Moore, George Edward (1873–1958), philosopher, was born on 4 November 1873 at Hastings Lodge, Upper Norwood, Surrey, the third son and fifth child of the eight children of Daniel Moore (1840–1904), physician, and his second wife, Henrietta Sturge (1839–1903). His paternal grandfather was George Moore (1803–1880); Joseph Sturge was a great-uncle. His eldest brother was Thomas Sturge Moore, the poet. G. E. Moore much disliked his forenames and during his academic career he was called just Moore, though his wife called him Bill.
From the age of eight Moore attended Dulwich College as a day boy (1882–92); there he was educated almost exclusively in the Latin and Greek classics. His parents were Baptists, and at home his upbringing was religious. At about the age of twelve he went through a spell of evangelical enthusiasm which lasted two years. He emerged from this a convinced agnostic and later wrote: 'For my part I never did get much comfort from religion, and never felt very sorry at disbelieving: indeed I find it hard to understand how it can make much difference to most people' (letter to Desmond MacCarthy's mother, 1900, Moore MSS).

**Philosophical influences**

In 1892 Moore won a scholarship to study classics at Trinity College, Cambridge, and obtained a first class in part one of the classical tripos in 1894. He then decided to combine further study of classics with the study of philosophy and in 1896 he obtained a second class in part two of the classical tripos and a first class in part two of the moral sciences tripos (which was by then primarily concerned with philosophy).

Moore's new interest in philosophy had been stimulated by his new friends and acquaintances at Trinity, particularly Bertrand Russell and J. M. E. McTaggart. Russell later wrote concerning his time as a student at Trinity:

> In my third year I met G. E. Moore, who was then a freshman, and for some years he fulfilled my ideal of genius. He was in those days beautiful and slim, with a look almost of inspiration, and with an intellect as deeply passionate as Spinoza's.

Russell, 68

In his autobiography Moore himself tells the story of his meeting with McTaggart, who was then a prize fellow of Trinity:

> Russell had invited me to tea in his rooms to meet McTaggart; and McTaggart, in the course of conversation had been led to express his well-known view that Time is unreal. This must have seemed to me then (as it still does) a perfectly monstrous proposition, and I did my best to argue against it.

Moore, Autobiography, 13–14

Russell and McTaggart were already members of the Cambridge Conversazione Society, commonly known as the Apostles, and in 1894 Moore was elected a member. The meetings of the Apostles, which comprised short philosophical papers followed by uninhibited discussion, provided Moore with the ideal context for the
development of his philosophical interests. Moore was at this time studying philosophy with, among others, Henry Sidgwick; but although Moore's early writings are much indebted to Sidgwick, Moore found him remote and rather dull, and never enjoyed a close intellectual relationship with him. Instead it was McTaggart whose influence was at first dominant, so much so that, despite his account of their first meeting, Moore's first published paper (published in 1897) is a defence of the unreality of time.

Following his success in part two of the moral sciences tripos in 1896 Moore decided to try to follow in the footsteps of McTaggart and Russell by winning a prize fellowship at Trinity College on the basis of a dissertation. Moore's first attempt in 1897 was not successful; but in the following year he was elected to a prize fellowship which lasted until 1904. Moore preserved his two dissertations, and through them one can trace the course of his influential break with the idealist philosophy he had learned from McTaggart. Moore's main thesis in his second dissertation is the need to distinguish sharply, as idealists do not, between thought and its objects, and this distinction is the subject of his first important paper, 'The nature of judgment' (1899; Selected Writings, 1–19), which is in fact largely excerpted from this dissertation. Moore here also propounds a programme of conceptual analysis—maintaining that 'A thing becomes intelligible first when it is analysed into its constituent concepts' (p. 8) and in retrospect the paper can be seen to be the starting point of the Cambridge school of analytical philosophy.

Moore's time as a prize fellow at Trinity College (1898–1904) was the most productive period of his life. He published a series of papers critical of the dominant idealist metaphysics of the period, of which the best known is 'The refutation of idealism' (1903; Selected Writings, 23–44). Russell acknowledged the impact of these writings when he wrote in the preface to The Principles of Mathematics (1903) that 'on fundamental questions of philosophy, my position, in all its chief features, is derived from Mr. G. E. Moore' (p. xviii). The central themes of this new philosophy are, first, that thoughts of all kinds, even simple sensations, require objects distinct from the thoughts themselves. Second, Moore vehemently denounces the idealist conception of an 'organic whole' (G. E. Moore, Principia ethica, 1903, 82), the conception of a whole whose parts are intrinsically dependent upon each other, and especially the claim that the world itself is such a whole. But, third, Moore carries over from his own brief idealist phase his rejection of the naturalistic thesis that everything exists in space or time. Instead, according to Moore, there are plenty of things which are not in space or time, such as numbers, meanings, and values.
Principia ethica

Moore's development of this new philosophy culminates in his most famous book, his ethical treatise Principia ethica (1903; rev. edn, 1993). He maintains here that almost all previous philosophers have been guilty of a fallacy, the 'naturalistic fallacy' (p. 62) of treating ethical values as if they were natural properties and thereby seeking to reduce ethics to psychology, sociology, or some other science (or indeed to metaphysics). Instead, according to Moore, there are truths concerning the things that are good which are irreducibly different from all other kinds of truth. Ethical theory has its own distinctive domain, the study of goodness, which is 'simple' and 'unanalysable' (p. 72); but when its results are combined with knowledge of the potential consequences of the courses of action open to us, it should be possible to reach conclusions concerning those actions whose consequences are best, and these are the actions which we ought to perform.

