

A FEATURE OF MOORE'S STYLE OF PHILOSOPHIZING

The British philosopher G. E. Moore is not likely to be remembered by posterity for his doctrines, of which there is but little in his writings, nor for his method, which is more of historical importance than of intrinsic one. The thing that makes him a philosopher unusually interesting is, to my mind, his peculiar style of philosophizing. A characteristic feature of this style is the way he raises and clarifies questions, answers them, and then, elicits further questions from the answers given. In the present paper, I propose to throw some light on this feature of Moore's thought with reference to his long essay, entitled, "The Nature and Reality of Objects of Perceition".¹ As we shall see, the afore-said characteristic of his thought is conspicuously present in this essay.

In the beginning of this essay, Moore raises a question, on which centres almost the whole of his discussion. The question is, "How do we know that there exist any other people who have perceptions in some respects similar to our own?"² Moore sees that the question, as stated above, is far from being clear, for the words used are highly ambiguous; and he further points out that this ambiguity has been responsible for much confusion and error among philosophers. So, the first step that he takes to clarify this question is to distinguish it from a different psychological question viz. "How does our belief in their existence arise?". Here it may be noted that one of the ways in which Moore clarifies a question is to distinguish it from another question with which it is liable to be confused. Such discrimination contributes to making a question distinct and exact.

In the light of the given clarification Moore restates his question as follows : What reason have we for our belief in the existence of other persons? Further, he explains the word "reason" occurring in the above question. He tells us, "A Good reason for a belief is a proposition which is true, and which would not be true unless the belief were also true"³. Then, he reformulates the original question in the following words. "What proposition do we believe, which is both true itself and is also such that it would not be true, unless other people existed?"⁴ Moore points out that this formulation of the original question

shows, for one thing, more clearly its difference from the above-mentioned psychological question. He further tries to explain not only what reasons we have for believing in the existence of other people, but also in what sense we take them to be reasons. He illustrates that he is using "good reason" in a wide and popular sense. He says, "If...the Times stated that the King was dead, we should think, that was a good reason for believing that the King was dead;..."⁵ Thus, in looking for a good reason for our belief in the existence of other people, Moore is ready to accept a proposition, if it renders the conclusion positively probable, provided that it also fulfils certain other conditions, which will be mentioned presently.

Moore next clarifies the word "we" occurring in the initial question, and subsequently puts it in this way. Does each single one of us know any proposition, which is a reason for believing that others exist?⁶ Fearing that the above question might be taken to be vitiated by the fallacy of begging the question, he recasts it in another form. "There are certain kinds of belief which, as we commonly suppose, all or almost all men share. I describe this kind of belief as 'our' belief, simply as an easy way of pointing out which kind of belief I mean, but without assuming that all men do share them. And I then ask: Supposing a single man to have beliefs of this kind, which among them would be a good reason for supposing that other men existed having like beliefs?"⁷ Moore makes yet another attempt to put the question more precisely. He asks: "Which among the true propositions, of a kind (as we commonly assume) each of us believes, and which do not themselves assert the existence of anything other than that person himself, his own perceptions, or what he directly perceives, are such that they would probably not be true unless some other person existed, who had perceptions in some respects similar to his own?"⁸

It is remarkable that Moore formulates the original question as many as six times before attempting to answer it. His answer is that ... "one man would probably not have had just those perceptions which he did have unless some other man had certain particular perceptions"⁹ Moore draws a further question from the answer just given, because he finds it unsatisfactory. He asks,

“What reason has each of us for believing that....he would not have certain perceptions that he does have, unless some other person had certain particular perceptions?”¹⁰ He next points out that this question may be subsumed under the general question as to what reasons we have for such generalisations as assert a connection between the existence of a certain kind of perception in one man, and that of a certain kind of perception in another man. Replying to the above question he says that if we have any reason for such generalisations that must be given by observation. He is again not satisfied with the answer given because of its inadequacy, so he elicits a new question. He asks, “What reason can be found in observation for even a single proposition of the kind....that when one man has one kind of perception, another man generally has or has had another?”¹¹ Before trying for an answer to this question Moore explains the word “observe” occurring in it. He is using it in a strict sense. in which we can be said to observe nothing but our own perceptions. thoughts and feelings. He now begins to state his question. It is really surprising that, at this place, Moore sets forth the question not less than six times. He is trying again and again to state the question as clearly and precisely as possible. I shall state only one of these six forms. Which among the things, which one single man observes, are such that they would probably not have existed, unless it were true that some of them generally stood in certain relations to observations of some other person?¹² Moore next splits this question into two other questions which are : (1) Of what nature must observations be, if they are to give a reason for any generalisation asserting that the existence of one kind of thing is generally connected with that of another ?; (2) What kinds of things do we observe ?¹³

