

Moore and the ‘new philosophy’

PHIL 43904
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September 6, 2007

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1 The new philosophy

In *My Philosophical Development*, Russell wrote:

“It was towards the end of 1898 that Moore and I rebelled against both Kant and Hegel. Moore led the way, but I followed closely in his footsteps. I think that the first published account of the new philosophy was Moores article in *Mind* on The Nature of Judgement. Although neither he nor I would now adhere to all the doctrines in this article, I, and I think he, would still agree with its negative part — i.e. with the doctrine that fact is in general independent of experience. . . . I felt [this new philosophy] as a great liberation, as if I had escaped from a hot-house on to a wind-swept headland. I hated the stuffiness involved in supposing that space and time were only in my mind. I liked the starry heavens even better than the moral law, and could not bear Kant’s view that the one I liked best was only a subjective figment. In the first exuberance of liberation, I became a naive realist, and rejoiced in the thought that grass is really green, in spite of the adverse opinions of all philosophers from Locke onwards.”

So far we have spent most of our time discussing Bradley’s monism, and the views about relations which supported it. But Bradley’s view — and those of the dominant philosophers in England at this time — was also a form of idealism, the view that facts are in general not independent of, or to be analyzed in terms of, some class of mental acts,

whether these are conscious experiences, acts of thinking, or some blend of the two. The positive view that Moore and Russell developed in opposition to Bradley rejected not just Bradley's monism, but also his idealism.

In fact, they developed and defended an extreme version of realism — the view that what exists typically does so independently of our mental activity. In arguing for this thesis, Moore took two routes:

1. He argued (in 'The nature of judgment') that facts must exist independently of our mental activity, since the objects of thought exist independently of our mental activity. As we'll see, this led Moore and Russell to distinctive views about the relation between thought and reality, and the nature of truth.
2. He argued (in 'The refutation of idealism') that reflection on the nature of sense experience shows that there is a distinction between the act of sensing and the object of sensation, and that the objects of sensation cannot be analyzed in terms of acts of sensing.

We'll discuss the first of these arguments first.

2 Moore's criticism of the idealist view of thought and its objects

In the opening pages of 'The nature of judgment', Moore discusses Bradley's use of the term 'idea.' He thinks that Bradley has used this term ambiguously, sometimes to stand for the object of thought — what the thought is about — and sometimes to stand for the act of thinking. Moore presses this point because he wants to raise a question about the relationship between acts of thinking and the objects of thought.

Idealists like Bradley, he thinks, must take the objects of thought — what thoughts are about — to be 'abstractions' from acts of thinking. For suppose that the objects of thought were independent of acts of thinking. Then something would exist which is independent of facts about thinking; and the idealist view that all of reality is constituted by acts of thinking.

So the question at this stage is: can we analyze the objects of thought as abstractions from acts of thinking? Moore gives two related arguments to show that they cannot:

The first argument is contained in the following passage:

“... before I can judge at all on Mr. Bradley's theory, a part of this character must have been “cut off and fixed by the mind.” But my question is, whether we can thus cut off a part of the character of our ideas, and attribute that part to something else, unless we already know, in part at least, what is the character of the idea from which we are to cut off the part in question. If not, then we have already made a judgment with regard to the character of our idea. But this judgment, again, requires, on Mr. Bradley's theory, that I should have had an idea of my idea, and should have already cut off a part

of the content of that secondary idea, in order that I may make a judgment with regard to the character of the primary idea that is in question. . . . The theory would therefore seem to demand the completion of an infinite number of psychological judgments before any judgment can be made at all.”

1. To think about a content, I have to first know what that content is about which I will think.
 2. But content is an abstraction from acts of thinking. (assumed for reductio)
 3. So, in order to think, I have to know something about a prior act of thinking. (1,2)
 4. So, for each act of thinking, there must exist some prior act of thinking. (3)
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- C. In order for an act of thinking to take place, there must be infinitely many prior acts of thinking. (4)

The conclusion is absurd; so, if the argument is valid, at least one premise must be false. Moore’s idea is that the premise we should reject is (2). But if we reject this, we he thinks we have to accept that the objects of thought are distinct from, and hence independent of, acts of thinking — which is contrary to idealism.

How should Bradley, or any proponent of the idea that contents are abstractions from acts of thinking, respond to this argument?

