

A HUNDRED YEARS OF *PRINCIPIA ETHICA*

An interview with Thomas Baldwin

ethic@: A hundred years ago, *Principia Ethica* was first published. As one of the best scholars of Moore's philosophy, could you, please, tell us how you came across this book and what is its importance in twentieth-century ethics.

Baldwin: My first Philosophy supervisor (tutor) at Trinity College Cambridge in October 1965 was Simon Blackburn, and one of the very first tasks he gave me was an essay on the 'naturalistic fallacy', for which he told me to read chapter 1 of *Principia Ethica*. This was my first acquaintance with the book, and during the subsequent months I read it all since it still had a special place in the teaching of ethics at Cambridge.

In assessing the importance of the book in twentieth century ethical theory it is, I think, important not to exaggerate its initial impact when it was first published in Cambridge in 1903. If one looks to writings in ethics in English during the ten years after its publication, there is not much sign that *Principia Ethica* was widely read and appreciated. Instead Moore's reputation during this period largely rested on his paper 'The Refutation of Idealism' (*Mind* 1903) and on his subsequent papers in the philosophy of perception such as 'The status of sense-data' (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 1913-4). Of course Moore's friends within the Bloomsbury Group (especially Lytton Strachey, Maynard Keynes, Clive Bell and Leonard Woolf) were immediately impressed by *Principia Ethica*, as was Bertrand Russell; but beyond this circle of friends, the book's reputation was limited.

After the First World War, however, in the English-speaking world the general intellectual atmosphere was hostile to the 'philosophy of progress' that had been characteristic of the late 19th and early 20th century. That kind of philosophy had been expressed in naturalistic terms by Herbert Spencer and his disciples, drawing on evolutionary theory, and in metaphysical terms by T. H. Green and his disciples, drawing on Hegelian theory; whatever its merits, the credibility of this philosophy was one of the casualties of the slaughter of the First World War. Hence when *Principia Ethica* was

reprinted in 1922 it found a much more appreciative, and larger, readership than before. Moore's criticisms of ethical naturalism and metaphysical ethics were taken to show the flaws in the old philosophies that people were now ready to discard, and his alternative, purified, conception of an ethics based on a personal appreciation of a plurality of intrinsic values appealed to an audience that wanted to get beyond the old alternatives of hedonistic utilitarianism and metaphysical theories of duty.

An important aspect of the growing importance of Moore's book during the 1920's was its appreciation at Oxford, where there was then, as now, by far the largest group of philosophers in Britain. This can be seen by comparing works by Harold Prichard and W. D. Ross. Despite Prichard's emphasis on moral obligation in his famous 1912 paper 'Does Moral Philosophy rest on a mistake?', the main theme of the paper is in fact similar to Moore's critique of the 'naturalistic fallacy'; but Prichard's paper includes no reference to Moore. By 1930, however, when W. D. Ross published his book *The Right and the Good*, the importance of Moore's book is explicitly acknowledged. Ross endorses Moore's criticisms of ethical naturalism and metaphysical ethics, and propounds an intuitionist conception of value similar to Moore's, despite his substantive disagreements with Moore about the relationship between the Right and the Good. Indeed Ross here makes clearer than Moore had done the distinction between intuitionism as a metaphysical and epistemological doctrine in ethics and intuitionism as a moral doctrine concerning the fundamental status of a plurality of duties. Once that distinction had been made, it was easy to see that Moore, Prichard, Ross and others (such as Carritt and Broad) belonged together as intuitionists of the first kind, despite their disagreements on the second point; and, further, to recognise that Moore's arguments against ethical naturalism and metaphysical ethics in *Principia Ethica* were central to the defence of this intuitionist position.

Indeed during the 1930's it seemed to many philosophers that Moore's arguments showed that some form of intuitionism concerning values was the only tenable position as long as one accepted the presumption that moral judgments are susceptible of truth and falsehood. Some philosophers of this period, however (most notably C. L. Stevenson and A. J. Ayer), took the view that intuitionism concerning values is not tenable. But they showed their respect for Moore's arguments by taking it that the only tenable alternative to the intuitionism they rejected required rejection of the presumption that moral judgments are capable of truth and falsehood and replacing it with the 'emotivist' thesis that moral

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judgment is an expression of emotion, or feeling, by the person making the judgment whereby he or she seeks to move others share their feeling. Although Moore was briefly attracted by this position, it is not compatible with the conception of goodness and its status that he advances in *Principia Ethica*. Nonetheless his own critical arguments form the background, and thus part of the basis, for this emotivist position and for later, more sophisticated, variants of it (such as R. M. Hare's prescriptivism and Simon Blackburn's expressivism). Hence the continuing debates concerning this issue bear witness to the enduring importance of Moore's critical arguments for twentieth century ethics.

