Introduction: Irony, Naïveté, and Moore

There is no purer expression of the objectivity of value than G. E. Moore's in *Principia Ethica*. We can best capture the purity of Moore's vision by reaching across the ages to contrast him to the philosopher with whom he shares the deepest affinities, Plato. Plato trounces both the logic and psychology of Thrasymachus's confused and callow diatribe that the notion of objective value is based on a hoax. Still, there are times when one wonders whether he is just saying how *he* would manage the hoax were he in charge. Even if Plato's giving great lines to skeptical opponents is finally not an expression of unease, but of supreme confidence in the power of his thought and the beauty of his poetry to overwhelm the gravest of doubts, this comparison highlights the fact that in *Principia,* Moore never even *entertains* doubts about the objectivity of value. It is not outright skeptics who catch Moore's ire, but philosophers who refuse to serve objectivism straight.

J. M. Keynes points in the direction of this fact about *Principia* in his loving and clear-eyed memoir when he speaks of Moore's innocence.[1] How a man of thirty, especially one who kept the company Moore did, could have remained innocent is a mystery difficult to fathom. Perhaps it is to be savored rather than solved. Likely, it is no part of its solution but only another way of pointing to the mystery to observe that Moore seems to have been utterly lacking in irony. Because he was as he seemed, he trusted things to be as they seemed.

Irony has been part of the stock in trade of philosophers since Socrates captivated Plato and in this era irony has even greater currency than usual. We thus have trouble believing that such a work as *Principia* could be great. But its lack of irony is actually the key to *Principia*'s greatness. Because the unwarranted, debilitating doubt that haunts others is the one thing Moore is skeptical of, he is able to tell a simple and moving story about how human beings constantly jeopardize the plain awareness of objective value that is their birthright. He makes us ache at how much unhappiness we cause ourselves by letting the simple truth about goodness, which should be nothing very hard to hold on to, slip *almost* entirely away. At the same time, the simple and sophisticated philosophical con-

[1] J. M. Keynes, "My Early Beliefs," in *Essays and Sketches in Biography* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 250.

ception of value lying behind his story makes him as tough-minded and tenacious as Joe Frazier in stalking the doubts of others. Because the deeper view, finally, is the one that comes to grips with doubts it has itself felt, we are unlikely to agree with Keynes that Moore surpasses Plato.[2] Nevertheless, we all have moments when the profoundest truths appear to be the ones right on the surface, when the idea of *depth* seems illusory.[3] *Principia* captures this thought as beautifully as any that has the depth to defend it.

Its being an expression of the thought that wisdom lies in accepting the simple, obvious truth makes *Principia* problematic to many philosophers. Most philosophers instinctively regard themselves as challengers rather than defenders of what all people, including philosophers, instinctively believe. It is thus difficult for them to avoid concluding that even if these beliefs are not simply to be jettisoned as terminally simpleminded, in the service of offering a revelation, it is their duty to make them over so thoroughly as to leave them unrecognizable. But it may just be that the greatest of iconoclastic acts is to renounce iconoclasm and to defend or, with the thought that it is not really defending that they need, just completely and confidently articulate the simple views that even philosophers hold when they forget they are philosophers: Moore is not afraid to be a lonely philosopher and stand with the crowd.

Those not given to irony make easy targets for it and history has targeted Moore in a particularly delicious way. In very little time, it became the received view that the philosopher who claimed to have cleared the ground of the obstacles impeding the complete philosophical acceptance of objectivism inadvertently laid bare its untenableness. Within a generation, two different ways of dismissing Moore's positive views were being rehearsed by those who accepted his negative arguments against objectivist theories less robust than his own. Some, such as A. J. Ayer, while finding much to praise in his making clarity the *sine qua non* of intellectual seriousness, dismissed his positive views with a sneer. Others, like C. L. Stevenson, posing as one who would eagerly look for the needle if only Moore would tell him what it looked like, dismissed them with a shrug.[4]

The view that Moore's thought was too barren to sustain objectivist ethics became more firmly entrenched after the Second World War, even as philosophers renewed their sympathies toward objectivism. Since Moore had been responsible for scorching so much of the ground, he could hardly be expected to help reenliven it. He rather deserved op-

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1953), p. 47.

