

Review of *G.E. Moore's Ethical Theory: Resistance and Reconciliation* by Brian Hutchinson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

They stick together at the University of Iowa. If you visit amazon.com you will find an enthusiastic 'customer review' by Panayot Butcharov of Iowa City giving *G.E. Moore's Ethical Theory*, the maximum five-star rating ('an important contribution to the current literature in ethics'). As readers of the book will realize, Panayot Butcharov is *Professor* Panayot Butcharov, author of *Skepticism in Ethics*, and an Iowa colleague of Hutchinson's, who evidently reciprocates his high regard. Butcharov gets no less than eleven entries in the index of Hutchinson's book. That is eight more entries than Russell, who developed the 'desire to desire' definition of 'good' to which the Open Question Argument seems to be a response, eleven more than Geach, whose famous essay 'Good and Evil' calls into the question the very idea of the predicative 'good', and eleven more than Bambrough, who managed to produce what Hutchinson merely gestures towards – a defense of the objectivity of ethics based on Moore's 'proof' of an external world.

But though Butcharov's piece is plainly a puff for a colleague, this does not mean that his high opinion of the book is unjustified. So is it as good as Butcharov believes? Butcharov thinks it is written with 'grace and flair'. I would not want to deny Hutchinson a knack for the felicitous phrase and he certainly gives himself airs and graces, but for his writing to be genuinely graceful it would have to be a pleasure to read - and that it most emphatically is not. The book is written with a sort of *de haut en bas* condescension and a vague, unfocused irony that is at first grating, then infuriating and finally unendurable. Moore is the principal victim of Hutchinson's patronage since he is depicted as a sort of holy fool whose inspired conclusions it is Hutchinson's mission to rescue from the integument of fallacious argument. (That they are thereby deprived of rational support does not seem to bother him.) But Moore is by no means the only one. Opponents (such as Darwall, Gibbard and Railton) are not so much answered or argued with as condescended to. Moreover Hutchinson is given to lofty generalizations about what 'the present age' or 'most philosophers' allegedly think, generalizations which are, perhaps, a trifle rash given the apparent paucity of his reading.

However, it was not just Hutchinson's manner but his matter that drove me to distraction. For Hutchinson eschews solid argument and detailed discussion in

favor of windy ruminations ('Is Moore a 'cosmic conservative'?) and portentous pronouncements: 'Showing [philosophers] that *the world as it is* has enough of value to make life worth living, [Moore] enables them to escape the perpetual state of disappointment with the world they have considered to be the badge of their superiority'. Moore himself passed a damning verdict on this sort of stuff in a letter to Leonard Woolf (another name unaccountably missing from the index.) 'I do wish people would not write such silly things – things which, one would have thought it is so perfectly easy to see to be just false. I suppose X's philosophy may have some merits: but it seems to me just like all wretched philosophy - vague, and obviously inconsequent and full of falsehoods. I think its object is to be like a sermon ... but it does annoy me terribly that people should admire such things.'

The history of philosophy can be seen either as a contribution to history or a contribution to philosophy or perhaps as a bit of both. History deals with human endeavor and since philosophy is a human endeavor, it has a history just like anything else. The historical task is to understand, an agent's actions – in this case the theoretical actions of a philosopher - as a more or less rational response to a particular problem-situation. (Hence context is important.) The philosophical task, by contrast, is to make the best of some late great philosopher, by extracting something true – or, at least interesting - from the text as a contribution to present-day debates. . Thus, for the philosophically-minded historian anachronism is not necessarily a vice. Arguments can be reworked with the aid of up-to-date conceptual devices such as rational choice theory, and it is quite in order to confront the late, great philosopher with latter-day criticisms, some of which can only be met with the aid of the latest philosophical equipment. Quentin Skinner and his disciples exemplify the first approach whilst Kavka, (on Hobbes) and Elster (on Marx) are distinguished representatives of the second.

Hutchinson fails on both counts. He is too ignorant, too incurious and too inattentive to make a contribution to history. And he lacks both the breadth of knowledge and the analytical acumen needed to make a contribution to philosophy.

