The Moore-Plato Open Question Argument

1. Introduction

Plato’s influence on G. E. Moore’s philosophical thought should be obvious. Moore was a classicist at Cambridge before dedicating himself strictly to philosophy.\(^1\) He studied Plato’s dialogues under Henry Jackson. He admits in his autobiography that:

…after reading parts of Hegel’s works for my Tripos, I never thought it worth while to read any part of his works again. But with regard to Plato and Aristotle my feeling and practice have been different. I have, at intervals, spent a considerable amount of time in reading various parts of their works and trying to learn from them.\(^2\)

In §52 of Principia Ethica Moore endorses the “oyster” or “mollusk” argument against hedonism that Plato deploys at Philebus 20e1-21d5. Moore even provides his own translation of that stretch of Plato’s dialogue and accepts Plato’s (or at least the character Socrates’) conclusions with confidence.

Furthermore, Moore was a leading philosophical proponent of common sense\(^3\)—someone so serious about this philosophical outlook that he successfully influenced Bertrand Russell and others to abandon what was then contemporary British Idealism and certain forms of skepticism.\(^4\) Moore’s common sense philosophical methodology even inspired Wittgenstein in certain ways.\(^5\) But the philosophical positions Moore articulates in Principia Ethica regarding the fundamental moral predicates (e.g., x is intrinsically good) and the

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\(^{1}\) See Moore (1968a).
\(^{3}\) See Moore’s “The Refutation of Idealism”, “A Defence of Common Sense”, and “Proof of the External World”.
natures of the properties they express (e.g., intrinsic goodness) are far from commonsensical. They seem Platonic, or at least Neo-Platonic.

Moore introduces his famous open questions arguments (OQAs) in §13 of *Principia Ethica* in an effort to articulate differences in meaning between the fundamental moral predicate(s) and the descriptive or naturalistic predicates that philosophers have proffered in attempted analyses of those moral predicates. Metaethical naturalists targeted by Moore’s OQAs include the ancient stoics, evolutionary ethicists (Herbert Spencer), those who attempt to analyze the meaning of ‘good’ in terms or desire or approval, and the hedonists: Aristippus, Epicurus, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Henry Sidgwick. Moore then utilizes what many disdainfully describe as a Platonic theory of meaning to argue for the now (at least somewhat) infamous metaethical doctrine that intrinsic goodness is an objective, immutable, mind-independent, unanalyzable, non-natural property.⁶ And that sounds similar in many respects to Plato’s Form of the Good.

I once overheard a specialist in ancient philosophy suggest that Moore’s most famous doctrines in *Principia Ethica* are nothing more than Plato dressed up in early 20th Century philosophical thought. A few others suggested that I investigate the metaethical influences Plato had on Moore, hinting that there is much more Plato in Moore’s *Principia Ethica* than is commonly acknowledged. In fact, Moore’s most famous and influential “open question” passages seem strikingly similar to certain stretches of text in Plato’s *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, and *Philebus*. And several of Moore’s dialectical moves in the axiological portions of *Principia Ethica* seem stripped straight from Plato’s thought. Surprisingly, almost no attention has been paid to these issues in the philosophical literature: A quick search on *Plato*

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and Moore (in abstracts) in the Philosopher’s Index, or a general search using the two names in PhilPapers, reveals nothing dedicated to Plato’s influence on Moore’s metaethics.7

Note that Moore’s OQAs are perhaps the most influential set of arguments in 20th Century metaethical thought.8 The theory of value articulated and defended in Chapter VI of Principia Ethica is one of the most intriguing and in some ways inspirational axiologies of the 20th Century.9 Moore’s metaethical and axiological doctrines continue to enjoy contemporary advocates. But in which respects are they strictly Platonic at the core? Strictly Plato’s?

7 Note that Clark (1980) addresses some of these issues and is cited in the latter half of this essay.
8 Several of Moore’s contemporaries defended various forms of metaethical nonnaturalism—a doctrine Moore himself endorsed—by appeal to OQAs. See Ross (1930): 8, 92-94, and his (1939): 27; the concluding chapter of Broad’s (1930); Broad (1985): 265f; and Ewing (1953): 90f. Bertrand Russell too found the OQAs persuasive, for he admits that he doesn’t disagree with anything in Chapter I of Principia Ethica. See his reviews of Principia Ethica—(1903) and (1904)—for details. Russell would later change his mind, finding metaethical noncognitivism more attractive than Moore’s preferred position. Also see Kolnai (1980) for a slightly more contemporary metaethical nonnaturalist who has been influenced by Moore’s OQAs.


And noncognitivists (those who believe that moral terms do not have semantic meaning components)—as well as those who defend various hybrid accounts of moral terminology—have traditionally used OQAs to fuel their own emotivist, prescriptivist, and expressivist metaethical programs. Ayer uses an OQA to motivate emotivism in Ayer (1952): 104f. While disputing that Moore’s OQAs entail the impossibility of analytic reductions of the meanings of fundamental ethical terms, Stevenson uses an OQA to establish that there is an emotive meaning component of such terms that cannot be captured by their analytic definitions; see Stevenson (1944): 272f and his (1963): 15, 30, 134. Hare adopts an altered version of an OQA to bolster a prescriptivist metaethical program in his (1952): 81-92. And recent writers use Moore’s OQAs to defend metaethical quasi-realism and metaethical expressivism from naturalistic attacks. See Blackburn (1984): 167-171 and his (1998): 14f. Also see Gibbard (1984): 200-206, as well as his (1985): 6, and his (1990): 11, 16-17, 19-22, 118, and 186.

