

# RUSSELL'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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## 1. Introduction

Russell remains famous for his achievements as a logician, a metaphysician, and a philosopher of mathematics, and was famous, if not notorious, in his own day for his social and political opinions. He wrote an immense amount about topics that would nowadays be regarded as within the purview of practical ethics – women's rights, marriage and morals, war and peace, authority and the individual, and the vexed question of whether socialists should smoke good cigars. (They should.) And unlike present-day practical ethicists (with a few notable exceptions such as Peter Singer) he was widely read by the non-philosophical public. But though he was famous as a moralist and famous as a philosopher, Russell does not have much of a reputation as a *moral* philosopher in the more technical sense of the term. Until very recently, his contributions to what is nowadays known as *ethical theory* - meta-ethics (the nature and justification, if any, of moral judgments) and normative ethics (what makes right acts right etc) - were either unknown, disregarded or dismissed as unoriginal. Russell perhaps would not have repined, since he professed himself dissatisfied with what he had *said* 'on the philosophical basis of ethics' (*RoE*: 165/*Papers* 11: 310). But since he took an equally dim view of what he had *read* on that topic, the fact that he

did not think much of his own contributions to ethical theory does not mean that he thought them any worse than anybody else's. In my view they are often rather better and deserve to be disinterred. But 'disinterred' is the word since the neglect that Russell's writings on ethical theory have suffered is largely his own fault. Some of his most original contributions were left unpublished in his own lifetime and what he *did* publish was often delivered, in passing, in publications not addressed to academic philosophers and principally devoted to less theoretical topics. Thus his brilliant little paper 'Is There an Absolute Good', which anticipates Mackie's 'The Refutation of Morals' by over twenty years, was delivered to a meeting of the Apostles (an exclusive, prestigious but secret Cambridge discussion group of which Moore, Russell and Ramsey were all members) in 1922 and was not published until 1988, whilst his version of emotivism (which anticipates Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) by one year, and Stevenson's 'The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms' (1937) by two) appeared towards the end of a popular book, *Religion and Science* (1935), whose principal purpose was not to discuss the nature of moral judgments but to do down religion in the name of science. It is perhaps worth recording that Russell's dissatisfaction with what he had said on ethical theory did not extend to his writings on social and political topics. 'I have no difficulty in practical moral judgments, which I find I make on a roughly hedonistic [i.e. *utilitarian*] basis, but, when it comes to the philosophy of moral judgments, I am impelled in two opposite directions and remain perplexed' (*RoE*: 165-6/*Papers* 11: 311). His perplexity however was theoretical rather than practical. He was pretty clear about what he thought we ought to do (work for world government, for example), but 'perplexed' about what he meant when he said that we ought to do it.

One point to stress before we go on. Russell took a pride in his willingness to change his mind. Obstinacy in the face of counter-arguments, he thought, was not a virtue in scientifically-minded philosopher. Unfortunately he overdid the open-mindedness, abandoning good theories for worse ones in the face of weak counter-arguments and sometimes forgetting some of his own best insights (a forgivable fault in given the fountain of good ideas that seemed to be continually erupting in his head). Russell's mental development, therefore, is not always a stirring tale of intellectual progress. This applies in spades to his writings on ethics where his first thoughts are often better than his second thoughts and his third thoughts are sometimes worse than his second thoughts. For example, the emotivism that was his

dominant view in the later part of his life is vulnerable to objections that he himself had raised in an earlier incarnation, as was the error theory which he briefly espoused in 1922. Nobody should be surprised, therefore, if I sometimes deploy an earlier Russell to criticize one of his later selves. Whitehead is reported to have said that Russell was a Platonic dialogue in himself, and in this temporally extended debate quite often it is one of the younger Russell's who wins the argument.

## 2. Russell and Moore I: Moore's Influence on Russell

Russell's development as an ethical thinker was dominated by one book - G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903). Before 1903, Russell devoted some of the energy he could spare from German Social Democracy, the foundations of mathematics and the philosophy of Leibniz to working out a meta-ethic of his own. After 1903, he became an enthusiastic but critical convert to the doctrines of *Principia Ethica* (though there is some evidence that the conversion process may have begun as early as 1897). Moore is famous for the claim that there is a 'non-natural' property of *goodness*, not identical with or reducible to any other property or assemblage of properties, and that what we ought to do is to maximize the good and minimize the bad. Russell subscribed to this thesis - with certain important reservations - until 1913. Thereafter he continued to believe that *if judgments about good and bad are to be objectively true*, non-natural properties of goodness and badness are required to make them true. It is just that he ceased to believe that there were any such properties. Does this mean that judgments about good and evil are all false? Not necessarily (though Russell did subscribe to that view for a brief period during 1922). An alternative theory is that moral judgments are neither true nor false, since their role is not to state facts or to describe the way the world is, but to express emotions, desires or even commands. This (despite some waverings) was Russell's dominant view for the rest of his life, though it took him twenty-two years to develop a really well worked-out version of the theory. He tended to call it subjectivism or 'the subjectivity of moral values' though it is nowadays known as non-cognitivism, expressivism or emotivism. He came to think that moral judgments - at least judgments about what is good or bad in itself - are really, despite their indicative appearance, in the optative mood. (A sentence is in the optative mood if it expresses a wish or a desire.) What 'X is good' means is 'Would that everyone desired X!'. It therefore expresses, but does not describe, the speaker's state of mind, specifically his or her desires, and as such can be neither truth nor false, anymore than 'Oh to be

in England now that April's here!' If I say 'Oh to be in England now that April's here!', you can infer that I desire to be in England now that April's here (since absent an intention to mislead, it is not the sort of thing I would say *unless* I desired to be in England). But I am not *stating* that I desire to be in England, since I am not stating anything at all. (See *RoE*: 131-144/*Religion and Science*: ch. 9.) Although this was Russell's dominant view from 1913 until his death, he did not care for it very much. 'I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values, but I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don't like it' (*RoE*: 165/*Papers* 11: 310-11). It is not entirely clear what Russell took these overwhelming arguments to be. But one of them seems to have proceeded from a Moorean premise. Russell took Moore to have refuted *naturalism*, the view that although there are moral truths, nothing metaphysically out of the ordinary is required to *make* them true. Conversely Russell took Moore to have proved that *if* there were to be moral truths, they required spooky non-natural properties, of goodness, badness etc - quite unlike the 'natural' properties posited by science and commonsense - to make them true. In the supposed absence of such properties, he was driven to the conclusion that moral judgments (at least judgments about goodness and badness) were either *all* false or *neither* true *nor* false. Thus Russell remained a renegade Moorean even after he had ceased to believe in the Moorean good. But if Moore was a decisive influence on Russell, it seems that Russell was an important influence on Moore. For as we shall see, Moore may have been driven to invent his most famous *argument* for a non-natural property of goodness by the need to deal with a naturalistic theory of Russell's.

But first we must turn to another theme – absolute idealism and its rejection.

### 3. Sidgwick's Problem and the Rejection of Idealism

'We called him "old Sidg" and regarded him as merely out of date' (*My Philosophical Development*: 30). So said Russell of his teacher, the great Victorian moral philosopher, Henry Sidgwick (though he later thought that he and his contemporaries 'did not give [Sidgwick] nearly as much respect as he deserved'). But though Russell may have regarded Sidgwick as an old fogey, he set the agenda for a lot of Russell's work on ethics in the 1890s. For Russell was much exercised by a problem that also bothered Sidgwick: the Dualism of Practical Reason. (See Sidgwick (1907): 496-516. See also Schulz (2004), ch. 4 in which it becomes

abundantly clear how very preoccupied Sidgwick was with this problem.) According to Sidgwick, it is rational to do what is morally right (by maximizing pleasurable consciousness on the part of all sentient beings) and rational to do what is prudentially right (by maximizing pleasurable consciousness on the part of oneself), but, when the two come into conflict, the one does not seem to be any more rational than the other. If God exists, then He can ensure that it will pay in the long term to promote the public interest, by rewarding the righteous in the life to come. What is morally right will coincide with what is prudentially right, and that, consequently, is what Practical Reason will command. But if, as Sidgwick was reluctantly inclined to think, there is no God, what is morally right and what is prudentially right will sometimes come apart, and Practical Reason will speak with a divided voice. If it does not always pay to be good, then it is not clear that is more rational to be good than to be bad, a conclusion that Sidgwick found deeply disturbing. The rather priggish young Russell was bothered by the problem too (a solution, he said, would be 'a real solid addition to my happiness') because, like Sidgwick, he did not believe in God. But as a fashionable young philosopher of the 1890s he did believe in something that he thought would do nearly as well, namely, the Absolute. For at this time, Russell, like most of his philosophical contemporaries in the English-speaking world, was a neo-Hegelian or Absolute Idealist. Though we may *seem* to be living in a material world and to be material boys and girls, this is an Appearance only. Reality, the Absolute, is basically mental, a sort of timeless and harmonious group mind of which our separate selves are (perhaps delusory) aspects. As Bradley put it, 'the Absolute is one system, and ... its contents are nothing but sentient experience. It will hence be a single and all-inclusive experience, which embraces every partial diversity in concord. For it cannot be less than appearance, and hence no feeling or thought, of any kind, can fall outside its limits.' (I should stress that it is hard to present this doctrine concisely without gross caricature.) But there was a crucial difference between McTaggart and Bradley, the two leading idealists of Russell's day. McTaggart believed in personal immortality and claimed the harmony that already exists timelessly (so to speak) 'must some day become explicit' (McTaggart (1996): 210-211). Bradley did not.

At first Russell was an adherent of McTaggart. This afforded him a neat solution to Sidgwick's problem. The happy day when the harmony becomes explicit can be promoted or retarded by human action. If I benefit myself at your expense

not only am I doing down a self with whom I am, in Reality, intimately linked - I am putting off the day when the harmony that Really Is becomes apparent. And since this harmony will be supremely pleasurable I am harming myself into the bargain. Hence morality and self-interest coincide and Practical Reason is reunited with itself. (See Russell (1893) 'On the Foundations of Ethics', *RoE*: 37-40/*Papers* 1: 206-211.) This illustrates the point made by a number of unkind critics, that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Absolute Idealism functioned as a sort of methodone program for high-minded Victorian intellectuals, providing them with moral uplift as they struggled to get off the hard stuff of official Christianity. (See Stove (1991), chs. 5 & 6, and , in more restrained language, Griffin (2003b), pp. 85-88.) Before long however, Russell moved over to Bradley's camp and ceased to believe that the timelessly existing harmony would become manifest in time. Nevertheless, since we are all aspects of the Absolute, a sort of timeless super-self, there is essentially that same objection to indulging my desires at your expense as there is to indulging one of my own passions at the expense of others which are inconsistent with it. I am hurting, if not myself, at least a larger whole of which we are both parts. (Russell (1894) 'Cleopatra or Maggie Tulliver', *RoE*: 57-67/*Papers* I: 92-8.) But before long even this solution ceased to satisfy. In a paper not published until 1957, 'Seems Madam? Nay It Is', Russell argued (as he put it to Moore) that 'for all purposes that are not *purely* intellectual, the world of Appearance is the real world'. In particular, the hypothesis that there is a timeless and harmonious Reality provides no consolation for our present pains since it is a Reality that we never get to experience. If 'the world of daily life remains wholly unaffected by [Reality], and goes on its way just as if there were no world of Reality at all ', and if this world of Reality is a world that we not only *do not* but *cannot* experience (since experience is necessarily temporal), how can its alleged existence afford us any consolation for what seems to be (and therefore *is*) evil in the world of Appearance? (Russell (1897) 'Seems, Madam? Nay, It Is', *RoE*: 79-86/*Papers* 1: 105-111/*Why I am Not a Christian*: 75-82.)

Now this argument has an interesting corollary which Russell does not explicitly draw. It may be that in Reality the pains I inflict on you affect me – or at least a larger mind-like thing in which we both participate – but if I never *experience* those effects, how can this give me a motive to do or forbear if my interests conflict with yours? How can the fact that you and I are in Reality one (or at least part of one) give me a reason to look out for you, if this oneness is something I never

experience? If Absolute Idealism can provide no consolation for life's disasters - which is what Russell is explicitly arguing - then it seems that it cannot supply me with a reason not to visit those disasters on you if doing so is likely to benefit me. It may be that I suffer in a metaphysical sort of way when I profit at your expense, but if this suffering is something I never *feel* (since I am effectively confined to the world of Appearance) why should this bother me? Thus the Dualism of Practical Reason reasserts itself. Sometimes what is morally right is at odds with what is prudentially right and when it is, there seems no reason to prefer the one to the other.

Whether Russell realized this is not entirely clear. What is clear is that 'Seems, Madam? Nay, It Is' marks the beginning of the end for Russell's Absolute Idealism. Once he realized that 'for all purposes that are not *purely* intellectual [including perhaps the purpose of providing moral uplift] the world of Appearance is the real world', Russell came to feel that the world of Reality was no use for purely intellectual purposes either and soon resolved to do without it. A big 'R' Reality, that could neither console us for life's troubles nor reconcile duty and interest, was a big 'R' Reality that might as well not exist. The method of Absolute Idealism having failed, Russell was forced to accept appearances at face value.

But what about the problem of the Dualism of Practical Reason? In later life at any rate, Russell ceased to worry about it perhaps because he realized that it is a problem that cannot be resolved. The Cosmos of Duty really is a Chaos (as Sidgwick rather colorfully put it). Duty and interest *can* come into conflict and when they do there is no decisive reason for preferring the one to the other. All you can do is to try to instill altruistic motivations, which is what Russell tried to do with his children. But when they asked *why* they should care about other people (as his daughter Kate definitely did) he had no adequate answer to give. (See *RoE*: 16.)

#### **4. Russell and Moore II: Russell's Influence on Moore - the 'Naturalistic Fallacy**

'I certainly have been more influenced by [Russell] than any other single philosopher' wrote Moore in his intellectual autobiography (Schilpp ed. (1942): 16). But Moore's 'Autobiography' suggests (without actually saying so) that this influence was mostly metaphysical. I shall be arguing in the next two sections that Russell had a considerable influence on Moore's *ethical* doctrines and that some of Moore's key ideas were developed in the course of ongoing debates with Russell.