Let us now sum up Moore's procedure of philosophic questioning as he has carried so far. He puts a particular question, but because of its ambiguity he reformulates the question by distinguishing it from another question. As this recast question embodies some new expressions, which are vague but important, he feels impelled to clarify them. After he has elucidated the expressions in question, he casts the original question into another fresh form. But for his incisive intellect whipped by a burning passion for clarity and exactitude Moore might have ceased to see new difficul-

ties in this recast question. The fear that some expression figuring in one of the versions of the original question might make it misleading, or, that it might be taken to be vitiated by a logical fallacy drives him to put the question in more and more fresh forms. It is significant to note that Moore offers an answer to the initial question after several clarificatory attempts. However, he finds this answer unsatisfactory, so a new question arises out of its unsatisfactoriness. This question in turn draws his attention to a general question which presupposes the former. He manages to answer this general question, but the answer given is later found by him to be inadequate. Hence he again elicits a fresh question from the inadequacy of this answer. Then, he first explains an important word occurring in this new question, and next, makes a painstaking efforts to state the question in not less than half a dozen slightly different versions. Even after so much trouble, his process of raising and clarifying questions does not stop, for he breaks the above question into two other questions.

To revert to our discussion, while answering the question : Of what nature must observations be, if they are to give a reason for any generalisation asserting that the existance of one kind of thing is generally connected with that of another ? Moore points out that there are three conditions, which are necessary to justify such generalisation. The first condition is that one must observe both some object, say A^1 which is in some respects like A, and also some object, say B^1 , which is in some respects like B. One must also observe B^1 preceding A^1 . Secondly, both the B^1 and the A^1 must exist; and B^1 must precede A^1 . The third condition is that if the observation of B^1 preceding A^1 can ever give us any reason for supposing that A is generally preceded by B, it can at most give us reason to suppose that an A is generally preceded by a B which stands to our A in the same relation in which B^1 has been observed to stand to A^1 .

Next, Moore answers the other question as to what kinds of things we observe by distinguishing three different ordinary senses of the word "observe". First, the word "observe", according to him, is sometimes used in the sense of directly perceive. Another sense of the word "observe" is that in which we can be said to observe our own perceptions, thoughts and feelings. Thirdly, we can also legitimately be said to observe external objects.

Moore then gives attention to the question of the meaning of the word "exist" occurring in the second necessary condition. The sum and substance of his discussion about it is that he is using "exists" in its ordinary sense, which consists in that to say "A exists" is not to say "A is perceived."

Moore's statement of these three necessary conditions, his discrimination between three ordinary senses of the word "observe", and his making explicit the ordinary use of the word "exist" together bring him quite close to finding an answer to the problem at issue. Moreover, the preceding brief discussion of these three points will help us in following his reasoning when he grapples with the crux of the problem.

In the long run, Moore puts his finger at the nerve of the central question. He first examines a possible answer to it, which consists in that the observation of one's own perceptions, thoughts and feelings can, by itself, give him a reason for believing that other persons have perceptions, etc. Refuting this view he rightly contends that somebody's observation of his own perceptions may, by itself, give him reason to suppose that, *if* another person has certain perceptions or feelings, he will also have certain others but cannot confirm the generalisation that any one of his own perceptions is just what would occur if another person had a particular perception or feeling.

After this, Moore answers the original question by asserting that other persons exist, and the argument that he produces in its favour may succinctly be set forth as follows. He holds the general principle that beliefs which lead to true predictions are generally true. He then contends that this general principle cannot be true unless some external things, over and above, what he directly perceives, exist. Thus; Moore assumes the existence of external things in order to account for the truth of the general principle in question. Further, he points out that, in his own case, he observes a general connection between his perceptions, thoughts and feelings. From all these things in conjunction with the third necessary condition; already mentioned, Moore infers that other persons exist. If we grant the assumption made by him, his argument seems to me tenable.

Moore further gives some arguments in justification of the as-

sumption in question. But I shall deal with them in brief, for this is not the purpose of this paper. My reason for considering them is that this will help bring out Moore's real form as an answer at the crucial stage of his discussion. One of his arguments is that, since 'exist' does not mean "is perceived" it is at least conceivable that things should exist, when they are not perceived. This argument may be disputed on⁹ the ground that although within the confines of ordinary language, it will not be self-contradictory to say that a thing which is not perceived, exists, and vice versa; I do not think, this logical possibility covertly being an appeal to ordinary usage can successfully defend the Moorean assumption.

Moore puts forward two more arguments by way of an examination of the Berkeleian argument that though to the same body water may appear to be simultaneously both hot and cold yet the heat and the cold cannot both really be in the same body at the same time. Disputing this argument he argues that even if we grant the assumption that the heat and the cold cannot both exist in the same place, it does not follow that neither exists there. This type of argument, he contends, only entitles us to conclude that some sensible qualities, which we perceive as being in a certain place at a certain time, do not exist in that place at that time; but we have no reason to suppose that they do not, except on the assumption that our observations give us reason to believe that other sensible qualities do exist in those positions. This argument also fails to support his assumption that external things exist, because, to my mind, it is not necessary to assume the existence of certain sensible qualities to account for the appearance of some other ones.

