

SOAMES ON ETHICS

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Though primarily focussed on philosophy of language, metaphysics, and epistemology, Scott Soames's *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century* contains several discussions of ethics. Volume 1 contains two chapters on Moore's ethics, one on the emotivism of Ayer and Stevenson, and one on Ross; Volume 2 adds a chapter on Hare's prescriptivism. The bulk of the Moore chapters as well as the ones on emotivism and Hare concern metaethics, but there is also discussion of Moore's normative views and the chapter on Ross is entirely normative. Since there is no material on ethics after Hare, the book concentrates on figures from the first half of the century. But there is much of interest in what it says about them.

Soames discusses these figures without much reference to the recent literature on them or their philosophical problems, but his book is none the worse for that. Since ethics is not his main area of expertise, there are, not surprisingly, some historical inaccuracies, but they mostly concern matters of detail. On the larger issues he nicely picks out these philosophers' most important ideas, even when they are not highlighted in their texts, and his criticisms go to the heart of those ideas; in several cases they are also novel. In this paper I will concentrate on an objection he raises against Moore's ethics that connects to one of his book's central themes.

In his "Introduction" Soames identifies two main achievements of 20th-century analytic philosophy. One is the successful understanding of the concepts of logical consequence, logical truth, necessary truth, and a priori truth. The other is the recognition that philosophical

speculation must be grounded in pre-philosophical thought, so no philosophical theory can be more securely supported than pre-philosophical beliefs arising from common sense or science. For this second theme Moore is a hero for his work on epistemology, where he famously held that our common-sense belief that we have knowledge of an external world cannot be overturned by any philosophical theory of knowledge. But Soames argues that Moore did not follow the same methodology in constructing his ethical theory. Moore's normative theory was ideal consequentialism, which combines the consequentialist claim that what is right is always what maximizes the good with the value-claim that the relevant good is not confined to pleasure but contains a number of "ideal" states centred on, though not restricted to, the appreciation of beauty and deep personal relationships. But the central elements of this theory, Soames says, are highly abstract theses far removed from moral common-sense, and Moore thought they could only be known as abstract claims, rather than derived by reflection on the more particular convictions found in common sense. But it is these common-sense convictions, either about particular cases or as expressed in more restricted generalities such as "Keeping one's promises is *prima facie* right" that are, according to Soames, the proper starting-point of philosophical ethics. They are not its end-point; they need to be refined and systematized to yield a true ethical theory. But in ignoring them in favour of highly abstract theses that he claimed to know just as abstract theses, Moore failed to transfer to ethics the correct methodology he used in epistemology. The philosopher who did so was Ross. His normative theory affirmed a plurality of *prima facie* duties at the level of Soames's restricted generalities, such as to keep promises, compensate for harms, show gratitude, and so on. And he explicitly rested its defence on moral common sense. It is therefore Ross who is the analogue in ethics of Moore the epistemologist and

the hero of Soames's ethics chapters.

Soames's criticism of Moore is both novel and striking. In response, I will argue that the criticism is for the most part not fair about Moore's claims about the good, at an initial level is fair about his claims about the right, but at a deeper level is not fair. At that deeper level Moore shared the view of Ross and other early 20th-century philosophers that our pre-philosophical convictions about what we ought to do cannot and need not be justified by any philosophical theory.

Soames's first charge against Moore's central claims about the good, that aesthetic appreciation and personal relations are good, is that they are too abstract. But I do not see that they are any more abstract than Soames's own claim that keeping promises is *prima facie* right: just as it identifies one out of several *prima facie* duties, so each of them identifies one out of several intrinsic goods. Nor are Moore's claims more abstract than those implicit in Soames's proposed self-evident truths about the good, such as that "Any state of affairs in which every sentient being suffers alone in intense and continual pain with no relief of any kind, followed by death, is bad," and "Any man who habitually tortures children to death solely for the pleasure of watching them suffer and die is a bad man." And Moore accepted those very claims. He held that pain is evil, adding insightfully that it is more evil than pleasure is good.. He also held that the enjoyment of what is evil is evil, giving as his central example of this cruelty, or pleasure in another's pain. Moore's formulation of this claim differed in several respects from Soames's, for example by being partly theorized. He noticed that pleasure in pain is evil because pain is evil, and so generalized his claim to condemn all pleasure in evil. But the core of his claim overlaps closely with Soames's.

