32. SINGER, MOORE, AND THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I argue that Marcus G. Singer's attack on Actual Consequence Utilitarianism, as held by G.E. Moore, is inconclusive. Singer contends that Moore's view is incoherent because it cannot provide a criterion of moral rightness and wrongness. Singer makes the historical claim that Moore intended his theory to provide such a criterion and the philosophical claim that any moral theory must provide such a criterion.

I contend that Singer's historical claim is false. While Moore uses the terms 'criterion' and 'test' in connection with his moral theory, an examination of Moore's use of the terms shows that this notion does not involve the verifiability that is at the heart of Singer's understanding of 'criterion'.

I then argue that Singer's claim that moral judgments be verified begs the question against Moore's realism. I argue that Singer must either reject semantic realism in general or give up the view that moral judgments are objectively true or false.

In "Further on Actual Consequence Utilitarianism" (*Mind*, 1983, XCII), Marcus G. Singer contends that Actual Consequence Utilitarianism, as advocated by G.E. Moore, is incoherent because it cannot provide a criterion or test of moral rightness and wrongness. Singer contends both that Moore expressly claims that Actual Consequence Utilitarianism does provide such a test and that any moral theory that cannot provide such a test is incoherent. I think that, by examining both the historical and philosophical claims, the issues that divide Singer and Moore can be brought into sharper focus. In so doing I think it will become clear that Singer's case against Actual Consequence Utilitarianism is seriously incomplete.

In "Actual Consequence Utilitarianism: A Reply to Professor Singer" (*Mind*, July 1978) I had argued that Actual Consequence Utilitarianism was advanced by G.E. Moore as a theory of what it *is* for an action to be right or wrong and that it was a central feature of Moore's view that

there is a fundamental distinction between what it is for an action to be right and epistemological considerations about how we can know that an action is right. Singer rejects this historical claim:

> Moore thought 'results the *test* of right and wrong'. It is clear then that Moore never had any idea of presenting a moral theory that would be only a theory about what it is for an action to *be* right or wrong and would have nothing to do with ever *knowing* whether an action is right or wrong. Such a theory would not provide a *test* of right or wrong, 'a *criterion* of what ought or ought not to be done'. Thus the distinction between 'the order of knowing' and 'the order of being' is altogether spurious in just this context. It ignores the order of testing, which is essential for ethics, and cuts across this in this context spurious distinction. (*Mind*, April 1983, vol. XCII, 273).

The historical question turns on what Moore meant in holding that Actual Consequence Utilitarianism provides a 'criterion' or 'test' of right and wrong. Singer evidently understands the notion of a 'criterion' or 'test' to include what I shall call 'applicability in practice'. When I say of a criterion that it is *applicable in practice* I mean something like this:

> If C is a criterion of A, then not only is it true that if we knew C was present we would thereby know that A was present, but also it must be possible to find out (or know with 'the requisite degree of certainty'), at least in some cases, whether or not C is present.

On Singer's understanding, a criterion or test of rightness must be such that we can, at least sometimes, apply it in order to *conclusively* verify the claim that some action is right. Now Moore concedes that, on the Actual Consequence version of Utilitarianism which he advocates, it may be that we can never *know for certain* whether an action is right or wrong.[1] In view of this fact, Moore's position would be ridiculous if he meant by 'criterion' what Singer means.

Whatever may be true of the terms 'criterion' or 'test' in ordinary language, or in their technical uses by other philosophers, as Moore uses these terms their meaning does *not* include the notion of applicability in practice. While Moore does not explicitly define these terms in his *Ethics* (1912), he does so in writings whose dates of composition are quite close to the date of composition of *Ethics*. In a course of lectures delivered in 1910-1911, and published in 1953 as *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, Moore tells us what he means by a 'criterion' or 'test'. The context is a discussion of truth, but it is reasonable to suppose that what he says applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to rightness:

> By a criterion or test of truth we mean, then, a property which is always present where truth is present, and never present where truth is not present; so that *if we could discover in any particular instance* whether the property in question did or did not belong to a belief, we should be able to judge from this, whether the belief in question was or was not true.[2]

Note the hypothetical sentence in which the epistemic terms 'discover' and 'judge' are embedded. On Moore's account, to say that C is a criterion or test of A is to say merely that *if* we could discover whether or not C was present we could then judge whether or not A was present. Of course, this hypothetical can be true even if we can in *no* case discover whether or not C is present. Thus, Moore does not hold that, in the sense defined above, a criterion or test must be applicable in practice.

In connection with Moore's use of the terms 'criterion' or 'test', it should be noted that Moore expressly leaves open the possibility that the property that is the criterion and that of which it is the criterion may be one and the same. Thus, in the discussion of truth in *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* Moore ventures the opinion that correspondence with the facts is not only the criterion of truth, but the very meaning of 'truth'.[3] That Actual Consequence Utilitarianism provides not merely a criterion, but the very meaning of 'right' and 'wrong' was Moore's view in *Principia Ethica* (for example, when he says ". . .to assert that a certain line of conduct is, at a given time, absolutely right or obligatory, is obviously to assert that more good or less evil will exist in the world, if it be adopted than if anything else be done instead."[4]) and there is no evidence of a change in this position in *Ethics*. Thus, despite Moore's use of the terms 'criterion' and 'test', there is no doubt that he took himself to be giving an account of what it *is* for an action to be right or wrong and not an account of how we can verify (much less *conclusively* verify) that an action is right or wrong.

