

MOORE'S LINGUISTIC TURN

DEBIKA SAHA

Academic philosophy has undergone a striking change in recent years. The attention of philosophers has become more and more concentrated on language and linguistic consideration, which were once introduced for the sake of clarifying a question or an argument, now occupy a central place in the field of philosophy. The tendency refers back to Socrates, who was engaged in answering such questions as 'What is justice' in *The Republic* or 'What is knowledge' in the *Theaetetus*. It has been frequently believed that philosophy is a search for truth. Socrates appeared as a break-through when he assumed that philosophy must be opposed to the special sciences. It was Socrates, who believed that philosophy consisted of a special method different from the method of science. The primary purpose of philosophy is to make clear what is meant when certain questions are asked or when certain words are used. Socrates tried to clarify thought by analysing the meaning of our expressions and the real sense of our propositions.

Philosophy thus differs from the sciences. The sciences aim at discovering the truth. Philosophy discovers meaning also. The spirit of the modern "Age of Analysis" actually is an extension of what Socrates initiated. The revival of the Socratic tradition took a long time.

Against this changing perspective G. E. Moore appears in the arena of philosophy. It is Moore, who challenges the predominant philosophical views of the period and is responsible for the new conception of philosophy. He suggests that common sense and ordinary language supplies to philosophy both its problems and a touchstone by which its speculative claims may be checked. The present paper is concerned with Moore's philosophical method, namely, his way of dealing with the notion of analysis.

Moore writes in his *Autobiography* :

I do not think that the world or the sciences would ever have suggested to me any philosophical problems. What has suggested problems to me is things which other philosophers have said about the world or about natural science.¹

This remark of Moore leads us straight to his conception of philosophy.

The notion of analysis plays an important part in his writings and there can be no doubt that he is responsible for concentrating attention of philosophers to analysis. But he himself explicitly denies in his reply to Langford in "A Reply to my Critics" that he ever engaged in the analysis of verbal expressions. So before entering into details it will be helpful to explain what Moore means by "analysis". If by analysis we mean merely counting the letters in a sentence then it is a fact that Moore never engaged in such type of analysis. But he surely deals with linguistic analysis in the sense of determination of the various senses of a word or the difference of use between philosophical and ordinary writings.

The most important use which he makes of this notion is in his "A Defence of Common Sense" where he is concerned to refute certain philosophical propositions. Now here one may ask : what does Moore mean by "Common Sense" and how is it relevant for philosophical investigation. In "A Defence of Common Sense", we do not find any definition of "Common Sense" but in his earlier writings he writes :

There are, it seems to me, certain views about the nature of the universe, which are held, now-a-days, by almost everybody. They are so universally held that they may, I think, fairly be called the views of Common Sense.²

The principal feature of the Common Sense view of the world consists in a belief in two different sorts of entities, namely, material object and acts of consciousness. The novelty of Moore's treatment lies in the fact that he does not define either material object or acts of consciousness. On the contrary, he supplies a set of propositions in favour of them. He knows with certainty that there are human beings with whom he can communicate and this proves that there are material objects. And acts of consciousness are attached to bodies as they are causally dependent on them. He criticises those philosophers who held

that material things are unreal on the ground that their denial entails the fact that they themselves do not exist.

Here a question arises. Are all those philosophers naive, who regard the above view? Are they not conscious of the above consequences? Certainly Moore is not suggesting that line. Then what is the reason for discarding their view? Moore thinks that these philosophers, who negate such 'Common Sense' beliefs outright, are unaware of a pair of important distinctions. The first is the distinction between a proposition and the analysis of that proposition. We may be perfectly certain that material things exist while genuinely uncertain how the concept 'material thing' should be analysed. It is the latter sense that philosophers are thinking when they are saying that material things are not real.

The other distinction that the philosophers are unaware of, is the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary uses of language. Moore shows that such words as 'time', 'space', 'material thing', 'mind', 'see', possess a common or standard meaning and an extraordinary meaning that is substitution of a new sense for the standard meaning without due warning of the change. As Russell says, "All that one ever sees when one looks at a thing is part of one's own brain".³ Now, what does Russell mean by this peculiar statement? Does he mean to imply that whenever the physiologist examines one's brain he is just deceiving? What kind of statement it is? Is it an empirical statement or an a priori statement? It is not an empirical statement as the perceived fact is quite different as stated. It is also not an a priori statement as its denial involves no self-contradiction. So Russell's disagreement with the common man is not about facts but about what language shall be used to describe these facts.

So here it is language that matters. Now one may question, is Russell so naive as to the correct usage? The fact is, he knows very well what distinguishes the correct usage from an incorrect one. He just wants to point out that even when the usage is infallible, here is every chance of being mistaken and indeed they are fundamentally mistaken about the nature of things.

Against the above view, Malcolm suggests there are certain conditions under which Common Sense *cannot* be mistaken. These conditions are the following : An expression must have (1) a descriptive and (2) an underivative use. It is generally said that an expression has a descriptive use when there are objects to which it actually applies. The expression "Golden Mountain" has no

descriptive use because it applies to nothing. An expression has underivative use when it can be known at firsthand as the expressions 'earlier', 'behind', 'material thing'. And when such expressions are used in their ordinary meanings it is impossible to distrust them.

Russell's philosophical statement is not only inconsistent with Common Sense beliefs, it is not in correct language. The notion of 'correctness' of language requires clarification. It is not grammatical accuracy which has been hinted at by Moore. It is just false to say Russell's statement offends against grammar. Moore believes that it is correct language to say that what we are doing now is seeing a desk, and it is not correct language to say that what we are now doing is seeing parts of our brain.

