

Ethics Expertise

**History, Contemporary
Perspectives, and
Applications**

Edited by Lisa Rasmussen

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ETHICS EXPERTISE

HISTORY, CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES,
AND APPLICATIONS

Edited by

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CHAPTER 6

BEN EGGLESTON

THE INEFFABLE AND THE INCALCULABLE: G.E. MOORE ON ETHICAL EXPERTISE

1. WHAT IS ETHICAL EXPERTISE?

Although the publication of G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* is widely acknowledged as a momentous event in the history of ethics, it is especially significant in connection with the idea of ethical expertise, since it was hailed as a turning point in the use of reason rather than sentiment to decide ethical questions. Moore's friend Lytton Strachey wrote to him saying that his book "laid the true foundations of Ethics" and that "It is the scientific method deliberately applied, for the first time, to Reasoning. . . . I date from Oct. 1903 the beginning of the Age of Reason" (quoted in Baldwin, 1993, p. xi). In addition, John Maynard Keynes famously wrote that "I went up to Cambridge at Michaelmas 1902, and Moore's *Principia Ethica* came out at the end of my first year. . . . it was exciting, exhilarating, the beginning of a renaissance, the opening of a new heaven on a new earth" (1972, p. 435). A hundred years later, Moore's work is viewed more critically, but hardly less seriously, and few doubt that Moore did, indeed, try to impose on the field of ethics more structure and analytical rigor than was previously associated with it. In this chapter, then, I shall explain what, according to Moore, would constitute ethical expertise. I shall begin by devoting the remainder of this section to the task of interpreting the notion of ethical expertise itself.

One question about the notion of ethical expertise is whether it is primarily a matter of knowledge or practice. Although the notion of expertise obviously has more of a theoretical connotation than a pragmatic one, the subject matter of ethics is so inevitably pragmatic that some have thought it to be an essentially practical endeavor. Aristotle, for example, writes in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that "Our present inquiry does not aim, as others do, at study; for the purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good" (p. 1103b, ll. 27–29). But in modern ethics, the opposing view is predominant. Moore's teacher Henry Sidgwick, for example, writes in his *Methods of Ethics* that "here as in other opinions we ought to aim at nothing but truth" (p. 335) and "on reflection it is generally admitted that it cannot be good to be in error on . . . any . . . point" (p. 429). And Moore himself is quite emphatic in his claims that "The direct object of

ethics is knowledge and not practice” (p. 71) and that “What I am concerned with is knowledge only—that we should think correctly and so far arrive at some truth, however unimportant: I do not say that such knowledge will make us more useful members of society” (p. 115). Moreover, this privileging of the theoretical over the practical is reinforced when we return to the specific notion of ethical expertise. For even if a person always did the right thing, but without giving it any thought or being able to instruct others in doing the right thing (except by example), then although we might regard her as a benefactor to her fellows, and although we might even acknowledge her as being virtuous, we would hesitate, I think, to regard her as having ethical *expertise*. For the notion of expertise, like the notion of philosophy itself, seems to invoke the notion of knowledge. I shall take as given, then, that ethical expertise is essentially a matter of knowledge, not practice.

A second question about the notion of ethical expertise concerns its subject matter, because here there are two possibilities. First, one might think that ethics is primarily concerned with the good: what objects are good, what institutions are good, what states of affairs are good, and so on. Second, one might think that ethics is primarily concerned with the right: what actions and courses of action are right, what policies and laws it would be right to enact, and so on. The difference this distinction makes is that if ethical expertise is primarily concerned with the good, then although an ethical expert may be able to judge given objects (and institutions and states of affairs and so on), her ability to guide action—to tell agents which of the acts open to them would be right, and which would be wrong—is not assured. (At least, it is not assured unless she can also forge some connection between judgments of the good and judgments of the right.) On the other hand, if ethical expertise is primarily concerned with the right, then the ethical expert is in a position to use her expertise in an explicitly action-guiding way.