As we have seen, Singer's requirement that a moral theory provide a criterion of right and wrong that is applicable in practice amounts to the requirement that moral judgments be verifiable. Indeed, since Singer's complaint against Actual Consequence Utilitarianism is that on its account of such matters judgments of right and wrong would be merely probable, not certain, Singer's demand is that moral judgments be conclusively verifiable. In effect, Singer holds a verifiability criterion of significance for moral judgments. Singer's verificationist approach is evident in his contention that 'the order of testing' cuts across the distinction between the order of knowing and the order of being, at least in the context of ethical theory.

As is well known, one of the cornerstones of Moore's philosophy, at least after 1900, is the articulation and defense of metaphysical realism. It is characteristic of a realist metaphysics to insist that *what* we can assert (that is, the *content* of our judgments) outstrips what we can verify. For a realist, significance is a matter of the truth–conditions of a judgment, not its verification conditions. To hold, as Singer does, that

> In this context there is no point to any such distinction [as that between the order of knowing and the order of being] because no way of ever making it out. . .For moral theory . . .it is unmeaning. (Singer, *loc. cit.*, 24).

is precisely to reject realism (at least 'in the context of moral theory') in favor of verificationism.

The scope of Singer's verificationism is unclear. Singer explicitly restricts his insistence on the primacy of 'the order of testing' to the

context of moral theory, evidently thinking verificationism required by
the ultimately *practical* nature of ethical inquiry:

> A moral theory is for the guidance of human beings, who
> are not omniscient beings. A moral theory that implies that
> whether an action is right or wrong is something that 'only
> God knows' is in so far forth incoherent. (Singer, *loc. cit.*,
> 273-271.)

However, it is not clear that this restriction of the scope of one's veri-
ficationism is altogether intelligible. Consider the following argument--of
whose spirit, at least, I think Moore would have approved.

1.   We say of moral judgments that they are true or
      false as we do of such other judgments as 'The cat
      on the mat', and 'Two plus two equals four.' (Let us
      call such judgments as the latter two, however they
      may differ in other respects, non-moral judgments.)

2.   If one accepts a verifiability criterion of significance
      (i.e., of *possible* truth or falsehood) for moral judg-
      ments, such that it makes no sense to say of a moral
      judgment that it is true or false unless it can be
      known to be so, one understands the notions of
      truth and falsehood, when applied to moral judg-
      ments, in a way that essentially involves verifiability.

3.   If one does understand the notions of truth and
      falsehood, when applied to moral judgments, as
      essentially involving verifiability then one must also
      adopt   a   verifiability   criterion   of   significance
      (possible truth or falsehood) in the case of non-
      moral judgments or hold that the terms 'true' and
      'false' are equivocal in their applications to moral
      judgments, on the one hand, and to non-moral
      judgments on the other.

    A metaphysical realist, who rejects verifiability as a *general* criteri-
on of significance, who also holds that moral judgments are objective--
are true or false in the same sense as non-moral judgments are--would
offer this argument as a refutation of the restricted verificationism at
the heart of Singer's attack on Actual Consequence Utilitarianism. But I
do not offer this argument in the spirit of refutation. Rather I offer it
to show that Singer's claims ought to be more radical than those he ex-
plicitly makes and to show that his case against Actual Consequence
Utilitarianism is far from complete. If the above argument is sound,
then Singer must either adopt a verifiability criterion of significance for
moral and non-moral judgments alike or he must hold that moral
judgments are not true or false in the same sense as that in which non-
moral judgments are.[5]   (Of course, both of these positions have been
held.) If he adopts the first alternative, the success of his argument
against Actual Consequence Utilitarianism would depend on the success
of his defense of verificationism against the realist view--still very
widely held, as it was held by Moore--that what we can assert outstrips
what we can, even 'in principle' verify. If Singer adopts the second
alternative (of which I find no hint in his article), it is fair to ask him
for an account of the logical status of moral judgments--that is, an ac-

count of the meaning of 'true' and 'false' when applied to moral judgments. Again, the success of his attack on Actual Consequence Utilitarianism would depend on the success of his account of the logical status of moral judgments.

The rejection of realism at the heart of Singer's position is assumed without argument. In the absence of a reasoned defense of a verifiability criterion of significance, either in general or as a feature of the special logic of moral judgments, an Actual Consequence Utilitarian-- who is bound to reject verificationism in favor of realist semantics--may well feel that the central question has been begged. I conclude that Singer has not yet made out his case against Actual Consequence Utilitarianism, and that the most fundamental issues relevant to its evaluation are yet to be addressed.

ENDNOTES

[1] G.E. Moore, *Ethics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), 120.

[2] G.E. Moore, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1953), 282-283. Italics added.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 25.

[5] There is some evidence that Singer would adopt the first alternative, in his persistent tendency to assimilate probably true judgments of what the consequences of an action would have been to judgments of what the consequences of an action probably would have been. While Singer now seems to recognize that the two sorts of judgments have different truth conditions, he seems to think that they essentially come to the same thing. This assimilation would be explicable on the assumption that Singer adopts verificationism as a general approach to meaning. For while the two sorts of judgments have different truth conditions, their verification conditions are the same.