

A NON-DUALISTIC REPLY TO MOORE'S REFUTATION OF IDEALISM

If philosophical Idealism may be characterized as in some sense placing mind at the center of reality, then a system of thought which identifies consciousness and reality may qualify as a candidate for philosophic Idealism. Such is the approach taken by the non-dualistic system of Advaita Vedanta according to which consciousness is reality.¹ I propose to examine the refutation of idealism offered by G. E. Moore from the standpoint of non-dualistic Idealism according to which neither subject nor object possess real existence.² The claim I hope to substantiate is that from the standpoint of non-dualistic Idealism, G. E. Moore's refutation of Idealism can be seen not as an argument offered against Idealism, but rather as an argument offered on its behalf.³

G. E. Moore begins his now classical essay with the statement that Modern Idealism asserts that the universe is spiritual. One of the meanings he ascribes to this statement is :

Chairs and tables and mountains *seem* to be very different from us; but when the whole universe is declared to be spiritual, it is certainly meant to assert that they are far more like us than we think.⁴

Here, Moore takes for granted the existence of the subject and assumes that the Idealist argues that the object is in reality like the subject. Moore does not consider the possibility of an idealistic perspective according to which neither subject nor object may lay claim to real existence. But if neither subject nor object are ultimately real, neither one exists so as to be either like or unlike the other.

Again, Moore holds that for Idealism, the universe, "...has what we recognize in ourselves as the *higher* forms of consciousness."⁵ However accurate Moore's description may be of other Idealisms, it does not touch upon the position of the non-dualist. For, if by the universe Moore means the world which is made up of objects, then for the non-dualist, such a world has no existence in reality.⁶ That which does not exist in reality cannot possess forms of consciousness whether higher or lower.

G. E. Moore, however, as he later notes, is only interested in idealistic arguments and he concentrates on the one argument which he believes that all Idealists must rely upon in order to establish the conclusion that 'Reality is spiritual'.⁷ The proposition upon which G. E. Moore claims that all Idealism rests is the proposition *esse is percipi*.⁸ Moore states his philosophical translation of Bishop Berkeley's celebrated formula :

If *esse is percipi*, this is at once equivalent to saying that whatever is, is experienced; and this, again, is equivalent, in a sense, to saying that whatever is, is something mental.⁹

This formulation, however, does not capture the position of non-dualism since it requires a distinction between experiencer and experienced, a distinction, which, as we have seen above, is not proper to the non-dualistic Idealist. If we were to adopt a paraphrase appropriate to articulating the essence of the ontological commitment of non-dualism, we might say, 'Whatever is, is experience'. It is crucial to see that Moore's argument against Idealism rests at every stage upon the acceptance of the subject-object duality, the very supposition that the non-dualist calls into question.

G. E. Moore's argument rests upon another equally important assumption as well, namely, that reality is a whole, part of which is not experienced.¹⁰ Nowhere does Moore *prove* that perception is only a part of a whole which is reality. Why does Moore think that there is something more in reality than there is in experience? He thinks this because otherwise he thinks that the proposition, *esse is percipi*, will be an absolute tautology.¹¹ But the proposition, 'Whatever is, is experience',¹² is only empty if we assume that experience is the experience of objects, and if we then take the objects away, experience is empty. But if there are no objects, we are not taking anything away. We assert only what is.

But let us inquire into why G. E. Moore says what he does. He holds that if there is not a reality in addition to experience, to assert that *esse is percipi* will amount to making a "perfectly barren analytic proposition".¹³ But the proposition, 'Whatever is, is experience', is not an analytic truth in the same sense in which the proposition, 'All bachelors are unmarried males', is an

analytic truth. The latter proposition is true because of the rules of language. The former proposition is analytically true because it is analytic of experience; i. e., it is analytic of what is found in experience. That a truth of experience is analytic for experience follows from its being a truth of experience. If we assert that which is necessarily true of experience that does not make our assertion an empty truth.

Let us proceed with the argument of G. E. Moore. G. E. Moore states :

We have then in every sensation two distinct terms (1) 'consciousness', in respect of which all sensations are alike; and (2) something else, in respect of which one sensation differs from another. It will be convenient if I may be allowed to call this second term the 'object' of a sensation We have then in every sensation two distinct elements, one which I call consciousness, and another which I call the object of consciousness.¹⁴

This analysis of Moore's states the problem in a nutshell. The question at issue is, are there two distinct elements in sensation, namely consciousness and the object of consciousness? But we cannot appeal to introspection to settle the case as according to some, introspection reveals that there are two elements in consciousness while to others introspection reveals no duality within consciousness.¹⁵ On the basis of introspection, at least, it appears to be a moot point as to whether or not there is a duality within sensation.

