

# MOORE: THE LIBERATOR

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The writings of G. E. Moore at one time were a standard part of the philosophy curriculum, especially in those schools steeped in the traditions of analytic philosophy, broadly conceived. The portrait of Moore then favored (I shall refer to it as the received opinion) depicted him as the defender of common sense, the plain man's (at that time people did not hasten to add, "and the plain woman's") philosopher. After all, had not Moore himself proclaimed that the common sense view of the world is essentially correct? His worries were confined to questions of analysis and did not include matters of substantive truth. Moore knew for certain that tables and chairs are real; he had no deep skeptical angst concerning the furniture of the universe. His demon woke him at night only to ask, "What does it *mean* to say 'Chairs are real' or 'Tables are things'?" He had no dogmatic slumbers, only occasional meta-nightmares.

Moore's ethical writings, we were taught, had a slightly different cast, but only in appearance. His most famous teaching in this field is that definitions of Good commit the naturalistic fallacy. Not only is this claim not part of the common sense view of the world, the very ideas Moore sought to defend—that Good is a simple, unique, unanalyzable, nonnatural property—remain notoriously unclear to pale scholars in their studies, let alone robust ordinary men and women in the streets. So there was, hovering round Moore's ethical philosophy, the hint that he was a thinker who could sometimes unburden himself of the duty to defend common sense.

But even here the received opinion minimized the appearance of Moore's unorthodoxy. His opaque claims about Good were just that—opaque claims about Good. And these were claims offered in the language of conceptual analysis and so could depart from common sense as much as Moore saw fit without compromising his allegiance to the plain men and women of the world. Besides, when, in the end, Moore does set forth his substantive views about what things are good and bad, what acts right and wrong, his judgments are rendered in the name of common sense.

A few things are very good, he maintains. These include the admiring contemplation of beautiful objects and the pleasures associated with friendship. So obvious is it that these are the best of the best that Moore characterizes his view that they are as "platitudinous," the very sort of truth ordinary people accept without the need of argument.

And so for right and wrong, well here we do best (or so the received opinion claims) to follow the rules of conventional morality—the prevailing moral customs of our time and place and position—as every man and woman of common sense would agree. Even if you think that better results would come about if you broke a rule of conventional morality (for example, a rule against stealing or another against sun bathing in the nude) common sense speaks sternly against allowing such naked abandon. We are not to make exceptions to such rules, no matter what.

The cumulative portrait that emerges when the received opinion's views of Moore's ethical and nonethical work are combined, then, is that of a not very imaginative, inspiring or provocative thinker. If, today, students of philosophy spend little if any time investigating Moore's views, whether in ethics or beyond, some might rest comfortably in the belief that the teaching of philosophy is the better for it. Moore was what he was, and not another thing. And what he was (as the Cambridge literary critic F. R. Leavis describes him) was "a disinterested, innocent spirit" who enjoyed what influence he had in spite of, not because of, his substantive views. "Moore," Leavis reports Wittgenstein as having once said, "shows you how far a man can get with absolutely no intelligence whatever." Such a man as this might grudgingly be allowed a place in the dusty footnotes, but hardly in the well polished text, of the history of our discipline.

But all is not well for the received opinion. Dissidents beyond the borders of philosophy have a different view of Moore the man, and Moore the philosopher. The most articulate voices who speak for those artists, writers, thinkers and critics who comprise what has come to be known as the Bloomsbury Group—such men as John Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf's husband, Leonard—these voices offer a series of variations on the main theme of Moore, the moral visionary. Here is a quote from Leonard Woolf that is representative.

There have been other groups of people who were not only friends, but were consciously united by a common doctrine and object, or purpose artistic or social. The Utilitarians, the Lake poets, the French Impressionists, the English Pre-Raphaelites were groups of this kind. Our group was quite different. Its basis was friendship, which in some cases developed into love and marriage. The colour of our minds and thought had been given to us by the climate of Cambridge and Moore's philosophy, much as the climate of England gives one colour to the

face of an Englishman while the climate of India gives quite a different colour to the face of a Tamil.<sup>1</sup>

Those who echo Woolf's assessment of Moore's influence on Bloomsbury, especially its Cambridge nucleus, also agree with him when he identifies Moore's *Principia Ethica* as the Group's sacred book—Bloomsbury's bible, as it were. Let us allow Strachey to speak for everyone, as he was only too happy to do. I read from a letter of his, sent to Moore, just a few days after *Principia's* publication.

