

## MOORE AND INDEFINABLE SIMPLES

There are three notions which are central to *Principia Ethica*: *definition*, *simple* and *naturalistic fallacy*. Moore's charge of committing the naturalistic fallacy against a number of philosophers follows from his notions of 'definition' and 'simple' as they are the key concepts in Moore's analysis. In this essay, I will not attempt to examine his charge of committing naturalistic fallacy, brought against several thinkers, though I believe that the present discussion will lead to some significant points on this issue. I will limit myself to an attempt to show that there cannot be any simples in the *absolute sense*. By showing that the so called simples are only relatively or that is a contingent fact that they are simples at a given moment of time, I hope to shake the basis of the charge of naturalistic fallacy. I follow the following procedure: In the first section I propose to discuss his three notions of definitions: arbitrary verbal, verbal and proper. I will concern myself with Moore's notion of simples in the second section. In the third section the impossibility of there being any absolute simple notion will be shown.

### Arbitrary Verbal Definition:

Arbitrary verbal definitions can be of two kinds: (1) One may define a word which is not use in terms of some other word which has some use. For example, by "archar" I mean a table. (2) One may define a word which is in use in terms of some other word which also is in use. For example, by "chair" I mean a pen. What happens in both the cases of arbitrary verbal definitions is that there will be a notion<sup>1</sup> which is common to both definiendum and definiens. Both the definiendum and definiens are two verbal expressions used to stand for (refer or denote) one and the same notion. In the case of first, both the expressions, definiendum and definiens will be synonymous expressions, but in the second, both expressions, definiendum and definiens will not be synonymous. In the case of first kind of arbitrary verbal definition there is no possibility of a sentence being ambiguous when the definiendum is used in forming sentences, whereas, if a word in use is defined in terms of another word in

use arbitrarily, there is some chance of a sentence being ambiguous when the definiendum is used in foaming sentences. Apart from this, no definition can be characterized as "wrong" or "fallacious", and because of this reason one cannot charge any arbitrary verbal definition to be committing naturalistic fallacy.

### Verbal Definition Proper :

This kind of verbal definition also involves one notion and two verbal expressions. Both definiendum and definiens stand for (refer or denote) one and only one notion. And both these expressions will be in use. For example, an "atheist" can be defined as "one who does not believe in the existence of God". The cognitive meaning of both the expressions will be same, though there is some possibility of their having different suggestive and emotive meanings due to different expressions. The possibility of the constituent words of some definiens standing for different notions independently is not ruled out, but when they are combined into a phrase they must stand for the same notion to which the definiendum stands for. In order to find out whether a definition is proper one has to look into the uses of the or refer to a standard revised dictionary. It will be a mistake if two expressions which are conventionally used to stand for (refer or denote) two different notions are used in a definition of this kind. But what kind of mistake is this? Certainly it is not a logical mistake, for no logical reasoning is involved. It can be said to be an empirical mistake or a linguistic failure or misuse of a word. Being ignorant is not a logical mistake, nor is using a word where it is linguistically forbidden. Irrespective of the fact how such a mistake is committed, the definition turns out to be an arbitrary verbal definition of the second kind which we have discussed. Arbitrary verbal definition cannot be said to be correct or incorrect, hence we cannot treat such definitions as cases of the commission of the naturalistic fallacy. Thus either a verbal definition proper is a correct definition or it will be an arbitrary definition; and no definition of this kind can commit a naturalistic fallacy.<sup>2</sup>

Arbitrary verbal and verbal definition proper are rightly called to be verbal definitions by Moore. In these definitions, we do not make use of notions or concepts, but make use of only words or expressions and one expression is defined in terms

of another. The basis of keeping the distinction between these two kinds of verbal definitions seems to be this : no arbitrary verbal definition is verbal definition proper and *vice versa*, though wrong verbal definition proper can be arbitrary verbal definition. This is precisely because if two expressions express in a communication situation one notion, then they are not arbitrary, but if they are used to refer to one notion arbitrarily in order to start a new linguistic convention, then they cannot be said to have already had some old linguistic convention of expressing the same notion.