Moreover, a central aim of *Principia Ethica* was to defend the deliverances of direct moral intuition, which Moore thought recognized a complex plurality of goods, against the demand of philosophical theory, represented especially by Sidgwick, for the simplicity of a view affirming only a single good such as pleasure. “We have no title whatever,” he wrote, “to assume that the truth on any subject-matter will display such symmetry as we desire to see – or ... that it will possess any particular form of ‘unity.’ To search for ‘unity’ and ‘system,’ at the expense of truth, is not, I take it, the proper business of philosophy.” I would have thought that Soames would find that remark congenial.

Soames’s second charge concerns Moore’s methodology, which held that the central truths about the good can be known only as self-evident in themselves and not by inference from other truths. And that was Moore’s official position, as stated, for example, in the Preface to *Principia Ethica*. But he often abandoned this position when defending particular claims about the good, appealing instead to coherence with other convictions. His argument against hedonism, for example, sets out to show that, when properly understood, hedonism “is in conflict with other beliefs, which will, I hope, not so easily be given up.” And another part of his official position positively required this kind of argument. He held that to know whether some type of state X is intrinsically good we must imagine a world containing only X and ask whether that world is good, so to know whether pain is evil we must imagine a world exactly like the one Soames describes, where people experience only pain, and assess that world’s value. But then the general judgement about the goodness of X derives from a particular judgement about a particular imagined world. And in eliciting such particular judgements Moore sometimes constructs striking particular examples, in one case anticipating Nozick’s famous example of the experience

machine (PE, 197). It is true that Moore sometimes argues in the purely top-down way Soames disapproves; thus, Chapter 6 of *Principia Ethica* just announces it as self-evident that aesthetic appreciation and personal relations are the two greatest goods. But enough of his discussion appeals to more particular claims about value that Soames's second charge, while not without merit, is, again, to a considerable extent unfair.

When we turn to Moore's consequentialist claim about the right, Soames's objection is much more on target. In *Principia Ethica* Moore notoriously held that consequentialism is analytically true, since to say that some action is right just is to say that it will result in the most good possible. Soames notes that this claim is vulnerable to Moore's open-question argument, since in saying it is right to maximize the good we do not mean only that what maximizes the good maximizes the good, and quotes Ross to this effect. But the same criticism was made much earlier, in a review of *Principia Ethica* Russell published in 1904. And in the Schilpp volume Moore reports that Russell's review led him to abandon the analyticity claim, which he explicitly rejected in his 19?? book *Ethics* and never defended again. I think the claim was just a mistake on Moore's part, inconsistent in various ways with the fundamental ideas of his moral philosophy and therefore something we should ignore.

Doing so does not, however, save Moore from Soames's objection. For when Moore defends consequentialism non-analytically in the later book *Ethics* he follows his official methodology and announces only that it is self-evident when considered in itself. He could have given a coherentist argument, as Sidgwick did in *The Methods of Ethics*. Sidgwick argued that if one examines the duties common sense recognizes, and the way it specifies their content and weighs them against each other, one will see that it is tacitly guided by, and can be systematized

only by, a consequentialist principle. But Moore does not do this, mounting his defence of consequentialism only at the most abstract or philosophical level. And he is therefore open to Soames's objection, since his consequentialist principle is not affirmed by common sense. Its principles are more restricted ones about promising, showing gratitude, and so on, and the philosopher whose theory reflects it is Ross. In fact, Ross is standardly seen as extending Moore's own mode of argument from the good to the right. Sidgwick had recognized only one principle of the right, namely the consequentialist one, and the one good of pleasure. Moore argued against him that our intuitions recognize a plurality of goods, but retained the one principle of right. But Ross said the same considerations apply to the right, where our intuitions likewise recognize a plurality of principles and should not be ignored in favour of some systematizing principle. Ross is therefore rightly the hero of Soames's discussion, but because he does more consistently what Moore also did in part.

Though Ross aims to capture common-sense morality, he does not do so entirely. He holds that if we are not violating any deontological constraint, our duty is to produce as much good as we can. But, as Soames notes, that is not the view of common sense, which grants what Ryle called "moral holidays," saying that even if we could do more good by, say, volunteering at the food bank, we are permitted to watch TV, work in our garden, or so on. We are of course also permitted to volunteer at the food bank; that would even be admirable or morally ideal. But it is supererogatory, or beyond our duty, rather something we are obliged to do. Ross is here still influenced by the consequentialism that had been so dominant when Moore wrote *Principia Ethica*, and Soames is right that to better reflect common sense Ross should supplement the deontological constraints he affirms with options, which allow people sometimes to do what is

less than the best. But he supplements this with a further claim that he directs initially at the emotivism.