Moore's other argument may be outlined in the following manner. He tries to show against Berkeley that two things can really occupy the same place. His contention is based on such reasoning as given below. We sometimes believe that a given spatial area may contain parts which are invisible to us. Hence it is quite conceivable that parts of a given area may be really occupied by one colour, while the whole is really occupied by another. He further points out that we certainly believe that the area which appears to be occupied by one colour really is the same area as that which appears to be occupied by another. The

above argument resting on Moore's appeal to common sense may easily be seen to be vitiated by some serious flaws. First, Moore's commonsensical assumption that space is real is questionable. Secondly, to believe that a particular appearance really occupies some real spatial area is a more precarious common-sense assumption. Lastly, to suppose that different appearances occupy the same real spatial area is to place a very uncritical trust on common sense. Besides, it should be taken into account that Moore has not done justice to Berkeley, because the latter advanced some other important arguments in refutation of external, physical objects.

It may thus safely be concluded that Moore's attempt to justify the assumption that there are external things in addition to what he directly perceives, is very unsatisfactory and inadequate. And his confession that he has not properly justified this assumption does not absolve him of the above charges. However, there seems to be some weight in Moore's contention that the general principle, noted above, cannot be true, unless the given assumption is granted, and further that as the general principle appears to be true, the existence of external things may be assumed. This being so, the argument that he has put forward in support of his final answer to the original question is not without avail despite the fact that he has failed to justify the assumption at issue on the basis of the above three separate arguments.

To conclude, we have seen with what brilliance, acuteness, and pertinacity Moore carries out the task of philosophic questioning. He raises a question, elucidates it, and then, puts it in a clearer, more precise, and improved form. This process continues. It has also been shown that the answer he gives to a particular version of the question initially asked raises a further question, which after clarification is answered to give rise to another question. This distinctive style of Moore's philosophical discussion is very important for certain reasons. First, this is very helpful in dispelling ambiguities and confusions, drawing distinctions, and thus elucidating ideas. As a consequence of an uninterrupted process of questioning and answering aided by a sustained clarificatory enterprise, a particular question originally raised tends to greater and greater clarity and precision. This feature of

Moore's philosophizing assumes special significance in view of the highly deceptive character of the language used by philosophers. We see that philosophers generally put ordinary word to new, and technical uses often without adequate explanation. Moore's type of questioning can render invaluable service in this field. Secondly, it should also be noted that several different formulations of the old question given by Moore differ from one another not only verbally, but they become more and more improved and pointed questions pregnant with an answer. In other words, in the process of the problem at issue being sharply defined, he is drawn close to finding an answer. Thirdly, Moore's practice of eliciting a question from an answer further helps him in his search for a final answer. Moreover, checks and counter-checks, which are characteristic of a dialogue form of discussion, may, in some measure, be seen in this type of philosophizing. For some such reasons, I think, Dr. Metz is, to some extent, right in holding that we may call Moore the greatest, acutest, and most skilful questioner of modern philosophy."¹⁴

However, the foregoing discussion also brings to our notice Moore's weakness as an answerer. Though his questioning has been excessive and ingenious, his answering rather scanty and poor. Regarding the second point about his answering, particularly the concluding part of his essay, where he argues for the answer eventually given to the original question after a very long and hard exploratory toil, cannot escape one's notice. At this crucial place, his arguments are not only quite insufficient in number, but also except one (which might also be rejected by some) very unsatisfactory. I, therefore, think that Dr. Metz's remark that ".... he is an extremely weak and unsatisfying anywerer."¹⁵ may, at least to some extent, be substantiated on the ground of the present essay. An investigation into the possible reasons for Moore's failure as an answerer is a separate subject. Nonetheless, it may very briefly be contended that his failure on this count is partly due to his wrong approach to the problem in question, partly to his too much concentration on some points, and, in part, to his being temperamentally rooted in common sense.

NOTES

1. G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Studies*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London), Paperback edition 1960, pp. 31-96.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 33
3. *Ibid.*, p. 35
4. *Ibid.*, p. 36
5. *Ibid.*, p. 41
6. *Ibid.*, p. 42
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43
8. *Ibid.*, p. 45
9. *Ibid.*, p. 46
10. *Ibid.*, p. 49
11. *Ibid.*, p. 53
12. *Ibid.*, p. 54
13. *Ibid.*, p. 61
14. R. Metz., *A Hundred Years of British Philosophy* (Allen & Unwin, London, 1938), p. 540
15. *Ibid.*, 540