9 See Regan’s Bloomsbury's Prophet.
In this essay, I investigate the extent to which Plato’s thought influenced Moore’s “open question” maneuvering and the metaethical (as well as metaphysical) conclusions Moore hopes to draw from it. After extracting and presenting an anti-hedonistic OQA from §13 of *Principia Ethica*, I investigate conceptually similar passages in Plato’s *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, and *Philebus*. Then I explore these questions: To what extent did Plato’s thought influence Moore’s metaethical theorizing in *Principia Ethica*? Is Moore merely embracing and promoting Plato’s argumentation and subsequent conclusions? Or does Moore offer something new, something different, something that goes beyond Plato’s philosophical theorizing in interesting ways? Ultimately, I conclude that Plato’s influence on Moore’s metaethical theorizing is radically underappreciated. I end by considering some hypotheses regarding the extent to which Plato should be credited for Moorean portions of the contemporary metaethical landscape.

2. Moore’s Anti-Hedonistic OQA

Consider this rich portion from the second subsection of §13 of *Principia Ethica*:

It is very natural to make the mistake of supposing that what is universally true is of such a nature that its negation would be self-contradictory: the importance which has been assigned to analytic propositions in the history of philosophy shews how what seems to be a universal ethical principle is in fact an identical proposition; that, if for example, whatever is called ‘good’ seems to be pleasant, the proposition ‘Pleasure is the good’ does not assert a connection between two different notions, but involves only one, that of pleasure, which is easily recognised as a distinct entity. But whoever will attentively consider with himself what is actually before his mind when he asks the question ‘Is pleasure (or whatever it may be) after all good?’ can easily satisfy himself that he is not merely wondering whether pleasure is pleasant. And if he will try this experiment with each suggested definition in succession, he may become expert enough to recognise that in every case he has before his mind a unique object, with regard to the connection of which with any other object, a distinct question may be asked. Every one does in fact understand the question ‘Is this good?’ When he thinks of it, his state of mind is different from what it would be, were he asked ‘Is this
pleasant, or desired, or approved?’ It has a distinct meaning for him, even though he may not recognise in what respect it is distinct.

Moore is, initially, considering the inference people might be liable to make from a “universal ethical principle” to a proposition about the identity of what Moore calls “notions.” To illustrate Moore’s idea clearly, we can interpret Moore’s sentence “whatever is called ‘good’ seems to be pleasant” as

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GP: \forall x (x \text{ is good} \supset x \text{ is pleasant}).
\]

And we can interpret Moore’s “identical proposition” that “Pleasure is the good” as

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P=G: \text{The notion of pleasure is identical to the notion of goodness.}
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Moore worries that the conceivable truth of GP will convince people to identify the notion of pleasure with that of goodness, thus leading them down the path of metaethical naturalism, the view that fundamental moral predicates can be defined exclusively by way of some combination of purely naturalistic expressions and that moral properties are natural properties. It is in response to this possible inference that Moore presents his anti-hedonistic OQA.

Here is the explicit target of Moore’s anti-hedonistic OQA:

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BH: x \text{ is good } =_{df} x \text{ is pleasant}.^{10}
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Now consider a couple of Moore’s questions.

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Q1: \text{Is pleasure pleasant?}
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Q2: \text{Is pleasure good?}
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\(^{10}\) BH stands for a metaethical version of Benthamic hedonism: “Now, pleasure is in itself a good: nay, even setting aside immunity from pain, the only good: pain is in itself an evil; and, indeed, without exception, the only evil; or else the words good and evil have no meaning. And this is alike true of every sort of pain, and of every sort of pleasure.” From Jeremy Bentham’s *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. (Chapter X, § 2, paragraph X.)
How the term ‘pleasure’ in these questions might best be interpreted is a controversial matter. In fact, these questions seem to have a Platonic flavor. Q1 reminds of the self-predicating feature of Plato’s Theory of the Forms as it is articulated and defended in Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* but criticized in Plato’s *Parmenides*. (We will take a look at a “self-predicating” or “property” interpretations of these questions shortly.)

Q1 and Q2 as they stand seem to be formulated in a somewhat confusing way, owing to Moore’s inconsistent usage of the term ‘pleasure’. Sometimes Moore uses ‘pleasure’ to refer to a notion, a *type* of feeling of which all particular experienced pleasures are instances. He uses ‘pleasure’ in this way in the formulation of his “identical proposition” P=G above, suggesting these potential interpretations of his questions:

- **Q1**: Is the notion of pleasure (or: the property pleasantness) pleasant?
- **Q2**: Is the notion of pleasure (or: the property pleasantness) good?

But at other places he uses the term ‘pleasure’ as the nominative counterpart of the predicate ‘x is pleasant’ and is thus using the term to “refer” to all pleasant things.

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11 Richard Fumerton notes how unusual these questions are and also explores ways to provide charitable interpretations of Moore’s thoughts in his (2007): 230.