[4] Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic,* 2nd ed. (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1946), pp. 32, 33–4, 68. C. L. Stevenson, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms," *Mind,* Vol. 46 (1937), pp. 30–1.

probrium for steering ethics into so horribly dead an end that emotivism or some equally benighted offshoot seemed for a time to be the only way out. It is in the work of the philosopher-historian Alasdair MacIntyre, with a historical sweep and sense of Moore's importance almost matching Moore's own, that the view of Moore as destroyer achieves its ironic apotheosis. MacIntyre holds Moore to be a major figure not just in the decline of English-language ethical thought, but in the moral deterioration of Western culture that has gone on for centuries.[5] One might find there to be a rough justice in the way history has come to look at Moore. What has been done unto him is no different than what he, so melodramatically assuming the role of revolutionary, had done unto others.[6] But even if *Principia* is responsible for nothing but mischief, the least it deserves is something it has not received to this day – a careful, reasonably sympathetic, and *thorough* reading.[7]

No doubt Moore must receive some of the blame for the partial readings his work has received. His overplaying his revolutionary part has made it difficult for many to see that rather than destroying the Western ethical tradition, which after all has for the most part been objectivist, he actually sheds a light upon it that allows its objectivist outlines to stand out more sharply than ever. By his own fiery words, he directs attention to the part of *Principia* in which he is most melodramatically in opposition. This, of course, is the Open Question Argument. The attempt to understand great figures is often impeded by the overwrought praise of early adulators who only half understand them. So it is no surprise that the high repute in which so many prerevisionist admirers held that argument has abetted the overly great, far more critical attention it has received in the years following.[8] One of the aims of this book is to take that very famous argument down more than a notch so that *Principia* and the rest of Moore's ethics may be more easily read as an organically unified whole.

In this, the book employs the same strategy but a different tactic than the one employed by a book to which this book, however much it might

[5] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 2nd ed. (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 14–19.

[6] For quotes from anonymous early reviewers of *Principia* who express grave reservations about the accuracy of Moore's history, see Tom Regan's *Bloomsbury's Prophet* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), pp. 19, 196–7.

[7] Regan is a great admirer of both Moore and his work, but his work is as much a spiritual and intellectual biography as a philosophical study. Other sympathetic and more distinctly philosophical studies of Moore's ethical thought such as John Hill's *The Ethics of G. E. Moore, A New Interpretation* (Assen: The Netherlands, Van Gorcum and Co., 1976) and Robert Peter Sylvester's *The Moral Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), do not deal with Moore's work in its entirety.

[8] William K. Frankena, "The Naturalistic Fallacy," in *Readings in Ethical Theory,* Willfred Sellars and John Hospers, eds. (New York: Appleton-Crofts Inc., 1952), pp. 103–4, notes the early uncritical praise for the OQA.

disagree with it, acknowledges a great debt, Tom Regan's *Bloomsbury's Prophet.* Regan attempts to bring Moore back to life as a superb ethicist whose work has profound and surprising ramifications for social and political philosophy. Coincident with that, Regan also presents Moore as a figure whose personality and voice were compelling enough to dazzle a coterie of interesting artists and intellectuals. But although he considers the claim that good is an indefinable property to be of crucial importance to Moore, Regan *ignores* the argument by which he attempts to prove it. His single reference to this "particularly important argument" has to do with Virginia Woolf's vertiginous feelings of bafflement about it.[9] There is much to be said for Regan's tactic. The argument is but one small part of a grandly conceived book. The historical evidence amassed by Regan suggests that the conception drove the argument, which is the opposite of what the great critical emphasis on the argument suggests.[10] Nevertheless, this book chooses to confront the argument early on and acknowledge its weakness as an argument. Later, it suggests ways to free it from the burden of being the thing everything else depends on. Even if Moore placed great weight on the definitiveness of the OQA *for a time,* in this most ironical of ages we should be willing not to take a philosopher at his own word.[11]