Moore's *Principia Ethica* took a long time to finish. He had a pretty good draft in 1898, but he did not publish it until 1903. Why the long delay? One reason, I suspect, was that he had to deal with a problem posed (perhaps unwittingly) by Russell.

It is not generally recognized that *Principia Ethica* contains *two* distinct arguments against the 'Naturalistic Fallacy', the supposed intellectual error of identifying goodness with some other property (usually, though not necessarily, a *naturalistic* property). The first, which is derived from Sidgwick, and has a long philosophical pedigree, goes something like this:

1^) For any naturalistic or metaphysical 'X', if 'good' meant 'X', then (i) 'X things are good' would be a barren tautology equivalent to (ii) 'X things are X' or (iii) 'Good things are good'.

2^) For any naturalistic or metaphysical 'X', if (i) 'X things are good' were a barren tautology, it would not provide a reason for action (i.e. a reason to promote X-ness).

3^) So for any naturalistic or metaphysical 'X', *either* (a) 'X things are good' does not provide a reason for action (i.e. a reason to promote X-ness), *or* (b) 'good' does not mean 'X'.

To put the point another way:

3^) For any naturalistic or metaphysical 'X', *if* (a) 'X things are good' provides a reason for action (that is, a reason to promote X-ness), *then* (b) 'good' does not mean 'X'.

Following Russell, I call this the *Barren Tautology Argument*. (RoE: 100/Papers 4: 572.) The idea is that 'good' cannot be synonymous with any naturalistic 'X', if 'X things are good' is supposed to be a reason for action rather than a 'barren tautology'. So for example, if 'good' just *means* 'pleasant' then 'Pleasant things are good' is a barren tautology (equivalent to 'Pleasant things are pleasant' or 'Good

things are good') and cannot provide us with a reason for the pursuit of pleasure. Only if 'goodness' and 'pleasure' are *not* synonymous, can 'Pleasant things are good' provide an intellectual incentive for the pursuit of pleasant things. This argument crops up at *PE*: §11, though variants of it recur throughout the first four chapters (*PE*: §§14, 24 & 26). However Moore did not invent it. A.N.Prior, in his (1949) *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, ch. IX, traces it back to Cudworth in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, though it doubtful whether Moore was aware of this. (He does not seem to have been particularly well read.) But it certainly occurs in Sidgwick, which is presumably where Moore got it from. The Barren Tautology Argument is to be distinguished from the Open Question Argument proper, which Moore *did* invent. This occurs at *PE*: §13, a section that does not appear in the 1898 draft. It can be stated thus:

1\*) 'Are X things good?' is a significant or open question for any naturalistic or metaphysical predicate 'X' (whether simple or complex). [A question is significant or open if an understanding of the language does not suffice for an answer. Thus 'Are bachelors unmarried?' is *not* an Open Question.]

2\*) If two expressions (whether simple or complex) are synonymous this is evident on reflection to every competent speaker.

3\*) The meaning of a predicate or property word is the property for which it stands. Thus if two predicates or property words have distinct meanings they name distinct properties.

From 1\*) and 2\*) it follows that

4\*) 'Good' is not synonymous with any naturalistic or metaphysical predicate 'X' (or 'goodness' with any corresponding noun or noun-phrase 'X-ness').

From 3\*) and 4\*) it follows that

5\*) Goodness is not identical with any natural or metaphysical property of X-ness.

This argument is wheeled on to discredit a particular naturalistic analysis of 'good' – 'one of the more plausible, because one of the more complicated of such definitions' - that 'good mean[s] ... that which we desire to desire'. Where did Moore get this definition? He does not say, crediting it, in effect, to Mr Nobody, but it seems very likely that the proponent of this plausible but fallacious analysis was none other than Bertrand Russell.

During the 1890s Russell wrote several papers tinkering with the foundations of ethics, none of which were published during his lifetime. (*RoE*: chs. 2-12/*Papers I*: chs. 31-36, 39, 14,15 & 17.) In retrospect, he seems to have been trying (unsuccessfully) to come up with a theory which would meet six conditions.

- (1#) Moral judgments, "like judgments as to what is", must have a truth-value.
- (2#) Moral judgments must be liable to error (two constraints that Russell tends to confuse).
- (3#) There must be a conceptual connection (possibly an iffy one) between moral belief and motivation [a rather weak form of motivational internalism].
- (4#) It must be possible to desire the bad and to have bad desires.
- (5#) Moral judgments must not reduce to "statements of a psychological state".
- (6#) The basis for moral judgments cannot be sought in any proposition about what is, has been or will be.

The last two conditions indicate that the pre-*PE* Russell had strongly anti-naturalist leanings since it is hard to see how fundamental moral judgments can be liable to truth and falsehood yet unconnected with what is, has been or will be, unless they deal in non-natural properties. Russell's problem was that, individually plausible as these six conditions may be, they cannot be jointly met (hence the succession of papers). In particular, it is difficult to devise a theory according to which moral beliefs can be simultaneously true, liable to error and motivating but somehow unconnected with what is, has been or will be. The obvious way to make moral beliefs both factual and motivating is to relate them to our desires and passions, but

if we do that, there is a strong risk that they will reduce to 'statements of a psychological state'. At all events, in 1897, Russell sacrificed conditions (5#) (6#), and perhaps (2#) to conditions (1#), (3#) and (4#). In that year he read a paper to the Cambridge Apostles 'Is Ethics a Branch of Empirical Psychology' in which he defined goodness as that which we desire to desire. (*RoE*: 71-78/*Papers* I: 100-104). Moral judgments (at least judgments about goodness) reduce to 'statements of a psychological state' since to say something is good is to say that 'we' desire to desire it, a statement well within the frontiers of psychology (whether 'we' refers to the community at large or the speaker whoever he or she may be). And of course, if judgments about goodness reduce to 'statements of a psychological state', they clearly reduce to statements about 'what is, has been or will be', since whether 'we' desire to desire something is determined by whatever *is* the case in 'our' minds. Are moral judgments liable to error? Only in so far as we can be mistaken about what we desire to desire, which is, perhaps, not very far. On the plus side, moral judgments will be true or false, and will have a conceptual connection (albeit an iffy one) to our actions and passions. Assuming that (at least sometimes) I actually desire what I desire to desire, the fact that (for me) X is good means that (at least sometimes) I will have a desire to pursue or promote X. Finally, it is perfectly possible to have bad or even evil desires, namely the desires I desire *not* to desire, thus solving a problem with Russell's previous attempts at a desire-based ethic. (See *RoE*: ch. 9/*Papers* I: ch. 39.) Thus the answer Russell provides to his own question ('Is Ethics a Branch of Empirical Psychology?') is a clear, but reluctant, *yes*.

Now why should this theory pose a problem for Moore? Because the time-honored Barren Tautology argument does not work against it. Remember, the conclusion of the Barren Tautology Argument is this:

3<sup>^</sup>) For any naturalistic or metaphysical 'X', *if* (a) 'X things are good', provides a reason for action (that is, a reason to promote X-ness), *then* (b) 'good' does not mean 'X'.

By substitution this gives us:

3<sup>^^</sup>) If (a') 'Things which we desire to desire are good', provides a reason for action (that is, a reason to promote what we desire to desire), then (b') 'good' does not mean 'what we desire to desire'.

But the point of defining goodness in terms of what we desire to desire is *not* to give us a reason to pursue or promote what we desire to desire – rather, it is supposed to *explain why something's being good GIVES* us a reason (or at least, a motive), to pursue or promote it. Russell is not *advocating* the pursuit of what we desire to desire: he is trying to provide an analysis of 'good' which helps to make sense of the fact that we tend to pursue and promote (what we believe to be) good things. (We do it because to be good just *is* to be something which we desire to desire, and hence something which, sometimes at any rate, we will actually desire.) In other words, 'Things which we desire to desire are good' is *meant* to be a barren tautology – barren in terms of practical consequences, that is, though, hopefully, philosophically illuminating. It does *not* provide (and is not intended to provide) a reason for action. But in that case, the antecedent (a') of 3<sup>^^</sup>) – that the belief that 'Things which we desire to desire are good', provides a reason for action – is false, so far as Russell's analysis is concerned. Thus even if the conditional 3<sup>^^</sup>) is true, it does not support the consequent (b') – that 'good' does not mean 'what we desire to desire'. The Barren Tautology Argument is therefore impotent against the Desire to Desire Theory.

Nor is this all. The Barren Tautology Argument fails against other theories whose aim is to explicate the appeal of goodness rather than to advocate the pursuit of some alleged good thing. For instance, if 'good' means 'what we are ideally inclined to approve of', then 'What we are ideally inclined to approve of is good' will be a barren tautology. But since people like Hume, who propound such definitions, don't intend them to be anything else, they are not compelled to the conclusion that such definitions are false. Thus *if naturalism was to be defeated* (which was clearly Moore's project) a *new* argument had to be invented. And it is significant, I think, that Moore did not publish *Principia Ethica* until he had invented just such an argument.

The Open Question Argument proper does not terminate in a conditional but a categorical. It starts with the assumption that 'Are X things good?' is a significant

or open question for any naturalistic or metaphysical predicate 'X'. It is not a tautology, barren or otherwise, that *what we desire to desire is good*, and the proof of this is that competent speakers can sensibly wonder whether or not it is true. Indeed, according to Moore, "any one can easily convince himself by inspection" that the predicate 'good' "is positively different from the notion of 'desiring to desire'". If we grant Moore's first implicit assumption – that if two expressions are synonymous this is evident on reflection to every competent speaker – we can derive the consequence that 'good' does not *mean* 'what we desire to desire'. And if we grant his second implicit assumption – that if two predicates or property words have distinct meanings they name distinct properties – then we can derive the conclusion that he really wants, namely that goodness is not *identical* with what we desire to desire. And by parity or reasoning we can do the same for any naturalistic property whatsoever.

Now Moore's twin assumptions have subsequently fallen upon hard times. (The first leads straight to the Paradox of Analysis, whilst the second would exclude synthetic identities such as *water is H<sub>2</sub>O*.) But *if* they were correct, the Open Question Argument would indeed dispose of the Desire to Desire theory along with kindred theories such as Hume's. It is notable that David Lewis, who revived Russell's theory in 1989 (without realizing it was Russell's), explicitly affirms what Moore implicitly denies – that there can be *unobvious* analytic truths; that is, truths *not* evident to every competent speaker. (Lewis (1989) 'Dispositional Theories of Value II'.) But if Moore were correct and there were no such things, then naturalistic analyses of the moral concepts such as Russell's would be in big trouble. The Barren Tautology Argument only works against *some* naturalistic analyses of 'good', namely those that define 'good' in terms of some property that the theorist wishes to promote. The Open Question Argument, if it works at all, works against them all. It seems very likely that what prompted Moore to invent his philosophical weapon of mass destruction was the Desire to Desire Theory of Bertrand Russell.

'Then why didn't Moore say so – or at least, why didn't he attribute the Desire to Desire definition to its original inventor?' Because Russell propounded his definition at a meeting of the Apostles, a supposedly secret society. The rather priggish Moore took the code of secrecy very seriously and used to fuss about discussing the doings of the Apostles by postcard in case they were read in transit.

(The slightly less priggish Russell had to reassure him that only college porters were likely to read them and only initiates would understand.) To have attributed the Desire to Desire Theory to an Apostolic paper of Russell's would have broken the code of silence (a code designed to promote the unfettered exchange of honest opinion).

There is an irony in this episode. The last page of the paper, 'Is Ethics a Branch of Empirical Psychology?' is marked with a query in Russell's hand 'Shall we spell {Good/good} with', to which Moore replies 'Good = good' - which looks like a succinct formulation of his famous no-definition definition of 'good' ('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.' *PE*: 58.) If I am right, Russell's Desire to Desire Theory posed a problem for Moore which it took him five years to solve. But, given the annotation, it seems that the debate on Russell's paper began a process of conversion that led Russell himself to accept the doctrines of Moore's *Principia Ethica*.

### 5. Russell and Moore III: Actual versus (Rationally) Expected Consequences

Although Russell was for some time a convert to the doctrines of *Principia Ethica*, he disagreed with Moore on two important points. Russell, like Moore was what is nowadays known as a consequentialist. He believed that the rightness or otherwise of an act is 'in some way, dependent on consequences'. However, according to the young Moore, it is *analytic* that the right thing to do is that action which will, *actually* produce the best consequences. According to the young Russell it is *synthetic* that the right thing to do is that action which, 'so far we can judge, will have the best consequences'; (though he is 'doubtful' whether 'this particular rule is itself quite true'). It is (Moore thinks) 'demonstrably certain' (!) that 'I am morally bound to perform this action' is *identical* [that is synonymous] with the assertion 'This action will produce the greatest amount of possible good in the Universe'. (*PE*, ch. 5, §87.) In other words, the claim that an action is *right* or that it *ought to be done* is synonymous with the claim that it is *optimific*, that it will actually produce a greater preponderance of good over evil than any available alternative. 'Right' and 'ought' are defined in terms of an action's *actual* as opposed to *expected* consequences. Thus it is an analytic truth that the right action (or the action which we ought to do) is that action that will, in fact, produce the best consequences (where the intrinsic value, if any, of the action itself is included among its consequences and where 'best' is

supposed to cover the least bad). But in Russell's view this claim is neither analytic nor true. The Open Question Argument itself can be deployed to prove that it is not analytic and a little critical reflection reveals that it is not true. In a generally laudatory review of *Principia Ethica*, Russell writes: 'It is held [by Moore] that what we ought to do is that action, among all that are possible, which will produce the best results on the whole; and this is regarded as constituting a definition of *ought*. I hold that this is not a definition, but a significant proposition, and in fact a false one.' (RoE: 101/*Papers* 4: 573.) It is a 'significant' or non-analytic proposition because a competent speaker can believe that X is the act that will produce the best consequences without believing that he ought to do it. If the two propositions 'X is the act available to me that will produce the best consequences' and 'I ought to do X' were *really* synonymous, then a competent speaker could not believe the one whilst remaining doubtful about the other. Since this is perfectly possible (as is shown by the fact that 'Ought I to do what will have the best results?' is an obstinately open question for competent speakers of English) the two claims are not synonymous.

