G. E. MOORE

PRINCIPIA ETHICA

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
THOMAS BALDWIN

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Early in 1992 Timothy Moore gave to Cambridge University Library a large collection of his father's philosophical manuscripts. This collection includes a substantial manuscript entitled 'Preface to the Second Edition' which, although incomplete, is of considerable intrinsic interest. When I came across this manuscript, whose contents had been described some time ago by Dr C. Lewy (in his lecture 'G. E. Moore on the Naturalistic Fallacy'[1]), I suggested to Cambridge University Press that they should consider including it at some date in a new edition of *Principia Ethica*. It turned out that, for other reasons, they were already considering the possibility of a new edition; so they were happy to give it extra significance by including the previously unpublished preface. It also turned out, coincidentally, that Routledge were planning to bring out a new selection from Moore's philosophical writings which would concentrate on his metaphysical writings.[2] So it seemed that it would be worthwhile to expand the new edition of *Principia Ethica* into a comparable collection of Moore's ethical writings by including two important pieces from his later ethical writings which would otherwise languish out of print – the chapter 'Free Will' from his book *Ethics* and his paper on 'The Conception of Intrinsic Value' from his *Philosophical Studies*. There is a close thematic connection between the unpublished 'Preface to the Second Edition' and

[1] *Proceedings of the British Academy L* (1964), pp. 251–62.

[2] *G. E. Moore: Selected Writings*, ed. T. R. Baldwin (Routledge, London: 1993).

'The Conception of Intrinsic Value', so it is especially valuable to be able to include them together in this volume.

Moore obviously attempted to write the new preface in order to bring out a second edition of *Principia Ethica*. In the event Moore abandoned the attempt, and when the book was reprinted in 1922 with only a few textual corrections, this reprinting was not described as a second edition. The opening paragraphs of the preface imply that Moore had in fact originally contemplated a substantial revision of the text itself, and this is confirmed by a letter which Moore wrote to Cambridge University Press in November 1921 in which he writes that he 'ultimately gave up the idea of trying to prepare a Second Edition of my *Principia Ethica*, on the ground that the corrections needed to make it represent my present opinions would be so numerous that nothing short of a completely new book would be satisfactory'.[3] Although I have not discovered any correspondence which concerns the preface published here, I presume that the project of writing it must have occurred to Moore late in 1921 once he abandoned the task of revising the whole book; he must have hoped that he could thereby indicate the points concerning which he felt that the discussion in the book was unsatisfactory while also clarifying the propositions which he still felt to be 'true, in the main' and 'well worth emphasising'. The incomplete state of the manuscript shows that Moore did not in the end feel that he was able to bring even this limited project to a satisfactory conclusion, so he abandoned it altogether and merely added a couple of sentences to the Preface to the first edition when it was reprinted in 1922. In reading the new preface, therefore, one must bear in mind that Moore explicitly decided not to publish it. Although it is an invaluable guide to his later thoughts about ethical theory, it does not, so to speak, have his assertion sign at the start.

[3] The letter is preserved in the Cambridge University Press archive at Cambridge University Library.

I

Principia Ethica was published in October 1903. Moore's friend Lytton Strachey read it at once, and wrote enthusiastically to him:

> I think your book has not only wrecked and shattered all writers on Ethics from Aristotle and Christ to Herbert Spencer and Mr Bradley, it has not only laid the true foundations of Ethics, it has not only left all modern philosophy *bafouee* – these seem to me small achievements compared to the establishment of that Method which shines like a sword between the lines. It is the scientific method deliberately applied, for the first time, to Reasoning... I date from Oct. 1903 the beginning of the Age of Reason.[4]

We are unlikely now to share Strachey's hyperbolic enthusiasm, but *Principia Ethica* remains one of the central ethical treatises of this century – important both for the conception of ethical theory it proposes and for its celebration of the value of Art and Love. At first the influence of the book was largely restricted to the circle of Moore's friends and disciples, such as Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, and Maynard Keynes, who were already familiar with the general outlines of his position. But after the reprinting of the book in 1922, when the influence of the idealist philosophy of F. H. Bradley and others was waning fast, it was recognised as a classic text of analytic ethical theory.