The second argument runs as follows:

“Mr. Bradley’s theory presupposes that I may have two ideas, that have a part of their content in common; but he would at the same time compel us to describe this common part of content as part of the content of some third idea. But what is gained by such a description? If the part of content of this third idea is a part only in the same sense, as the common part of the other two is a part of each, then I am offering an explanation which presupposes that which was to be explained. Whereas if the part, which is used in explanation, is a part in the only sense which will make my explanation significant . . . then it is difficult to see how that which belongs to one idea can also come to belong to other ideas and yet remain one and the same.”

1. Two thoughts can have part of their content in common (be partly about the same thing).
 2. Either thoughts sharing content is explained by an act of thinking, or it is a fact about the relations between the objects of thought which is independent of acts of thinking.
 3. If it is constituted by an act of thinking, then either this third thought has its content partly in common with each of the first two, or it does not.
 4. If it does, then the third thought presupposes and hence cannot explain having content in common.
 5. If it does not have content in common with the first two thoughts, then it cannot explain what they have in common.
 6. Two thoughts having content in common cannot be explained by a further act of thinking. (3,4,5)
 7. Two thoughts having content in common is a fact about the relations between the objects of thought which is independent of acts of thinking. (2,6)
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- C. The nature of the objects of thought is independent of acts of thinking. (7)

Moore concludes:

“The concept is not a mental fact, nor any part of a mental fact. Identity of content is presupposed in any reasoning; and to explain the identity of content between two facts by supposing that content to be a part of the content of some third fact, must involve a vicious circle. For in order that the content of the third fact may perform this office, it must already be supposed like the contents of the other two, i.e., having something in common with them, and this community of content is exactly what it was proposed to explain . . .”

3 Moore on thought, the objects of thought, and the world

So we know that Moore thinks that there is a distinction between acts of thinking and the objects, or contents of those acts — what they are about. He calls the latter ‘concepts’, and holds that they are independent of acts of thinking.

3.1 *Concepts, propositions, and truth*

Soon after asserting the independence of concepts from acts of thinking, Moore introduces the term ‘proposition’:

“A proposition is composed not of words, nor yet of thoughts, but of concepts. Concepts are possible objects of thought; but that is no definition of them. It merely states that they may come into relation with a thinker; and in order

that they may do anything, they must already be something. It is indifferent to their nature whether anybody thinks them or not. They are incapable of change . . .

It is of such entities as these that a proposition is composed. In it certain concepts stand in specific relations with one another.”

Propositions are the objects of thought; concepts are constituents of propositions. This raises the important question of what makes propositions different from concepts, such that the former but not the latter can be true or false. Moore says that there is no difference in kind between concepts and propositions:

“...It would seem, in fact, from this example, that a proposition is nothing other than a complex concept. The difference between a concept and a proposition, in virtue of which the latter alone can be called true or false, would seem to lie merely in the simplicity of the former. . . .” (180)

Why this seems unsatisfactory; all complex concepts are not apt to be true or false, so a proposition can't be simply defined as a complex concept. The nature of propositions is clearly a central question for Moore, and for anyone who thinks of the objects of thought as distinct from acts of thinking; Moore and Russell were to spend much of the next two decades thinking about this question. (For the idealist, by contrast, the question never really arises; if propositions are just abstractions from acts of thinking rather than separately existing things, then there's no question about what propositions are besides the question about what acts of thinking are.)

So much for the relationship between propositions and concepts. Can we say anything more about what sorts of things propositions and concepts are? A hint as to how Moore thought about this question comes from the following striking claim:

“It seems necessary, then, to regard the world as formed of concepts.” (182)

It seems, then, that whatever Moore took to be the fundamental building blocks of reality, he took the same things to be concepts. When we turn to Russell's *Principles of Mathematics*, we'll see in detail how a view of this sort might work.

Another question to which we will return is: given that concepts (and hence propositions) are the same sorts of things as make up the world, what could it be for a proposition to be true, or false?

3.2 *The puzzle of non-being*

One worry about Moore's view, to which we will return, is that even if by constructing propositions out of worldly items it makes truth comparatively easy to understand, it for the same reason makes falsity comparatively difficult to understand. One dramatic way to raise this problem is via the Platonic problem of non-being.

Moore addresses this point when he says,

“Similarly when I say ‘The chimera has three heads,’ the chimera is not an idea in my mind, nor any part of such idea. What I mean to assert is nothing about my mental states, but a specific connexion of concepts. If the judgment is false, that is not because my ideas do not correspond to reality, but because such a conjunction of concepts is not to be found among existents.”

