

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

G. E. Moore pioneered analytic philosophy, along with Russell and Wittgenstein, and his argumentative technique, his intellectual example, and his characteristic philosophical concerns informed the way several generations of philosophers approached their discipline. As a result, his historical influence is difficult to exaggerate. Even if few philosophers today self-consciously adhere to any distinctively Moorean tenets or methods, his legacy is deeply and permanently embedded in Anglophone philosophy. This is particularly true in ethics, where scarcely anyone would dissent from the judgment that 'no philosopher had greater impact on Anglo-American moral philosophy in the first half of the 20th century than G. E. Moore'.¹

Moore published two books on ethics—his 1903 classic, *Principia Ethica*, and the work reprinted here, his *Ethics* of 1912. He wrote the latter for the Home University Library of Modern Knowledge, originally published by Williams and Norgate in London and Henry Holt in New York. Nearly 40 at the time, Moore worked on the book when he was living with his sisters in Richmond before returning to Cambridge after a seven-year absence to take up a lectureship (and, as it turned out, to continue teaching there for the next twenty-eight years). During the summer of 1911 Moore spent a week at a country cottage rented by Lytton Strachey, who was then also at work on a book for the same publisher. In an autobiography, Leonard Woolf describes the scene memorably:

In the morning Lytton used to sit in one part of the garden, with a panama hat on his head, groaning from time to time over his literary constipation as he wrote *Landmarks in French Literature* for the Home University Library; in another part of the garden sat Moore, a panama hat on his head, his forehead wet with perspiration, sighing from time to time over his literary constipation as he wrote *Ethics* for the Home University Library. . . . Moore . . . said that his mental constipation came

¹ Stephen Darwall, 'Moore to Stevenson', in Robert J. Cavalier, James Gouinlock, and James P. Sterba (eds.), *Ethics in the History of Western Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 366.

from the fact that as soon as he had written down a sentence, he saw either that it was just false or that it required a sentence to qualify it which would require another sentence to qualify the qualification. This, as we pointed out to him, would go on ad infinitum, and the 60,000 words which he had bound himself to write on ethics for the Home University Library would, after he had written a first sentence which was not 'just false,' consist of an infinite series of qualifications to it only cut short by the fact that the publishers would not print more than 60,000 words.²

Books in the Home University Library were, as the name implies, intended for a non-specialist audience. Senior academics edited the series, and its more than one hundred volumes, intended to be 'comprehensive and authoritative', included among their authors such distinguished academics and intellectual luminaries as J. A. Hobson, Hilaire Belloc, John Masefield, Ramsay MacDonald, A. C. Pigou, Paul Vinogradoff, and W. E. B. Du Bois. Moore's *Ethics* was number 52 in the series and appeared around the same time as Whitehead's *Introduction to Mathematics* (1911) and Russell's classic text, *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912). Oxford University Press later took over many Home University volumes and reprinted Moore's *Ethics* several times, including a separate American edition in 1965.

The book has, however, been out of print for some years now. Moreover, *Principia Ethica* has always overshadowed it, so dominating critical discussions of Moore's work that even experts on his moral philosophy have tended to ignore it.³ This neglect is a shame. As mentioned above, *Ethics* is Moore's only other book on moral philosophy, and one of only a handful of post-*Principia* publications dealing with ethics. For this reason alone *Ethics* deserves to be rescued from obscurity. Moreover, its detailed discussions of utilitarianism, free will, and the objectivity of moral judgments find no real counterpart in *Principia Ethica*. The republication of *Ethics* thus rounds out our understanding of Moore's ethical thought. But the book's value goes beyond its historical or scholarly interest. A short, but philosophically rich

² Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911–1918* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 41–2.