Moore himself is primarily concerned with what is good. Of the six chapters of *Principia Ethica*, only one has much to say about what is right, whereas each of the other five chapters contribute significantly to Moore’s account of what is good. Moreover, he explicitly says that “‘good’ is the notion upon which all Ethics depends” (p. 192) and that “the primary and peculiar business of Ethics” is “the determination [of] what things have intrinsic value and in what degrees” (p. 78; see also p. 54 and p. 57). But he recognizes the importance of using judgments of the good to arrive at judgments of what is right, and he endorses a specific conception of the link between them (which I explore below, in section 2). In thus acknowledging the importance of questions about what is right, Moore shows some affinity with the prevailing trend in modern ethics. Moore’s predecessor John Stuart Mill, for example, writes that “It is the business of ethics to tell us what are our duties” (p. 219). More recently, John Rawls writes that

in ethics we are attempting to find reasonable principles which, when we are given a proposed line of conduct and the situation in which it is to be carried out and the relevant interests which it affects, will enable us to determine whether or not we ought to carry it out and hold it to be just and right (p. 2).

This position is advanced yet more strongly in the following remark by Jan Narveson:

Let us begin by recalling the primary function of ethical principles: to tell us what to do, i.e., to guide action. Whatever else an ethical principle is supposed to do, it must do that, otherwise it could not (logically) be an ethical principle at all (p. 105).

According to Shelly Kagan, the “received view” is that “normative ethics is concerned with determining which actions are right, which wrong,” among other things (p. 223), and Kurt Baier explains that

action has, for some time now, occupied the limelight in ethics because, although we have a measure of control over [such things as “behavioral dispositions, character traits, habits or feelings”], we have the most direct control over [acts]: they are things we can do or perform at will (pp. 282–283).

So it seems clear, both from the perspective of philosophical tradition and from the presumption that ethical expertise should be useful in guiding action, that ethical expertise should be construed as concerning, primarily, the rightness and wrongness of acts and courses of action.

So, to sum up: I side with Moore in regarding ethical expertise as a matter of knowledge, not practice, but I differ from Moore in emphasizing the right, not the good, as the object of that knowledge. I conclude, then, that ethical expertise shall be understood in this chapter as the ability to have knowledge about the rightness and wrongness of possible acts and courses of action.

2. CONSEQUENTIALISM

According to Moore, a question about the rightness or wrongness of some act has a simple answer: an act is right, or ethically permissible, if and only if its consequences are at least as good as the consequences of any alternative act, and an act is a duty if and only if its consequences are better than the consequences of any alternative act (p. 198). So, an act is a duty if it ranks first in the production of good consequences, and if there is a tie for first place, then every act tied for first is right, or ethically permissible. Moore, then, affirms consequentialism—“[t]he view that the value of an action derives entirely from the value of its consequences” (Blackburn, 1996, p. 77).

Two things are remarkable about Moore’s endorsement of consequentialism. First, consequentialism is contrary to prominent strands in the history of ethics. As Moore writes, “The very opposite of this view has been generally prevalent in Ethics. ‘The right’ and ‘the useful’ have been supposed to be at least *capable* of conflicting with one another, and, at all events, to be essentially distinct” (p. 196). As Moore goes on to acknowledge, it is a matter of ethical common sense, for many people, that the ends do not justify the means, and many philosophers have held this as well (p. 196). They have held that complying with the categorical imperative is always right, that punishing the innocent is always wrong, and that justice must be done, though the heavens may fall. They have held, that is, that there are some means that no ends can justify. So Moore’s consequentialism, simple though it is, is significant.

What is also remarkable about Moore's endorsement of consequentialism is the logical status he claims it has. For he claims that it is true in virtue of the meanings of the words and concepts in which it is expressed. That is, Moore does not settle for saying that assertions about what is right are *supported* by assertions about what is good; he claims that assertions about what is right *are* assertions about what is good:

In asserting that the action is *the* best thing to do [a duty], we assert that it together with its consequences presents a greater sum of intrinsic value than any possible alternative (p. 76).

In short, to assert that a certain line of conduct is, at a given time, absolutely right or obligatory, is obviously to assert that more good or less evil will exist in the world, if it be adopted than if anything else be done instead (p. 77).

