UNIT 5: MOORE'S ON REFUTATION OF IDEALISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

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5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to :

- define idealism and its core principle
- explain Moore's criticism on Kant's idealism
- define the different meaning of esse is percipi
- discuss Moore's distinction between object and object of sensation
- explain Moore's refutation of idealism
- explain Moore's criticism on Absolute Idealism

5.2 INTRODUCTION

Moore's refutation of idealism started with his critical response to Kantian idealism. He argues that Kant's conception of morality as

founded on *a priori* principles of practical reason is untenable. He was also critical of Hegel's Absolute idealism and his views that were endorsed by Bradley and Mc Taggart, with whose works Moore was more familiar. Moore's most famous argument against idealism are contained in his paper 'The Refutation of Idealism'. It is an argument against the one claim that all Idealists according to Moore considers necessary to their position – the claim that "*esse* is *percip*i" (to be is to be perceived). Moore in this paper aim to prove that this claim is false in all the sense ever given to it. Moore's final critical response to idealism concerns his rejection of the Absolute Idealism or the philosophy of monism that characterised British idealism. He argues that idealist conception of organic whole is self-contradictory and its internal realtion involves a logical fallacy.

5.2.1 G.E. Moore

George Edward Moore (1873-1958) was an important British philosophers of the first half of the twentieth century. He was one of the trinity of philosophers at Trinity College Cambridge (the others were Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein) who founded the analytic tradition in philosophy. He was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge and the editor of the influential journal *Mind*. Moore's paper 'The Refutation of Idealism'(1903) was originally published in *Mind* in 1903. It was Moore's most famous criticisms of idealism. *A*mong other Moore's most famous works includs his book Principia Ethica, (1903)and his essays, 'A Defence of Common Sense', (1925) and 'A Proof of the External World' (1939).

5.2.2 Idealism

Idealism is a philosophical doctrine which asserts that reality is fundamentally mental or immaterial. Idealist maintained that knowledge is not independent of mind. They assign crucial importance to ideal or spritual. There are different types of idealism namely subjective idealism , objective idealism, absolute

idealism and transcendental idealism . Beginning with Kant, German Idealists such as Hegel, Fichter, Schelling and Schopenhauer dominated nineteen-century philosophy. This tradition, which emphasized the mental or 'ideal' character of all phenomena, birthed idealistic and subjectivsit schools ranging from British Idealism to phenomenolism to existentialism .

5.3 MOORE'S REFUTATION OF IDEALISM

Moore was antagonistic towards the idealism that dominated British philosophy. He believe that there is too much dogmatic slumbering in the camp of the idealists. One of the most important parts of his philosophical development was his break from the idealism. His revolt against idealism came between 1898 and 1903 when Moore published the first major anti-idealist essay especially 'The Nature of Judgment' (1899) which comes largely from his 1898 Dissertation and 'The Refutation of Idealism' (1903). His final aspect of critical response to idealism is found in the paper 'External and Internal Relations' (1919).

5.3.1 Moor's criticism on Kantian Idealism

Moore was critical of Kant's idealism . He assused Kant of bluring the distinction between 'the psychological faculty of making judgments and inferences' on the one hand and that which is 'true and objective' on the otherhand. The first is psychological while the seoncd is rational and objective. That is, it is a distinction between thought on the one hand and what is objective or real on the other. This distinction, Moore maintains, 'cannot be either done away or bridged over'. He attack Kant for wrongly regarding the truth of the *a priori* principles of morality, as constituted by the structure of the rational will. That is Kant account of the *a priori* embodies a radical confusion of sound logic and irrelevant psychology. Moore rejected Kantian conception of the *a priori* as a muddles form of subjectivism or

psychologism. Hence Kantian conceptions of the a priori priciples of practical reason is untenable. Moore extended this line of thought to a general criticsm of Kant's conception of the *a priori.*

Moore's criticism of Kantian account of idealism as implicited in his crticism of *a priori* knowledge can be formulated in two ways . First , he accuses Kant of trying to bridge over the gulf between a thought and its truth. Second, Kant cannot account for the necessity of his synthetic *a priori* principles. This is because the principle of a priori, must be themselve either contingent or necessary. If they are contingent, they cannot provide a basis for the necessity of the *a priori* principles and if they are necessary, then there must be synthetic *a priori* principles characterising these necessities . These *a priori* principles cannot be explained by refernce to the mind's opeation. It could not therefore be a logical basis from which their necessity could be deduced.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Write the name of the philosopher who is associated with the essay 'Moore's Refutation of Idealism'

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Q 2: Write the definition of idealism.

