

Maxims and Thick Ethical Concepts: Reply to Moore

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Adrian Moore's paper continues the development of a radical re-interpretation of Kant's practical philosophy initiated by his *Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty*. [Moore, 2003] I have discussed elsewhere why it seems to me that Moore's work, taken as a composite with that of his co-symposiasts today Philip Stratton-Lake and Burt Louden, adds up to a comprehensive and radical re-assessment of the contemporary significance of Kant's practical philosophy which moral philosophers generally ought not to ignore. [Thomas, 2004] Moore states that he is engaged in today's paper "in a rational reconstruction of Kant sufficiently Kantian to be at least worth taking seriously. But I shall certainly part company with Kant at various points." [Moore, 2005 p. 1] I shall, similarly, not be evaluating Moore's arguments in terms of their fidelity to Kant; that would not be the most fruitful way to engage with his project. It is better evaluated as a free-standing meta-

ethical position that draws on Kant and as a position that seems to me one of the most interesting on offer in contemporary meta-ethics.

Moore's overall strategy has three separable components. First, he accepts that there is no such thing as pure practical reason, as that very idea would violate the *internal reasons constraint*. [Williams, 1981, 1995a, 2001] Second, he makes a concession, which softens the impact of this first admission, to the effect that concept possession in the context of a given social practice has a range of normative commitments including practical commitments. Third, Moore emphasises the continuity between the practical orientation of living by concepts and the general project of making rational sense. It is this latter idea, in particular, that leads his general arguments in his book length study into Kant's religious as well as his moral writings.

On the first point, Moore is simply prepared to work with the idea that a general *contrast* between "reasons" and "motives" is not helpful. This clearly sets him apart from many others who take the undermining of this distinction as central to Kant's moral psychology. Moore argues, by contrast, that properly understood the practicality of practical reasons lies in the fact that the statement that a person has a reason for action has the implication that the reason engages with a conative state of a particular agent. The risk otherwise is that the claim that a reasons statement is true of a person will turn out to be, to use a characteristic Bernard Williams expression in this context, a "bluffing" use of a putative external reasons statement. Such a usage may have an important moral point. It may, for example, make good sense as the guise of an "optimistic internal reasons statement", an important weapon of moral argument. But the general characterization of what it is to *be* a practical reason remains correct – they are all internal reasons. On this

point it seems to me that both Williams and Moore are right. [Thomas, 2002, 2006a] The question is how damaging this is to Kant's account of moral psychology and moral motivation.

One might note at this point Williams's apparently surprising claim that Kant was the limiting case of an internal reasons theorist. [Williams, 1995c, p. 220 note 3] In one sense, of course, this is *not* a surprising claim, given Kant's emphasis on the ideal of autonomy and on the capacity of rational agents to act on reasons that they can endorse from their first personal deliberative perspective. [Skorupski, 2006] But the usual way that the dialectic unfolds is to classify Williams's internal reasons constraint as representative of a Humean account of moral motivation, and thereby as based precisely on a discredited notion of a motive or desire in a way that threatens the authority of moral reasons over other sources of motivation. Williams, clearly, saw things differently: the issue for him was how much one is allowed to build in, a priori, to the very idea of a practically rational agent. [Thomas, 2002] Kant therefore emerges as the limiting case of an internal reasons theorist in the sense that while he offers a reciprocal account of the content and authority of moral reasons and of the psychology of the moral agent. However, under the distorting pressure of that which Williams independently called "the Morality System" Kant was led to moralise his account of moral psychology in a damaging way. [Williams, 1985; Skorupski, 2006; Loudon, 2006]

How serious a problem is it, then, if we re-interpret Kant's account of moral motivation in such a way as to bring it into line with an independently motivated internal reasons constraint derived from the very idea of what it is for a reason to be practical? The answer, from Moore's perspective, is that this concession is *not* very damaging to

Kant. This is so even though we seem to have abandoned a central Kantian claim that reason itself can be a source of reasons independently of any conative states of agents about whom true reasons statements can be made. Furthermore it is Williams himself, by drawing attention to the class of thick ethical concepts, who adds a valuable new idea for those, such as Moore, concerned to defend Kant. For a thick ethical concept *is* a concept such that, when it is used in judgements by the right kind of agent, it has the feature that the judgement as a whole is both responsive to how the world is and gives the agent defeasible reasons for action. This defeasibility is insightfully exploited by Moore in his defence, in today's paper, of a Kantian account of the connection between maxims and laws. *If* there exists a class of concepts of this kind, then given all the background presuppositions of this deployment, we can explain how their deployment is practical. It simply is the case that to undertake to use one of these concepts, to live by that concept, is to undertake a complex set of normative commitments. Among those normative commitments are certain mandated, if defeasible, reasons for action. So, if you want to know how reason can be practical, given the failure of the claim that pure reason can be practical, the answer is "look at our life with concepts". [Moore, 2005; Diamond, 1988]