In characterising the importance of *Principia Ethica* I have emphasised the role of Moore's arguments in subsequent meta-ethical debates. This emphasis shows itself in *Principia Ethica* itself, where the first four chapters are devoted to meta-ethical issues, and substantive moral theory is restricted to the last two chapters. Indeed this emphasis is internally related to a central thesis of *Principia Ethica* itself, that there is no possibility of giving arguments for or against fundamental ethical judgments, since these judgments are 'intuitions' for which no reasons can be found, whereas, by contrast, there is nothing at all improper about arguments for meta-ethical claims, such as the 'open question' argument for the indefinability of goodness. So the emphasis within twentieth-century philosophy (at least until 1980 or so) on meta-ethics as compared with substantive moral theory is part of the heritage of Moore's philosophy. Recognition of this emphasis, however, needs to be balanced by recognition of the fact that in the last two chapters of *Principia Ethica* Moore does advance both an interesting form of consequentialism and a distinctive conception of the good. I say more about these points in my answer to question 5 below.

ethic@: *In your opinion, what are the main contributions of Moore's Principia Ethica to moral philosophy?*

As my answer to the previous question indicates, I think that the main contribution of *Principia Ethica* lies in the sphere of meta-ethics. Indeed Moore, by insisting on the application within ethics of the analytic/synthetic distinction (so that fundamental truths about the kinds of things which are good are synthetic and not analytic), separates meta-ethical issues off from substantive moral theory much more sharply than his predecessors had done and thereby creates meta-ethics as an apparently autonomous area of philosophical debate. Whether in fact there is such a sharp separation here is of course a

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matter for debate: one of the important claims made by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* is that the analytic/synthetic distinction is no more legitimate in ethics than, according to Quine, it is elsewhere. But even if Rawls is right, and meta-ethics is not clearly separable from moral theory, the issues that Moore raises about the definability of moral concepts and the relationship between ‘nature’ and value are issues that have to be confronted by any ethical theory. But since questions 3 and 4 below concern the definability of moral concepts and ethical naturalism, I will not say more here about Moore’s contribution to clarifying and resolving these issues. Equally, since question 5 in effect asks about Moore’s contributions to moral theory through his ideal utilitarianism and his conception of the good, I will not pursue those matters here.

But there are some other points to be noted. Moore’s critical discussion of hedonism is, I think, of interest. On the one hand, Moore cannot allow himself officially to argue directly against hedonism, since the judgment that pleasure is intrinsically good is a potential ‘intuition’ that is beyond argument. On the other hand, Moore does adduce some potent considerations that are in fact capable of ‘determining the understanding’, in particular that the value of pleasure is dependent on the value of that in which pleasure is taken, so that the sadist’s pleasure in his cruelty makes matters worse, not better. By, in effect, pointing to the intentionality of pleasure, Moore shows the deep conceptual flaw in hedonism; and the substance of his argument can be reapplied to undermine more recent positions which invoke the satisfaction of preferences rather than pleasure as the good. Admittedly there is an element of hedonism in Moore’s own position, since his greatest goods are pleasures; but that thesis is consistent with his rejection of hedonism in general.

Moore’s criticism of hedonism is one way in which he differentiates his ethics from that of his teacher, Henry Sidgwick, whose *Methods of Ethics* nonetheless stands behind much of Moore’s discussion in *Principia Ethica*. Another point where Moore disagrees with Sidgwick arises from his famous ‘Two World’ consideration (argument) against Sidgwick’s thesis it is only situations that are in some way related to consciousness that have intrinsic value. Moore’s reply is that we can see intuitively that the existence of a beautiful world would be much better than the existence of an ugly world, even if neither world were ever an object of consciousness. As stated, Moore’s claim is too abstract and abrupt to be convincing; indeed under the influence of Maynard Keynes Moore himself came to adopt the standard Bloomsbury thesis that only states of consciousness have

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intrinsic value. Nonetheless Moore's argument advances a point which anticipates the radical environmental ethics that is now familiar, according to which the value of the environment does not depend on its role in human life. Hence in this case, as so often in the rest of his philosophy, Moore launches a line of thought that is not altogether convincing as he sets it out, but which initiates genuinely valuable discussion.

