

G. E. Moore. *Early Philosophical Writings*

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The main part of the book consists in the publication of the two dissertations Moore has written: the rejected 1897 dissertation and the successful 1898 dissertation, both called ‘The Metaphysical Basis of Ethics’. The dissertations were written to obtain a six year Prize Fellowship at Trinity College Cambridge. Together with the dissertations and the annotations by the editors, the reports of the examiners Sidgwick, Caird and Bosanquet are published, and the editors wrote a long, informative introduction. Neither the 1897 nor the 1898 dissertation were kept by the library of Trinity College. Moore preserved, though, the draft manuscripts for the submitted dissertations. Especially the 1898 dissertation had to be reconstructed as substantial parts of the first chapters are missing. The hypothesis that the missing parts are used for the paper ‘The Nature of Judgment’, published in *Mind* in 1899, is well argued for and convincing. The way these reconstructed parts are presented, being printed in italics, is helpful to the reader. The dissertations are of interest because they can help us to find an answer to the question how analytic philosophy precisely emerged from British idealism. As the introduction already makes clear, it is not merely by the denial of some of Bradley’s theses that analytical realism could emerge. Moore was also influenced by and reacted to the successful science of psychology. And, as far as Moore’s ethics is concerned, Sidgwick has been influential. Furthermore, the opposition to the empiricist tradition is not merely a Bradleian influence; the way Moore reacts to this tradition seems rather to be inspired by Plato.

Moore’s *Principia Ethica* (1903) was able to appeal to a wider audience, including the Apostles, to whom the book is dedicated, and members of the Bloomsbury group. Lytton Strachey, E.M. Forster, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, and Maynard Keynes were influenced by Moore, especially by his personality, his dedication to clarity and truth in discussions. Moore’s way to explain the most

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valuable things neither in Christian nor in Victorian terms must have attracted them. His statement in the last chapter that the most valuable things are certain states of consciousness, involving personal affection and the appreciation of beauty supported their life for the sake of art and friendship. Although Moore is now understood as a philosopher's philosopher, he was able to be in touch with a wider public at the time. What made it possible for Moore to put forward these new values, to give an ethics in which there is no need for the New Testament or utilitarian principles, and in which each person is able to intuit the good? In order to be able to answer this question one needs to know more about Moore's development in the years preceding the publication of the *Principia Ethica*.

Already in the first dissertation, Moore aims at a science of ethics by distinguishing between the empirical question what things are good and the metaphysical question 'what is good?' Such a science of ethics is not to be based on an empirical definition of the concept. There is a 'fallacy involved in all empirical definitions of the good' (*The 1897 dissertation*, 10). We thus see a precursor of the thesis in *Principia Ethica* that the confusion of the good with any natural object involves a naturalistic fallacy. The 1897 dissertation is idealistic insofar as Moore criticises Kant from a Bradleian point of view. Like Bradley, Moore criticises the Empiricist philosophers, and he takes Kant's transcendental philosophy to contain 'Locke's psychological problem' (idem, 32). There is no distinction between 'Transcendental Psychology' and empirical psychology, Moore says in the 1898 dissertation (p. 156). For, the Kantian a priori depends on the nature of our knowing faculties. On Kant's account we will in the end know nothing about the world, the *Ding an sich*. According to Moore, Kant conceives of Reality as a cause, external to all particular Appearances. Because the appearances are thus only externally related to the world, we cannot know the world. For Moore, as for Bradley, Reality is an individual whole implied by and internal to Appearances, as a ground rather than a cause for them (*The 1897 dissertation*, 35). Knowledge of appearances thus gives at least a partial knowledge of reality.

Besides these Bradleian elements, there is already a more Platonic direction given to the question of the metaphysical basis of ethics. One can see it in the question addressed above, 'what is good?', and in the separation of truth from cognition, as well as the separation of goodness from volition (idem, 76): 'the question "what is good?" may involve a metaphysical enquiry to which no identification of the good with any one empirical datum, such as pleasure, ..., can ever by the nature of the case furnish an adequate answer.' (idem, 9). Moore does not want to devote the dissertation to Plato's ethics, though, as he had decided to become a philosopher rather than a classicist.