³ For example, Brian Hutchinson's *G. E. Moore's Ethical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) refers only four times to *Ethics* although it proclaims itself to be 'the first comprehensive study' of Moore's ethical thought.

text, *Ethics* stands independent of *Principia* and repays careful study in its own right. This judgment, it must be confessed, runs counter to that of the numerous philosophers who have snubbed or disparaged *Ethics*. (A 'rather pedestrian restatement of themes from [*Principia*]' is a representative charge.⁴) But it coincides with that of Moore himself, who regarded the book highly. Thirty years after its publication, he wrote, 'I myself like [it] better than *Principia Ethica*, because it seems to me to be much clearer and far less full of confusions and invalid arguments'.⁵

RETRIEVING *ETHICS* FROM THE SHADOW OF *PRINCIPIA*

Although reviewers did not immediately hail it as a classic, *Principia Ethica* proved to be a groundbreaking work. With a great deal of bravura, it claimed to be the first ethical treatise to undertake the task of precisely formulating the basic questions of ethics, clarifying the differences among them, defining their fundamental concepts, and specifying the procedures appropriate to answering them. By self-consciously striving for clarity and argumentative rigor and by attending closely to distinctions that other philosophers were seen as having overlooked, *Principia's* style contributed significantly to the emergence of analytic philosophy. In this respect, its historical impact is beyond question. Even more important, *Principia Ethica* shaped the nature and course of moral philosophy for decades to come. It shifted the discipline away from synthetic and systematic moral theorizing and toward conceptual analysis—that is, toward an explicit preoccupation with the meaning of moral terms and the nature of moral language, and with what this investigation implies for the possibility of justifying ethical judgments. Until the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, no single work of twentieth-century ethics was to surpass *Principia* in influence and importance.

⁴ Thomas Baldwin, *G. E. Moore* (London: Routledge, 1990), 134.

⁵ G. E. Moore, 'An Autobiography', in Paul Arthur Schlipp (ed.), *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, 3rd edn. (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1968), 27.

Principia designated moral philosophy's most important task to be clarification of the concept of good. Moore famously urged that *good* is a simple notion that cannot be defined or broken down by analysis into more primitive, constituent parts. Rather, goodness is a simple and unique property, one that is nonnatural in the sense that it is neither reducible nor equivalent to any natural, empirical property, on the one hand, nor to any metaphysical or supernatural property, on the other. This is shown, Moore thought, by what has come to be called the 'open-question argument': Whenever a theorist equates good with some property *x*, one can still respond with perfect intelligibility, 'I know that this thing is *x*, but is it good?' To be sure, in Moore's view the things that are good are really existing natural objects or states of affairs, but there is no property or characteristic, other than that of goodness, that is both common and peculiar to them. The failure to recognize this—the failure to appreciate that good denotes a unique, indefinable, and unanalyzable property—and thus to identify this simple notion with some other notion is what Moore calls the 'naturalistic fallacy'.

Moore was a cognitivist who believed that there are true ethical propositions and that we can know some of them. But his doctrine that ethical knowledge involves the apprehension of a nonnatural property (namely, goodness) never found as much favor as did his bracing critique of the naturalistic fallacy. Although this critique had a powerful impact, the appeal of Moore's nonnaturalistic cognitivism was, by contrast, relatively weak. In the decades following *Principia*, many philosophers who were persuaded by the former ended up abandoning cognitivism altogether in favor of the position that distinctively ethical discourse is not cognitive at all, but rather an expression of attitude or emotion. As a result of this development, twentieth-century metaethics is commonly portrayed as a three-way dispute among naturalism, nonnaturalism, and noncognitivism.