Moore was just thirty when the book was published. He was coming towards the end of his position as a Prize Fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he had previously studied Classics and Moral Sciences (that is Philosophy) as an undergraduate, graduating in 1896 with First Class Honours in Part II of the Moral Sciences Tripos. At this time one route for those hoping to pursue an academic career was to obtain a 'Prize' Fellowship at their college, election to which was on the basis of dissertations submitted by candidates. So Moore submitted a dissertation to Trinity College one year after graduating, in

[4] Letter from L. Strachey to Moore, 11 October 1903; the letter is among the Moore papers in the University Library, Cambridge.

1897. On this occasion he was not successful, but he spent the following year re-writing his dissertation, and submitted this revised version in 1898, when he was elected to a six-year Prize Fellowship.

Most of the text of Moore's two dissertations has survived,[5] and, as their (common) title – 'The Metaphysical Basis of Ethics' – suggests, they can be regarded as the starting point of an intellectual project which culminates in *Principia Ethica*. Indeed they both begin with an introduction in which Moore criticises what he calls 'the fallacy involved in all empirical definitions of the good' – a line of thought which, redescribed in terms of 'the naturalistic fallacy', is one of the central themes of *Principia Ethica*. But the dissertations differ radically concerning the assumptions within which the critique of empiricist, or naturalist, theories of value is conducted. In the 1897 dissertation Moore is largely content to accept the idealist thesis that the familiar empirical, spatio-temporal, world is a web of appearances grounded in a timeless reality that transcends our perceptions; and he even holds that there is a necessary connection between this transcendent reality and value. But a year later he has lost his faith in any such transcendent reality, and with it that way of providing a metaphysical basis for ethics. Moore does not, however, now switch to an all-embracing empirical realism, which would have brought with it an empiricist (or naturalist) theory of value. Instead, at least in his ethical theory, he retains a residue of his previous idealism by embracing a quasi-Platonist conception of values as abstract objects, detached from empirical reality but nonetheless as real as any empirical object (see *Principia Ethica* §66). According to this new position, therefore, the common mistake of both empiricist and idealist theories of ethics is that in seeking to

[5] They are in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge. Moore's early paper 'Freedom' (*Mind* n.s.7, 1898, pp. 179–204) is taken from the 1897 dissertation and is indicative of the latter's content, although Moore introduced some alterations in preparing the paper for publication. His next paper 'The Nature of Judgment' (*Mind* n.s.8, 1899, pp. 176–93) is taken from the 1898 dissertation, and comparison with 'Freedom' shows the radical development of Moore's metaphysics at this time. Both papers are reprinted in *G. E. Moore: The Early Essays*, ed. T. Regan (Temple University Press, Philadelphia: 1986).

integrate ethical values into broader non-ethical theories (empirical or metaphysical) they fail to do justice to the distinctive abstract reality of values.

These early dissertations lay the groundwork within which Moore articulates his metaphysics of value in *Principia Ethica*. The next stage in the development of his thought can be seen in the text of a course of lectures which Moore gave in London late in 1898, just after he had taken up his Fellowship, under the title 'The Elements of Ethics with a view to an appreciation of Kant's Moral Philosophy'. Moore wrote out each lecture in advance and subsequently had the lectures typed up with a view to working them up into a book; this text survives,[6] and was recently published under the title *The Elements of Ethics*.[7] In 1902 the Syndics of Cambridge University Press agreed to publish a revised version of these lectures, and *Principia Ethica* is clearly the result of this process of revision (the relevant minutes refer to the proposed book as 'Moore: Principles of Ethics').[8] Much of the text of the first three chapters of the later book is simply taken *verbatim* from the earlier lectures, although the last three chapters of the later book differ significantly from the contents of the earlier lectures. I have added, in an appendix to this edition, a guide to the relationship between the two texts. This shows which paragraphs of *Principia Ethica* are genuinely new (significantly, the famous 'open question' argument of §13 is new) and how in *Principia Ethica* Moore directly juxtaposed passages which originally occurred in different lectures in *The Elements of Ethics* – a feature of the text of *Principia Ethica*, especially chapter 1, which undoubtedly contributes to its difficulty.