In both these kinds of verbal definitions there is no scope to define a notion in terms of other notions, for in that case they will not remain verbal definitions. It should be noted that when both definiendum and definiens are used to form a sentence, it turns out to be an identity sentence which obviously true by definition, or because of the very meaning of the terms used. If any one defines one notion in terms of other notions, it will not be a verbal definition but a proper definition or analysis according to Moore.

#### Definition Proper :

A lexicographer may be interested in defining words to terms of other words, but a philosopher is not much interested in verbal definitions. His interest rests in the definition of notions, not of words. A good example of such a definition Moore thinks is that of a horse :

.... certain object, which .... is composed in a certain manner : that it has four legs, a head, a heart, a liver, etc. etc. all of them arranged in definite relations to one another.<sup>3</sup>

In such a kind of definitions there do occur one or more notions in definiens which are not the very notion which we define. In such a case if both definiendum and definiens are put together, they will not form an identity sentence. For example, "Pleasure is good" is not an identity sentence, for if we deny the sentence it will not be self-contradictory. That is to say the words "pleasure" and "good" do not express one and the same notion. If this were to be treated as verbal definition, then it will be arbitrary verbal definition, for the words express different notions.

Treating a non-identity sentence to be an identity sentence is a mistake. If we treat a non-identity sentence to be an identity

sentence, then will be treating two or more notions to be one. (I am not talking about an identity sentence which involves only proper names.) It is certainly a mistake, not in reasoning, but in proper recognition of the nature of a sentence.

It is difficult to know whether "Pleasure is good" is treated as an identity sentence, unless one also says "Good is pleasure". If "Pleasure is good" is an identity sentence, then "Good is pleasure" also is an identity sentence. It is possible that one is not treating "Pleasure is good" as an identity sentence, but a sentence where "good" is the predicate and "pleasure" is the subject, and good is predicated of pleasure. In other words one may admit the possibility of many things being good and still say "Pleasure is good".

Moore also distinguishes between *the* good and good.<sup>4</sup> It is possible to have many things which are good: pleasure, intelligence etc. are good. Then the sentences "Pleasure is good", "Intelligence is good" etc. are not identity sentences. They will not be self-contradictory if they are negated.

According to Moore if the list of good things is prepared that will not give us notion of good. It will only give us the list of *the* good things. In other words, by knowing how a word is used (not how it is *to be* used) one cannot know the meaning of that word. This position of Moore appears to go against the *use theory* of meaning. But in fact it does not. The use theory of meaning maintains that if we know the *use* of a word, then we know the meaning of it. Knowing the *use* of a word not only includes the situation under which it is used, but also the possible situations where it can be meaningfully used. By knowing what are the things which are good, we do not necessarily know all the possible good things. Unless we know all the possible meaningful uses of a word, we do not know the full *use* of the word, hence we do not know the full meaning of the word. But this last conclusion is not acceptable to Moore for even if we give the list of all possible good things, what we know is all about *the* good things but not 'good' itself.

Moore appears to have some strong ground to believe that the list of all possible good things will not give us the meaning of "good". Consider again the sentence "Pleasure is good". 'Pleasure' and 'good' are two notions therefore they cannot be identified:

The same is the case with 'intelligence' or any possible good thing. That is to say the list of all possible good things also will give us least account of what is good.

We may slightly change the terminology of *use theory* of meaning by maintaining that if we know all the linguistic rules according to which a word is to be used, then we know the meaning of the word. I do not see any reason why this is not acceptable to Moore. Acceptance of this theory will not make him reject his own thesis that by knowing what are the good things we do not know what is it to be good, for he can reasonably maintain that it is one thing to know the meaning of the term "good" and another thing to know which are the good things. If one knows what is to be good, one can also find out what are the good things, but not *vice versa*.

What Moore wants to say about this kind of definition is not very clear from the example of horse. However, there seem to be two presuppositions which Moore makes: (1) we can bring out the proper meaning of a word by analysing the concept for which the word stands. (2) Understanding a whole is nothing but understanding its parts and the way each part is related to other parts. When one defines a notion, one has to analyse and bring out its parts and their arrangements.