'Ignorant, incurious and inattentive'? Why yes. To begin with Hutchinson does not seem to realize that there is nothing particularly new about non-naturalism, conceived as the doctrine that there is a special realm of moral properties and

relations which cannot be reduced to or identified with any others. This had been a common view among British philosophers since Cudworth in the 17th Century. (Of course you can convert it into a novelty by insisting on the details of Moore's exposition which Moore himself came to regard as 'utterly silly and preposterous' – e.g. that natural, as opposed to non-natural properties can exist in time all by themselves. But the basic idea is not a novel one.) Moore was just wrong to think that Sidgwick was the only philosopher beside himself not to commit the naturalistic fallacy, as he and Hutchinson might both have discovered had they bothered to consult Sidgwick's *Outline of a History of Ethics*. (Thus the 'paradox' addressed in chapter 3 rests on a false presupposition since Hutchinson implicitly accepts Moore's claim to novelty.) But even though there are more pre-Moorean non-naturalists than Hutchinson seems to be aware of, the existence of just *one* – namely Sidgwick – raises an obvious question which Hutchinson does not address – what *arguments* (if any) led Sidgwick away from naturalism? Indeed, the same question arises with respect to Moore himself in his pre-*Principia* phase, since his early draft, the *Elements of Ethics*, demonstrates that he was a non-naturalist in the late 1890s long before he invented the Open Question Argument. In fact (as Russell in effect recognized in an early review but as Hutchinson does not seem to notice) there are *two* arguments against naturalism in *Principia*, the Open Question Argument and what I call the 'Barren Tautology Argument'. [For Russell's review, see *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, vol. 4 pp. 571-5. Moore refers to this review in his 'Reply to My Critics' but Hutchinson does not seem to have followed up the reference.] If 'good' means (say) 'pleasant', then the claim that pleasant things are good is a 'barren tautology' (the phrase is Russell's) and as such can provide no reason for the pursuit of pleasant things. But by insisting vociferously that pleasure is good (worth 'shouting from the housetops' as A. N. Prior put it [*Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, p. 7]), the hedonists themselves demonstrate that it is *not* a barren tautology and thus that 'good' and 'pleasant' are not synonymous. This argument goes back at least to Francis Hutcheson and was definitely propounded by Sidgwick. Not so the Open Question Argument proper, which seems to have been a Moorean invention. But why did Moore feel the need to invent the OQA given that he already had a convincing argument against naturalism? (Another question that does not occur to Hutchinson.) The clue is to be found in the definition of 'good' that it seems to have been designed to dispose of – that good is what *we desire to desire*. A philosopher (such as David Lewis) who maintains that good is what we desire to desire is not be

trying to persuade us to pursue or promote what we desire to desire – rather he is trying to explain why supposing that something is good (i.e. something we desire to desire) gives us a reason to pursue or promote it. Hence it would be no objection to point out that on this definition ‘What we desire to desire is good’ would be a barren tautology since it was never intended to be anything *but* a tautology (though hopefully a philosophically illuminating one). To dispose of *this* definition something more is required, and that is where the OQA comes in. Now, Moore does not give the source for this definition but since he had a preference for real-life as opposed to imaginary opponents, it is natural to suppose that he got it from someone. But who? Again Hutchinson lacks the curiosity to ask, but if had bothered to peruse volume 1 of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, (available since 1983) he would have discovered the answer.

When it comes to philosophy, it is one of Hutchinson’s stated aims to ‘take this very famous argument [the OQA] down more than a notch’, though, oddly, he seems to endorse the conclusion of the argument which he regards as fallacious and for which he has no substitute to offer. Perhaps this is because he regards it ‘not as an argument but as a means for the attainment of an epiphany’. Had he bothered to formulate the argument precisely so as to bring out the unstated premises, he might have seen two things: a) that the argument is *not* question-begging (as following Frankena, Hutchinson fondly believes) and b) that if the argument fails, no epiphany can establish its conclusion. The argument can be stated thus:

- 1) ‘Are X things good?’ is a significant or open question for any naturalistic or metaphysical predicate ‘X’ (whether simple or complex).
- 2) If two expressions (whether simple or complex) are synonymous this must be evident on reflection to every competent speaker.
- 3) The meaning of a predicate or property word is the property for which it stands. Thus if two predicates or property words have distinct meanings they name distinct properties.

