

From G.E. Moore
(1990)

It is immediately after the 1898 Dissertation that Moore writes of 'objects' of consciousness as things in their own right, merely externally related to the consciousness we have of them. Such objects need not exist and are typically complex, since they are usually propositions. A good example is provided by his discussion of ends in his 1898 lectures on *'The Elements of Ethics'*. He distinguishes a sense of 'end' in which it is any 'object of desire', and observes that where I desire to eat an apple the 'object' of my desire is my eating an apple, which is 'one and the same thing, whether it has existed, does exist, or will exist', so that 'the fact that I desire it, seems to make us call it an end; and yet this fact seems to make no difference whatever to what it is in itself'. It is at this time too that Moore begins to deploy an explicit 'object/content' contrast; in his article on 'Truth' he writes of 'the almost universal error, whereby the *object* of a belief or idea is regarded as the attribute or content of such belief or idea' (B vol. 2 p. 717). It is clear that Moore is here using the term 'object' to specify the intentional object of a mental act — what is desired, believed, etc. But, as these passages also show, since he thinks that the phrases which give the intentional object of a mental act denote things which *are* in their own right (whether or not they exist or are thought of), it is only to be expected that he will tend to incorporate this latter belief into his use of the term 'object', just assuming that intentional objects are real objects, if one may so speak. In discussing a version of phenomenalism which rejects this assumption for the objects of sense-experience there is then a manifest danger that questions will be begged. In fact I do not think that this is the case in RI, but it often appears to be so, and in presenting Moore's argument I shall sometimes disambiguate his uses of the term 'object' by adding the prefixes 'intentional' and 'real'.

5: *The refutation of phenomenalism*

We are now in a position to understand properly the central thesis of RI that phenomenalists mistake object for content in sensation.²² Moore explicitly employs Bradley's account of a thing's 'content', whereby a

thing's content comprises its properties, and maintains that a phenomenalist will say that the (intentional) object of sensation is just part of its content. Moore holds that this is not so: his thesis is that the (intentional) object of sensation is always a real object, something which exists in its own right.

He initially explains his use of the crucial phrase 'object of sensation' as that wherein distinct sensations, such as a sensation of blue and one of green, differ. Clearly, 'object' here need mean no more than 'intentional object', and although he proceeds immediately to characterise the object of sensation as a 'distinct element' in sensation, there is not yet anything which a phenomenalist has to reject. Moore, however, moves very rapidly to an emphatic assertion of realism with respect to objects of sensation. Taking as his example a visual sense-experience, a 'sensation of blue', he writes:

For we can and must conceive the existence of blue as something quite distinct from the existence of the sensation. We can and must conceive that blue might exist and yet the sensation of blue not exist. For my own part I not only conceive this, but conceive it to be true.

(RI pp. 18-19)

Assertion, however emphatic, is not argument; the question is whether Moore gives any good reasons for what he here says.

The answer to this lies in Moore's critical discussion of the phenomenalist claim that the intentional object of sensation is part of its content. Moore tacitly restricts a thing's content to its non-relational qualities, and, thus understood, it is clear why he rejects the claim. Whether a phenomenalist really has to accept it is an issue I shall discuss later. In arguing against it, Moore assumes the following interpretation of what it is to treat the intentional object of a sensation as a quality of it:

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 and hair, it contains consciousness. The relation of the blue to the consciousness is conceived to be exactly the same as that of the blue to the glass or the hair: it is in all three cases the *quality* of a thing.

(RI p. 22)

What matters now in this strange passage is Moore's interpretation of the claim he is attacking as the claim that for a sensation to be of blue is

just for it to be blue. He associates this allegedly phenomenalistic claim with the thought that for a phenomenalistic sensations are mental images (RI pp. 23-4), related to their intentional objects as an image in a mirror is related to that of which it is a reflection; in both cases, for an image, mental or mirror, to be of blue, it must be blue.

It is a simple matter to refute the principle that for a sensation, or image, to be of *F* is for it to be *F*: an image of a horse is not a horse. However, this makes things too easy; for Moore's allegedly phenomenalistic principle seems to be restricted to colours and other sensible qualities, as in his sole, awkward, example of a sensation of blue. This restriction is not stated by Moore in RI, but I think he just took it for granted that the phrases which give the intentional objects of genuine sensations or sense-experiences describe only sensible qualities. Moore implies as much in his contemporary paper E&E when he denies that we can experience visually the woodenness of a wooden table (p. 91) and in his slightly later paper NROP (1905) this assumption is expressly enunciated: Moore here distinguishes what we normally say we see (e.g. books on a shelf) from what we 'actually see', which amounts only to 'colours, and the size and shape of colours, and spatial relations in three dimensions between these patches of colours' (p. 68).

With this restriction to sensible qualities in place, Moore's phenomenalistic principle looks more plausible, and it is now Moore's objection to it that seems peculiar. Moore's objection rests on the assumption (apparent in the passage cited above from p. 22 of RI) that there is no distinction between colours as qualities of material objects (as in 'blue bead') and colours as experienced qualities (as in 'seeing blue' or 'sensation of blue'). That there is any such distinction is itself a contentious claim, though one which Moore was himself to endorse later (cf. e.g. *PGEM* pp. 657-8; *CB* p. 327) and at the time of RI the distinction was often made.²⁹ Discussion of its validity can be postponed until it arises in the context of a discussion of Moore's sense-datum theory in chapter 8; I shall, however, employ here the phrases 'objective quality' and 'phenomenal quality' to describe this distinction, if it is one. In RI Moore treats sensible qualities throughout as objective qualities, and it is this that makes possible his chief argument against his phenomenalistic principle. His argument is just that even if visual sensations do have colours, we have no reason to suppose they have the colours that they are of (RI pp. 24-6). Clearly, if we are to think of visual experiences being coloured in the way in which material objects like beads are coloured, Moore's point is correct; but any half-awake defender of Moore's phenomenalistic principle will reject its relevance by distinguishing between colours as objective qualities and as phenomenal qualities. For with this distinction, Moore's phenomenalistic principle will not entail that 'a sensation of blue . . . differs from a blue bead in

exactly the same way in which the two latter [the blue bead and blue bead] differ from one another'; what blue is in the first case (a phenomenal quality) will itself differ from what it is in the other cases (an objective quality).

