moore, after some thought, thinks not. The material aspects of your friends rather enhance your appreciation than detract.

On the whole in spite of Moore's pains to be precise and thorough it is hard not to feel that essential elements of a discussion on Ethics are missing, The discussion is too cloistered, although given the general tenor of his exposition one is bound to underestimate it. Many a contemporary discussion on topical subjects having to do with say freedom of speech and other matters of political science, certainly might have benefited from his insights and treatment, but when it comes to the great tradition in philosophy, Moore has really less to contribute. He clearly holds that Ethics is a subject independent of Man, although the latter is of course very dependent on it. But is not the Good like the Beautiful something that does not make sense without a human context, in fact are they not human constructs? That is a discussion, well underway already at the time of Hume, which he does not attend to.

In retrospect one is somewhat puzzled why this book was once considered so important. Moore was an indefatigable contributor to the lectures the Apostles gave to each other, in fact for many years being the secretary of the association of budding geniuses. One may well see *Principia Ethica* as an extended sophomoric lecture, written in a spirit of sheltered cleverness and pedantry, no doubt more impressive when delivered in real time than when read and pondered more of a century later. On the other hand how many books are read after a century? Quaint and pedestrian as the book may now strike us, it has not so obvious virtues, and anyone but the most arrogant could actually learn something from it. In fact how many modern sincere attempts at a systematic theory of ethics would stand up as well? Moore is honest (no doubt a consequence of his basic innocence), he does not try to obfuscate, thus the failings tend to be more visible than the merits.

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