What concept does Moore think corresponds to ‘the chimera’?

Why this is not a problem for the idealist view of thought and its objects.

4 Moore on sense perception and ‘esse is percipi’

So Moore’s principal argument against idealism in ‘The nature of judgement’ concerns the independence of objects of thought from acts of thinking. In ‘The refutation of idealism’, he gives a formally similar argument, focusing on visual sense experience rather than thought.

In this paper, Moore argues against the idealist slogan that “esse is percipi” – to be is to be experienced. He glosses the relevant interpretation of this as follows:

“Esse is percipi asserts that wherever you have x you also have percipi : that whatever has the property x also has the property that it is experienced.”
(439-40)

This is not equivalent to idealism; but Moore thinks that it is a claim which is such that, if it is false, there will be no reason to accept idealism. (He discusses arguments for idealism which use this slogan as a premise briefly on p. 437.)

Moore thinks that we can show this idealist slogan to be false by reflection on the nature of sense experience. Moore starts by distinguishing two aspects of an experience of a color:

“We all know that the sensation of blue differs from that of green. But it is plain that if both are sensations they also have some point in common. What is it that they have in common? . . .

I will call the common element ‘consciousness’ without yet attempting to say what the thing I so call is. 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 . . . This must be so if the sensation of blue and the sensation of green, though different in one respect, are alike in another . . .”

This is enough to show that blue cannot be identified with the sensation of blue, or with conscious awareness:

“Accordingly, to identify either ‘blue’ or any other of what I have called ‘objects’ of sensation, with the corresponding sensation is in every case, a self-contradictory error. It is to identify a part either with the whole of which it is a part or else with the other part of the same whole.”

This undercuts one motivation for the slogan that *esse is percipi*: that experience is taken to be identical with what is experienced (p. 445).

So, if the two are not identical, how should we think of the relationship between the visual awareness of blue, and blue? Moore sees two possibilities here:

- Visual awareness is a relation to blueness, which is something independent of the awareness.
- Blueness is an aspect, or property, of the awareness. (This is what Moore has in mind when he talks about the view that blue is part of the ‘content’ of the sensation of blue; here he is using ‘content’ like ‘property’ and not in the sense in which people now use it, where it means something more like ‘proposition.’)

Moore thinks that idealists will prefer the second view. But, he says, this second view misconstrues the relationship between blue and the sensation of blue:

“When, therefore, blue is said to be part of the content of the ‘sensation of blue,’ the latter is treated as if it were a whole constituted in exactly the same way as any other ‘thing’. The ‘sensation of blue,’ on this view, differs from a blue bead or a blue beard, in exactly the same way in which the two latter differ from one another : the blue bead differs from the blue beard, in that while the former contains glass, the latter contains hair; and the ‘sensation of blue’ differs from both in that, instead of glass or hair, it contains consciousness.

...

The [view that blue is a quality of the sensation of blue] may now be expressed by saying that, if it were true, then, when the sensation of blue exists, there exists a blue awareness: offence may be taken at the expression, but yet it expresses just what should be and is meant by [this view]. Whether or not, when I have the sensation of blue, my consciousness or awareness is thus blue, my introspection does not enable me to decide with certainty: I only see no reason for thinking that it is. But whether it is or not, the point is unimportant, for introspection does enable me to decide that something else is also true: namely that I am aware of blue, and by this I mean, that my awareness has to blue a quite different and distinct relation.” (450)

Moore relies here on the intuition that the way ‘blue’ figures in a sensation of blue is quite different from the way it figures in a blue bead. This, he thinks, favors the first view of what is involved in a sensation of blue: that it is a relation of awareness to something that is not a part of the awareness.

He draws out the moral of this point as follows:

“what my analysis of sensation has been designed to show is, that whenever I have a mere sensation or idea, the fact is that I am then aware of something which is equally and in the same sense *not* an inseparable aspect of my experience. . . . 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. It is to know something which is as truly and really *not* a part of *my* experience, as anything which I can ever know.

. . . if we never experience anything but what is *not* an inseparable aspect of that experience, how can we infer that anything whatever, let alone *everything*, is an inseparable aspect of *any* experience? How utterly unfounded is the assumption that ‘esse is percipi’ appears [sic] in the clearest light.” (451)

Moore is clearly emphasizing the fact that experience is a relation to something which is not itself a part of the experience. How do you think he would get from there to the conclusion that esse is not percipi?