So far as I can see, therefore, Moore's influential refutation of 'idealism' (i.e. phenomenalism) in RI is a total failure. It is only fair to add that Moore himself later expressed much the same opinion (*PGEM* p. 654), and, indeed, may have held this opinion when in 1922 he commented in the preface to *PS* (p. viii) that RI was 'very confused' and embodied a 'good many down-right mistakes'. One point that Moore must have soon come to recognise is that the issue he here takes to be crucial is not really such. For the sense-datum theory he soon adopts is supposed by him to be consistent with phenomenalism, and yet it precisely does not embody the kind of treatment of the sensible qualities given in sense-experience which in RI he regards as characteristic of phenomenalism; instead of treating them as qualities of sense-experiences, it treats them as sense-data given in experience or properties of them. So even if his argument in RI were persuasive, he would have later acknowledged that it does not suffice for the falsity of phenomenalism. Nor, indeed, is it necessary: those who hold an 'adverbial' view about sensible qualities (cf. chapter 8, section 4) treat the sensible qualities we experience as qualities of our experiences; but they are not thereby committed to phenomenalism. Thus the relevance to phenomenalism of Moore's putative phenomenalistic principle that for a sensation to be of sensible quality *F* it must be *F* is at best indirect.

From the failure, as he saw it, of the phenomenalistic account of sensible qualities, Moore inferred the truth of his own strongly realist account of the intentional objects of sense-experience. According to this theory, in sense-experience we are directly aware of objects in space whose existence is as independent of our awareness of them as the existence of propositions is independent of our thoughts of them. Furthermore, by treating the sensible qualities we experience as entirely 'objective' (rather than merely 'phenomenal'), Moore is led to interpret these objects of which we are directly aware as qualities of material objects in physical space. The resulting position is the most naive of naive realisms, whose difficulties soon became apparent to him. I shall discuss the theory in more detail in the next chapter and Moore's recognition of the insuperable objections to it in chapter 5. But for now we can return to RI and conclude this examination of Moore's critical response to Kant with Moore's use of his realist position to present the conclusion of RI in explicitly anti-Kantian terms:

When Kant supposed that the objectivity of things in space consisted in the fact that they were 'Vorstellungen' having to one another

different relations from those which the same 'Vorstellungen' have to one another in subjective experience, he supposed what was false. I am as directly aware of the existence of material things in space as of my own sensations; and *what* I am aware of with regard to each is exactly the same — namely that in one case the material thing, and in the other case my sensation, does really exist.

(p. 30)²⁴

6. Moore and Absolute idealism

So far I have concentrated on Moore's critical response to Kantian idealism, in which his rejection of Kant's 'too psychological standpoint' is the predominant theme. But Moore was well aware that Hegel, while taking over much of Kant's idealism, had developed further views, some of which were endorsed by Bradley and McTaggart, with whose work he was especially familiar. One Hegelian doctrine accepted by Bradley and McTaggart was especially notorious — the doctrine that ordinary truths can only be properly understood in the context of an all-encompassing ultimate reality, the Absolute; and it is because of their acceptance of this that the kind of idealism they advanced was known as 'Absolute idealism'.

As an undergraduate Moore was introduced to Absolute idealism by Ward, Stout, and especially McTaggart (*PGEM* pp. 17–19). I have already described Moore's initial enthusiasm for some aspects of this philosophy and his special respect for Bradley; there are even favourable references to Hegel in his very early writings (e.g. F.P. 200). But in 1898 Moore began to turn critically upon the doctrines of Absolute idealism. In section I I quoted Moore's favourable acknowledgement of Bradley from the preface to his 1897 Dissertation; the preface to the 1898 Dissertation shows a marked change — he now writes

For my own metaphysical views I am no doubt chiefly indebted to Bradley. But I have come to disagree with him on so many points, and these points of importance, that I doubt if I can name any special obligations.

Over the next few years, his criticisms turn into a biting scorn, especially directed at Hegel:

The principle of organic unities, like that of combined analysis and synthesis, is mainly used to defend the practice of holding both of two contradictory propositions, wherever this may seem convenient. In this, as in other matters, Hegel's main service to philosophy has consisted in giving a name to and erecting into a principle, a type of fallacy to which experience had shown philosophers, along with the

rest of mankind, to be addicted. No wonder that he has followers and admirers.

(RI p. 16)

Hegel, being dead, could be abused with impunity. No similar abuse is ever openly directed at Bradley, whom Moore rightly described in 1911 as 'one of the most eminent of living philosophers' (*SMPP* p. 207). But Bradley is none the less indirectly attacked through the abuse that is heaped upon claims that are all too easily recognisable as characteristically Bradleyan; Bradley is, so to speak, abused by description. For example, the thrust of Moore's heavily ironical discussion of the thesis that reality is spiritual at the start of RI is unmistakable, the conclusion of *Appearance and Reality* being that 'We may fairly close this work by insisting that Reality is spiritual' (p. 552).