

CHAPTER II

Moral Realism: Moore and Hartmann

Nothing to my mind can be said on moral realism without discussing the views of the English philosopher, G.E. Moore and the German philosopher, Nicolai Hartmann. The reason is not far to see. Both of them have reflected on the problem in their own ways. Though they belonged to two different cultures, and differed in their philosophical persuasions, yet, their thought patterns reveal striking similarity. Moore's *Principia Ethica*¹ was published in 1903 and the English translation of Nicolai Hartman's *Ethics*, vols. I and II² were published in 1932. A gap of almost thirty years separates them; we also do not know if Hartmann had any acquaintance with Moore's ethical ideas as Kant had of Hume's skepticism. Yet there are many analogous notions and ideas noticeable in them. We shall start with Moore.

I

In the *Principia Ethica*, Moore introduces the subject matter of ethics, saying, "Ethics is the general enquiry into what is good." For him the fundamental ethical question is: What is good? This question which is a metaphysical one - a question of ultimate value, is approached by Moore *via* the indefinability and unanalysability of the word 'good.' Moore's connection with the present context, therefore, has to do with certain epistemological problems. There is nothing surprising about that moral realism is intimately related to moral cognitivism. It may be convenient to distinguish between the two. But the distinction should not be stretched too far. For, epistemological problems and ontological claims, both negative and positive, are dependent on each other. To take one sample, moral epistemology is concerned with the possibility of

moral knowing. And this concern has a bearing on moral ontology - the kind of fact being there. The question: What is ethical knowledge about may be interpreted as asking for an object of ethical knowledge. Moore's link with moral realism has to be sought *via* his views on moral epistemology.

According to Moore, propositions about what is intrinsically good are self-evident, i.e., they cannot be proved or disproved by anything else save themselves. These judgements are about the non-natural quality of goodness. This quality has a peculiar ontological status. With regard to the meaning of moral predicates like 'good', 'bad', 'right', 'wrong', etc., Moore's views move in two directions. One is about the definition of evaluative predicates falling under the rubric of evaluative language. The other relates to the denotation of ethical terms.

With regard to the first, Moore says that if evaluative predicates can be defined, then such definitions are provided either by employing the evaluative terms or wholly naturalistically. Moore just dismisses the latter option. In other words, evaluative terms must either be defined by other evaluative terms, e.g., by 'right' with regard to 'good' or not at all. Moore claims that we cannot give a naturalistic analysis of 'good'. Any putative analysis of 'good' in naturalistic terms, i.e., without the use of evaluative terms must also fail. One could always sensibly ask whether something acknowledged to exemplify the *analysans* was also good. For example, if 'good' is defined as 'produces pleasure', then it can be pertinently asked whether whatever is pleasant is good. The question, "I know that X is pleasant, but is it good?" is a meaningful question. But whatever naturalistic definition we provide the question will always remain open. Moore says, "Whatever definition be offered, it may be always asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good."³ This is now referred



to as “the open-question argument”⁴. Given the proposed definition of ‘good’, e.g., ‘good’ means produces pleasure, if we ask whether or not any thing is good, we shall be asking in effect whether or not it produces pleasure. But suppose someone asks, “Is what produces pleasure good?” If the foregoing definition of ‘good’ is correct, this question will be self-answering: that is, it will be equivalent to “Does what produces pleasure produce pleasure?” We are not asking a meaningful question but uttering a tautology. According to Moore, even a committed hedonist would not suppose that when one is wondering whether what produces pleasure is really good, he is simply mouthing an insignificant tautology.