While he was an undergraduate at Cambridge, Moore had come into regular contact with Henry Sidgwick, who was then a

[6] There are two copies of it among the Moore papers in the University Library, Cambridge. These papers also now include the manuscript text of Moore's subsequent lectures (Spring 1899) on Kant's Moral Philosophy. These cover much the same ground, in much the same way, as his 1898 dissertation.

[7] *The Elements of Ethics*, ed. T. Regan (Temple University Press, Philadelphia: 1991).

[8] The matter was discussed on 14 March 1902, and again on 12 April 1902. The minutes of the Syndics are held in Cambridge University Library.

Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge and a Fellow of Trinity College. Moore attended Sidgwick's lectures and even wrote some essays for him on such familiar topics as 'Egoism and altruism' and 'The relation of reason to moral action'.[9] But relations between them were never close: Sidgwick was by then an old man (he died in 1900) and Moore found his lectures 'rather dull'.[10] Nonetheless Moore studied Sidgwick's masterpiece, *The Methods of Ethics*,[11] very closely and there are many more references in *Principia Ethica* to this work than to any other book. Indeed the two central themes of *Principia Ethica* are developments of lines of thought already present in *The Methods of Ethics*.[12] Moore's thesis that almost all previous ethical theorists have been guilty of a fallacy, the 'naturalistic fallacy' of attempting to define goodness, is a development of Sidgwick's thesis that the concept of practical reason is the characteristic, but indefinable, mark of ethical thought.[13] Similarly, Moore's non-hedonistic 'ideal utilitarianism',[14] to the effect that we ought always to act in such a way that our action has the best possible consequences, where these are not just the consequences which maximise pleasure, is a development of Sidgwick's observation that a utilitarian account of obligation, which he endorsed, needs to be supplemented by an intuitionist specification of the ideal ends of action.[15]

Despite this close intellectual relationship, however, it would

[9] These essays are preserved, with Sidgwick's marginal comments on them, among the Moore papers in the University Library, Cambridge.

[10] G. E. Moore, 'An Autobiography', p. 16 in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. P. A. Schilpp (3rd edn, Open Court, La Salle: 1968).

[11] This book was first published in 1874; Sidgwick repeatedly revised the text, and the final, seventh, edition was published posthumously in 1907 (Macmillan, London).

[12] In his acute, and not altogether unfavourable review of *Principia Ethica* (*Mind* n.s.13, 1904, pp. 254–61) Bosanquet noted how greatly Moore was indebted to Sidgwick.

[13] *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edn, Bk. I, ch. III.

[14] The phrase 'ideal utilitarianism' actually comes from the work of Moore's contemporary Hastings Rashdall – cf. *The Theory of Good and Evil* (Clarendon, Oxford: 1907), p. 84. Rashdall, who had also been a pupil of Sidgwick, alludes briefly to *Principia Ethica*, but makes it clear that, insofar as his views resemble those of Moore, he had arrived at his position independently.

[15] *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edn, pp. 400ff.

be a mistake to regard *Principia Ethica* as only a restatement of positions already adumbrated in *The Methods of Ethics*. For the style of the two books is quite different: where Moore is primarily concerned to articulate a metaphysical thesis concerning the status of ethical values which he takes to have absolutely fundamental significance for ethical theory, Sidgwick was not much interested in the metaphysics of value. He wanted to provide a conceptual framework within which he could do justice both to our ordinary, common sense, moral convictions and to the systematising demands of reflective reason. Furthermore, although Moore and Sidgwick were in agreement concerning the irreducibility of ethical concepts, they differed sharply on the issue of the relationship between these concepts and human ends. Where Moore denies that concepts such as goodness have any essential reference to human goals, Sidgwick defined the goodness of a possible outcome in terms of its implications for the goals of rational human agents.[16] This disagreement is notoriously manifest in their discussions of egoism: where Sidgwick maintained that the conflict between egoism and altruism, between the pursuit of that which is good for oneself and that which is good in itself, is one of 'the profoundest questions of ethics'.[17] Moore maintained that the whole issue was nothing but a tissue of confusions, since there is no coherent conception of that which is merely good for oneself (*Principia Ethica* §§59–62).