One who wishes to deflate the OQA in order to revive interest in the entirety of Moore's theory faces imposing obstacles. A 1992 article on the current state of ethics commissioned by *The Philosophical Review* in celebration of its one-hundredth year may fairly be considered to represent the age's received opinion.[12] In "*Principia*'s Revenge," the very first section of that article's introduction, the authors observe that the controversy initiated by the OQA is only slightly less old than the *Review.* While celebrating the one "without reserve" they wonder whether they should be "equally happy about the continuing vitality of the other." They worry that "Moore's accident-prone deployment of his . . . argument . . . appeal[s] to a now defunct intuitionistic Platonism." Still they conclude, "However readily we now reject as antiquated his views in semantics and epistemology, it seems impossible to deny that Moore was on to something." The sad truth then is that the OQA must be separated from the rest of *Principia* because it is the one part of it time has not passed by. Al-

[9] *Bloomsbury's Prophet,* pp. 197–8.

[10] Thomas Baldwin notes in *G. E. Moore* (London and New York: Routledge 1990), pp. 87–8, that the section in which Moore presents the OQA is the only part of his early discussion that does not come directly from his original book-length effort, *The Elements of Ethics,* Tom Regan, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991). But this seems rather tenuous evidence for his conclusion that "Moore felt that the argument . . . needed a more careful statement than he had previously given it."

[11] G. E. Moore, Preface to *Principia Ethica: Revised Edition,* Thomas Baldwin, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 3.

[12] Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, Peter Railton, "Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics: Some Trends," *Philosophical Review* (January 1992), pp. 115–89.

though it does not lead these authors to wonder with any great humility about what their own final philosophical destinations might be, the illustriousness of Moore's company in the graveyard might ease his disappointment at being found inept and outmoded. Just possibly, it might also suggest that for strong and compelling expressions of major philosophical points of view, time's sting is never quite permanent.

Much of the current age's unease with Moore has to do with its obsession with the thought that many different points of view may be taken about anything at all and that none of them can be validated as presenting the world as it really is. Any attempt to assess the adequacy of a point of view must be made from a different point of view; *that* point of view must then be assessed from another, and so on and on. The thought naturally arises that it is impossible for us ever to know that we have cognized the world as it really is. When that thought is fully absorbed, a second one naturally arises that there *is* no way the world "really is." If, from the first point of view, one considers Moore to be trying to present the world as we would all acknowledge it to be but for our letting it get sicklied o'er with philosophical thought, the response is that he actually just presents us with another *appearance* of the world. If, from the more radical point of view, one considers him without realizing it to be trying to present the *original* appearance of value upon which all other appearances are worried elaborations, the first response is that there just is no such appearance. But even if there were, no matter how ingenious and ingenuous his *re*-presentation of it would happen to be, it would, since it lies on the other side of doubt, have to be something different. So Moore makes not one, but two, failed attempts to retrieve an incontestable starting point for ethics: he gives us neither pure reality nor pure appearance.

Papers Moore allowed to gather dust show that for a time even he adhered to such lines of thought as these. But in the same year as *Principia,* he puts forward a view of consciousness that allows him to escape the perspectivalist conundrum.[13] Rather than having "contents," consciousness is directed to objects lying outside it. There can thus be present *to* consciousness (part of) the very world itself. It follows then that it is possible for one who is not benumbed by doubts of philosophical making just to *observe* how (part of) the world is. Turning to value, Moore does not then just deliver to philosophers the *perspective* on the world taken by the naïve and for that reason, clear-minded child – he delivers them the *world.* The joke turns out to be on those sophisticates who think that things must be seen through rather than just seen. Although he came to be unhappy with the particulars of it,[14] once Moore offered his refutation of idealism,

[13] "The Refutation of Idealism," in *Philosophical Studies* (Totowa, New Jersey: Littlefield and Adams, 1965), pp. 1–30.