And he explicitly invokes the concept of meaning in his claim that “‘right’ does and can mean nothing but ‘cause of a good result,’ and is thus identical with ‘useful’” (p. 196). Given that Moore is perhaps unsurpassed among moral philosophers in the attention he pays to the distinction between the meanings of moral words and what may count as evidence for sentences containing them, we must take Moore seriously when he says, in effect, that consequentialism is true as a matter of definition. Finally, Moore dispels any worries about the propriety of this interpretation by affirming that “the assertion ‘I am morally bound to perform this action’ is identical with the assertion ‘This action will produce the greatest possible amount of good in the Universe’ ” (p. 197).

Moore is almost alone among prominent consequentialists in claiming that the thesis they share is true as a matter of definition. Mill, of course, affirms a form of consequentialism—holding that “the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality” (p. 214)—but gives no sign of thinking that this particular statement is true in virtue of the meanings of the words, or that non-consequentialists succumb to a verbal mistake; he seems to just think that they are making a mistake in ethical judgment. Similarly, Sidgwick affirms a form of consequentialism, but regards it as a matter of intuition, and hence synthetic, and not just a matter of analytically reflecting on the meanings of words (pp. xvii–xxiii). In fact, among the major consequentialists, only Jeremy Bentham anticipates Moore in claiming that consequentialism is true as a matter of meaning; he writes that when the words ‘right’ and ‘ought’ are interpreted in conformity to the version of consequentialism he favors (hedonistic utilitarianism), “the words *ought*, and *right* and *wrong*, and others of that stamp, have a meaning: when otherwise, they have none” (p. 13). But Moore vehemently rejects Bentham's hedonism, as we shall see in the next section, so even this similarity goes only so deep. So Moore's definitional consequentialism is significant indeed.

What grounds does Moore provide for this strikingly strong position? He begins his argument with the claim that “It is plain that when we assert that a certain action is our absolute duty, we are asserting that the performance of that action at that time is unique in respect of value” (p. 197). Now some would claim that this statement is far from obvious, and that if it is defensible, then it must be because the notion of some action's being unique in respect of value is extremely vague, and is nearly vacuous. But taking this proposition as given, Moore then surveys several possible

meanings that might attach to the notion of some action's being unique in respect of value, and purports to show that none is satisfactory except the one that establishes the principle of consequentialism. But given, as just mentioned, the extreme vagueness of the notion of some action's being unique in respect of value, no assurance can be provided that the options Moore considers are exhaustive of all the possibilities. So Moore's consequentialism is likely to strike many readers more as a matter of dogma aspiring to definition than as a genuine analytic truth.

In any case, consequentialism is an essential component of Moore's approach to answering ethical questions, and it has two implications that are significant for our inquiry into ethical expertise. First, it means that we can safely impute to Moore the claim that ethical expertise requires, among other things to be discussed below, an appreciation that consequentialism is analytically true. For if a philosopher were to affirm consequentialism on other grounds, as Mill and Sidgwick do, or were to affirm as analytically true some variant of consequentialism that Moore rejects, as Bentham does, then although such a philosopher might on occasion reach ethical judgments that would match those that Moore would reach, still Moore would surely say that the other philosopher does not have ethical expertise but rather just stumbles onto the truth. For if her affirmation of consequentialism is not for the right reasons, then it is just luck that she affirms it at all, and no one whose judgments are so dependent on luck can be said to have expertise. Indeed Moore writes that "The main object of Ethics, as a systematic science, is to give correct *reasons*" for holding certain ethical judgments (p. 58). So this is the first of the three elements of the conception of ethical expertise I shall be imputing to Moore: the ability to appreciate that consequentialism is analytically true.

The second significant implication of Moore's consequentialism has to do with the further abilities that it implies are required for ethical expertise. Specifically, Moore's affirmation of consequentialism leads him to maintain that questions of the rightness and wrongness of acts are reducible to other questions:

Whenever, therefore, we ask 'What ought we to do?' or 'What ought we to try to get?' we are asking questions which involve a correct answer to two others, completely different in kind from one another. We must know both what degree of intrinsic value different things have, and how these different things may be obtained (p. 77; see also p. 79).

