Moore

G.E.Moore and the Cambridge Apostles

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Unhappy boys with intellectual leanings tend to find the idea of Cambridge pure paradise. I certainly did in my adolescence, inspired by Russells autobiography; but it remained for me but an idea. Whether Moore ever was unhappy is a matter of speculation, certainly he gave every impression of being a happy boy at Cambridge. And indeed he did sample Cambridge to the hilt, being part of that charmed circle of Apostles, a secret, slightly sophomoric society, stemming from the beginning of the 19th century, membership of which was an exclusive thing indeed, bestowing on the select an assurance of brilliancy. The society was indeed secret, but its existence inevitably became publicly known as many of the leading intellectual and literary figures of the early 20th century had been connected to it[1]. The secret society, many of whose antics were rather silly, nevertheless seems to have been taken deadly serious by its members, many of whom attended its meetings regularly even after 'retirement' (or in the jargong of the society, becoming angles and 'taking wings'). Introduction in the society was of course, due to its secret nature, strictly by invitation, and usually took place the first or second year of attendance at the university, if at all. Noteworthy is also that the majority of the selected were associated either with Kings or more commonly with Trinity. Now the main activity of a meeting consisted in giving a talk of a philosophical nature, which was supposed to result in a question, on which a vote was taken. Moore quickly became assigned secretary and on his lot fell to give a lot of those lectures, and was more than most of the members shaped by this youthful experience.

Moore was an issue of the educated upper middle-class, in particular related to a variety of families[2] with radical religious backgrounds such as Quakerism, which intermarried and produced a disproportionate amount of scientists and literary men of note in late Victorian society, in fact constituting an intellectual aristocracy. This could of course be subjected to be a part of the interminable discussion on nature versus nurture, intrinsic talent versus a conducive culture, but from which we will wisely refrain. Moore himself was a shy modest boy on whom greatness was thrown uninvited. His ambition may not have gone beyond that of becoming a school-teacher, and his interests were of the classics. Philosophy as such he had had little exposure to, until he was asked to expound on it, and in the process embarking on a course of self-education, initially mentored by senior lights,

[1] The book lists as an appendix in chronological order all the members up to member 255 elected in November 1914. For all I know it may still be in existence, and if so the number of members must have run into the 500's. The author only treats Moore until the First World War, so there is no reference to later apostles, but it is not unlikely that some of those famous Cambridge spies were members as well

[2] Such as Sturge, Wedgwood, Darwin, Stephens, Strachey

such as McTaggart and Lowes Dickinson.

Now as a philosopher Moore was guided by some very common and useful professional virtues, such as the striving for precision and rigorous thinking consistently applied. This might be sufficient for competent academic philosophers, but maybe quite not for truly great ones, whose impact go beyond the narrow academic scene. Now was Moore a truly great philosopher? The author apparently thinks so, linking him with Russell and Wittgenstein as three truly great philosophers of the first half of the 20th century. Professional philosophers may disagree, wanting to further qualify greatness by locality as well as period. Certainly if you restrict yourself to Cambridge philosophers the statement may not appear quite as outrageous. Of the three both Russell and Wittgenstein have enjoyed great popular attention. Russell deliberately courted it, writing and lecturing for the public, titillating them with his open anti-religious views[3], while the reputation of Wittgenstein having been less direct, and more in the nature of an intellectual fad. Most people who savour Russell have at least read something by him, while this is not necessarily the case with the admirers of Wittgenstein. For the general public Moore is a far more anonymous figure, and few have actually heard of his major opus, and even less have ever read it. Moore's claim to fame is the influence he exerted on the influential. And the latter actually constitutes a very narrow base. Keynes refers to him, and so does Virginia Woolf, both being members of the Bloomsbury group. The inevitable, if ungenerous, suspicion is that the influence of Moore ultimately rested more on his personality than on his philosophy.

