

## Should Moore Have Followed His Own Method?

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1. Scott Soames closes the third chapter of his extremely impressive new book<sup>1</sup> with the following critical remark about Moore's moral philosophy:

No idea is more associated with G.E. Moore than the idea of starting with pre-philosophical certainties about particular cases, and using them to confirm or disconfirm general philosophical principles, rather than going the other way around. None of his contributions to philosophy match this for lasting importance. How ironic, and what a pity, that he didn't follow this method in ethics. Had he done so, the crippling philosophical tension in his ethical views might have been, to some significant degree, alleviated (p.70).

There are, I take it, three basic suggestions here. First, Moore's moral philosophy as articulated mainly in *Principia Ethica*<sup>2</sup> contains a crippling philosophical tension. Second, nevertheless this tension might have been alleviated. Third, the way in which it might have been alleviated draws essentially on Moore's own methodology set out in another part of his philosophy and in particular in 'A Defense of Common Sense' and 'Proof of an External World.'<sup>3</sup> In what follows I will agree with Soames that there is a tension in Moore's moral philosophy, but will raise some questions about whether the

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<sup>1</sup> Soames, Scott. *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century, Vol. 1. The Dawn of Analysis*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2003); all pages references in the text are to this book unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) Original publication: 1903

<sup>3</sup> G.E. Moore, 'A Defense of Common Sense' in G.E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (London: Collier Books, 1962), 32-59. Original Publication: 1925; 'Proof of an External World', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol25, 1939. These works post-date *Principia*, but as Soames explains (p.13) in the case of 'Proof', "its main ideas had been familiar fixtures of [Moore's] philosophical outlook for at least thirty years prior to its publication."

tension might have been alleviated in the way that he suggests, and moreover whether the issues here really bear the relation to Moore's methodology that he says.

2. The crippling philosophical tension Soames has in mind is that between, on the one hand, the idea that no moral claim is analytic or empirical and on the other hand, the idea that some moral claims are true and capable of being known. To bring out the tension, let us take (1) as our example:

- (1) Experimenting on animals in certain circumstances is morally right, even if it causes the deaths of the animals in question.

If (1) is knowable, then it is either knowable essentially on the basis of experience or knowable but not essentially on the basis of experience. But, if it is knowable essentially on the basis of experience, it is empirical; but Moore says—or would say—that (1) is not empirical. For Moore held that moral properties such as being morally right were non-natural properties, and by this he meant in part that you could not establish that they are instantiated by observation. On the other hand, if (1) is knowable but not essentially on the basis of experience, then it is (or so initially it is tempting to think) analytic; but Moore says—or would say—that (1) is not analytic. For Moore held that the open question argument showed that any substantive moral truth, such as (1), is not analytic. In short, it seems plausible to say that if (1) is knowable it is either analytic or empirical; but Moore says it is neither. How then is (1) knowable according to Moore?

One response to the argument—the response of the analytic naturalist—is to deny that no moral claim is analytic. The analytic naturalist need not say implausibly that (1) in particular is analytic. He or she might instead say that I may come to know (1) by inference from two other claims (2) and (3):

- (2) Experimenting on animals in certain circumstances produces more pleasure<sup>4</sup> than any reasonable alternative, even if it causes the deaths of the animals in question.
- (3) If an action produces more human pleasure than any reasonable alternative, then it is the morally right action.

For the analytic naturalist, (2) is a non-moral empirical claim, and so presents no problem in the context, and (3) is a moral claim that is analytic—contra, of course, the open question argument. In other words, since (2) and (3) together entail (1), one might come to know (1) simply by putting together some empirical knowledge and some analytic knowledge.

Of course, Moore himself is no analytic naturalist; in fact this is the position to which he is mainly opposed in *Principia*. How then does he respond to the problem illustrated by (1)? His response is to say that certain moral claims are self-evident without being analytic. For example, Moore regards (4) as self-evident:

- (4) Pleasure is good.