From 1) and 2) it follows that

- 4) ‘Good’ is not synonymous with any naturalistic or metaphysical predicate ‘X’ (or ‘goodness’ with any corresponding noun or noun-phrase ‘X-ness’).

From 3) and 4) it follows that

5) Goodness is not identical with any natural or metaphysical property of X-ness.

Thus the argument starts with a linguistic claim (the Open Question Thesis) and proceeds via a psycho-semantic claim (that synonymies are evident on reflection to every competent speaker) to a claim about meanings (that 'good' is not synonymous with any naturalistic predicate 'X'). No questions are begged though the argument does rely on a controversial and, in my view, false premise, namely 2). Then, with the aid of a semantico-metaphysical thesis, namely 3) we arrive at Moore's desired conclusion 5). Again no questions are begged, though again the argument relies on a premise, which is controversial and, in my view, false, since it precludes the possibility that non-synonymous predicates can stand for the same property. In the 1970s criticism focused on the move from 4) to 5) via 3) (a fact of which Hutchinson seems to be unaware). In the 1980s criticism focused on the move from 1) to 4) via 2) since 2) seems to lead straight to the Paradox of Analysis (a fact of which Hutchinson *does* seem to be aware). But here's the rub. It is just about possible that an 'epiphany' might establish that the *concept* of goodness is not identical with any corresponding *concept* of X-ness (because in *this* instance we really can see that the two notions are distinct). But if 3) is false, it is hard to see how this could establish that the *property* of goodness is distinct from any naturalistic *property* unless we assume 'some kind of Platonic intuitionism', specifically the thesis that we have direct intellectual access to the Form of the Good. Since this assumption is utterly fantastic (certainly not an item of common sense), it seems that if the argument fails, an epiphany is not enough.

One of the chief themes of Hutchinson's book is that Moore was a sort of anti-philosopher who stood up for commonsense against the metaphysical vagaries and skeptical doubts of his brother philosophers. And this is roughly how Moore seems to have conceived of himself. (Hutchinson is apparently unaware of Geach's charge that Moore's whole meta-ethic rests on 'a peculiarly philosophic use of words' and that we cannot 'be asked to take it for granted' that this use 'means anything at all. [Geach: 'Good and Evil', reprinted in Foot ed. 1967, *Theories of Ethics*, p. 67.] Even if

Geach is wrong about this – as I think he is – the very fact that the charge is made and widely believed, indicates that Moore is not quite the representative of uncontroversial commonsense that Hutchinson makes him out to be.) But what Hutchinson does not appreciate is that many, if not most, philosophers start off with some fairly commonsensical idea but find themselves driven to say weird or even absurd things in the attempt to make coherent sense of that idea. Thus a David Lewis, for example, can start off wanting to make room for modal facts whilst denying that reality is deep-down modal, only to wind up with an infinity of possible worlds. Moore himself is no exception to this generalization since his early efforts to refute idealism led to the bizarre view that the world is made up of non-mental concepts. And as we have just seen, it is hard to defend his supposedly commonsensical non-naturalism without succumbing to some kind of Platonism. Perhaps this is not so very surprising since commonsense is a sedimentary affair, laid down over the ages. It embodies not only the metaphysics of the stone-age but bits and bobs of the folk-metaphysics of subsequent ages inconsistently compounded together. Thus any philosopher who poses as the champion of commonsense against the philosophers is probably deceiving himself somewhere along the line. At best he can be the champion of *bits* of commonsense against *some* philosophers, since commonsense itself is neither consistent nor metaphysically untainted. Hutchinson does not seem to realize this, perhaps because he is blind to the metaphysical oddities inherent in Moore's position. For despite his pose of ironic self-awareness, *this* is an irony of which Hutchinson is *not* aware – that in Moore's case, at any rate, the attempt to defend what he takes to be a commonsense position in ethics forces him to adopt a decidedly *un*-commonsensical metaphysic. (It leaves many of my students gaping with incredulity.) Thus Hutchinson's idea that there is an unproblematic world of 'ordinary thought' which it is the 'job of reactionary philosophy' to protect is radically misconceived. 'Ordinary thought' is not unproblematic and however reactionary a philosopher may want to be, he won't be able to defend 'ordinary thought' *in toto*, and is liable to end up saying something strange.