As Moore puts it:

Practical reasoning, on this reconstruction, includes a pure element: keeping faith with concepts. Theoretical reasoning also includes keeping faith with concepts. What makes it possible for keeping faith with concepts to have a practical dimension as well as its more familiar theoretical dimension is, ultimately, the fact that some concepts—thick ethical concepts—equip those who possess them with certain reasons for doing things. [Moore, 2005, p. 18]

A suitably broadened conception of phenomenology, which extends its scope to encompass all that holistically surrounds life with a given set of concepts, simply exhibits *that we have concepts of this kind*. If we have concepts of this kind, then we can make judgements that use them. If we can make those judgements, reason can be practical even if it is subject to the internal reasons constraint that on any such occasion of use it must engage with a conative state of the agent.

Now if Williams drew attention to this class of concepts he was not prepared to let the issue of their practical objectivity end there and Moore is well aware of this. The other interesting aspect of Moore's overall approach is that he does *not* take the line pursued by Rorty, Putnam, McDowell and Lovibond and argue that we can stop with a phenomenological description of our practices that simply describes, from an internal perspective, how objectivity is constituted for different areas of thought and language. [Moore, 2000] This would give us a "language game internal" ideal of objectivity that applied across the board, whereas Moore, like Williams, argues that we can form a conception of the world that is "maximally independent of our perspective and its peculiarities" that is not language game internal. [Williams, 1985; Moore, 2000] There are some areas of our life with concepts where we use concepts as part of a practice that is concerned with the maximal amount of self-transcendence of our perspective. But that concession to Williams does not, in Moore's view, lead to the idea that we can *contrast* a description of the world from that maximally detached perspective with one from our engaged ethical perspective and use the former to identify the "underlying reality" of the latter. For that would simply be to deny that there are any thick concepts.

Williams himself certainly did not proceed in such a manner: indeed, he appealed to the existence of thick concepts precisely to undermine any two-factor analysis of this kind. The prospects for this kind of projectivist analysis of our concepts, he argued, are very dim. You cannot glue on to the correct social scientific explanation of a practice with a concept a “thin”, non-world guided principle, and thus “work one’s way back”, as it were, to a projectivist analysis. As Williams once remarked, “centralism {the claim that “thin” ethical concepts are explanatorily prior to “thick” ethical concepts} is a doctrine about language and linguistic practice, and there is no reason at all to think that people could substitute for a linguistic practice the term in which that practice was psychologically or sociologically explained.” [Williams, 1995b p. 187]

If there is to be a challenge from Williams, then, to Moore’s attempt to use his appeal to thick concepts to defend the practicality of reason, it will be of a more subtle variety. Moore has himself pointed out that the way Williams’s realism shapes his discussion is by allowing him to express a certain kind of contrast. [Moore, 2006] That is the contrast between the way in which his realism about science allows the possibility of the direct vindication of two apparently incompatible items of scientific knowledge, and the way in which we treat apparently incompatible ethical representations. The latter will turn out to be from the point of view of a given social world, such that we know, from a social scientific perspective, that they play a certain kind of functional role in structuring a given form of social life in one way or another. [Moore, 2006] There is no one way such forms of social life must be structured, and the knowledge that they sustain cannot receive the kind of direct vindication they can receive if the independent, substantial and

autonomous reality underpinning our scientific representations has no direct ethical equivalent.

Moore is equally clear that this approach leaves open that which he calls, following Williams, the prospect of a certain kind of *indirect vindication* of our ethical judgements:

{A} distinction that arises within {Williams's} realism between, on the one hand, directly expressing what members of the community know—that is, what they know through exercise of their thick ethical concepts—and, on the other hand, telling a story that indicates indirectly what they know. The observer cannot do the former because, as someone who lives outside their social world and who does not share the values that sustain exercise of their thick ethical concepts, he cannot himself make use of those concepts. Nor, crucially, does he have the wherewithal to construct neutral equivalents of those concepts On the other hand, he may be able to do the latter. He may be able to understand enough about the community, about their social world, and about its history to be able to see how their use of these concepts enables them to live in that world, and he may be able to say, in the light of that, how their circumstances warrant the exercise of the knowledgeable judgements they make using these concepts. Admittedly, if he does succeed in doing this, he might still not have carved out the same chunk of logical space as they do in making any of the relevant judgements. *But carving out the same chunk of logical space must not be confused with carving out a chunk of the same logical space.* He will have done the second of these, which is all that Williams requires. [Moore, pp. 19 – 20, emphasis added]