Another case of this kind is Moore's doctrine of organic unities. As set out by Moore, the doctrine can be criticised both for imposing a part/whole analysis of complexity in cases where it is not appropriate (e.g. the analysis of complex intentional states of consciousness), and for offering no explanation as to why the value of a 'whole' does not differ from the aggregate value of its 'parts'. Yet there is no doubt that Moore does here point to a phenomenon of genuine importance for ethics, especially where complex personal relationships are involved. My view is that the ethical significance of 'organic' unities has to be grounded in an account of their unity which is more than just the mereological combination Moore offers, though it need not require the full-blown internal relations of the idealist metaphysics Moore rejects. Thus Moore's contribution in this area was to point to the ethical importance of complexity and relationship even though he did not himself provide a satisfactory account of this matter.

ethic@: *What do you think of Moore's criticism of naturalism in ethics? Do you believe that his clarifications of the naturalistic fallacy argument given in the second preface, which was published in your revised edition of Principia Ethica, are sound and illuminating?*

For two reasons, it is difficult to deal briefly with Moore's criticisms in *Principia Ethica* of ethical naturalism: first, because Moore himself is unclear here whether naturalism is an inherently reductive doctrine, and, second, because Moore gives different accounts of what it is for a property to be natural, each of which thereby implies different versions of the ethical naturalism he seeks to criticise. But in the preface for the second edition Moore himself clarifies these issues by separating the issues as to whether goodness is a natural property from that of whether or not it is definable, and by taking it that a property is 'natural' where it is a property that forms part of the subject-matter of the 'natural' sciences.

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The first of these moves is much to be welcomed, since it is an important failing of *Principia Ethica* that it does not clearly explain what is supposed to be wrong with non-reductive versions of ethical naturalism (or of metaphysical ethics, for that matter). This is a crucial point since once this distinction is in place it is obvious that the objection to ethical naturalism cannot be just that it falls foul of the ‘naturalistic fallacy’, for the reason, as Frankena observed long ago, that is fundamentally a ‘definist fallacy’ - i.e. a mistake supposedly inherent in attempts to define goodness. Only if one could show that ethical naturalists are committed to providing naturalistic definitions of goodness could one seek to convict naturalists of such a fallacy (mistake). Not only does Moore not show this, it is hard to see how it could be made plausible: it would, for example, seriously distort Aristotle’s naturalist ethics if one attempted to interpret it in this way (and the point is equally clear from most systems of religious ethics which are not happily construed as providing definitions of value).

I am less enthusiastic about the second point made in the second preface, concerning the definition of ‘natural’, since it just invites the question as to what makes a science a ‘natural’ science or not. In effect it seems to rely on the standard empiricist methodology of the physical sciences for a definition of ‘nature’; but of course those who take themselves to be ethical naturalists, as John Dewey did, will repudiate any such implication. There are, however, other strands in the preface for second edition which help to advance Moore’s treatment of this issue. Moore here introduces the conception of intrinsic value, and the dependence of intrinsic value upon intrinsic nature, as a way of superceding his earlier claim that goodness is not itself a natural property. The notion of intrinsic value had, of course, occurred in *Principia Ethica* itself, but not much weight had been placed on it in the anti-naturalist discussion; by contrast, in his 1917 paper ‘The Conception of Intrinsic Value’ Moore uses the conception of intrinsic value to argue against naturalist positions such as evolutionary ethics. The basic idea here is that the value (goodness) of a kind of thing should be intrinsic to it, in the sense that it is not contingent upon its relationships to other things (e.g its fitness for assisting survival in a complex environment). It does not follow from this alone that goodness is not a natural property, since there are intrinsic natural properties. But Moore’s further thesis that a thing’s value depends on its intrinsic nature can be interpreted as an attempt to rule this out, by taking it to imply that value is in

principle answerable to the totality of natural intrinsic properties, so that it cannot itself be just one such natural property.

