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Virginia Woolf's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

In spite of her claim for modernity, Woolf's work owes a lot to the Victorian tradition, especially, I will argue, to British moral philosophers. Moral philosophy, from the early Utilitarians to Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics* and Stephen's *Science of Ethics*, will be shown to resonate in Woolf's work. Basing my argument on "On Being Ill", I will show that Woolf re-enacts in an original way the debates over morals and ethics that took place in Victorian times while responding to Moore's philosophy as expounded in *Principia Ethica* and qualifying it, thus paving the way for later 20th-and 21st-century ethical theories.

When Ann Banfield argued in *The Phantom Table*,¹ that the debate about modernism should take into account its revolutionary conception of the objects of sensation and turned to Bertrand Russell's 1914 theory of knowledge to do so, she challenged on the one hand the critics' near ignorance of the Cambridge Apostles' influence on Bloomsbury, and on the other, the "assumption of contemporary understanding of modernism—that the only philosophy of relevance to twentieth-century art and literature is continental."² Following her example, daunting as it may be, I will challenge this last assumption and argue that the philosophy of relevance to the understanding of Woolf's work is not necessarily continental but British.

My purpose here will be to investigate the possible role of philosophers in the shaping of Woolf's ethics, a field which has just begun to be charted. To do so, I will turn to G.E. Moore, Woolf's contemporary and therefore, most obvious and probable influence, as well as to other earlier British philosophers. Indeed, as Todd Avery remarks, the influence of moral philosophy on Bloomsbury is a nearly virgin field³ and it is a field I propose to explore partly—assuming, as Rothenstein did in an unpublished letter to Max Beerbohm, that Woolf is a thinker as well as a writer: "Though she lived in the heart of Bloomsbury she was too

scrupulous a thinker a(nd) a writer to follow the Frys a(nd) Bells in their trips to France to bring back French 'moorls' (sic) for English wear.”⁴

In the line of recent Woolfian criticism which has shown that, in spite of Woolf’s claim for modernity and her desire for a clean break with her predecessors, her work owes a lot to the Victorian tradition,⁵ I would like to trace some possible connections between British moral philosophers and Woolf. Moral philosophy from the early Utilitarians to Henry Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics* (1874) and Leslie Stephen’s *The Science of Ethics* (1882),⁶ the controversy between Sidgwick and Stephen will be shown to resonate in Woolf’s work. Some motifs that recur in Woolf’s fiction will be examined; how they acquire a paradigmatic, almost conceptual value will be analysed as well as the way in which they shape Woolf’s ethics and aesthetics in a dialogic relation to Sidgwick’s philosophy or an ironic one to her own father’s philosophy. Woolf will be shown to re-enact in an original way the debates over morals and ethics that took place in Victorian times while responding to Moore’s philosophy as expounded in *Principia Ethica*⁷ and qualifying it, thus paving the way for later 20th and 21st century ethical theories. Woolf’s work being, as we know, wide-ranging, I will take as a starting-point, and in order to clarify and synthesise my point, an essay that Woolf wrote in 1926, “On Being Ill.”⁸

Woolf and Victorian moral philosophy

“On Being Ill” consists in a defence of illness. In this essay, Woolf remarks that illness has never been a favourite of writers, with a few exceptions like De Quincey or Proust, and calls for “a new hierarchy of the passions” (p. 319) that would pay greater attention to the ups and downs of the body and include illness alongside health. In mock-epic pages, she proceeds to turn illness—what has usually been construed as a disability—into a strength and a valuable state that enables one to look at the world differently. By the end of this essay, illness has

become a metaphor of a new form of reading, of reading against the norm. Woolf's personal experience of illness finds its way into this essay as it does in her fiction and illness as such is turned into an aesthetic position.