12 See *Symposium* 210e3-212b1 and *Phaedrus* 250d1-e4. Plato’s earliest exposition of this self-predicating position might occur at *Protagoras* 330c-331c. Also see (the character) Parmenides’ “third man” criticism of the forms at *Parminedes* 132a1-133a4 and the discussion of the forms of knowledge and truth at 134a4-c1.

13 Moore held what might be called “the distinctive feeling” view of pleasure: the view that pleasures are certain feelings that may differ in intensity and duration but are phenomenologically uniform. To experience a pleasure, on this view, is to experience the so-called distinctive feeling of pleasure to some intensity, for some duration. The distinctive feeling view of pleasure is carefully described and perhaps justifiably rejected by Fred Feldman in his (1988).


15 I do not, at present, have an analysis for the half-empty schema: Term, t, is the nominative counterpart of predicate, P, iff. . . . But I do have an intuitive idea about how these nominative counterparts of predicates are supposed to work. Consider the following questions:
Clarification of Moore’s intentions is required to generate a charitable interpretation of his questions. If we interpret Moore as referring to the notion of pleasure with his use of ‘pleasure’ in the questions, as he does in the construction of his “identical propositions,” then the questions turn out to be very unusual, and, moreover, unsuited to do the work that Moore has in mind: Properties themselves, or concepts, just are not bearers of intrinsic value. What theoretical purpose could be served by questioning whether the notion of pleasure is pleasant, or good? Questioning whether or not predicates such as ‘x is good’ or ‘x is pleasant’ are applicable to names of notions seems to involve some kind of category mistake. Notions (or properties) are simply not of the kind of thing that can be intrinsically good or pleasant in any straightforward way. Though some of have interpreted Moore’s questions in this way—which seems Platonic or at least influenced by Platonic thought—a more charitable, interesting interpretation is available.

I suggest that the term ‘pleasure’ in Moore’s questions be interpreted as the nominative counterpart of the predicate ‘x is pleasant’. This interpretation can be made explicit by substituting the following questions for Moore’s originals:

Is water wet?
Is chocolate tasty?
Is sugar sweet?

I believe the terms ‘water’, ‘chocolate’, and ‘sugar’ to be the nominative counterparts of the predicates ‘x is water’, ‘x is chocolate’, and ‘x is sugar’, respectively. Nominative counterparts of predicates “refer” to the items that fall under the extension of the relevant predicate. Thus, the “water” question above asks whether the extension of ‘x is water’ is a subset of the extension of ‘x is wet’. Similar interpretations are available for the other two questions.

This is labeled the “Self-Predication” interpretation in Feldman (2005). The referents of some property-refering terms instantiate the properties they pick out; some do not: Solidity is not solid; abstractness is abstract; the property of being easy to analyze is easy to analyze. Cf. Darwall, S., Gibbard, A., and Railton, P. (1992) and Altman (2004), proponents of this Self-Predication interpretation.
Q1: Are all pleasant things pleasant?

Q2: Are all pleasant things good?17

With the proper questions in hand, we can reconstruct Moore’s anti-hedonistic OQA.

Moore’s argument is terse, and unfortunately, not perfectly transparent. But a clear explanation of how it is supposed to work is readily available. First, the notion of an *open question* must be introduced.18 We can say a question is open just in case either (i) it is possible for a person to have a complete understanding of its meaning without knowing the correct answer to it or (ii) it makes sense as something to say as an expression of genuine doubt in a serious conversation.19

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17 My interpretation also seems to be consonant with the following quotation located in Moore’s preface to the (projected but never published) second edition of *Principia Ethica*:

[W]hat I really mean to assert is that G is not identical with any predicate of this particular class, or that propositions which assert of predicates of this class, that what has them has G, are non-tautologous. They suggest, in fact, that G is not identical with any predicates, which are, in a certain respect, like ‘is a state of pleasure’ and ‘is desired’—that it is not identical with any predicates of this sort... (1993b): 11.

18 Interestingly, the phrase ‘open question’ does not occur in what is considered Moore’s most famous “open question” passages: §13 of *Principia Ethica*. Rather, the phrase is introduced in the last sentence of §14:

For we shall start with the conviction that good must mean so and so, and shall therefore be inclined either to misunderstand our opponent’s arguments or to cut them short with the reply, ‘This is not an open question: the very meaning of the word decides it; no one can think otherwise except through confusion.’

This conception of an open question is seemingly the same as Moore’s notion of a “significant question” utilized in the opening passages of §13:

The hypothesis that disagreement about the meaning of good is disagreement with regard to the correct analysis of a given whole, may be most plainly seen to be incorrect by consideration of the fact that, whatever definition be offered, it may be always asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good.

19 The concept of an open question has been described in a number of very similar ways. A question is an open question iff: “it is possible for a person to understand its meaning fully without knowing the correct answer” (Feldman 1978, p. 202); “it is possible for someone to completely understand the question, yet not know its answer” (Horgan and Timmons 1992b:
But whoever will attentively consider with himself what is actually before his mind when he asks the question ‘Is pleasure (or whatever it may be) after all good?’ can easily satisfy himself that he is not merely wondering whether pleasure is pleasant. (§13 of PE)

Now for the argument:

1. Q1’’ is not open.
2. Q2’’ is open.
3. If (1) and (2), then Q1’’ differs in meaning from Q2’’.
4. If Q1’’ differs in meaning from Q2’’, then BH (x is good =df. x is pleasant) is false.
5. Therefore, BH (x is good =df. x is pleasant) is false.

