

The Resonant Thought of G. E. Moore

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Themes from G. E. Moore: New Essays in Epistemology and Ethics, de SUSANA NUCCETELLI AND GARY SEAY (eds.); NEW YORK AND OXFORD, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2007, pp. 368; £ 45.00.

Themes from G. E. Moore is a collection of sixteen new essays written by prominent contemporary philosophers. The essays explore a wide variety of themes arising from Moore's work in epistemology and ethics. The first eight essays in the collection are devoted to Moore's work in epistemology and include discussion of Moore's proof of an external world, skepticism, idealism, perceptual knowledge, and Moore's Paradox. The last eight essays concentrate on Moore's ethics and include discussion of the relation between ethics and practical reason, moral phenomenology, the Open Question Argument, naturalism in ethics, Utilitarianism, and Moore's theory of organic unities. This review will focus on essays that examine Moore's proof of an external world, Moore's Paradox, and the Open Question Argument.

The collection begins with a substantial introduction from its editors, Susana Nuccetelli and Gary Sea. The introduction provides an insightful initial presentation of some of the central themes that are explored at length in the subsequent essays. The introduction also bridges many of the historical gaps between Moore's historical presentation of the themes and the contemporary incarnation of these themes in the context of twenty-first century philosophy. The essays themselves are, for the most part, less occupied in historical exegesis than in reexamining and reapplying some of Moore's primary arguments, doctrines, and philosophic methodologies in light of contemporary philosophic developments and controversies.

The first six essays of the collection deal directly or indirectly with Moore's 1939 proof of an external world [Moore (1959)]. Moore's Proof proceeds by deducing the existence of an external material world from just two premises. The first premise is the empirically justified 'Here is a hand'.

Moore displays the truth of this premise by holding up one of his hands to an audience with an unobstructed, sufficiently close view in a well lighted room. The second premise is the *a priori* conceptually justified hypothetical, 'If here is a hand, then there exists an external world.' This hypothetical proposition is based on the fact that objects like hands, if they exist; both are in space and can exist even if nobody is conscious of them. Thus by a simple *modus ponens* inference, Moore concludes the existence of a mind independent external world.

The first essay, *The Perils of Dogmaticism* by Crispin Wright, argues against accepting Moore's proof of an external world as vindication of the liberal conception of epistemic warrant, known as dogmaticism.¹ Acceptance of such a liberal view of epistemic warrant naturally leads to a 'global dogmatist' epistemology whereby for every broad region of epistemic concern — matter, other minds, testimony, etc. — there exists the same sort of *prima facie*, defeasible but nevertheless basic, and unconditional epistemic warrant that transmits justification or knowledge from standard evidentiary reasons to rational acceptance, so long as one has no good reason for skeptical doubts about the authenticity of the situation. After formulating global dogmaticism, Wright goes on to illustrate four serious epistemic problems or perils for the view. He ultimately concludes that the epistemic architecture of dogmaticism is really only useful when restricted to the sphere of appearances and is therefore useless for the traditional epistemic project of justifying that external things are, by and large, as they appear.

The second essay, *Moore's Proof* by Ernest Sosa, argues that the target of Moore's Proof is not skepticism about our perceptual knowledge of the external world but rather idealism. Viewing the argument in this way, Sosa argues, makes the most sense out of Moore's Proof, but that ultimately it fails as a deductive proof for reflective knowledge of a mind independent world. Nevertheless, Sosa interprets Moore's notion of comparative certainty to allow for knowledge of the external world based on the possession of conclusive reasons that are not known *a priori*. Thus Sosa maintains that Moore could know for certain that the external world is mind independent by employing an inductive argument that employs a holistic model of reflective justification based on immediate sense experience, memory, and an interconnected system of belief.

The third essay, *Fixing the Transmission Failure: The New Mooreans* by Ram Neta, argues that Moore's Proof can help one rationally overcome skeptical doubts about the external world by *displaying* one's knowledge of the external world based on perception, but that the Proof does not give rise to justification or knowledge of its conclusion. Neta points out that unless the one denies that evidentially based justification is closed under known entailment, granting that Moore's Proof gives rise to knowledge will commit one to 'miraculous justification' that one's current perceptual experience is not

misleading. The justification is miraculous because it is based on nothing but the experience itself and one's non-skeptical attitude toward that experience.