But though Hutchinson is weak on those aspects of Moore's philosophy that interest *me* (such as the OQA and related matters) perhaps he is stronger on those aspects of Moore's philosophy that interest *him* (such as Moore's views on conduct and his critique of egoism)? Alas no. On the publication of *Principia*, Russell wrote

a letter of congratulation to Moore with the reservation that Moore was 'unduly conservative and anti-reforming'. Hutchinson agrees except for the 'unduly'. Indeed, he celebrates Moore's moral conservatism and tries to recruit him for his own, rather belated, anti-Leninist crusade ('programs unprecedentedly bloody for regimes unspeakably dreary'). Hutchinson endorses Moore's claim that 'any rule that is generally useful ... ought always to be obeyed' even though 'in some cases the neglect of an established rule will be the best action possible' since it is difficult if not impossible to tell whether the deed proposed is indeed such an act. What Hutchinson does not seem to realize is that this is flatly inconsistent with Moore's definition of 'duty' as 'that action which will cause more good to exist in the Universe than any possible alternative.' For Moore, the right thing to do is (defined as) that action which will maximize *actual* utility. But if the right thing to do is what will maximize actual utility, and if some conventional acts don't maximize it (which Moore explicitly admits), then it follows that those actions are wrong and that we ought not to do them. Thus Moore is committed to the view that there are some actions (though we don't know which) that we ought to do even though we ought not to do them. To avoid this contradiction without rejecting consequentialism, Moore needs to amend his conception of duty so that the right thing to do is that action which maximizes *expected* as opposed to *actual* utility, where the values of an action's outcomes are multiplied by their probabilities before they are summed. Did Hutchinson but know it, this was suggested at the time by Russell, who (like Moore's disciple Woolf) went on to use this amended consequentialist criterion as a stick to beat the Leninists. Those 'programs unprecedentedly bloody' were almost certainly unjustified since the present pains were certain and the future gains unlikely. Moore's criterion, by contrast, unfitted him for the crusade. Of all this Hutchinson appears to be innocent, just as he seems to be innocent of challenges to consequentialism (such as Anscombe's) and the vast 20th Century literature on consequentialism and its discontents. When it comes to consequences, philosophers have not been idle over the last one hundred years, and to tackle these issues bare-brained, as Hutchinson tries to do, strikes me as a trifle presumptuous.

Hutchinson's discussion of egoism is vitiated by a related fault. He does not seem to realize that Moore's critique of egoism is heavily dependent on his analysis of duty and falls to the ground once that is given up. (For Moore it is analytic that we each ought to maximize what is good-in-itself, so if I ought to maximize my own

good this must be because my good is good-in-itself. But if my good is good-in-itself, then other people are equally bound to maximize it, which according to egoism they are not. Contradiction!) Two chapters of Hutchinson's book are devoted to this feeble argument, which is treated with as much respect as Hutchinson's patronizing style will permit. This discussion too is carried on in apparent ignorance of the literature, in particular Mackie's excellent article on the subject [Mackie, J.L. 'Sidgwick's Pessimism' reprinted in Mackie, J. & P. eds. 1985, *Persons and Values*], which Hutchinson would have done well to have read. Even Broad's damning critique (which Hutcheson refers to in a different context) is largely ignored [See Broad 'Certain Features in Moore's Ethical Doctrines', in Schilpp ed. 1942, *The Philosophy of G.E.Moore.*]

The book then is bad: bad in itself (since it quite definitely ought not to be) and bad as a companion to *Principia* (since it sets students a bad example of slapdash, lazy and pretentious philosophizing and would tend to put them off reading Moore). As a conscientious reviewer I ploughed through every page and I have to say that I resented every minute of my life that I wasted on the book. Don't waste any of yours.

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