Woolf's defence of illness could simply be analysed as an autobiographical reflection or as a form of literary defamiliarisation; it could be analysed in reference to Russell's epistemology, using the tools Banfield provided us with. It has also been read in the light of Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque,⁹ compared to Charles Mauron's theory of aesthetics¹⁰ or read as revealing a masochistic aesthetics.¹¹ I will argue that it can also be understood as a reaction to Victorian moral philosophy, especially to Leslie Stephen's philosophy as expounded in his only and rarely mentioned book of philosophy, *The Science of Ethics*.

Published in 1882, the very year Woolf was born in, *The Science of Ethics* is itself a reaction to what Leslie Stephen considered to be Henry Sidgwick's failure to establish a scientific method in his study of *The Methods of Ethics* (1874). Consequently, Stephen's aim, as the title of his book indicates, was to turn ethics into a science and apply to it the evolution theory. Stephen first connects morality and social welfare, thus following the main tenets of the Utilitarian doctrine according to which "the utility of an action is its tendency to produce happiness; its morality is measured by its utility" (p. 341) (in other words, what is good is what is useful and what is useful is what makes the largest numbers happy). However, he adapts this doctrine. For him, indeed, an action is useful in so far as it produces happiness *and* contributes to the preservation of the human being: morality, he writes, is both "happiness-giving and [...] life-preserving" (p. 340). Stephen thus connects the utilitarian doctrine with the evolution theory or "Stephen marries Darwinism to John Stuart Mill."¹² This leads him to define happiness in terms of health: "the first, most essential, and most sufficient condition of happiness is health— [...] an absence of every disease of mind or body" (p. 389); and he adds: "Happiness is the reward offered, not for virtue alone, but for conformity to what I have

called the law of nature, that law, namely, of which it is the great commandment, ‘Be strong’” (p. 393)¹³—an injunction which may be reminiscent of the Muscular Christianity Stephen illustrated through his athletic feats and above all of Jeremy Bentham’s theory, according to which happiness is the activity of a “healthy mind in a healthy body.”¹⁴

What Stephen defended in his philosophical treatise is close to what he defended in his essay “The Moral element in literature” (1881) where he defines morality in terms of health and immorality in terms of disease.¹⁵ Even through his position as an agnostic, Stephen appears as the spokesman of the moral tradition in English philosophy, believing as he does in good and evil, in a dichotomous and immutable system of values. On the whole, Leslie Stephen’s is a very conventional position, in keeping with his other better-known works.

Bearing this in mind, Woolf’s disquisition on illness can now read as a reply to Stephen’s conception of ethics, a model she must necessarily have had in mind, since she not only had had access to her father’s library but had also been educated along such principles. In her essay, (without ever mentioning his name) she first and foremost voices her disagreement with his main point, i.e. that health and morality (what she calls “law” [p. 325], “the police” [p. 321] or “respectability” [p. 320]) are closely connected and that, as a consequence, health only should be valued. Her criticism comes after that of Stephen’s contemporary, T.H. Huxley, and of G.E. Moore. T.H. Huxley denounced evolutionary ethics as fraudulent and “denied that the Fittest was necessarily the Best” (Annan, p. 284). As for G.E. Moore, he showed that there is “no *logical* connection at all between moral standards and the evolutionary process” (Annan, p. 288). While agreeing with them, Woolf looks at her father’s ethics from a different angle. Rather than denouncing bluntly his evolutionary ethics, she is more interested in vindicating the value of illness. By pointing at some advantages of illness, Woolf shows that health is not necessarily the only positive value. The result is that illness comes out as a state which is as enabling as health, just as in *Mrs Dalloway*, insanity is

explored along with sanity.

From morals to ethics

On the whole, rather than assenting to her father's value judgment and dismissing one state in order to praise the other, Woolf vindicates illness without disparaging health. She praises what her father regarded as moral—even if with tongue in cheek—but also praises what he regarded as immoral and threatening the social organism. She shows the value of health and illness, of pleasure and pain, going against the philosophy of her father as well as of Bentham who held that pain was a drawback and that when pleasure was combined with pain, pleasure was “impure.”¹⁶ Woolf values this very impurity and far from simply reversing categories, she questions the conventional difference between what is supposed to be moral and immoral so that her “new hierarchy of the passions” (p. 319), unlike Shaftesbury's, is a mock- hierarchy.