In other words, we need to know which ends are good, and which means will lead to those ends. I turn to Moore's thoughts on these questions in sections 3 and 4.

3. INTUITIONISM ABOUT ENDS

Moore's view of what is required in order to identify the good is a distinctive, mysterious, and troubling part of his ethical theory. Rejecting the approach taken by many of his predecessors, both consequentialist and otherwise, Moore maintains that the notion of the good is simple and unanalyzable. Here is how he puts it:

If I am asked 'What is good?' my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked 'How is good to be defined?' my answer is that it cannot be

defined, and that is all I have to say about it. . . . propositions about the good are all of them synthetic and never analytic. . . . nobody can foist upon us such an axiom as that 'Pleasure is the only good' or that 'The good is the desired' on the pretence that this is 'the very meaning of the word' (pp. 58–59).

In these remarks, some of which apparently refer to the views of Bentham, discussed above, we find Moore espousing a view about the good that can best be understood in contrast to the view about the right that we considered above. Whereas statements of the form "X is right" are equivalent to statements about the good (as we saw above) and statements about consequences, and thus can be analyzed into statements about the good and statements about consequences, statements of the form "X is good" succumb to no such analysis. Whereas the notion of duty can be "defined" in terms of the good (p. 198), the notion of the good is "indefinable" (p. 60).

Moore's view can be more fully understood by considering his use of two concepts that have come to be closely associated with him: the open-question argument and the naturalistic fallacy. To see the substance and force of the open-question argument, begin with a purported analysis of the notion of the good, such as the claim that the good is the pleasant. According to Moore, if this were a satisfactory analysis of the notion of the good, then the claim that something pleasant is good should strike us as a tautology, and the question of whether some particular pleasant thing is good should strike us as straightforwardly self-answering, like the question of whether some particular pleasant thing is pleasant. But, Moore's argument goes, this question is actually perfectly open: one may very reasonably ask whether some particular pleasant thing is good, without asking something akin to whether some particular pleasant thing is pleasant. And this point can be generalized, Moore says: "whatever definition is offered, it may always be asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good" (p. 67).

Now Moore's point here is not to show the falsity of claims such as that the good is the pleasant. Although he does think that many such claims are false, his point here is that even if they were true, they would not be correct *analyses* of the notion of the good. At best, they would be true predications of goodness to things of particular descriptions, just as the claim that my desk is gray is a true predication of the notion of the gray to my desk. But just as such a claim would have no place in an analysis of either concept, so likewise Moore maintains that no statement about the good and properties such as pleasantness, however true such a statement may be as a matter of correct predication, has anything to offer towards an analysis of the concept of the good.

This error—the error the open-question argument exposes—is what Moore calls the naturalistic fallacy:

It may be true that all things which are good are *also* something else. . . . And it is a fact that Ethics aims at discovering what are those other properties belonging to all things which are good. But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good; that these properties, in fact, were simply not 'other,' but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call the 'naturalistic fallacy' (p. 62).

In other words, the naturalistic fallacy involves “identifying an ethical concept with a ‘natural’ concept, or description of the features of things in virtue of which they are supposed good or bad” (Blackburn, 1996, p. 255).

In understanding the open-question argument and the naturalistic fallacy, it is important to note that these concepts pertain not only to attempts to define the good in terms of genuinely naturalistic criteria, but also to attempts to define the good in terms of what might be called supernatural criteria or, as Moore says, “metaphysical” (p. 161) or “supersensible” (p. 162) criteria. (Indeed the central chapters of Moore’s book, all meant to expose instances of the naturalistic fallacy, are called ‘Naturalistic Ethics’, ‘Hedonism’, and ‘Metaphysical Ethics’.) For example, the claim that the good is what God wills may, again, be true; but it is perfectly reasonable to ask whether something that God wills is good—it is reasonable in the sense that one is not just asking a question about the meanings of the concepts. So the open-question argument shows the futility of metaphysical ethics as well as naturalistic ethics (which Moore takes to include hedonism as one of its virulent strains), and the naturalistic fallacy is committed even by those who regard ethics as a supernatural, and hence (in a sense) non-natural, area of inquiry.