I have read your book, and want to say how much I am excited and impressed by it. I'm afraid I must be mainly classed among "writers of Dictionaries, and other persons interested in literature", so I feel a certain sort of essential vanity hovering about all my "judgments of fact". But on this occasion I am carried away. I think your book has not only wrecked and shattered all writers on Ethics from Aristotle and Christ to Herbert Spencer and Mr. Bradley, it has not only laid the true foundations of Ethics, it has not only left all modern philosophy bafouee—these seem to me small achievements compared to the establishment of that Method which shines like sword a between the lines. It is the scientific method deliberately applied, for the first time, to Reasoning. Is that true? You perhaps shake your head, but henceforth who will be able to tell lies one thousand times as easily as before? The truth, there can be no doubt, is really now upon the march. I date from Oct. 1903 the beginning of the Age of Reason....Dear Moore, I hope and pray that you realize how much you mean to us.

The obvious problem Bloomsbury's adulation of Moore poses for the received opinion is this. Whatever else one might wish to say about Bloomsbury (and many powerful voices, including those of Leavis and D. H. Lawrence, for example, wish to say much, all of it negative) its members were not conventional, either in their attitudes or in their behavior. Just the opposite in fact. Convention in their day (the first two decades of this century, roughly speaking) was on the side of chastity, monogamy, and heterosexual relations, for example. But not Bloomsbury. If it is not quite true, as one wag put it, that "In Bloomsbury all the couples are triangles," it is quite true that sex fell into enthusiastic, imaginative and (for their time and place) decidedly unconventional hands when it fell into theirs. Strachey takes Duncan Grant as a lover, only to lose him to Keynes—who in turn loses him to Vanessa Bell, who in turn loses him to David Garnett, who in times moves to Charleston farm to live with—Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell. In matters of sex, whatever may be true of logic, Bloomsbury had a rich, precocious understanding of recursive functions.

No less unconventional was Bloomsbury's open disdain of the frills and majesty of the British Empire. When the First World War came, only Keynes served the war effort, and even he did so in the government, not the trenches. Duncan Grant refused to serve, as

did Clive Bell. But it is Strachey's interrogation before the Hampstead Tribunal, where the sincerity of his conscientious objection was put to the test, that has become part of oral intellectual history. Keynes' first biographer, Michael Holroyd, recreates the occasion as follows.

In the course of (the examination) the military representative attempted to cause (Strachey) some embarrassment by firing a volley of awkward questions from the bench.

"I understand, Mr. Strachey, that you have a conscientious objection to all wars." "Oh no," came the piercing, high-pitched reply, "not at all. Only this one." "Then tell me, Mr. Strachey, what would you do if you saw a German soldier attempting to rape your sister?" Lytton (whose homosexuality was a matter of public knowledge) turned forlornly regarded each of his sisters in turn. Then he confronted the Board once more and answered with gravity, "I should try and interpose my own body."<sup>2</sup>

Almost a decade earlier (the year was 1910) other members of Bloomsbury had assaulted the British sense of the Holy by playing a hoax on the most venerable of the empire's institutions—the British Navy and its Admiral, afloat aboard the flagship *Dreadnought*, anchored off Weybridge. Dressed for success, which in this case meant some of the pranksters wore great coats and bowler hats, other (with darkened skins) were attired in billowy silken creations from the east, the *Dreadnought* hoax came off without a hitch. The Admiral and his officers had welcomed these merry-makers on board without so much as a murmur of suspicion, having been duped (via an elaborate scheme) into thinking that the Emperor of Abyssinia and his retinue, accompanied by representatives of the Home Office, were to be their honored guests. Red carpets, a military band, a private launch—all the trappings of English pomp and circumstance—and all showered upon a group of impostors which, united mainly by their thirst for scandal, included Duncan Grant in false beard and (believe it or not) Virginia Woolf, in Eastern drag.