She adopts a position which, apart from being a threat to her father's authority and to patriarchal values, is a dys-position, as defined by Georges Didi-Huberman,¹⁷ since she displaces the “respectability of health” (p. 320), what is conventionally regarded as good. In other words, she goes against the norm of Victorian moral philosophy, questioning the prescriptive authority of morality and the absolute nature of moral principles. By so doing, she adopts a method which owes more to her father's opponent (and friend), Sidgwick, than to her father. For Sidgwick, whose influence over Woolf is rarely acknowledged, “Conformity to the dictates of the utilitarian principle is what makes right acts right [...]. But the utilitarian principle is not valid by definition. It is valid because it is demanded by our actual moral principles. In a world that was very different from ours, in which very different moral principles were commonly accepted, some other principles might be the independent first principles.”¹⁸ As Schneewind clearly points out, Sidgwick refuses the universality of moral principles, suggesting indirectly that moral principles, because they may differ from world to

world, have a relative rather than a universal value.

This is a point that Moore will come back to, a point which is perfectly relevant in Woolf's case.¹⁹ In chapter V of his book, Moore shows that "[w]hat is a virtue or a duty in one state of society may not be so in another" (p. 222); going beyond Aristotle's ethics, he concludes that "virtues have, in general, no intrinsic value whatsoever" (p. 225) before adding: "it may be possible to prove that a few of the commonest rules of duty are true, but only in certain conditions of society" (p. 230). In the wake of Sidgwick, Moore points here at the lack of universality of the notions of virtue and duty, what he calls "the naturalistic fallacy." Like Sidgwick, he dissociates what is regarded as right in a specific society from what is good in itself. Such a distinction seems to have found its way in Woolf's work, and particularly in her essay where she analyses illness as an unusual disposition and position that break habits of feeling and of seeing; with "the great experience," Woolf writes, "the world has changed its shape" (p. 319). And she shows this unusual disposition is not necessarily bad. There she meets Moore who questions the universality of virtue, which is in fact simply a "habitual disposition" resting on consensus (p. 249). By questioning the necessary association of health with what is good or moral and of illness with what is bad or immoral, she comes to dismantle the opposition of health with illness as well as its related dichotomies: good vs bad, the moral vs the immoral, the beautiful vs the ugly, the mind vs the body, etc., a move that is recurrent in her work. For her, rather than being opposed to each other, these notions are complementary and interconnected: "literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and [...] is null, negligible, and non-existent. On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All day, all night the body intervenes" (p. 318). She thus displays an open mind and adopts an ethical attitude. This is very much in keeping on the one hand with Sidgwick's "most open mind" (Annan, p. 277) which could reconcile what is traditionally opposed, altruism and

egoism especially, (more exactly, universalistic and egoistic hedonism) and on the other, with Moore's ethics.

Moore also highlights the flimsiness of the moral rules on which the Christian system is based since it can only stand thanks to the absence of "a correct judgment of what things are good or bad in themselves—a judgment which has never yet been offered by ethical writers" (p. 230). The authority of a set system of virtues and vices suddenly appears very fragile because its universality is questioned. This signals the moment of entry into ethics, the moment when a shift from morals to ethics took place. And the difference between the two has been phrased most clearly by Gilles Deleuze, though with reference to Spinoza rather than Moore: "Ethics, which is to say, a typology of immanent modes of existence, replaces morality, which always refers existence to transcendent values. Morality is the judgment of God, the *system of judgment*. But ethics overthrows the system of judgment."²⁰