If we ignore for the moment other potential sources of goodness, the combination of (4) and (2) yields:

- (5) Experimenting on animals in certain circumstances produces more goodness than any reasonable alternative, even if it causes the deaths of the animals in question.

Hence Moore may explain how I might come to know (5) by saying that I put together some empirical knowledge with some self-evident knowledge. Of course, this by itself does not explain how (1) is knowable, for (5) alone does not entail (1). But (5) *does*

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, it might produce other things as well, including happiness and knowledge, but I will focus on pleasure in what follows.

entail (1) when it is combined with a further thesis about the right and the good, which Moore regards as analytic:

- (6) If an action produces more goodness than any reasonable alternative, then it is the morally right action.

In sum, Moore's suggestion concerning (1) is—or would be—that it is knowable by inference from the self-evident (4), the empirical (2) and the analytic (6).

There are clearly a number of questions about Moore's response to the argument about (1). One notorious question, for example, is why he feels entitled to say that (6) is analytic. His official view is that no substantive moral claim is analytic; but is (6) not a substantive moral claim? (Soames discusses this problem on pp. 79-85.) Another question, and for us the more important question, is that it is none too clear what self-evidence is, and so what property Moore is attributing to (4) when he says it is self-evident. Soames tells us that, when he says that various moral claims are self-evident,

Moore is claiming (i) that they can be known to be true, (ii) that our belief in them is justified even though they cannot be deduced (logically or analytically) from other more basic known or justified propositions, (iii) that their justification does not rest in any way on propositions other than themselves, and (iv) that their truth is potentially obvious to us once we attend to them and carefully distinguish them from other propositions with which they might be confused. (p. 64)

But the problem is that these ideas don't provide a positive account of what self-evidence is: (ii) and (iii) in particular tell us something negative, about what must *not* happen if a moral claim is self-evident, but nothing here seems to tell us what positively must be the case if something is self-evident.<sup>5</sup> And this I take it is what creates the tension in Moore's moral philosophy. There is an argument that ordinary moral claims like (1) are

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<sup>5</sup> The reference to potential obviousness in (iv) might be thought to be an exception to this. I will return to this point briefly later on.

unknowable. His response to the argument is to invoke self-evidence. But self-evidence is an epistemological property about which he is in no position to say anything positive.

3. So much the worse for Moore's moral philosophy one might think. But, according to Soames, there is something that Moore *should* have said here, and was available for him to say, but that he did not say. As I understand it, Soames' proposal has two parts. The first is that Moore should switch examples. We have seen that according to Moore, (4) is self-evident:

(4) Pleasure is good.

But for Soames this sort of claim is "too broad, too far reaching and too contentious to have this status" (p.67). Moore would do better, Soames says, to concentrate on hedged or restricted moral claims. One example he gives (p. 69) is (7):

(7) Keeping one's promises is prima facie right.

And presumably another example would be a hedged version of the claim we began with:

(8) Experimenting on animals in certain circumstances is prima facie morally right, even if it causes the deaths of the animals in question.

In emphasizing these restricted claims, what Soames seems to be saying is that, while it might be on the face of it implausible that (4) is self-evident, it is not implausible that (7) or (8) is. In this connection, Soames cites W.D.Ross with approval, as it is of course Ross who most famously says that claims such as (7) are self-evident.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ross *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1930). As Tyler Doggett pointed out to me, it is not quite clear that prima facie claims of this sort are properly classified as *moral* claims because they might be read instead as psychological reports; that is 'x is prima facie morally right' might be thought to mean what 'it seems to me offhand that x is morally right' means. But I will ignore this in what follows. Even if it this were the right way to interpret prima facie moral claims, the problem it raises could be finessed, i.e., by considering different examples. Soames in fact *does* consider some different examples; cf. p.68-9.