That the Admiral and his fleet were taken in so unreservedly by such amateurs only heightened the official outrage that shook the last pretense of empire, once the hoax was revealed. Regulations concerning visitors were tightened, a development which led Virginia to observe, in an uncharacteristic rush of patriotism, "I am pleased that I, too, have been of service to my country."

Sex, politics, dress—Strachey was conspicuous for his earrings generations before more timid men would dare wear them, and Virginia (these are only two examples) walking about the streets of London with an ensemble of clothes held together (barely) by safety-pins—in these and other respects the Bloomsberries, as they were called, exhibited neither respect nor reverence for the standards of conventional morality. Theirs was in many respects a most uncommon sense of what a person should be allowed to do.

Ever observant, Strachey understood the insurmountable task the Group faced when they turned their attention to convincing people outside Bloomsbury that the Bloomsberries had their hand on the truth. "It's madness of us to dream of making dowagers understand that feelings are good," he wrote in April 1906 to Keynes, "when we say in the next breath that the best ones are sodomitical."

Not to go unnoticed, finally, is the cool aloofness and elitism that even today is synonymous with the "Bloomsbury." With rare exceptions (Keynes' government service is the most notable) the Bloomsberries were in the world not a part of it. They had neither the temperament nor felt the calling to improve the lot of humanity. They had their (in Leavis' words) "coterie" and luxuriated in their own peculiar "ethos." Their sense of the larger political reality surrounding them is perhaps best illustrated by Vanessa Bell's asking H. H. Asquith over dinner whether he had any interest in politics. Asquith at the time was England's Prime Minister. The conventional expectations of citizenship failed to take up lodging in the hearts of most who were Bloomsbury.

Here, then, in the broadest terms, is the challenge to the received opinion Moore's influence on Bloomsbury offers. That opinion pictures Moore as a philosopher of narrow aspirations and achievements, whose only adventure with unorthodoxy (if such it be) was a nonnatural tryst with the concept, Good, and whose beliefs and teachings in other areas of ethics favored strict adherence to the expectations of conventional morality—who advocated, in Gertrude Himmelfarb's telling phrase, "a feeble concession to conventional morality."<sup>3</sup> The Bloomsberries for their part were openly contemptuous of these same expectations, and yet it was Moore whom they identified as their inspiration and prophet, his *Principia Ethica*, their bible. The challenge is: How can the received opinion possibly be correct if we trust the testimony of the Bloomsberries?

Paul Levy has a provocative reply: We are not to put much trust in the testimony of Leonard Woolf, Strachey and the others. In his book, *Moore: G. E. Moore and the Cambridge Apostles*, Levy argues that it was not Moore's philosophy but his character that both emboldened and inspired those who would be Bloomsbury. "Those who proclaimed themselves his disciples," Levy writes,

were devoted not so much to his ideas as to certain aspects of his character. Everyone agrees his character was remarkable, and some agree with Leonard Woolf that it was unique. My claim is that what Moore's followers had in common was admiration—even reverence—for his personal qualities; but that as their hero happened to be a philosopher, the appropriate gesture of allegiance to him meant saying that one believed his propositions and accepted his arguments for them. Had the great man been a poet, they would no doubt have shown their fealty (as others have) by reciting his verses; if a composer, by singing his songs. This is a radical view to espouse, for one does not

often encounter 'the cult of personality' in the history of philosophy.... It is tantamount to saying that in professing belief in Moore's 'philosophy' his Bloomsbury disciples were, for the most part, gesturing in order to demonstrate their allegiance.<sup>4</sup>

For reasons I can only sketch in what follows, I do not believe that Levy has got it quite right. (A fuller explanation of my views will be found in my book, *Bloomsbury Prophet: G. E. Moore and the Development of His Moral Philosophy*.<sup>5</sup> What we might call the Cliff's Notes version will be presented here.) That presentation begins by noting that Moore wrote a great deal on ethical matters before *Principia's* publication in 1903, most of which has never been published but all of which was familiar to the Cambridge-core of Bloomsbury (Clive Bell, Leonard Woolf, Roger Fry, Desmond McCarthy, Maynard Keynes, and Strachey) and all of which sheds light on *Principia's* pages.