From ethics to aesthetics

If Woolf reenacts in this essay the debates over morals and ethics that took place in Victorian and early Edwardian times, she also seems to respond to G.E. Moore's famous definition, in chapter VI of *Principia Ethica*, of what is, for him, the fundamental question of ethics, i.e. the nature of good. "By far the most valuable things, which we know or can imagine, are certain states of consciousness, which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects. No one [...] has ever doubted that personal affection and the appreciation of what is beautiful in Art or Nature, are good in themselves" (p. 237). These words have usually been retained as providing the connecting link between the philosopher and Bloomsbury. Indeed, Moore is generally said to have deeply influenced the Bloomsbury Group who were enthusiastic about his book, as Rosenbaum reminds us. Woolf herself read the book in 1908 and 32 years later would write, with tongue in cheek, that

it was “the book that made us all so wise and good.”²¹

Moore’s emphasis on “the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects” has also been the vehicle of strictures of the Bloomsbury Group. Indeed, it has been (rightly) commented upon as emphasising a passive form of enjoyment which tends “to idealise a solipsist form of life.”²² And Russell, amongst others, harshly criticised Moore’s supporters for “aim[ing] rather at a life of retirement among fine shades and nice feelings, and conceiv[ing] of the good as consisting in the passionate mutual admirations of a clique of the elite.”²³ What is of interest to us is that Woolf was lumped together with the Bloomsbury Group as a whole and accused of the same things. Baldwin, for instance, in his 1993 preface to *Principia Ethica*, cannot refrain from mentioning Moore’s idealisation of a solipsist form of life without adding a footnote to the effect that “one can read Virginia Woolf’s novel *Waves* (sic) as an exploration of this theme” (p. XXXV n49). He thus becomes the spokesman of a long tradition in Woolfian criticism originating probably in Winifred Holtby in the 1930s²⁴ and which has long presented her as a formalist and an aesthete.

I would like, if tentatively, to reassess the influence of Moore’s ethics on Woolf briefly, still referring to “On Being Ill.” Even if Moore’s definition of good as “the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects” (p. 237) is highly debatable, it has the merit of shifting the definition of good away from morality. Moore, indeed, denounced the fallacious arguments of some of his hedonistic predecessors who identified good with pleasure,²⁵ dismissed the definition of ethics as dealing with the question of what is good or bad in human conduct and launched into an enquiry into what is good, his analytic method. And in his demonstration that the appreciation or consciousness of beauty is more valuable than beauty itself and is good in itself, he brought aesthetics and ethics together.

This will be central to Woolf’s whole work too and is exemplified in the essay “On Being Ill” where illness is used as a vehicle for an enquiry into what is good and what is bad

as well as a metaphor of reading, that is, a joint reflection on ethics and aesthetics. In that respect, we can say that Moore and Woolf go the same way.

In the statement quoted above, Moore acknowledges his debt to Sidgwick who first pointed out that the consciousness of beauty has much greater value than the beautiful object itself; this is, Moore insists, the fundamental truth of moral philosophy and has not yet been recognized: “Prof. Sidgwick was so far right [...] that such mere existence of what is beautiful has value, so small as to be negligible, in comparison with that which attaches to the *consciousness* of beauty” (p. 237). And he adds that, for Sidgwick, the consciousness of beauty is the origin of duty, virtue, human action and social progress, something which, according to Moore, has been overlooked (p. 238).

For Moore, the appreciation of a beautiful object is good in itself. He further argues that aesthetic appreciation includes bare cognition of what is beautiful in the object and some kind of feeling or emotion; this organic whole is good.²⁶ The beautiful is both the result of a consensus and good (“whatever is beautiful is also good,” p. 250), the beautiful being “that of which the admiring contemplation is good in itself” (p. 249). This argument which puts the cult of beauty at the centre of ethics is rather circular and somewhat similar in its circularity to Clive Bell’s definition of “significant form” in *Art*.²⁷

When Moore comes to examine “the pleasures of human intercourse,” he writes that “the appreciation of a person’s attitude towards other persons, or, [...] the love of love, is far the most valuable good we know” (p. 253). The object here being human—i.e., beautiful and of great intrinsic value, “truly good”—emotion and cognition are here also necessary to appreciate it. We are clearly faced on the whole with an ethics of contemplation which lays the emphasis on “the appreciation,” the “enjoyment” of beautiful objects and personal affection, and goes as far as to praise, where personal affection is concerned, indirect pleasure and contemplation at one remove. Moore’s ethics definitely reads as an ethics of passivity.