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Q 3: Who are Q 3:Who are known as the trinity of philosophers?

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Q 4: Write the name of the book in which Moore reaction against idealism.

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Q 5: What are the different types of idealism?

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5.3.2 'The Refutation of Idealism'

In this essay Moore rejected the core principle of idealism and offered a distinctly realistic alternative. He claimed that idealist simply assume without evidence the truth of their most important principle. The essay is a respond to the metaphysical idealism advocated by F.H Bradley and George Berkey. According to Moore every form of idealim, relies on the principle expressed by Berkeley , "esse est percipi" or " to be is to be perceived". This belief that, everything is an object of expereince in some mind. That is, existence of an object depends upon its being perceived by some mind. Berkeley even postulates the existence of God as a supreme being who perceives all object, at all time, thus ensuring their contineous existence.

The Idealist Thesis:

Moore formulated the idealist argument as follow : since A is B and B is C and C is D, therefore A is D. Here the first step A is B is "esse is percipi" and the last step, A is D is that " reality is spritual". By the chain of inference of the sort " esse is percipi", idealist according to Moore begins from " to be is to be perceived" through expereince to that "reality is spritual'. Moore task was to dispute the idealist support for this single most trivial proposition namely "esse is percipi" that will subsequently refute an argument for the idealist thesis that 'reality is spritual'. Here it may be noted that Moore aim is not to argue that the idealist thesis that reality

is spiritual is false. He is rather arguing that (any or all) arguments based on the claim that " to be is to be perceived" are flawed. That is Moore is not here to refute the idealist thesis . He is only refusing the idealist argument for that thesis . This, he does so, not by showing that the claim " esse is percipi" is false, but by showing that the idealist way of arguing for that claim leads to contradiction.

Meaning of esse is percipi:

Moore begins by examining the meaning of 'esse is percipi'. According to him, there are atleast three sense of 'esse is percipi'. First the words 'esse' and 'percipi' have precisely the same meaning. That is the word 'esse' is used to signify nothing either more or less than the word 'percipi'. The two words are precisely synonyms. For example it is analogous to 'bachelors are unmarried adult human males'. Hence esses is absolulety identical with what is meant by percipi. Second, the meaning of 'percipi' is part but not all of the meaning of 'esse'. For example it is analogous to ' bachelors are male'. This is a relation of analytic containment. Third, is a relation of synthetic necessity. It is synthetic because it is a claim about the world and the nature of reality and not merely about the way we use words or concepts. It is necessity because it is a claim whose negation is in a sense ' inconveivable'. Here, esses is percipi asserts that wherever you have x you also have percipi and that whatever has the property of x also has the property that it is experinced.

When idealist philosophers say 'esse est percipi' Moore's questions is : what reason have they for saying so? The idealist means that 'esse' is necessarily 'percipii'. This means that being perceived is a necessary condition for existence. To this Moore questioned , what is the sort of necessary connection they assert between 'esse' and 'percipi'? The sort of necessary connection they assert is that which exist between a thing and its qualities.

That is, the relation of blue to the consciousness of blue is conceived to be exactly the same as that of the 'colour' blue to the blue 'bead'. Now if the relation is between a thing and its qualities, then it follow that to say ' a thing is' means that 'it is perceived'. This is because if a thing exists, its qualities must exist. Moore argue that this however is an error.

Object and Object of Sensation :

According to Moore, idealist is led into this error by an analysis of experience into two and only two constituents namely- content and existence. For Moore there should be a third constituents in expereince namely, a unique element called consciosuness . In other word a unique relation of consciousness to the "object". This relation of knowing is unique and it is present in the sensation of 'blue' or in any independent thing of which 'I am aware'. In other words 'sensation of blue' is like consciousness or awareness of blue which is different from the object of awareness. That is 'object of sensation' is a distinct element in sensation, different from the 'object' itself. That is on this view, the 'sensation of blue' is different from an object, a blue bead or a blue beard , just as the object blue bead is different from the object blue beard. This is because the 'sensation of blue' contains consciosuness where as the object blue bead or blue beard does not . In other words the existence of blue object is quite distinct fom the existence of the sensation of blue object.