Two things in particular we learn from these papers. First, Moore early on saw himself as a reformer, especially of that Science he most revered: Ethics. He refers to what he calls "would-be scientific moralists, with their (lists of) virtues and duties." It is clear that he has nothing but contempt for these impostors. Their lists, he believes, are both too extensive and too demanding, and what pretense of truth their oppressive deliverance might appear to have cannot disguise what he calls "their lies." *Principia*, as I shall explain (albeit overly briefly) below, continues Moore's self-declared civil war with other practitioners of the Science of Morals; but that war was well under way long before that book was published.

The second thing we learn from these unpublished essays is that Moore at one time was sorely tempted by a form of moral mysticism—the view that during certain heightened moments of consciousness we are able to grasp the complete truth of good and evil, in a flash, as it were. Now, Moore-the-mystic is rather far removed from our ordinary picture of the great defender of common sense, and those who favor the mythological to the genuine article might prefer to keep Moore's romance with mysticism in the closet. But genuine this side of Moore's character was, and though it was in time to give way to his rapacious appetite for rigorous analysis, my guess is, it was never totally vanquished—another point I shall develop briefly below.

The main point, however, is the first one—the one about Moore's civil war with other practitioners of the Science of Morals. His hope was to leave no wounded. His most earnest desire, which Strachey's glowing letter upon *Principia's* publication must have at least partially satisfied, was to replace false science with the true one. Less than total victory was, for Moore, less than total vindication of the truth.

Moore's effort to grasp the Science of Morals from the clutches of would-be scientific moralists is symptomatic of his resolve to save

his Science from the muddled hands of natural scientists and metaphysicians. When in *Principia* Moore writes that Good is "unique," he means just that. And what he means, by way of implication, is that no other science, whether it be natural or metaphysical, can presume to study Good systematically. This is the central theoretical result of Moore's criticisms of any and all attempts to define Good (his famous declarations regarding "the naturalistic fallacy"). What is at issue is the autonomy of Ethics. The uniqueness of Good, assuming it to be so, shows that Ethics and its defining question (What is Good?) cannot be co-opted by any other science—not by biology, not by psychology, not by sociology, not by theology, not even by metaphysics. For Moore is no less insistent that Good is not a metaphysical property than he is that it is not a natural property. It, along with a few other properties Moore mentions (evil and beauty in particular), are members of a very select ontological club: it (and they) are non-natural.

No less important than Good's uniqueness is its alleged simplicity. Definitions, Moore contends both in *Principia* and before (for example, in *The Elements of Ethics*), are possible only in the case of those things that are complex, from which it follows, given the alleged simplicity of Good, that no definition of Good is possible. Moreover, the nature of simple properties is such that no reason, by which Moore means no evidence, can be given for the judgment that something has them. Not only, then, is it the case that no natural or metaphysical science can presume to study the nature of Good, it is no less true that these sciences cannot presume to offer any reason or evidence, for or against, something's being good.

The result is that there can in principle be no priestly caste of moral experts—people who, because of their expertise in other fields of inquiry, are better qualified, on that basis, than are others, to establish which things are good, which not. By insisting on the simplicity and uniqueness of Good, Moore democratizes the domain of moral judgments about what things are good. Those would-be scientific moralists he attacks, who celebrate the great goodness of their duties and their virtues, are no more qualified to say or discover what things are good than are people of common sense everywhere. As we might imagine, this happy message of equality was not lost on Moore's disciples. Few things could have pleased the likes of Lytton Strachey more than to learn that his preference for the higher sodomy over the higher pleasures of the church could not be discredited because he lacked an education in theology. Better to be a satisfied homosexual than a dissatisfied priest.

But Moore's was a democracy of judgment, not a state of anarchy. Along with his emancipation of every individual to judge with no less authority than people in robes or white coats there was his severe repudiation of subjectivism. Some things really are good, others really are evil. And this is true independently of what any of us say or

ur thinking it so does not make it so, anymore than our liking things more than others make the former better than the latter. though the Lytton Strachey's of the world are no less qualified to judge of what is good than are the Cardinal Mannings, heathens or just as mistaken as clerics. However, since in the very nature of the case no reason can be given, for or against, judgments of intrinsic goodness, who could say which judgments are correct, which is right? This is a problem Moore confronted honestly throughout the work he worked on *Principia* as well as during the formative years leading up to its composition.