But the fact that 'I ought to do X' and 'X is the act available to me that will produce the best consequences' are not synonymous does not show that it is *false* that *I ought to do that act which will, in fact, produce the best consequences*. The latter claim could be synthetic (or as Russell would have it, 'significant') but true. Why does Russell think it false? Russell raises the *ad hominem* objection that Moore's thesis is flatly inconsistent with the moral conservatism that he goes on to embrace. According to Moore, although 'there are cases where [an established moral] rule should be broken', since 'in some cases the neglect of an established moral rule will be the best course of action possible', nevertheless, 'we can never know what those cases are, and ought, therefore, never to break it.' (*PE*, §99.) 'The individual, therefore, can be confidently recommended *always* to conform to rules which are generally useful and generally practiced.' But if we ought to perform the best action possible, what this implies is that there are some cases (though we can never know which) where we ought to do what it is not the case that we ought to do. Moore could avoid this contradiction by adopting the view that what we ought to do is that action which *we have reason to believe* will, produce the best consequences. As Russell himself put it, Moore's moral conservatism 'implies that we ought to do what we have reason to *think* will have the best results, rather than what *really will* have the best results' [my italics] – since, in any given instance, we may have reason to *think*

that the conventionally right act will have the best consequences even though we know that this won't always be the case.

But this can hardly have been *Russell's* reason for rejecting the idea that rightness is determined by actual, as opposed to rationally expected consequences. For, as he informed Moore by letter, he regarded Moore's views on Practical Ethics as 'unduly Conservative and anti-reforming'. However, even the more moderate thesis that Russell presumably *did* believe - that *on the whole*, we ought to obey *rationally justified* rules of conduct, since *generally speaking* we cannot identify those instances in which better results would be obtained by breaking them - is inconsistent with Moore's thesis that we ought to do what will in fact produce the best results. Indeed, anybody who thinks that there are any actions which we ought to do even though, as a matter of fact they won't have the best consequences must, on pain of inconsistency, reject Moore's view that the rightness (or otherwise) of an act is determined by its actual consequences. And it is precisely because he believes this that Russell rejects Moore's brand of consequentialism. 'Some people', says Russell, 'whom I refrain from naming, might with advantage to the world have been strangled in infancy; but we cannot blame the good women who brought them up for having omitted this precaution.' It was a disaster for the world that Stalin's mother refrained from strangling him at birth, yet it seems very odd to say that it was wrong of her to do so. [The example, is of course, mine not Moore's or Russell's, since in the early 1900s Stalin had yet to manifest his talent for mass-murder.] But if Stalin's mother did the right thing in *not* strangling him, then it follows that the right thing to do is not always the act with the best actual consequences. Russell admits that his view is not without paradox, since if it is sometimes right to do what is actually disastrous, it follows that it can sometimes be 'a pity [that] a man [or in the case of Stalin's mother, a woman] did his [or her!] duty', a thesis which Moore regards as 'a contradiction in terms'. But paradoxical as this may seem, it is only a contradiction on the assumption that 'the right action' simply *means* 'the action with the best actual consequences', an assumption which Moore's own arguments prove to be false. Moore's view, by contrast, is contradictory however 'right' and 'ought' are to be defined since it implies that we sometimes ought to perform acts which (since they are not optimistic) it is not the case that we ought to perform.

Russell's criticisms can be summed up as follows:

- A. It is false that 'I am morally bound/I ought/it is right for me to perform this action' is *synonymous* with the assertion 'This action will produce the greatest amount of possible good in the Universe', since the Open Question Argument can be deployed *mutatis mutandis* to prove otherwise.
- B. Moore subscribes to three theses that are flat-out contradictory:
- 1) We ought to perform those acts that will in fact produce the best consequences.
  - 2) Following established rules does not always result in acts that produce the best consequences.
  - 3) We ought to follow the established rules.

These three theses jointly imply that we sometimes ought to do things that it is not the case that we ought to do. Russell gently points out this contradiction and suggests, in effect, that Moore resolve it by modifying 1) to 1')

- 1') We ought to perform those acts which it is reasonable to believe will produce the best consequences.

C. The 'good women' who brought up the likes of Hitler and Stalin cannot be blamed for not strangling them in infancy. This suggests that it was right of them to refrain even though the actual consequences of their acts of forbearance turned out to be horrendous. Thus the right thing to do is not that act which will *actually* produce the best consequences but that act which it is *reasonable to believe* will produce the best consequences.

Moore accepted argument A (See his 'Reply to My Critics': 558), and in his later book *Ethics* (1912) he treats consequentialism as a synthetic thesis. 'It is, I think, quite plain that the meaning of the two words ['expedience' and 'duty'] is *not* the same; for if it were then it would be a mere tautology to say that it is always our duty to do what will have the best possible consequences. Our theory does not, therefore, do away with the distinction between the *meaning* of the two words "duty" and "expediency"; it only implies that both will always apply to the same actions.'

(*Ethics*: 89). He also seems to have accepted Russell's ad hominem argument B – that, given the fairly obvious fact that doing the done thing does not always produce the best results, his actualist brand of consequentialism is inconsistent with his moral conservatism. However, he did not resolve the problem by modifying thesis 1) as Russell, in effect, recommended – instead he resolved it by dropping thesis 3). In *Principia*, moral conservatism had been 'confidently recommended' to the conscientious 'individual'. By the time Moore came to write *Ethics* in 1912 it had simply disappeared, leaving the puzzled 'individual' bereft of practical guidance. What ought the individual to do, when, as is usually the case, she cannot determine, which of the available acts will have the best total consequences? Moore does not say, thereby sacrificing helpfulness to theoretical consistency. However, in answering argument C, Moore develops a distinction that might have been of use in vindicating his moral conservatism.

Moore's principal argument for actualist consequentialism is that it seems to him self-evident that 'if we *knew* that the effect of a given action really would be to make the world, as whole, *worse* than it would have been if we acted differently, it certainly would be wrong for us to do that action' (*Ethics*: 89-90). But, as Moore himself realized, even if this *is* self evident – and it is by no means self evident that it is – this argument does not discriminate between *his* kind of consequentialism and Russell's. For if we did indeed *know* which action had the best consequences, then Russell's theory, like Moore's, would bid us do it, since if we really *knew* that action X would be for the best, then it follows that it would be *rational to believe* that action X would be for the best. And Russell's theory bids us do what it is *rational to believe* will be for the best. Thus the fact (if it is a fact!) that it is self-evidently *wrong* to perform that action which we know would make the world worse than *some* alternative and self-evidently *right* to perform that action which we know would make the world better than *any* alternative does not prove that the rightness (or otherwise) of an action is determined by its actual, rather than its rationally expected, consequences. (*Ethics*: 98-99) Moreover, Moore accepts the premise of Russell's argument C, that the 'good women', who refrain from strangling the likes of Stalin at birth, are not to be blamed for their disastrous acts of forbearance. (I should stress however that, he expresses the point in more abstract and general terms – Moore was not known for his vivid examples!) How then can Moore resist Russell's conclusion? By drawing a distinction between what is *wrong* and what is

*blameworthy* and a corresponding distinction between what is *right* and what is *praiseworthy*. Stalin's mother is not to be blamed - indeed she is to be praised - for *not* strangling him, although as a matter of fact, her act of forbearance was disastrously wrong. Conversely, had she strangled him, this would have been right, even though it would have been blameworthy in the extreme. Hence we cannot infer from the fact that her action was praiseworthy (or at least not blameworthy) that it was right. In which case, we are not compelled to the conclusion that the rightness of an action is determined by its rationally expected, as opposed to its actual consequences. This distinction does indeed block off argument C, but it doesn't make Moore's position any more plausible. For although Moore can say what right acts are *like* (they will have the property of being productive of the best consequences) he cannot say *which* acts are right, since in general it is impossible to know whether any given act will be more optimistic than its alternatives. He cannot even recommend a strategy (say doing the done thing) as what people *ought* to do, since, on his own showing, all such strategies will sometimes result in actions that are objectively wrong. However, Moore's distinctions do allow him to reassert his moral conservatism in an amended form. He *could* say (or he could have said) that although it is *not* true that

3) we *ought* to obey established rules,

it is true that

3') it is *morally praiseworthy* for us to follow the established rules.

And although 3') is, perhaps 'unduly Conservative and anti-reforming', it is not actually inconsistent with the conjunction of the two claims:

1) We ought to perform those acts that will in fact produce the best consequences,

and

2) Following established rules does not always result in acts that produce the best consequences.

However, 3') does have the paradoxical consequence that we sometimes ought not to do what it is morally praiseworthy to do and the corollary that it is sometimes morally blameworthy to do what in fact we ought to do. But paradoxical as these consequences are, they are not actually self-contradictory. Thus Moore's distinction, which he used to block off argument C, would also have allowed him – although at a cost – to evade the *ad hominem* argument B. Moore need not have abandoned his conservatism after all.

Russell, like Moore, modified his brand of consequentialism, but in his case the modifications were slight. 'The Elements of Ethics' (first published in full in Russell's *Philosophical Essays* of 1910) is a generally faithful exposition of Moore's opinions, but when it comes to rightness, Russell ploughs his own furrow. 'An action is [objectively] *right* when, of all those that are possible it will probably have the best results.' (*Philosophical Essays*: 36) What does 'probable' mean in this connection? He gives us a gloss a few pages earlier where he defines the *wisest* act (which will turn out to be the right one) as 'that [act] which, when account is taken of all the available data gives us the greatest expectation of good on the balance or the least expectation of evil on the balance' (*Philosophical Essays*: 31). And this is virtually indistinguishable from his earlier view that the right action is the one 'we have reason to *think* will have the best results'. But this is not quite the end of the matter. Russell defines the *moral* action as the action 'the agent would judge to be *right* after the appropriate amount of candid thought, or a small amount in the case of acts which are best when they are unreflecting' (*Philosophical Essays*: 36). His point is that you are acting *morally* if you are trying *to work out* and *to do* what is objectively right or if you are unreflectively acting on impulses (such as little impulses of love or kindness) that it is generally right to indulge. How much 'candid thought' is 'appropriate' will depend upon the time and the epistemic resources that you have at your disposal. The more momentous the decision the more time and energy you should devote to getting it right, though sometimes there is nothing for it but to make a snap judgment, even on matters of great pith and moment. However, you should not *try* to do the moral thing – rather acting morally consists (very roughly) in making a reasonable fist of trying to do what is objectively right.

## 6. Politics, Consequentialism and the Need for Skepticism

Dry and abstract as these disputes may seem, they are not devoid of practical import. One of the common complaints against consequentialism is that it allows - and indeed encourages - the consequentialist to do evil that good may come. For the consequentialist there is nothing so bad, nothing so wicked, that it cannot be right to do it under certain circumstances. If the goods to be achieved or the evils to be averted are sufficiently large, it may be not only permissible but *obligatory* to torture prisoners, execute hostages or to massacre civilians – so long, that is, as there is no other, less costly way to achieve the goods or avert the evils. This is not only objectionable in itself – it encourages ruthless types to commit horrors in the here and now for the sake of some imagined utopia, whilst pretending to themselves and others that they are actuated by the highest motives. Because *in principle* consequentialism licenses doing evil that good may come, *in practice* it encourages fanatics to do evil even when the good to come is highly unlikely. In his ‘Newly Discovered Maxims of la Rochefoucauld’, Russell remarks that ‘the purpose of morality is to allow people to inflict suffering without compunction’. (*Fact and Fiction*: 184.) And it cannot be denied that moralities of a broadly consequentialist or utilitarian type have enabled many people to inflict a great deal of suffering, not only without compunction, but often with an insufferable air of moral smugness.

By adopting *expected* utility as the criterion of right action Russell goes some way towards meeting these objections. In practice when people propose to perpetrate horrors for the sake of some greater good, the horrors are usually certain and the greater good is highly speculative. In weighing up the options, the good to be achieved by some tough course of action must be multiplied by the probability of achieving it, which is always a fraction of one, and often a rather small fraction at that. So although doing evil that good may come is not excluded *in principle*, the expected utility theorist is far less likely to do it in practice – at least if he or she is intellectually honest. The classless society (let us suppose) would be a very good thing, but I am probably not justified in shooting the hostages to bring it about. For I can be certain that if I shoot them, the hostages will be dead, whereas the probability that shooting them will bring about the classless society is very low. Moreover there is likely to be an as-good-or-better chance that I can bring about the classless society *without* shooting the hostages. Thus even if the classless society would be supremely good, the expected utility theorist will not be justified in shooting the hostages to bring it about. The expected utility theorist may be obliged to do evil that good may

come, but only if the good is large, highly likely given the evil, and most unlikely *without* the evil. These conditions are seldom met.

Thus Russell could use the criterion of *expected* utility against those (such as warmongers and enthusiasts for revolutionary violence) who employed utilitarian patterns of reasoning to inflict suffering without compunction. It was (for example) one of his chief weapons in his polemics against the Bolsheviks during the 1920s. The Bolsheviks had a certain tendency to reject the claims of morality as bourgeois illusions or to shuffle off the moral responsibility for their actions on the grounds that they were the predetermined agents of history. But in so far as they *did* justify their program, they used broadly utilitarian or consequentialist arguments: 1) that the Bolshevik program would lead via violent revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat to the classless society; and 2) that *only* the Bolshevik program could achieve these supremely desirable results. In Russell's view the Bolshevik program was likely to lead to a civil war in any country in which it was tried (as it had led to a civil war in Russia). Such a war would be very terrible and the chances of a socialist but democratic society emerging from such a conflict were quite remote. Thus despite the desirability of socialism (in Russell's eyes at any rate) the Bolshevik program had to be rejected *for utilitarian or consequentialist reasons*. As he wrote in a review of Bukharin's *Historical Materialism*, 'we do not know enough about the laws of social phenomena to be able to predict the future with any certainty, even in its broadest outlines ... For this reason, it is unwise to adopt any policy involving great immediate suffering for the sake of even a great gain in the distant future, because the gain may never be realized.' (RoE: 203/Papers 9: 371. See also *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, particularly Part II. ch.iv.) The Bolshevik program, like many political programs involving cruelty and persecution, depended upon dogmatism; specifically on an irrational faith in theses 1) and 2). Only if it were *certain* that a Bolshevik revolution would bring about classless society could the Bolshevik program be justified. But so far from being certain this thesis was dubious in the extreme. Thus the Bolsheviks' 'habit of militant certainty about doubtful matters' (*Practice and Theory*: xi) was not only irrational, but *dangerous*, since it led to pointless suffering. Hence 'The Need for Political Skepticism', the title of one of Russell's essays, and a major theme in his moral and political writing. (*Sceptical Essays*: ch. 11.) Dogmatism leads to cruelty since it encourages people to overestimate the likelihood that their objectives will be realized and hence to exaggerate the expected

utility of their violent and persecuting policies. In Russell's opinion a healthy dose of skepticism, is required to make the world a better place. This explains the maxim that he put into the mouth of la Rochefoucauld: 'It does not matter what you believe, so long as you don't altogether believe it.' (*Fact and Fiction*: 185.)