As Moore himself acknowledged later, it is not clear that this last point is altogether persuasive, though it incorporates the important insight that moral evaluations require an assessment of the totality of a situation and cannot be settled by attending to just one or two aspects of it. One way to reinforce Moore's position here is to hold that the relationship between intrinsic nature and intrinsic value is synthetic but a priori; for this status really does rule out a conception of intrinsic value as itself natural (since on that view the relationship would be either analytic or empirical). This characterisation of the relationship fits well with the position to be found in *Principia Ethica* itself, where Moore writes of necessary truths concerning the value of kinds of thing. But the dependence on the synthetic a priori is striking - it suggests that Moore's account of moral judgment needs to be complemented by a further account which explains, as Kant would put it, how these synthetic a priori truths are possible. I think myself that this is correct - i.e. that Moore's position is in this respect incomplete. By itself this is not an objection; but I do not think the Moorean critique of naturalism can be regarded as satisfactory until the vindication of the ethical synthetic a priori has been achieved.

One alternative here would be to abandon the synthetic a priori and attempt to rely merely on the supervenience of value on nature which is implicit in Moore's position. This is an important theme of contemporary moral philosophy which owes much to Moore's account of the dependence of intrinsic value upon intrinsic nature, though he does not himself write of 'supervenience' as such. Supervenience is of course compatible with reductive naturalism; but the interesting and disputed question is whether it also provides a foothold for a form of non-reductive naturalism. Discussion of this is now a very complex matter which I cannot address here, involving a variety of supervenience claims of different strength; and to that extent the assessment of Moore's criticisms of ethical naturalism must in this respect also remain incomplete.

ethic@: *What about the open question argument? Do you think that it is effective against, for example, sociobiological reductionism in moral philosophy?*

The open question argument lies at the heart of Moore's criticisms of reductive definitions in ethics. He holds that goodness is not definable in ways that do not depend on

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concepts such as ‘worth having’ or ‘ought to exist’ which are themselves evaluative. A reductive definition would be one which did not draw on any antecedent mastery of evaluative or normative concepts, but then showed how these concepts could be constructed. Moore’s claim is that no such construction could be carried out; and the ‘open question’ argument is intended to persuade us of this claim by inviting us to see how any such proposed construction of value raises genuine questions of value, ‘open’ questions, which we address by drawing on precisely the antecedent mastery of concepts of value that we are supposed to be constructing.

Moore’s argument raises important questions as to the proper standards for definitions. Sometimes it seems that Moore holds that any proposed definition can be ruled out once we accept that someone could sensibly have doubts about it. But I think that we can reformulate Moore’s challenge as one to the effect that one cannot banish sensible doubts about a proposed definition of value. As such Moore’s argument seems effective as an argument against purported analytic definitions of value; but, the standard objection runs, it carries little weight against definitions of value that do not purport to be analytic because they draw on synthetic hypotheses. A sociobiological theory of value is a good example of a hypothesis of this kind: such a theory seeks to construct value by showing its role in our lives, without thereby suggesting that this is how we normally think about value (Thrasymachus’ definition of justice in Book 1 of Plato’s *Republic* is the ancestor of such positions).

I do not think this objection to Moore’s argument is persuasive. My defence of Moore has two elements. First, although Moore does not put the point in this quite this way, the core of the open question argument is an epistemological thesis: we have to draw on our own moral judgment when dealing with moral questions - we cannot derive answers to moral questions from a broader theory even if this includes an account of the development of moral judgment, as sociobiology does. Second, one main purpose of the synthetic definitions which are proffered as models of the alleged definition of value offered by theories such as sociobiology is epistemological. Take the standard case ‘water = H₂O’: this is supposed to provide us with a way of telling whether some substance is water merely on the basis of a chemical analysis of it, without reference to the normal visual, tactile and gustatory properties by which we recognise water. We draw on this definition for epistemological purposes when, for example, we discuss whether there is water on Mars. A

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theory whose purported definitions could not be used in this way for epistemological purposes would be useless and would be rejected. Hence: putting these points together, the second point implies that a proposed definition of value issuing from a theory such as sociobiology should have an epistemological role in enabling us to answer moral questions which we cannot answer directly by employing our own moral judgment. But the first point implies that we cannot in good conscience alienate our moral judgment in this way and put our trust in the authority of a non-moral theory.