Such an ethics may not apply so easily to Woolf. In “On Being Ill,” it is true that illness is exalted as being a place where we go alone and can be “irresponsible and disinterested” (p. 321). It stands for the perfect aesthetic disposition: “Illness in its sublimity [...], leaves nothing but Shakespeare and oneself” (p. 325). A quick reading of the essay could conclude to Woolf adhering to Moore’s philosophy of passive contemplation of beauty. However, what Woolf makes clear is that health is as valuable a state as illness. If she insists more on illness, it is because it is an uncharted territory (“a virgin forest,” “unknown,” p. 320) and usually despised but what she asks for is for illness to be set on an equal footing with health. And that is where she begins to differ from Moore (concomitantly meeting, unexpectedly enough, Moore’s first influence, Kant, whom Moore kept criticising²⁸). Woolf, indeed, shows that she appreciates human intercourse in health but not as pure pleasure: if illness breeds a craving for sympathy, health is associated with civilisation, communication, sharing, duty to the others, in other words, with an openness to the other, exchange and commitment. Illness (which is on the side of the ab-normal and the margin) and health (which is on the side of the norm and the centre), passivity and activity, concern for the self and for the other come out as necessarily complementary—(just as in Kant’s concept of disinterestedness contemplation and the *sensus communis* come together).²⁹ The outcome is thus a rather complex situation in which Woolf proposes through her discourse on illness and health, a defence both of passivity and activity whereas Moore lays the emphasis on passivity only. Concomitantly, Woolf retains Moore’s spirit as it appears especially at the end of *Principia Ethica*, where beside “unmixed goods,” he defends “mixed goods.” Holding that illness, while containing some pain, has some value just as health does, is in a way an enactment of Moore’s “mixed goods.”³⁰

Moreover, in the essay, ethics and aesthetics are, in Moorean fashion, brought together through metaphor. Health is used as a metaphor for a traditional form of reading, the reading of the prose “monuments,” like *The Golden Bowl* or *Madame Bovary*, whereas illness stands

for the reading of poetry and minor works. In one case, one reads with one's intelligence, being sensitive to meaning; in the other, with one's senses, being sensitive to "what is beyond [the] surface meaning" of words (p. 324), their "scent" (p. 324), their movement or poetry—a combination comparable to that of cognition and emotion which, according to Moore, go into the appreciation of beauty and which seem to have gone into T.S. Eliot's "re-association of sensibility," the origin of "art emotion."³¹ In the first case, there is an intellectual exchange, in the second, an emotional one as we enter the intimacy of forgotten figures like Louisa Waterford or Charlotte Canning and make them live again. In the end, the two are necessary and complementary, as they are for Moore, but both, unlike Moore's Ideal, are passive and active. Indeed, the enjoyment of beautiful objects is, for Woolf, "a little shocking" (p. 321);³² this shock stirs the recumbent reader into reaction and action just as the writer creates thanks to his "shock-receiving capacity."³³

As in other essays, as in her short stories and her novels, Woolf requires here a passive-active reader, a reader who can be in a recumbent position but also in a vertical one. Representing and foregrounding a passivity that cannot be disentangled from activity has wider consequences if we think of the writer as being also a reader and a critic. Woolf posits a reader/writer who is not locked in an ivory tower but led to forms of commitment through the contemplation and creation of beautiful objects. And beautiful objects, for Woolf, may not mean the same thing as for Moore. For him, what is beautiful is what is considered as such by the greatest number, which leads him to voice a value judgement: seeing beauty in a thing which has no beauty is inferior in value to seeing beauty where beauty really is—it is even evil: "If one emotion is directed to an ugly object, the whole state of consciousness may be bad" (239). Woolf may not agree with such a conventional or hierarchical conception; for her, the ugly and the beautiful may make up a single state of consciousness, even give rise to a moment of being and therefore beauty. Far from supporting a consensual definition of beauty,

she introduces a dissenting note, thus qualifying Moore's initial statement.

