June 1991

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Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 27, no.2, June 1991, p.82-87

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R. P. Sylvester and the
Moral Philosophy of G. E. Moore

by RAY PERKINS

When I was a student at Colby in the early 1960s, I had the good fortune of knowing and studying under Professor Robert Reuman. I remember most vividly his highly stimulating seminar in contemporary moral philosophy. I recall an early lecture which he began with the riveting phrase, “When I was in prison . . . ,” and he proceeded to illustrate several points of moral theory with examples from his own experience as a conscientious objector during World War II. I thought to myself at the time, “Here is a philosopher who understands and takes seriously the connection between moral theory and practice.”

It was also in that seminar that I was introduced to G. E. Moore’s important 1903 work, Principia Ethica. Moore’s book is perhaps best known for its theoretical—or rather, metaethical—analyses of the meaning of moral language and basic moral concepts. But he was at least equally concerned with the practical side of ethics, especially with the question of how we ought to conduct our lives.

What follows is a discussion of some of the issues raised by Robert Peter Sylvester’s recent book, The Moral Philosophy of G. E. Moore (Temple University Press, 1990), a work which I edited with Ralph Sleeper following Sylvester’s untimely death in 1986. These remarks were originally presented at the meetings of the Northern New England Philosophical Association at Keene State College in Keene, N.H., in October of 1990.

Sylvester’s book presents Moore’s moral thought, as it was developed over the first two decades of this century, as a remarkably consistent and coherent whole. In the course of his exposition, Sylvester manages to shed new light on Moore’s work, and he shows how some “old truths” of Moore scholarship fail to pass the most important test of acceptability, viz., conformity to what Moore himself actually said. In his foreword to Sylvester’s book, Tom Regan affectionately says that Sylvester is not only “mad about Moore” but that he also “believes him—if not always, at least most of the time” (p. xvi). True enough. But throughout his book Sylvester’s main concern is not so much to defend Moore as to “get him right.” This he achieves in essentially two ways: (1) by reading Moore’s work, especially his 1903 Principia Ethica, in the context of his revolutionary, if philosophically eccentric, metaphysical views put forward in several papers at the turn of the century; and (2) by presenting Moore’s moral thought as falling within the purview of three distinct questions which Moore himself articulated and insisted upon keeping distinct: What is good? (by which Moore asked for the definition or analysis of the concept of universal good);
What things are good and in what degree? And the practical ethical question: What ought I to do?

In the first part of what follows I would like to look briefly at what I take to be the most important examples of Sylvester’s fresh perspectives on Moore in his attempt to “get him right.” Specifically, I want to cite: (A) his view of Moore’s alleged intuitionism; (B) his explication of Moore’s obscure doctrine of non-naturalism; and (C) his revelations concerning Bishop Butler’s maxim and its alleged connection with Moore’s naturalistic fallacy. In the second part I wish to consider an interesting speculation of Sylvester’s concerning Moore’s conception of duty and to comment on what some might see as a source of tension in that account between Moore’s conservative and nonconservative tendencies.

I

A. Let’s look first at the issue of Moore’s intuitionism. According to Sylvester “It is...a plain mistake for anyone to classify G. E. Moore as an intuitionist with respect to obligation, duty or the rightness of an action” (p. 38). Yet many, like George Santayana, have so classified him. As Sylvester makes clear, it is only with respect to moral philosophy’s second question—what things are good and in what degree?—that intuition plays a direct role for Moore. And even here, contrary to what Stephen C. Pepper and others have claimed, intuition is not epistemically absolute. One can be mistaken. Indeed Sylvester shows, by means of Moore’s discussion of Sidgwick’s intuition (that pleasure alone is intrinsically good), the sense in which, and the extent to which, intuitions may themselves be supplied with reasons and subject to philosophical argument. The main point about Moore’s moral intuition is that we can know intuitively what specific things are good (ought to be), but there is no such mode of cognition regarding what specific actions are our duty (ought to be done), though we can know intuitively (Moore says in Ethics that it’s “self-evident”) the general proposition that our duty is always to maximize good. Sylvester also notes that this latter point has led some notable scholars—he mentions both A. C. Ewing and Mary Warnock—to take it to be Moore’s view that duty, like good, is a simple, indefinable notion. Another “plain mistake.”

B. Consider the issue of what is sometimes called Moore’s non-naturalism, i.e., the doctrine that good is a non-natural property. It has been widely held, and perhaps rightly, that Moore’s distinction in Principia between natural and non-natural properties is hopelessly muddled. Yet few have bothered to look at that distinction in terms of the metaphysical doctrines that Moore was propounding at or near the time he was writing Principia. From Moore’s 1899 paper “On the Nature of Judgment” (a paper once described by Bertrand Russell as the paper from which he [Russell] derived his position on the chief questions of philosophy) Sylvester is able to glean insight into the nature of value judgments and truth as Moore may have been thinking of them in Principia Ethica. From that paper and others (e.g., “Identity,” 1901) he is also able to gain some understanding of
Moore’s peculiar blend of Platonic and Aristotelian realism that comes into play in Moore’s conception of good as a non-natural property. And with the help of some of Herbert Hochberg’s ontological ideas, Sylvester is able to provide a coherent account of what he calls “good’s ingression into the world of existence” (p. 143). In short, good is a real, universal concept which may be exemplified by phenomenal objects. But its exemplifications do not constitute any objects in the way in which substantial, phenomenal qualities do. The latter, but not the former, have their own substantiality; they are what Sylvester calls “simple particulars”; they are what Moore calls “natural properties.” By contrast, good’s exemplifications depend on substantial natural properties in a sense in which the natural properties do not depend on good’s exemplifications. This dependence, Sylvester says, is lawlike though it is a stronger dependence than that of ordinary causal law. And although neither Moore nor Sylvester uses the term “supervenience,” it is clear that what Sylvester gives us in his account of ingression is an ontological account of the supervenience of good as Moore conceived of it in his moral philosophy.