Let us now come to the other aspect of Moore’s view. Moore wants to credit ethical propositions with meaning. Meaning for Moore consists in denotation. He speaks of ethical propositions as referring to or denoting something. In order for ethical terms to have meaning they have to correspond to something. Moore’s theory of meaning is a ‘naming’ theory. It calls for ethical realities corresponding to ethical language. My “business”, Moore says, “is solely with the object or idea which I hold rightly or wrongly, that the word ‘good’ is generally used to stand for.”⁵ Moore speaks of a class of objects, which he says, “... do not *exist* at all. To this class, as I have said, belongs what we mean by the word ‘good’ ... the most prominent members of the class are perhaps number ... Two *is* somehow, although it does not exist.”⁶ Moore would draw a distinction between the things or objects which are good, say, for example, a good watch, a good cricket bat, a good argument, good wine, etc., and what we mean by the adjective ‘good’. Only the things and qualities which are good exist in time, can have duration, have beginning and end and are objects of perception. The quality goodness does not exist in time and hence, is not part of nature. Towards the end of the

passage quoted above, Moore compares goodness with “truths which have been called ‘universals’.” Thus, Moore’s ethical theory in the *Principia Ethica*, at least, involves, besides the cognitive character of ethics, the view that there is ethical being. Goodness also is somehow like the truths of number and universals; it is ‘somehow’, but it does not exist in time.

On the other hand, Moore is also encouraged to posit ethical entities by his theory of truth. We have already stated that Moore believes that ethical propositions are true or false. To be meaningful, a sentence expressing a proposition, must be true or false. He presumes that true ethical propositions correspond to something in reality. But what is the nature and status of this reality? It is non-natural in character. Thus, both Moore and the ethical naturalists, in a way, take for granted the referential theory of meaning, in some form or other. The naturalists believe that moral terms mean, i.e., refer to certain natural properties of actions or states of affairs, and that these properties can be known by empirical means. Moore, by contrast, believes that moral terms mean, i.e., refer to non-natural properties which can only be apprehended by moral intuition. So, it is reasonable to suppose that for Moore there are non-natural ethical qualities which have ‘being’.⁷

This kind of approach, as Nowell Smith observes⁸, tends to assimilate the task of a moral philosopher to that of a scientist. Ethics is a theoretical science, and its task is the description, classification and explanation of special phenomena, objects, qualities, etc, denoted by the words in our moral vocabulary, the ‘right’ and the ‘good’.

Ethical concepts are assumed as having objects possessing being, and intuition is introduced as a self-evident apprehension of these objects. We do not literally see the moral object or property, goodness, for example, but employ, what Moore calls ‘non-

sensuous intuition'. Moore also uses expressions like 'awareness', 'apprehension', 'recognition', 'acquaintance' – expressions with same or similar meaning. So we see that as in science, an appeal is made to observation but it is observation of a very special kind.

With respect to the nature of objectivity of goodness Moore holds it to be a non-natural type of objectivity. Moore says,

“If we consider as to whether any object is as of such a nature that it may be said to exist now, to have existed, or to be about to exist, then we may know that that object is a natural object, and that nothing of which this is not true, is a natural object... I do not deny that good is a property of certain natural objects ... and yet I have said that 'good' itself is not a natural property. Well, my test for these two also concerns their existence in time. Can we imagine 'good' as existing *by itself* in time, and not merely as a property of some natural object? For myself, I cannot so imagine it...”⁹

Moore holds that goodness or value is apprehended by an a priori intuitive awareness. Propositions about good are all of them self-evident. “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 propositions other than itself. By saying that a proposition is self-evident, we mean... that it has absolutely no reason.”¹⁰

Moore further says, “The Intuitional view of Ethics consisting in the supposition that certain rules stating that certain actions are always to be done or to be omitted may

be taken as self-evident premises. I have shown that with regard to judgements of what is *good in itself*, that this is the case; no reason can be given for them.”¹¹

Moore thus subscribes to an *a priori* intuitionism not only about judgements of what is *good in itself* but about the goodness itself. And goodness does not designate any natural property. Knowledge of goodness is neither perceptual nor inferential in nature, but intuitive and *a priori*. This is evident from Moore’s words:

It is not *goodness*, but only the things or qualities which are good, which can exist in time...can be objects of *perception*.¹²

It is evident that judgements about goodness are neither perceptual nor inferential but intuitive and *a priori*. Moore, however, rejects all attempts to derive the notion of the good, and with it any valid moral philosophy, from spurious metaphysics or false *a priori* insights into or deductions of, the essence of the good. He wishes to establish with unshakable firmness that the good could not be derived from anything beyond itself, that is, anything extraneous or ‘natural’, a term which in his usage included all that exist in the world of the objects, or in the mind. On the contrary, good is unique, it is itself and nothing else. Rightly therefore, Moore’s ethics has been called moral intuitionism (a term coined by Sidgewick), and ascribed by McIntyre to Locke, Richard Price as well as to Moore.

