

Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, eds. *Metaethics After Moore*

**Oxford University Press, 2006. ISBN: 978-0199269914. 410 pp.
\$49.95 pb**

Consuelo Preti

Published online: 30 June 2010
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2010

This book is a collection of 16 essays, seven of which have already been published in the *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 41 (2003). The editors assert in the Preface that the essays “represent recent work in metaethics after, and in some cases directly inspired by, the work of Moore.” It has been easy to fasten a variety of discussions in ethics, even tenuously, onto Moore, and this was especially prevalent in 2003, on the occasion of the 100 year anniversary of the publication of the Moore’s seminal *Principia Ethica*. Does this collection clothe itself in Moorean garb as a matter of convenience, or is there a genuine link to Moore’s work? If so, is it successful?

To answer that, it might be necessary to briefly consider how Moore’s work might ‘directly inspire’ recent metaethics. Moore himself would not have recognized the expression, but *Principia Ethica* has long been considered the *locus classicus* for metaethics—defined here as the concern to answer second-order non-moral questions, such as those that arise in the investigation of the nature of moral discourse and moral content. The title of this collection is a neat play on ‘after’; there is little recognition today of any metaethics before Moore, but plenty of it these days is influenced, even in opposition, by Moore; and some of it even unfurls in a Moorean manner, as we see in this volume.

Principia Ethica was an arduously revised development from Moore’s early work, which remains mostly unpublished, on the subject of Kant’s ethics. Both versions of Moore’s Trinity Fellowship dissertations, 1897 and 1898, were critical analyses of Kant’s notion of practical reason, which Moore titled “The Metaphysical Basis of Ethics,” and represent his first serious attempt at, as well as a new approach to, ethical theory. Moore’s views underwent further expansion through a series of lectures that he gave in 1898 and 1899, titled, respectively, “The Elements of Ethics” and “Kant’s Moral Philosophy.” Moore revised his 1898 lectures over the course of some years—though a comparison of the texts show that a number of

C. Preti (✉)

Department of Philosophy, The College of New Jersey, P.O. Box 7718, Ewing, NJ 08628, USA
e-mail: preti@tcnj.edu

chapters of *Principia Ethica* are intact and unmodified portions of ‘The Elements of Ethics’—and in 1902 submitted a draft to Cambridge University Press, ultimately published in 1903 as *Principia Ethica*.

What stands out both in the text of the 1898 dissertation and in the Elements of Ethics lectures is Moore’s grappling with the problem of normativity—as he understands it—and in particular, its role in moral agency. How can moral properties both have normative features, which for Moore, very roughly, means ‘realist’, and play a role in directing the will and action? For Moore, moral properties could be normative only if mind-and-language independent. As he saw it, the only other option was that their nature was subjective or psychological, which would entirely scuttle their claim to normativity. But if properly normative, then it is difficult to understand how moral properties can play a role, a causal role, in specifically moral accounts or explanations of behavior, let alone act as prescriptions.

The distinction Moore argues for between theories of the good and theories of conduct is only one legacy of *Principia Ethica*, but perhaps it is the most significant one, as the editors note. A defining characteristic of 20th century ethics after Moore is a distinction between so-called ‘metaethics’ and ethics, what Moore would have called ‘practical ethics’ or, borrowing from Sidgwick, ‘conduct’. Moorean ethical theory is a meticulous analysis of moral concepts and less an attempt to derive a consistent and practically applicable set of prescriptions from the result of the analysis. But it is probably safe to say that few ethicists today are as willing to disengage a theory of the nature of moral concepts from their application in a theory of conduct in the way that Moore did.

The editors of this collection nevertheless show a deep appreciation of the fundamentals of Moore’s approach by organizing the papers according to four groups, which they rightly claim are related to central issues raised by Moore: the subject matter of ethics; moral semantics; moral metaphysics; and moral epistemology. These are clear categories and most plausible, according to Moore’s own views. Moore himself was committed to defining the subject-matter of ethics as clearly as possible, and in so doing—though Moore himself would not have recognized any such thing as ‘moral semantics’—his early work is very much concerned with clarification of the nature of ethical judgment and its objects. The clarification of moral concepts, for Moore, just was an exercise in moral metaphysics; and Moore’s moral epistemology in 1903, at least, can be crudely summarized as a version of Russellian acquaintance, and so derivative from his moral metaphysics.

The authors variously address themselves to the issues consistent with those that Moore grappled with over the course of his career, in spite of the fact that he never taught ethics at Cambridge, and that from 1912 to 1942 he did not write about it. For instance, key distinctions between what the editors call the *independence*, *primacy*, and *indefinability* theses are critically examined throughout, as are the specifically Moorean positions and arguments familiarly bequeathed by *Principia Ethica*: the Open Question Argument, the thesis of the non-naturalism of the good, and the naturalistic fallacy.

