

1

[p.1>]

A setting of the stage

The science of ethics, both in its philosophical and theological varieties, is caught up in the throes of transition. Under the impact of irrationalistic underminings, there is a general willingness to break away from the shackling effect of time-less maxims. But the promised deliverance to freedom having boomeranged into a deliverance to fear, uncertainty and anxiety, there is a growing hesitation to accept the appalling consequences of an “every-man-does-what-is-right-in-his-own-eyes-morality.” Ethical theories vacillate between casuistry (with its universally valid natural law) and an existentialistic ethics (with its “absolute” freedom).

In contemporary ethical philosophy the main problems involved come to a head in the question of “value.”¹ Do “values” exist, or are they figments of the imagination? Do value statements refer to “value realms” (historically, the general trend in Continental Europe), or are they to be interpreted psychologically in the behaviorist pattern (historically, the dominant tendency in the United States and Britain)? Are they objectively real, or are they non-referential in character, perhaps hallucinations or symbols of the conscious mind? Are they like psychosomatic ejaculations, ceremonial utterances, or mathematical formulae? Or are they simply the functions of social, economic and political situations? Such is the sense of bewilderment and frustration which faces a modern ethicist.

It is in this “time of trouble” that a “new” kind of ethics has raised its head and announced itself as the way out of the impasse in ethical theory. This novel approach, variously dubbed meta-ethics, critical ethics or analytic ethics, is practiced in a branch of neo-positivism known as Linguistic Analysis.² At [p. 2>] the moment it may be said to be setting the tone in contemporary moral philosophy, at least in the English-speaking world. This being the case, it is necessary that the present developments receive critical attention. The present study is an attempt in this direction. To understand “the revolution in ethical theory,”³ as it has been recently called, one must become acquainted with its instigators. And thus, we shall give pride of place to the work of George Edward Moore (1873-1958), by all accounts the philosopher with

¹ The same may be said for theological ethics. Joseph Fletcher, a leading proponent of the fashionable contextualist approach to ethics states it plainly: “The basic issue at stake between the situational ethic and natural law theory is the locus of value” (in *Christian Ethics in a Changing World*, ed. J. Bennett, 1966, p. 327).

² Not to be confused with the “strong” Logical Positivism of the Wiener Kreis or the “weaker” version subsequently advocated by Reichenbach, Carnap *et al.* in the United States. Cf. discussion of Ayer’s views Ch. 4, p. 98 ff.

³ G. Kerner, *The Revolution in Ethical Theory* (1966).

whom this modern interest in and development of ethics first began. Chapters two and three will respectively be expositions of his ethics and general philosophy. Subsequent to the fourth chapter in which attention will be given to the post-Moorean developments, a fifth chapter launches an in-depth critique of Moore's position.

Finally, after catching sight of some inherent problems with which fact-value dualisms must cope in chapter six, this study will conclude by suggesting the outlines of a "new" approach which seeks to do in this dualism. But before we can begin our journey proper, three matters call for attention, albeit in brief. We must sketch the historical context in which Moore moved, as well as characterize the way of philosophizing of which he was a father. Lastly, a quick glance at his person and influence is in order.

THE HISTORICAL SETTING

For the greater part of the history of philosophy the problem of value was, as such, non-existent, or at least incidental. It began to emerge as a full-scale problem when, in reaction to a rationalism which laid all the emphasis on scientific knowledge (Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Hobbes), practical life with its "values" demanded its due in the Aukklärung (Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau). The tension between the two streams was relaxed by the Idealist synthesis: Kant's dichotomic separation of the phenomenal and noumenal worlds.

