

Travels in the History of Philosophy: A Dialogue with Adrian W. Moore

Eric Sancho-Adamson
Keele University

Descartes once wrote that conversing with those of other ages and travelling are almost the same thing. It is fair to say that Professor Adrian W. Moore's philosophical project has thoroughly been influenced by his conversations with those of other ages, that is, to extend Descartes's simile, by his ample travels in the history of philosophy. I shall proceed to illustrate with an example Moore's mode of engagement with this history. Despite ultimately rejecting it, Moore considers transcendental idealism a serious alternative to his own stance (e.g., in Chapter 6 of *Points of View* (1997)). Thus, Moore has had a long-standing commitment to reasoning through Kant's transcendental idealism and identifying what he considers to be its inherent inconsistencies. This equips him with an understanding of Kant's thought, which in turn deepens and enriches his own philosophical project. Indeed, in general, the historical philosophers Moore engages with are recast as *topoi* within his arguments. Yet, the special issue of *Public Reason* you are about to read underscores the other side of this engagement, that is, not – at least not primarily – how the history of philosophy exerts its influence on Moore's thought, but rather how Moore interprets the history of philosophy.

The articles in this special issue discuss Moore's account of what Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein had to say and what insights they made possible for the succeeding development of philosophical thought. Either as senior established scholars or as junior upcoming scholars, all authors of the articles featured herein have substantial expertise on the philosophies of the figures mentioned above and the surrounding intellectual periods. This puts them in a unique position to add to, to discuss, to agree or disagree with, and to challenge Moore's writings as well as each other's. As the articles are written in a way that maximises this kind of dialogical exchange, a word about how this arrangement came to be is in order.

The idea for this special issue of *Public Reason* originated from the 2019 edition of the 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau' Annual Lecture and Annual Conference, organised by the Keele-Oxford-St Andrews Kantian (KOSAK) Research Centre,¹ featuring Adrian W.

1] The 2019 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau' Annual Lecture and Annual Conference hosted at Keele University on the 2nd and 3rd of July, 2021. It was organised by the Keele-Oxford-St Andrews Kantian (KOSAK) Research Centre, jointly with Keele's Research Centre for the School of Social Sciences (at the time, School of Social, Political and Global Studies) and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Office. The 'Rousseau' events usually take place at the end of November, occasionally moved to March, the following year. The 2019 events were initially scheduled for March 2020, but, with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, they were postponed in the hope that they could be organised in-situ, and eventually took place online in 2021.

Moore as invited ‘Rousseau’ Annual Lecturer. Moore’s writings, including his lecture ‘Armchair Knowledge: Some Kantian Reflections’,² became the subject of discussion in the ensuing ‘Rousseau’ Annual Conference. In addition to capturing the ideas first discussed in the aforementioned conference in a more refined form (plus some new ideas), this special issue of *Public Reason* has also inherited the majority of the event’s participants as well as its structure.³ Namely, it consists of four thematic duos: each set of two articles treat one topic related to Moore’s research, with each second article commenting on the first. The special issue, as did the conference, then closes with a response from Moore to every contributor.

In the preamble to his replies, Moore draws attention to a unifying concern of the special issue, namely, “the concern with limits and with what is involved in recognizing and acknowledging them” (106). To this, I would add several other recurring topics. A first one involves tracing philosophical problems back to their inception, namely, showing them as arising from attempts to grasp modality and unrestricted totalities from the finitude of the human perspective. A second one is the relevance and implications for moral and practical philosophy, especially salient in the articles by Jennifer Bunker, Pablo Montosa and Zachary Vereb. Ultimately, what I take to be the main overarching theme of this special issue is something that has already been mentioned: an interpretative, multi-faceted dialogue on the history of philosophy.

1. DESCARTES ON THE DIVINE CREATION OF ETERNAL TRUTHS

Sarah Patterson is a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Birkbeck, University of London. Her article, ‘Descartes on Modality and the Eternal Truths’ (11-25), examines Descartes’s particular way of reckoning with the philosophical problems associated with the doctrine that all truths, including necessary and eternal truths such as those of arithmetic, were created freely by God. One presentation of the problem is as follows. While these truths are eternal and necessary, insofar as they depend on God’s will, and God’s will is not determined or dependent on any further thing, it appears that God could have willed them otherwise, in which case they would not be necessary. How is the Cartesian approach to be interpreted? One possibility is expounded in Moore’s 2020 paper ‘What Descartes Ought to Have Thought About Modality’. Patterson underscores both what is enlightening and what she deems problematic in Moore’s account, which hinges on Moore’s suggestion to take Descartes’s anthropocentric formulation of the possible as that which does not conflict with our human concepts.

²] The paper has subsequently been published as Chapter 1 in Moore’s book *The Human A Priori* (Oxford, 2023).