Now a sensation of blue differs from a sensation of green because blue and green are different 'object of sensation'. However a sensation of blue resembles a sensation of green because both are cases of consciousness. Again conscionsess which sensations of blue and sensations of green have in common is different either from blue or green. To say that the consciouness of blue exist and the consciousness of green exist, is to say that consciousness also exists. Now consciousness is

obviously mental and at time the sensation of blue exists in my mind and at some time it does not . But the point is, if the sensation of blue includes both consciousness and blue, then when the sensation of blue exists in my mind three different alternative arises. That is either :

a) consciouness exists alone;

b) blue exists alone;

c) consciousness and blue exist.

To say (b) is to say something different from (c). and to say that they are the same is to contradict oneself. That is to say that the sensation of blue exists and the sensation of green exists is to say that consciousness also exists, for it is consciouness which is common to both sensations. It is consciousness in virtue of which both are sensations. Now since consciousness is a necessary element in sensation, (b) cannot be the case. Then either (a) or (c) is the case. Therefore the existence of blue (b), cannot be the same thing as the existence of the sensation of blue. We are therefore left with either (a) or (c), but not both together. From this it follow that the object of sensation must be different from the sensation itself. This is because to claim that blue is the same as consciouness plus blue, is to claim that a part is the same as a whole of which it is only part, or else to identify it with something which it is not, namely the other parts.

Whenever we have a sensation, consciousness and its object exist together. Since consciousness and its object always exist together, philosophers according to Moore has fail to realised that we can distinguished the consciousness (of blue) from the object (blue) just as we can distinguish a sensation of blue from a sensation of green. Now consciousness is obviously mental, but there is no reason whatsoever for concluding that the blue must also be mental. This argument does not provide the ground for concluding that the object blue is not mental. But it remove the ground for concluding that it is mental. Hence this

argument destroys idealism by destroying one of the strongest reasons for beleiving that blue is mental.

Implications of Moore's arguments :

Three consequences follow from this :

i) when i have a sensation of blue, my awareness is related to something outside. Therefore the idealists problem of how we are to get out of our circle of ideas does not arise. This is because to have a sensation is already to be outside it.

ii) Blue (or any colour) exists in the same sense as my expereince of it exists.

iii) The object has exactly the same nature both when we are aware of it and when we are not aware of it. Knowing therefore makes no difference to the object known.

If the analysis of Moore is right, it would follow that, the relation of knowing is 'external' to the object known and the subject that knows.that is in having a sensation, we are oputside the circle of our own ideas and thus reach out to something which is independent of our expereince of it. Henceforth there is no reason to think that the proposition esse is percipi is true and no reason to think that all objects depend for their existence upon the mind to think about them .

Lastly Moore made a distinction between object of sensation and content . According to Moore object of any sensation or mental expereicne is distinct from content . This is because, content can be the content of a perception, thoughts and volitions. That is, I can perceive something blue, I can think of something blue or I can will somehting to be blue. In all thses cases, the content may be the same. That is, the content is, indeed, something distinct from the particular expereince of it .



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: What is the main essay of idealism?

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Q 7: What is meant by esse is percipi?

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Q 8: Is esse necessarily percipi?

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5.3.3 Moore's criticism of Absolute idealism

The final aspect of Moore's critical respond toward idealism concerns his rejection of absolute idealism . Moore's criticsm on Absolute idealism is especially characteristic of Bradley's idealism according to which reality exists as an organic whole that are essentially inter related. Hence the Absolute is the one real thing. This is also called the theory of monism which was characteristic of Britsh idealism . Moore's paper on 'External and Internal Relation' (1919) focus on the idealist conception of internal relations which is the core of monist thesis.

First Moore began by characterising an organic whole as the whole that would not be what it is but for the existence of the parts, and the parts would not be what it is but for the existenbce of the whole. Moore maintianed that the concept of an organic whole is self-contradictory. He starts by introducting the assumption that the parts of an organic whole 'contian analytically' the whole of which each is a part. If so, it follow that the parts are not even 'distinct object of thought'.

Second, Moore critisied the internal relations of Absolute idealism. Absolute idealism requires that since everything is part of an organic whole, there is a necessary connection between every aspect of things and therefore all relations must be internal. Moore's argument against this thesis starts from the claim that it

conflicts with our common snese conviction that things are not essentially inter-related . This is because a change to one thing in one respect does not necessitates changes to everything else. Moore when on to show that the thesis that all relations are internal involves a logical fallacy. He inferred from Leibniz' Law, the uncontentious principle that things which differ in their relations must differ in their identity too. The argument applying Morre's concept of entailment runs as follows:

1. Leibniz' Law states that
   xRy entails (*z = x* '! *zRy*),
   where ''!' is the truth-functional conditional
2. Since entailment is a necessary connection, one might infer *xRy* '! Necessarily (*z = x* '! *zRy*)
3. From (2) one can immediately infer *xRy* '! Necessarily (*x = x* '! *xRy*)
4. Since *x = x* is itself a necessary truth, one can now infer *xRy* '! Necessarily (*xRy*) which expresses the thesis that all relations are internal.