Premise (1) is clearly true. Due to the simple tautologous nature of Q1’’, mere grasp of its meaning (a mere recognition of its syntactic structure) forces an affirmative response.

Premise (2) is tricky, and subsequently, much more controversial than premise (1).

Reflection upon Q2’’, Moore assures us, should somehow indicate the openness of the question. An understanding of its meaning does not force us to provide an affirmative answer.

Other commentators on Moore’s OQAs—including Moore himself in his (1993b)—have eschewed discussion of open questions altogether, preferring to work with the similar, if not identical, concept of a “significant” question (or statement) instead. Most interpretations of Moore’s “significance” involve the concept of a contradiction or a tautology. For example, the question “Are all pleasant things good?” comes out as significant according to many interpreters just in case a negative answer to the question does not imply a contradiction. This sort of employment of the notion of a significant question (or statement) in the construction of Moore’s OQAs can be found in Prior (1949): 2, Ewing (1953): 91, White (1958): 126, and Putnam (1981): 206. Hancock (1960) distinguishes three notions of significance (the second being very similar to the notion employed by the other “significance” interpreters), suggesting that none of them will serve to establish Moore’s anti-naturalist conclusions.
response to it in the same way that the trivial Q1’’ does. In fact, philosophers have provided negative responses to Q2’’.

Premise (3), though not immune from attack, is fairly plausible. It rests upon the principle that two questions differing with respect to which meaning-related properties they instantiate, differ in meaning. If Q2’’ has the property of being open, something that Q1’’ obviously lacks, then the two questions must have different meanings.

Premise (4) is justified by a substitution principle. The only difference between the two questions is that the second instance of the term ‘pleasant’ in Q1’’ is substituted with the term ‘good’ in Q2’’. Thus, assuming a straightforward principle of compositionality, if there is any difference in meaning between the two questions, it must be due to a difference in meaning between the terms ‘pleasant’ and ‘good’. And any difference here obviously entails the falsity of BH: x is good =df. x is pleasant.

20 Compositionality Slogan: “The meaning of a sentence (or question) is a function of the meanings of its parts.”
21 My interpretation here does not avoid controversy. Cf. Pigden (2007) who argues that Moore’s OQAs must establish a metaphysical as well as a semantic thesis. My reluctance to embrace Pigden (2007)’s interpretation is largely due to taxonomical reasons. 1. Moore’s OQAs appear in §13 of Principia Ethica. All of the open question discussion in §13 is about the meanings of various predicates and other terms. And these OQAs are utilized in efforts to distinguish the meanings of ethical terms from non-ethical, descriptive terms. 2. I regard Moore’s OQAs as components in a larger argument for his preferred metaethical position: nonnaturalism. 3. Many philosophers have utilized OQAs similar in structure to the one I attribute here to Moore against versions of metaethical naturalism for a variety of reasons: to undermine purely semantic versions of metatheoretical naturalism, to argue ultimately for some form of metaethical nonnaturalism, or to bolster an emotivist, prescriptivist, quasi-realist, or expressivist metaethical program. (See footnote 8.) My interpretation is compatible with all of these reasons and preserves Moore’s OQAs as salient components in his general argument for the thesis that the predicate ‘x is good’ is indefinable, expressing an unanalyzable concept (or property).

Also: Cf. Kalderon (2004), who writes about Moore’s OQA that: “The immediate conclusion of the argument is that no moral predicate is synonymous with any descriptive predicate.” (269) Feldman (2005) extracts several OQAs from §13 of Principia Ethica, all of
The argument, as stated, is valid, and many take it to be sound (though others argue that it likely suffers from at least one serious flaw). Furthermore, it can now be seen how Moore utilizes OQAs in his general attack upon metaethical naturalism. Moore’s “refutation” of metaethical naturalism rests upon the claim that a successful OQA can be constructed against each and every naturalistic interpretation of the fundamental ethical predicate(s), including non-hedonistic naturalistic efforts like these: x is approved, x is desired, x is something we desire to desire. Coupling this claim with the absurdity of ethical noncognitivism (something Moore believed throughout his philosophical career save for a short time span in the 1950s where he struggled with its appeal) and the belief that “metaphysical” interpretations suffer the same fate as their naturalistic counterparts led to the inference of Moore’s famous doctrine that the predicate ‘x is good’, under the relevant interpretation, is indefinable, expressing an unanalysable, non-natural concept (or property). This I take to be the most charitable interpretation of Moore’s open question maneuvering.

Now we turn to a few of Plato’s dialogues, searching for similarities to Moore’s metaethical (and axiological) maneuverings. We will start with Gorgias before investigating corresponding passages in Protagoras. We will complete our search with an investigation of which are intended by Moore to establish conclusions about the meaning of the predicate ‘x is good’. Also see the interpretation of Moore’s OQA labeled OQc in Fumerton (1990): 71.

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22 I present and defend this interpretation of Moore’s OQA in AUTHOR1. Whether Moore’s OQAs are question-begging, commit its adherents to unenviable positions with respect to the paradox of analysis, or are incompatible with the popular Kripke-Putnam causal theory of reference is carefully investigated in AUTHOR1 and AUTHOR2.