This defence of Moore depends on an epistemological thesis which I take from the open question argument, that there is no non-moral point of view which we can come to recognise as legitimately supplanting our own moral judgment. The open question argument is, in effect, a phenomenological expression of this thesis. But it does not offer a principled vindication of it. Thus here too Moore's position now seems to me incomplete - it requires supplementation by a transcendental argument for the inalienability of moral judgment. I think such an argument can be given, but I suspect that Moore would regard it as carrying a commitment to a metaphysical ethics!

ethic@: *Moore's ideal, his defence of the value of friendship and aesthetic contemplation, had a strong influence on the Bloomsbury Group. In your book "G.E. Moore" (Routledge, 1990), you were very critical of Moore's ideal consequentialism. Do you still hold those views?*

This question runs together several points. In my book I was critical of Moore's claim that the ideals of friendship and artistic appreciation are 'the rational ultimate end of human action and the sole criterion of social progress' as Moore puts it (*PE* p. 238). It still seems to me that very little reflection on issues of social morality and personal value is required to dismiss this thesis, though I also hold that Moore's ideal has an important place as one personal ideal among many others, as the ideal of a life committed to friendship and art. It was this personal ideal that was, to some extent, practised within the Bloomsbury Group, and one should respect it as such without seeking to inflate it in the terms used by Moore. But I would argue that a sensitive reading of, say, the novels of Virginia Woolf will show her commitment to many other values, both social and personal, and will also show that the great value of these novels is dependent upon her ability to represent the possibilities and tensions inherent in these other values. Indeed I would argue that something of this kind is quite generally true of much art; that the value of art often depends on what it shows about

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the value of other activities, and thus that art alone cannot be a fundamental value, though it is certainly a great value.

Turning now to Moore's 'ideal utilitarianism', I remain a critic of Moore's position, which seems to me vulnerable to many of the criticisms made by Prichard, Ross, Bernard Williams and others. It is not, I think, worth entering these familiar, but complex, debates here, but I still think that Thomas Nagel's distinction between 'agent-neutral' and 'agent-relative' values enables one to pin-point accurately where Moore's neutralist perspective goes wrong. There, however, one point I would now want to make to qualify my earlier criticisms of Moore which concerns the relationship between the Good and the Right. It is a striking feature of Rawls' 'contractualist' theory of justice, and equally of Tim Scanlon's generalisation of it as a normative theory of right and wrong, that although they are critical of utilitarian ways of basing practical norms on values, they do start from a theory of the good which informs the subsequent contractualist identification of moral norms and social justice. So the contractualist position offers an attractive possibility of a giving a Moorean theory of the Good a fundamental role within a non-Moorean theory of the Right.

ethic@: *Is there anything in Moore's unpublished work, at the Cambridge University Library, which may shed some light on Principia Ethica?*

I have not found anything written after 1903 (apart from the Preface for the second edition which is now published in the revised edition of *Principia Ethica*). It is well known that Moore's early essays for the Apostles and other groups, which are to be found among his papers, are relevant to *Principia Ethica*. I myself think that they show a good deal about Moore's personality and intellectual development; I am not sure that they provide a great deal of insight into *Principia Ethica*, which, I think, should be interpreted and assessed primarily as it stands.

ethic@: *To finish, is there anything else that you would like to tell us?*

I would add one further thought about the difference between Moore's ethical theory and the rest of his philosophy. It seems to me a pity that Moore never stepped back from the strongly theory-dominated perspective of his ethical writings to explore the 'ordinary language' of moral judgment. For once one puts before oneself the ways in which we talk about, and distinguish between, our duties, obligations and responsibilities, the uniform

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application of a consequentialist normative perspective should strike one as crass. Similarly, once one reflects on all the different ways in which we talk of things as good ('good as', 'good for' etc.) Moore's confidence that there is just one fundamental kind of goodness that is relevant to moral judgment seems misplaced. In his later epistemological writings Moore's philosophy is rightly admired for the ways in which he seeks to stop traditional philosophical arguments before they run away with us by confronting them with our common sense judgments and ordinary language distinctions. I regret the fact that Moore did not apply the same philosophical method in his discussions of ethical theory.