[14] Preface to *Philosophical Studies,* p. viii.

he never looked back. As is suggested by Bertrand Russell's moving comments about the relief and joy Moore brought to him by enabling him to trust again in the world's reality, Tom Regan's view that Moore is a "liberator," which we shall discuss at length and mostly oppose, seems in this instance to be right on the mark.[15]

To someone with Moore's views, the philosopher's task is not just to defend the claim that we are directly in touch with the things of the world; it is also to show what these things are. The great difficulty has been that philosophers suffer from a deep-seated impulse to obscure the things they observe. He thus considers that his ruthless exposure of the "naturalistic fallacy" by the OQA will give philosophers a chance to go back to just before the moment when they made the first false judgment of identity that set everything off on the wrong foot – and not make it. Previously when philosophers had made such a judgment, whatever it happened to be, they had never been able to completely unmake it. Their impulse had always been to construct a philosophical system to mitigate their error when only a renunciation of it would do.

The response to Moore's argument that William Frankena has made obvious is that any *argument* that sets out to *prove* that an identity judgment is false must beg the question.[16] This requires us then to go beyond Moore's express understanding of the OQA. Rather than see it as a failed attempt to prove what he came close to recognizing as being unprovable,[17] we should see it instead as something that helps us to get our bearings about what we honestly *find* about value – that it can be understood in, and accepted on, its own terms only. The rest of *Principia,* by offering a full-scale theory that makes rich sense of our honest findings, enables us to answer the question whether any scruples we might have about them can be so deep and well taken as to lead us to reject them. The answer is the same as that concerning any scruples we might have suggesting that we do not really have knowledge of the external world: "No." So any reading of *Principia* that, as the one proffered in *The Philosophical Review* does, severs the OQA from its metaphysical and epistemological underpinnings, will leave it without the resources to address skepticism and all its attendant feelings of bewilderment and loss.

Looking at *Principia* as entirely of a piece makes Moore interesting company for Wittgenstein. Moore can be seen to anticipate Wittgenstein's diagnosis that the philosophical intellect suffers a kind of bewitchment that creates a deep and abiding sense of alienation. Like Wittgenstein, Moore suggests a program of therapy whose aim is to restore to philosophers their sense of being at home in the world. But

[15] Bertrand Russell, "My Mental Development," in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell,* Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed. (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1972), p. 12.
[16] "The Naturalistic Fallacy," p. 113. [17] *Principia,* p. 143.

rather than requiring philosophers to do what Wittgenstein himself could never do – give up philosophy – Moore assumes that his therapy will allow them to continue to philosophize. It will do so by giving them the means to keep their nerve in the face of the doubts that are the source of their alienation: Moore holds that it is only an impulse philosophers give in to while doing philosophy that is alienating, not philosophy itself. But given his claim that all philosophers prior to Sidgwick had given in to this impulse, he should have been at least a little bit troubled by the possibility that philosophy itself is the source of alienation.[18] It ought to have occurred to him, as it did to Wittgenstein, to wonder whether a skeptical metaphilosophy must go all the way down with philosophy. Moore's belief that the philosophical impulse to obfuscate can be eliminated without trace merely by his exposure of it is *very* naive. It turns out then, and for similar reasons, that Moore's relation to Wittgenstein is similar to his relation to Plato. Wittgenstein's willingness to raise doubts about philosophy, when combined with his penetration and immense poetical gifts, gives his investigations a tragic grandeur that Moore, who left no room for tragedy in the world, cannot sustain.[19]