The fourth essay, *Moore's Anti-skeptical Strategies* by William G. Lycan, uses Moore's notion of comparative certainty along with epistemic externalism to justify Moore's anti-skepticism. Lycan identifies Moore's recognition that the skeptical point, 'if one cannot know that one has hands or is standing up unless one knows for certain that one is not dreaming or a brain in a vat' cuts both ways. In other words, if one *can* know that one has hands, then one knows for certain that they are not dreaming or a brain in a vat. Lycan maintains that Moore straightforwardly compares what is more certain: the controversial philosophic assumptions required to support the proposal that 'you don't know whether you are dreaming or a brain in a vat' or those that support 'here is a hand' and 'I am standing up'. The answer obviously favors the latter, thus defeating the rationality of skepticism.

The fifth essay, *Moore's Common Sense* by C. A. J. Coady, defends Moore's use of common sense against the charge of dogmaticism in the sense of unwarranted confidence in one's own views and the disregard for arguments or reasons against them. Coady shows that, on the contrary, Moore painstakingly recounts and examines a variety of skeptical arguments in his essays, *Four Forms of Skepticism* and *Certainty*. For example, it is only after carefully analyzing McTaggart's arguments for the unreality of time that he assesses the comparative certainty of these arguments relative to the evidence for common sense truths such as, 'before I had lunch today, I had breakfast'. Coady also points out that Moore's method of common sense does not cause him to always accept commonly held opinions. For example, Moore denies that the nearly universal belief in God makes belief in God common sense. Common sense enters Moore's argument only after careful philosophic analysis of skeptical claims and their justifications.

The sixth essay, *G. E. Moore on Sense-data and Perception* by Paul Snowdon, tries to explain why Moore labored so extensively on the relation between the experience of sense data present in our experience and perceived external objects. The answer, according to Snowdon, lies in Moore's interest in skepticism and specifically his epistemological assumption that apprehending sense data must provide the core element that ultimately accounts for our knowledge of the external world. If Moore could show that sense data are identical with the surfaces of objects perceived, he would have an account of how the experience of sense data allows subjects to demonstratively identify external objects in an epistemically unmediated way. Such an account would defeat skepticism and perhaps even idealism. Unfortunately, Moore is never able to provide a convincing account of this identity because he is misled by examples involving the variability of appearances, illusions and hallucinations.

The last two essays in the epistemology section of the collection involve Moore's Paradox [Moore (1993)]. Moore's paradox concerns how to

explain why it is absurd but not logically contradictory to assert or even believe sentences such as:

1. It is raining outside, but I don't believe it is raining outside.

or

2. It is raining outside, but I believe it is not raining outside.

Moore's paradox has traditionally been used to illustrate various theories in the philosophy of language. The seventh essay in the collection, Michael Huemer's *Moore's Paradox and the Norm of Belief*, reflects on the lessons that Moore's paradox has for epistemology and in particular the analysis of knowledge. Huemer points out that similar to 1 and 2 above, there is something equally absurd about *believing*:

3. It is raining outside, but I don't know that it is raining outside.

or

4. It is raining outside, but I lack justification for thinking it is raining outside.

Asserting or believing 3 is especially absurd if one is more explicit about why one takes oneself to not know, citing some explicit knowledge condition that is lacking. The surprising result is that all the conditions required for knowledge are likewise restrictions on rational belief.

Huemer's starting point is the self-intimating account of Moore's paradox. Beliefs are self-intimating in the sense that if S consciously believes that p, then S must be conscious of her belief that p. Thus if S believes 1 or 2, S must consciously believe both p and not p or at least both believe and not believe p. Given the obvious epistemic closure of such simple beliefs, believing 1 or 2 is absurd or irrational. In the attempt to account for the Moorean absurdity of not only 1 and 2 but also 3 and 4, Huemer expands the self-intimating account of belief to include the self-intimation of knowledge or at least the self-intimation of rational endorsement. He calls this restriction on belief, the Knowledge Norm. The Knowledge Norm for belief is: if S consciously believes that p, S is rationally committed to reflectively endorsing $\Phi(p)$, where $\Phi(p)$ is a condition for knowing p. The Knowledge Norm applies only to conscious beliefs and requires rational endorsement of a particular knowledge condition *only if* one happens to rationally reflect on that condition.

