LOCKE ON MORALITY

Terence Moore

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke makes an extravagant claim: Morality is as capable of demonstration as Mathematics. In the sixth Conversation between the seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke and the student of language Terence Moore, Moore points out that Locke's own arguments on the nature of language demonstrate that morality in a strong sense is not demonstrable. The Conversation then turns to Locke's real concern – ways in which words used in moral judgements might be made less 'uncertain, vague, ambivalent'.

MOORE: Today I want to talk about your boldest, rashest, most foolhardy claim.

LOCKE: That sounds ominous. What do you believe it was?

MOORE: Your claim that Morality was as capable of demonstration as mathematics.

LOCKE: I did say that, didn't I?

MOORE: You did. Not once but several times.

LOCKE: Really?

MOORE: Yes, really. Do you remember, '. . .moral Knowledge is as capable of real Certainty as Mathematicks . . .', 'Morality among the Sciences capable of Demonstration. . . (its) Propositions as certain as any Demonstration in Euclid. . . '

LOCKE: I did say all that, I confess.

MOORE: You even rated studying morality higher than all the other enquiries going on around you into the

doi:10.1017/S1477175611000121 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2011
Think 28, Vol. 10 (Summer 2011)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000121 Published online by Cambridge University Press

natural world, like those of your friend Boyle, claiming that 'Morality is the proper Science and Business of Mankind in General. . .'

LOCKE: I said that because its enquiry concerns how we should live.

MOORE: That makes it important, yes, but you didn't argue, let alone prove, morality was demonstrable.

LOCKE: I did try to put together an argument. Friends pressed me.

MOORE: One close friend in particular, I understand, William Molyneux, was very keen.

LOCKE: William begged me to write a 'Treatise of Morals'. He continued to urge me to do it when he came to stay at Oates. I did warn him I wasn't sure whether I could do it.

MOORE: If it were a treatise on morals we were talking about of course you could produce one. But not a Q.E.D. No one could. I don't believe it can be done. Not only is morality not capable of mathematical demonstration, I'm going to persuade you – to use your own expression – there can be no 'algebra' of morality.

LOCKE: So I was right to give up.

MOORE: No, not at all. What I hope to do is show you that there are steps we can take towards finding ways to reach some sort of agreement on what can be usefully said concerning key words in moral judgements.

LOCKE: You're setting yourself a tough task.

MOORE: But a necessary one. After all, where you and I are in perfect agreement is on the importance of understanding the significance for our lives of the words we use when making moral judgements.

LOCKE: That only makes it an even tougher task!

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000121 Published online by Cambridge University Press

MOORE: Not really. Because what I'm planning is to use your own insights into the nature of words and meanings. You, not me, will be doing the work.

LOCKE: This might be interesting.

MOORE: Do you recall your comments on moral words such as 'Justice'?

LOCKE: Remind me.

MOORE: If you want to check, it was in Book III in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Chapter IX, entitled 'Of the Imperfection of Words'. You wrote; '... moral Words have seldom, in two different Men, the same precise signification ... since one Man's Complex Idea seldom agrees with another, and often differs from his own, from that which he had yesterday, or will have to-morrow.'

LOCKE: Yes, that's what I believe. The meaning of such words is uncertain, vague, ambivalent.

MOORE: Unlike the certainty and precision of numbers: 2 + 2 x 5 has got to equal 20 precisely, definitively. And yet the fact that words excite meanings that are uncertain, vague, ambivalent is a consequence of a more fundamental problem. A problem that is even more grave, irremediable in fact. You spelt it out in our first Conversation.

LOCKE: How did I put it then?

MOORE: Don't you recall our first Conversation?

LOCKE: Not exactly. It was a long time ago!

MOORE: It was then that you persuaded me that the meanings of words are in the last resort located in our own minds. Let me quote you, 'Words, in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them ...'

LOCKE: What else could they stand for?

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000121 Published online by Cambridge University Press

MOORE: Precisely. You repeat it seven or eight times in Book III, Chapter II – a chapter three and a bit pages long! You went on to ask for leave to say that, '. . . it is a perverting the use of Words, and brings unavoidable Obscurity and Confusion into their Signification, whenever we make them stand for anything, but those Ideas we have in our own Minds.'

LOCKE: I do believe the mind is the great creator of meanings for each individual. Each mind takes the words it hears and annexes them to its ideas of the world. Meanings emerge from the complex filtering processes by which each individual mind fuses public words with their private ideas.

MOORE: So meanings are mind-dependent. Each mind making meanings for itself.

LOCKE: It's not the whole story, but mind-dependent will do for the moment. But don't overlook 'secret reference'.

MOORE: 'Secret reference', the tacit assumption we make that the meanings words have for us are the meanings others have in their minds. A useful working hypothesis but not true of course. Sometimes our meanings are the same as other people's, sometimes they're not.

LOCKE: You can see why I believe our use of language begins and ends in imprecision, though the degree of imprecision can vary!

MOORE: I can indeed. It was by following through on your insights into the nature of language, in particular each individual's highly personal relations with words and meanings, that I came to see morality is not capable of demonstration in the way mathematics is.