### 7. Consequentialism, Emotivism and Moral Reform

The criterion of expected utility had another advantage for Russell. It allowed him to recommend a less 'conservative and anti-reforming' version of Moore's *Principia* principle that 'the individual can be confidently recommended *always* to conform to rules which are generally useful and generally practiced.' Such a principle is at least consistent with Russell's criterion since, even if we admit that, in some cases, breaking the established rules will *actually* be for the best, it *might* be the case that the action with the highest *expected* utility is always the one that conforms to established custom. Thus Russell, unlike Moore, *could* have been moral conservative without self-contradiction. But such was not his belief. He was basically an act-consequentialist rather than a rule-consequentialist. An act is right if the expected consequences of performing it are as good or better than any other. It is not right because it conforms to some rule, even if it is a rule that it is generally useful to obey. Nevertheless, rules are necessary because we have not world enough and time to calculate the consequences of every act. 'I think that, speaking philosophically, all acts ought to be judged by their effects; but as this is difficult and uncertain and takes time, it is desirable, in practice, that some kinds of acts should be condemned and others praised without waiting to investigate consequences. I should say, therefore, with the utilitarians, that the right act, in any given circumstances, is that which, on the data, will probably produce the greatest balance of good over evil of all the acts that are possible; but that the performance of such acts may be promoted by the existence of a moral code'. (*RoE*: 216/*Power*: 168.) Thus Russell believed that it is generally right to obey 'generally useful' rules, though these rules are essentially 'rules of thumb' and there may be exceptional circumstances in which it is right (that is *obligatory*) to break them. 'Even the best moral rules, however, will have *some* exceptions, since no class of actions *always* has bad [or good!] results.' (*RoE*: 137/*Religion and Science*: 227-8.)

But though Russell thought that it is generally right to obey generally useful rules, he also thought that many of the rules that are 'generally practiced' are *not*

‘generally useful’. Sometimes they derive from bygone superstitions and sometimes they foster the interests of the powerful at other peoples’ expense. ‘Primitive ethics ...select certain modes of behavior for censure [or praise] for reasons which are lost in anthropological obscurity.’ (*Education and the Social Order*: 23.) However, ‘one of the purposes -- usually in large part unconscious -- of a traditional morality is to make the existing social system work. It achieves this purpose, when it is successful, both more cheaply and more effectively than a police force does ... The most obvious example ... is the inculcation of obedience. It is (or rather was) the duty of children to submit to parents, wives to husbands, servants to masters, subjects to princes, and (in religious matters) laymen to priests.’ (*RoE*: 207/*Power*: 157.) Thus Russell was inclined to agree with Plato’s Thrasymachus, at least to the extent that what *passes* for justice is *often* [to] the advantage of the stronger [that is the ruling caste, class or gender]. Russell was opposed both to power-moralities (codes designed to bolster the interests of exploitative elites) and to the senseless and often pernicious remnants of defunct superstitions. ‘An ethic not derived from superstition must decide first upon the kind of social effects which it desires to achieve and the social effects which it desires to avoid. It must then decide, as far as knowledge permits. What acts will promote the desired consequences: these acts it will praise, while those acts having a contrary tendency it will condemn.’ (*Education and the Social Order*: 73.) It was Russell’s mission as a practical moralist, a social reformer and a popular sage to promote a non-superstitious ethic. This was partly a matter of preaching and partly a matter of argument: preaching as regards ends and argument as regards means.

In the latter, and more preachy, part of his career, it was Russell’s dominant view that judgments about what things are good or bad as ends do not have a truth-value. To say that it is a good thing ‘that the individual, like Leibniz’s monads should mirror the world’ (*Education and the Social Order*: 10) is to say something like ‘Would that everyone desired that that the individual, like one of Leibniz’s monads, should mirror the world!’ Since this is neither true nor false, it cannot be argued for. For (as Monty Python teaches) an argument is [at least usually] a connected series of propositions designed to establish the *truth* of some conclusion. Thus when there is no possibility of truth, as with claims about the goodness of ends, there is no possibility of argument (at least in this sense), and the best we can do is to remove objections and present the end in a favorable light. Russell was perfectly clear about

this. 'Why [should the individual mirror the world]? I cannot say why, except that knowledge and comprehensiveness appear to me glorious attributes in virtue of which I prefer Newton to an oyster. The man who holds concentrated within his own mind, as within a *camera obscura*, the depths of space, the evolution of the sun and its planets, the geological ages of the earth, and the brief history of humanity, appears to me to be doing what is distinctively human and what adds most to the diversified spectacle of nature.' This is eloquent stuff (and too me, at least, convincing) but it hardly constitutes an argument. And this Russell freely admitted. 'Ultimate values are not matters as to which argument is possible. If a man maintains that misery is desirable and that it would be a good thing if everybody always had a violent toothache, we may disagree with him, and we may laugh at him if we catch him going to the dentist, but we cannot prove that he is mistaken as we could if he said that iron is lighter than water ... As to ultimate values, men may agree or disagree, they may fight with guns or with ballot papers but they cannot reason logically.' (*Education and the Social Order*: 136.) This is rather disconcerting, especially if we replace the comic examples that Russell employs in *Education and the Social Order* (he imagines a prophet 'who advance[s] the theory that happiness should be confined to those whose first names begin with Z') with the real-life moral elitists and chauvinists that he discusses in other works of the 1930s and 1940s. Nietzsche and the Nazis really did believe that the sufferings of some people were not significant evils (herd-men in the case of Nietzsche, Jews, Slavs and Gypsies in the case of the Nazis) and it was Russell's thesis that no rational argument could be advanced against them. 'Let us consider two theories as to the good. One says, like Christianity, Kant, and democracy: whatever the good may be, any one man's enjoyment of it has the same value as any other man's. The other says: there is a certain sub-class of mankind -- white men, Germans, gentiles, or what not -- whose good or evil alone counts in an estimation of ends; other men are only to be considered as means ... When [irrelevant] arguments are swept away, there remains, so far as I can see, nothing to be said except for each party to express moral disapproval of the other. Those who reject this conclusion advance no argument against it except that it is unpleasant.' ('Reply to Criticisms' *RoE*: 146-147/*Collected Papers* 11: 48-49.) But unpleasant as this conclusion may be, it does not imply that those with a humane and egalitarian conception of the good should give up preaching on its behalf. On the contrary, such preaching becomes imperative, especially for those with rhetorical gifts. Which is why Russell devoted so much time

and effort to this activity. 'According to me, the person who judges that A is good is wishing others to feel certain desires. He will therefore, if not hindered by other activities, try to rouse these desires in other people if he thinks he knows how to do so. This is the purpose of preaching, and it was my purpose in the various books in which I have expressed ethical opinions. The art of presenting one's desires persuasively is totally different from that of logical demonstration, but it is equally legitimate.' ('Reply to Criticisms' *RoE*: 149/ *Papers* 11: 51.) Persuasion as regards ends may be a non-rational process, but that does not mean that it is irrational, let alone *wrong*, to engage in it.

In fact, though he appears to have forgotten the point when he came to write 'Reply to Criticisms' in 1944, Russell *did* think that there was one kind of argument which had some degree of logical force against certain kinds of ideals. It is possible to argue that a given set of ends is either impossible or very difficult to realize, either because of historical contingencies or because it is somehow incoherent or self-refuting. The irrational elements in Nazi philosophy were irrational 'because it is scarcely possible that the small shopkeepers, for example, should realize their hopes, and fantastic beliefs are their only refuge from despair'. There were 'comparatively sane' militarists and industrialists, such as Thyssen, whose ends, though 'Satanic', 'might be realized by means of Fascism but not in any other way'. But for Thyssen to achieve his objectives 'it [was] necessary for him to stir up German self-confidence and nationalist feeling to a dangerous degree, and unsuccessful war [was] the most probable outcome'. ('The Ancestry of Fascism', written in 1935, *In Praise of Idleness*: 77/*Papers* 10: 433.) Thus Nazi ends were either impossible or unsustainable, a proposition which might be rationally argued for and which subsequently proved to be true. A Nazi convinced of this proposition might be persuaded to modify his ends if he had the meta-desire that his lower-order desires should be satisfied and if he were disposed to satisfy this meta-desire by suppressing some of his unsatisfiable lower-order desires. If it is constitutive of rationality to have such a meta-desire (as Russell, was inclined to think) then there are factually-based, non-preachy arguments *against* certain ideals that might persuade a rational person. If to think something good is to have a certain sort of desire, and if it is irrational to retain unsatisfiable desires, then it is irrational to think that certain things are good. The problem with this however, is that it is not *always* irrational to retain your desires even if, like the Rolling Stones, you can't get no satisfaction. Besides, such

arguments are not effective against every agent with ‘Satanic’ ends but only against those whose Satanic projects are impracticable. And when, as is too often the case, the Satanic projects *are* practicable, they are beyond the reach of rational criticism.

When it comes to means however, rational argument becomes a genuine possibility. It might seem otherwise since judgments about what is right or what ought to be done – which for Russell are essentially concerned with means – would appear to be as incapable of truth as judgments about what is good and bad. In Russell’s view, ‘the right *act*, in any given circumstances, is that which, on the data, will probably produce the greatest balance of good over evil’ and the right *rule* or *policy* is likewise the one that can be expected to produce the best effects. That is, ‘X is right’ is *assertible* (roughly, a sensible thing to say) when X can be expected to lead to the best results. But if ‘Y is good’, is really in the optative mood, amounting to the exclamation ‘Would that everyone desired Y!’, then ‘X is right’ would appear to be optative too, since it comes down to something like ‘X leads to more of what [would that everyone desired!]’. Here the clause in square brackets, which is obviously in the optative mood, infects the entire sentence with its optative character. ‘X leads to more of what [would that everyone desired!]’ in so far as it can be made sense of, does not seem to be the kind of thing that could be true or false. One might object that this reading reduplicates Moore’s error in *Principia Ethica* of incorporating the criterion of right action – being such as to produce the best consequences – into the meaning of ‘right’. So it does, but the alternative readings which suggest themselves suffer from other defects. If we analyze ‘It is right [or obligatory] for A to do X’ along the same lines as Russell’s analysis of ‘X is good’, we are driven to something like this: what ‘It is right [or obligatory] for A to do X,’ *means* is ‘Would that A did X [and perhaps that everyone in similar circumstances did likewise]!’ This is precious close to the prescriptivism of R.M. Hare and it deprives judgments about right and duty of the very possibility of truth or falsehood.

However, Russell believed that judgments about what is right or what ought to be done *can* be given an analysis which gives them a sort of ersatz objectivity and hence the possibility of truth. If Dmitri has a reasonably determinate conception of the good, that is, a coherent set of opinions about which things are good and which bad, then although Dmitri’s opinions themselves are neither true nor false – since,

despite appearances they are not really opinions at all but optative expressions of Dmitri's desires. - it can nevertheless be true or false that X is good in Dmitri's opinion, that is, good-according-to-Dmitri. 'Oh to be in England, now that April's here!' is neither true nor false, but if I say it sincerely, it will in fact be true that I desire to be in England. Similarly, if Dmitri says that 'Bungy-jumping is good' what he says won't be true, since really it is in the optative mood, but if he says it sincerely, it will be true that Bungy-jumping is good in Dmitri's opinion, or good-according-to-Dmitri. Thus although there are no facts of the matter about which things are good or bad, there *are* facts of the matter about which things are *believed* by this or that person to be good or bad. Furthermore – and this is the crucial point – there are facts of the matter about whether a given action or a given policy is likely to promote what somebody-or-other *believes* to be good. Since Hitler believed that victory over Britain would be good, there was a fact of the matter about whether bombing London as opposed to bombing the RAF's airfields would bring about the states of affairs that he desired. As it turned out, the policy he pursued did not produce results that were best-according-to-Hitler. Hence if Hitler had adopted a consequentialist reading of 'ought', and had indexed it to his own requirements, 'I ought to bomb London', would have been *false*. And its truth or its falsehood would have been a factually arguable question.

Now, suppose we *define* the right act with respect to B, not as 'that which, on the data, will probably produce the greatest balance of good over evil' but as 'that which, on the data, will probably produce the greatest balance of what B *believes* to be good over what B *believes* to be evil'. The right rule of policy with respect to B will correspondingly be defined as the rule or policy that will probably in the appropriate circumstances produce the greatest balance of what B *believes* to be good over what B *believes* to be evil. Then, so long as B has a reasonably coherent set of ideals, the claim that a given act or policy is right or wrong with respect to B will usually have a determinate truth-value. Claims of the form 'X is right wrt to B' will be either true or false, so long as the person or persons designated by B has or have a clear and consistent set of values. There will thus be a fact of the matter about whether X is right wrt to B which can be the subject of rational enquiry. And if 'B' stands in for us (whoever 'we' may be) and if we share a reasonably coherent set of ideals, then there will be a fact of the matter about whether X is right or wrong with respect to our ideals. Thus if there is agreement with respect to ideals and if we

adopt a consequentialist conception of rightness, indexed not to what *is* good but to what we *believe* to be good, then we can have a rational debate – maybe even a scientific enquiry - about the rights and wrongs of actions, rules or policies, or at least about their rightness or wrongness with respect to us. ‘The framing of moral rules, so long as the ultimate Good is supposed known, [Russell should have said ‘supposed agreed’] is a matter for science. For example: should capital punishment be inflicted for theft, or only for murder, or not at all? Jeremy Bentham, who considered pleasure to be the Good, devoted himself to working out what criminal code would most promote pleasure, and concluded that it ought to be much less severe than that prevailing in his day. All this, except the proposition that pleasure is the Good, comes within the sphere of science.’ (*RoE*: 137-138/*Religion and Science*: 228-229.) Once the ends have been agreed, we can have a rational debate about the code most likely to promote those ends. In some cases, such questions can be resolved by scientific enquiry, or at any rate by statistics. But (with one or two exceptions) rational argument is only really possible when we take the ends as read and confine our attention to the means.