Following this comparison, I would suggest that, however modern it may be, Moore's ethics is also, paradoxically enough, partly based on exclusion,³⁴ in the sense that his definition of the beautiful does not allow for dissensus and that only the reception of beauty is exalted while the creation of it is not. Woolf's ethics certainly derives from Moore's and yet seems to be more daring, as if, with the benefit of his work behind her, she could take his logic further while retaining "a very open mind," in Sidgwick's tradition. Her ethics is more daring since it appears to be throughout an ethics of connection and combination: the passivity of illness is indeed creative and on a par with the activity of health; her reader-writer is passive-active and as such, reminiscent of Wordsworth's, especially Wordsworth as read by Leslie Stephen. Surprisingly enough, Woolf departs from Moore to meet her own father and more particularly, his essay on "The Moral Element in Literature" (1881) where he discusses Wordsworth in response to Arnold's essay on the same author and shows that contemplation, for the poet, is a "prelude to action, not a substitute for it" (Annan, p. 321).

"On Being Ill" reads in the end as a paradigm of Woolf's ethics, of her ability to bring together such binaries as illness and health or the self and the other, which could in turn be read as a way of pursuing and rephrasing the 19th century debates over egoism and altruism. On the whole, it is as if Woolf were taking to its logical conclusion Sidgwick's own conception of ethics. Where Sidgwick conceived of ethics in conflicting terms without seeing any rational way of proving one method was better than the other, Woolf brings the two conflicting ethical principles (the duty to do good to others and the duty to seek one's own good) together.

If Moore helps us to read Woolf, we can also say that in some measure, reading Woolf with Moore has been instrumental in long-established misreadings of her work as

experimental and aestheticist. Woolf's ethics may be seen as influenced in some way by Moore but also as reacting in some measure to Moore and taking his logic further while it should also be inscribed within the landscape of Victorian moral philosophy, as reacting against it but also as intimately shaped by it.

On the whole, Woolf adopts the British tradition in ethics, an ethics deprived of transcendence or, at least, doubting it. She counters her father's ethics—a compound of Benthamite ethics and Darwinism—to join the tradition initiated by Sidgwick, pursued by Moore, from whom Woolf departs at some point to signal towards a form of ethics that may be deriving from it and is defended by our own contemporaries in England. Indeed, through her complex relation to the philosophy of her time and Victorian times, she also displays, like Sidgwick, a “most open mind,” enacting a liberating ethical attitude, and as such foreshadows contemporary British theorists' definitions of ethics as “the compromised binary”³⁵ that permits openness and the welcoming of the other. In the end, her ethics may well have contributed to the shaping of today's ethical philosophy and theory.

ENDNOTES

¹ Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table. Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. XI.

² Except for S.P. Rosenbaum's 1971 article, “the first strong case for the importance of Moore's epistemology for Woolf” (Banfield X). See S. P. Rosenbaum, “The Philosophical Realism of Virginia Woolf,” *English Literature and British Philosophy: A Collection of Essays*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1971), pp. 316-56.

³ Todd P. Avery, “Ethics Replaces Morality: The Victorian Legacy to Bloomsbury,” *English Literature in Transition* 41/3 (1998): 294-316. In this seminal article, Avery draws our attention to the general influence of Sidgwick, and therefore, of his antagonist, Stephen, over the Bloomsbury Group but does not examine their influence over the various artists. His starting-point is extremely stimulating; however, he assumes that Bloomsbury's standpoint is an “ethical aestheticism” or “aesthetic ethics” (294). In our own analysis, Sidgwick, Stephen and Moore's influence on Woolf will be made clear but whether her ethics are aesthetic will be discussed.

⁴ Unpublished letter of Rothenstein to Max Beerbohm (1942?), archives of the Clark Library, UCLA.