However, the reconciliation was more fancied than real. Since theoretical reason only wielded sovereign sway in the phenomenal realm, "values," assigned as they were to the noumenal realm, were deprived of logical structure. What heretofore had never been the central problem, or the most serious problem—previously there was little doubt that the good could be known, it was even surer than knowledge of the "facts"—became a burning issue: can one really know "values," the good, true and beautiful? See here the value- problem with which modern philosophy is still wrestling.⁴

Then after the brilliant but speculative excesses of the later Idealists (Fichte, [p. 3>] Schelling, Hegel), which overextended the noumenal, came the enshrinement of the phenomenal as the only real realm and the rejection of any ulterior "metaphysical" explanation. This dramatic shift, from rationalism with its precast moulds set to capture once and for all the "content" of human experience to neo-rationalism which placed its confidence in the methods rather than in the content of reason; from an idealism which did not flinch at remaking the world in the image of the system to a positivism which gave the first and last word to scientifically determined "positive facts," was ushered in by Auguste Comte. Echoing Francis Bacon's cry that knowledge is power, Comte proclaimed *savoir pour prévoir*. By means of a science solely based upon the facts, and the knowledge and foresight such a science affords, mankind can control reality and plan progress.

As it went along, the nineteenth century succumbed in increasing degrees to positivism. The exact sciences were championed as the models of unassailable trustworthiness by which life must be regulated and reformed. Nature can be dominated, the future can be predicted by means of science with its experimental

⁴ It would seem that the concept of "value" first became the center of philosophic interest as a result of the work of B. H. Lotze. The Austrian School of Economics (Menger, Von Wieser) also deserves mention. Cf. also H. O. Eaton, *The Austrian Philosophy of Values* (1930).

method. The evolutionary hypothesis (Darwin and Spencer) and the genetic method undermined belief in absolute ethical and religious laws. “Natural” and “relative” were the words of the hour.

But positivism as a post-Kantian development could not—intentions to the contrary—make believe that the (positing) subject was irrelevant. (Indeed, the empiricism of John Stuart Mill was through and through psychological.) This became increasingly evident as science was conceived more and more as the means to be employed by human subjects for the subjugation of reality; that is, “*prévoir pour gouverner*.” At the same time, when such supposedly self-evident concepts as “fact” and “law” were found to be replete with problems, “metaphysical” ones at that, science was shaken to its foundations. And as if that were not enough, the gathering cultural crisis abetted by the inattention of science to the fundamental questions of life, as well as the developments in science itself (theory of relativity, quantum-mechanics etc.) helped vitiate the ruling optimistic and utopian belief in progress.

All in all this meant that the attention given to historical relativity and psychology developed (especially in the work of Nietzsche, Dilthey, Troeltsch) into outright relativism and historicism: in short, into irrationalism. Intent on damming the historical stream, neo-Idealism emerged in the form of neo Kantianism (Cassirer and the “value” philosophies of Richert, Windelband) and especially in England of neo-Hegelianism.

It was in this hyper-idealistic atmosphere of the late 1800’s that Moore received his training.⁵ He soon saw that the neo-Idealism of Bradley and [p. 4>] McTaggart gave short shrift to common sense knowledge and that its victories were at best academic. At the same time he keenly felt the dangers of both psychologism and Naturalism. Moore sought out a new way.

Thus it was that along with the turn of the century came a “turn” in British philosophical thought, hailed by enthusiasts as the harbinger of a second Copernican revolution, derided by dissenters as the prelude to the abandonment of the philosophical task, in any case what Moore initiated—along with Bertrand Russell (b. 1872) and later Ludwig Wittgenstein (1899-1951)—has evolved into a philosophical movement of power and influence.

It is worthy of note that Moore’s repulsion of Naturalism finds its counter part on the Continent in the work of Husserl (and to a lesser extent Brentano). Even as Moore, Husserl and Brentano⁶ took up the cudgels against Naturalism at the dawn of this century. And it is a tribute to their greatness that they succeeded in steering philosophy away from Naturalism in their respective areas. Even as Moore stressed the unique character of goodness and the crucial difference between natural and non-natural properties, so Husserl and Brentano rejected the reduction of norms to natural

⁵ At this time curiously enough, traditional roles were reversed. Just when neo-Idealism was exerting its greatest influence in England, there was a renewed German interest in the British empirical tradition.

⁶ Whereas Husserl began his attack on Naturalism in the theory of logic, Brentano like Moore took to the battlefield in the area of ethics. For Husserl see especially *Logische Untersuchungen* (1901), “Die Philosophie als strenge Wissensehaft,” *Logos* (1910), and *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften* (1954). For Brentano, see *Vom Ursprung sittlicher Erkenntnis* (1899).