We are now in a position to understand Russell’s general strategy as a polemicist for moral reform and its relation to his emotivist meta-ethic.

- (i) He dismisses supposed duties that cannot be given a consequentialist justification as the products of bygone superstitions or, in some cases, the ideological props to predatory elites.
- (ii) He uses non-rational methods to preach the goodness of some ends – a life inspired by love and guided by knowledge, mirroring the cosmos like one of Leibniz’s monads etc. – and the evil of others. This is essentially a process of getting his readers to share his desires.
- (iii) He then argues for his revised code of conduct as likely to promote those ends. Here there can be truth and falsehood and consequently rational argument, but only because ‘ought’ and ‘right’ have been given a consequentialist reading and indexed to the ends that Russell desires to promote.

## 8. Objections to Emotivism and Relativism

Thus Russell's meta-ethic was closely connected to his to his program of moral reform. The idea was to advocate a certain set of humane and egalitarian ends, using non-rational methods of persuasion, and then to argue on the basis of psychology, social science, history and common sense that that these ends would be best achieved if, on the whole, people obeyed a reformed moral code. The kinds of acts prescribed would be those that could be rationally expected to maximize the chances of achieving the recommended ends. Judgments that this or that is good or bad were to be construed as disguised optatives ('Would that everyone desired X!' and 'Would that everyone desired not Y!' respectively). 'Ought' and 'right' were to be given a consequentialist reading and indexed to the ends that Russell hoped his audience could be persuaded to share. Thus Russell combined an emotivist analysis of 'good' and 'bad' with a consequentialist/relativist reading of 'ought' and 'right'. But was he right to do so? Do 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'ought' really mean what he thought they meant? (Or, to be more precise, do *sentences* involving these expressions really mean what he thought they meant?)

Although Russell and Santayana were toying with emotivism in the 1910s, it was not until the 1930s that the theory really hit the philosophical headlines. Since then it has taken a beating, and although it still finds favor with the semi-philosophical public, it is no longer widely believed by professional philosophers. There are, to be sure, some distinguished philosophers such as Gibbard and Blackburn who believe in something like emotivism, but they are swimming against the tide of philosophical opinion. Relativism likewise is generally regarded as a down-list option, though again there are one or two distinguished philosophers who are prepared to stick up for it. Does Russell's meta-ethic stand up against the objections that laid emotivism and relativism low?

A. According to Stevenson and Ayer the function of moral judgments is to express approval and disapproval. But approval and disapproval are not mere surges of unarticulated emotion but feelings *that*, where what follows the 'that' is itself a moral judgment. To approve of X is to think or feel that X is good or right: to disapprove is to think or feel that it is bad or wrong. Thus the emotivist analysis of the moral terms is viciously

circular. To say that X is good is to express the feeling that ... well, er, the feeling *that X is good*. The analysis presupposes the very concepts it is designed to explicate. [Russell himself had developed a similar line of argument against theories which identify rightness with a tendency to arouse approval in his 1912 'The Elements of Ethics'. 'If these {that is, 'the dictates of the moral sense' which issue in feelings of approval and disapproval} are to afford a *definition* of right conduct, we cannot say that they consist of judging that such and such acts are *right*, for that would make our definition circular {But} though there is an emotion of approval, there is also a judgment of approval, which may or may not be true ... Thus in order to give a meaning to this judgment of approval, it is necessary to admit a sense of *right* other than *approved*.' ('Elements of Ethics', *Philosophical Essays*: 26-7/*Papers* 9: 226-227.) Unfortunately he forgot this point in his subsequent paper 'Is There an Absolute Good?' (1922). There he claims that 'It seems to be an empirical fact that the things people judge good are the same as those towards which they have an emotion of approval, while the things they judge bad are those towards which they have an emotion of disapproval.' (*RoE*: 123-124/*Papers* 9: 346.) But though the things people judge good *are* the same things as those towards which they have an emotion of approval, this is not an empirical fact but an analytic truth. Russell should have remembered the teachings of 'Old Sidg': 'The peculiar emotion of moral approbation is, in my experience, inseparably bound up with the conviction, implicit or explicit, that the conduct approved is 'really' right---*i.e.* that it cannot, without error, be disapproved by any other mind.' (*Methods of Ethics*: 27.) Sidgwick himself probably derived the point from Thomas Reid, who used it to argue against the approval-based meta-ethic of David Hume: 'In the approbation of a good action, therefore, there is feeling indeed, but there is also *esteem* of the agent; and both the feeling and the esteem depend upon the *judgment* we form of his conduct.' (*Essays on the Active Powers*: 381.) Thus Emotivism – or at least the emotivism of Stevenson and Ayer - appears to have been born refuted.]

Whatever the merits of this objection, it does not apply to Russell's brand of emotivism, since in his view, when we call things good or bad we

are not expressing approval or disapproval but *desire* (in the case of 'good' the desire that everyone should desire X in the case of 'bad' the desire that everyone should desire *not* X). There are some philosophers who, following Anscombe (*Intention*: 70ff), suppose that it is impossible to desire anything without (first?) subscribing to a desirability characterization, that is, without seeing it as *good* in some way. If this were true, then Russell's theory too would run the risk of circularity. (Good-judgments would express desires which themselves depended on the thought that their objects were, in some sense, good.) But since Anscombe's thesis is false and desire does *not* presuppose a desirability characterization (as the desires non-human animals abundantly demonstrate) Russell is not entangled in any such circle.

B. If judgments about what is good or bad in itself merely express approval and disapproval 'X is good' said by me and 'X is bad' said by you do not contradict one another. After all, I am merely expressing my feelings whilst you are expressing yours, and there is nothing remotely inconsistent about the supposition that X arouses approval in me and disapproval in you. But plainly when I call X good and you call it bad we *are* contradicting one another. Hence emotivism, which seems to imply otherwise, is false.

Again Russell's brand of emotivism is immune to this objection. According to Russell, 'X is good' and 'X is bad' are really in the optative despite their indicative appearances. As such they express desires or wishes, and desires and wishes can, in a sense, be inconsistent with one other, namely when they are not (in Russell's phrase) 'compossible', that is, when they cannot both be realized. 'Would that I had all the ice-cream!' said by me and 'Would that I had all the ice-cream!' said by you express contradictory desires since we cannot both have all the ice-cream. As such the two optatives contradict each other, not because they *describe* incompatible *facts* but because they *prescribe* incompatible *states of affairs*. Similarly 'X is good' said by me and 'X is bad' said by you express contradictory desires and hence contradict each other. For 'X is good' means 'Would that everybody desired X!' and 'X is bad' means 'Would

that everybody desired that not-X!', and the desires expressed by these two optatives are not compossible, or at least, are only compossible on the condition that we all have inconsistent desires (both for X and for not-X).

But the situation is a little different when we come to judgments about what is *right* or what *ought to be done*. As we have seen, Russell is sometimes inclined to give such judgments a consequentialist reading and then to index them to some presumed set of projects. It is therefore *true* with respect to, say, Russell and myself that we ought to abolish the Death Penalty, since abolishing the Death Penalty is conducive to the ends that Russell and I happen to favor. But it is equally true with respect to some hardcore retributivist that we *ought not* to abolish the Death penalty, since it is *not* conducive to the eye-for-an-eye ends that *she* considers good. And this seems to be a problem. For when Russell and I say we *ought* to abolish the Death Penalty and the retributivist says we that we *ought not* it seems that we are contradicting each other. Yet if the two 'oughts' are indexed to different views of the good, it seems they are quite compatible. What Russell and I are saying is that abolishing the Death Penalty can be rationally expected to maximize the things *we* consider good and to minimize the things that *we* consider evil. What the retributivist is saying (if she is a consequentialist) is that *not* abolishing the Death Penalty can be rationally expected to maximize the things *she* considers good (which include retributive punishment) and to minimize the things *she* considers evil (such as murderers not getting their just deserts). And these claims can both be true. Hence Russell's theory brings about a spurious appearance of semantic harmony where in fact there is conflict and contradiction. His theory suggests that the friends and foes of the Death Penalty are *not* contradicting each other, when in fact it is evident that they are. Genuine disagreement would only be possible between those who agreed about the ends but disagreed about the means. Thus if (in 1940) Hitler claimed that the Luftwaffe ought to bomb London rather than the RAF airfields whilst Goering claimed that the Luftwaffe ought to bomb the RAF airfields rather than bombing London, the two would be in contradiction since their ends were presumably the same. But their views

would be quite compatible with those of a pacifist who claimed that nobody ought ever to bomb anything!

Russell himself had raised much the same objection against relativist definitions of 'good' and 'bad'. In 1912: 'If in asserting that A is good, X meant merely to assert that A had a certain relation himself to such as pleasing his taste in some way [or being conducive his ends] and Y, in saying that A is not good, meant merely to deny that A had a like relation to himself; then there would be no subject of debate between them' (*Philosophical Essays*: 20-21 / *Papers* 6: 222). But, as Russell plainly believes, *there is* a subject of debate between them, which means that relativistic readings of 'good' and 'bad' must (at least sometimes) be wrong. A similar problem afflicts his own subsequent analyses of 'ought' and 'right'. Moore in his *Ethics* of 1912 had made much the same point, this time with respect to 'right' and 'wrong'. 'If, when one man says, 'This action is right,' and another says, 'No, it is not right,' each of them is always merely making an assertion about *his own feelings* [or what will conduce to *what he considers good*], it plainly follows that there is never really [or on Russell's later theory that there *usually is not*] any difference of opinion between them: the one of them is never really contradicting what the other is asserting ... [But] it is surely plain matter of fact that when I assert an action to be wrong, and another man asserts it to be right, there is sometimes [indeed Moore might have said *usually*] a real difference of opinion between us' (*Ethics*: 50-51). And in a vast range of cases, Russell's theory implicitly denies that real difference.

Russell might reply that his suggestion is not intended as a *theory* about what 'right', 'wrong' and 'ought' *actually* mean but as *proposal* about what they *ought to* mean, if they are to have any hopes of appearing in sentences that can be both true and motivating. (Russell's 'ought's are motivating to me, at least when they are indexed to what *I* consider good, because I will tend to be motivated to do those things which bring about the ends that I desire everybody to desire, since a) I am rational and b) I will tend to desire what I desire everybody to desire.) What Russell has in

mind with his analyses of 'right', 'wrong' and 'ought' is not a *description* of our current semantic slum but a scheme for linguistic *reform*. Away with those tumbledown, antiquated moral concepts, rat-ridden with superstition and authoritarianism! In their place we will have brand new, spanking versions of the moral concepts (particularly 'right' and 'ought') fitted to play their parts in a new and humane ethic 'not derived from superstition'! It may be that *at present* we take those whose 'ought's are indexed to different ends to be contradicting one other. But this does not mean that Russell's theory is wrong. For Russell is not denying (even by implication) that this *is* so: he is recommending that it *should not be* so. Given current usage, when Hitler says 'We ought to bomb London' and the pacifist says 'Nobody ever ought to bomb anything', the two claims contradict each other, but once Russell's reform is has been implemented this disagreeable dispute will be smoothed into non-existence. Philosophers hitherto have only attempted to *interpret* the moral concepts in various ways: Russell's point, however, is to *change* them.

Would this response save the later Russell from the objections raised by Moore and his younger self? I think not. For Russell's 'proposal' is not a very attractive one. One of the things we *want* to do with moral language - or to put it another way, one of its most important *functions* - is to express our disagreements. Russell's new-fangled 'ought' would be unable fulfill one of the most important linguistic functions of the old-fashioned 'ought', namely to express that fact that people with different ends disagree (as we would now put it) on *what ought to be done*. In depriving people with different ends of the means to contradict each other Russell would be doing them a disservice. As for those with a non-consequentialist ethic - those like Anscombe and Nozick who think that there are certain things that ought not to be done *whatever the consequences* - Russell's reform would deprive them of the possibility of expressing their opinions. A 'side-constraints' view of ethics could not even be stated in the new and improved moral language that Russell sometimes seems to be advocating. Moreover, Russell would be left with a peculiarly ramshackle meta-ethic. He would have a descriptive account of what 'good' and 'bad' *do* mean and a prescriptive *suggestion* about the about

what 'right', 'wrong' and 'ought' *ought* to mean. There is no actual inconsistency in this but it does seem to be a bit anomalous. If the name of the game is to *analyze* the moral concepts, then it seems Russell's analysis of 'right' and 'ought' is wrong. But if the name of the game is to *reform* the moral concepts, then why not subject 'good' and 'bad' to the same treatment, giving them the kind objectivity that Russell would evidently have preferred them to have?

Another way to restore contradiction between those with different visions of the good might be to give 'ought' 'right' and 'wrong' and optative reading. Perhaps 'Osama ought to give himself up' means something like 'Would that Osama gave himself up!'; 'Stealing is wrong' means something like 'Would that nobody stole!'; and 'The right thing to do is what can be rationally expected to have the best consequences,' means something like 'Would that everybody did what can rationally be expected to have the best consequences!'. That way Hitler's 'We [the Nazis] ought to bomb London,' would be genuinely inconsistent with the pacifist's 'Nobody ought to bomb anything', since the first would mean something like 'Would that we [the Nazis] bombed London!' whilst the second would mean something like 'Would that nobody bombed anything!', and the desires expressed in the two optatives would not be 'compossible' – they could not both be realized. However, the problem with this solution is it that deprives judgments featuring 'ought', 'right' and 'wrong' of the possibility of truth and ejects them from the realm of science, which Russell was evidently reluctant to do. In the second half of the Twentieth Century, R.M. Hare developed a meta-ethic known as prescriptivism according to which moral judgments have *both* descriptive content (allowing them to be true or false) *and* prescriptive content (making them akin to orders and thus not so very far removed from Russell's optatives). Russell's difficulties suggest the need for such a theory, but to discuss it in detail would take us too far afield. Suffice to say that Russell's theory is in big trouble, since he cannot easily reconcile the fact of moral disagreement with his desire to make judgments involving 'ought' susceptible to truth and falsity.