Because the philosophical climate Moore helped to create reinforced the priority of issues of meaning, language, and justification, his own contribution to ethics came to be seen as residing solely in his resistance to naturalism and in his thesis that 'good' names a simple, unanalyzable property. But despite this

legacy, *Principia Ethica*'s objectives were not exclusively or even primarily metaethical, for Moore also wanted to address two substantive questions: What kinds of things are good in themselves, and what kinds of actions ought we to perform? Indeed, Moore undoubtedly believed that a correct understanding of the concept of good was the first task of ethics precisely because he was a normative consequentialist for whom the rightness or wrongness of our actions is a function of the goodness or badness of their results. It is an irony of intellectual history that by propelling ethics toward metaethical concerns, *Principia Ethica* encouraged the very tendencies that led philosophers to neglect its own substantive normative theory. Yet, had it not been for that substantive theory—in particular, had Moore not embraced consequentialism—then he would have had little reason to insist that grasping the concept of good was the first priority of philosophical ethics.

One merit of Moore's *Ethics* is that it brings normative theory to the fore. Although nominally intended as an introductory survey of some fundamental issues of ethics,⁶ the book in fact serves as a vehicle for laying out Moore's own distinctive theory and defending it against various challenges. To be sure, *Principia* also presents Moore's account of right and wrong, but *Ethics* is better argued, better written and organized, and more accessible than *Principia*. As an early reviewer noted, *Ethics* is a more philosophically mature work, in which an 'increased perception of difficulties has led to greater caution and subtlety in the selection of arguments, which, many of them quite different from those used in the "Principia," are all stated with an almost miraculous clearness and simplicity'.⁷

Focusing more directly and exclusively on normative theory than *Principia* does, and presenting Moore's own views in a lucid and economical way, the book defends theses that are more

⁶ See *Ethics*, 3. Early reviews of *Ethics* opined that it was probably not a very good book for beginners, a judgment from which it is difficult to dissent. See Harold P. Cooke, 'Critical Notice: *Ethics*. By G. E. Moore', *Mind*, 22/88 (Oct. 1913), 552, and Walter B. Pitkin, '*Ethics*. G. E. Moore', *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, 10/8 (10 Apr. 1913), 222.

⁷ Sydney Waterlow, '*Ethics*. By G. E. Moore', *International Journal of Ethics*, 23/3 (Apr. 1913), 345.

pertinent to contemporary ethics—where debate flourishes over the interpretation and assessment of utilitarianism and various forms of consequentialism—than are the sometimes dated and rather obscure metaethical arguments of *Principia*. In particular, the reader finds in *Ethics* no mention of the naturalistic fallacy or the proposition that 'good' names a simple, unanalyzable property. Although these hallmark theses of *Principia* have generated decades of seemingly endless and often opaque interpretative discussion, Moore himself soon developed grave doubts about them,⁸ which no doubt explains their absence from *Ethics* along with some of *Principia*'s more reckless arguments. Although in some ways Moore's *Principia* challenge to naturalism still lies at the heart of metaethical debate, philosophical discussion over the past century has moved beyond his own contribution to that debate.⁹ Moreover, metaethics has ceased to dominate moral philosophy. Since the publication of *A Theory of Justice*, many analytically minded philosophers have set aside traditional metaethical topics in order to investigate and assess rival normative principles and theories, including, in particular, utilitarianism in all its variants. Thus, as the contemporary relevance of *Principia* has waned that of *Ethics* has waxed.

UTILITARIANISM

The first two chapters of *Ethics* explain and closely analyze the normative structure of utilitarianism (or, to be more precise, what philosophers today would call 'hedonistic act utilitarianism'). The theory Moore discusses might appropriately be called classical utilitarianism because Sidgwick pretty clearly endorsed it or something very like it, and many commentators interpret Bentham, Mill, and other nineteenth-century utilitarians as

⁸ See the 'Preface to the Second Edition' that Moore drafted but abandoned, in *Principia Ethica*, rev. edn., ed. Thomas Baldwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); 'Is Goodness a Quality?' in G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Collier, 1962), 98 (repr. from *Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Vol. XI*, 1932); and C. Lewy, 'G. E. Moore on the Naturalistic Fallacy', in P. F. Strawson (ed.), *Studies in the Philosophy of Thought and Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 137.