23 Moore presents an OQA against a “something we desire to desire” naturalistic analysis of intrinsic goodness in §13 of Principia Ethica just prior to his presentation of the anti-hedonistic OQA.


25 See Chapter IV of Principia Ethica.
Plato’s *Philebus*, the richest and most mature treatment of pleasure and the nature of the good life in the Platonic corpus.

3. Plato’s *Gorgias*

Plato was keen to distinguish goodness, or the Form of the Good, from natural phenomena like desire, approval, and pleasure. Here is Socrates’ attempt to persuade the sophist Polus that goodness is distinct from desire:

SOCRATES: Hence, we don’t simply want to slaughter people, or exile them from their cities and confiscate their property as such; we want to do these things if they are beneficial, but if they’re harmful we don’t. For we want the things that are good, as you agree, and we don’t want those that are neither good nor bad, nor those that are bad. Right? Do you think that what I’m saying is true, Polus, or don’t you? Why don’t you answer?

POLUS: I think it’s true.

SOCRATES: Since we’re in agreement about that then, if a person who’s a tyrant or an orator puts somebody to death or exiles him or confiscates his property because he supposes that doing so is better for himself when actually it’s worse, this person, I take it, is doing what he sees fit, isn’t he?

POLUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And is he also doing what he wants, if these things are actually bad? Why don’t you answer? (468c4-d8)

Socrates attends to a couple of things here. One is a puzzle about the nature of desire or wanting, a puzzle Socrates pursues further at *Meno* 77b2-78b1.26 The other is an argument intended to distinguish good things from things that are desired or things that are seen as fit.27 Socrates (apparently) succeeds here in distinguishing the concept of being desired (or being approved) from the concept of goodness, eliminating two (rather simple) naturalistic candidates from axiological contention.

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26 Plato seems to be introducing *de re/de dicto* puzzles in these passages from *Meno.*
27 Also see *Republic* 438, a passage Stephen Clark refers to in his argumentation regarding the extent to which Moore is a Platonist. See Clark (1980): 230.
Moore entertains these concerns in *Principia Ethica* and makes similar dialectical moves (as we have just seen): “Every one does in fact understand the question ‘Is this good?’ When he thinks of it, his state of mind is different from what it would be, were he asked ‘Is this pleasant, or desired, or approved?’”  

Socrates attempts to persuade Polus to embrace something like this in the passage from *Gorgias* above.

Plato pursues pleasure next. Immediately after Socrates’ presentation of the metaphor of the leaking jar and the sieve, Socrates launches arguments against the pure form of hedonism endorsed by Callicles.

CALLICLES: Yes, and also having all other appetites and being able to fill them and enjoy it, and so live happily.

SOCRATES: Very good, my good man! Do carry on the way you’ve begun, and take care not to be ashamed. And I evidently shouldn’t shrink from being ashamed, either. Tell me now first whether a man who has an itch and scratches it and can scratch to his heart’s content, scratch his whole life long, can also live happily.


SOCRATES: That’s just how I shocked Polus and Gorgias and made them be ashamed. You certainly won’t be shocked, however, or be ashamed, for you’re a brave man. Just answer me, please.

CALLICLES: I say that even the man who scratches would have a pleasant life.

SOCRATES: And if a pleasant one, a happy one, too?

CALLICLES: Yes indeed.

SOCRATES: What if he scratches only his head—or what am I to ask you further? See what you’ll answer if somebody asked you one after the other every question that comes next. And isn’t the climax of this sort of thing, the life of a catamite, a frightfully shameful and miserable one? Or will you have the nerve to say that they are happy as long as they have what they need to their hearts’ content?

CALLICLES: Aren’t you ashamed, Socrates, to bring our discussion to such matters?

SOCRATES: Is it I who bring them there, my splendid fellow, or is it the man who claims, just like that, that those who enjoy themselves, however they may be doing it, are happy, and doesn’t discriminate between good kinds of pleasures and bad? Tell me now too whether you say that the pleasant and the good are the same or whether there is some pleasure that

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isn’t good.
CALLICLES: Well, to keep my argument from being inconsistent if I say that they’re different, I say they’re the same.
SOCRATES: You’re wrecking your earlier statements, Callicles, and you’d no longer be adequately inquiring into the truth of the matter with me if you speak contrary to what you think.
CALLICLES: And you’re wrecking yours, too, Socrates.
SOCRATES: In that case, it isn’t right for me to do it, if it’s what I do, or for you either. But consider, my marvelous friend, surely the good isn’t just unrestricted enjoyment. For both those many shameful things hinted at just now obviously follow if this is the case, and many others as well. (494c2-495b5)

One stretch in the passage above seems open question-ish, especially the part where Socrates commands: “Tell me now too whether you say that the pleasant and the good are the same or whether there is some pleasure that isn’t good.”

While Plato employs content similar to some of Moore’s questions here, the point might be raised that Moore’s open question inquiries are fundamentally more linguistically oriented than are Socrates’ moves above, that Moore moves philosophically beyond Plato’s dialectical activities in certain respects. Socrates’ inquiry seems essentially axiological, not necessarily metaethical. But recall Moore’s questions (when interpreted most charitably):

Q1’’: Are all pleasant things pleasant?
Q2’’: Are all pleasant things good?