Unavoidable consequences of such a notion of definition are these: (1) we cannot analyse a simple notion and therefore simple notions cannot be defined. (2) Meaning of the words which stand for simple notions cannot be taught through language. One has to learn through sense experience. (3) If any attempt is made to define a simple notion, then it will be a mistake.

It seems to me very obvious that Moore is not talking about an *image* of a horse. The images of a horse are different from person to person, though one can reasonably talk of different parts and their arrangements of an image of a horse. The ideational theory of meaning is quite unsatisfactory and I have no evidence to think that Moore is holding such a theory, other than that the phrase "parts of a notion" suggests such a theory. Moore is also not talking about a horse i. e. a particular horse, though it makes sense to say that only particular horses which are in space and time or imaginable

horses which are in imagined space and time have parts arranged in a particular way.

There does seem to be any other context where we can use the terms "parts" and "whole" in their literal sense. Therefore obviously I make the hypothesis that these terms have been used metaphorically in the example of horse. This is not enough to understand the example quoted. There is one more crucial term to be understood. The term "object" has not been used in the normal sense of the term. Sometimes he equates 'object' with 'notion'. He writes : Definitions of the kind that I was asking for, definitions which describe in real nature of the *object* or *notion* denoted by a word...<sup>5</sup> (italics mine). Elsewhere he equates 'object' with 'idea'.<sup>6</sup> He writes : My business is solely with that *object* or *idea*, which I hold, rightly or wrongly, that the word is generally used to stand for.<sup>7</sup>

It is evident now that he is not talking of "object" in the sense of things in space and time, but about objects of thought i. e. concepts. Indeed an object of thought e. g. "horse" does not exist in space, though there can be disagreement about whether they are in time in the sense that they can be constructed or formulated and can be forgotten. From this one can argue that "parts" and "whole" which Moore talks of are not used in the literal sense, for no object of thought with which Moore is concerned (i. e. a notion) can have part as they do not exist in space. (However, an object of thought can also be in space and time in different sense e. g. 'the present prime minister of India' can be my object of thought who is in space and time. In such case by the word "object" we do not mean a "notion" but a thing or individual.) To put it in Moore's own words : . . . if by definition be meant the analysis of an object of thought, only complex objects can be defined. . . .<sup>8</sup>

The phrase "arranged in definite relations to one another" also needs to be interpreted. "Head", "heart", "leg" etc. are all notions. Thoughts can be arranged, but how to arrange a head, a heart and four legs? Not any arrangement can do, for if the arrangement is different, then it can turn out to be a donkey. Thoughts can be arranged and rearranged also ; there is no rigid rule for it. What is this *definite* relation between 'head and 'heart' ? I cannot think of any other relationship other than

conceptual, as all the words involved stand for different concepts. A "head of a horse" is also a notion or concept and it does not refer to any particular head of any particular horse existing in space or time or imagined.

I must confess my inability to understand what Moore is trying to say because of the following question for which I do not see any clear answer. If we talk of conceptual relations, then they must be logical relations, then there does not seem to be any logical relationship between a "head of a horse" and a "heart of a horse". The only way they can be said to have some relationship is that whenever we observe a particular horse in full detail we also observe that it has a head and heart in a particular physical relationship which are different from those of any other animals. If this is the way they are to be related, then the relationship between a "head of a horse" and a "heart of a horse" is empirical.

So far as conceptual relationships are concerned, one can talk of different conceptual relationships. If genus and species have one kind of conceptual relationships, the opposite concepts have another, incompatible concepts have still another. It is not very clear which kind of conceptual relationships Moore is talking about. Would Moore consider "colour" as a complex notion? If so, would he consider "yellow", "green," "blue", etc. which are species of the concept "colour" as parts of "colour"?