⁵ See especially, S. P. Rosenbaum, SP, *Victorian Bloomsbury: the Early Literary History of the Bloomsbury Group*, vol. I. (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1987) and Gillian Beer, *Virginia Woolf. The Common Ground* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996).

⁶ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, foreword by John Rawls (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981); Leslie Stephen, *The Science of Ethics* (London: Smith Elder & Co, 1907).

⁷ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, edited with an introduction by Thomas Baldwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁸ “On Being Ill” was first published as a signed essay in *New Criterion* 4/1 (January 1926): 32-45 and reprinted in a shorter version with revisions, as “Illness—An Unexploited Mine” in *Forum* (April 1926). All references are to “On Being Ill,” *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. Vol. 4: 1925 to 1928*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), pp. 317-29.

⁹ Jeanne Dubino, “On Illness as Carnival: The Body as Discovery in Virginia Woolf’s ‘On Being Ill’ and Mikhail Bakhtin’s Rabelais and His World,” *Virginia Woolf: Emerging Perspectives*, eds. Mark Hussey and Vara Neverow, with an introduction by Jane Lilienfeld (New York: Pace UP; 1994), pp. 38-43.

¹⁰ Kimberly Engdahl Coates, “Exposing the Nerves of Language: Virginia Woolf, Charles Mauron, and the Affinity Between Aesthetics and Illness,” *Literature and Medicine* 21/2 (Fall 2002): 242-263.

¹¹ Eve Sorum, “Masochistic Modernisms: A Reading of Eliot and Woolf,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 28/3 (Spring 2005): 25-43.

¹² Noel Annan, *Leslie Stephen. The Godless Victorian* (Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 283.

¹³ If, for Stephen, the interest of the social organism comes first and “requires the individual at times to sacrifice his self-interest,” health and happiness coincide and moral conduct is presented as “a vital principle in the survival of the race” (Annan pp. 283-84). Morality is presented as crucial in any society; if not, society will be endangered. For instance, intemperance will breed disease both in the individual and in society. Hence the importance of the family as the main social institution; indeed, within its circle, one can inculcate the notions of right and wrong to one’s children and if family life is healthy, the life of the “race,” i. e. society, will be ensured.

¹⁴ Qtd in Sidgwick, p. 92.

¹⁵ Leslie Stephen, “The Moral element in literature,” *The Cornhill Magazine* 42/253 (1881): 34.

¹⁶ Sidgwick writes about Bentham: “For many pleasures are not free from pain even while enjoyed; and many more have painful consequences. Such pleasures are, in Bentham’s phrase, ‘impure’” (p. 94).

¹⁷ “Dys-position” designates a form of disorganization or displacement and the disposition or re-organisation that follows and that produces defamiliarisation, new knowledge while translating a specific ethical and political position. A “dys-position” dismantles conventions, whether social or aesthetic. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position. L’œil de l’histoire, I* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2009).

¹⁸ Jerome B. Schneewind, *Essays on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 34.

¹⁹ Although it is not what has been underlined as having influenced the Bloomsbury Group and more particularly Woolf, in *Principia Ethica*. Moore’s influence on the Bloomsbury Group has been much debated. His analytic philosophy, as opposed to the idealist one, has often been found to be at odds with Woolf’s writings (on that subject, see Roger Poole, *The Unknown Virginia Woolf* [Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982], p. 66; Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World: the Philosophy of Virginia Woolf’s Fiction* [Columbus: Ohio State

University Press, 1986], p. 99; and Lorraine Sim, *Virginia Woolf: the Patterns of Ordinary Experience* [Farham: Ashgate, 2010], p. 23) but his ethics may not be, as Rosenbaum pointed out.

²⁰ *The Deleuze Reader*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 73-74. Original version in Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza. Philosophie pratique* (Paris: Minuit, 1981).

²¹ Virginia Woolf, “*Leave the Letters till we are Dead*,” *Collected Letters: 1936-41*, vol. 6, ed. Nigel Nicholson (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), p. 400.