The validity of Moore's arguments in Principia ethica remains much disputed. But it is beyond dispute that Moore inaugurated a new approach to ethical theory, in which an analytical concern with the structure of ethical concepts is sharply separated from debates about the substance of morality. This analytic concern within ethical theory was enormously influential during the twentieth century, though it was also much criticized. It is important to recognize, however, that Moore did also advance a substantive scheme of moral values in Principia ethica, for he ends the book with an emphatic affirmation of the values of friendship and art:

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 ... it is only for the sake of these things—in order that as much of them as possible may at some time exist—that anyone can be justified in performing any public or private duty.

pp. 237-8

It is easy to see here the influence of the discussions in which Moore had participated through his membership of the Apostles. Indeed throughout his time as a prize fellow Moore took a leading role in running this group, and in this context he developed friendships with several younger students which were to become central to all their lives thereafter— with Desmond MacCarthy, Leonard Woolf, Lytton Strachey, and J. Maynard Keynes. This is, of course, the group of Cambridge friends who formed the original nucleus of the Bloomsbury Group, after moving in 1904 into Bloomsbury where the Stephen sisters Vanessa and Virginia were setting up house. Moore was never himself a member of this group; but if he took from them a profound, and perhaps exaggerated, sense of the value of
friendship and art, they took from him the thought that lives dedicated to these values were indeed lives well spent. As Keynes later put it, *Principia ethica* provided them with their ‘religion’ (Keynes, 436).

In 1904, when Moore’s young friends were moving to London, he too moved away from Cambridge, having failed to secure an extension to his fellowship at Trinity. He went first to live in Edinburgh with his friend A. R. Ainsworth, where he continued writing philosophy while living off some private income inherited from his mother. This situation was, naturally, a challenge to his self-confidence, and the characteristic assertiveness of his early writings was now replaced by a rather tedious determination to make himself absolutely clear. Leonard Woolf’s description of Moore writing his second book, *Ethics* (1912), during a holiday in 1911 captures well his state of mind at this time:

> in another part of the garden sat Moore, a panama hat on his head, his forehead wet with perspiration, sighing from time to time over his literary constipation as he wrote *Ethics* ... Moore said that his mental constipation came from the fact that as soon as he had written down a sentence, he saw that it was just false or that it required a sentence to qualify the qualification.

Holroyd, 234

**Lectureship, marriage, and Cambridge chair**

By 1911 Moore’s relative isolation had in fact come to an end. In 1908 he moved to London, and in the winter of 1910–11 gave an important series of public lectures in London under the title *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (he wrote out the lectures in full, and they were published in 1953). Finally in 1911 he was appointed to a university lectureship in moral sciences at Cambridge, though at this time the salary for a lectureship was only £50 p.a., and even when it was supplemented by further fees he still needed to draw on his private income until 1925, when he was appointed professor of mental philosophy and logic at Cambridge and elected to a fellowship at Trinity College. Moore then stayed on in Cambridge throughout his academic career, and indeed for almost all the rest of his life. In 1916 he married Dorothy Mildred Ely (1892–1977), who had been a student of moral sciences at Newnham College. They had two sons, Nicholas (1918–1986) and Timothy (1922–2003), and lived at 86 Chesterton Road, Cambridge, where for years they welcomed visitors who had come to study with Moore. Nicholas Moore was a poet; his works include *The Glass Tower* (1944), with illustrations by Lucian Freud. Later he became a gardener and wrote a guide to garden irises. Timothy Moore became a teacher and composer of music; for many years he was head of music at Dartington School.
Despite Moore's crabbed writing style there are many testimonies to his personal impact in philosophical discussions and lectures. Here, first, is Lytton Strachey, describing Moore's contribution to a discussion of a paper given by Karin Costelloe at a meeting of the Aristotelian Society in London in 1913:

the excitement came with Moore ... and the intellectual display [was] terrific. But display isn't the right word. Of course it was the very opposite of brilliant—appallingly sensible, and so easy to understand that you wondered why on earth no one else had thought of it. The simplicity of genius! But the way it came out—like some half-stifled geyser, throbbing and convulsed, and then bursting into a towering gush—the poor fellow purple in the face, and beating his podgy hands on the table in desperation. The old spinster in the background tittered and gasped at the imprévu spectacle.