It is in *Principia's* famous "method of isolation" that Moore finds an answer that permits him to believe that things are good without forsaking the demands of reason. Because those things that are intrinsically good are good independently of their causes and effects, one must consider their claim to value in isolation from anything else, as if they existed quite alone—as if they were the only thing that existed. And though this level of abstraction is not common, Moore is confident that achieving it is well within the reach of every person of common sense.

Once the questions are clearly understood, the answers, Moore thinks, are so obvious as to be platitudinous.

By far the most valuable things, which we know or can imagine, are certain states of consciousness, which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects. No one, probably, who has asked himself the question, has ever doubted that personal affection and the appreciation of what is beautiful in Art or Nature, are good in themselves; nor, if we consider strictly what things are worth having for their own sakes, does it appear probable that any one will think that anything else has nearly so great a value as the things which are included under these two heads.<sup>6</sup>

Keynes and the others who were Bloomsbury were no less enamored of "Moore's method" than they were of the results they obtained by its finest application. Not only, then, did the Bloomsberries eagerly embrace the democratization of value judgment Moore's treatment of Good made possible, and not only did they find in the method of isolation the "logical and analytical technique" that enabled them to answer questions of value, Keynes, Strachey and the others also found in Moore's work the celebration and vindication of those very values that helped create and sustain their identity as a Group: the great values of friendship and the shared appreciation of beauty.

But they found more even than this. Moore's ethic in relation to conduct could not have fallen on more attentive or receptive ears, and it is in this respect, more than any other, that Bloomsbury's cast of characters provides us with an understanding and appreciation of Moore's thought that reduces the received opinion to rubble. That opinion maintains that Moore offers an uninspired (and uninspiring)



defense of conventional morality: We are always, or so its is alleged, to follow the rules of conventional morality—the prevailing moral expectations of our time and place and position. A close reading of *Principia*, illuminated by what we know of Bloomsbury and its members' way of life, reveals that this gets Moore's teachings quite wrong.

Moore sets forth his views of ethics in relation to conduct in Chapter Five. Perhaps the main reason why his views have been so badly misunderstood is the common failure to recognize that he carries out his analysis at two different, but related levels. On the one hand, he continues the work of reform he had begun in his pre-*Principia* papers. At this level of analysis Moore's intention is to show *how very limited the science of morals is*. Ethics, Moore argues, can at best make a probable case for why a very few rules are universally binding, and those rules of which this is, or may be, true are ones that *already* exist and *already* are generally observed and socially sanctioned. What Ethics *cannot* do, is to justify the introduction of some *new* rule. It is largely because of their failure to recognize the limits of their science that those would-be scientific moralists, with their extensive lists of duties and virtues, many of which are not part of the existing moral code, offer lies in the guise of truth.

Moore offers three reasons why Ethics is likely to fail if its practitioners offer rules of duty or sets of virtues that are not part of the already existing moral conventions of a given society:

- In the first place, (1) the actions which they advocate are very commonly such as it is impossible for most individuals to perform by any volition....  
 (2) Actions are often advocated, of which, though they themselves are possible, yet the proposed good effects are not possible, because the conditions necessary for their existence are not sufficiently general....  
 (3) There also occurs the case in which the usefulness of a rule depends upon conditions likely to change, or of which the change would be as easy and more desirable than the observance of the rule. (*Principia*, pp. 160-161)

What needs to be emphasized is that Moore is not here defending blind conformity to prevailing social customs on the part of individual moral agents. His point is a very different one—namely, that the *Science of Morals* is limited in what it can do by way of challenging or changing the conventional morality of one's time and place. "One or another of these (three) objections," Moore goes on to observe, "seems generally to apply to proposed changes in social custom, advocated as being better rules to follow than those now actually followed; and, for this reason, *it seems doubtful whether Ethics* can establish the utility of any rules other than those generally practiced" (p. 161, emphasis added). Moore does not infer from this either that (a) all existing rules have utility or that (b) each individual ought to abide by every rule of conventional morality and social custom.