At this point it may be useful for us to inquire into the way in which G. E. Moore has arrived at his conclusion that there are two distinct elements in sensation. Consciousness, for Moore, is a name given to all cases of sensation on the ground that while individual sensations differ from each other, they all nonetheless share in common the characteristic of being sensations. If individual sensations differ from each other, and yet, are all equally consciousnesses then it follows for Moore that each sensation differs from each other sensation *qua* content. This, however, is not the only conclusion that we might draw. It is also possible that each sensation might differ from each other sensation *qua*

a mode or kind of consciousness without there being, in any individual case, a distinction between a consciousness and an object of consciousness.

For Moore, since individual sensations differ from one another, and all are equally consciousnesses, it follows that consciousness is something distinct from its contents since these are different while it remains the same. However, from the fact that consciousness, as a name, is given equally to all of its cases, it does not follow that in any one application of the name that there is a difference between consciousness and its object. Consciousness, as a concept, is formed by Moore, by abstraction from individual cases of what all individual cases share in common. It does not follow that in any one case of sensation that there is a distinction between consciousness and an object of consciousness. Because consciousness, *qua* abstract concept, is alike in all cases, it does not follow that because one sensation differs from another that consciousness and sensation are different. It only follows that what is true of the abstract order of existence (concepts) may not be true of the concrete order of existence (sensations). All cases of consciousness may be identical *qua* being consciousnesses and each may differ from each other in the way each has of being a consciousness without it being true that consciousness and its object are distinct.¹⁶

Let us now turn to what G. E. Moore terms the true analysis of sensation :

The true analysis of a sensation or idea is as follows. The element that is common to them all, and which I have called 'consciousness' really *is* consciousness. A sensation is, in reality, a case of 'knowing' or 'being aware of' or 'experiencing' something.¹⁷

From this analysis it would appear that sensation is a case of subject knower "knowing" an object. Sensation, in this analysis, is not the object known, but the knowing of it.

Later on, however, Moore gives this analysis of sensation :

....I am aware *of* blue, and by this I mean, that my awareness has to blue a quite different and distinct relation. It is possible, I admit, that my awareness is blue *as well* as being of blue; but what

I am quite sure of is that it is *of* blue; that it has to blue the simple and unique relation the existence of which alone justifies us in distinguishing knowledge of a thing from the thing known, indeed in distinguishing mind from matter.¹⁸

Here, Moore admits the possibility that awareness can be blue as well as being of blue. But I will argue that if awareness is blue then it makes no sense to say that it can be of blue as well. For, if awareness is blue then we do not need to become aware of it. If there is already a blue awareness we would not need to become aware of it or else why should we have said that it was a *blue awareness* in the first instance. The only possible alternative is that it is not a blue awareness of which we are becoming aware, but it is a blue *simpliciter* of which we are becoming aware. But if it is blue *simpliciter* of which we are becoming aware, it seems then that we must first have the blue before knowing it. But this, even on Moore's own account, is impossible. On the one hand, if there is already a blue awareness there would seem to be no need to become aware of it, or else why do we refer to it as a blue *awareness*. On the other hand, if it is a blue *simpliciter*, we could have a sensation without knowing. But this Moore himself does not allow.¹⁹

What Moore actually discovers in introspection is, I think, blue awareness and not blue *simpliciter*. Why else would he allow for the possible existence of blue awareness? And yet, if what he actually discovers is blue awareness, it would not seem that he would need a further entity, consciousness, to become aware of this.²⁰

Moore's 'Refutation of Idealism' follows quite simply from his last description of sensation :

There is, therefore, no question of how we are to "get outside the circle of our own ideas and sensations." Merely to have a sensation is already to *be* outside that circle.²¹

What Moore intends in this analysis is simply this. If sensation is comprised of two distinct elements, consciousness and the object of consciousness, then to have a sensation is already to be

aware of something which is other than consciousness. But Moore's analysis depends upon his having access to that to which he has no access, namely a blue in itself. If the blue Moore speaks about is a blue awareness then he would not have to become aware of it, in which case there are not two items, consciousness and its object. If the blue Moore speaks about is that of which he must become aware before he can know it as blue then it must be that he can have a blue before he knows it as blue. But this is impossible. For how could you "have a blue" without knowing it was blue? It must be that "having a blue" is discovering a blue awareness, or, in a word, that blue and consciousness are not two distinct elements, but one.²² It seems that Moore's argument for the 'Refutation of Idealism' is not actually an argument for the 'Refutation of Idealism'. It seems rather to be an argument on its behalf.