II

Moore devotes the first four chapters of *Principia Ethica* to the identification of a fallacy, the 'naturalistic fallacy', which, he claims, undermines almost all previous ethical theories (the exceptions being those of Sidgwick and Plato). Moore's line of argument in these chapters was, and remains, enormously influential. By and large, Moore's contemporaries and successors

[16] *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edn, pp. 109–12. In the light of this passage it is not so clear after all why Moore exempted Sidgwick from the charge of committing the Naturalistic Fallacy.

[17] *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edn, p. 110, n. 1.

were persuaded by him that there is a deep flaw (if not quite a 'fallacy') in most traditional 'naturalist' ethical theories. Not all of them were equally persuaded that the abstract, Platonist, conception of value that Moore advanced in place of the rejected naturalist theories is itself tenable: it seemed questionable on both metaphysical and epistemological grounds. So one common reaction was to dispute an assumption which, it was held, is shared both by Moore and the theorists he criticises, that ethical judgments purport to characterise some definite matter of fact whose obtaining provides them with their truth-conditions. Instead, it was proposed, ethical judgments should be regarded as primarily expressive of certain emotions or attitudes.[18]

This is not the place to discuss these positions, which still attract wide support. My point is only that they are the product of a dialectical process which has its origins in Moore's writings, in particular in his allegation that other theorists have been guilty of a fallacy – the naturalistic fallacy. But what is this fallacy? As Moore makes painfully clear in the 'Preface to the Second Edition', there is no simple answer to this question; for in the discussion of the naturalistic fallacy in *Principia Ethica* he slides between three different theses – that one commits the fallacy by (1) 'identifying G' (goodness, which Moore takes to be the fundamental ethical concept) 'with some predicate other than G', or (2) by 'identifying G with some *analysable* predicate', or (3) by 'identifying G with some *natural or metaphysical* predicate' ('Preface to the Second Edition', p. 17). As Moore also acknowledges, to make the first of these accusations is to accuse one's opponents of denying a trivial tautology. Since this is a gratuitous accusation, and unlikely to have the significance that the accusation of the naturalistic fallacy is intended to have, the significant theses associated with the allegation of the naturalistic fallacy are that goodness is unanalysable and that it is not a 'natural or metaphysical predicate'. Moore recognises that these theses are independent (pp. 13–14); but he also observes that they can be combined in the thesis that goodness 'is not

[18] The classic text here is C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Langauge* (Yale University Press, New Haven: 1944); cf. also R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Clarendon, Oxford: 1952).

completely analysable in terms of natural or metaphysical properties' (p. 14); and the denial of this can then be taken to amount to the commission of *the* naturalistic fallacy.

In considering Moore's position I think it is in fact best to keep these theses apart, since they are independent of each other. But before proceeding further we need to clarify what is meant by all this talk of 'goodness'. Moore recognises in the 'Preface to the Second Edition' (pp. 3–5) that in *Principia Ethica* itself his discussion of this was unsatisfactory, and here explains that he was primarily concerned with the evaluation of possible states of affairs with a view to determining what actions one ought to perform. In discussing such evaluations Moore distinguishes between the judgment that a state of affairs is 'good in itself' (or 'intrinsically good') and the judgments that a state is 'good as means' and 'good as a part'. But since he takes these latter judgments to be directly reducible to the former, it is the concept *good in itself*, or *intrinsic value*, as employed in the evaluation of states of affairs, with which Moore is primarily concerned. It may be felt that in concentrating attention upon this concept an important ethical presumption has slipped in, namely a utilitarian account of obligation, which threatens to restrict the scope of Moore's thesis concerning the unanalysability of ethical value to utilitarian theories. It seems to me, however, that although there is no doubt that Moore himself conducts his discussion within a broadly utilitarian perspective, one can bracket that assumption at this stage of the discussion, since no specific account of the determination of obligations by the evaluation of possible states of affairs is in fact yet required.