³] An exception is Jack Coopey’s (Durham University) original commentary to Jenny Bunker’s article, which was presented at the ‘Rousseau’ Annual Conference but did not make it into this special issue. We are very grateful to Jack Coopey for his original commentary in the conference and to Pablo Montosa for stepping up in his stead.

Patterson lauds Moore's conception as making Descartes's doctrine intelligible, but points out that this advantage comes at an expense: Moore holds that some of Descartes's conflicting statements – e.g., in his letters to Arnauld and Mesland – are to be regarded as “lapses”. Patterson's article develops an alternative account of Descartes's position which needs not make this move. Patterson's account pivots on the Thomistic solution to the problem of the creation doctrine, and is constructed on the basis of three of Descartes's conceptions concerning God: (i) omnipotence, (ii) indifference and (iii) the dependence of the eternal truths on God.

Jonathan Head is Lecturer in Philosophy at Keele University. Jonathan Head's 'Divine Simplicity and Freedom in Descartes - Comments on Sarah Patterson "Descartes on Modality and the Eternal Truths"' (26-30) starts by identifying the main proposals that are argued for in Moore's and in Patterson's writings on Descartes, with the intent of tackling the same central problem. Head attributes voluntarism to God in Descartes's account, maintaining the dependence of the creation of eternal truths on God's will while indicating that God could not have created things in another way. Head's response is cast on a point of contention with both Moore and Patterson. Patterson's Descartes reconciles the apparently conflictive statements from the letters to Arnauld and Mesland, and thus these need not be written off as lapses. Yet, Head notes, they are not taken at face value either. Head's reading of Descartes takes the conflictive statements in the letters to Arnauld and Mesland at face value, neither writing them off as lapses (as Moore does) nor translating them into a more palatable form (as Patterson does). Rather, Head's strategy is to show that the contradiction that Moore and Patterson attempt to circumvent exists only in appearance. The key to the compatibility that Head proposes is Descartes's commitment to divine simplicity.

2. NIHILISM AND THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF THE INFINITE IN SPINOZA, HEGEL AND NIETZSCHE

Jennifer Bunker is a Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Roehampton. Her contribution is titled 'Infinity and Beyond? Learning How to be Finite' (31-45). On the occasion of the 2019 third edition of his first book, *The Infinite*, Bunker discusses Moore's “reassessment”. The reassessment in question appears in the wholly new Part III of the book and consists of two final chapters. Chapter 16, in Bunker characterization, develops Moore's own account of the ethical and existential dimension of the infinite, the transcendent and God, an account which is formed on the basis of his “renewed” interpretation of the history of philosophy. In particular, the arch of Moore's narrative traces the historical development of how the metaphysical infinite is reckoned with from Spinoza to Hegel to Nietzsche, underscoring their respective ability to answer the nihilistic challenge “So what?”. Moore furthers his argument in Chapter 17. In this chapter the interpretation of the above philosophers continues with an added undercurrent: a dialogue held with both Wittgenstein and Deleuze. In

a nutshell, Bunker portrays Moore's position as advocating for a continual exercise of making the following two tenets fit with each other, with our human outlook on the world and our finite existence in it: (i) the inevitable nonsense of our claims about the transcendent and (ii) the inherent meaningfulness of the concerns that brought us to make said nonsensical claims. Key to this is the Kantian notion of a regulative ideal and Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing. After providing an explanation of Moore's conclusion to his book, Bunker starts with the other purpose of her article: she interrogates Moore. The first two questions she poses are directed to Moore's interpretation of the history of philosophy. The last two questions Bunker aims at Moore's own position. All four of Bunker's questions, although clarificatory, are by no means superficial: they are incisive, bearing upon the heart of Moore's project.

Pablo Montosa is a PhD Candidate and Assistant Professor of Philosophy at University of Barcelona. His article 'Learning How to be Infinite' (46-51) raises a series of objections to Moore's Spinoza from *The Infinite*, taking his cue from the first of Bunker's questions to Moore. While fundamentally agreeing with Moore's emphasis on the existential and ethical dimensions of the infinite in Spinoza's account, Montosa is concerned that Moore's interpretation suffers from an "inability to explain the differentiation of Spinoza's modes in a purely positive way" (47), which ultimately leads to an interpretation of the distinction between the substance and its modes that differs from Spinoza's. To argue this point, Montosa hones in on the distinction between "differentiation" and "delineation", noting (following Bunker) that in Moore's reading of Spinoza, finite bodies are a product of delineation, as a Cartesian sort of divided extension. But, then, Montosa points out, finite bodies are only described in terms of negation as privation, a strategy that fails to define them, and supervenes on a previously presupposed differentiation among them. To correct this, Montosa proposes developing a point that Bunker also suggests, namely, understanding finite bodies as being intrinsically relational. A second theme Montosa raises is the relationship between Spinoza's relativity of values and nihilism (understood as remorse and contempt of the world). Spinoza, in Montosa's reading, holds that nihilism arises from a particular instance of inadequately considering modes as substantial, namely, when it comes to judgments of value. According to Montosa, Moore appears to be reading Spinoza the other way around: the relativity of values, Montosa holds, does not lead to nihilism, but rather is its antidote.

