

Paul Levy's God-Awful Book on Moore

Dear Roland,

Why is Levy's MOORE so awful? Well it is sloppy, inaccurate and marred by misunderstandings and a pronounced anti-Russell bias. It is badly put together (just one damn thing after another) and above all it is BORING. It is true that Moore was not as exciting a person as either Russell or Wittgenstein, but as his (rather good) autobiography reveals, there was a mind and personality there of some interest and distinction, and Levy fails dismally to make it come alive. For a more detailed critique see Nick Griffin's excellent review 'The Acts of the Apostles' in RUSSELL vol. 1, 1, 1981. To show I am not just sounding off, I suggest you read Russell's apostolic essay 'Was the World Good Before the Sixth Day' in the light of either MY comments (RUSSELL ON ETHICS pp. 8-10 & 87) or the editorial commentary to CPBR vol. 1. p. 112. Then read Levy's commentary on pp 204-6. To begin with Levy supposes that the paper is addressed to Moore's apostolic paper of the previous week when Russell says quite explicitly that it is addressed to the lectures that Moore had delivered in London (and which he had seen in typescript). Having begun with this blunder, Levy accuses Russell of misrepresenting Moore's position in the previous week's paper. Had Russell's paper been addressed to Moore's it would have misrepresented it, but since it was not, it did not. Moore DOES contend in the lectures (which survive and have been reprinted by Tom Regan) that beauty is objectively good whether or not there are any eyes to behold it, a view he continued to defend in PRINCIPIA ETHICA. This is precisely the view that Russell facetiously characterizes as follows: 'Moore contends that God, when he looked down on the world in its early stages was right in maintaining it to be good - that it was already good in and of itself, and would have continued so even if God had not been looking. A world of matter alone ... may be good or bad. for it may certainly be beautiful or ugly and beauty is better than ugliness.' That Moore thought this and that he continued to think this is evident from *Principia* revised edn, pp. 133-138 and particularly p. 135 (that's ch. III, sections 49-51 for those with older editions). These passages come unchanged from the London Lectures. (See Baldwin's revised edition of *Principia*, p. 313.) On the basis of this blunder Levy develops a gratuitous anti-Russell speculation. Russell must have INTENDED to give offence by misrepresenting Moore out of jealousy of Moore's influence.

Having misrepresented Russell as misrepresenting Moore, Levy goes on to misrepresent Moore himself. He says 'Russell goes on to accept what as to be the main assumption of the last chapter of *Principia Ethica*, that the only things that are good in

themselves are states of mind.' This is NOT the doctrine of *Principia Ethica* (as my previous citations prove). What Moore actually says in the last chapter is 'By far the MOST valuable things [my emphasis] we can know or can imagine [NOT 'the ONLY valuable things we can 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'. But the fact that these states are the MOST valuable things we can imagine implies of course that there are other valuable things we can imagine even if these things are a lot less valuable. Where Levy got this crass misunderstanding of Moore from God alone knows, certainly not from people like Keynes and Woolf who are quite clear on this point. This misunderstanding is no minor blunder. For in so far as Levy's book has a theme (which is not very far given that it is so poorly structured) its theme is the explanation of *Principia Ethica*, an exploration of the mind and the milieu that produced such a masterpiece. But you cannot explain what you do not understand and Levy does not understand the basic doctrines of *Principia Ethica*. (As we have seen he doesn't really understand the milieu that produced it either, but that is a different story.)

One other thing before I end this tirade. Levy accuses Russell of a 'nonogenarian fib' in denying that he had strong views as to whether Wittgenstein should have been elected to the apostles in 1912, mainly on the say-so of Lytton Strachey who took the Society rather more seriously than Russell did. But as Monk makes plain, both in his life of Russell and his life of Wittgenstein, Russell was telling the truth. He did NOT have 'strong views' on this matter. He rather suspected that the Society wouldn't suit W (as indeed it did not) but was not violently opposed to his joining. As for Strachey's idea that Russell was mortified at W's joining the Society because he wanted to keep W to himself this was a complete fantasy. (See W: the duty of Genius pp. 66-69 and BR: the Spirit of Solitude 285.) I appeal to Ray [Monk's] authority here not only because he has gone into the matter thoroughly but because he is by far the most critical of Russell's biographers. Had Russell been lying he would not have been loath to say so.

There you go Roland. You have kept me up till nearly 3am with your question even though I have just completed a 3-mile sea swim to raise funds for Amnesty International (It took me 1 hour and 22 minutes).

I shall be holidaying in York from the 2nd till the 9th of June. How about making it up to me by meeting for dinner?

Regards

Charles