Wittgenstein is said to have remarked of Moore that he showed how far one could get in philosophy without a great intellect.[20] Even if he did not mean this remark to be a compliment, there is a way to read it as such: It takes a very great prosaic mind to withstand the philosophical temptation to try to make things more or less than they are. Likely, it was this remarkable cast of mind that also enabled Moore, of all those who knew Wittgenstein, to take his measure most accurately for philosophy, to indulge in neither hysterical denunciation nor sycophantic adulation when he began his great therapeutic exercises. It is a literary staple that a sidekick knows some things the hero does not. Does Moore, in his insistence that the world has a nature that is not to be shaped by what we say or think about it, not only express the view we cannot help but accept when we are not philosophizing, but also the wiser philosophical view? When the critique that philosophical attempts to explicate reality are the result of tricks played by language is itself subject to critique, is not Moore's naïve view that the world has an ultimate, explicable nature the one left holding the field? Irony, understood as the attempt to hide from and acknowledge failure simultaneously, only makes sense if we *know* there is a reality we must try to live up to.

One way of responding to such questions as these is to refuse their terms. Philosophy consists of a series of negotiations between dichotomies, with the ones it must negotiate at any particular time being

[18] Ibid., p. 17.
[19] Ibid., p. 219. We discuss Moore on tragedy in the book's last chapter.
[20] *Bloomsbury's Prophet*, p. 187.

bequeathed to it by history. As it has been for more than half a century now, the task of objectivist ethical theory is to find a way of chastening Moorean confidence with Wittgensteinian humility. As the authors of *The Philosophical Review* article explain, many philosophers consider it to be their task to show "morality [to be] a genuine and objective area of inquiry," that need not appeal to any grand notions of an "independent metaphysical order."[21] One might continue in this vein by saying that because they have learned from Wittgenstein how to be suspicious of them, philosophers now have a better chance of avoiding the stupefying commitments that traditionally have been made in the name of such an order. Being more careful of the dangers they themselves create, they will be more disciplined in their refusal to make use of notions they have officially discounted. Nevertheless, as long as they exercise extreme caution, they may – must – borrow from the tradition of which they are so wary. Although the scale of the resulting theories will be smaller than what generations of earlier philosophers have been used to seeing, they will, for that very reason, be more human and more plausibly sustained.

The refusal of duly chastened philosophers to make use of grandiose notions will lead many nostalgic philosophers to worry that what is lacking in these accounts is just what is most important. Therefore, a crucial part of these projects will consist of debunking, of applying the Wittgensteinian insight that the monsters philosophers have tried to keep at bay by creating adamantine metaphysical structures, are really just the shadows of those structures. Once started on the project of building such a structure, at no matter what stage they find themselves in it, philosophers have been unable to put to rest their fears that something is amiss with it, that it is not yet strong enough really to keep those monsters out. These fears spur further efforts at construction and repair, which create more shadows in a never-ending dialectic of futility.

It goes against received opinion to recognize that for the most part, Moore stands up well to criticisms of this kind. Although there are times when he suffers from a somewhat prolix and gnarled style, in his hands it does not make the truth seem baffling or obscure. His style is rarely suggestive of one who must first convince himself before he can convince others. His plain words bespeak his fundamental conviction that goodness is simply *there* – we find it. His great confidence does often serve him poorly as a critic, however, making him much too impatient of those who have failed to see as clearly as he. On too many occasions, he takes a hammer to views that call for a scalpel. Especially in his discussion of evolutionary ethical theories, his impatience leads him to smash away at points that would, when properly understood, serve his own views.

[21] "Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics," pp. 130–1.

One place where we do find him straining is in his discussion of ethical egoism. This is not surprising, as it is over this issue that the encounter with moral skepticism becomes most troubling. The fear of being played for a sucker looms large both in everyday life and philosophy. Still, the indignant tone Moore takes in this discussion poorly serves what is supposed to be a purely logical demonstration – he seems to be trying to badger the egoist into silence. His constant repetition of the charge that the egoist is "irrational," invoked almost as if it were a mantra, suggests a certain amount of desperation; even if he is at ease with his argument, he rightly senses that others will not be. It might be that Moore's straining shows him to suffer a weakness that sends him to the wrong place in his attempt to understand and deal with egoism's attractions. Perhaps the flaw in our thinking that makes egoism enticing has to do with a flaw in our *character* that his moral psychology is either not rich enough or not worked out enough to come to grips with fully.