One objection is frequently lodged against the open-question argument, and is worth noting here. The open-question argument rests on a comparison, or contrast, we draw between the way in which different questions strike us. “Is this particular pleasant thing good?” strikes us differently from “Is this particular pleasant thing pleasant?” The latter is obviously to be answered in the affirmative, whereas we feel less certain about how to answer the former question (even assuming that the referent of ‘this particular pleasant thing’ is obvious). And this, Moore claims, shows that there is a difference in the meanings of the questions, and a difference between the concept of the good and the concept of the pleasant. But, it is frequently objected, the fact that certain concepts strike us differently does not mean that they are not, in fact, identical. It is possible that although questions such as whether some particular pleasant thing is good strike us as open, this is only because we lack a complete understanding of the concept of the good. So the open-question argument, and the wide applicability that Moore claims for the notion of the naturalistic fallacy, must be accepted with some caution.

Despite these concerns, no conception of ethical expertise can reasonably be imputed to Moore without taking seriously his rejection of all analyses of the notion of the good. This notion, he writes, is “a simple, indefinable, unanalysable object of thought” (p. 72). It is, in a word, ineffable.

How, then, is anyone supposed to accurately attribute goodness to anything, if the notion itself resists analysis? How is ethical expertise even possible? Here Moore offers some guidance, but more warnings as well. The bulk of Moore’s guidance comes in his espousal of a particular method for ascertaining whether something is good: in order to ascertain the value of some particular quality, such as consciousness of pleasure, “it is absolutely essential to consider each distinguishable quality *in isolation*, in order to decide what value it possesses” (p. 145). That is, “We must ask: Suppose we were conscious of pleasure only, and of nothing else, not even that we *were* conscious, would that state of things, however

great the quantity, be very desirable?" (p. 147). Moore goes on to explain that his method applies to both absolute and relative judgments of goodness. In order to know what things have intrinsic value, or are good,

it is necessary to consider what things are such that, if they existed *by themselves*, in absolute isolation, we should yet judge their existence to be good; and, in order to decide upon the relative *degrees* of value of different things, we must similarly consider what comparative value seems to attach to the isolated existence of each (p. 236).

Here is an example of the application of this method, in order to judge the relative goodness of beauty and ugliness, taken in isolation from the question of what it is like for persons to perceive them:

Let us imagine one world exceedingly beautiful. Imagine it as beautiful as you can; put into it whatever on this earth you most admire—mountains, rivers, the sea; trees, and sunsets, stars and moon. Imagine these all combined in the most exquisite proportions, so that no one thing jars against another, but each contributes to increase the beauty of the whole. And then imagine the ugliest world you can possibly conceive. Imagine it simply one heap of filth, containing everything that is most disgusting to us, for whatever reason, and the whole, as far as may be, without one redeeming feature. . . . [S]upposing them quite apart from any possible contemplation by human beings; still . . . it [is not irrational] to hold that it is better that the beautiful world should exist, than the one which is ugly (p. 135).

The method, according to Moore, is perfectly general. One simply entertains the idea of the thing(s) to be assessed, and intuitively perceives them to be good or bad, or better or worse than certain other things.

Moore warns, however, that one cannot verify, introspectively, the accuracy of one's intuitions. He writes that it is "a very natural, though an utterly false supposition that for a thing to *be* true is the same thing as for it to be perceived or thought of in a certain way" (p. 184). But, he replies, there is nothing about the state of knowing something, even knowing it with a certain level of confidence or certitude, that distinguishes that state from one that may involve a belief that happens to be false. When someone says that she knows *p* and we believe that *p* is false, we do not need to accuse her of mistaking or misreporting the contents of her own mind; on the contrary, we can affirm that she has *p* in mind in exactly the way in which she would have *p* in mind if *p* were, in fact, true (pp. 184–185). As Moore puts it, "in every way in which it is possible to cognise a true proposition, it is also possible to cognise a false one" (p. 36).