C. Consider also Moore’s naturalistic fallacy and its alleged dependency on Bishop Butler’s maxim that “Everything is what it is and not another thing.” Many moral philosophers—William Frankena and R. M. Hare among them—have assumed that the point of Butler’s maxim is to underscore the indefinability of good. Since good, like everything, is what it is and not another thing, any definition of good would violate the maxim, or so these philosophers suppose Moore to have believed. But, as Sylvester makes clear, Butler’s maxim has nothing to do with Moore’s thesis of the indefinability of good. On Moore’s view, good is indefinable, not because it is the thing it is but because it is the simple thing (concept) it is. It is the simplicity of good (qua concept) that is the central point about the naturalistic fallacy. Indeed, in the passage in *Principia* (p. 206) where Moore cites the Butler maxim, the question of the definability of good is not at issue. Rather, the issue is Moore’s second question, viz., what things are good? I.e., the issue is one of enumerating the kinds of things that exemplify good, not one of finding the definition or analysis of the concept so exemplified. It is in this connection (the second question) that Moore cites the Butler maxim. And his point is one having to do with his doctrine of organic unities, viz., that things exemplifying good are organic wholes and the value of those wholes bears no necessary relation to the values of the parts.

It would seem, then—certainly Sylvester would say so—that many of Moore’s critics have failed to keep Moore’s distinct questions distinct. Some, like Pepper, have conflated the second and third questions; others, like Frankena, have conflated the second and the first.

I turn now to some of Sylvester’s speculations about Moore’s notion of duty and certain tensions connected with it. In his final chapter Sylvester claims to find
in Moore a concept of duty—which Sylvester calls *moral* duty—that stands in contrast to Moore’s utilitarian ideal duty—which Sylvester calls *ontological* duty. It is a more subjective and personal notion. In Sylvester’s view, moral duty presupposes a moral context which is perceived and “lived through” by an individual self of intrinsic value capable of free choice and engaged in a process of rational deliberation. This, one might think, is at least a potential prescription for individualism and even nonconformism in the moral life. But Sylvester also tells us that owing to the difficulty of knowing the long-range effects of individual human actions and, hence, of knowing our ontological duty, Moore turns to the established social rules as a way of determining what we morally ought to do. And Moore says, as Sylvester notes, “The individual can therefore be confidently recommended always to conform to rules which are both generally useful and generally practiced” (Sylvester, p. 119; *P.E.*, p. 164). But this seems to be a prescription for a kind of collective conservatism, and the moral life threatens to reduce itself to mere social conformism. On the face of it, then, we seem to have a paradox. In short, what becomes of moral deliberation and individual freedom of choice if morality becomes a mere matter of conforming to the norms of society?

I am going to end up claiming that the tension within Moore’s practical ethics is more apparent than real and that close attention to the text will show that Moore’s conformism is of a limited sort. This, not unchallenged, interpretation is one that has been put forward in recent years by Tom Regan in his important book *Bloomsbury’s Prophet: G. E. Moore and the Development of His Moral Philosophy* (Temple, 1986). First, however, I should like to sketch Sylvester’s ideas about the two notions of duty which he claims to find in Moore.

What Sylvester calls “ontological duty” is the view usually ascribed to Moore and found clearly stated in both *Principia* and *Ethics*. One’s duty is simply to do that act which maximizes intrinsic value. The paradoxes of this view were noted as early as 1904 by Bertrand Russell. Can it really be my duty to do that which maximizes value even if I am not cognizant of it? And can it really be my duty to do such an act even if I believe mistakenly but reasonably that some other act would be better? These considerations lead to a more subjective notion which Sylvester claims to find in a rudimentary form in *Principia* (pp. 149–51), where Moore distinguishes between “possible actions” open to an agent (whether the agent is aware of them or not) and “actions of which it is possible to think” (i.e., actions which it is likely that the agent will think of). The point is that although a certain action A may be my ontological duty in the sense that it really will bring about more good than any other thing that I could do, still there is another sense of duty such that if, in the course of my deliberation, A never crossed my mind, and could not reasonably have been expected to, then A could not be my duty.

