

This book review by Thomas D. Carroll of A. W. Moore's *Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty: Themes and Variations in Kant's Moral and Religious Philosophy* (London and New York, Routledge, 2003), has been published in *Heythrop Journal*, 46/4: 609-611, 2005, and is available in its final form at <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.2005.00272.x>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Use of Self-Archived Versions.

Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty: Themes and Variations in Kant's Moral and Religious Philosophy. By A. W. Moore. Pp. xx, 249, London and New York, Routledge, 2003, d55.00/\$96.95.

A. W. Moore's recent book, *Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty*, provides a creative and critical exploration of some Kantian themes in the problem of how human beings can make ethical sense of their circumstances. Through the text, Moore considers the truth and security of what he calls 'the Basic Idea': the idea 'that there is a *nisus* in all of us, more fundamental than any other, towards rationality' (p. xviii). Moore recognizes that addressing the rationality of human beings is a different project in the early twenty-first century than it was in the late eighteenth. Defending the Basic Idea must now include awareness of the human condition as informed by sociobiology, Marxist and Freudian analyses of religious faith, and awareness of the social nature of language. Reflecting on the difficulties for human rationality that emerge from understanding human evolution and cultural pluralism, Moore recalls Bernard Williams' argument that without the teleology of a pre-Darwinian worldview, 'there is no orchestral score provided from anywhere according to which human beings have a special part to play' (cf. p. 10).

Yet Moore seeks to retain the Basic Idea despite Williams' call for the removal of this idea from contemporary ethical thinking. Inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Keith Ansell Pearson, Moore borrows the format of 'themes and variations' from modern classical music and adapts it to philosophical inquiry. In an illuminating quotation, Ansell Pearson writes in a

Deleuzean vein: '[There] is never any finality in nature or evolution, but only a musical expression of nature involving explication, implication, and complication . . . [We] are to become those that we are: musicians of nature and artists of our own cultivation' (ibid.). In musical variation, a preexisting theme is abstracted from its original source and 'repeated several or many times with various modifications' (Elaine Sisman: 'Variations', *Grove Music Online* edited by L. Macy [Accessed 24/11/2004], <http://www.grovemusic.com>).

A variation is ambitious because it is offered as both commentary and original work. In the history of music, the variations format has a mixed reputation, being criticized for *ad hoc* compositional choices. Despite this criticism, many composers and audiences have found this format to be illuminating and expressive. Moore's use of the format is effective significantly because of his careful, systematic thinking. However, because of this fact, his book is difficult to read in a straightforward manner; it must be studied. Indeed, after an initial reading of the text, I found it more natural to cross-reference sections the book.

Moore's goal is ambitious: he develops a case for the reasonableness of moral objectivity. Moore selects three Kantian themes for exploration: morality, freedom, and religion. The chapters developing these themes are fairly straightforward critical explorations. Following each thematic chapter is a counterpart chapter offering a variation on the theme. The chapters on morality are the longest and most developed, perhaps belying a shared agenda for Kant and Moore of exploring and shoring up the foundations of moral objectivity. An important variation Moore makes early in the text is to explore so-called 'action-guiding concepts': concepts that give their possessors a reason for acting in certain ways (e.g., the concept of a promise, cf. p. 39). That a person holds some action-guiding concepts and not others is linguistically, socially and historically contingent. By focusing on action-guiding concepts, Moore recognizes the diversity of cultures from which moral agency emerges.

The chapters on freedom explore Kant's initial attempts to correct the antinomy of freedom and necessity. The two hundred years that separate us from Kant further complicate this problem. Modern psychology, especially when following the evolutionary paradigm, seems to confirm the unsettling thesis that freedom, if human beings have any, consists in consent to what would have happened anyway. Despite these problems, Moore seeks to provide some rational support for the Basic Idea. While the truth of the Basic Idea cannot be conclusively established, Moore identifies practical reasons for accepting it. This practical rationality of the Basic Idea leads directly into the third theme: religion.

While Kant's conception of religion is famously, some would say infamously, constrained within the limits of mere reason, he opened up an avenue for faith while taking seriously the scepticism of Hume. Moore does not maintain Kant's postulates of practical reason exactly as they stand, but he intuitively feels that similar postulates must be proposed. Indicating – albeit somewhat ambivalently – the need for belief in God, Moore writes:

No-one . . . can avoid adopting, towards the contingencies that enable us to make sense of things, something *like* an attitude of faith, some kind of combination of belief and trust and hope. For there is no proof, no *a priori* guarantee, that these contingencies will continue to hold (p. 171).

It may be that Moore does not need to postulate the existence of God; philosophically, it may be adequate to postulate that human beings possess biologically hard-wired dispositions to be social animals with capacities for language use. Still, it is good to be reminded of this basic trust humans have in the intelligibility of the material and social world.

Moore's arguments are stimulating in a philosophical era characterized by renewed emphasis on cultural difference. Moore's conclusion-oriented ethical objectivism allows for both rationalism and conceptual pluralism. Furthermore, scattered comments in the book

connecting rationalism with new discoveries in the cognitive and biological sciences promise an exciting story to be filled in, hopefully, in future work. A project as ambitious as Moore's leaves some critical perspectives unaddressed. One such question has to do with power and conclusion-oriented objectivity. A standpoint epistemologist might argue that the quest for universality all too easily can lead to epistemic imperialism. Is ethical objectivism a precondition for flourishing in our culturally plural yet economically and technologically connected world, or might the quest for universalism itself be an obstacle to the achievement of mutual (but differentiated) flourishing? Moore may have not found this topic essential to his variation on Kant's theme of hope; nevertheless, the topic is a salient theme in much contemporary discussion of rationality. For some readers, additional variations on these Kantian themes may address the issues not addressed by Moore. For others, the ad hoc criticism of the themes and variations format may be compelling. However, Moore's playful, yet careful, experiment in interpretation reminds readers of the continuing relevance of Kant's thought for our own philosophical moment, and for this Moore's work should be admired.

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