

G. E. MOORE AND THE DEFINITION OF 'GOOD'

G. E. Moore's position on 'Good' as stated in his famous *Principia Ethica*, is based on three presuppositions : (i) 'Good' connotes a property, (ii) 'Good' is a simple notion, and (iii) 'Good' is indefinable. The proposition (iii), as stated by Prof. Moore, is derived by him from the propositions (i) and (ii), together with the sense of 'definition' he has in his mind. The three senses of definition which he mentions in the *Principia*, including the sense most acceptable to him and whereby he tries to establish his chief position that 'Good' is indefinable, are (i) arbitrary verbal definition, (ii) the verbal definition proper, and (iii) what may be called, analytic definition. He illustrates them by taking the definition of 'horse' as "A hoofed quadruped of the genus *Equus*",¹ and states the three senses of definition thus : (i) "When I say 'horse', you understand that I am talking about a hoofed quadruped of the genus *Equus*'. This may be called the arbitrary verbal definition...."² (ii) "'When most English People say 'horse' they mean' a quadruped of the genus *Equus*'. This may be called the verbal definition proper...."³; and (iii) when we define 'horse', "We may mean that a certain object, which we all of us know is composed in a certain manner : that it has four legs, a head, a liver, etc., all of them arranged in definite relations to one another".⁴ And he goes on to add, "It is in this sense that I deny good to be definable. I say that it is not composed of any parts which we can substitute for it in our minds when we are thinking of it".⁵

It is then, in the last sense, in the sense of analytic definition as he calls it, that Moore declares 'good' to be indefinable. He calls it 'the most important sense of definition—surely a *petitio principii*, for it is this very assertion which it is his duty

to prove. However, it is the traditional sense of definition which purports to state right analysis of the term defined, i.e., definition *per genus et differentiam*. It is claimed by Moore that simple notions, which cannot be analysed into a genus and a differentiam are indefinable. He affirms that "in this sense 'good' has no definition because it is simple and has no parts. It is one of those innumerable objects of thought which are themselves incapable of definition, because they are the ultimate terms...."⁷ But what are the ultimate terms? According to Russell, only undefined symbols are the ultimate terms; and undefined symbols, to him, would represent symbolically what I mean by the 'ultimate furniture of the world'⁸ While discussing this in connection with "classes" he urges that "all the particular things there are in the world would have to have names which would be included among undefined symbols".⁹ Thus, only particular things are included in the 'ultimate furniture', and their names among 'undefinced symbols'.

To these particular names, J. S. Mill adds the names of simple feelings. He says, "The only names which are unsusceptible of definition, because their meaning is unsusceptible of analysis, are the names of the simple feelings themselves. They are in the same condition as proper names".¹⁰ I am sure G.E. Moore would be reluctant to treat of 'good' either as a particular thing or, more still, as a simple feeling. He took such pains to reject all the subjectivist ethical theories in his booklet *Ethics*.¹¹ For him 'good' is a property or an adjective applicable to a motley variety of objects, e.g., character, actions, books, tools, etc. To use his own words, "I suppose it may be granted that 'good' is adjective. Well 'the good', 'that which is good', must therefore be substantive to which the objective 'good' will apply :..."¹² An what applies to an object cannot itself be an object or a mere feeling.

Granting that 'good' is an adjective or a notion, what Prof. Moore emphasises next is that it is a simple notion, and hence not analysable. He appears to have made a distinction between simple

notion, and hence not analysable. He appears to have made a distinction between simple and complex notions, of which only the latter are definable. He argues, "My point is that 'good' is a simple notion, just as 'yellow' is a simple notionDefinition of the kind that I was asking for, are only possible when the object or notion in question is something complex".¹³ Here Moore is unduly restricting the meaning of 'definition', and no doubt in this restricted sense his position looks plausible. However, there is no warrant for this restriction as we will see in the sequel. His position, when studied closely, lends itself to the following criticism :

- (i) Moore is guilty of double confusion : he confuses an object and a concept, which he uses synonymously throughout his discussion ; again, he also appears to have confounded a symbol with what it symbolizes
- (ii) He largely misconceives the nature of an analytic definition which, he thinks, purports to state analysis of the object defined. He misses that an analytic definition, like any other definition, "is of symbol, not of the concept which symbol expresses".¹⁴