Moore claims that Q2’’ is open, at least partly because philosophers are capable of doubting an affirmative response it. Plato’s argumentation motivates that doubt.

Note further that Moore employs an argument against hedonism almost conceptually identical to Socrates’ “catamite” argument from the passage above in §56 of Principia Ethica:

Common Sense would certainly not think it a sufficient justification for the pursuit of what Prof. Sidgwick calls the ‘refined pleasures’ here and now, that they are the best means to the future attainment of a heaven, in which there would be no more refined pleasures—no contemplation of beauty, no personal affections—but in which the greatest possible pleasure would be obtained by a perpetual indulgence in bestiality.
Yet Prof. Sidgwick would be bound to hold that, if the greatest possible pleasure could be obtained in this way, and if it were attainable, such a state of things would be a heaven indeed, and that all human endeavours should be devoted to its realisation. I venture to think that this view is as false as it is paradoxical.

This passage has more than just a Platonic feel; there is Platonic content in there, content with which Moore was surely familiar. These passages reveal serious conceptual similarities between the lines of thought of these two philosophers.

A final passage from Plato’s *Gorgias* deserves some attention.

SOCRATES: Well, I’ll tell you more clearly. Given that we’re agreed, you and I, that there is such a thing as good and such a thing as pleasant and that the pleasant is different from the good, and that there’s a practice of each of them and a procedure for obtaining it, the quest for the pleasant on the one hand and that for the good on the other—give me first your assent to this point or withhold it. Do you assent to it?

CALLICLES: Yes, I do. (500d7-e2)

Again, we find seemingly open question-ish content here, but we do not yet find the focus on the meanings of predicates (or names) that plays such a prominent role in Moore’s OQAs.

4. Plato’s *Protagoras*

I am inclined to believe (controversionally, I know) that *Protagoras* was likely written after *Gorgias*. Protagoras is “the dramatic masterpiece among Plato’s ‘Socratic’ dialogues.” And like *Gorgias*, the *Protagoras* sees Socrates taking on some of the greatest sophists of his time. Several of the themes articulated in *Gorgias* also play prominent roles in *Protagoras*, but this time in more economic, precise ways. And the development of these themes enjoys more sophistication in *Protagoras* than in *Gorgias*.

“Would you say, Protagoras, that some people live well and others

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29 See Nails (1995) for a compilation of scholarly views regarding the chronological order of Plato’s dialogues. Also see Irwin (2011), who claims—regarding the *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, and *Meno*—that “It is difficult to find clear stylistic or doctrinal grounds for fixing the order of these three dialogues.” (80) Nothing really turns on which dialogue was written first.

30 From the editor’s introduction to *Protagoras* in Plato (1997): 746.
live badly?”
“Yes.”
“But does it seem to you that a person lives well, if he lives distressed and in pain?”
“No, indeed.”
“Now, if he completed his life, having lived pleasantly, does he not seem to you to have lived well?”
“It seems that way to me.”
“So, then, to live pleasantly is good, and unpleasantly, bad?” (351b1-c1)

So far, this passage aligns closely with those just examined from Gorgias.

“Yes, so long as he lived having taken pleasure in honorable things.”
“What, Protagoras? Surely you don’t, like most people, call some pleasant things bad and some painful things good? I mean, isn’t a pleasant thing good just insofar as it is pleasant, that is, if it results in nothing other than pleasure; and, on the other hand, aren’t painful things bad in the same way, just insofar as they are painful?”
“I don’t know, Socrates, if I should answer as simply as you put the question—that everything pleasant is good and everything painful is bad. It seems to me to be safer to respond not merely with my present answer in mind but from the point of view of my life overall, that on the one hand, there are pleasurable things which are not good, and on the other hand, there are painful things which are not bad but some which are, and a third class which is neutral—neither bad nor good.” (351c2-d7)

Here Protagoras employs the very same argumentation against Socrates that Socrates employs against Callicles at Gorgias 494c2-495b5. But Protagoras’ exposition and argumentation are tighter and clearer. The open question-ish content is evident, but theoretical advancement on this front—clear open question content—is immediately forthcoming:

“You call pleasant things those which partake of pleasure or produce

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31 Cf. Republic 505c6-d3:
What about those who define the good as pleasure? Are they any less full of confusion than the others? Aren’t even they forced to admit that there are bad pleasures?
Most definitely.
So, I think, they have to agree that the same things are both good and bad. Isn’t that true?
Of course.
It’s clear, then, isn’t it, why there are many large controversies about this?
How could it be otherwise?
pleasure?”
“Certainly.”
“So my question is this: Just insofar as things are pleasurable are they
good? I am asking whether pleasure itself is not a good.”
“Just as you always say, Socrates, let us inquire into this matter, and if
your claim seems reasonable and it is established that pleasure and the good
are the same, then we will come to agreement; otherwise we will disagree.” (351e1-8)

Socrates’ questions in this passage may be conceptually indistinguishable from Moore’s
questions. And Moore was aware of these passages: He studied them carefully as a classicist-
in-training before returning to them with rich philosophical interests.32 Note that the first step
of Moore’s anti-hedonistic OQA can be stripped straight from this stretch of Plato’s
Protagoras. But there is more. And it is more linguistically-oriented than what we have seen
thus far.