Moore present here a sophisticated piece of informal modal logic. He observes that the step from (1) to (2) is invalid. It confuses the necessity of a connection with the neccisity of the consequent.

How far Morre's argument is acceptable is a questioned . Critic argues that Bradley's reason for his Absolute idelaism do not involve the model fallacy that Moore identifies. This is becasue Bradley's dialectic rest on a diiferent thesis about the inadequacy of thought as a representation of reality, and thus that one has to dig rather deeper into Bradley's idealist metaphysics both to extract the grounds for his monism and to exhibit what is wrong with it.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: Define monism?

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Q 10 : Is there a necessary internal relation between part and whole?

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Q 11: Is the concept of organic whole self-contradictory?

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5.4. CRITICISM

In his paper on 'The Refutation of Idealism', Moore begins his criticism against idealist with the statement aserting that the universe is spiritual. His definition of spiritual included all objects in the universe that includes chairs, tables and mountians. Here it can be argued that Moore has taken for granted the existence of the subject and assumes that the idealist argues that the object is in reality like the subject. Moore does not consider the possibility of an idealistic perspective according to which neither subject nor object may lay claim to real existence. Moore has infact misunderstood the nature of the metaphycial thesis offered by idealist.

Second criticism is directed against the three interpretaiton Moore offered for the 'esse is percipi'. His three interpretaiton are namely 1) that the words "esse" and "percippi" are synonymous; (2) that esse is not absolutely identical with what is meant by percipi, however the former includes the latter as a part of its meaning and (3) that "whereever you have esse you also have percipi that whatever has the property x also has the property that it is expereinced".

According to Moore the idealist interpretaion of esses is percipi necessirily fits into the third alternative. Whatever is, is expereince. First

this implies that esse is percipi necessarily requries a distinction between an experiencer and an expereinced. This requires an acceptance of the subject-object duality. Second it also assume that the reality is a whole, in which part of which is not experienced. But if expereince is the expereince of objects, and if we then take the object away, there is no expereince. That is experience is empty. On the other hand, if there is no object, we are not taking anything away but merely asserting only what it is .

The third major criticism of Moore's argument is directed towards Moore's distinction between consciousness and object of sensation. According to Moore, we have in every sensation two distinct terms (1) 'consciousness', in respect of which all sensations are alike and (2) somehting else, in respect of which one sensation differs from another . He calls this second term the 'object' of a sensation. According to this analysis there are two distinct elements in sensation, namely consciosduness and the object of consciousness. But the question is are there really two disitnct elelemts in sensation. According to the critic the only way to settle the case is by appealing to introspection. That is, it is on the basis of introspection that one can check whether or not there is a duality within sensation.

Moore arrived at his conslucison that there are two distinct elements because consciousness is a name given to all cases of sensation on the ground that while individual sensations differ from each other, they all nontheless share in common the characteristic of being sensations. Hence if individual sensations differ from each other, and yet, are all equally consciousness then it follows for Moore that each sensation differs from each other sensation qua content. For Moore, since individual sensation differ from one another, and all are equally conscious, it follows that consciousness is something distinct from its contents. Moore also analysis sensation or ideas as

"a case of 'knowing' or 'being aware of' or 'experiencing' somehting". According to the critic, this anaysis assume sensation as a case of subject knower "knowing" an object. That is sensation in this

analysis is different from the object known. Later on Moore analysis the sensation like 'I am aware of blue' to mean both my awareness has to blue as well as being of blue. That is Moore admits that awaress can be blue as well as being of blue.

The critic argues that if awareness is blue then it makes no sense to say that it can be of blue as well. If awareness is of a blue then we need not become aware of it . The critic argues that the only possible alternative is that it is not a blue awareness of which we a re becoming aware, but it is a blue simpliciter of which we are becoming aware. If this is is the case, then we must first have the blue before knowing it. But this, even on Moore's acount is not possible. Hence there follows two alternative. First , if there is already a blue awareness there would seem to be no need to become aware of it or else why do we refer to it as a blue awareness. Second, if it is a blue simpliciter, we could have a sensation without knowing. But his Moore himself does not allow.