Soames thinks emotivism had several unfortunate effects, of which one was to contribute to the disappearance of normative ethics in the middle part of the century. But another was to restrict attention to a narrow range of evaluative terms, namely *good*, *bad*, *right*, and *wrong*, as against the full range found in everyday language and including, to select from Soames's longer list, *fair*, *rude*, *heroic*, *courageous*, *slovenly*, *wonderful*, *dainty*, and *dummy*. But this is an odd charge to make against the emotivists. First, it is in principle possible to hold that sentences containing different evaluative terms express irreducibly distinct emotions. Second, and more important, the restriction to what are now called "thin" moral terms was not original to the emotivists; it was shared by all the non-naturalists from Sidgwick to Ross, Broad, and Ewing who preceded them and against whom they were reacting. Sidgwick thought there was just one basic evaluative concept, that of what one ought or has reason to do, Moore held first that there was one such concept, namely good, and then that there were two, good and ought, while the title of Ross's great book is not *The Fair, Rude, Slovenly, Dainty, and Dummy*; it is *The Right and the Good*. The philosophers who championed an irreducible plurality of "thick" moral terms were the ordinary-language philosophers – "dainty" and "dummy" are examples of Austin's – whom Soames usually excoriates. But on this point he seems to follow them, holding that to capture common-sense morality we must not only affirm a plurality of goods and principles of right, as Ross did, but also express them, as Ross did not, using a large plurality of distinct moral terms. Is he right about this?

The answer depends on how far common sense can be theorized. Ross and his fellow

non-naturalists recognized that common sense does not explicitly reduce terms like “fair” and “heroic” to “good” and “ought,” but thought the reduction was implicit and, once made, explains how common sense reaches its judgements. Consider options to produce less than the best outcome, which Soames rightly thinks should be added to Ross’s theory. Soames seems to think they require additional irreducible concepts like the supererogatory and the heroic, but there is an alternative. It supplements the prima facie duties in Ross’s theory with a prima facie permission to care more about one’s own good, and weighs that against the duty to promote the good. If an act will produce vastly greater goods for others, as when it will save several lives at the cost of missing some TV, the duty outweighs the permission and the act is on balance required. But when the act will produce only somewhat greater goods, the permission has greater weight and watching TV is permitted, though the act is also permitted and, because it fulfils a prima facie duty, is morally better. This account gives a better explanation of when and why common sense grants options, but it does so using only the thin concept of a permission, which is defined as the negation of a duty. Or consider, from Soames’s list courage, and in particular contrast a courageous act like sacrificing one’s life in battle to save the lives of five comrades with the foolhardy act of not complying when a robber says, “A nickel or your life.” Some contemporary philosophers, such as perhaps McDowell, hold that the difference between courage and foolhardiness is sui generis and cannot be explained, but is something a virtuous person just sees, as she sees the difference between red and yellow. But this, frankly, is nonsense, because there is an obvious explanation in terms of the courage-independent reasons bearing on the two acts, which in this case turn on the magnitudes of the goods they will produce. The first act is courageous because the good it secures, the lives of the five comrades, is greater than the lost

good of one's own life. But the second act is foolhardy because the good of retaining a nickel is vastly smaller than that of one's life. Again we get an explanation when we look to thin moral concepts. Of course two examples cannot make a general case, but I think Ross had the right approach: affirm a plurality of ultimate goods and duties, with common sense, but theorize common sense by reformulating its claims using just a few thin concepts.

Let me return to my main theme. I have argued that Soames's objection to Moore's moral methodology, while fair about his particular, consequentialist claim about the right, is not fair about his claims about the good. I will now conclude that it is also not fair at a deeper level of Moore's view about the right. At that level Moore, like all the non-naturalists from Sidgwick to Ross, Broad, and Ewing, used precisely the methodology Soames recommends.