In the eighth essay of the collection, *Can the Dead Speak?*, Roy Sorenson argues that the Moorean paradoxical nature of statements such as "I am dead" show post-mortem assertions to be impossible. In turn, the impossibility of post-mortem assertions shows the entire class of speech acts known as

deferred assertions to be impossible [Sidelle (1991)]. Sorenson argues that the lesson of Moore's paradox is that assertion is a semantically sophisticated speech act that cannot be replicated merely by placing a display sentence in a conditional setting, however complex. Assertions are special in that they analytically connect the speaker's psychological states with the purported truth of utterance. This analytic connection is only possible via demonstrative indexicals that link the speaker with her contemporaneous utterances [Kaplan (1989)]. Thus utterances that are remote from the speaker in time and space are not possible.

The last Moorean theme discussed in this collection that I will examine in this review is Moore's Open Question Argument (hereafter, OQA). The OQA attempts to establish that any value predicate such as 'good' is indefinable and unanalyzable in terms of purely descriptive or natural predicates. Goodness or any intrinsic value predicate refers to a unique, simple, non-natural property. The OQA proceeds by reducing to absurdity any purported purely descriptive (semantic or metaphysical) definition or analysis of the 'good'. Suppose 'good' *could* be defined or analyzed in terms of (say) 'desired' or 'maximizes pleasure'. But then the identity statements "good is what is desired" and "good is what maximizes pleasure" would mean the same thing as "good is good". But this is obviously absurd. The first two identities, if correct, are cognitively significant or informative whereas the last identity is trivial. For any object or action *x*, the questions, "x is desired but is it good?" and "x maximizes pleasure but is it good?" will always remain 'open' in a way that, "x is good but is it good" does not.

The eleventh essay of the collection, *Open Questions and the Nature of Philosophical Analysis* by Richard Fumerton, investigates whether Kripke's direct reference account of necessary *a posteriori* identity statements undermines the OQA. Kripke plausibly shows how identities such as "heat is mean molecular motion" and "water is H₂O" can be informative and yet possess the same necessity as "heat is heat" and "water is water". Thus questions such as "x is heat, but is it mean molecular motion?" and "x is water, but is it H₂O?" are as 'closed' (metaphysically) as "x is heat, but is it heat?" and "x is water, but is it water?" Might the same sort of analysis work for value predicates and purely descriptive predicates? Fumerton argues that it will not.

To employ a Kripkean style analysis on a value predicate such as good, it would have to be the case that the property of goodness is first identified in some direct way and has some hidden nature that could be uncovered by empirical research. But Fumerton argues that there is simply no reason to think that this is the case. Any purported purely descriptive property, such as flourishing or the satisfaction of human needs is as directly and simply presented to the mind as goodness. Further, the theory that flourishing or the satisfaction of human need forms the basis of ethics will always be parasitic on the idea that these things are *good*. Fumerton, like Moore, believes that the cor-

rect philosophical analysis of value predicates and their modal characteristics will turn on conceptual analysis based on the semantic analytic/synthetic distinction and not the epistemic *a priori*/*a posteriori* distinction. Only the former kind of analysis can capture Moore's main point, which is that what you have before your mind when you use the 'good' predicate is different from what you have before your mind when you use the 'desired' predicate.