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NOTES

1. "Vedānta, like Hegel, says that Reality is thought ...", Nikhilananda, Preface to *The Māndūkyopaniṣad with Gaudapāda's Kārikā and Śankara's Commentary*, p. xxxII. "Being is identical with thought ..." (in Advaita), Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 458. "Existence and consciousness are one." (in Advaita) Chandradhar Sharma, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, p. 284.
2. "This perceived world of duality, characterized by the subject-object relationship, is verily an act of the mind." Śankara, *Māndūkyopaniṣad*, IV, 72. Cf., the author's *Five Dialogues on Knowledge and Reality*, Library of Congress Number A-412079. *First Dialogue*, pp. 17-23; *Second Dialogue*, pp. 33-38; p. 42; *Fourth Dialogue* p. 99 *Fifth Dialogue*, pp. 120-122; *Epilogue*, pp. 146-147.
3. Although the later Moore does not subscribe *in toto* to this argument against Idealism (*Vide.*, the preface to

Philosophical Studies in which Moore says of his early paper: "This paper now appears to me to be very confused, as well as to embody a good many down right mistakes." This refutation retains a classic historical and philosophical significance of its own. Because of this, it deserves consideration in its own right, independently of Moore's later position.

4. G. E. Moore, 'The Refutation of Idealism', *Philosophical Studies*, p. 1 (emphasis his).
5. *Ibid.*, p. 1 (emphasis his).
6. "Man has mere persistent belief in the reality of the unreal (which is duality). There is no duality (corresponding to such belief)." Sankara, *Mandūkyopaniṣad* IV, 75. Cf., Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, pp. 456-458 *et passim*.
7. *Op. cit.*, p. 3.
8. *Op. cit.*, p. 5.
9. *Op. cit.*, p. 6.
10. *Op. cit.*, p. 9.
11. *Op. cit.*, p. 11.
12. For the sake of a harmony of reference we will change only the past tense of the verb for 'experienced' to the noun form 'experience' and leave the word order of the paraphrase intact. However, we must keep the above arguments in mind.
13. *Op. cit.*, p. 10.
14. *Op. cit.*, p. 17.
15. Professor Errol E. Harris states that he can find no such distinction in sensation: "I am myself unable to distinguish in my own experience of sensation between anything describable as an act of consciousness and the immediate object of consciousness." *Vide* 'The Mind-Dependence of Objects', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, April, 1955, p. 224. Professor Harris states that Bertrand Russell is also unable to find such a distinction in sensation: *Vide*, Russell, *Analysis of Mind*, pp. 17, 141 f.

- and *Our Knowledge of the External World*, p. 83. On the other side there is Moore himself, Brentano, Husserl, and others. Professor Ducasse states: "Professor Moore asserts that in any case of awareness of blue it is possible (even if not easy) to distinguish by careful introspective observation the awareness from the blue. This I readily grant..." Cf., Moore's: "The Refutation of Idealism", *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, p. 239.
16. The confusing of what is true of the abstract order of existence with what is true of the concrete order of existence, we may call the fallacy of confusing existential orders.
 17. G. E. Moore, 'The Refutation of Idealism', *Philosophical Studies*, p. 24 (emphasis his).
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 26 (emphasis his).
 19. *Vide*, above f. 17.
 20. *Five Dialogues on Knowledge and Reality. Second Dialogue*, pp. 47-49; *Fifth Dialogue*, pp. 118-123. The question addressed here is, what is knowledge? While Moore calls it a simple and unique relation he does not analyze what *is* the relation.
 21. *Op. cit.*, p. 27 (emphasis his).
 22. Cf., C. J. Ducasse, Moore's "The Refutation of Idealism", *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, pp. 232-233; 236-237; 239; 242; *et passim*. In Professor Ducasse's very cogent analysis he argues that blue is a kind of experience as waltzing is a kind of dance. The discovery of blue awareness would be the discovery of a kind of awareness. In Professor Ducasse's terms, blue is not an object of experience, but a species of experience.

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