The thesis that goodness is unanalysable is therefore a thesis about the nature of the evaluation of possible states of affairs, to the effect that the content of these evaluations cannot be captured within some broader theory that does not, overtly or tacitly, employ evaluations among its basic principles. In the 'Preface to the Second Edition' (pp. 12–14) Moore considers two ways of challenging this thesis: first, by maintaining that the content of these evaluations can be given by means of an account of the subject's obligations; secondly, by maintaining that it can be given within a value-free psychological, sociological, or

theological theory. The first of these challenges may seem to put the cart before the horse, since judgments concerning the intrinsic value of states of affairs were supposed to enable an agent to determine what she ought to do, rather than vice-versa; but appearances can be, to some extent, saved by means of a distinction between *prima facie* obligations (which will be taken to give the content of judgments of intrinsic value) and all-in obligations (which are then determined by the relevant *prima facie* obligations). We need not, however, worry much about this challenge to Moore's thesis, since he makes it clear in the 'Preface to the Second Edition' (p. 5) that as long as it is allowed that the concept of obligation (or *right* or *duty*) is an ethical concept, he does not regard this kind of account as posing a serious threat to his thesis, which was primarily concerned with the unanalysability of ethical concepts in terms of non-ethical ones.

It is, then, challenges of the second kind that Moore is primarily concerned to reject: his thesis of the unanalysability of goodness is a thesis to the effect that the content of ethical thought is irreducible. Before considering Moore's reason for denying that any such account is possible, however, it is worth stressing that the question concerns the distinctiveness of the content of ethical judgments; it does not concern the possibility of deriving them from non-ethical premises. This latter question is standardly associated with Hume and the possibility, or not, of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is'. In the critical literature Hume's denial that any such derivation is possible has sometimes been conflated with Moore's thesis that goodness is unanalysable. But Moore's theory shows that this conflation is a mistake, at least in advance of further argument: for although Moore held that intrinsic value is unanalysable, he also combined his ideal utilitarian account of obligation with the thesis that the intrinsic value of a state of affairs depends upon its natural properties, and he regarded this dependence as resting upon necessary connections between natural properties and intrinsic value. So, for Moore, it is possible to derive an 'ought' from an 'is'.

Moore's famous argument for the unanalysability of goodness is that, whatever analysis is offered (e.g. that to think that

something is good is to think that it will satisfy one's desires), we find that we can still attach substantive significance to the question as to whether a state of affairs which satisfies the analysis really does possess intrinsic value (for example, is a state which satisfies one's desires *ipso facto* good?) – whereas if the analysis were correct, this question should strike us as a trivial question about the truth of a tautology.[19] This argument raises difficult issues concerning the criteria for the acceptability of a proposed conceptual analysis – one does not want to hold that an analysis has to strike us as trivial if we are to accept it.[20] I think, however, that we can to some extent sidestep these issues by assuming, on Moore's behalf, that if a conceptual analysis is correct, then, once we have encountered it, it should come to seem to us entirely appropriate to guide our thoughts and judgments in accordance with it, even if at first the analysis strikes us as unobvious; and Moore's objection to proposed analyses of intrinsic value is precisely that we do not find ourselves able to move to this reflective assimilation of them. The concept of intrinsic value seems to be such that we can persistently re-insert serious questions about intrinsic value within a theory which purports to offer a reductive account of them.

So far the argument only concerns the phenomenology of ethical thought, and Moore is content in *Principia Ethica* to rest his case on this point. Moore's critics will urge that more needs to be said to show that this phenomenology is not merely an illusion – the unrecognised residue, perhaps, of religious belief; and twentieth-century ethical theory contains several attempts to

[19] As Rashdall pointed out (*The Theory of Good and Evil*, vol. I, p. 135, n. 1) this argument for the unanalysability of ethical concepts, which Moore employs without acknowledgment, had been used by Sidgwick, who attributed it to the eighteenth century moralist Richard Price (cf. Sidgwick's *Outlines of the History of Ethics* (Macmillan, London: 5th edn, 1902), pp. 224–6).

