

SOME COMMENTS ON MOORE'S METHOD OF ISOLATION*

G. E. Moore's main objective in *Principia Ethica*¹ is to establish his Normative Ethics. Before going into his Normative Ethics he finds it necessary to analyse the nature of 'goodness'. In the first four chapters of the book he shows how philosophers before him had misconceptions about the real nature of goodness and how they committed the Naturalistic Fallacy by taking goodness to be what it is not. Moore says that goodness is a simple non-natural quality and the commitment of the fallacy involves not realising the distinctive nature of goodness as non-natural quality. Moore offers his Normative Ethics in the rest of the book. In the final chapter he tries to fulfil the task of finding what things are good in themselves in the highest degree. The method he uses in this endeavour is the method of Isolation and he says this is the method which must be employed in order to decide the question 'What things have intrinsic value and in what degree?' According to him a correct decision to the question involves examining things in absolute isolation.²

By employing the method of Isolation, Moore says, we shall guard ourselves against two errors: one error consists in neglecting the principle of organic unity, viz., the error in supporting that 'if we see a whole state to be valuable, and also see that one element of that state has no value by itself, then the other element, by itself, must have all the value which belongs to the whole state.'³ This is an error because as an organic unity the whole may be greater or lesser in value than the aggregate value of the whole as well as of the parts separately, and to avoid a confusion between means and end, Moore says, 'it is absolutely essential to consider each distinguishable quality in isolation'.⁴ And the avoidance of such errors is possible only when we consider each 'distinguishable quality' in order to decide what value it possesses. The other error is the error which consists in confusing things which are mere means to what is good as ends with things which

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are themselves good as ends. The nett result of the application of the method of Isolation by Moore is that there are three main classes of things which have intrinsic value: Unmixed Goods and Mixed Goods have positive intrinsic value, and Greatest Evils have negative intrinsic value.

In this paper I shall examine the validity of the application of the method of Isolation by which Moore attempts to find out which states of things are good in themselves. This is important because it is the foundation of his normative judgments. It is questionable whether this method is applicable at all to states of mind, such as, personal affections and aesthetic enjoyments. These wholes are complex organic unities and the elements in them are not entities which can be isolated at will to examine their individual worth apart from the whole to which they belong as parts, though it is possible that they have independent existence apart from the whole itself. A further examination of these complex organic unities would provide us with the fact that if we do apply Moore's Isolation test to them, as he does, it is not at all certain that any thing will pass it except 'twinges of pain' and 'sensations of pleasure'—even 'consciousness of pain' and 'consciousness of pleasure', for example, can hardly be isolated from 'twinge of pain' and 'sensation of pleasure' respectively. Moore seems to be using this method without first examining the feasibility of the application of the method to the states of things which are very much unlike the subject matter of physics and chemistry.

Moore says that it is good that man should be pleased, it is good that beautiful qualities should be cognised with an appropriate emotion, it is good that certain qualities in human beings should be loved and certain qualities in them should be hated, etc. etc. What is good, in fact, is a *state of mind*. He talks about wholes, which are highly complex unities, and also says that a part of these organic wholes may be good or bad separately and that the value of the whole is distinct from the aggregate value of the parts. He says, for example, that there is a whole consisting of (a) beautiful qualities, (b) the physical embodiments of these qualities, (c) the contemplation of them, and (d) the emotion towards them. He then asks what value each of these elements has separately, and maintains that the absence of one of

them would diminish the value of the whole, in some cases enormously. The question of isolating the elements of a good whole often strikes us as unintelligible. It is very hard to understand what is meant by asking whether cognition of a beautiful quality is good apart from the beautiful qualities itself, the emotion towards it, etc., etc. Nor is it very helpful to be told that the test is whether it would be good if it existed quite alone as the sole element in another Universe. Would a Universe which contained only a particular beautiful quality be good? Would it be good if it contained only the cognition of a beautiful quality and nothing else whatever, neither the quality itself nor the person cognising? All these questions seem to be very hard to decide and it is doubtful whether they convey any meaning at all. Moore seems to think that to these questions particular answers are often self-evident. But it is hard to understand what he means by 'self-evident' here. At least some of these questions, I think, are just like asking: Is it good that 'of' should exist by itself, or 'not' should? The main point of this objection is that it is really doubtful whether 'consciousness' or 'hatred' is the sort of entity of which *isolated existence* can ever be supposed. They are, most probably, not entities at all but relations; and it does not make sense to suppose them to exist without the things they relate.