3. KANTIAN REFLECTIONS ON KNOWLEDGE AND CONCEPTUAL LIMITS

Sorin Baiasu is a Professor of Philosophy at Keele University. Sorin Baiasu's paper, 'The Possibility of Kantian Armchair Knowledge' (52-75), is a response to Adrian W. Moore's 'Armchair Knowledge: Some Kantian Reflections'. Baiasu's article casts light on one of Moore's main points in his lecture: the assertion that Kant's transcendental idealism cannot solve the puzzle of "armchair knowledge" without contradiction.

Baiasu does not intend to redeem Kant of all the potential problems in his philosophy, but to show that “there are resources in the Kantian corpus to clarify the significant conflicts Moore thinks Kant ends up with.” (53) Assuming that there is such a thing as armchair knowledge (knowledge independent from experience), an old philosophical puzzle recurs: armchair knowledge includes knowledge concerning what lies beyond the subject, yet without appeal to any encounter with anything lying beyond the subject. Moore holds that Kant’s solution to this problem (transcendental idealism) runs into another old philosophical puzzle: that of finite and contingent beings (us humans) accounting for knowledge of what is necessary *as* necessary. Building upon the notion of “i-dependence”, Moore’s charge is that transcendental idealism is bound to accept some instances of synthetic armchair knowledge of things in themselves, and thus is incoherent. Baiasu’s strategy for addressing these issues consists of reconstructing them in Kantian terms, namely, on the basis of the Kantian distinction between knowledge [*Wissen*] and cognition [*Erkenntnis*] and furthermore upon the several accounts of cognition that can be distinguished in Kant’s thought. The latter includes cognition broadly understood as an inclusive disjunction of concepts and intuitions (E_M), or as restricted to the conjunction of the two (E_K). Upon these distinctions, Baiasu treats in a detailed and persuasive fashion the analytic and synthetic sides of the armchair knowledge puzzle, the problem of modality, and ultimately the particular instance of synthetic armchair knowledge about things in themselves that Moore thinks Kant is committed to accepting. In its conclusion, Baiasu’s article raises some suggestive ideas regarding Moore’s consideration on whether different subjects can have different pure concepts (Relativised Concept Thesis) and ultimately questions whether we are forced to concede the rejection of Kant’s transcendental idealism.

Zachary Vereb is an Assistant Professor at the University of Mississippi. ‘Kantian Reflections on Conceptual Limits’ (76-83), Vereb’s article, adds some insightful reflections to Baiasu’s objections to Moore and poses an intriguing question: why does Kant’s thought continue to incite revisitation (even if it were wrong)? Vereb largely agrees with Baiasu that certain issues Moore has with Kant would not arise were Moore’s account more sensitive to Kant’s distinctions. Vereb pinpoints some other areas he deems to have been underexplored by both Moore and Baiasu. A first one is the particular notion of “concern” with which Moore says knowledge may concern something, which Vereb sees as in need of clarification. Secondly, Vereb notes that it would be helpful to discuss the rather pertinent passages where Kant portrays the thing in itself as a limit concept. In response to the question about why we keep returning to Kant, Vereb draws on both Baiasu’s and Moore’s writings. First, the question of what is at stake in the Moore–Baiasu debate is addressed via a discussion of Baiasu’s “Metaphysics and Moral Judgement” (2011). On this account, if transcendental idealism is wrong, much of the justificatory underpinning of Kant’s practical philosophy is compromised. Last, Vereb highlights Moore’s idea that even Kant’s errors are philosophically instructive, due to the deep possibilities that they have opened.