Moore spoke highly of Brentano’s book. His opinions resemble mine more “than those of any other ethical writer with whom I am acquainted” (*PE*, xi). Nevertheless, Moore espies a mistaken empiricistic influence in Brentano’s contention that psychical impressions can give rise to the concept of right loving (Moore’s Review in *International Journal of Ethics* XIV, 1903, pp. 115-23).

laws as well as the identification of historical facts and norms. And just as in the case of Moore, the work of Husserl and Brentano could be described as an endeavour to maintain values in a strictly scientific philosophy.^{7, 8} [p. 5>]

Generalizing one could say that whereas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mathematics was the science par excellence (Descartes' *more geometrico*), in the nineteenth the emphasis switched to sciences dealing with the so-called positive facts, physics, biology and psychology. Forced by subsequent crises to an internal critique of science itself, twentieth century philosophy has centered in logic (more and more identified with language). At present, due to the trend away from artificial or ideal languages to ordinary language, neo-positivistic philosophy is acquiring renewed interest in mankind's "practical" problems. As a matter of course this tendency is leading and presumably will continue to lead to a revived, heightened, concern for ethics. In this growing concern for language and ethics Moore has played a powerfully influential role.

Moore, it is becoming clear, was a *transitional* figure. Therein lies a large measure of his philosophic importance. Hopeful of pushing aside the idealistic intrusion into England, he could only fall back upon the British tradition of empiricism (Locke, Hume, Reid). But, enthused as he is by the empiricist emphasis on sense-experience, impressed as he is by the achievements of natural science, he is convinced that there is more to reality than facts. At this point Moore has already begun his attack on the dilemma of that era: Naturalism or Idealism. Naturalism is scientific, but value-less; that is, it is incompetent to answer the important questions of life. Idealism is value-sate, but unscientific; that is, its answers are will-o'-the-wisps which help no one.

The next step is to provide an alternative to a false dilemma. Moore aspires to develop a *scientific* theory doing full justice to the *more-than-factual* character of reality. However, this does not mean that Moore takes flight to a realm of super-sensible existents called values. Such a move would entail going "meta physical" and that runs counter to the scientific spirit. He determines to walk the tightrope between "the naturalistic philosophers proper—those who are empiricists—and those whom I have called 'metaphysical'" (*PE*, 124). One must, he felt confident, begin with the priority of a mind-independent "objective" world, non-natural as well as natural. This fact; namely, that from out of a mind in many ways congenial to empiricism and positivism

⁷ These parallels—and more of them could be mentioned—are as interesting as they are significant. Nevertheless, they are similarities amid basic differences. Whereas Moore (in *PE*) believed that the world could exist without the consciousness, Husserl (in his last stage) considered the consciousness the source of all being. And although Brentano never took the step to transcendental Idealism, his theory as subject-oriented (psychologism with the intentionality-theme) contrasts with Moore's efforts to develop an object-centered theory.

⁸ Ontologically Moore is much closer to the German neo-Idealist Alexius von Meinong, who on account of his position has had little impact on the Continent blanketed as it has been by phenomenology and existentialism. J. N. Findlay has judged that "philosophically, as well as personally, there is no one Meinong so much resembles as G. E. Moore" (*Meinong's Theory of Objects and Values*, 1963, pp. ix-x). It is then no surprise that the American writers of the New Realism (1912), among them R. B. Perry, W. P. Montague and F. B. Holt, refer to Russell, Moore and Meinong as their "big brothers overseas." Russell and Moore looked to Meinong for support in their fight to win back a robust sense of reality from the idealistic intoxication with the mind and its fabrications (Cf. Russell's "Meinong's Theory of Complexes and Assumptions," *Mind* XIII, 1904 and Moore's "The Subject Matter of Psychology," *PAS* X, 1909).

It is worthy of note that Max Scheler considered Moore to have in many respects a "similar conception of the problem of value" (*Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, 1954 Edition, p. 13).