We have stated earlier that Moore is concerned with the “object or idea” that the word ‘good’ designates. Now, the phrase, “object or idea” is puzzling. It seems clear that for Moore the whole phrase refers to good or goodness as a property. But goodness as a property and goodness as an idea are certainly distinct. Goodness as a property would belong in *rerum natura* to certain things, acts, persons and relations. The idea of

goodness, on the other hand, could not be said to belong to or characterize anything in the same sense. In Moore's own work, the difference between ideas and properties or attributes is blurred. Perhaps his phrase, "object or idea" merely provides stylistic variety. We need not try to decide this issue. What is important for us is that Moore was a Platonist, that for him the word 'good' stood for an entity of some sort which is simple and unanalysable, non-temporal and therefore, a non-natural entity. Referring to this Moore holds that such non-natural existence "... have always played a large part in the reasonings of metaphysicians from Plato's time till now, and that they have directed attention to the difference between these and what I have called 'natural objects' is the chief contribution to knowledge which distinguishes them from ... that other class of philosophers – 'empirical' philosophers."¹⁴ It is Moore's Platonism and his belief in the ultimate simplicity and non-naturalness of goodness as a kind of entity that makes his theory interesting from the point of view of moral realism.

To defend his method of discovering the good simply by contemplating it with his mind's eye, Moore pointed to the generally agreed view that axioms such as A cannot be both B and not-B at the same time, were known in this way and this way only, that is, by intuition. Thus, he puts 'good' with truth and truth and number in the same category. This shows that Moore draws on ideal existents like axioms and simple ideas like 'yellow' as models for the 'good'. About the simplicity of goodness and the type of knowledge – intuition - which he, therefore, deemed possible of goodness of something, made his view unpalatable to many.

Moore's views are open to many objections. We shall state some of them. The most pertinent one is how the non-natural, non-temporal goodness is related to many good things. This was also a problem for Plato, to explain how the sensible particulars

are related to the particulars. And Plato had to think of different kinds of metaphors – the particulars partake of the ideas, they participate in the ideas, stands in the relation of an original to a copy or imitation or that of a model and the things copied from the model etc. As Moore has created a two-world theory of value how he is going to explain their relation? Is the non-temporal non-natural good stands in a temporal relation to the good things which exist in time? Any attempt to relate them will raise the problem of the timeless being in time. Is the relation one being timeless like goodness itself? But any thing timeless is static or fixed and good things, in that relation by the ‘Mida’s touch’ as it were, will become timeless themselves. About the definability of ‘good’, we can say that ‘good’ can be defined ostensively. One may point to things which have that property. One may point to a honest person, to a good deed, to a quality of character. But what is property common to all these things pointed to, wherein there goodness consists? “There is, then, a difficulty about ‘good’ that there is not about ‘yellow’ or ‘triangle’. People can agree on the meaning of ‘yellow’ even though they can not define it. They can both agree on the meaning of ‘triangle’ and define it. This is not the case of goodness as the meaning of a non-natural property.