Now what exactly does his philosophy consist in? Unfortunately the author is not very clear on this, at least not in any technical sense. Philosophy is classically about what is true and what is right, and philosophy as education and instruction is ultimately about how to led the good and righteous life, thereby incidentally not differing significantly from religion. The great intellectual revolution of the 19th century was the separation of ethics from religion, a separation that left the former orphaned and in need of a new basis. The classical secular approaches to ethics derived from Bentham and his notion of utilitarianism, further developed by Mills, father and son. Moore's contribution can be seen as a reaction as well as a further refinement of it, because in its basics, the claims of utilitarianism are hard to reject wholly. In a more purely philosophical sense he rejected the idealism so dominant in Victorian philosophy and thereby also influencing and liberating Russell. Russell and Moore were philosophical rivals, and while Moore may have been above jealousy, Russell apparently was not, and was very clear that while Moore might have an edge on the ethical side of philosophy, Russell was supreme when it came to logic. Now, fittingly in a society of mutual admiration and passionate friendship, personal relations and concomitant states of mind were considered good things supreme, i.e. good in themselves and not as means to other ends. This was also what excited people and suitably interpreted was seen as a license of liberation from stuffy Victorian morals to those exalting personal development and intellectual intercourse. Thus, not surprisingly, the very tenor of Moores personality played a crucial role, especially in such a close-knit circle. And it is to the personality of Moore one has to turn in order to make sense of the

[3] Which did get him into trouble in the City University of New York, where his appointment was barred due to the supposedly lewd influence he was to have on the young.

phenomenon.

The striking quality of Moore was his innocence. A natural innocence may be a very powerful thing, and Moores innocence was natural and non-premeditated, and while it put off Wittgenstein (who claimed he could never warm to the man, as he like every child lacked true kindness and a throbbing heart) and provoked Russell to cruel teasing[4] it certainly seems to have held the majority of his associates in awe[5]. It is natural to suspect that the very personal example of the philosopher himself, his integrity and genuine unworldliness, must have added significantly to his argumentation. An added weight transmitted by friendship alone, and thus vanishingly absent on the printed page, all that is left for posterity to ponder. The innocence of Moore is somewhat ironic, because after all the circles in which he found himself, were aggressively hedonistic and radical, prone to break taboos, especially sexual. There was to the banter of the Apostles at his time a definite homosexual tinge, something Moore adjusted to in stride. After the election of Lytton Strachey, the society became more overtly homosexual, encouraging sexual relations between their members, with Strachey and Keynes leading the way. Strachey encouraged Moore to think of himself as a homosexual and indeed Moore was stimulated to develop an innocent boyhood crush for another member, and after his temporary expulsion from Cambridge, set up house with him in Edinburgh, incidentally a city which with its connections to Scott, greatly excited his imagination. But of that nothing came, except possibly the innocent holding of hands. The idea to get married did not strike him until his forties, when he proposed to a young pretty woman, nineteen years his junior. Two sons issued out of this happy union. By that time his years as an intellectual guru were ended, and he settled into the obscurity of an ordinary academic philosopher concerned with the technical questions of little general import. By that time the biography has also faded into an epilogue.

Indeed the times up to the First World War was a charmed one, especially if you had independent means and was sequestered in nice academic surroundings. The long walks taken by the actors were legendary, not only involving England but also Germany and the Alps. People were in general pro-German, being enthralled by German culture, and thus their virulent opposition to the First World War, the responsibility of which they thought grossly unfair to lay exclusively at the feet of the Germans. Some of them, like Russell went to jail for their fierce opposition, while Moore held a far lower profile. His innocence implied honesty, and he remarked that he in fact enjoyed the spectacle of the war and thus could not rouse himself into genuine indignation, something he envied and admired in others. No doubt if he was to see at first hand the horrors of the war, he might find it less exciting, but as long as he was sheltered from such knowledge, it provided curiosity and interest. Still he was instrumental in formulating grounds for conscientious objection which did not have to rely on principled pacifism, which helped many of his friends. He himself dreaded being actually drafted, a possibility that loomed threateningly during a period in the middle of the war, but he was eventually spared the anguished decisions such

[4] Moores personal dislike for Russell increased with time to the extent that he found it awkward to socialize with him, but that he overcame him in order to discuss philosophy with him

[5] he was often associated with Socrates, Christ and Mushkin by his admirer with no ironic hyperbole intended, it may also be significant that all three figures are fictional, at least if you are being sufficiently cynical

an event would have saddled him with. And instead he married, his concerns taking a far more congenial and domestic turn from then on, allowing his idyllic existence to continue unaffected by the cruelty of the outside world.

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