Occasionally, Moore uses odd figures. Consider, for instance, his claim that good is something we are unable to pick up and move about with even "the most delicate scientific instruments."[22] Such figures have a charm that heightens *Principia*'s quality of innocence; this very prosaic mind still leaves a great deal of room for wonder. As Keynes notes, his innocence adds a most touching quality to his discussion of love and friendship.[23] At first, his tone appears to be much too abstract to tell us anything interesting about the flesh and blood of real life. But eventually one comes to wonder whether that tone enables him to find an element of purity that is common to our most mundane personal transactions and our most intimate and passionate moments. And although he writes distantly and diffidently of these things, his insistence on the indispensability of the body in love makes him one naïf who does not blush.

His ability to express his views in terms that do not stray beyond the resources of his philosophy also serves to keep Moore rather immune from self-deception. He is one philosopher who does not fall into the traps he most warns others against. In this, he compares favorably to some of his debunkers. He would never, for instance, think that the metaphysical-moral commitments of objectivity can be rendered less troubling by the simple expediency of having the "objective, categorical demands . . . ultimately issue from deep within the moral agent" rather than from the "external" "metaphysical order."[24] Surely, the skeptic's catcalls upon being told of objective moral "demands" has little to do with the "place" of their origination. Moore would have called those so easily impressed by their own metaphors "naïve and artless."[25]

[22] Ibid., p. 124 [23] "My Early Beliefs," p. 250.
[24] "Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics," p. 137
[25] The phrase comes from his critique of Mill, *Principia,* p. 66.

He would also have been skeptical about the claim that although the weight of objectivity cannot be borne by goodness, it can somehow be shifted onto the entire corporate body of ethical concepts. As was recognized by Aristotle, the philosopher in whose name this claim is so often made, all the other finely honed notions used in the making of ethical judgments are forever in service to one basic question: Is a thing good or is it bad? Difficult philosophical questions about the nature of good cannot be made to disappear by having good slip into the crowd of the concepts it leads. And if we remain focused on the master ethical concept, we will be less likely to think that truisms about how each of us is acculturated into some particular ethical scheme both render us credulous with regard to that scheme and incapable of understanding any other. Moore was never so naïve as to think that the solution to moral-epistemological worries lies in making self-satisfaction and a lack of imagination prerequisites of moral understanding – skeptics will consider themselves *vindicated* to be told that there are different logically impregnable ways of making morality up. Once again, Moore insists on the truth of something we cannot help but believe (but *not* that it is true because we cannot help but believe it): There is a world independent of any of the ethical schemes we happen to employ to which they must all be responsible.

But if Moore avoids falling into the conservative metaphysical-epistemological trap of thinking that whatever different people cannot think their way beyond is true ("for them"), many philosophers seem to assume that the weight of his thought makes him far too eager to embrace a more conventional kind of political-social conservatism. Their fear is that his metaphysics and epistemology lead him to radically underestimate the intrinsic worth of the fully "autonomous" moral agent. This in turn makes him far too acquiescent in whatever rules, arrangements, and mores a particular society happens to have. The line of thought that leads to this conclusion starts with the observation that in order to engage in serious moral reflection, one must be searching and fearless; one must be willing to explore the possibility that *anything* might be good. Even though Moore admits this possibility as far as logic goes, the suspicion remains that he loses his nerve and forecloses too quickly on fearless moral exploration.[26] The *psychological* logic of his view, wedded as it is to the metaphor of having one's reflections and decisions guided by the property good, finally leaves him overly beholden to the established orders that "guide" one in so many different ways. Lying in the background of this criticism is the paradoxical and quintessentially modern thought that the fundamentality of the value(s) of autonomy and freedom requires people to *choose* the values by which they are to be guided.

[26] Abraham Edel, "The Logical Structure of Moore's Ethical Theory," in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, Paul Schilpp, ed. (Evanston and Chicago, 1942), pp. 170–6.