There are certain ways of meaningfully talking about a notion being simple or complex : (1) A notion can be said to be complex because it has many instances. This is not the sense Moore is talking about as he admits that both pleasure and intelligence are good even though 'good' is a simple notion. (2) A simple notion has no other notion as its parts. There are three possible interpretations of this statement : (a) The notion 'head' can be a part of the notion 'horse', the way Moore talks of. In this sense 'head' can be a part of the notion of 'man' as well. If we replace 'head' by 'horse's head'; then that will be begging the question; we must know what is it to be a horse before knowing what is it to be a horse's head. (b) A notion which cannot be understood in terms of other notions, e. g. 'electron' (presupposing that we do not talk of parts of an electron. This may be a matter of my ignorance. Even if scientists talk of two or more

different constituents of electrons, we can treat any one of them as an example). (c) Species concepts can be said to be parts of the genus concept. But this is not the sense in which Moore talks of simple notions because the complex notion "colour" can be known without knowing all its species i. e. what is it to be "red" or "green" etc. And in the given example of horse "head", "heart" etc. are not the species of the notion of "horse".

## II

Perhaps we can understand Moore better if we try to see it in another perspective i. e. what is it that we cannot define. He considers "yellow" and "good" to be simple notions and writes :

My point is that 'good' is a simple notion, just as 'yellow' is a simple notion; that, just as you cannot by any manner of means, explain to anyone who does not already know it, what yellow is, so you cannot explain what good is. Definitions of the kind that I was asking for, definitions which describe the real nature of the object or notion denoted by a word, and which do not merely tell us what the word is used to mean, are only possible when the object or notion in question is something complex.<sup>9</sup>

The passage consists of the following main points: (1) A statement of fact, that one cannot, by any manner of means, explain to any one who does not already know what yellow or good is. (2) 'Yellow' and 'good' are simple notions. (3) Only complex notions are definable. One may understand the significance of the first in two ways: (a) One may say that as 'yellow' and 'good' are simple notions, they cannot be explained to others. This may further mean that either these simple notions are in-born or it is developed by every person by sensual experiences. The fact that people differ on moral issues is enough to show that the notion 'good' is not in-born. So far as second alternative is concerned there are two further alternatives: either it is logically impossible to explain these notions to others because of the limitation of the existing language or it is logically impossible to develop a language such that we can explain simples to others. I will argue



later that it is because of this first alternative i.e. because of the limitations of the existing language that some notions are not explainable to others who do not know them, though there will always be some notions, for this or that person at a particular point of time, though not at different times, which cannot be explained (b) One may say that we cannot teach notion to someone who does not know it, is a criterion to know that notion is simple. This consists of two alternatives: with the help of existing language if some notion is not explainable to the one who does not know it, then it is simple; or if there is no logical possibility of explaining it to the one who does not know it in whatever language conceivable, then it is simple. The first alternative does not really provide us an infallible criterion, whereas, the second does. If there are really some simple notions, then it would necessarily follow that it is logically impossible to explain them in terms of constituent notions. If this failure of explanation of some notion is due to the limitation of the language, then it does not necessarily mean that the notion is simple, for it is possible that the notion is complex but we do not have adequate words to stand for their constituents.

### III

I think, no one will disagree with me that we can formulate new concepts. Four decades ago, we did not have the notion of 'electron', 'proton' and 'neutron'. Hare has introduced two concepts to us that of phrastic and neustic.<sup>10</sup> If Moore is not a Platonist, one can reasonably talk of formulating or creating new concepts. One may discover new similarities or resemblance or family resemblances in things and can acquire new concepts. I believe the concept of entailment is a contribution of Moore himself to the world of philosophy. He also recognises this fact to certain extent and writes: "We can, for instance, make a man understand what a chimaera is although he has never heard of one or seen one. You can tell him that it is an animal with a lioness's head and body, with a goat's head growing from the middle of its back, and with a snake in place of a tail."<sup>11</sup>

Moore recognises only one way of constructing concepts. He believes that we can construct new concepts only if they are complex and we know their constituents, simple or complex concepts. He further writes: "And so it is with all objects, not previously known, which we are able to define: they are all

complex ; all composed of parts, which may themselves, in the first instance, be capable of similar definition, but which must in the end be reducible to simplest parts, which can no longer be defined." 12

There is also another way of constructing a concept. Consider again the concept of horse. 'Head' is a part of horse. Head has other parts as well. If we analyse a head, we get brain, skeleton etc. Brain also is constituted of different parts : auditory, memory etc. If we have to set a limit some where, it can be for one of these reasons : (1) We cannot perceive any smaller part than X of a brain and therefore X can give rise to the simplest possible concept C. (2) We do not have any other concepts which constitute the concept C.