Moore struggled to affirm the irreducibility of values (the non-natural) in respect to facts pinpoints his significance for the study of ethics. That he essayed to do this in a new “analytical” way and that present-day conceptions are the continuations and extensions of his work only enhances this significance and witnesses to Moore’s far-reaching and profound influence. [p. 6>]

LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS AND META-ETHICS

Thus, because Moore not only ended an epoch in philosophy, but initiated a new one, prior to examining his position in detail it is advisable to look ahead and make first acquaintance with the novel way of philosophizing and ethicizing which he adumbrated and, to a degree, practiced. In chapter four this acquaintance will be deepened as we trace in some detail the post-Moorean developments in ethics.

Moore was one of the precursors of linguistic analysis, the name generally applied to the latest phase of neo-positivism. As its name indicates, neo-positivism is a new form of positivism, chastened and shorn of its former rationalistic self-confidence, blind optimism and naïveté. It has not forsworn so much its allegiance to the ideal of science as that instrument by which reality is dominated as it has withdrawn into logico-lingual strongholds in order to consolidate and rebuild its forces for future, hopefully more realistic, conquests.

In its initial stage, the Logical Positivism of the *Wiener Kreis*, neo-positivism sought to do in metaphysics completely by a logical analysis of language. But this flight into logic and artificial languages ended up in the empty tautologies of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. In reaction, again under the influence of Wittgenstein, there was a general return to Ordinary Language.

Linguistic analysis itself was born when the later Wittgenstein’s language- game approach in which meaning is equivalent with use fertilized Moore’s emphasis on the clarification of the dictates of Common Sense. It has since flourished in the so-called Oxford School of Ordinary Language under the leadership of Gilbert Ryle (b. 1900), J. L. Austin (1911-1959) and presently P. F. Strawson (b. 1919), in the more Wittgenstein faithful “therapeutic analysis” of John Wisdom (b. 1904) at Cambridge, and in the philosophizing of many in America, Scandinavia, and the entire English-speaking world. It is not only the dominant philosophical school in the Anglo-American world, it is at present steadily encroaching on the mainland of Europe.

Expressing as it does an irrationalistic distrust as to the possibility of anything fixed and certain, whether it be final truths or ultimate methods, linguistic analysis is known by its style, its type of concern, its way of philosophizing, rather than by a unity of conception and doctrine.

Philosophy means doing, not being. It is an activity as over against a doctrine. It is a game to play rather than a lesson to learn; it is search, never discovery; it is an activity to practice, not a message to preach. Analysis does not affect the world of facts—positively or negatively—“Philosophy... leaves everything as it is.”⁹ There is nothing more for philosophy to say: either the [p. 7>] natural sciences will explain it, or common sense already knows it. At least, nothing more can be said, the rest is ineffable or hidden. Yet, something must be done—otherwise there will be “nothing”

⁹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 124. Cf. also pars. 109, 119, 122, 125ff. For meaning = use, cf. par. 43.

to do and philosophy will (de)cease! There are two possibilities: concentrate on the “saying” or try to show what is ineffable. Following the dominant emphasis of the late Wittgenstein, linguistic analysis has followed the first course and ignored the second as an aspect of the to-be-rejected mysticism of the *Tractatus*.¹⁰ Philosophic problems arise from the misuse or abuse of language, from imagining for example, that the logical form of a sentence is the same as the grammatical form. It is not the results which are important—they will come—but the activity, usually taken as technical mastery with language as the instrument. In other words, linguistic analysis thinks of itself as a kind of secretarial-service-for-hire, as a janitor service. It provides a toolbox to be employed as the occasion demands. In disarming fashion, the analyst points out that he has “nothing” to sell, he just offers a new set of tools, or perhaps, just wishes to sharpen old tools. Party banners and school loyalty have no place in philosophy.¹¹

Linguistic analysis is thus typified by a “wholesale rejection of programmatic aspirations and zealotry.”¹² However, this overly-modest bordering on embarrassed demeanor is only one side of the analytic coin. The analyst on the whole would claim that “this way of approaching philosophical problems was better—more illuminating, more realistic, and more rational—than any other.”¹³ In effect, this is to say that analysis regards itself as the best, if not the lone, remaining option open to philosophy.¹⁴