His concern here is *not* with what individuals ought to do, or how they should decide this but rather with putting the Science of Morals in its proper place. When properly reformed, we too (or so Moore believes) that this Science lacks the wherewithal to change existing social customs by justifying the introduction of new rules.

That is the first strand of analysis Moore weaves through the pages of Chapter Five. The second, though related to the first, is distinct from it. It concerns the domain of individual moral autonomy and how this domain is defined by the Science of Morals. According to Moore, the principles of this Science can be used to make a plausible case in favor of universal compliance to certain rules. Very few in number, these rules in Moore's view are presupposed by any society, given the world as we know it. So the Science of Morals does offer principles that—again, in Moore's view—do justify the imposition of certain limits on everyone's behavior. At the same time, however, the very same principles that underwrite these universal limits on individual behavior also provide the bias for that extensive individual liberty, both in conduct and judgment, that Moore's own practical ethic allows and indeed encourages. Just as the Science of Morals cannot rationally justify general adoption of a *new* set of rules, so it cannot rationally defend uniform conformity to the *old* set that defines the body of prevailing social customs at a given time and place. It is precisely these limits of Ethics, when it comes to establishing what *everyone* ought to do or what virtues *everyone* ought to acquire, that open up the vast area of individual discretion Moore is at pains to protect from the moral imperialism of those "would-be scientific moralists"—those philosophers and theologians who use their "science" to call for the establishment of a "new" set of rules or who offer a blanket endorsement of the "old" set. Moore's fundamental point is that in the vast percentage of cases the individual does—and the individual should—get along just fine without trying to conform to *any* rule, old or new. An enlightened ethic in relation to conduct must encourage rich diversity between individuals, not bland sameness. As Moore writes:

Moralists commonly assume that, in the matter of actions or habits of action, usually recognized as duties or virtues, it is desirable that every one should be alike. Whereas it is certain that, under actual circumstances, and possible that, even in a much more ideal condition of things, the principle of division of labour, according to special capacity, which is recognized in respect to employments, would also give a better result in respect of virtues. (pp. 165-166)

To encourage diversity among individuals is not to answer the question, "How should we decide what we ought to do when, as is true in Moore's view in the vast majority of cases, it is improbable that we should follow a rule?" Moore anticipates the question and replies as follows:

It seems, therefore, that, in cases of doubt, instead of following rules, of which he is unable to see the good effects in his particular case, the individual should rather guide his choice by a direct consideration of the intrinsic value or vileness of the effects which his action may produce. (p. 166)

This, however, is only part of an answer. Which among the possible good effects should we aim at: The immediate or the remote? Those that will affect strangers or those that will touch friends? Moore again anticipates the question and offers a reply: In general we ought to aim at goods affecting oneself and "those in whom one has a strong personal interest" rather than to "attempt a more extended beneficence" (pp. 166-167); and in general we also ought to try to secure goods that are in "the present" rather than to seek goods that are in the more distant future. Both points of general instruction are defended by Moore by appealing to their probability of success. We are, he thinks, *less* likely to secure a good in the future than we are in the present, and we are *more* likely to obtain goods for those (ourselves included) for whom we are more concerned than for those for whom we are concerned less. "Egoism," Moore proclaims, "is undoubtedly superior to Altruism as a doctrine of means: in the immense majority of cases the best thing we can do is to aim at securing some good in which we are concerned (that is, concerned either for ourselves personally or for those in whom we have a 'strong personal interest'), since for that very reason we are far more likely to secure it". (p. 167) Because we want that outcome most, in short, we are in Moore's view more likely to act in ways that will get it.