Williams seemed to suggest that such a form of indirect vindication was possible, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, drawing on the social phenomenon that he called, there, “confidence”. But it is, it seems to me, not clear how this invocation of confidence by either Williams or Moore is intended to work. [Thomas, 2006a, 2006c] For there is a historical strand to Williams's argument that suggests that the very abstract model of the loss of moral knowledge in the specific conditions of a modern society is intended to model a genuine historical transition. This narrative is a narrative of gains and losses:

modernization has led to the twin phenomena of a corrosive reflectiveness that has put our thick ethical concepts, for any given “us”, on the endangered species list while also leading to an increasing demand for transparency and truthfulness that continues to drive that process of reflectiveness forwards. But nothing, not even “confidence”, is going to restore those thick ethical concepts that are lost, nor offer any kind of guarantee that we will not continue to lose those thick concepts that we currently have.

In what way do these concerns about Williams’s original argument transfer to Moore’s position in today’s paper? Moore seems to suggest, at the end of his description of one version of the “indirect vindication strategy”, an argument of the following general form in his forthcoming paper on Williams’s realism:

The concept of being intrinsically wrong is not itself a thick ethical concept. Its applicability is not ‘world-guided’ in the way that, say, the concept of being a racist is. My conviction that racial discrimination is intrinsically wrong is not an item of knowledge. But—and this is the point—it does enable me to know such things as that Wagner was a racist. The clumsy appeal to the fact/value distinction obscures this. Williams’ more layered view makes it very clear. It also makes clear what kind of thing I need, or more generally what kind of thing we need, if we are to maintain our point of view and continue to have such knowledge, from that point of view. We need confidence. Not that Williams’ realism itself gives us confidence. On the contrary, it contributes significantly to undermining our confidence—not least, by making us aware of our need of it. But that is the predicament that we must learn to face if we are to live in light of the truth, something we have every reason to do. [Moore, 2006 p. 22]

That is, as it were, the general truth of our predicament. But more specific truths, Moore envisages, are possible even if this “disenchanted” view is correct. Even if it is a sociological matter, and not simply an issue of philosophical analysis, to determine the extent to which a given society relies more heavily on “thin”, non-world guided concepts,

it is true that a modern society such as ours *does* rely more heavily on thin concepts. This stock can be bolstered by the remnants of our cultural supply of thick concepts that has survived the corrosive effects of reflection. So we could still know ethical truths, but only if we can draw upon the resources of “confidence” that Williams argued was “basically a social phenomenon”. Within a non-objectified ethical life, we could even have knowledge if we could remain “confident” enough to go on with our concepts. Williams later explained his invocation of it as follows:

...What is done by confidence? The answer I had in mind was that, granted the nature of modern societies, we would face a good number of ethical tasks with the help of unsupported thin concepts, and, since there was not going to be knowledge in that connection, it would be as well if we had confidence. [Williams, 1995c, p. 207]

"Confidence" is a social phenomenon in the strong sense that it depends, for its existence, on certain social conditions: we need to live in a certain kind of society. But it does not, itself, play a role in making such a society come into being. Williams's invocation of the concept rests on a background theory of the nature of a modern society, implicit in many of his later arguments.

Confidence is, then, a key concept in Williams's attempt to reconcile us to a life, lived in the light of truthfulness, in "non-objectivist" ethical conditions. Moore tries to bring out, surprisingly for Kant's benefit, the "upside" of Williams's apparently pessimistic narrative. If we can foster confidence in our ethical point of view, then we can retain a commitment to unshakeable convictions, such that racism is wrong, while recognising that this is not knowledge. But in the light of that conviction we can know

particular things. And this entire account places us in the position of living in the light of truth. We can view our relations between reflection and practice as transparent, and the authority of morality and the conviction we attach to it as a matter of, to borrow a Rortyan term, collective solidarity.