In developing the idea that Moore should shift examples, Soames makes the related suggestion that lying underneath the tension set out above is a certain view of Moore's about the direction of justification. At some points in his discussion, Soames sets out the problem more or less as I have done (e.g. p.71). But his considered view (p. 72) of the issue is that it arises from Moore's holding three claims:<sup>7</sup>

- (9) The most general ethical claims, *things that are D (and only those things) are good*, are neither analytic nor susceptible to philosophical proof, for any relevant D, and for any such D the question *Granted that a is D, is a good?* is genuinely open.
- (10) Some ethical claims are both true and capable of being known to be true; hence they are self-evident, or they can be justified.
- (11) Justification of ethical claims flows from the general to the specific. Particular claims about this or that being good are justified by appeal to generalities under which they fall. Lower level generalities are justified by higher-level generalities and equivalences, until we reach a fundamental claim *things that are D (and only those things) are good*.

If the problem is confronted in this form, what Soames suggests is that Moore should give up (11). Justification does not flow from the general to the specific; in particular it does not flow from (4) to (7) or (8). Rather it flows in the opposite direction. If Moore had said this, Soames suggests, he would have been better off when it came to the central tension in his philosophy.

4. The advice to switch examples and, similarly, to reverse the order of justification, is as I understand it only part of Soames' overall suggestion about what Moore ought to have said. We will turn in a moment to the other part of his suggestion. But before doing so, it is important to notice that Soames sometimes gives the impression—more accurately, he sometimes gave *me* the impression—that he thinks that Moore would have

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<sup>7</sup> I have adjusted the numbering and replaced Soames's Greek letters with Latin ones. Apart from that the three claims in the text are the same as the ones that appear on p. 72.

been better off *simply* if he had switched examples or reversed the order of justification; that is, Soames seems to suggest that this first part of his proposal *already* makes Moore better off.<sup>8</sup>

I am not sure if Soames really means this, but if so, he is mistaken. The reason, to put it somewhat directly, is this: sticking ‘prima facie’ into the relevant moral claims does not alleviate in any way the fundamental epistemological problem that Moore faces. For the problem with Moore’s response to the argument about (1) above concerns the epistemological property of being self-evident, and particular it concerns the fact that we don’t know what that property is. It does not concern *which* moral statements that epistemological property attaches to.

To bring out the difference, suppose you think there is a problem with what it means for an object to move. It is no good my responding that, according to me, things only move on a Tuesday or that the only things that move are tomatoes. Even if I hold these eccentric views, my doing so is no response to you, because your problem is with moving; that is, with the property of motion. Your problem is not with what things precisely that property attaches to; that is, with what things move. Similarly if the problem with saying that (4) is self-evident is that we don’t know what self-evidence is, then suggesting that something *else*—(7), say—is self-evident is no response. Moreover, when Soames suggests (p. 72) that Moore “got himself into this predicament by holding fast” to an idea about the direction of justification, this would seem to be mistaken. The predicament does not have its source in an idea about the direction of justification. It has its source rather in the idea that a train of justification, in no matter what direction it proceeds, could terminate in self-evidence in the first place.

It might be responded that the talk above about demanding a positive account is not terribly specific, and in particular that it fails to distinguish two separate problems. The first is that it is hard to see how anything, and so (4), is self-evident. The second is that it is hard to see how (4) *in particular* is self-evident; this second problem does not presuppose that there is something amiss with self-evidence as such. As I have argued, if

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<sup>8</sup> Soames writes (p.67) for example “In my opinion, Moore’s thesis that some ethical claims are self-evident is stronger, and more plausible, than it is often taken to be. One reason for this is that the particular examples he chose to illustrate his thesis are not the best candidates for the job.”

the problem at issue is the first, the first part of what Soames says has no force, at least if you take it in isolation. But for all that it might have force if the problem at issue is the second. However, there are two difficulties with this idea. First, it seems to me to be unlikely that the problem in Moore's moral philosophy stems from what he took to be self-evident rather than from self-evidence itself. But, second, even if the problem did stem in part from the implausibility of the suggestion that (4) *in particular* is self-evident, it seems reasonable to insist that it stems *also* from the nature of self-evidence. But what Soames says about switching examples does not speak to this aspect of the issue.