⁹ See Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton, 'Toward *Fin de Siècle* Ethics: Some Trends', *Philosophical Review*, 101/1 (Jan. 1992).

implicitly committed to it.¹⁰ Moore did not consider himself a utilitarian, but as the book proceeds, it eventually becomes clear that he accepts classical utilitarianism's consequentialist account of right and wrong although not its hedonistic value theory (see pp. 118, 121). These opening chapters are a model of analytic exposition as Moore, with a thoroughness and care sometimes bordering on pedantry, lays out utilitarianism's theoretical structure and contrasts various distinct, but closely related theses. Moore expounds the utilitarian theory with far greater precision than the classical utilitarian thinkers had ever achieved. Along the way he makes a number of pertinent and illuminating points, many of which philosophers today overlook, and he implicitly corrects various sloppy formulations of the theory that are still all too common. For example, at page 10 he explains why it is inaccurate to present utilitarianism as holding that the right action is the one that maximizes pleasure or that produces a maximum balance of pleasure over pain (although for convenience he 'adopt[s] this loose way of speaking').

These days most utilitarians take the moral goal to be happiness or well-being rather than pleasure, but one can readily modify the terms of Moore's exposition accordingly. In any case, in its classic, hedonistic act-oriented variant, utilitarianism holds that 'a voluntary action is right, whenever and only when no other action possible to the agent under the circumstances would have caused more pleasure; in all other cases, it is wrong'.¹¹ This formulation identifies both the characteristic shared by all right actions, and only right actions, and the distinctive characteristic of all and only wrong actions. Moore then goes on to spell out the concepts of ought and duty and to trace their logical relations with the concepts of right and wrong (pp. 14–17).

¹⁰ Moore is cautious on this point. He writes: 'Whether this theory has ever been held in exactly the form in which I have stated it, I should not like to say. But many people have certainly held something very like it; and it seems to be what is *often* meant by the familiar name "Utilitarianism"' (p. 38). See also William H. Shaw, *Contemporary Ethics: Taking Account of Utilitarianism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 8–10.

¹¹ p.13. By 'more pleasure' Moore has in mind 'greater net pleasure'; that is, outcome A is better than outcome B, and hence to be chosen over it, if it contains a greater balance of pleasure over pain than B does (or, where neither A nor B produces a positive balance of pleasure, A produces less excess pain than B does). By 'possible to the agent' he means that the agent could have performed the action if he or she had chosen to do so.

The utilitarian principle encompasses not only actions actually performed but also actions that would have been right or wrong if they had been done in the past or would be right or wrong if they were to be done in the future. However, the principle as stated affirms only that as a matter of fact right action always does bring about at least as much pleasure on the whole as anything else the agent could have done and that wrong actions fail to do so and, 'considering how the Universe is constituted' (p. 21), always will fail to do so. The principle does not assert that an action is right *because* it maximizes pleasure or wrong *because* it fails to do so. With logical consistency, one could believe that the production of pleasure reliably indicates where our duty lies—even that it is 'an absolutely universal *criterion* of right and wrong' (p. 21)—but yet deny that the production of pleasure accounts for why our duty lies where it does. One could believe, in other words, that although the right action always produces at least as much pleasure as any alternative open to the agent, this fact does not explain its rightness.

As Moore sees it, then, utilitarianism is committed to a second and distinct thesis, namely, that actions are right (or wrong) *because* they maximize (or fail to maximize) pleasure. This second thesis cuts away the possibility that maximizing pleasure reliably indicates rightness only because it coincides with the production of some other result (or, one might add, with the manifestation of some intrinsic characteristic) on which the rightness of actions actually depends. Furthermore, utilitarianism asserts not only that actions are right because they maximize pleasure in the universe as it actually is, but also 'that this *would* be so in all conceivable circumstances and in any conceivable Universe' (p. 26). The utilitarian principle is thus unconditional, with the connection between rightness and maximizing pleasure similar, Moore says, to that between two and four when we say that two times two equals four. In any circumstances whatsoever—in any possible world—it will always be one's duty to choose an action that causes more pleasure rather than one that causes less.