Holroyd, 279

Second, here is I. A. Richards, who studied moral sciences at Cambridge during the years 1912–15 and 1918–19, describing Moore as a lecturer:

[Moore] was not like any other lecturer I have heard or heard of. He made sure that what was going on mattered enormously—without your necessarily having even a dim idea as to what it could be that was going on. We were, in truth, undergoing an extraordinarily powerful influence, not one that I would suppose Moore could for a moment conceive. He was not at all interested in that. He was interested in the problem in hand: more interested in it than, I think, I have ever seen anyone interested in anything ... He could take a single sentence from James Ward's Encyclopaedia Britannica article on psychology and stay with it for three weeks ... underlining the key words perhaps seventy times, gown flying, chalk dust rising in clouds, his intonations coruscating with apostrophes, and come out by the same door as in he went, looking up to heaven and shaking his head in despair.

Richards, 109

Another of those who attended Moore's lectures on Ward in 1912 was Ludwig Wittgenstein, who reputedly told Moore that he should not waste his lectures on criticisms of Ward but should use them to develop his own ideas. Moore later wrote that he quickly came to feel that Wittgenstein was 'much cleverer at philosophy ... but also much more profound' (Moore, Autobiography, 33). During this early period Moore did not in fact have much contact with Wittgenstein, although he visited Wittgenstein in Norway in 1913 and took an important dictation from him; but after Wittgenstein returned to
Cambridge in 1929 the two of them met regularly, and some of Wittgenstein's later writings show the importance he attached to Moore's views. This is indicative of the fact that from 1910 onwards Moore had in fact begun to develop new positions of his own in which he in effect acknowledged that the emphatic realism of his earlier 'refutation' of idealism had been too simple. One central concern of these later writings is with the structure of perception and belief: Moore seeks to show how we can accommodate the existence of illusory appearances and false beliefs within a non-illusory world which does not include objective falsehoods. Another central concern is with the issues raised by sceptical arguments: Moore maintains that scepticism is an absurd doctrine, but recognizes that he has to demonstrate that there are mistakes in sceptical arguments.

The analysis of common sense

The best way to characterize this mature philosophy is as 'the analysis of common sense'. Moore was one of the first philosophers to grasp the significance of the new logic developed by Russell, and he became an effective practitioner of that branch of applied logic that has come to be known as 'philosophical analysis'. Although it was never his view that such analysis by itself yields the resolution of philosophical problems, his writings bear witness to its effectiveness in setting the stage for further argument. At the same time he identified himself as a defender of what he called 'the Common Sense view of the world' by composing his famous paper 'A defence of common sense' (1925; Selected Writings, 106–33) for a collection of 'personal statements' on philosophy. This marked a change in his philosophical position—*Principia ethica* is certainly not a defence of common-sense ethical thought. The climax of this development comes in his most famous, and almost his last, paper, 'Proof of an external world' (1939; Selected Writings, 147–70). This is the text of a lecture in which Moore returns to the task of refuting idealism and finally accomplishes his 'proof' by means of a startling theatrical gesture in which he simply holds up his hands before his audience and challenges them to deny their reality.

Moore held his professorship at Cambridge from 1925 until 1939. This was the golden period of Cambridge philosophy, when distinguished students from home and abroad came to study with him and with Wittgenstein, and then travelled afar to spread their new way of doing philosophy. Moore's influence among British philosophers of the period was unrivalled. One vehicle of this was his editorship of the philosophical journal *Mind*, of which he was editor from 1921 until 1944. But, as ever, it was in discussion that he really captured his audience, especially those of a younger generation, such as Gilbert Ryle:
For some of us there still lives the Moore whose voice is never quite resuscitated by his printed words ... He gave us courage not by making concessions, but by making no concessions to our youth or to our shyness. He would explode at our mistakes and muddles with just that genial ferocity with which he would explode at the mistakes and muddles of philosophical high-ups, and with just the genial ferocity with which he would explode at mistakes and muddles of his own. He would listen with minute attention to what we said, and then, without a trace of discourtesy or courtesy, treat our remarks simply on their merits ... sometimes, without a trace of politeness or patronage, crediting them with whatever positive utility he thought they possessed.

Ryle, 270–71

In 1939 Moore retired, and then spent the war years 1940–44 in the United States; again there are many testimonies from his time there to his impact as a teacher. Thereafter he lived quietly in Cambridge. In 1951 he was appointed to the Order of Merit. He died at the Evelyn Nursing Home, Cambridge, on 24 October 1958 and was buried in St Giles's cemetery. His son Nicholas wrote this epitaph for him:

Here lies the great philosopher
Who did not like the world to err,
Who did not err himself, but died
Forever not quite satisfied
That he was not a silly, though
His wise friends never thought him so.

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**Sound**

BL NSA, performance recording
Likenesses

photograph, 1899, Trinity Cam. [see illus.]

W. Stoneman, two photographs, 1921–45, NPG

P. Horton, chalk drawing, 1947, Trinity Cam.

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