Of course, even if switching examples does not on its own put Moore in a better position, this does not show that Soames' overall proposal is mistaken. All it shows is that the *first* part of what he says is no help by *itself*. In the second part of his proposal, he goes on to say that, if Moore had switched examples, he would have been in a position to appeal to the methodology that he himself advances in another part of his philosophy. So at this point I turn to this part of what he says.

5. In 'A Defense of Common Sense', Moore famously suggested that claims such as (12) are obvious:

(12) I have a human body that was born at a certain time in the past.

As Soames points out, while simple, this idea has far reaching consequences for the evaluation of scepticism about the external world, and for the various forms of idealism that are motivated by such scepticism. Positions of this style implicitly deny (12). But, since (12) is obvious, it must be that there is something very wrong with these positions. In essence, Moore's methodology can be summed up as follows: don't deny the obvious. Moore thinks that, while most philosophers *assert* the obvious, many (e.g. idealists and sceptics) deny it too.

Now, this Moorean way of dealing with idealism and scepticism seems to me, as I think it seems to Soames, to be extremely attractive, at least on the surface. But what is its connection to ethics? In suggesting this connection, I take it he has in mind something

like the following. Suppose that Moore had insisted that the hedged moral claim (7) is obvious just as he insists that (12) is obvious:

(7) Keeping one's promises is *prima facie* right.

It immediately follows that (7) is true and knowable, for if something is obvious in the relevant sense, it is known, and if it is known it is true and knowable. But if (7) is true and knowable, then—one might think—it is reasonable to suppose that it is self-evident too. For on the assumption that (7) is neither analytic nor empirical, then it is plausible to suppose that it is self-evident. In a sentence: if restricted moral claims are obvious, then, if they are not empirical or analytic, they are self-evident.

Of course, the claim that some restricted moral claims are self-evident does not entail that *unrestricted* moral claims are. On the other hand—and this I take to be Soames' main idea—if restricted moral claims are self-evident, then Moore is certainly in vastly better position than he initially appears to be when he responds to the argument that we started with. His response to that argument is or entails that (4) is self-evident:

(4) Pleasure is good.

The reply to this response is that unless something positive can be said about self-evidence it is illegitimate to attribute that property to (4). The rejoinder to this reply—offered on behalf of Moore by Soames—is that, since (7) is self-evident because obvious, it is perfectly legitimate to say that (4) is self-evident too—and this remains true, even in the absence of any positive account.

How plausible is this rejoinder? It is certainly plausible that (7) or something like it is obvious just as Soames says. And it is also plausible that *if* (7) is self-evident, then Moore is in a better position with respect to the argument we considered at the beginning than he appeared to be. So the crucial question we need to focus on is this: what is the connection between the claim that (7) is obvious, on the one hand, and the claim that it is self-evident on the other? Clearly, if Soames' suggestion about what Moore ought to have said is plausible at all, there must be *some* connection here; what then is it?

6. I think there are two relevant suggestions about the nature of this connection; but unfortunately neither makes Soames' advice to Moore plausible. According to the first, if something is obvious, then it is self-evident. If this suggestion is adopted, Soames' advice is that Moore ought to have said this: "(7) is obvious. Since it is obvious, it is self-evident. So we *know* that something is self-evident. So it is not illegitimate of me to invoke the notion of self-evidence, even if I can't provide a theory of what self-evidence is." However, the problem with this suggestion is that it has Moore saying something false. For obviousness does not entail self-evidence; in fact the latter is neither necessary nor sufficient for the former.

To see that it is not necessary, consider (12) again:

(12) I have a human body that was born at a certain time in the past.

I take it that (12) is obvious if anything is. And yet it is not self-evident, or at least might not be. For some philosophers, I may come to know (12) directly on the basis of experience; for others I may come to know it by inference from other beliefs or knowledge about my experience. But on neither view is (12) self-evident in the relevant sense.

To see that it is not sufficient, consider a *recherché* metaphysical claim such as (13):

(13) There are no necessary connections between metaphysically distinct existences.

Understood in the right way, (13) is a candidate for being self-evident; at any rate it is neither analytic nor empirical and is held by many philosophers as a sort of first principle. But it is anything but obvious in the Moorean sense. Indeed, if Moore were to have included (13) in his list of obvious truths in 'A Defense', he would have immediately lost his audience.