²² Thomas Baldwin, “Introduction” to *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. IX-XXXVII; p. XXXV.

²³ *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, qtd in A.J. Ayer, *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (London: Unwin, 1982), p. 48.

²⁴ Winifred Holtby wrote that for Woolf, art “must be an end in itself, as perfect and self-contained as a Greek vase.” Winifred Holtby, *Virginia Woolf. A Critical Memoir* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 44.

²⁵ To maintain that virtue is good in itself is, according to Moore, a gross absurdity. This is his starting-point for a harsh criticism of Aristotelian, Christian and Kantian ethics. For Moore, good is a non-natural quality, it cannot be identified with pleasure only: this is a “naturalistic fallacy,” the fallacy involved in all empirical definitions of good.

²⁶ Where Sidgwick talked about cognition of what is right as being accompanied by emotion (see chapter VI, “Ethical principles and methods”), Moore talks about cognition of what is beautiful as accompanied by emotion and as being good.

²⁷ See Clive Bell, *Art* (Oxford University Press, 1987) and Barry Bullen, Introduction to *Art* (Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. XXI- L; p. XXXVI.

²⁸ See Baldwin pp. XXXVI-XXXVII on that subject.

²⁹ Christine Froula argues that “Bloomsbury’s modernist aesthetics resonates with Kant’s emphasis on the artwork’s purely formal beauty.” She shows that disinterestedness entails an escape from personality and gives the freedom to enter into a dialogue with the “common life,” the *sensus communis*: “Far from setting art off from the world, Bloomsbury, like Kant, finds in its beauty a manifestation of freedom that mediates sociability and community—not by imposing canons of taste but by transporting its beholders beyond egotism into (possible) disinterested pleasure, and thence into non coercive dialogue about the *sensus communis*, or common values.” Christine Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-garde. War. Civilization. Modernity* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2005), p. 13; p. 14.

This *sensus communis* could also be related to the British tradition and particularly to Shaftesbury’s “moral sense,” a common faculty of judgment—of judging what is good and bad—a common sense, in the Stoics’ tradition, shared by a community and therefore endowed with a political dimension.

³⁰ Mixed goods are defined by Moore as “positively good as wholes” and “nevertheless contain[ing] [...], something intrinsically evil or ugly” (p. 262) but for him, the consciousness of intense pain is “a great evil” (p. 260).

³¹ T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), pp. 13-22.

³² This shock could be analysed in Derek Attridge’s words as “the act of breaking down the familiar” which “is also the act of welcoming the other.” Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 26.

³³ Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past,” in *Moments of Being. Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: Triad Granada, 1981), p. 83. This “shock-receiving capacity” is close to “bewilderment,” a term that Woolf uses in “Modern

Fiction” to describe the reader’s first impression of Chekhov’s short stories and that comes back repeatedly in her fiction. Woolf’s bewilderment can be compared with Spinoza’s *admiratio* or “étonnement,” “the moment when the mind loses its bearing and is ready to accept new landmarks, a new way of thinking [...]. The emphasis Woolf lays on bewilderment [...] reads as a call for the suspension of fixed reading habits—which goes together with the questioning of fixed moral categories—and for the necessity of responding fully to the alterity of the text.” See Christine Reynier, *Virginia Woolf’s Ethics of the Short Story* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. 33. Such a connection with Spinoza is not surprising since we saw that Woolf goes along with Sidgwick’s questioning of the universality of moral categories, something Spinoza does as well.

³⁴ It is also an ethics of exclusion if we consider, with Russell, that it addresses only an elitist circle. However, we must grant that Moore’s ethics is in some way an ethics of connection since he inserted ideals defended by the Romantics (the value of art) and by Plato or McTaggart (the value of love) into the framework of a utilitarian ethics which had been usually assumed to be opposed to it (see Baldwin, Preface to *Principia Ethica*).

³⁵ Geoffrey Harpham, *Getting it Right: Language, Literature and Ethics* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1992), p. 48.