How far Moore is from endorsing those views attributed to him by advocates of the received opinion should now be clear. There are, he thinks, a *very few* rules that people everywhere ought always to follow. (Not even all the rules commended by Common Sense qualify: only "*most of those most universally* recognized by Common Sense" are possible candidates, and even in their case Moore maintains only that the requisite type of justification "*may be possible*." (p. xxii) *Almost all* our decisions will have to be made without relying on any rule: in almost all cases "*rules of action* should not be followed at all." (p. xiii) In *all* cases of this sort individuals should guide their choice "by a direct consideration of the effects which the action may produce," *not* by reference to the expectations of conventional morality. In *these* cases one in general ought to do what one thinks will promote one's own interests, as these are enlarged by the lives of others in whom one has "a strong personal interest," instead of attempting to satisfy the demands of "a more extended beneficence." And of the goods to be aimed at, the more immediate are generally to be preferred to the more distant. *In short, in virtually all our activities in our day-to-day life we are at liberty to live and choose without troubling ourselves about whether we are doing what duty, in the form of the prevailing*

*rules of conventional morality, requires.* To draw the limits of morality along these lines is not arbitrary or capricious. It has reason—discovered, articulated, and defended by a reformed Science of Morals—on its side.

Moore's teachings in Chapter Five of *Principia* could not have been lost on those attentive readers who were familiar with the major tendencies of his thought at this time—in particular, his developing tendencies in reforming the Science of Morals. Part of that reform on which Moore was embarked involves breaking that Science free from mistaken connections with other sciences, both natural and metaphysical. That is the work of the first four chapters, where Moore tirelessly makes the case both for the uniqueness of the concept, Good, and for the autonomy of Ethics. But another part of his reform involves defining the limits of this Science *after* its autonomy has been secured. Nothing would be more natural than to suppose that an autonomous Science of Morals is a liberty to promulgate wearisome lists of duties and virtues, each incumbent upon everyone, at all times, and in all places. Given its autonomous status, no other science could challenge its claims. What else could?

Moore could. And does. A further reform must come *from within* this science itself. Because in his view such notions are Duty, Right, Obligation, and the like are necessarily tied to the notion, Good, Ethics must consider what is right, what is obligatory, and so on. But because of *how* these notions are related to Good, Moore believes the limits of knowledge in this quarter are severe. We do not know very much about what is productive or good. And this must chasten the enthusiasm of each and every practitioner of Ethics. That Science must (in Moore's words) be appropriately "humbled." When it is, Moore believes its practitioners are only slightly better able to say what acts are duties than they are able to say what things are good. On the latter point (What things are good-in-themselves), Ethics is able to prove nothing; on the former point (What acts are obligatory), Ethics can prove at best that a very few rules impose duties. Nothing in the one case. A few things in the other. Not a very impressive showing.

When viewed in a more sympathetic light, however, these results *are* impressive. Immensely so. By severely limiting the number of duties and virtues the Science of Morals can identify and defend, Moore offers an ethical system that aspires to prick the inflated pretenses of would-be scientific moralists, one that justifies the necessity of the *individual's* moral judgment and freedom. That is the principal message of *Principia's* Chapter Five and of that book generally. When Vanessa Bell writes, just before the First World War, that "a great new freedom seemed about to come," she pays proper homage to Moore the liberator.

For Bloomsbury practiced what *Principia* preaches, not only (as many commentators have noted) in its acceptance of that work's

pronouncements about what things are good in themselves, but also *Principia's* major themes concerning what sort of person we ought to be and how we ought to live. Each member of Bloomsbury in his or her own way labored to acquire those "private" virtues Moore commends in *Principia*: prudence, temperance, industry. There was not a slackard in the crowd. Not one who recklessly threw his or her life away through willful over-indulgence in one vice or another. Though God was dead in Bloomsbury, the work ethic of their largely Protestant upbringing was alive and well. Moore's celebration of those virtues the members already were determined to pursue and in time were in large measure to possess could hardly have failed to elicit their happy approval. Not beneficence. Not charity. Not civic-mindedness. Not social justice. Not patriotism. Not courage. Not self-sacrifice. Not any of those "social virtues" that would-be scientific moralists applauded and that Bloomsbury by its cliquish aloofness tended largely to disdain. The virtues of Bloomsbury are *Principia's* virtues. They are the virtues of the private self, not the virtues of the corporate citizen.