C. The later Russell's account of 'ought'-judgments runs foul of Moore's Open Question Argument as his earlier self could have told him.

### 9. Objections to Objectivity

'When I was young,' writes Russell, 'I agreed with G.E. Moore in believing in the objectivity of good and evil. Santayana's criticism in a book called *Winds of Doctrine*, [which Russell read in 1913] caused me to abandon this view, though I have never been able to be as bland and comfortable about it as he was' (*Portraits from Memory*: 91). As a piece of intellectual autobiography this is insufficient. Santayana's book may have *caused* Russell to give up on the Moorean Good, but his reasons remain obscure. What Santayana is pushing in his *Winds of Doctrine* is plainly some kind of proto-emotivism ('to speak of the truth of an ultimate good would be a false collocation of terms; an ultimate good is chosen, found or aimed at; it is not opined'). But though his text abounds in mellifluous sneers, arguments are conspicuous by their absence. Russell's reasons for rejecting a non-natural property of goodness have to be reconstructed from literary asides, delivered in passing in the course of his anti-War polemics.

However, Santayana does give *one* reason, not for doubting the existence of the Moorean Good, but for wishing that nobody believed in it. The idea that there are objective moral facts breeds intolerance and fanaticism. Accordingly, the rejection of this idea 'would tend to render people more truly social', specifically, more tolerant. 'Moral warfare would continue', he writes, 'but not with poisoned arrows.' Russell came to agree, especially after the outbreak of World War I. 'My H[erbert] S[pencer] lecture was partly inspired by disgust at the universal outburst of righteousness in all nations since the war began. It seems the essence of virtue is persecution, and it has given me a disgust of all ethical notions, which evidently are chiefly useful as an excuse for murder' (letter to Samuel Alexander, 5/2/1915, *RoE*: 107/*Papers* 8: 56). There is something rather paradoxical about this, since Russell was firmly convinced of the rightness of his own anti-War activities: 'When the War came, I felt as if I heard the voice of God. I knew it was my business to protest,

however futile protest might be' (*Autobiography* II: 18). If there are no objective moral properties there is no such thing as moral knowledge, which means that Russell cannot have literally *known* that he ought to protest. At best he could have known that he ought to protest *given his values*. But though he sometimes seems to talk as if it is objectively wrong to believe in objective values, Russell's position is (or can be made to be) coherent. It might just be a fact that moral realists tend to be more intolerant and cruel than moral relativists and anti-realists. Hence those who dislike intolerance and cruelty have a reason for running down objectivity. As Russell himself put it, 'for my part, I should wish to see in the world less cruelty, persecution, punishment, and moral reprobation than exists at present; to this end, I believe that a recognition of the subjectivity of ethics might conduce.' (*RoE*: 117/*Papers* 13: 326.) The word 'recognition' suggests that the 'subjectivity of ethics' is true, and thus that there is no such thing as a non-natural property of goodness. But setting the success-word to one side, it *might* be the case that we would be better off believing in the subjectivity of ethics since believing in objective values leads to persecution, punishment, cruelty and moral reprobation. It might pay in terms of peace, love and understanding if people came to believe Russell's brand of emotivism. But the fact that a belief *pays*, in some sense, does not make it true, as Russell himself was at pains to point out. (See *Philosophical Essays*, chs. iv & v.) So even if we *would* be better off believing that there were no objective values (a thesis Russell later came to doubt), this does not prove that there are no such things.

So what were Russell's reasons for rejecting a non-natural property of goodness? One argument was the diversity of moral opinion and the supposed impossibility of proof when it comes to ultimate values. 'If our views as to what ought to be done were to be truly rational, we ought to have a rational way of ascertaining what things are such as ought to exist on their own account [that is, what things are good] .... On [this] point, no argument is possible. There can be nothing beyond an appeal to individual tastes. If, for example, one man thinks vindictive punishment desirable in itself, apart from any reformatory or deterrent effects, while another man thinks it undesirable in itself, it is impossible to bring any arguments in support of either side.' (*RoE*: 112/*Papers* 13: 186.) Now it is, of course, a *consequence* of Russell's later view both a) that it is impossible to have a rational argument about 'what things are such as ought to exist on their own account' and b) that in such disputes there can be nothing beyond 'an appeal to individual tastes'.

You can't have a rational argument because there is no fact of the matter to be argued about. And there is nothing beyond an appeal to individual tastes because ultimate evaluations are based upon desires and our ultimate desires are beyond the reach of reason. Thus you can argue *from* emotivism and the non-existence of objective goodness to the truth of a) and b). But can you argue from a) and b) to the non-existence of objective goodness? Ayer went on to do so in his famous *Language, Truth and Logic*. A proposition is only factually meaningful if it is analytic, contradictory or empirically verifiable. (This is the verification principle, famous in philosophical folklore.) Propositions about what is good or bad in itself are not analytic, contradictory or empirically verifiable. Hence propositions about what is good or bad in itself are not factually meaningful, which means that they are not really propositions (sentences susceptible to truth and falsity) at all. According to Ayer, their role is to express emotions, which is pretty close to Russell's doctrine that they are really in the optative mood. Now if propositions about what is good or bad in itself are not really factually meaningful, there is no need to posit a non-natural property of goodness to correspond to the predicate 'good'. Indeed the hypothesis that such a property exists verges on the unintelligible.

But this cannot have been Russell's argument, since he explicitly rejected the verification principle. (He thought there were non-analytic propositions, such as 'It snowed on Manhattan Island on the first of January in the year 1 A.D', which were factually meaningful and indeed true or false, but *not* empirically verifiable. See *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*: 277.) Which brings us back to the question of how we can argue from a) and b) to the non-existence of non-natural goodness. The argument, I suggest, is best construed as an inference to the best explanation. The best explanation of a) that it is impossible to have a rational argument about what is good or bad in itself and b) that in such disputes there can be nothing beyond 'an appeal to individual tastes' is the hypothesis c) that there is nothing objective to disagree about since there *is* no such thing as goodness – rather our opinions on these topics are somehow dependent on, or expressive of, our disparate desires.

Is this a good argument? I think not. Inference to the best explanation is, of course, a respectable *form* of argument even though the premise - that hypothesis Y is the best explanation of the facts P and Q - can be true and the conclusion - Y - can be false. (Inferences to the best explanation are abductive, and abductive

arguments fall short of deductive rigor.) But even if we waive that point, a lot can go wrong with such inferences. The 'facts' to be explained can turn out not to be genuine facts, the 'best' explanation can turn out not to be the best after all, or all the available explanations can be so bad that even the best does not deserve to be believed. In the present case, it is not clear to me that theses a) and b) represent genuine facts. Is it *really* true a) that it is impossible to have a rational argument about what is good or bad in itself and b) that in such disputes there can be nothing beyond 'an appeal to individual tastes'? And even if a) and b) *are* true and *do* represent genuine facts, is c) the best explanation? Perhaps there is a property of goodness but it happens to be a property that it is difficult to discern. Some people are just better at seeing what is good or bad than others. As Russell himself put it in 1909 'the difficulty of discovering the truth does not prove that there is not truth to be discovered' (*Philosophical Essays: 20/Papers 6: 222*).

Nevertheless, the later anti-Moorean Russell of 1915 may have been onto something. Suppose a group of mediums all claim to have a Sixth Sense. They can use this sense to access a Spirit World which is invisible to ordinary people. Wild as such a claim might be, it cannot be ruled out *a priori*. After all, if most people were blind, and only a small minority were sighted, the blind would be wrong to discount the deliverances of this weird and wonderful Fifth Sense. (The deliverances would be weird and wonderful since it would be difficult to express the perceptions of the sighted in the vocabulary of the blind. The perceptual reports of the sighted would tend to the metaphorical.) Nevertheless we would have reason to be skeptical if the mediums disagreed radically the nature of the Unseen. If their claims about the Unseen contradicted each other, then most of them would have to be wrong. Of course, some might really have a Sixth Sense whilst others were hallucinating. But we would have reason to doubt whether any of them had a genuine Sixth Sense if what they claimed to perceive was closely correlated with the stories they had been told in childhood or suggestions implanted by hypnotists. Despite all this an individual medium might yet convince us of her powers if she could make observations or predictions via her Sixth Sense which were impossible for us but which we could subsequently confirm. (Just as one of the sighted might convince the blind of his wonderful Fifth Sense by his ability to find lost items or stray sheep without having to feel his way across the fields.) But if the alleged mediums differed about the Unseen World, and if their differences could be put down to the tales they

were told in childhood, and if none of them could use their supposed Sixth Sense to make verifiable predictions about the visible world, then we would have ample reason to doubt both the Sixth Sense and any entities 'detected' by it. Indeed we would have reason to doubt the Sixth Sense and its deliverances, *even if we ourselves seemed to have one*. (This is the initial attitude of Scrooge when he tells Marley's Ghost that 'there's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!') Now with a substantial dollop of charity, Russell can be construed as arguing that a non-natural property of goodness perceived by 'intuition' is rather like the entities perceived by such a 'Sixth Sense'. We differ wildly in our 'perceptions', our differences can be put down to our upbringing and other such mundane causes, and our perceptions of the good don't allow us to make any predictions about non-moral realities. If the mediums should be skeptical about the spiritual entities they seem to sense, we should be skeptical about the moral properties we seem to perceive.

But Russell had another argument which prefigures a famous argument of Gilbert Harman's. 'I have been led to [the view that all ethics is subjective] by a number of reasons, some logical, some derived from observation. Occam's Razor, or the principle that constructions are to be substituted for inferred entities whenever possible, leads me to discard the notion of absolute good if ethics can be accounted for without it. Observation of ethical valuations leads me to think that all ethical valuations can be so accounted for, and that the claim of universality which men associate with their ethical judgments embodies merely the impulse to persecution or tyranny.' (*RoE: 117/Papers 13: 325-6.*) The idea seems to be that our moral evaluations – our beliefs about what is good bad, wrong or right – can be explained without supposing that they correspond to facts involving a Moorean or 'absolute' property of goodness. And since our evaluations can be accounted for without supposing that there is such a property, we have no reason to suppose that it exists. Russell advances a similar argument in his 1922 paper 'Is There an Absolute Good?' 'Since people disagree in their judgments of good and bad to just the same extent to which they differ in their feelings of approval and disapproval, the objectivity secured by ethical predicates [by which Russell means *properties*] is only theoretic, and does nothing to mitigate ethical disputes in practice ... Since the facts can be accounted for without the predicates "good" and "bad", Occam's razor demands that we should abstain from assuming them.' (*RoE: 124/Papers 9: 346.*) Here Russell seems to be making two points. a) Since people's different 'judgments of good and

bad' are caused by their feelings of approval and disapproval, there is no need to explain them by positing moral properties. And if moral properties play no role in the explanation of our moral beliefs, they are not needed to explain anything and we should 'abstain from assuming' that they exist. b) Since people's moral beliefs are caused by their emotions, moral properties would not be any use even if they did exist. In particular they would not be of any use in arriving at a rational consensus in moral matters, since, if they influence us at all, their influence is too weak to overcome the pre-existing passions of approval and disapproval. However this is not a reason for doubting the existence of moral properties, but a reason for not being too sad about it if it turns out that there are no such things.

At this period Russell devoted a lot of the time he could spare from politics, journalism and his anti-War activities to slashing about with Occam's Razor. His methodological slogan was 'Wherever possible, logical constructions [composed, for example, of sense-data] are to be substituted for inferred entities [such as physical objects as usually conceived]' (*Mysticism and Logic*: 149/*Papers* 8: 11). But the argument that he suggests in these passages is not dependent on anything as contentious as this substitution principle, and is quite compatible with his later view that inferred entities are sometimes to be preferred to logical constructions.

Why do I believe that there is a telegraph pole outside my window? Firstly because I seem to see it, and secondly because the best explanation of my telegraph-pole-perceptions is that they really are caused by a telegraph pole and not by a fancy hologram fabricated by mad scientists. If my telegraph-pole-perceptions could be explained away as due to some such cause or causes, then I would no longer have a compelling reason to retain the telegraph pole in my ontology. Now it is Russell's thesis that our alleged perceptions that this or that is good can be explained away by facts about our desires and about what we have been brought up to believe. Harman also argues that the badness that we seem to perceive when we see a gang of young hoodlums setting fire to a cat is not really needed to explain our alleged perceptions. We have been brought up (or perhaps evolved) to regard acts of wanton cruelty as bad and since this is an act of wanton cruelty, that is how we regard it. (Harman (1977): 4-10.) Our moral sensibilities plus the cruelty of the act suffice to explain our reactions, and badness is not required to explain our sensibilities. A naturalist might reply that the cruelty of the hoodlums plus the

sufferings of the cat are in some sense *constitutive* of the action's badness. Since these cause our reactions, its badness causes our reactions, and there is thus no call for moral skepticism. (This very roughly is line of Sturgeon (1985).) A Humean naturalist might reply that the action's badness consists in its tendency to arouse disapprobation in [suitably qualified] observers, and that, since it has this tendency, its badness is vindicated. But whatever the merits of these replies, neither is available to the people Russell was arguing against, namely G.E. Moore and his meta-ethical disciples, who took badness to be a non-natural property supervenient on, but not identical with, such qualities as cruelty and suffering. Goodness and badness are not, for Moore, a-causal, properties. The configuration of matter in the physical world can affect the distribution and intensity of goodness. If a flower is born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness on the desert air, the goodness of the relevant patch of desert will be enhanced, since unperceived beauties are good. Conversely, if the blushing flower is consumed by cockroaches, the goodness of the desert will be diminished. But although alterations in the configuration of matter can affect the level and distribution of goodness, goodness can only affect the configuration of matter through the medium of rational (and, so far we know, human) minds. It is because (and only because) we perceive certain things as good and are thereby induced to promote them, that goodness has an effect on the physical world. Hence if these 'perceptions' can be explained without the aid of goodness, goodness is redundant and we have no reason to believe in it.