At 352a5 Socrates and Protagoras begin a discussion about the possibility of akrasia,
more specifically: the possibility of someone knowingly doing something that is bad for
himself because he is “overcome by pleasure or pain”. Here is Socrates:

“Right you are. You realize that most people aren’t going to be convinced
by us. They maintain that most people are unwilling to do what is best,
even though they know what it is and are able to do it. And when I have
asked them the reason for this, they say that those who act that way do
so because they are overcome by pleasure or pain or are being ruled by
one of the things I referred to just now.” (352d3-e2)

Now Socrates goes metaethical in his discussion of akrasia, focussing intently on the names
pleasant, painful, good, and bad in his argumentation. If akrasia (of this type) is a real
phenomenon, then the meanings of the words good and bad must differ in important respects
from the meanings of the words pleasant and painful, or so Socrates argues here:

“But even now it is still possible to withdraw, if you are able to say that
the good is anything other than pleasure or that the bad is anything other
than pain. Or is it enough for you to live life pleasantly without pain? If

it is enough, and you are not able to say anything else than that the good and the bad are that which result in pleasure and pain, listen to this. For I say to you that if this is so, your position will become absurd, when you say that frequently a man, knowing the bad to be bad, nevertheless does that very thing, when he is able not to do it, having been driven and overwhelmed by pleasure; and again when you say that a man knowing the good is not willing to do it, on account of immediate pleasure, having been overcome by it. Just how absurd this is will become very clear, if we do not use so many names at the same time, ‘pleasant’ and ‘painful,’ ‘good’ and ‘bad’; but since these turned out to be only two things, let us instead call them by two names, first, ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ then later, ‘pleasant’ and ‘painful.’ On that basis, then, let us say that a man knowing bad things to be bad, does them all the same. If then someone asks us: ‘Why?’ ‘Having been overcome,’ we shall reply. ‘By what?’ he will ask us. We are no longer able to say ‘by pleasure,’—for it has taken on its other name, the good’ instead of ‘pleasure’—so we will say and reply that ‘he is overcome . . .’ ‘By what?’ he will ask. ‘By the good,’ we will say, ‘for heaven’s sake!’ If by chance the questioner is rude he might burst out laughing and say: ‘What you’re saying is ridiculous—someone does what is bad, knowing that it is bad, when it is not necessary to do it, having been overcome by the good. So,’ he will say, ‘within yourself, does the good outweigh the bad or not?’ We will clearly say in reply that it does not; for if it did, the person who we say is overcome by pleasure would not have made any mistake.” (355a2-d7)

If the meanings of the terms good and pleasure are identical, then it may be impossible to articulate clearly a certain species of akrasia. When someone knowingly does something bad for himself because he is overcome by pleasure, he is not—so argues Socrates—doing something bad for himself because he is overcome by the good. That would be “ridiculous”. Socrates is distinguishing axiological from descriptive predicates (or names) here, presenting an argument from akrasia intending to establish that the meanings of axiological predicates are in important respects different from the meanings of a certain class of descriptive predicates. If Socrates’ argument succeeds—if there are important differences in meaning between the two types of predicates—then perhaps those two types of predicates pick out different forms, or express different properties, properties that differ richly in ontological ways.
How similar is this line of argumentation to Moore’s? Extraordinarily similar. But more similarity is yet to come. The *Philebus*.

5. Plato’s *Philebus*

A late-era dialogue, the *Philebus* is Plato’s most mature philosophical inquiry into the nature of the good life and the extent to which pleasure (or enjoyment) plays a role in it. *Philebus* was written after Plato’s *Republic* and *Phaedrus*, dialogues where Plato introduces (among other things) a conception of moral psychology capable of explaining how certain forms of akrasia emerge in people’s behavior. Plato seems to regard the problem of pleasure as one of our most serious moral challenges (or temptations). Much of the *Philebus* is dedicated to inquiry into the nature and varieties of pleasure, and the extent to which certain kinds of pleasures can contribute (or detract) from the value of a person’s life. Plato explicitly employs open question strategies early in the piece.

SOCRATES: Because you call these unlike things, we will say, by a different name. For you say that all pleasant things are good. Now, no one contends that pleasant things are not pleasant. (13a7-b1)

The content of this passage is practically indistinguishable (for any theoretical purpose) from content in the following passage from §13 of *Principia Ethica*. Compare:

…if for example, whatever is called ‘good’ seems to be pleasant, the proposition ‘Pleasure is the good’ does not assert a connection between two different notions, but involves only one, that of pleasure, which is easily recognised as a distinct entity. But whoever will attentively consider with himself what is actually before his mind when he asks the question ‘Is pleasure (or whatever it may be) after all good?’ can easily satisfy himself that he is not merely wondering whether pleasure is pleasant.