But not only *Principia's* virtues, that book's entire practical ethic permeates Bloomsbury's moral approach to living. How ought we to decide what to do, if we are to act as a legitimate, scientific ethic requires? *Principia* offers its justification of a very few rules of duty: Do not murder. Do not steal. Bloomsbury could not have asked for more sanguine prescriptions. Murder was not on their social agenda. Nor the theft of another's property. Nor any serious meddling with the existing social structure, the one that enabled the Bloomsberries to work at perfecting their several crafts while the servants did the housework. Theirs was an anarchy of the bedroom, not the streets. How reassuring to learn that everyone had a moral duty not to steal, that the stability of any society—or so Moore claims—depends on everyone's respecting a person's property rights, and that those who had more than enough property had no obligation to cultivate a "more extended beneficence" by inquiring into how equitably it had been acquired. The Bloomsberries could rest comfortably in the belief that more than enough was enough. And they did.

But Moore's influence goes deeper still. That passage in *Principia* in which Moore extols the virtue of Egoism over Altruism as a means of producing good—that passage more than any other captures the essence of Bloomsbury's ethic. We are to act to increase our share of what is good in this world, including in our range of concern those persons "in whom (we have) a strong personal interests." Loyalty to friends comes before loyalty to country. The patriotism of a McTaggart is dead. The friendship of a Forster is alive. We have no *duty* to nourish "a more extended beneficence." In general we do best if we keep to ourselves and our friends, mindful, of course, that we are not to commit murder or steal—even in the company of strangers. That cool aloofness that is synonymous with the name Bloomsbury is a predictable outgrowth of Moore's teachings when

taken seriously by intelligent, clever people who belong to the leisure class. Leon Edel is both right and wrong when he states that "the ethical side of Moorism...touched the young men (that is, the Cambridge core of Bloomsbury) less than the philosophical sanction given them to assert themselves, to shake off the old rigidities, to be homosexual if they wished, to scoff at the dying—the dead—Victorians." Right in ascribing this liberating influence to Moore, Edel is wrong only in thinking that the influence is somehow distinct from Moore's "ethical side." Moore's "ethical side" is a declaration of individual liberty, not, as the received opinion supposes, a dreary call to acquiesce in the face of "old rigidities," not (in Gertrude Himmelfarb's telling phrase) "a feeble concession to conventional morality."

The Bloomsberries took Moore's liberating teachings into themselves. They were doing exactly what Moore said they ought to be doing. It was the great mass of people outside Bloomsbury—too much involved in the unproductive affairs of social justice, too frequently in pursuit of a hopelessly extended beneficence, too much in bondage to a morality of rule worship, too little in control of their own destinies, too much under the regrettable influence of those "lies" told by "would-be scientific moralists"—it was the great mass of humanity who failed to carve out an approach to life that could be defended by a truly scientific ethic. The barbarians outside Bloomsbury did not live as they ought. The Bloomsbury elect did. When David Garnett writes to Moore in June of 1949, after reading Keynes' "My Early Beliefs," that "the thing which I don't like in Maynard's paper is the assumption that nobody reads you today and that you are a prophet without disciples," he gives, I would venture to say, a fairly accurate description of where Moore and his work stand today. This was not always so. For Moore *was* Bloomsbury's prophet, and the people who were the Bloomsbury Group *were* his disciples. Perhaps once we come to see these people and their lives as tangible expressions of Moore's ethical teachings, including his ethic in relation to conduct, we will recognize the need to read his work again, with renewed interest and clearer vision. We are, perhaps, beyond the point of revering him as our prophet, and the days of Moorean disciples probably are behind us. But the man, and his work, deserve nothing less than a fresh, enriched reexamination, something knowledge of his Bloomsbury connection hopefully will help occasion.

1. Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964), p. 25.
2. Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography*, Vol. II (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 179.
3. Gertrude Himmelfarb, "From Clapham to Bloomsbury: A Genealogy of Morals," *Commentary* 79, no. 2 (Feb. 1985), p. 40.

4. Paul Levy, *G. E. Moore and the Cambridge Apostles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 9.
5. Tom Regan, *Bloomsbury's Prophet: G. E. Moore and the Development of His Moral Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986). Portions of the present essay are excerpted from Chapter Eight of this longer work.
6. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1960), pp. 188-189. Hereafter page references to *Principia* are noted in the main body of the text.
7. Leon Edel, *Bloomsbury: A House of Lions* (New York: Avon Books, 1980), p. 37.