This argument seems to rely on the Eleatic principle that it is unreasonable to posit entities or properties that make no causal difference to the world; a principle that Russell would probably have rejected. But in fact, nothing so dogmatic is presupposed. If the only reason to posit goodness is to explain our alleged perceptions, and if our perceptions can be explained without it, then there is no reason to posit goodness. The principle that we should not believe in properties if there is no reason to believe in them is a weak and innocuous variant of Occam's Razor, very close to the moderate and Whiggish skepticism that Russell advocates in *Sceptical Essays*. 'I wish to propose for the reader's favorable consideration [the] doctrine [that] it is undesirable to believe a proposition when there is no ground whatever for supposing it true' (*Sceptical Essays*: 11/*Papers* 10: 281.) To challenge the argument you must challenge one of its premises: either a) that our moral reactions can be explained without resorting to a non-natural property of goodness or b) that

there is no *other* reason to posit such a property. It seems that Russell *did* think that there was another reason for positing goodness, namely a semantic one: perhaps a *property* of goodness is required to explain how the *predicate* 'good' can be meaningful. Indeed in 'Is There an Absolute Good?' (to which we shall turn in the next section) he seems to suggest that this is the chief reason for believing in an 'absolute' good in the first place: 'it seemed natural to infer, as Moore did, that, since propositions in which the word "good" occurs have meaning, therefore the word "good" has meaning [i.e. that there is some property which it means]; but this was a fallacy. And it is upon this fallacy, I think, that the most apparently cogent of Moore's arguments rest.' (RoE: 123/Papers 9: 345.) However, by 1916 Russell had at least one theory up his sleeve which could explain how 'good' could occur in meaningful sentences without a corresponding property of goodness: the emotivist theory suggested by Santayana, and perhaps the error theory, for which he already had the wherewithal in the form of his theory of definite descriptions. Thus the semantic side of ethics as well as our alleged perceptions could be explained without the benefit of non-natural properties.

A Moorean might be tempted to deny that it is possible to explain either our perceptions or our sensibilities without positing moral properties. It is because the goodness of friendship is there to be perceived that we seem to perceive it. But there is a problem with this reply - the problem of misperception. Even the most devout moral realist must admit that there are some people who get it wrong, namely the people who disagree with them about ultimate values. There are some who see badness in what is good or goodness in what is bad. These people are not so much morally blind as morally deluded. How then are their 'perceptions' to be explained? If one person thinks lasciviousness is bad and retributive punishment is good and the other thinks that lasciviousness is good and retributive punishment bad how can each explain the intuitions of the other? Moore did have a rather rudimentary theory of moral error which is implicit in *Principia Ethica* and explicit in Keynes' memoir 'My Early Beliefs' (Keynes (1972): 437-441). Some people give the wrong answer because they have not got the question clear in their minds. The 'two parties [are] not really talking about the same thing; not bringing their intuitions to bear on precisely the same object, and by the principle of organic unity a very small difference in the object might make a big difference in the result'. (Keynes (1972): 437.) But this cannot account for clear-headed disagreement when the parties to the

dispute *are* focused on the relevant 'object'. In 1899 Moore was 'sickened' to discover that his fellow-Apostles did not regard 'self-abuse' as bad as an end, even though he had taken some pains to distinguish this from 'the practical question' (presumably whether or not one ought to do it) and to concentrate the attention of his audience on 'the thing in itself'. (Levy (1981): 207-8.) If his fellow-Apostles were so benighted as not to see that the thing in itself was bad, despite the fact that their minds were concentrated on the 'object', what possible explanation could there be for their misperceptions? Temperament, upbringing, and, perhaps, a taste for self-abuse - precisely the kinds of causes that a moral skeptic would invoke to explain their reactions. But if their 'perceptions' could be - indeed *had* to be - explained in this way, could not the self-abuse party return the compliment and explain Moore's perceptions in terms of his Puritanical upbringing? Since the 'perceptions' of the self-abuse party could be - indeed *had* to be - explained without the aid of goodness, what reason was there to suppose that badness was required to explain the contrary 'perceptions' of G.E.Moore? Thus anyone who thinks that *some* people's moral perceptions can be explained without the aid of moral properties - which is what everyone thinks about the opinions of their opponents - is in a poor position to insist that moral properties are required to explain their own reactions. If natural causes suffice to explain the beliefs of those who 'get it wrong', why are non-natural properties required to explain the beliefs of those who (in their own eyes at any rate) 'get it right'? It seems that the perceptions of Moore and his self-abusing opponents can both be explained in much the same way - *without* the aid of non-natural properties. This argument is not watertight of course. There *may* be a genuine asymmetry, with moral properties playing a part in the genesis of some beliefs and not others. But the simple feeling that you *see* what is good is not a proof that you actually do so, since your opponents presumably experience much the same thing. Everyone admits that *some* intuitions can be explained without recourse to non-natural properties, namely those of their deluded opponents. But the explanations of the contending parties would appear to be on a par. (My psycho-sociological explanation of your intuitions is as good as your socio-psychological explanation of mine.) This suggests that each party is right about the others but wrong about themselves, since there is no independent evidence - evidence not presupposing a set of values - that some are blessed with a capacity to perceive good and evil that the others lack. But if moral properties play no part in the generation of our perceptions, then they are wholly redundant since the only reason to believe in them

is that they account for our beliefs.

There is *one* argument that may have influenced Russell, which suggests, not that Moore's objectivism is false, but that emotivism is true – the Argument from Motivation. This argument derives from David Hume and depends upon the Humean premise that 'reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions' (Hume, *Treatise*, II.iii.3: 415). This is generally taken to mean that beliefs (the products of reason) cannot motivate by themselves – that they cannot induce new desires or prompt us to act without the aid of some pre-existing desire, passion or want. In 1952 Russell gave Hume's Slavery of Reason thesis a ringing endorsement ('Reason and Passions' *Papers* 11: 424-426, reprinted as the Preface to *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* and in *RoE*: 169-172). "'Reason" has a perfectly clear and precise meaning. It signifies the choice of the right means to an end that you wish to achieve. It has nothing whatever to do with the choice of ends ... There is a famous sentence: "Reason is and ought only to be, the slave of the passions." This sentence does not come from the works of Rousseau or Dostoevsky or Sartre. It comes from David Hume. It expresses a view to which I, like every man who attempts to be reasonable, fully subscribe. .... Desires, emotions, passions (you can choose whichever word you will), are the only possible causes of action. Reason is not a cause of action but only a regulator.' But though Russell waited until he was eighty to pay explicit homage to Hume, he seems to have been a life-long subscriber to the Slavery of Reason Thesis. As Hume was eager to point out, a corollary of the thesis that 'reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will ' is the further claim that reason 'can never oppose passion in the direction of the will' (*Treatise*: 413) and that 'we speak not strictly and philosophically, when we talk of the combat of passion and of reason' (*Treatise*: 414). In his 1894 paper 'Cleopatra and Maggie Tulliver' (written nearly sixty years before his Humean outburst) Russell endorses the corollary, attributing the thesis to Spinoza rather than Hume: 'As Spinoza says, a passion can only be overcome by a stronger passion' (*RoE*: 60/*Papers* 1: 92). Forty-one years later, in *Religion and Science*, Russell expresses the view that since reason cannot induce new desires without the aid of pre-existing desires, there are some basic or underived desires which are not the products of reason, though this does not make them 'irrational': 'A desire [Russell should have said 'an *underived* desire'] cannot, in itself, be either rational or irrational. It may conflict with other desires, and therefore lead to unhappiness; it may rouse opposition in others, and therefore be incapable of

gratification. But it cannot be considered "irrational" merely because no reason can be given for feeling it. We may desire A because it is a means to B, but in the end, when we have done with mere means, we must come to something which we desire for no reason, but not on that account "irrationally." (RoE: 143-144/*Religion and Science*: 242.) But did Russell subscribe to the Slavery of Reason Thesis during the 1910s when he made the break with Moore? The answer would appear to be *yes*, though Russell is not as clear about it as he might have been. '[North Staffs] begins by suggesting that I regard the bellicose as moved by impulse and the pacifists as moved by reason. My whole lecture, on the contrary, was concerned to represent *both* sides as moved by impulse, and to show that impulse is essential to *all* vigorous action, whether good or bad ... It is not the act of a passionless man to throw himself athwart the whole movement of the national life, to urge an outwardly hopeless cause, to incur obloquy and to resist the contagion of collective emotion ... it is not cold reason alone that can prompt such an act.' (RoE: 115/*Papers* 13: 324. Russell, in his reply to North Staffs, is quoting from his then unpublished lectures, *The Principles of Social Reconstruction*.) The reason that this pronouncement is not as clear as it might be is that 'impulse' for Russell is a more narrowly defined category than 'passion' or 'desire'. But if he means, what he seems to mean, that an impulse is a desire or family of desires *not* derived with the aid of reasoning from other desires, then this is a somewhat florid restatement of the Slavery of Reason Thesis. Thus in 1916 as in 1894, 1935 and 1952, Russell subscribed to the first premise of the following argument.

- 1) Genuine beliefs cannot motivate by themselves -- they require the aid of preexisting passions or desires. (Slavery of Reason thesis.)
- 2) Moral 'beliefs' *do* motivate by themselves.  
Therefore
- 3) Moral 'beliefs' are not genuine beliefs.

[I should stress that although this argument is *derived* from Hume (*Treatise*, III. i.1: 457-458), Hume himself was arguing for a different thesis. He did not want to prove that moral 'beliefs' were not genuine beliefs but that moral beliefs were not derived from reason but from a moral sense. Thus Hume's initial premise was not that genuine beliefs alone cannot motivate, but that *beliefs derived from reason* cannot motivate, leaving open the possibility of other beliefs - such as moral and aesthetic

beliefs – that are *not* derived from reason.] Now if Russell had something like this at the back of his mind, it might explain why he found emotivism so compelling. If moral ‘beliefs’, unlike genuine beliefs, motivate, this must be because to ‘believe’ a moral judgment is not to assent to a proposition but to adopt a desire or to register an emotion. Moral beliefs are not propositional attitudes – in which the subject has the attitude of *belief* towards some proposition that might be true or false – but attitudes towards optatives. Indeed, if moral judgments are really in the optative, then it is hard to see what ‘believing’ such a judgment could amount to except adopting the desire that the optative would express. But it is important to understand how the argument is supposed to work. We *deduce* the conclusion that moral ‘beliefs’ are not genuine beliefs and then *explain* that conclusion (together with the fact that moral ‘beliefs have the power to motivate by themselves) with the aid of some emotivist meta-ethical theory. The conclusion of the deductive argument is taken as the datum to be explained in an inference to the best explanation. If the explanation is a good one, then we have some reason to believe the emotivist meta-ethic. The argument is interesting because a *semantic* conclusion – that moral judgments are not, as they appear to be propositions, capable of truth and falsity, but are, perhaps, disguised optatives – is inferred from a set of *psychological* premises – that the mental states which have moral judgments for their objects have different motivational properties from genuine, product-of-reason beliefs. I shall not debate the merits of this argument here since it is exhaustively discussed in several other entries to this Encyclopedia. The crucial question for us is whether Russell accepted it. We know he subscribed to the first premise, but what about the second? Here I am not so sure. For so far from thinking that moral ‘beliefs’ can motivate without the aid of pre-existing desires, he sometimes seems to suggest that moral beliefs – or at least beliefs about what is good and bad in itself – can *only* have an influence *in so far as* they express or reflect pre-existing desires. In his controversy with ‘North Staffs’ (in which, as we have seen, he seems to endorse premise 1) of the Motivation Argument) Russell writes ‘An ethical argument can only have practical efficacy in one of two ways: (1) by showing that the effects of some kind of action are different from what the opponent supposes; this is really a scientific, not an ethical argument; (2) by altering the desires or impulses of the opponent, not merely his intellectual judgments. I cannot imagine any argument by which it could be shown that something is intrinsically good or intrinsically bad; for this reason ethical valuations not embodying desires or impulses cannot have any importance.’ (RoE: 117/*Papers*)

13: 324.) The claim seems to be that there may be *some* ethical valuations (moral judgments) about intrinsic goodness and badness that do *not* motivate, since they do not ‘embody desires’, but that these are rare and of no importance. Why are such valuations rare? Well, in ‘Is There an Absolute Good?’ of 1922, Russell takes it to be an ‘empirical fact that the things people judge good are the same as those towards which they have an emotion of approval.’ (RoE: 123-124/Papers 9: 346.) Hence judgments unaccompanied by emotion are likely to be uncommon. Why are such valuations ‘of no importance’? Precisely because they have little or no influence on conduct. So what Russell seems to think is this. The vast majority of moral ‘beliefs’ about what is intrinsically good or bad *can and do* motivate without the aid of pre-existing desires *apart* from those that they ‘embody’. But some – those that do not embody desires - are as impotent as regular, product-of-reason beliefs. This gives us the following argument:

- 1) Genuine beliefs cannot motivate by themselves -- they require the aid of preexisting passions or desires. (Slavery of Reason thesis.)
- 2\*) Moral ‘beliefs’ about goodness and badness which embody desires (and this includes most such beliefs) *do* motivate by themselves (that is without the aid of pre-existing desires apart from the ones they embody).  
Therefore
- 3\*) Moral ‘beliefs’ about goodness and badness which embody desires are not genuine beliefs.

This argument is valid. It may even be sound. But the version of the second premise that Russell seems to accept is so flagrantly question-begging as to reduce the argument to rational impotence. No foe to emotivism is likely to acknowledge that most moral ‘beliefs’ about goodness and badness embody desires. Moreover the conclusion is too weak to sustain the needed inference to the best explanation. The explanation of the alleged fact that *moral ‘beliefs’ about goodness and badness which embody desires are not genuine beliefs* has to be that moral ‘beliefs’ are not *propositional* attitudes – in which the subject takes the attitude of *belief* towards some *proposition* (true or false) – but attitudes towards optatives (which is what moral judgments are supposed to be). But if 3\*) is the fact to be explained, it could be that moral ‘beliefs’ embodying desires motivate, not because they are not *propositional* attitudes but because the attitude to the proposition involves something more than mere belief.

After all, Russell seems to acknowledge that you can ‘believe’ a moral judgment about what is intrinsically good or bad *without* being motivated. If this is possible at all, it is difficult to see how moral judgments can be optatives. To ‘believe’, or accept an optative is presumably to adopt the desire that it expresses. Hence if you can ‘believe’ or accept a moral judgment *without* acquiring the relevant desire, the judgment cannot be a disguised optative.