[20] Moore himself focused attention on these issues by formulating in his later writings the 'paradox of analysis', which does indeed seem to imply that an analysis must be trivial if true: cf. C. H. Langford, 'The Notion of Analysis in Moore's Philosophy' in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, esp. p. 323, and Moore's 'A Reply to my Critics' in the same volume, esp. pp. 665–6. For a recent discussion of the paradox, cf. T. Baldwin, *G. E. Moore* (Routledge, London: 1990), pp. 208–14.

provide an account of ethical concepts which shows why Moore's thesis is correct.[21] I shall not attempt to discuss these here, beyond indicating briefly the issue which I now think is central to any attempt to substantiate Moore's thesis concerning the irreducibility of judgments of intrinsic value. Such an attempt must, I think, start by recognising that these judgments are linked to judgments about the nature of human life, concerning especially the general purposes and interests which provide the elements and structure of an individual's sense of their own identity. This thesis, I well recognise, is not the way Moore himself thinks about intrinsic value; but all evaluations assume an interested point of view which provides the criteria by which the things to be evaluated are evaluated, and since Moore himself specifies his judgments of intrinsic value as those which determine what human agents ought to do, it is the perspective of human agents wondering how to lead their lives which informs Moore's judgments. Thus the irreducibility thesis centres on the claim that there is no comprehensive and altogether value-free understanding of the ends of human life (of which, say, 'maximal fulfilment of desires' might be a simple example) by reference to which the content of judgments of intrinsic value can be articulated. For if there were such an understanding, then for those who had fully internalised it, the implied analysis of judgments of intrinsic value (for example that to think of something as good is just to think of it as capable of satisfying desires) would lack the apparent significance that Moore claims to be inescapable. Now I do not think that, as things stand, we possess such an understanding, for our self-understanding is in fact achieved largely through social identifications and individual commitments which themselves incorporate value judgments. It is these value judgments which, as things stand, make possible the kind of reflective detachment concerning alleged analyses to which Moore's phenomenological argument calls attention. But it does not follow from the fact that this is how things are for us now that this is how they have to be (nor, more importantly, that this is how they always have been). Thus it

[21] The best known is R. M. Hare's thesis that ethical thought is distinctively *prescriptive*; cf. *The Language of Morals*, p. 30.

now seems to me that to establish Moore's thesis concerning the unanalysability of intrinsic value as the conceptual truth which he took it to be, one needs to show that it is a conceptual truth that the perspective of a deliberative human agent is informed by a self-understanding which itself incorporates value judgments. Whether this can be shown, and, if so, under what assumptions, are questions I leave open here.

The other important thesis whose denial Moore described as the commission of the naturalistic fallacy was that goodness is neither 'a natural nor a metaphysical' property. 'Metaphysical' properties are those which involve reference to some putative metaphysical entity, such as God. We can leave these to one side, since the interesting, and contentious, thesis is that goodness is not a 'natural' property. Moore, I think, has three different accounts of what it is for a property to be natural. I have already remarked that in *Principia Ethica* he associates his anti-naturalism with a Platonist position according to which fundamental truths concerning goodness, like the truths of arithmetic, do not concern things whose existence is spatio-temporal; and this would seem to imply that a natural property is one such that all truths involving it do concern the spatio-temporal world. But he also here comes at the matter in another way. In trying to elucidate the way in which goodness, unlike yellowness, is not a natural property, a problem he faces is that he also holds that *qua* abstract universal, the property yellowness is just as non-empirical, or non-natural, as goodness; so nothing distinctive can be claimed for goodness in this respect. Equally, just as some natural objects are yellow, so some are good; so it is no mark of goodness that it lacks natural instances. In what way, then, is goodness distinctive? Moore's claim is that whereas an object's natural properties are independent *parts* of it which 'give to the object all the substance it has' (*Principia Ethica* §26, cf. §73), its goodness is not in this way an independent part of it, and it is this fact about goodness which, in *Principia Ethica*, he takes to be constitutive of its not being a natural property. This is a peculiar view which draws on further aspects of Moore's part/whole metaphysics at the time (which he abandoned fairly soon afterwards); it does, however, admit of reinterpretation, as the view that it is distinctive of goodness, that it is an essentially