The latter two sentences in the passage from *Philebus* are identical in meaning to the questions Moore employs in his OQA against a hedonistic interpretation of the predicate ‘x is intrinsically good’ in the passage above. The first sentence in the Platonic passage expresses
the thought that there are reasons why we use two different names (or predicates) to describe various things, because we mean different things when using those names; the two names (or predicates) have different meanings, and for good reason. This is precisely what Moore is arguing. These two passages are more than merely conceptually similar. They seem to evidence that Moore utilized straightforwardly Platonic dialectical moves in his OQAs. And this passage from *Philebus* (as well as, perhaps, the stretch of text at *Protagoras* 355a2-d) illustrates that open question-style, metaethical argumentation stretches back to the Golden Age of Athens. Consider one final passage from Plato’s *Philebus*:

> SOCRATES: Philebus says that pleasure is the right aim for all living beings and that all should try to strive for it, that it is at the same time the good for all things, so that good and pleasant are but two names that really belong to what is by nature one and the same. Socrates, by contrast, affirms that these are not one and the same thing but two, just as they are two in name, that the good and the pleasant have a different nature…. (60a6-b3)

The conceptual similarities between Plato’s articulation of the two axiological and corresponding metaethical positions and Moore’s subsequent articulation of the two camps is conspicuous. And it is not even clear to what extent Moore’s argumentation stretches theoretically beyond Plato’s own in any important ways. Plato endorsed the view that some naming practices are superior to others, that a godlike legislator of names would assign names (or predicates) in ways that pick out the forms (or properties) in precise ways.33 One name for each form, never more than one. If we can establish that two different predicates genuinely have different meanings, then the properties (or forms) expressed by those two predicates

33 See Plato’s *Cratylus*, especially 400d4-11. Also see *Philebus* 12b6-c7.
must also differ. Why else would we use two different predicates? That seems to be Plato’s point. Moore’s too.34

Also note this: While Plato was probably optimistic about the possibility of providing an account of the nature of pleasure,35 he seems skeptical about the possibility of providing an account of the Form of the Good. He does not attempt to provide any such account in the latter half of the Republic, the most extensive and concentrated discussion of the Form of the Good in the Platonic corpus. And the author of the Seventh Letter suggests that “the weakness of language” and limitations of the power of human reasoning might preclude complete theoretical knowledge of the nature of the good.36 Moore might have had similar reservations, and it should be noted that Moore’s conception of intrinsic goodness is similar to Plato’s conception of the Form of the Good in interesting respects, for Moore took the predicate ‘x is intrinsically good’ to express an unanalyzable, non-natural property. The Platonic influences on Moore’s metaethics and axiological argumentation are immense.

6. Concluding Remarks

Plato’s influence regarding many of the prominent doctrines and dialectical maneuverings in Moore’s Principia Ethica has not been sufficiently acknowledged. Nor has it been properly appreciated. Moore’s controversial OQAs—celebrated by some, abhorred by others—are strictly Platonic. It even remains unclear to what extent Moore’s open question

34 Note that contemporary philosophers have criticized Moore’s deployment of so-called “turn of the century semantics” in his OQAs. See Sturgeon (1985): 25-26. Lycan goes further, chiding Moore’s argumentation: “…for I suppose that this is what comes of thinking of properties as predicate meanings, pure and simple.” See his (1988): 200-201. Moore’s semantics and philosophy of language seem almost purely Platonic. Also see Moore (1899).
35 A thorough examination of his Philebus should make this clear.
36 See Letter VII 342a1-344b8.
maneuvering extends theoretically beyond Plato’s. And Plato’s influence upon *Principia Ethica* stretches beyond Moore’s metaethics. Striking structural similarities between Plato’s *Philebus* and *Principia Ethica* suggest so much more: open question maneuvering that leads to an investigation of serious puzzles for hedonism (one of which Moore lifts straight from the *Philebus*; he even provides his own translation), which—in turn—motivates the philosophical defense of a pluralistic conception of the good life. And the similarities between the strictly axiological argumentation and doctrines of the two philosophers have barely been touched upon here.

What should we make of all of these similarities? Possibilities of plagiarism may come to mind. Did Moore fail to give Plato his due? It is unclear. Scholarship practices at the beginning of the 20th Century differ from contemporary practices. Plus, Plato was widely read by philosophers and classicists at Cambridge. It just does not make any sense for Moore to engage in sneaky scholarship involving a philosopher he so admired. Could it be that Plato’s language and thoughts influenced Moore in ways that he did not quite understand or appreciate? Possibly. But Moore must have been familiar with the Platonic passages cited in this essay, especially those in *Philebus*. Perhaps Moore thought he was advancing the metaethical dialectic beyond anything we find in Plato. Moore introduces metaethical argumentation with the explicit use of semantic ascent, and Moore does his best to articulate the theoretical positions in the conceptual space of metaethics. He gathers them into families of theories, investigating theoretical challenges to each of them.

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37 Though a case can probably be made that Moore’s open question argumentation is a bit more ambitious than Plato’s: Moore took on a greater variety of naturalistic and supernaturalist (or transcendental) contenders, resulting in a general philosophical confidence that open question strategies could be utilized to undermine any purely naturalistic or supernaturalistic interpretation of the fundamental moral predicates.
A final thought: Suppose we imagine Moore’s open question maneuvering in *Principia Ethica* as a collaborative effort—Plato and Moore as co-authors. How much of the theoretical content should be attributed to each? 60% Plato, 40% Moore? I fear that may not accurately depict the extent of Plato’s contributions. 70% Plato, 30% Moore? That may not give Moore his just due. Somewhere in between? Perhaps.

**References**


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