R. M. Hare observes that “The work of Moore convinced most philosophers that naturalistic definitions of moral terms had to be ruled out. But Moore and his immediate followers showed a great reluctance to abandon what had been the traditional view of the way in which words have meaning. It was taken for granted that the way to explain the meaning of an adjective, for example, was to identify the property which it ‘stands for’ or ‘is the name of ’and adjectives have the same logical functions, that of ‘standing for’ a property, and the differences between them are not difference in logical character, but simply differences between the properties for which

they 'stand'. When, therefore, it became accepted that moral adjectives did not stand for 'natural' (that is, non-moral properties), it was concluded that they stand for peculiar moral properties, thought to be discerned by intuition."¹⁵

Elsewhere, Hare also notes that, in one important respect, there is an affinity between the naturalists and intuitionists in that, both the systems take words, such as, 'good', 'right', and 'ought', to be descriptive.¹⁶ Moore, in fact, is a descriptive non-naturalist, in view of the moral epistemology and ontology he subscribes to.

Despite these reservations, we must recognize the tremendous influence he exerted on subsequent thought. Moore's argument remains relevant, and this for two reasons. First, it suffices to create a burden of proof on the ethical naturalists. There is a second reason also. Moore's *Principia Ethica* clearly sides with moral cognitivism and moral realism at a time when the debate over them has not really started. Moore's arguments have been put to powerful use by Moore's non-cognitivist opponents who share his rejection of ethical naturalism but find grave ontological, epistemological and moral rationalist worries in Moore's own views. Indeed, according to Shafer-Landau it is possible to trace the history of twentieth-century meta-ethics as a dialectics of positions each of which takes Moore's theories for granted, and proceeds with its own argument from elimination.¹⁷ However, the non-naturalists who believe in the existence of a realm of morals, that is something other than a sub-species of natural facts, have nothing to be ashamed of with their relatively expansive ontology.

II

In Section I we have pointed out the striking convergences, in the thought patterns of G.E. Moore and Nicolai Hartmann on the important question of values and morals. Those thought-convergences carry the weight of conclusive validity by the fact that

Moore and Hartmann, two leading thinkers in the Anglo-American and continental traditions respectively, were not mutually influenced at all. Yet, they betray 'common attitudes' to a basic component of philosophy, *Value*. While the key concept in Moore is 'good', for Hartmann it is the objective self-existence of values as ontological categories. As such, Hartmann recognizes three aspects of value – the universality, the apriority and the categorical character. We shall concentrate on these three aspects of value, particularly, of moral phenomena.

Hartmann develops his conception of values in opposition to the subjectivist aprioristic ethics, from which he thinks even Kant, was unable to escape. He says in elaborating his project, Hartmann also concurs with Moore of knowing value through *a priori* intuition.

... ethics can learn that the universality, the apriority and the categorical character of the principle have no need of a subjective origin—even though it be an origin of the highest dignity, an origin in the constitution of practical reason itself. Its only need is an origin which is not to be found in naturalistic objectivity—that is, not in nature or in the world perceived by the senses. From this sphere ethical consciousness must not derive its principle... there is a self-existent ideal sphere in which values are native, and that, as the contents of this sphere, values, self-existent and dependent upon no experience, are discerned *a priori*.¹⁸

He says, "Values ... are discerned apriori".¹⁹ Speaking of the apriorism of value Hartmann goes on to say:

Every moral preference is intuitive, is immediately there and is always contained in the grasping of a given circumstance (whether it be a situation or a finished course of conduct) ... Comprehension of ethical reality – whether it consists of goods, human relations or demands for a personal decision – is always, even for the naïvest consciousness, transfused with valuations, ... All acts which are related to this fullness of life and which grasp reality are at the same time acts which grasp values and which select according to values.²⁰

Comprehending the connections of apriority and categorical structures, he says, “... all comprehension is accomplished in categorical structures, and precisely herein consists the apriori of the latter.”²¹

The presence of Plato is felt in both Moore and Hartmann. The objectivity of values is of course not a new idea. It had been anticipated in Plato’s Idea of the Good. Hartmann gives a new orientation to the problem. Although he did not mention Plato in his foreward to the Vol. I of *Ethics* and acknowledges his intellectual debt to Aristotle, the Platonic element is prominent in him. In fact, in his consideration and understanding of the essence of values, in its universality, he says:

In ancient times it was seen that there is another realm of being than that of existence, than that of “real” things and of consciousness which is not less “real”. Plato named it the realm of Idea.²²