LOCKE: I accept I may have overstated my point. But it seems you're missing something that's truly important to me. When I claimed Morality was demonstrable it was because I wanted it to be! Wishful thinking you may say,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000121 Published online by Cambridge University Press

but I believe we need a foundation for our moral language. I wanted to be able to establish some certainty of meaning for words like 'Justice' even though I knew, and said repeatedly, 'Words having naturally no Signification' it was going to be difficult to reach agreement.

MOORE: Very difficult precisely because of your radical view of meaning. As you put it in your favoured simile, words are like knots tying the bundle of ideas the Mind collects. Sometimes the knotted bundle one Mind has collected is similar to the collection another Mind has made. But it's rare, perhaps impossible, because of our different experiences of life, for two collections tied by the same knot to be identical.

LOCKE: I know. Nevertheless what I was looking for was some way to get closer to a generally accepted meaning for moral terms such as 'Justice' however difficult. You did read the Chapter on 'Abuse of Words'?

MOORE: Of course. And the ones on 'Imperfections of Words', 'Remedies for the Imperfections and Abuses of Words'. Yes, I read them all several times!

LOCKE: And so, rightly, I persuaded you there could not be an algebra of ethics.

MOORE: You persuaded me precisely because of your repeated insistence that the use of language is both fundamentally and irrevocably subjective. Subjectivity is the cross you have all us language-users bear. It's a heavy cross. And it's this innate subjectivity that will not allow moral codes to be as demonstrable in a strong sense as mathematics.

LOCKE: I'm afraid my arguments persuade me too. That's why I suppose I agree I could never demonstrate morality was demonstrable. I only wished it were.

MOORE: Don't despair. From your own work I believe we can find two grounds for a degree of optimism. The

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000121 Published online by Cambridge University Press

first concerns words and their meanings. Let's work an example to pin the problem down. Take the moral word 'Torture'. For me it excites ideas about inflicting pain, either as a punishment or for the purpose of extorting a confession or information from an accused person.

LOCKE: Those ideas are certainly part of the bundle the word 'torture' ties for me. There's also the question for me of the value of what is gained by torturing an individual.

MOORE: You see, we're already getting somewhere. We're beginning to unravel some of the strands of meaning the word knots for us. Though in Chapter IX you despaired, reminding us, '. . . these moral words are, in most Men's mouths, little more than bare Sounds, when they have any [signification] 'tis for the most part but very loose and undetermined, and consequently obscure and confused. . .' Yet here we are, you and I, learning about our individual bundles tied by the word 'torture' So far 'value' of what is learnt by torturing has not figured in mine.

LOCKE: So you make me see. I suppose if we hadn't discussed our individual strands, we'd never have unearthed this difference.

MOORE: Let's push the example a bit further. Suppose I put the word whose meaning we have been exploring into a moral judgement and claim, 'Waterboarding is torture'. Following your account, though you and I might come to agree on the meaning for us of this moral judgement because we can discuss our individual bundles, I'm pretty sure we would not win universal consent. For some 'waterboarding' may fall within their ideas of what constitute 'torture', for others it may not.

LOCKE: What's 'waterboarding'?

MOORE: There are at least two ways of looking at it. One tries to avoid a moral judgement, the other's morally

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000121 Published online by Cambridge University Press

loaded. The first might run: 'Waterboarding is a form of interrogation of a prisoner to elicit information. It consists of first strapping down a prisoner supine on a board, covering his mouth with a cloth, and then pouring water over his face in a continuous stream. Among other effects, it causes fear of drowning, asphyxiation, rapid heart beats . . .' I could go on.

LOCKE: No, no, you've made your point. The interrogators I suppose believe the prisoner, after such treatment, will yield up valuable information. Hmm! What's the second account?

MOORE: It might run: 'Waterboarding is a form of torture used in interrogating prisoners. It induces terrifying fear of death by drowning. In contrast to submerging the head face downwards in water, waterboarding precipitates an almost immediate gag reflex, causing extreme pain, damage to the lungs, brain damage from oxygen deprivation, lasting psychological damage and, if uninterrupted, death . . .'

LOCKE: Enough of that. Yours I've learnt is a lawful country. Don't you have laws against practices like waterboarding?

MOORE: We have signed up to an international Convention Against Torture. All signatories have agreed they are subject to the explicit prohibition of torture under any conditions. And that's not all. We are also signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its Article 5 states, 'No one shall be subjected to torture, or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.'

LOCKE: So you have international laws against torture. But laws are written in words. And words will require some interpreting, some unravelling of the ideas they excite. Lawyers will be busy!

MOORE: We are back to words knotting bundles. Exactly as you would predict, there are broader and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000121 Published online by Cambridge University Press

narrower construals of 'torture'. In some construals water-boarding is not classed as torture. As you would also expect, given what you wrote about individuals changing their minds about the meanings of moral words, you won't be surprised that signatories behave in the same way. Our own record, for instance, is not impeccable. We are not alone, of course, in shifting our moral position. Governments may declare at time-t waterboarding was legal, then at time-t + 10 years declare it illegal.