So the method of isolation cannot be augmented by introspection on the part of the person making the ethical judgment. Moreover, Moore claims, judgments of good and bad, and of better and worse, cannot be based on anything else, because no statement of any other kind can count as evidence for any of them. Not even broad agreement on some such judgment counts as evidence for it:

the fundamental principles of Ethics must be self-evident. But I am anxious that this expression should not be misunderstood. The expression 'self-evident' means properly that the proposition so called is evident or true, *by itself* alone; that it is not an inference from some proposition other than *itself*. The expression does not mean that the proposition is true, because it is evident to you or me or all mankind, because in other words it appears to us to be true. . . . By saying that a proposition is self-evident, we

mean emphatically that its appearing so to us, is *not* the reason why it is true: for we mean that it has absolutely no reason (p. 193).

This last remark is of the highest significance. Precisely because the notion of good is indefinable and unanalysable, a statement that a certain thing is good is, strictly speaking, unsupportable. One either regards it as true or one does not, and it doesn't have any logical connections to other statements of which one may be confident and with reference to which one might hope to judge or confirm the statement in question.

So Moore's view that ends are known to be good by intuition is, to say the least, rather mysterious. It is also troubling, since it implies that if two people have divergent beliefs about the good, then there is no method by which this can be empirically settled. Consider Moore's judgment that "By far the most valuable things, which we can know or imagine, are certain states of consciousness, which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects" (p. 237). Congenial though this judgment may have been to Moore and his fellows, what can Moore say to someone who thinks friendship and the enjoyment of beauty are, while valuable, no more valuable than other pleasurable states of consciousness, regardless of whether they have to do with—to use Bentham's example—pushpin or poetry? In anticipation of this concern, Moore writes that

Many of the judgments, which I have made in this chapter [about what things are good], will, no doubt, seem unduly arbitrary: it must be confessed that some of the attributions of intrinsic value, which have seemed to me to be true, do not display that symmetry and system which is wont to be required of philosophers (p. 270).

In response to this concern, he writes that

We have no title whatever to assume that the truth on any subject matter will display such symmetry as we desire to see—or (to use the common vague phrase) 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, however universally it may have been the practice of philosophers (p. 270).

This response, one might concede to Moore, puts the burden of proof back on any proponent of "symmetry and system".

But the concern stated above has two prongs, and Moore's response deflects only the second one. For prior to any worry about symmetry and system is a worry about arbitrariness, which Moore does not address. To distinguish this worry from the one about symmetry and system, imagine an objector who says to Moore,

Admittedly, symmetry and system are not to be found here, despite previous philosophers' conceit that it was. But my judgments are the opposite of yours, and thus are neither more nor less systematic; or they simply diverge from yours in various ways, in ways that leave them, as a whole, neither more nor less systematic than yours. How do we know that your judgments are right and mine are wrong?

To this question Moore seems to have no answer. In fact, he himself confesses that he is less interested in defending the results of his application of this method as correct than in defending the method itself as sound (p. 271). So, although Moore's

method may be sound in principle, in practice it leaves room for troubling divergence among persons' ethical judgments—even, presumably, those of experts.

As I said at the beginning of this section, Moore's view of what is required in order to identify things that are good is distinctive, mysterious, and troubling. Nevertheless, it firmly establishes another element that must be included in any conception of ethical expertise we impute to Moore: the ability to discern, by intuition, the goodness and badness, both absolute and relative, of various possible ends.

4. EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF MEANS

We have examined two of the three elements of Moore's conception of ethical expertise. One is the ability to factor judgments of right and wrong into (1) judgments of good and bad and (2) judgments of cause and effect, and the other is the ability to make the requisite judgments of good and bad. The third element, of course, is the ability to make the requisite judgments of cause and effect.