It may be that somewhere in Russell’s voluminous writings there is a passage in which he unequivocally accepts Premise 2) rather than its less serviceable variant Premise 2\*). But until I see such a passage, I inclined to think that Russell’s emotivism was not motivated by the Motivation Argument.

Whether or not Russell accepted the Motivation Argument, *most* of Russell’s arguments of the 1910s are objections to objectivity rather than arguments in favor of a rival hypothesis. He rejects objective goodness but it is unclear what, if anything, he proposes to put in its place. His dominant view was to be emotivism but there was at least one significant wobble. In 1922 he proposed a version of the error theory, anticipating J. L. Mackie by over twenty years.

### 9. There Is No Absolute Good

‘Is There an Absolute Good?’ was apparently delivered on the 14<sup>th</sup> of March 1922 at special meeting of the Apostles. (RoE: 122-124/Papers 9: 345-346.) Russell opens up with a joke in fine, flippant Apostolic style: ‘When the generation to which I belong were young, Moore persuaded us all that there is an absolute good. Most of us drew the inference that *we* were absolutely good, but this is not an essential part of Moore’s position, though it is one of its most attractive parts.’ But he soon gets down to philosophical business in what must be one of the pithiest meta-ethical papers on record (it is a mere 809 words long). Moore is right, he says, in thinking that ‘when we say a thing is good we do not *merely* mean that we have towards it a certain feeling, of liking or approval or what not.’ Indeed ‘ethical judgments claim objectivity’; that is they purport to tell it like it is. In the jargon of contemporary meta-ethics they are *truth-apt*, that is, the kinds of expressions that are *either* true *or* false. However, this ‘claim [to] objectivity ... makes them all false’. Since there is no property of goodness corresponding to the linguistic predicate ‘good’, nothing can ever possess it. Hence, any claim that friendship or anything else is *good* will be false,

since there is no such thing as goodness for friendship or pleasure to be. The same goes for badness. Since there is no such property as badness, lasciviousness or wanton cruelty cannot literally be *bad*, and all claims to the effect that they *are* bad will be false. Moreover, if there is no such thing as goodness or badness there is no such thing as rightness either, since for an action to be genuinely right it must be such that it can reasonably be expected to produce more good and less evil than any alternative. But if there is no such thing as goodness to be produced, no action can be expected to produce more of it than any other. Of course, an action can still be *relatively* right: more likely to produce more of what somebody *believes* to be good and less of what somebody *believes* to be evil than any alternative. But no action can be *genuinely* right or *genuinely* obligatory, since there are no such properties as goodness or badness for conscientious agents to maximize or minimize.

Thus far this is very like the error theory of J.L. Mackie. . (See 'Mackie (1946) and Mackie (1977), ch. 1.) Even the arguments that led Russell to give up on the Moorean good are very like the arguments that led Mackie to give up on moral properties generally. Mackie, like Russell, rejects naturalism. Thus for Mackie, as for Russell, it's a case of non-natural properties or nothing. And since there are no non-natural properties, there are no moral properties either. Mackie, like Russell, is bothered by the 'relativity' of moral judgments, the existence of widespread and deep-seated disagreement in moral opinion. (Not all moral disagreement can be put down to differences about the best means to achieve agreed on ends. We differ both *in principle* and *in practice*.) For Mackie, as for Russell, this disagreement is due to the fact that there are no moral properties to agree *about*. If there were moral properties that affected us in some way, then we might expect an emerging consensus. The absence of consensus suggests the absence of moral properties. Mackie, like Russell, thinks that moral properties are redundant in the explanation of moral belief. Since our moral beliefs are due to psychological and cultural causes, there is no need to posit moral facts to explain our alleged perceptions. But there is a twist. For Mackie, as for Russell, 'good' is a meaningful predicate even though there is no property corresponding to the word. But Mackie, unlike Russell, is unfazed by this fact. So far as Mackie is concerned, meaningful predicates that refer to non-existent properties pose no particular problems. It is otherwise for Russell. For Russell, we can only talk meaningfully about *non-existent* things if they are defined in terms of what *does* exist. Indeed, we can only talk about non-existent things if they

are defined in terms of things with which we are acquainted.

According to Russell, it 'seems natural to infer, as Moore did, that, since propositions in which the word "good" occurs have meaning, the word "good" [itself] has [a] meaning.' This, however, is a 'fallacy'. Even though 'good' can appear in meaningful sentences it does not have a meaning of its own. This is very puzzling. What does Russell mean when he says that 'good' has no meaning? And why is Moore's view dependent on the thesis that it does?

Let us start with Moore. As I understand the Open Question Argument, a key (unstated) premise is this:

3\*) The meaning of a predicate [such as 'good' or 'is good'] or a property word [such as 'goodness'] is the property for which it stands. Thus if two predicates or property words have distinct meanings they name distinct properties.

Moore takes it for granted that the meaning of a predicate is the property for which it stands. Hence, if there were no property of goodness corresponding to the word 'good', 'good' would be meaningless. Since 'good' is quite obviously *not* meaningless, the corresponding property is guaranteed. Thus we move from an obvious semantic fact - that 'good' is plainly meaningful - to a much more contentious metaphysical claim - that there is a corresponding property of goodness. What greases the wheels of this transition is the apparently innocuous assumption that if a word like 'good' is to mean something, there must be some *thing* which it means. If this doctrine were true, then the objections to objectivity discussed in the last section would fall to the ground. The very fact that we can *talk* meaningfully about goodness would show that there must indeed *be* such a property. It might be causally impotent and metaphysically queer, but the fact that we can discuss it would entail that we were stuck with it anyway.

To the end of his life Russell believed

## 10. Human Society in Ethics and Politics

## 11. Conclusion

We started out with Russell's rather adverse verdict on his own writings on theoretical ethics: 'I am not, myself, satisfied with what I have read or said on the philosophical basis of ethics. I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values, but I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don't like it' (*RoE*: 165/*Papers* 11: 310-11). And we can see in a sense that he was right. Every meta-ethic that he developed – the desire-based theories of the 1890s, his variant of Moore's non-natural objectivism, the error theory of 1922, the emotivism that was his dominant view from 1913 until the end of his life and the rather confused naturalism of *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* – all of these theories are unsatisfactory: despite their merits, they all seem, in their different ways, to be subject to serious, perhaps insuperable, objections. But although Russell's writings are, in this sense, unsatisfactory, this does not mean that they are worthless. Meta-ethics is a difficult subject and it is hard to get right. And if we ever *are* to get it right, we must learn from those, like Russell, who got it interestingly and instructively wrong. In the course of his long philosophical career, Russell canvassed most of the meta-ethical options that have dominated debate in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries – naturalism, non-naturalism, emotivism and the error-theory, even, to some extent, subjectivism and relativism. And though none of his theories quite worked out, there is much to be learned from meditating on his mistakes. Nor is this all. His *arguments* as well as his *theories* are often interesting and instructive. As we have seen, the ethical corollary to the argument of 'Seems Madam? Nay, It Is,' puts the kybosh on any attempt to resolve Sidgwick's Dualism of Practical Reason by arguing that although we are distinct beings with different interests in the world of Appearance, we are, in Reality, all one (§3). Russell's arguments against objectivism, sketchy though they are, are often quite powerful, and one anticipates the famous and influential argument of Gilbert Harman's, that there is reason to doubt the existence of objective values since they lack explanatory power (§8). Russell's damning critique of Moore's analytic consequentialism led Moore to abandon the view and perhaps to give up his 'unduly anti-reforming' moral conservatism. Moreover, if I am right, Russell's *indirect* influence on meta-ethics has been quite profound: the Open Question Argument, fabled in song and story, was invented to deal with Russell's 'desire-to-desire' theory of 1897. Finally, in the realm of normative ethics, Russell developed a sensible and humane version of

consequentialism, which (despite its rather shaky meta-ethical foundations) is resistant, if not immune, to many of the standard criticisms, especially if combined - as Russell thought it should be combined - with a healthy dose of political skepticism. It avoids the conservative and anti-reforming absurdities of Moore, without endorsing certain cruelty in the present for the sake of uncertain future gains. It therefore provides a useful tool of social and political criticism, a tool which Russell vigorously employed on a vast range of topics in his voluminous writings on practical ethics.

Indeed, I should emphasize that, lengthy as this entry is, I have said virtually nothing about the vast bulk of Russell's writings on moral and political topics. If we are to judge by his literary output, Russell was much more interested in social and political questions and the rights and wrongs of war and peace than in abstract questions of ethical theory. There is some doubt, however, about whether this vast mass of material qualifies as philosophy. Russell himself was inclined to think that it did not. His popular books, he said, were 'not [written] in [his] capacity as a "philosopher" ... but as a human being who suffered from the state of the world, wished to find some way of improving it, and was anxious to speak in plain terms to others who had similar feelings.' (Schilpp (1944) pp. 730-731/*Papers* 11, pp 55-56.) This was largely because in his more austere moments, Russell subscribed to a restricted conception of philosophy which tended to exclude his own writings on practical ethics and political theory. For a time this conception caught on, with the odd result that Russell's writings on politics and practical ethics have been largely neglected by philosophers even though they no longer subscribe to the strict conception of philosophy that tended to rule them out. (I suspect that another factor in this neglect is that Russell, who really wanted to change the world, addressed his writings on practical ethics to a non-philosophical audience, unlike many of today's practical ethicists who endeavor to make a difference by writing articles in learned journals which are only read by other philosophers as politically impotent as themselves. If it's a best seller and easy to understand, it cannot be serious stuff.) But the days of disciplinary strictness are long gone. Our current conception of philosophy (like that of earlier philosophers) is much more inclusive than Russell's. Practical ethicists can discuss just and unjust wars, the status of women or the pros and cons of socialism, abortion or euthanasia without feeling that they have strayed outside the confines of philosophy. (See Pigden (2003) for an extended discussion of

the issues.) Judged by these relaxed standards, Russell wrote more about moral and political philosophy than he wrote about anything else. *The Cambridge Companion to Bertrand Russell* lists 58 books that Russell published during his lifetime (some of his shorter, more pamphlet-like productions being omitted). Of these, by my count, *twenty-three* are wholly or partly concerned with practical ethics, but only four are devoted to the philosophy of mathematics (though one of these is the three-volume blockbuster *Principia Mathematica* which it took Russell and Whitehead about ten years to write). The series of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* is expected to run to thirty-three fat volumes, each containing about 400 pages of text (exclusive of the excellent editorial material). Of these, eleven are devoted to technical philosophy, and twenty-two are devoted to Russell's journalistic writings. Even if we exclude half of this as too ephemeral, too journalistic or too topical count as philosophy, this still leaves us with upwards of four thousand pages mostly devoted to practical ethics. Some of this is now out of date, as when Russell is arguing for causes, such as women's suffrage, which have triumphed over the grater part of the world. (Though the fact that we all officially believe in toleration does not stop us from reading Locke on the topic.) It would be simply impossible to discuss this huge mass of material adequately in a less than book-length study. There are, in fact two such studies: Alan Ryan's (1988) *Bertrand Russell: a Political Life* and Philip Ironside's (1996) *The Social and Political Thought of Bertrand Russell*. Of these, the first is much better than the second. Ryan's book is a good, brisk, entertaining survey of Russell's social and political thought, relating his writings to his life as an activist and part-time politician. Though evidently an admirer of Russell (his preface might have been subtitled 'I was a teenage Russell-geek'), he manages to achieve the right kind of critical distance. Ryan gives you a good idea of what Russell thought, why he thought it, and what (if anything) is wrong with what he thought. Ironside's book is a self-consciously 'contextualizing' biography (significantly published in Cambridge's 'Ideas in Context' series), which 'places' Russell in the 'clerisy tradition' of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Matthew Arnold, despite the fact that Russell hardly ever refers to either of them. But then Ironside is not one to let biographical or literary facts get in the way of a good interpretative theory. According to Ironside, Russell (an essentially Edwardian thinker) was an 'aristocratic liberal', not because he was a) aristocratic and b) a liberal - though he was, of course, both of these things - but because he was 'he was concerned above all with the role in society of the exceptional individual', the artist, the writer or the creative scientist. The

Victorian/Edwardian Russell had little real interest in working class political demands and little real sympathy for them either. The working class was going to win in the end and had to be brought round to the side of civilization. This does not sit well with what we know of Russell's political sympathies from 1892 to 1914. Russell's first political act as an adult was an anonymous donation to a miners strike fund (hardly calculated to bring the working-class round to civilized values as opposed to – say – *helping* them). He was in favor of Trade Union rights, the Lloyd George budget (including old age pensions) and minimum wage legislation (an issue on which he would have been prepared to desert the Liberals for Labour had he been in Parliament). Finally he left the middle-class suffragist movement of Millicent Fawcett for the Adult Suffrage group of Margaret Llewellyn Davies (a noted socialist) because 'even *poor* women are human beings' (*Selected Letters* I: 330). I don't want to force a cloth cap onto the Edwardian Russell's head. But all this suggests that his concern for the working classes was genuine, even if distant and perhaps a little patronizing. Ironside, therefore, is not a reliable witness as to what Russell thought. He sometimes gets the context wrong (supposing Russell's views on desire to have been largely derived from his contemporaries such as McDougall and Graham Wallas when Hume and Spinoza were much bigger influences) and even when he gets it right, the context becomes in his hands a kind of embalming fluid, preserving Russell from any taint of contemporary relevance. Anyone who wants to get to grips with Russell's social and political thought therefore would be well advised *not* to read Ironside. Besides, when it comes to Russell's popular writings, there is no real need for an intermediary. His books are easy to get hold of, easy to read, often very funny, and, despite the now dated allusions, easy to understand. Read them yourself and make up your own mind.

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Note: I have listed the editions of Russell's books to which *I* refer. Many of Russell's books have been through several editions with different publishers and the consequence is that pagination is not always uniform. For the most part I use relatively recent (though not the latest) editions by Routledge, for the simple reason that these are the editions that I had to hand. For the original dates and places of publication, see the Bibliography attached to Andrew Irvine's entry, [Bertrand Russell](#).

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