He refers to the notion of “ground” which belonged to the meaning of “essence” in Plato’s “Idea”. He says;

The kind of being peculiar to the "Idea" is that ... "through which" everything participating in it is just as it is. Characteristically among Plato's ideas are found ... those values upon which his ethics was built. This fact is especially illuminating for the theory of value: in their mode of being values are Platonic ideas. They belong to that further realm of Being which Plato first discovered, the realm which we can spiritually discern but cannot see or grasp.²³

These words bring together Hartmann's idea of "essences" in value. He further elaborates this, saying

Values emanate neither from the things (or real relationships) nor from the participant. No naturalism and no subjectivism attach to their form of Being. Furthermore, they are not "formal" or empty structures, but possess contents; they are "materials", structures which constitute a specific quality of things, relations or persons according as they attach to them or are lacking. And, ... not only are they never merely "invented"... but they are not even capable of being directly grasped by thought; rather are they immediately discerned only by an inner "vision", like Plato's "Ideas". The Platonic notion of "beholding" well fits that which ... ethics designates as the "*sensing of value*".²⁴

From what we have seen thus far it must be granted that Hartmann, like Moore, upholds the non-natural character of value. Value as a non-natural entity is independent of mind. Such a view may be called moral realism and it is realism in a Platonic sense.

However, there is a difference between Moore's variety of Platonism and Hartmann's. And in all fairness it will be proper for us to point out the differences and let them not be submerged by the symmetries in thinking.

It has been said that Moore is merely a value- *property*-Platonist as contrasted with Hartmann who is a value-Platonist-*proper*. Platonism, according to the property-Platonist, is a form of realism which holds that properties as a category are irreducibly real. Platonism, according to the Platonist-*Proper*, on the other hand, is the view that those real entities which there are over and above "sensible particulars" are not properties of those objects, and they are neither perceived nor perceivable by the senses. They are not in actual world at all, although they are real. From this perspective, Moore is merely a *property*-Platonist because he holds, first, that goodness is a "non-natural" property²⁵, and therefore, (*a fortiori*) a property, and second, that properties are really *in the world* as irreducible constituents of it.²⁶ (That is to say, more exactly, on Moore's view in *Principia Ethica*, if a given property is reducible merely to other properties). Since, as per our definition, a *property*-Platonist is anyone who holds this latter view (once again properties are a category of the irreducibly real), Moore is unquestionably a Property-Platonist.

Hartmann, on the other hand, is a Platonist- *proper*, inasmuch as he holds that the value-ideal, goodness (as well as the many other value-ideals) is, although, perfectly real, precisely not *in the world* at all.²⁷ Value ideals, for Hartmann, have ideal, not actual, self-existence (= being independent of the consciousness of them).²⁸ That is, they really have self-existence, although this self-existence is not real, where "real" means "actual". This point directs attention to the second distinction we require if we are to talk coherently about Moore's "Value Platonism" at all.

A second reason for being tempted to think that Moore's goodness is a Platonic value ideal is that Moore's language, especially when taken out of context is highly misleading. Moore writes, e.g., in his famous "pair of [possible] worlds" passage that "... beauty must *in itself* be regarded as a greater good than ugliness."²⁹ "... the beautiful world *in itself* is better than the ugly ..."³⁰. Since Moore specially by italicizing "in itself" in these sentences certainly seems to be writing about the ideal, the abstract or perhaps the concept of beauty, it (misleadingly) seems reasonable to identify (or at least associate) the "beauty" he is talking about with the value-ideal beauty. In fact, the context of these sentences, at first glance, seems to support such an interpretation. For is Moore not writing about possible or imaginary worlds? And is it not natural first to contrast possible with actual, then to associate possible with ideal, and finally to correlate value ideals with the possibility (i.e., non-actuality) suggested by the notion of a possible world?