Are utilitarians indeed committed to this further position? The question is pertinent because critics of the theory frequently attack it by arguing that in certain hypothetical or imaginary

circumstances the imperative to maximize happiness would oblige us to do abominable things and that therefore utilitarianism fails to provide an acceptable normative standard and must be rejected. Alleged counterexamples along these lines are legion, but slavery is a perennial favorite. We can imagine, the critic says, social and economic circumstances in which society's permitting slavery would maximize happiness. As a result, or so the critic contends, utilitarians must uphold slavery. But because we know that slavery is immoral, the very fact that utilitarianism might conceivably endorse it requires us to repudiate the theory. To this line of attack, it appears irrelevant to respond as many utilitarians are inclined to do (and as all of them probably believe) that slavery never in fact maximizes long-run human well-being; history shows this. The critics, for their part, simply reply, 'yes, but suppose, counterfactually, that in a particular case slavery did maximize happiness; then, utilitarianism would have to endorse it'.

Utilitarians have responded to this type of criticism in various ways, but one relevant rejoinder goes like this. Human nature, human psychology, and human social dynamics being what they are, slavery will never in fact maximize pleasure. Given this, the abstract possibility that, in some logically possible world, slavery does maximize pleasure is an irrelevant basis of critique. To imagine, as the critic is in effect doing, slavery without its socially and psychologically necessary consequences is idle. Moreover, the utilitarian rejoins, we condemn slavery so strongly precisely because of the misery we know it brings to human beings as they actually are, and for this reason utilitarianism accounts for slavery in the real world more aptly and effectively than do other moral theories.

Can utilitarians plausibly deny that they need to worry if their principles have counterintuitive implications when applied to a world in which human beings or the laws of nature are assumed to be fundamentally different from what they are in our world? This denial could be understood in different ways. On the one hand, utilitarians could be seen, contrary to Moore, as simply declining to assert that their standard holds in all possible worlds. And indeed Bentham and Mill do seem to premise their utilitarianism on an understanding of human nature and the laws that

govern it. On the other hand, utilitarians could be seen as affirming that maximization of pleasure or happiness constitutes the standard of rightness in all possible worlds, but as rejecting the assumption that counterexamples based on wildly counterfactual circumstances can undermine this standard. Conceding that slavery could conceivably maximize happiness, they would in effect be responding to their critics as follows: 'If you imagine a world so different from ours that slavery enhances overall, long-term utility, then you cannot fairly criticize utilitarianism's implications for that world on the basis of moral intuitions formed in a world (namely, ours) where slavery is inevitably malign'.

Utilitarians have not always thought their position through on these matters, and a merit of *Ethics* is that it forces them to do so. For his own part, Moore was unswerving in his normative stance: If we have to choose between two actions, A and B, where the outcome of A involves more net good than that of B, then it would always be our duty to choose A, no matter what A and B might be like in other respects. And this, he believes, holds true in all possible worlds. But then Moore was never compelled to address the various putative counterexamples to utilitarianism and to his sort of consequentialism that make up the standard repertoire of nonconsequentialists today. He did, however, employ the counterexample technique himself to critique hedonism.

HEDONISM AND INTRINSIC VALUE

As mentioned earlier, Moore's ethical theory differs from utilitarianism in one critical respect. Although he joins utilitarians in affirming the normative thesis that

an action is right, only if no action, which the agent could have done instead, would have had intrinsically better results: while an action is wrong, only if the agent *could* have done some other action instead whose total results would have been intrinsically better (p. 30)

he dissents from the theory of good associated with classical utilitarianism, rejecting the thesis that

any Universe, or part of a Universe, which contains more pleasure, is always intrinsically better than one which contains less (p. 29)