Moore says that cruelty is bad and hatred is bad but hatred of cruelty is good. He seems to use the method of Isolation in the model of chemical analysis. But unfortunately he has not taken into account the possibility that *hatred* and *cruelty* are not entities which can be isolated at will to see whether they are bad separately and when combined together become good. To talk about hatred is to talk about a fact that x hates y—so and so hates someone or something. And it may be that 'hate' is a dispositional word; it means that x will in various occasions behave in any of a number of ways towards y, or towards instances of y, if y is something like cruelty. He will utter words of loathing about y, try to prevent y, etc., etc. If 'hatred' is merely a way of saying that he tends to do these things then obviously hatred can hardly exist quite by itself. No doubt, x will have certain feelings towards y, experience certain emotions in its presence, etc., and this is part of what is meant by hatred. Moore I.P.Q...5

would perhaps say that 'hatred' is a 'state of mind' and he seems to think that states of mind are finally what are good and bad.

Another possibility, it seems, could be that Moore thinks 'hatred' and other states of mind are definite, unanalysable things as he says that pleasure is. It is also possible that he thinks of feelings in general on the model of 'twinge of pain'. But it is doubtful whether feelings of fear, anger, hatred, etc. are at all like 'twinges of pain'. There is some point in saying of a twinge of pain that this is something simple and unanalysable like a yellow patch, which we become aware of by introspection just as we become aware of a yellow patch by perception. But if, as some philosophers have argued, emotions are dispositions then they are something more complex than 'twinge of pain' or a patch of yellow. There is a general agitation—'a stirred up' state common to all emotions. What differentiates a specific emotion like anger from any other is, I think, its reference to external objects. We feel a desire to hit at something when angry, or prevent it, or destroy it, etc., etc. If, on the other hand, they are, as Moore seems to think, occurrents then it is still arguable that what differentiates one from another is their cognitive content (to be angry is to have a particular feeling plus a desire to hit out at something or perhaps a belief that something has harmed you; to be afraid is to have a particular feeling plus a belief that something may hurt you, etc.); and thus they are complex wholes and not simple. Even apart from that it is doubtful if the Isolation test can be applied to emotions.

'Cruelty is bad' does not mean the sort of thing that is meant by a 'twinge of toothache is bad', viz., that a specific sensation is bad. What is bad is that people should behave in certain ways towards other sentient beings. And 'hatred of cruelty is good' means that it is good that other people should try to prevent them from behaving in these ways. It does not mean, as Moore seems to think, that two specific sensations, hatred and cruelty, are bad in themselves and yet form 'a good whole' when related in a particular way. What we mean when we say that 'hatred is bad', I think, is that hatred is a violent tendency to destroy things without carefully considering the consequences. 'Hatred of cruelty' could be bad, quite contrary to what Moore thinks of

it, in so far as it displays this tendency and leads, for example to vindictive action not relating to the general aim of preventing cruel actions; but it is good in so far as this general aim is good. If we put it this way much of the paradox in Moore's principle of organic unities disappears.

The distinction above shows that there is something obviously unrealistic about Moore's talk of 'parts and wholes' which leads him to talk about fictitious entities existing in isolation as if they were things like yellow patches. The most glaring instance is probably his distinction between 'pleasure' and 'consciousness of pleasure', and 'pain' and 'consciousness of pain'.⁵ Moore elaborates the distinction between 'pleasure' and 'consciousness of pleasure' by referring to a passage in Plato's *Philebus*,⁶ and then in the final chapter when he makes a distinction between 'pain' and 'consciousness of pain' he refers back to this discussion. The distinction, for Moore, here seems to be the relational difference between 'one's being pleased' and 'one's knowing that he is pleased'. It is quite comprehensible to say: "Ah! I was happy in those days but of course I did not realise, young fool that I was!" But if this is what is meant by 'consciousness of pleasure' I doubt very much if consciousness of pleasure is valuable and pleasure is not valuable. It matters very little whether people go around saying to themselves and others: "Ah! How happy I am!" Certainly it does not matter if the alternative is to be immersed in the activities that make them happy without asking themselves whether they are happy or not. It may be different if the alternative is to be positively discontented. But it is doubtful whether it makes any sense to say that 'x is happy but discontented'. In such a case we would rather say that 'x ought to be happy' or 'x is happier than other people'.