A number of the authors in this collection, predictably, frame their positions as explicit objections to characteristically Moorean positions. Some, however, in spite

of their critical stance, stand out as more directly linked in subject matter or approach to Moorean views than others. Darwall, for instance, argues that a properly philosophical ethics cannot sustain a distinction between metaethics and what is known in the contemporary literature, perhaps unfortunately in this context, as normative ethics, conduct ethics, and that a proper critical analysis of the concept of normativity will provide common conceptual ground; Moorean in spirit, it might be said. Other authors' contributions are less explicitly direct progressions from Moore's own views in *Principia Ethica*—such as those by Svavarsdottir and Dancy—but they do offer contemporary discussion of an issue that Moore centered on in his very early work: the nature and role of so-called practical reason. Jackson and Smith debate the difficulty of detaching a theory of intrinsic value from a theory of conduct. Rosati brings something to her defense of a personal good that Moore appears to reject in *Principia Ethica*, with its indexing of good to a particular individual, though a paper of Moore's to the Apostles' Society in 1894 contains a discussion of love and friendship that might not have been as thoroughly at odds with Rosati's views here as his views in *Principia Ethica* came to be. Bloomfield applies himself to a question that Moore might well have appreciated: whether it is a mistake to think that moral concepts like 'goodness' are more problematic than any others. Stratton-Lake and Hooker both address themselves critically to Scanlon's transitive account of value, which itself puts Moore's Open Question criterion—which centers on the nature of non-naturalism and the naturalistic fallacy—front and center. Shafer-Landau and Dreier both tackle non-naturalism, with Dreier in particular addressing the question of what Moore could have meant, even on his own terms, by the distinction between natural and non-natural properties. Shafer-Landau defends a view that Moore would most likely find amenable—that even if moral facts do not have causal efficacy, this does not entail that they are not objectively real; in fact, Moore might well have argued that a lack of causal efficacy is a genuine mark of the objectively real. In a similar thematic vein, Butchvarov, in the very last paper in this volume, mounts an interesting plea for a return of sorts to the Moorean 'cosmological' position in ethics, where the irrelevancy to action of Moore's conception of intrinsic value is defended as a supporting a less localized ethical theory, in a way that Moore would likely approve of.

A significant legacy of *Principia Ethica*'s moral metaphysics has been the burgeoning discussion throughout 20th century ethics on the status of various versions of non-cognitivism in ethics, which has occupied a role in direct opposition to Moore's position. A number of authors in this collection take up the argument on one side or other of non-cognitivism as against Moorean realism. Thomson argues by way of an analysis of the predicate 'is good' that non-cognitivism may be false; but that it does not follow that some kind of Moorean realism is true. The contributions of Horgan and Timmons, Barker, and Gibbard all defend aspects of an expressivist position, but for obvious reasons, discussions of this kind are only indirectly linked to Moore's own position, even in the complexity of some of its entailments.

What stands out in this volume is that the authors represented successfully demonstrate that metaethics is very much a contender 100 or more years after Moore, and moreover, that ethics in Moorean spirit continues to flourish. Meta-

questions about metaethics abound throughout, and a solid footing in Moorean perspective is more than evident all the way through. We should not overlook the fact that Moore struggled to delineate a discipline in many ways on his own. The foundations of his own views were woven from the disparate 19th century views of Lotze, Green, Bradley, and Sidgwick, among others. But at the cusp of the 20th century Moore linked the nature of judgment and the nature of ethical judgment to what has become known as philosophical logic in a way that has gone on to define a unique place in philosophical ethics—and this collection is successful in demonstrating the depth and originality of his work, in the ongoing development of themes he found significant.

There is some irony in this. The historical characterization of the turn of the 20th century in philosophy is dominated by discussion of the life and work of Russell and Wittgenstein—which is no doubt partly owing to the exceptional impact of their personalities. There is an air of quaintness, by contrast, connoted by reference to Moore. Moore's own character was admired and lauded by friends and contemporaries, but it would be difficult to claim much that was spellbinding in his life or his career. But no philosophers today take Tractarian propositions as conclusive, and few, if any, believe *Principia Mathematica* succeeded in its logicist program. Moore's *Principia Ethica*, on the other hand, continues to stand solidly behind most of the interesting and original work in metaethics today. This collection is some of the best most recent evidence of Moore's continuing and central role in the history of philosophy.