What Moore intends in this analysis is to assert that sensation is comprised of two distinct elements, consciousness and the object of consicouness. To have a sensation is already to be aware of something which is other than consciousness. But the critic point is that , Moore's anaysis is dependend upon his having access to that to which, he has no access, namely a blue in itself. If the blue Moore speaks about is a blue awareness , then he would not have to become aware of it . In this case there are not two items, consciousness and its object . If on the other hand, the blue Moore speaks about is that of which he muct become aware before he can know it as blue, then it must be that he can have a blue before he knows it as blue. But this is impossible because the question is how could one 'have a blue" wihtout knowing it was blue. Hence the only alternative according to the critic must be that, "having a blue" is discovering a blue awareness. In other word, blue and consciosness of blue are not two distinct elements, but one. If this is the case, Moore's argument for 'The Refutation of Idealism' is not actually an argument for the 'refutation of Idealism' but rather an argument on its behalf.

5.5 CONCLUSION

Although Moore's refutation of idealism is highly questionable and his essay on *The Refutation of Idealism* is uncharitable to idealism, the idealist's postion is untenable in a radical sense. In a few words it may be summaried that Moore confuse what the idealist is attempting to do. He argues that the idealist contradicts himself in his thesis that the object of expereince is inconceivable apart from the subject because it means that that the idealist thinks 'yellow' is 'absolutely identical' with 'the sensation of yellow'. But the question is how can 'yellow' be 'absolutely identitcal' with 'the sensation of yellow?' In other words, how can 'yellow' be 'absolutely identical' with the sensation of itself?

Idealist implicitily has to presuppose the necessary distinction between 'yellow'and 'the sensation of yellow' , if he is to offer a coherent account of the identity of colour sensation. This leads to contradiciton because the idealist is implicitely presuppoisng what he explicitily denies. That is it conflicts with to our common snese thinking about the world. For example that in our ordinary langauge or conceptual scheme, 'yellow' is not distinguished from 'the sensation of yellow'. Hence it may be concluded that although there is lapps in Moore's account of refutaion of idealism, idealism simply does not provide th best explanation of how we expereince reality. Moore himself later expressed that his essay on *The Refutation of Idealism* was 'very confused' and embodied a 'good many down-right mistakes'. Nevertheless Moore's break with idealism with his refutation of idealism remains a decisive significance in the development of analytic philosophy .His critique of the idealism helped to break its hold on Anglo-American thought.



5.6 LET US SUM UP

- Moore's criticism of idealism is a general criticism against what he calls modern idealist. He assert that modern idealist are bound together by a chain of inference that begin from the thought or

expereinced of the phrase 'esse is percipi'. That is all idealist argument starts from 'to be is to perceice (or think or expereince)' to 'reality is spiritual'. Moore in the essay on 'The Refutation of Idealism' attemp to refute this line of reasoning by attaching the claim that esse is percipi, which originated from Berkeley.

- Moore begins by examining the meaning of esse is percipi. He argues that what is meant here is that esse includes percipi. That is, the predicate 'exist' is to be defined as 'is perceived' plus some additional x. That is being perceived is a necessary but insufficient condition for existence. Moore's task is to argued that this is not so.
- The crux of the argument is that idealist cannot consistently hold that blue is simply identitical with the sensation of blue. Just because sensation involves consciousness plus a certain content, and the two always exist together it soes not follow that they are inseparable. In fact the point is that they are separable . That is blue is separable from the sensation of blue . That is blue is different from the senation of blue. This is because, all of our sensations are modes of conscionsess, they must have certain commonalities, certain properties of consciousness *qua* consciousness. Hence sensation of blue is similar to sensation of green because both has the common elelment namely consciousness. However sensation of blue is different from sensation of green because the objects of sensations are different , one is blue , the other is green. The point is that blue is the object of our sensation and it cannot be strictly identitical with the sensation (of blue). What we have in this sensation is that there exists the awareness of blue that is certainly knowable.
- Now awareness is mental, therefore awareness of blue is also mental. According to Idealist awareness of blue entials the existence of blue . Moore thinks that this is inconsistent. This is because awareness of blue is awareness of my own mental states and it does not justify the conclusion that blue exists. It also does not justify the conclusion that blue is mental.