I will examine now, the first alternative. This alternative makes the same presupposition which Moore also makes that all simple concepts can be acquired only through sense experience. If this presupposition is made, then we can reasonably say that we cannot perceive horses and have the concept of horse unless we have acquired the concept of head, heart etc. If the procedure of learning a concept is same, both in the case of 'horse' and 'horse's head' or any other simple concepts which constitute the horse, I do not see why a person can only learn the simple concepts through sense experience and why not a complex as well. Such a position has to face the following problems : (1) In the first place this position goes against the fact that we can also learn the whole without harming about the parts. For example, I can learn what it is to be a transistor without learning its different parts. (2) In the second place, the concept of 'simple' becomes relative. (3) What makes me to acquire only simple concepts by perception of things and what hinders me from acquiring a complex concept through perception without formulating simple concepts. If it is possible to derive even a complex concept from experience, then it is a complex concept for one who has derived the concept of head, heart etc., earlier to his formulation of the concept of horse, and it is simple to one who has derived only the concept of horse. The same point can be made from the fact that two persons have different capacity to perceive something. For example, my visual capacity to see something is less than that of some others. If so,

the smallest particle which others can see with their normal eyes cannot be seen by me. That is to say, if a concept is simple to me because I am not able to see further resemblances in the smallest particles, then that concept will be simple for me, and to others it is complex if they can visualise the parts of those particles and are able to formulate other concepts which form the parts of the so called simple concept of mine.

All those who deny that concepts are necessarily derived from sense experience will disagree with Moore. For them, it will be possible to have a concept first and to have the species of that concept later on. It was possible for us to have the concept of atom earlier to the concepts of electron, proton etc. This is to say that what we are saying when we say that a concept is simple for us is that at present we do not possess concepts which are the parts of the concept. But, we do not rule out the future possibility of formulating other concepts which constitute the parts of so called simple concepts; which is to admit that there are no concepts whatsoever which are absolutely simple. We can talk of simplicity of a concept only with reference to time and person.

It is not very interesting to investigate those theories of concepts which believe that the formulation of a concept is partly because of one's own perception and partly because of one's own mind. Whatever position they hold, they will not be in a position to prove that there are concepts which are absolutely simple. If Moore also holds that certain concepts are simple for some and complex for others, he will not be able to make a case for the naturalistic fallacy. If he admits that some notions are simple for period of time and they can turn out to be complex when we formulate further concepts, then Moore has to admit the possibility of a definition of even simples in due course of time, and thus the force of the charge of the naturalistic fallacy is considerably reduced. Nevertheless, I am fully aware of the fact that Moore's charge of committing the naturalistic fallacy is not only based on the simplicity of good but on the more significant that good is a non-natural property and that the 'naturalistic ethics' violates this distinction between natural and non-natural properties. But I have not considered the cogency or otherwise of Moore's claim

on this point in this paper and I hope to consider it in one of my subsequent papers.

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#### NOTES

1. The word "notion" means the same as that of "concept".
2. In fact naturalists, hedonists etc. can be charged as giving arbitrary verbal definition or verbal definition proper incorrectly.
3. Moore, G. E. : *Principia Ethica*, (London, N. Y. : Cambridge University Press, 1903), p. 8.
4. *PE*, p. 9.
5. *PE*, p. 7.
6. The term "idea" is used in more than one senses : Some mean by "idea" an image. There is another use of the word "idea" which is prevalent in Idealistic School. They mean by "idea" a universal, which is nothing but what Moore calls "notion" or in the modern terminology it will be a concept.
7. *PE*, p. 6.
8. *PE*, p. XIII.
9. *PE*, p. 7.
10. Hare, R. M. : *The Language of Morals*, (Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 18.
11. *PE*, p. 7.
12. *PE*, pp. 7 & 8.