The assertion of Moore has the appearance of an apriori ruling. What justifies his assertion that one is correct language while the other is not? As Blanshard has interpreted Moore, Common Sense sets the bounds of a concept and language must obey it. This is what is understood by the word 'concrete'. Statements of philosophy must be translatable into the concrete.

Now, why this uncritical reliance on the veracity of Common Sense? Common Sense, firstly, has often been found to be wrong. Secondly, empirical things cannot be 'known for certain'. The Common Sense statement 'The earth is flat' has long been falsified. From what we can gather from Moore's writings, it appears that Moore does not intend to subscribe to all the claims of Common Sense. Common Sense beliefs differ enormously. They do not guide us. But Moore holds that there is a number of very general propositions which make up the Common Sense view of the world.

According to Ayer the phrase "know for certain" can have no proper application to empirical statement and it can only be applied to a priori statements. There is always a degree of uncertainty involved in empirical statement and it is better to say that we believe something to be true rather to say we know for certain to be true. As against this view Moore replies that it is better here to appeal to our language sense. He makes us feel how wrong it will be to say when we sit in a room, see and touch chairs that we only believe that there are chairs but do not know for certain.

The truth of the matter lies elsewhere. It is not possible that these

philosophers are making so trivial a mistake. But the fact is not that the phrase 'I know for certain' has no proper application to empirical statement. On the contrary, it is the *sense* that matters here. The sense in which it has its application to empirical statement, is different from the sense it has to apriori statement. When Ayer says that 'know for certain' cannot be applied to empirical statement, he is implying that logical certainty is not to be found there. And his statement is certainly true. What is wrong here is the fact that he expressed this truism in a false way.

Even admitting that there is a set of propositions which we can accept as Common Sense beliefs, and also admitting that we can know these propositions for certain, it is not clear how his defence of Common Sense is connected with his defence of ordinary language.

Moore's defence of Common Sense and his use of the same as a method of rejecting philosophical statements have often been subjected to severe criticism. For example, it has been said that Moore here fails in the very same way in which Dr. Johnson failed to refute Berkeley by kicking a stone. For Moore's part the procedure appears to beg the question, he seems to prove the external world by granting the existence and reality of his hands.

Further, one cannot *guarantee* which proposition should constitute Common Sense belief. In view of the rejection of so many beliefs of Common Sense, one cannot logically guarantee the abiding truth of any Common Sense belief, whatever Common Sense is in relation to the climate of the age. Of course, Moore has sometimes believed that there is always a central core of Common Sense belief which are known for certain, although we may not be in a position to prove them. Moore says that his inability to prove them does not prevent him from knowing them to be true.

Malcolm believes that the essence of Moore's technique is to point out that the philosophical statements go against ordinary language.

Language sense is one of the important factors in determining the truth or falsity of any statement. One must be aware of the ways in which language is ordinarily used. This emphasis on the variety of linguistic usage which sets the standard reminds us of later Wittgenstein's use of language game as, "I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it

is woven, the “language game”.⁴ Wittgenstein is impressed by the fact that to speak a language is to behave in a certain way. And all these requires skill and this skill can be correctly or incorrectly done. To speak a language is to exercise certain techniques and our behaviour shows various abilities. One’s behaviour is not an isolated mode of behaviour but it’s rather woven together with the surrounding circumstances. When Wittgenstein says that to speak a language is to exercise certain techniques we are at once reminded of Moore who says of the proper and improper way of speaking.

After having discussed Moore’s method it is time now to reflect on some of his views. We have to see whether Moore’s position can be accepted uncritically. One very important criticism that has been offered against his view is that for many words of philosophic importance there is no standard use, but a variety of uses. And if the philosopher tries to employ all of them, his language far from being clear will be ambiguous and it will be mere crowded universe. For instance, the words ‘know’ and ‘certain’ are used in every philosophical writings. These words ordinarily mean apprehension and degrees of awareness. And if the philosophers stick to this common usage, it will be impossible to conduct any philosophical discussion.

Professor Barnes has raised a point that if one asks Moore whether he knows the meaning of ‘This is a big inkstand’, Moore will no doubt reply that it all depends on what one means by ‘knowing the meaning’. If one is speaking about its understanding, the answer will be ‘yes’ and if one means the correct analysis of the sentence the answer will be ‘no’. And this shows that the phrase ‘knowing the meaning of’ has no standard meaning on which philosophers can rely.

Moreover, Moore’s proposal makes Common Sense an arbiter in fields outside its competence. For example, Moore says that material things exist as Common Sense says they do. But he also says if we are to get a clear answer to any question, we must know what it is that we are asking. But this is not the sort of question which Common Sense ever raises.

In conclusion we may say : while it is a fact that we have to face difficulties in applying Common Sense sometimes, yet one can philosophize in analysing Common Sense notion. But the condition is that one has to proceed within the bounds of Common Sense.

It appears that Moore is inclined to drive a wedge between Common Sense and philosophy (in the traditional sense). But it is not impossible to strike a compromise between them. One may very well restrict oneself within the bounds of Common Sense ontology and still engage in philosophical enquiry. The beliefs of Common Sense may provide us with a workable ontological framework; nevertheless such concepts as causality, material objects, etc. may raise important philosophical questions. It is thus not necessary to contradict Common Sense in order to formulate philosophical statements.

NOTES

1. John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, Penguin Books, 1980, P. 201.
2. G. E. Moore, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, New York : The Macmillan Co., 1953., p. 2.
3. Norman Malcolm, "Moore And Ordinary Language", *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. by P. A. Schilpp, The Library of Living Philosophers, Vol. IV., Northwestern University, Evanston and Chicago, 1942, p. 347.
4. George Pitcher, *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Prentice Hall of India, New Delhi, 1985, p. 240.

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Contact : The Editor,
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University of Poona,
Pune 411 007.