This element of ethical expertise, though less mysterious than the second, is no easier to attain or to execute. On the contrary, even if we assume perfect knowledge of the absolute and relative goodness of various ends, myriad factors conspire to complicate any judgment to the effect that certain means, in the form of performing a certain act, will lead to the best available consequences. First, it is hard to know what even the short-term consequences of a given act will be. Just as Lincoln did not know what awaited him at Ford's theater, or Andrew Wiles when he sat down to work on the day he saw the proof of Fermat's last theorem, so likewise we do not know what awaits us when we make breakfast, go to work, or come home and read our mail. Moreover, the long-term consequences of a given act are even harder to predict. And yet they all matter, because they all bear on what ends, and thus what sources of value and disvalue, will be produced by the means in question.

Second, even supposing perfect prediction of the consequences of any given act, it is basically impossible to be aware of, and to entertain explicitly, each of the act options that an agent may have at a particular time. Presumably chemicals that will treat or cure certain diseases can be concocted in scientists' laboratories right now, but so can thousands of others. Who can blame a scientist for failing to think of some random concoction and for failing to investigate its effects, when there is nothing (aside from what would be revealed only *by* an investigation into its effects) to commend it to the scientist's attention? The reason we don't blame such a scientist, of course, is that this happens to everyone: many of an agent's options are never noticed by her or anyone else, and they pass from being possibilities to being unexplored dead ends. And yet these possibilities would have to be noticed in order for an agent to know that a particular act is obligatory, or even ethically permissible. So the actual consequences available to an agent in a given situation are, in practice, utterly incalculable.

Considerations such as these are, of course, familiar to consequentialists; they receive ample attention in the work of such writers as Mill and Sidgwick. And for Moore they are no less compelling. As he writes, "it follows that we never have any reason to suppose that an action is our duty: we can never be sure that any action

will produce the greatest value possible” (p. 199). And a similar conclusion holds for actions that are merely right, or ethically permissible.

A further complication, unnoticed by Moore and his predecessors, arises in virtue of the fact that for Moore, as for Sidgwick, the rightness or wrongness of an act depends on its actual consequences, not its intended consequences. For this view assumes that, for every act option, there is some fact of the matter as to what the state of the world will be at every future point in time. But soon after Moore wrote *Principia Ethica*, physicists began to worry that this was not true, that reality is irreducibly probabilistic, and that there is no fact of the matter as to what the state of the world will be even moments from now, not to mention into the indefinite future. Of course, the regularities observed among large-scale phenomena are not illusory, but they mask divine dice-throwing (to recall Einstein’s metaphor) going on among very small-scale phenomena. Since these small-scale phenomena are not entirely swamped by the large-scale events, but occasionally rise up and influence them (as when a bomb is set to be triggered by one of them), they matter, in principle, to the prediction of acts’ consequences. What *actual* consequences are to be imputed to an act whose stream of consequences includes at least one irreducibly probabilistic event?

An obvious solution is to impute to any act, as the value of its actual consequences, the average of the values of its possible consequences, each value being weighted by the probability of the occurrence of the consequences of which it is the value. But this solution has the odd implication of sometimes imputing to an act, as the value of its actual consequences, a value that does not attach to any of the act’s possible consequences. For example, an act with two sets of possible consequences, one very good and one very bad, might have imputed to it, as the value of its actual consequences, ethical neutrality—neither good nor bad. But, by hypothesis, the act’s consequences will be either very good or very bad. When these are the only possibilities, saying that the act’s actual consequences are ethically neutral seems like a denial of the dictum that actuality implies possibility. Clearly a better solution needs to be found.

So the third element of Moore’s conception of ethical expertise—the ability to make the requisite judgments of cause and effect—exceeds the bounds of feasibility, both as an epistemic matter and, apparently, as a metaphysical matter. This third element is as demanding as the second is mysterious.

5. ETHICAL JUDGMENT IN PRACTICE

I have explained that, for Moore, ethical expertise consists of (1) the ability to factor judgments of right and wrong into (a) judgments of good and bad and (b) judgments of cause and effect, (2) the ability to use intuition to make the requisite judgments of good and bad, and (3) the ability to use empirical investigation to make the requisite judgments of cause and effect. All these abilities are needed in order for a person to know that a certain act is right or wrong.