Secondly, there is in Moore a teleological element when he says, rather teaches,

It is by anticipating and judging the consequences of any action which we may take that we do, or do not, find the good in the world of experience. Since we can be assumed to desire the good, we shape our action and thereby future reality in accordance with the good; we do not derive the good from an anticipated, imagined future reality.³¹

Here is what Moore had to say on the subject in *Principia Ethica*:

What I wish ... to point out is that 'right' does and can mean nothing but 'cause of a good result', and is thus identical with 'useful; whence it follows that ... no action which is not justified by its results can be right ... Our 'duty' ... can only be defined as that action which will cause more good to exist in the Universe than any possible alternative. And what is 'right' or 'morally permissible' only differs from this, as what will not cause less good than any possible alternative.³²

That is to say, Moore is not extracting the good from an anticipated experience, and thus commits the 'naturalistic fallacy.' Thus, there is a teleological element in Moore's reasoning – by aiming at the good we cause it to exist or come into being. Our judgement hinges on whether the consequences we foresee have or do not have intrinsic value. In this respect it has been observed that

Moore is an uncompromising teleologist whereas Hartmann is a deontologist in respect of the status of right action. An action, according to Moore, is right if and only if there be no other action which if done, can produce more valuable or better consequence. In other words, Moore did not recognise the intrinsic value of means *que* means, he only recognised the intrinsic value of means as effective means. But Hartmann, unlike Moore, recognized the intrinsic value of both the means and the ends. He accepted the value of aiming at as well as the value aimed at.³³

However, the essence of ought is a fundamental metaphysical problem for him and he devotes almost two Sections on different dimensions of the Ought.³⁴ In concluding, a last of point to note is that both Moore and Hartmann stress the autonomy or independence of moral values, yet moral realism in Moore is a matter of interpretation. Hartmann is more forthright in characterizing his ethics as moral realism. It is a vigorous interpretation of the data of ethics from the point of view of metaphysical realism. The translator of two volumes of *Ethics*, Stanton Coit, in his translator's Preface describes it as "... the most impressive statement of intuitive *ethical realism* in print."³⁵

However, we must admit that both Moore and Hartmann contributed to the subject-matter of ethics in a new light showing the inner structure and objective self-existence of values which influence subsequent ethical research.

Notes and References:

1. G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903; 1956.
2. Nicolai Hartmann, *Ethics*, Vol. I & II (trans), Stanton Coit, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1932, 1950.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p.6
6. *Ibid.*, pp- 110-111. Emphasis is author's
7. *Vide.*, A. R. White, *G. E. Moore: A Critical Exposition*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell Press, 1959, pp. 40-41, also p. 138.
8. Nowell Smith, P. H., *Ethics*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1957, p. 30.
9. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, *op. cit.*, Section 26, pp. 40-41.
10. *Ibid.*, Section 86, p. 145.
11. *Ibid.*, Section 90, p. 148.
12. *Ibid.*, Section 66, pp. 110-111.
13. Manjulika Ghosh, unpublished Post-Doctoral work on "Ethics and Knowledge".
14. *Principia Ethica*, *op. cit.*, Section 66, p.111.
15. R.M. Hare, *Essays on the Moral Concepts*, the Macmillan Press, 1972, p.45.
16. R.M. Hare, *Language of Morals*, Oxford University Press, 1952, p.155.
17. Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral realism*, *op. cit.*, p.58.
18. Nicolai Hartmann, *Ethics*, Vol. I, pp. 164-165.
19. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 175.
20. *Ibid.*, Vol.I, pp.176-177.
21. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 175.

22. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 183.
23. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 184-185.
24. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 185. Emphasis is ours.
25. G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956, eds.
p. 47.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.
27. Nicolai Hartman, *Ethics*, Vol. I, pp. 218-23.
28. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 218.
29. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 84.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 85. Italics original.
31. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.
33. M. S. Maitra, unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation on "Moral Realism", N.B.U.
34. Nicolai Hartmann, *Ethics*, Vol I, Section VI and VII, pp. 247-314.
35. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 11. Also see p. 12, where the translator calls it "ethical realism".

Italics ours