In his discussion of epistemology Soames distinguishes three possible responses to the skeptic's question whether we really have knowledge of an external world. One says the question needs to be answered by a philosophical theory but cannot be; this is the position of philosophical skeptics such as Sextus Empiricus and Hume. A second says the question needs to be answered and can be by a theory the philosopher has in his pocket; this is the position of Descartes and Kant. And the third, which is Moore's and Soames's, says the question cannot and need not be answered, because our conviction that we know an external world is more secure than any epistemological theory.

But exactly analogous positions arise in ethics. Here the skeptical question is whether we really ought, or really have reason, to act as morality requires, for example, really have reason not to cause others pain. One possible response says a positive answer to this question needs to be justified by a philosophical theory and cannot be, so morality is a sham that truly rational agents

will ignore. This morally skeptical position is classically represented by Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*. A second response says a positive answer needs to be justified by a philosophical theory and can be; this is the position of Plato and, again, of Kant. But a third position says a positive answer cannot and need not be justified philosophically, because our common-sense conviction that we do have reason not to cause others pain is more secure than any philosophical theory. It was most clearly expressed by Moore's contemporary Prichard. He titled his famous 1912 paper "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" because he thought most moral philosophy aims to answer the question "Why should I be moral?" when the only answer to that question is "Because it is moral to be moral," which is to say no answer is possible or necessary. We know directly that we have moral obligations, and any attempt to justify them philosophically is misguided.

But this was also Moore's position. It may not be evident in *Principia Ethica*, given that work's appeal to a claim about the meaning of the word "right." But I have argued that that claim is inconsistent with the basic ideas in Moore's ethics, is one he almost immediately abandoned, and should therefore be ignored. That leaves us with his later claim, in *Ethics*, that it is simply a self-evident truth that we ought to promote a good that includes others' freedom from pain as well as our own. And what is the point of calling a truth self-evident if not to urge, precisely as Prichard did, that it neither can be nor needs to be justified by philosophical theory? Soames may be right that Moore's defence of his particular consequentialist claim about the right did not follow the methodology of his response to epistemological skepticism, but his view about the deeper question of why we ought to act rightly did. And in fact his view on this question was shared by a whole sequence of moral philosophers from Sidgwick and Brentano in the 1870s and

1880s to Ross, Broad, and Ewing in the 1930s and 1940s. But it contrasts sharply with views that have been dominant in the revival of normative ethics that started in the last third of the twentieth century.

These views pursue precisely the project Prichard thought was misguided, namely that of providing a philosophical justification of our belief that we have duties to other people, as if without that justification morality would totter. This was the explicit aim of such early works in the revival as Baier's *The Moral Point of View* and Nagel's *The Possibility of Altruism*, and it continues to animate three highly influential current movements in philosophy. One tries to justify morality in straightforwardly egoist terms, arguing that accepting moral constraints will further the fulfilment of one's own desires; its most sophisticated expression is Gauthier's *Morals By Agreement*. A second is the high-minded egoism of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. It argues that benefiting others can express the virtue of benevolence, that the virtues are those traits one needs in order to flourish or live well, and that since all one's reasons concern one's flourishing one has reason to benefit others. Last come neo-Kantian positions, such as the Gewirth-Korsgaard project of showing that a commitment to pursuing others' good is implicit in the presuppositions of rational agency, so if one rationally pursues any goal, even a purely self-interested one, but does not care about the similar goals of others one is inconsistent. These projects are just like epistemological ones aimed at proving that we have knowledge of an external world. If Soames thinks the latter projects are misguided, he should think the same about large parts of contemporary moral philosophy.

If he does, moreover, this should affect the general tenor of his book. With respect to his first theme, the understanding of concepts like logical truth, necessity, and the a priori, his

account of 20th-century philosophy is broadly progressive. At the start of the century philosophers had not properly distinguished these concepts from each other; over time, however, and especially after the work of Kripke, their relations became better understood and the century ended in a much better position than it began. With respect to his second theme, however, and at least in the field of ethics, the story is very different. In the early part of the century, all the major figures – Sidgwick, Moore, Prichard, Ross, Broad, Ewing, recognized the primacy of our pre-philosophical conviction that we ought to fulfil moral duties like the duty not to cause pain, so the question “Why be moral?” cannot be given a non-trivial answer. In the last part of the century this insight was lost and vast amounts of energy were spend on precisely this pointless project. With respect to his second theme, the history of 20th-century ethics should for Soames be one of drastic and horrible decline.