So stated, Moore’s conception of ethical expertise seems hopelessly ambitious—certainly too ambitious to be of any use in practice. But Moore’s view has an

admirable simplicity that helpfully removes many variables from the activity of making ethical judgments, and Moore himself is not indifferent, in his *Principia*, to the need for more practical guidance. In closing, I'll touch on each of these topics in turn.

First, although the second and the third of the three kinds of knowledge involved in Moore's conception of ethical expertise are deeply problematic, Moore's view at least relieves the would-be ethical expert of having to inquire into topics that other theorists might deem essential to making an ethical judgment. For example, since Moore is concerned only with actual consequences (rather than, e.g., intended ones), the Moorean ethical expert does not need to inquire into the agent's motives, or—if she is the agent—assure herself that she does not have ulterior motives that might compromise the ethical quality of her act. Moreover, the Moorean moral agent does not need to attribute to an act any tendency, or regard the act as being of a type that usually has certain consequences rather than others. The actual consequences of the specific act itself are all that matter, regardless of tendencies and generalizations associated with acts of that type. Finally, since Moore's consequentialism is so demanding—forbidding any act that does not maximize the good—the Moorean ethical expert can remain oblivious to the distinction between the obligatory and the supererogatory. This may be an objection to the substance of Moore's ethical theory, but it simplifies the matter of ethical expertise considerably. So while in some ways Moore's conception of ethical expertise is impossibly ambitious, in other respects it boasts an admirable simplicity.

Second, Moore is concerned, in his *Principia*, to provide more practical guidance than is implicit in the notion of ethical expertise we've attributed to him. Turning his attention from the evaluation of individual acts to the determination of ethical rules that it would be desirable to have in force throughout a society, Moore writes that "If . . . we ask what rules are or would be useful to be observed in the society in which we live, it seems possible to prove a definite utility in most of those which are in general both recognised and practised" (p. 209). Acts in accordance with these rules, Moore argues, have the merit of promoting certain means and arrangements (such as life, liberty, and security of property) which are likely to be useful, under almost any social circumstances, for the attainment of just about any ends that people think are intrinsically good. So these rules can be recommended, albeit provisionally, more or less in independence of questions about exactly what things are good and bad, as long as the answers to those questions fall within certain broad ranges (p. 207). So simple common sense, even if it falls short of genuine ethical expertise, can determine a workable and responsible public morality.

But setting aside the formulation and promulgation of rules for a public morality, what about a choice that a specific individual may face? Again, Moore's answer is striking in its simplicity. If the individual's choice is one that is not governed by common-sense morality—if, that is, common-sense morality leaves the individual some latitude as to what to do—then the individual should just do what seems to have the best consequences: "the individual should . . . guide his choice by a direct consideration of the intrinsic value or vileness of the effects which his action may produce" (p. 215). If, on the other hand, the rules of common-sense

morality provide guidance sufficiently determinate to effectively reduce the individual's choice to one of compliance or noncompliance, then the individual should simply comply. In exceptional cases, of course, better consequences might result from the individual's breaking the established rule rather than complying with it. But Moore's concern is with whether the individual would ever be *justified* in *regarding* his own case as an exceptional one. "And it seems," Moore says, "that this question may be definitely answered in the negative" (p. 211). For the genuine exceptions are so rare, the facts of individual cases are so hard to ascertain, and individuals are so susceptible to misjudge cases in which they are involved, that

It seems, then, that with regard to any rule which is *generally* useful, we may assert that it ought *always* to 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 its 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. 212).

In practice, then, Moore enthusiastically recommends faithful support of and adherence to the rules of common-sense morality.

It follows, then, that the very simple, but epistemically demanding, conception of ethical expertise that is implicit in Moore's work is complemented by an equally simple, but epistemically undemanding, conception of how ethical decisions should be made in everyday life. Presumably, we should see Moore's support of common-sense morality as a consequence of his own reflection on the good and on the best means of promoting it—practical advice that follows from Moore's extensive reflection on the ineffable and incalculable matters that fall within the purview of genuine ethical expertise.

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