Another point is: it is genuinely arguable whether 'consciousness of pleasure' can be isolated from pleasure *itself*. I would rather think that we must first be pleased, i. e., we must experience the sensations of pleasure to become conscious of pleasure. There seems to be a strong case for the view that without pleasure there can be no consciousness of pleasure and without the consciousness also, on the other hand, pleasure itself

has no existence as a separate entity. Anyhow, this is very hard to decide.

Moreover, even if we unquestionably take it for granted that pleasure and consciousness of pleasure are separate entities then I should have thought that the knowledge of our happiness, i. e., the consciousness of pleasure is chiefly good as means in that it prevents us from making a change which we may regret; and similarly, that the lack of knowledge of our own unhappiness is chiefly bad as means. And thus it is not the case, as Moore holds, that consciousness of pleasure is good in itself. Consciousness of pain again if it can be isolated from pain *itself* would be good as means, contrary to what Moore thinks it to be, *always intrinsically evil*. Because, then this consciousness would prevent us from the actions which would have otherwise brought painful results, thus making the Universe better as there would be fewer total painful experiences in it. Moore thinks 'hatred of cruelty' to be good for the same reason: that if and when we hate cruelty we prevent cruelty done to others and in turn prevent multiplying instances of painful experiences or intrinsic evils in this Universe, though he thinks that it is good as an end.

Thus it seems to follow from the above that there is sufficient ground to doubt that the Isolation test is the right one, or that it does explain what we mean by saying that something is good in itself or 'worth having for its own sake'. Certainly we do feel inclined to say that personal affections and aesthetic enjoyments are good in themselves. But I do not think we mean by this that it is good that someone should brood in a certain way about some other person or that someone should go on contemplating beautiful objects for ever in isolation. The feeling of affection or the contemplating enjoyments are not what are good if we think of them on the analogy of an isolated twinge of pain like toothache. What is good is the whole situation in which A and B behave in certain ways which includes feeling in a certain way to each other. A contemplates a beautiful object with the aim of creating more beautiful objects or, if it is beyond his capacity then at least with the aim of cultivating a favourable atmosphere for others contemplating beautiful things in order to multiply the enjoyment of beauty in this Universe. But are

these good as ends or good as means? Most probably they are good as means—means to the end of harmonious human existence, the end of less misery and more happiness for men in this Universe.

The Isolation test thus does not enable us to find out the right answer to the question : 'What things are good in themselves?' It is not the right test to answer this for two main reasons : Firstly, because the states of things which Moore holds to be good in themselves are such complex wholes that the Isolation test is hardly effectively applicable to them; secondly, most of the things which Moore has found to be good as ends can be shown by further analysis to be good as means. Perhaps Moore is right when he observes that only the Isolation test could help us to find, without any doubt, the real worth of things which are highly complex organic wholes and to see which among the multifarious things of this Universe are worth having for their own sake. But it is very unfortunate for us all that these complex organic wholes are so inseparably connected to their respective parts that the parts hardly can be put apart for their individual worth to be examined.

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NOTES

1. Moore, G. E., *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge (1903).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p. 212.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 88 ff.

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THE HISTORY OF THE

REIGN OF

CHARLES THE FIRST

BY

JOHN BURNET

IN TWO VOLUMES.

LONDON,

Printed and Sold by

J. BARNARD, at the

Black-Swan, in Strand;

and

R. CLAYTON, at the

White-Horse, in Pall-mall.

1724.

Printed by

J. BARNARD, at the

Black-Swan, in Strand;

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R. CLAYTON, at the

White-Horse, in Pall-mall.