4. WITTGENSTEIN'S SENTENCES

Michael Morris is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sussex. Morris's article, 'Nonsense and the General Form of the Sentence' (83-99), discusses the inquiry into Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* initiated in Moore's paper 'The Bounds of Nonsense', whereby Moore proposes a definition and disjunctivist interpretation of sentences. What does this mean? Parting from the familiar tripartite classification Wittgenstein makes between *thoughts, tautologies and contradictions* and *nonsensical pseudo-propositions*, Moore asks what it is that is being classified. While one could understand them as being propositions (in a broad conception of the term), one could also wish to resist considering pseudo-propositions as a kind of proposition. Moore proposes to call them "sentences", defined as those items to which truth-operations apply, and proposes to interpret them according to a disjunctivist theory, namely, as either being truth-valued or merely appearing to be truth-valued, but not as possessing an independent essence of their own that is held in common by the three classes. Morris's article, by further developing Moore's inquiry, is oriented towards answering whether Moore's proposal is faithful to the *Tractatus* and whether Moore's reading transforms our current interpretations of Wittgenstein's text. First, Morris distinguishes several ways in which Moore's disjunctivist view can be held, roughly, as explanatory or as descriptive. Assuming that Moore would hold the explanatory variety of disjunctivism (a point which Moore confirms in his replies), Morris proceeds to compare this disjunctivism with those passages in the *Tractatus* that come closest to supporting it. Out of the exercise of making the two coalesce, Morris reaches several intriguing implications regarding syntax, the priority of external form over internal form, an apparent commitment to idealism, and a potential problem (for Moore) concerning combinatorial modality and representational modality which can nevertheless be solved, Morris suggests, by Wittgenstein's notion of clarity. Morris concludes that "[i]f we take the disjunctivist view to be true to the spirit of the *Tractatus*, I think we end up with our view of the work subtly transformed, although perhaps in a direction which some of us should anyway have anticipated." (97)

Oliver Spinney is a Lecturer in Philosophy at Royal Holloway, University of London. Spinney's 'Truth-Functional Logic and the Form of a Tractarian Proposition' (101-105) comments on Morris's preceding article, arguing that there is a divergence between the path Morris takes Moore's disjunctivist view to lead to and what Moore's position is actually committed to. Spinney describes Morris's account of external form (the capacity of a sentence to be combined in truth-functional combinations) and internal form (the capacity for a sentence's elements to combine with one another) in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Upon Wittgenstein's account of truth-functional combination and his picture-based account of representation, the distinction between external and internal form, Spinney argues, in fact collapses, whereas by contrast Morris claims that external form explains and is prior to internal form. Spinney's article continues

its argument by suggesting that this difference leads to an alternative train of thought about what Moore's disjunctivism commits him to. In particular, under Spinney's account, Moore's position remains both neutral and compatible with regards to realism, idealism, and transcendental idealism.

5. REPLIES

Adrian W. Moore is a Professor of Philosophy, Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Oxford and Tutorial Fellow of St Hugh's College Oxford. His 'Public Reason Replies' (106-130) is divided into a preamble and four parts. Given the interwoven points raised by the thematic couples of articles, in each part of his replies Moore addresses the two of them together: Sarah Patterson and Jonathan Head; Sorin Baiasu and Zachary Vereb; Jennifer Bunker and Pablo Montosa; Michael Morris and Oliver Spinney. I shall restrict myself to mentioning some key observations regarding Moore's replies instead of attempting a précis of its content. A first observation concerns Moore's writing. This is something that all the contributors of this special issue also emphasise: it is described as "subtle" (18), "masterful" (52), "illuminating" (76), "fascinating" (83), as well as "known for its clarity" (38), "depth" (42) and "erudition" (47, 50). It can be said without exaggeration that Moore's replies embody these traits. A second observation is that Moore's replies could have equally borne as title something like 'A Response to my Critics'. This is due to the acute challenges set forth by the preceding articles, whose authors remain unrelentingly aimed at an accurate account of the philosophers they are discussing. They courteously but surely step into the polemicist's shoes whenever they deem it necessary. Finally, a third observation I wish to make is that the responses Moore provides are incredibly thorough and exceedingly satisfying, although it is left to readers (as it should be!) to judge which ones they are ultimately convinced by.

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I would like to end this introduction with a playful idea, something that is possible here (in the text) but was not (in the real-life) 'Rousseau' Annual Conference. At the outset of his 1963 novel *Hopscotch*, the Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar invites his readers to opt for one of two self-consistent page orders for reading the book. Likewise, I suggest an alternative to the front-to-back reading of this special issue, an order I envisage as mimicking the back-and-forth nature of dialogue. First, after reading this introduction, head to the preamble of Moore's 'Public Reason Replies' (106). Then, after reading each thematic pair of articles, I advise immediately jumping to Moore's reply to them. Doing this will render the following page order. First comes the 'Patterson–Head–Moore' thematic block on Descartes (11-15, 26-30, 105-110). Second comes the 'Bunker–Montosa–Moore' thematic block on Spinoza, Hegel and Nietzsche (31-45, 46-51, 117-123). Third, the 'Baiasu–Vereb–Moore' block on Kant (52-74, 75-82, 110-

117). Last, the ‘Morris–Spinney–Moore’ block on Wittgenstein (83-99, 100-104, 123-128). Needless to say, whichever page order one opts for, it is an enormous privilege to introduce this exciting special issue of *Public Reason*, a dialogue on Adrian W. Moore’s contributions to the history of philosophy.

e.sancho.adamson@keele.ac.uk