However, I am not convinced by this more optimistic strategy as Williams's own version of the indirect vindication strategy is acceptable only if we can avoid the disaster scenario whereby the corrosive reflection of modern societies leads us to lose our thick evaluative concepts. However, as Williams sets up the problem, it seems to me an inevitable conclusion that what is lost is lost and cannot be recovered by cultivating the social phenomenon of confidence. The crucial point here is that Williams envisages the survival, at the reflective level, of *some* ethical knowledge. We have less ethical knowledge than we took ourselves to have, but we retain some, and these resources are bolstered by the invocation of confidence. As Bernard Yack has pointed out, a characteristic of recent philosophical discussions of modernity is that it is treated as a total concept, contrasted monolithically with “pre-modern” understandings of what it is to be modern. [Yack 1997] But, on a more historically and sociologically nuanced view, modern practices and ideologies exist alongside pre-modern equivalents. Williams’s global account of a modern society as reliant on thin concepts plus redemptive confidence is challenged by his own, more nuanced acknowledgement that we still possess considerable amounts of ethical knowledge that relies on “thick” concepts.

Confidence is, then, essentially a supplementary device to these resources of ethical knowledge. But, as Jeremy Altham has pointed out, it is precisely this scenario that makes the invocation of confidence so puzzling. [Altham, 1995] If we have some

knowledge, made possible using thick ethical concepts, how can we also have other ethical commitments sustained not by knowledge but by confidence? The combination looks unstable because Williams pressed confidence into two incompatible roles: to supplement thin, non-world guided commitments in their application and also, when we have thick concepts, to give us confidence in continuing to be committed to them when we know that others have incompatible sets. But Altham's argument, which I think is a very good one, is that if we have knowledge, we have no need to bolster it with confidence. If we don't have knowledge, we do need confidence. But the situation we cannot be in is that of having some knowledge and bolstering it with confidence while at the same time replacing our "lost knowledge" *with* confidence. Confidence is being called upon to play two very different roles that seem clearly incompatible. They can both be called "knowing how to go on" with our concepts, but this is envisaged in two contrasting and ultimately incompatible ways.

I think these problems about the role of confidence in any strategy of indirect vindication are also problematic for Moore's attempt to use Williams's ideas to re-state a Kantian view of the practicality of reason. Now Moore says that he "intend to put {this} notion {of a thick concept} to work in a way in which {Williams} never does." But let's look once again at the best case scenario where we accept the existence of principles "that are not items of knowledge, but allow one to know particular things". We are clearly in the situation of "chastened realists". But where, I would ask, in *this* Moorean picture are "thick" ethical concepts? Practical objectivity was secured, in spite of the failure of pure reason to be practical, by their existence. It was secured by seeing how, as Moore puts it, our concepts can withstand, on occasions of their use in judgements,

rational challenges. These challenges lead to internal development that keeps faith with the fact that these are the concepts we live by. But if we do retain them after such rational scrutiny, is not how we may go on with their development at least as dependent on their world guidedness as their practicality? And if we lose them, can we retain the practicality of judgements without those very conceptualizations that made “world guidedness” and “action guidingness” available within one and the same judgement? My concern, summarily put, is that if the strategy of indirect vindication rests on an appeal to confidence, it is going to fail. And if it fails, then we cannot see ourselves as in a situation where we have principles, which are not knowledge, in the light of which we know particular things, without invoking those thick conceptualizations that secure moral cognitivism alongside the practicality of judgement. And if those thick conceptualizations are simply not available, both Moore and the cognitivist are in serious trouble. Moore has, after all, abandoned pure practical reason as an independent source of justification for these “thin” principles, that, combined with confidence, sustain particular claims to knowledge such as “Wagner was a racist”.

Recall that a key part of Moore’s strategy in today’s paper, in explaining the relation of maxims to laws, is to introduce an important condition, namely, that the adoption of any maxim is not a requirement of reason in the sense that *any* rational person is bound to adopt it but that he or she is bound to adopt it *if she possesses the thick ethical concepts required to do so*. So perhaps I am merely pointing to a further condition on this condition: that the availability of this strategy is itself hostage to the availability of such concepts and that the indirect vindication strategy to which Moore is committed is an unreliable means of recovering such concepts once they have already been lost.

Let me conclude with the questions that seem to me to arise from Adrian's highly original and challenging work. First, is it possible to employ the strategy of indirect vindication and still to appeal to thick concepts, supplemented by the resources of confidence? The second, and related, point is whether in appealing to how we might see our lives with concepts as developing we need to emphasise the world guidedness of those thick concepts as much as their inherent practicality. Strictly speaking, of course, it is the judgements in which those concepts are used by appropriately receptive agents that both gives us defeasible reasons and that are responsive to the feature of "world guidedness". The third question is whether, as Williams seems in his more apocalyptic moments to suggest, this approach is simply historically too late. Or is it, indeed, that very historical situation that leads Moore away from the world guidedness of thick concepts to a greater emphasis on the "thinner" ideas of indirect vindication in the light of those principles "that are not items of knowledge, but allow one to know particular things"?

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