The twelfth essay of the collection, *Desiring to Desire: Russell, Lewis and G. E. Moore* by Charles R. Pigden, examines whether the OQA can avoid the paradox of analysis. The paradox of analysis shows that theories of conceptual analysis that accept a principle known as the publicity condition cannot show anything significant. The publicity condition maintains that whether a purported identity statement is analytic turns on whether everyone, simply in virtue of understanding both terms of the identity, would deem them to be synonymous; if an identity is analytic, this will be evident to every competent speaker. If an identity passes the publicity condition, it cannot be interesting or cognitively significant. If an identity doesn't pass the publicity condition, the claim that the identity is analytic turns out to be false. Moore's version of OQA clearly does depend on a view of conceptual analysis that is committed to the publicity condition. It is precisely the fact that competent speakers see a semantic gap between 'desired' and 'good' that makes the question 'x is desired but is it good?' open. The argument thus collapses, but Pigden believes that some version of the OQA is salvageable.

Pigden's version of the OQA depends on what might be called the weakened contra-positive of the publicity condition. In other words, if it is evident to *some* competent speaker that two terms are *not* synonymous, then this is evidence that their identity is not analytic (i.e. synthetic). If the identity of two terms is not analytic then, assuming semantic naturalism, one cannot be used to analyze or define the other. Pigden then goes on to convincingly argue that at least some competent speakers find it evident that 'desired', even if one allows for ideal desirers, is not synonymous with 'good'. Therefore, the semantic naturalist who tries to analyze 'good' in terms of 'desire' will likely fail. In addition to changing "all" to "some" in the contra-positive of the publicity condition, Pigden's new version of the OQA is weaker than Moore's original version in that it cannot be used to show that all naturalistic predicates will fail to adequately analyze value predicates. The argument needs to be reapplied each time the semantic naturalist proposes a new naturalistic predicate as a candidate for the analysis of value predicates.

The thirteenth essay of the collection, *What's Right with the Open Question Argument?* by Susana Nuccetelli and Gary Seay, begins by clearly distinguishing two varieties of reductive naturalism that the OQA is designed to block. Semantic reductive naturalism (SRN) maintains that value *predicates* are analyzable in terms of purely descriptive predicates, whereas metaphysical reductive naturalism (MRN) maintains that value *properties* are

analyzable in terms of purely descriptive properties. While both reductive projects are commonly motivated by the epistemic thesis that the methods of science will ultimately explain intrinsic value, the conceptual analyses employed to secure this result are radically different. SRN projects, such as analytic behaviorism employ conceptual analysis, whereas MRN projects, such as Hume's analysis of causation employ factual analysis. In turn these different types of analysis depend on very different criteria for determining whether a purported identity question is open or closed. Conceptual analysis can exploit the, albeit limited, transparency of the content of predicate terms in a way that the factual analysis of empirical properties cannot. As a result the impossibility of SRN can be shown on the basis of non-empirical, cogito-like reasoning by competent language users who judge identity statements involving intrinsic value and natural predicates to be open or unsettled. Unfortunately, unless we assume the simple and implausible 'fido'-fido theory of direct reference, the *co-extensionality* of intrinsic value and natural predicates cannot be settled by cogito-like reasoning by competent language users. Thus in the absence of compelling empirical reasons, the question of whether intrinsic value and natural properties are identical remains open and MRN remains a live option.

The essays I have reviewed, to one degree or another, all either defend or extend Moore's original positions, arguments, and methodologies against attack or reinterpretation. Wright and Neta reject neo-Moorean dogmatism, showing that Moore's Proof is actually stronger without the addition of a weaker entailment condition. Sosa, Lycan and Coady ultimately endorse Moore's anti-skeptical arguments, once properly understood. Snowden thinks contemporary perceptual theorists would do well to reexamine some of Moore's basic epistemic assumptions regarding perception. In fact, he thinks some central philosophic questions about perception cannot be answered if these assumptions are rejected. Huemer and Sorenson use Moore's paradox to produce significant results in the philosophy of language and epistemology. Finally, Fumerton, Pigden, Nuccetelli, and Seay, show that the paradox of analysis and the discovery of necessary *a posteriori* identities do little actual harm to the OQA. The collection thus reinforces Moore's reputation as one of the truly great philosophers of the twentieth century and demonstrates the resonance and durability of his ideas for contemporary philosophic controversies.

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NOTES

¹ Two prominent self ascribed dogmaticists are James Prior [Prior (2000)] and Martin Davies [Davies (2003)].

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