It might be thought that self-evidence *is* sufficient for obviousness, at least if one adopts Soames' account quoted above about what Moore means by self-evidence. (This

is the point foreshadowed in fn. 5.) For in the passage I quoted, Soames says, among other things that, if a proposition is self-evident, it is “is potentially obvious to us”, at any rate once we think clearly enough about the proposition in question. However, it is not at all clear that this condition is necessary for self-evidence, as (13) shows. But more important, this at most says that self-evidence entails *potential* obviousness, not that it entails obviousness outright.

I have pointed out that self-evidence is neither necessary nor sufficient for obviousness. I should also point out that this is unsurprising given the nature of the two properties in question. To say that (1), for example, is self-evident is to make an epistemological, and so philosophical, comment about it, i.e. it is at least to locate it in a structure of justification. But to say that (1) is obvious is to make a pre-philosophical comment about it. That (1) is obvious is not supposed to be a piece of philosophy, but that (1) is self-evident is an obvious piece of philosophy.

7. So much then for the first suggestion about the connection between obviousness and self-evidence, the suggestion that if something is obvious then it is self-evident—what of the second? The second suggestion is that if something is obvious, then it is self-evident, *so long as it is neither empirical nor analytic*. If this suggestion is adopted, Soames’ advice to Moore is to say something like the following: “(7) is obvious. Since it is obvious, it is self-evident so long as it is neither analytic nor empirical. Hence, if we know that it is neither analytic nor empirical, we *know* that something is self-evident. So it is not illegitimate of me to invoke the notion of self-evidence, even if I can’t provide a theory of what self-evidence is.” This proposal about what Moore should say avoids the problem with the previous one; at least it does not have him saying something clearly false. But nevertheless the proposal is no good for another reason, viz., if he had followed it, Moore would have said something unpersuasive.

To see that it is unpersuasive, consider the issue from the point of view of the analytical naturalist. The analytical naturalist is liable to agree that *if* something is obvious then, if it is not empirical or analytic, it is self-evident. But for him or her this only shows that *if* something is obvious, it is knowable somehow. Moreover, the analytic naturalist is liable to agree that (7) is obvious. But the analytic naturalist is likely to point

out also that none of this explains the notion of self-evidence, and it is precisely the lack of any such explanation of this notion—or at any rate, any positive explanation—that gets Moore into trouble. To put the point a little bluntly, for the analytical naturalist, appealing to self-evidence is like appealing to fairies. It might be true that if something is obvious, then it is either empirical or analytic or told to you by fairies—but that does not make it plausible that it *is* told to you by fairies.

It might be replied that the analytic naturalist is committed to rejecting the open question argument, and that this is itself implausible. However, while this might be true—I have not taken a stand on the issue—it in no way alleviates the tension *Moore* faces. The problem Moore faces is that it is implausible that *anything* is self-evident. And the problem for Soames’s suggestion on behalf of Moore is that the claim that *if* something is obvious, it is either analytic or empirical or self-evident does not in any way remove this implausibility. In fact, mentioning the open question argument permits another way to bring out our basic point. Just as the Moorean faces a problem with self-evidence, so too the analytical naturalist faces a problem with the open question argument: that argument threatens to show that no moral truth is analytic (or follows from something analytic). Imagine now the suggestion that the analytic naturalist ought to respond to the argument as follows: “(7) is obvious, since if it is obvious, it is analytic, so long as it is neither empirical nor self-evident. Since we *know* it is not empirical or self-evident, it must be analytic. Hence the open question argument is unsound”. If we agree, as I think we should, that this is an unpersuasive response to the open question argument, we should agree also that Soames’s suggestion on behalf of Moore is likewise unpersuasive.