This Platonism in Moore's dissertation also makes it clear to what extent his position differs from the ethics of Sidgwick. Sidgwick was an important influence on Moore, and he was the examiner of the 1897 dissertation. Sidgwick's utilitarian system is based on the idea of happiness of sentient beings, and this meant that beauty and the cognition of truth have no value except as a means to attain such happiness. For Moore, beauty and cognition of truth are good independent of the question whether they give us a state of happiness. Notwithstanding the fact that Sidgwick's hedonism is universalistic, Moore considers its basis to be too subjective

for a scientific ethics. Moore endorses, though, Sidgwick's intuitional method: we can directly see what is good. Goodness is a concept, and thus a possible object of thought, as Moore will explain in the second dissertation. Such a concept may be grasped directly. Moore is thus in need of a theory of concepts and an account of how we apprehend them. This theory will be developed in the first chapters of the 1898 dissertation.

For Moore's theory of concepts the distinction between act and object put forward by psychologists at the time is crucial. The psychologists James Ward and G.F. Stout were among Moore's teachers in Cambridge. Especially the younger Stout is of interest here. Stout argues extensively for a three-fold distinction between act, content and object in his *Analytic Psychology* (1896), and earlier writings. The content of the act, according to Stout, has merely a psychological existence, as it is dependent upon the act. This means, according to Stout, that the content of our acts cannot play any semantical role, a point well taken by Moore in his second dissertation. Moore concluded that the objectivity of semantics has to be founded on the object of the act, rather than on the content of our acts, as Bradley thought.

In the 1898 dissertation Moore distances himself from Bradley. We are already familiar with the parts of the dissertation that were published as 'The Nature of Judgment.' This paper can be understood as the first publication of British analytical realism, soon to be followed by the publication of Bertrand Russell's *Principles of Mathematics*. The paper is on judgement, reason and truth, that is, on logic, rather than on ethics. As in Brentano's famous lecture on ethics, *Vom Ursprung sittlicher Erkenntnis*, published in 1889, translated as *The Origin of the Knowledge of Right and Wrong* in 1902, and reviewed by Moore in 1903, there is for Moore a parallel between ethics and logic. What truth is for logic, the good is for ethics. As in the neo-Kantian tradition, well known to Moore, truth is a value as much as is the good. The paper is called 'the nature of judgment,' because Moore understands the nature of judgement to be the central issue by which absolute idealism can be criticised. Whereas for Bradley there is no truth without judgement, in which ideas are related to reality, for Moore, truth is independent of the judging and thinking mind. Truth pertains to the object of judgement, not to the judgement as act. Central to the paper is the thesis that the object of judgement is independent of the act of judgement. Most influential, Moore introduces the term 'proposition' for the object of judgement (*The 1898 dissertation*, 161). Moore's thesis that truth is independent of a judging mind does not imply that he defends a correspondence definition of truth. Because there is no distinction between states of affairs or objects in a certain state, on the one hand, and propositions, on the other hand, there is nothing to which the proposition could correspond to make it true (idem, 173). *Truth*, for Moore, is a primitive, unanalysable notion.

Now that we understand that the paper on the nature of judgement comes from a dissertation on ethics, we can see that the question about the objectivity of ethics, and its metaphysical basis, has been an important impetus for Moore's turning away from absolute idealism to analytical realism. The logical realism in the paper on the nature of judgement, that is, the thesis that truth and falsity and their bearers are independent of the judging mind, is in the first place motivated by a quest for the

objectivity of ethics. Goodness is a value independent of any desire or will on our side. Like truth, the notion of goodness is unanalysable (idem, 178). Just as truth cannot be explained in terms of what ought to be believed, because we would thus have explained an objective notion in terms of a 'state of mind', so we cannot explain goodness as what ought to be desired. In this sense Moore differs from Brentano, because Brentano gives an objective foundation to ethics in terms of the correctness of our acts of loving and hating. Brentano is anti-Platonistic and anti-metaphysical, whereas Moore aims at a Metaphysics of Ethics. Such a metaphysics is 'to give a "transcendental" meaning to good' (idem, 126). By reading the dissertations one is thus able to understand in what way analytical realism could emerge from absolute idealism. One is able to see now how Bradley's idealism, Platonism, psychological distinctions, and ethical questions have played a determining role in the emergence of that typical British variant of early analytic philosophy, in which the good and the true are understood as values independent of any judgement or desire.