Moral duty, then, requires a certain cognizance or awareness on the part of the agent. But Sylvester insists that something else is required as well. Moral duty also requires that the context for deciding what to do—for moral choice—be defined by the question “What ought I to do?” And here he seems to mean that it is Moore’s view that no one can truly be said to do his/her moral duty unless

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he/she is deliberately trying to determine what course of action will be most likely to maximize value. The connection between moral duty and ontological duty is that the latter is, as Sylvester says, the “conceptual backdrop” for the former (p. 114 and p. 188). Though our ontological duty may be hopelessly beyond our ken, we can achieve our moral duty, but only by deliberately seeking our ontological duty.

This is where society’s established rules come into the picture. They provide us with a route to actions that are generally a means to maximal good though they may not be so in any particular case. In Moore’s words:

It seems, then, that with regard to any rule which is generally useful, we may assert that it ought always be observed, not on the ground that in every particular case it will be useful, but on the ground that in any particular case the probability of its being so is greater than that of our being likely to decide rightly that we have before us an instance of disutility. In short, though we may be sure that there are cases where the rule should be broken, we can never know which those cases are. and ought, therefore, never to break it. (P.E., pp. 163–64)

Here we seem to encounter this distinct sense of duty as moral duty. Indeed, both senses seem to be present in this single passage. For consider a case where, according to Moore, a rule ought to be broken but, since I do not know that it ought to be, I ought not to break it. Surely there is an appeal to duty here in a sense other than ontological duty. If not, Moore is guilty of asserting a flat contradiction.

It should be noted that in his 1912 *Ethics*, although Moore has almost nothing to say about social rules, he does seem to recognize something very much like Sylvester’s moral duty in addition to ontological duty, but he prefers to consider it in terms of the agent’s praiseworthiness or blameworthiness rather than duty per se. Thus on p. 121 of that work, as Sylvester notes, Moore resigns himself to the paradox of saying that one may deserve the strongest moral blame for doing one’s duty (since the agent was not justified in believing that the action was value-maximizing). But I take this to be merely a terminological preference on Moore’s part. The conceptual details underlying what Sylvester calls moral duty really do seem to be there in Moore’s thought, however one chooses to label them.

But all this brings us back to our initial paradox: if epistemic considerations force us to seek the social rules for an answer to the practical ethical question “What ought I to do?” does not the moral life ultimately reduce itself to a kind of social conformism? And, if so, what becomes of, what’s the point of, moral deliberation, human freedom, and the intrinsic worth of persons? Though certainly not in strict contradiction with a thoroughgoing conformism, such ideas are difficult to reconcile with it. The answer, as I suggested earlier, is that Moore does not embrace a thoroughgoing conformism. Nor does Sylvester say that he does. The facts seem to be that even in *Principia* Moore subscribes to a limited conformism.

Recall that it was because of the difficulty of knowing the effects of our actions in individual cases that Moore turns to the societal rules. But obedience to the rules is only morally required, says Moore, in those cases where the rules are generally practiced and generally useful. Moreover, Moore imposes an
epistemic requirement here as well. The rules which demand our obedience must have a general utility which is provable, or, as he sometimes puts it, their utility must be “certain” (P.E., p. 162). Moore is somewhat vague as to what exactly is supposed to constitute a proof, but he says “. . . a proof of general utility is so difficult, that it can hardly be conclusive except in a very few cases. It is certainly not possible with regard to all actions which are generally practiced” (P.E., p. 165). It is reasonably clear that Moore believes that the general utility of society’s prohibitions on murder and theft are “certain” but less clear what other social rules would meet this epistemic test. (His remarks about rules governing sexual conduct, for example, suggest that their utility, being contingent upon factors “more or less likely to alter,” may be less than certain [P.E., pp. 158–60].) Following his remark on p. 165 about the difficulty of proof, he continues in the next paragraph:

The extreme improbability that any general rule with regard to utility of an action will be correct seems, in fact, to be the chief principle which should be taken into account in discussing how the individual should guide his choice.

What this seems to come to is that in a large number of cases, perhaps most, the utility of the rule in question is less than certain, i.e., it is subject to doubt. And in such cases his recommendation is clear:

in cases of doubt, instead of following rules, of which he is unable to see the good effects in his particular case, the individual should rather guide his choice by a direct consideration of the intrinsic value or vileness of the effects which his action may produce. (P.E., p. 166)

So Moore’s is a limited conformism. Only in some cases—perhaps fewer than the majority of cases—can we rely on rules to tell us what actions are most likely to maximize value. In the last analysis, with the exception of those established rules which apparently constitute only “a very few cases,” we are on our own in our deliberation both as to a determination of what actions will maximize value and as to what things possess it intrinsically. Here, of course, there is much room for error. But there is also room for individualism and even nonconformity. This is Tom Regan’s point. But Sylvester is surely right to call attention in Moore to a notion of moral duty distinct from ontological duty that depends on a moral context involving moral deliberation and individual choice. And this moral context will undoubtedly come into full bloom in those cases where rules fail to apply—whether because the cases fall outside the scope of the rules or because the rules themselves may be less than certain. But he is also undoubtably correct in emphasizing that the well-established rules of society will play an important part in that notion of duty though, from what Moore himself says, our moral duty needn’t be supposed to coincide with the application of the existing set of social rules.