Correspondingly, meta-ethics, the ethical mien of linguistic analysis, may be described as a linguistic retreat into an enclave purported to be morally anti septic, an enclave from out of which the ethicists, becoming more and more audacious, launch forays into the arenas of modern life. It claims to (dis)solve the problems under which ethics is staggering by a logical clarification of the [p. 8>] syntax of descriptive (“formal”) and (“material”) ethics. It is a second-order (meta-) study of the logic of normative language which prides itself on being “morally neutral,”¹⁵ on seeing issues in a “neutral perspective.”¹⁶ Whereas normative ethics is concerned with formulating valid ethical precepts and justifying these principles, whereas descriptive ethics describes the moral views which people in fact have, meta-ethics, its proponents claim, is concerned with the logical, epistemological and semantical questions involved. Meta-ethics deals with the meaning and use of key expressions (e.g. “good,”

¹⁰ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.44, 6.45, 6.522, 6.53, 6.54.

¹¹ Cf. G. Ryle, “On Taking Sides in Philosophy,” *P* XII (1937).

¹² In “Introduction” to *British Analytical Philosophy*, eds. Williams and Montefiore (1966), p. 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ The first glimmerings of realization that analysis is not merely a honed tool lacking all metaphysical pretensions is one of the most striking features of the present situation. Strawson, especially, advocates a “descriptive metaphysics” which is “content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world” rather than a historically popular “revisionary metaphysics” which is “concerned to produce a better structure” (*Individuals*, 1959, p. 9ff.). Strawson’s latest book, *The Bounds of Sense, An Essay on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason* (1966), is extremely significant in this respect. The author sets out to separate the cream of descriptive metaphysics from the skim milk of revisionism intermingled in Kant. Kant went awry when he declared the source of the limiting or necessary general features of experience “to lie in our own cognitive constitution” (p. 15ff.).

¹⁵ R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (1963), p. 97. Some ethicists prefer to consider meta-ethics the third level or the third tier. Ethical conduct is on the ground-level, the second level is that of the spectator who with reference to codes, criticizes, evaluates and comments on ethical activity, the third level is reserved for the ethicist who analyzes and systematizes the criteria, the principles and the concepts used by the actors (ground floor) and the critics (second floor). Cf. B. Mayo, *Ethics and the Moral Life*, pp. 9-14.

¹⁶ C. L. Stevenson, *Facts and Values* (1963), p. vii.

“free,” “responsible”), the nature of morality, the distinction moral and non-moral, the nature and possibility of ethical justification, etc.¹⁷ Meta-ethics has approximately the “relation to normative ethics that the *philosophy of science or epistemology or meta-science has to science*.”¹⁸

Meta-ethics does not claim to be the only legitimate ethics, it recognizes its restricted competence. By definition, meta-ethics requires a point from which to move beyond (metá). This means that “ordinary” ethics—as this jumping-off place—fulfills a foundational role for meta-ethics. Neither does meta ethics claim to solve all the problems, rather it purposively withdraws into a morally antiseptic vacuum and endeavours to absolve itself of responsibility in regard to the “big” questions of life. Thus, having thrown around its shoulders the mantle of neutrality—transforming a lack into a virtue—it reappears as the apostle of peace, volunteering its healing services to all the dissident parties. But, on the other hand, it champions itself as the one and only doctrine-less method which can set free ethics, of whatever stripe, to genuine ethicizing. “Obviously it is necessary to answer the main questions of critical ethics before we have firm grounds for constructing a system of normative ethics.”¹⁹

G. E. MOORE: HIS PERSON AND INFLUENCE

Born of Baptist parents in 1873, educated largely to the exclusion of other subjects in Greek and Latin, having entered Cambridge to read classics, George Edward Moore turned to philosophy in 1894. And for the rest of his rather ordinary uneventful life, philosophy, or more suitably philosophizing, [p. 9>]

¹⁷ W. K. Frankena, *Ethics* (1963), p. 4ff.

¹⁸ R. Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (1959), p. 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.