LOCKE: Where's this argument taking us?

MOORE: To my belief, or rather hope, that careful analysis of what we each have in mind by 'torture' might lead to an agreement about its meaning.

LOCKE: So you think that if more of us made a more careful analysis of such moral words as 'torture', there could eventually be an agreement on a 'Common Acceptation' of its Signification?

MOORE: I'm hopeful.

LOCKE: I'm sceptical. From where do you draw hope?

MOORE: Your insistence on the need for personal affirmation.

LOCKE: Personal affirmation! I'm sure never used such a ponderous expression. What on earth do you have in mind?

MOORE: True, you didn't use that phrase, but it's from you I realised the importance for language use of personal affirmation. It's where I believe we have to start.

LOCKE: Go on. What's 'personal affirmation'?

MOORE: Do you recall that in the bulk of Book III, 'Of Words or Language in General', you explore the problems of meanings for different categories of words – words for Simple Ideas, 'hot', 'cold', 'sweet', 'bitter', 'hard' ..., words for Substances – 'gold', words for Abstract terms like 'torture'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000121 Published online by Cambridge University Press

LOCKE: That's fair enough. Don't forget Particles. I was pleased with what I wrote about Particles.

MOORE: I won't forget them. But towards the end of Book III you change gear. A change I believe that has gone largely unnoticed.

LOCKE: What change do you have in mind?

MOORE: You shift from exploring the problems raised by the meanings of categories of words to considering the impact the subjectivity of meaning must have for the use of words in sentences.

LOCKE: Example?

MOORE: Let's take your own your favoured example, 'Gold is malleable'. You then correct yourself. You remind us that we should never make statements that sound impersonal, objective. What we should say, you say, is preface the proposition with a phrase acknowledging the limitations of our knowledge. In short we should say, 'What I call "Gold" is malleable'.

LOCKE: Well, that's as much as we really knew, not knowing its essence.

MOORE: But the phrase 'What I call' is a kind of Speech Act – it's personally affirming, making each individual take responsibility, for the truth of a proposition. Without the phrase the proposition appears to affirm a truth: 'Gold is malleable.' With the phrase the proposition is placed, quite properly, within a personal view. That's what I have in mind with the words, making a personal affirmation.

LOCKE: What's a Speech Act?

MOORE: That's for another day. Speech Acts come out of Oxford. Very briefly, when you say something, you do something, as when you promise something, or warn someone, or congratulate them.

LOCKE: Sounds interesting.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000121 Published online by Cambridge University Press

MOORE: Another day. What's important here is you make us see that by introducing a phrase like 'what I call' or say, 'in my view', we avoid making any objective claim. That's what I believe we should do for all moral statements.

LOCKE: Let me see if I've got this straight. Rather than say flatly, 'Waterboarding is torture', you'd have us say, 'What I call waterboarding is torture.'

MOORE: Exactly. That's what you'd have us say.

LOCKE: What makes you believe each of us personally affirming moral statements, provides any grounds for a meeting of minds on what is to count as the meanings of moral terms?

MOORE: Well, for a start, personally affirming invites the hearer to do exactly what we want them to do, ask why. Why do you call waterboarding 'torture'? This should lead to the kind of analysis we were talking about earlier. Some unpacking of the complex ideas the word 'torture' excites in our minds. Find out how far the bundle of ideas the word knots for each of us overlaps, or more likely perhaps, diverges.

LOCKE: You believe that particular process of analysis is what these international conventions should be subject to?

MOORE: All sorts of controversial issues should be subject to it. We should own up to our personal responsibility for what we claim.

LOCKE: But why might that lead to any agreement on their meanings?

MOORE: We share scruples.

LOCKE: Scruples! What's that?

MOORE: Pathological cases aside, I believe human beings share the same moral scruples. Certain

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000121 Published online by Cambridge University Press

behaviours feel wrong. Cruelty, especially to people weaker than oneself, is wrong.

LOCKE: Don't certain behaviours also feel right. Acts of compassion, performing selfless acts, serving others, all feel right. You believe these shared moral scruples provide the raw material out of which we might build a common moral code?

MOORE: Cultures permitting, yes.

LOCKE: That sounds to me like an expression of faith in human beings.

MOORE: Maybe you're right. That belief is part of my faith.

LOCKE: Not demonstrable then!

MOORE: Not as demonstrable as mathematics. No algebra for ethics. But potential grounds for a meeting of minds?

LOCKE: Where human beings' goodwill is concerned I suspect you're even more of an optimist about people than I am. Maybe though William Molyneux was right. We should consider writing a treatise on morals. It could serve as a sequel to 'The Conduct of the Understanding'.

MOORE: I have sometimes thought that the 'Conduct' should have been Book V of the *Essay*.

LOCKE: Maybe. In the meantime I see I'm going to have to re-write my claims about Morality.

MOORE: Not sure I can get a treatise by you published!

Terence Moore is a Fellow in Theoretical Linguistics at Clare College, Cambridge. tm15@hermes.cam.ac.uk

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175611000121 Published online by Cambridge University Press