Alternatively, it might be replied that Soames’ advice looks better if we consider the issue, not from the point of view of the analytical naturalist, but from the point of view of a sceptic about moral knowledge, i.e. from the point of view of a person who denies that (1) or (7)—or any moral claim—is known or knowable. If one’s opponent is a sceptic of this sort, it is certainly a good idea to say that (7) is obvious—for then the sceptic’s claim that we can never have any moral knowledge is false. However, while this is true, it does not put Moore in a better position with respect to the central philosophical tension in his ethics. For that tension arises not because of scepticism

about moral knowledge. To the extent that it has something to do with scepticism at all, the scepticism at issue concerns self-evidence; but scepticism about self-evidence is not scepticism about moral knowledge. To put it differently, if Moore had, in the course of developing his ethical views, taken himself to be responding the sceptic about moral knowledge, then appeals to obviousness might have played a role. But Moore does *not* take himself to be responding to the sceptic about moral knowledge. At least in *Principia*, his opponent is not the moral sceptic but the analytical naturalist. So it is hard to see that a response tailored for scepticism could have been of any help.

8. The point that Soames on the interpretation we are considering would have Moore saying something unpersuasive emerges in sharper relief if we look more closely at what Moore's response to the sceptic actually is. In discussing this response, Soames (p.22-3) makes the very illuminating suggestion that the plausibility of Moore's ideas comes out when we see him as responding to a quite general argument. The general argument at issue is this:

- (14) All knowledge is thus and so.
- (15) Alleged knowledge of hands, etc., is not thus and so.
- (16) Thus, no one will ever know that there are hands.

Moore's response to this argument, Soames says, is to say first that it is obvious that (17) is true:

- (17) I know that this is a hand,

and then to insist that if (17) is true, then either (14) or (15) is false. As Soames explains, the strength of Moore's response derives from the fact it forces the sceptic to justify his or her premises.

Now, it is possible to construct an argument about moral knowledge that exhibits the same structure as this general sceptical argument. Such an argument would have the following form:

- (18) All moral knowledge is either empirical or analytic.
- (19) Moral knowledge of promise keeping, etc., is neither empirical nor analytic.
- (20) Thus, no-one has any moral knowledge of promise keeping

And the response that Soames offers to Moore is to say first that it is obvious that (21) is true

- (21) I know that keeping promises is *prima facie* right,

and then to insist that since (21) is true, either (18) or (18) is false. Again, the strength of this response derives from the fact that it forces the moral sceptic to justify his or her premises.

However, the problem with this line of thought in the present environment is that it tells us nothing about self-evidence. The claim that (21) is obvious certainly entitles us to say—if it is true—that there is *something* in the argument to (20) that has gone wrong. But it does not entitle us to say what precisely has gone wrong. On the other hand, Moore's appeal to self-evidence is precisely a claim (or is part of a claim) about what has gone wrong, i.e., because it tells that the *first* premise of the argument to (20)—viz., (18)—is false. Again, contrast the Moorean appeal to self-evidence with the analytical naturalist who is sceptical about such an appeal. The analytical naturalist will agree with Moore that (21) is obvious and so something has gone wrong in the argument to (20). But he or she will disagree with Moore about what precisely has gone wrong. In particular, the analytic naturalist would say that the argument goes wrong because its *second* premise—viz., (19)—is false. Since the Moorean and the analytic naturalist agree about obviousness and disagree about self-evidence, for Moore to have insisted that some restricted moral claims are obvious would have been, in the context of a debate with the analytic naturalist, to have been quite unpersuasive.

9. We saw earlier that shifting examples would not *on its own* have put Moore in a better position when confronting the central tension in his ethics. What we have now seen is that shifting examples *and* utilizing his epistemological method would not have done so either. It is true that adopting this method would have allowed Moore to say that some moral claims are obvious. But it would not have further explained his claim that some moral claims are self-evident, and it is self-evidence, rather than obviousness, that creates the problem. I conclude therefore that Moore in ethics should not have followed the method of Moore in epistemology. Appeals to obviousness have considerable force when one's opponent is a sceptic. But if one's opponent is not a sceptic, one must do something else.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I have benefited greatly from an audience at ANU where a previous version of this paper was read. Thanks also to Tyler Doggett for written comments.