A definition states an analysis of a symbol or an expression into more primitive and familiar terms : e. g., Russell's definition of Second Cousins¹⁵ in terms of First Cousins is quite instructive in this place. In fact, in a definition both "the definiendum and the definiens express the same referend, the latter being an analysis of the former".¹⁶ L. S. Stebbing calls it the logical analysis which should not be confused with a chemical analysis¹⁷—an error which Moore seems to have committed. A proper analytic definition, as rightly stated by Condillac, J. S. Mill and others, "is the sum-total of all the essential propositions which can be framed with that name for their subject".¹⁸ The purpose of this kind of definition is "not to explain the meaning of a symbol which we already understand,

but to give an analysis of it in terms of more primitive symbols. These primitive symbols are only arbitrarily chosen. Russell is very clear on this point when he says, "Since all terms that are defined are defined by means of other terms, it is clear that human knowledge must always be content to accept some terms as intelligible without definition, in order to have a starting-point for its definitions. It is not clear that there must be terms which are incapable of definition: it is possible that, however far back we go in defining, we always might go further still".²⁰ He goes on to add, "Since human powers are finite, the definitions known to us must always begin somewhere, with terms undefined for the moment, though perhaps not permanently"²¹ Thus, undefined terms are chosen arbitrarily for the sake of convenience and to afford a foothold for defining. It is, however, certain that no analytic definition can directly entail an analysis of the object defined, as was erroneously held by G.E. Moore.

(iii) Moore appears to have in his mind, what he calls simple notions also form part of the 'ultimate furniture', a position which it is certainly hard to concede. Concepts or notions, whether simple or complex, are different from particular things, in any well-recognised sense of the word 'thing', and they are also not mere simple feelings; they cannot properly be called primitive notions. Among the greatest contributions of Bertrand Russell to modern logical analysis are his distinction between 'names' and 'concepts' or 'universals', and his famous theory of Logical Types.²² It is certain that concepts are universals, and they are to be treated as such. And 'good', being a concept, cannot be treated as a primitive notion, unanalysable and undefinable. It may perhaps be regarded as a 'flexible' word with varying significations in different contexts, as suggested by A.N. Prior in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*,²³ or as used by A. V. Ewing in *The Definition of Good*.²⁴ Words which have a shifting meaning in different context "can only be defined relatively to a given sort of usage", says Stebbing.

They can, however, hardly be regarded as undefined primitive symbols. Moore's chief position is tenable only in the case of primitive symbols, which it is hardly possible to treat of 'good' as one.

As said before G. E. Moore uses the term 'definition' in the traditional restricted sense. He acknowledges that 'good' can be defined in some other sense, but in what he calls 'the most important sense'. He admits, "A definition does indeed often mean the expressing of one word's meaning in other words. But this is not the sort of definition I am asking for. Such a definition can never be of ultimate importance in any study except lexicography".²⁶ In fact, all through Moore is tacitly adhering to the traditional distinction between the Nominal and Real definitions, a distinction which no more holds like so many other traditional doctrines. It was based on the assumption that definitions were the premises of scientific knowledge, and were the first principles from which the whole body of a science could be derived.²⁷ It was assumed that definitions were framed conformably to the phenomena of nature. It was, however, Hobbes who "rejected utterly the notion that a definition declares the nature of the thing, ..." ²⁸ Moreover, Mill has quite convincingly shown that first principles of sciences are not definitions; and in part postulates: mere definitions cannot by themselves generate any body of knowledge whatever.²⁹ However, if we read between the lines, he is basing his position on the following two assumptions: (i) what is defined is an object or a concept, and (ii) to define is to state the right analysis of the definiendum, i.e., to break it up into its component parts. This leads us to very basic question, 'What is defined, an object or a concept or a symbol'?

Moore's own position on the above question is traditional, viz., the definiendum is an object or a concept. A right answer to it, however, is in the offing after we have decided upon the true

purpose of definition. As L.S. Stebbing in *A Modern Introduction to Logic* has rightly said, "Definition is an aid to clear thinking and, therefore, to the communication of thought."³⁰ This briefly explains the chief purpose of defining. If we ask the question 'Why do we define'?, our answer will be 'to make our thought clear and communicable to others'. Again, what are the circumstances under which, in ordinary discourse, we should need to ask for a definition? We need to ask for a definition when in a discourse we fail to understand a word or an expression used by our opponent, and we want to know what he means by it. It is in view of this that W. E. Johnson, while talking of definition, says, "Our problem is how to define a given verbal phrase; and the answer is to substitute for it another verbal phrase. This is the complete and quite universal account of the procedure of definition, .."³¹ However, the definition should not be taken to mean the same as substitution: e.g., we cannot define 'valour' as 'courage', though this substitution makes the meaning of the word 'valour' intelligible, and thus serves the purpose of definition. Hence, Moore is right in denying that a bi-verbal definition is of any use to philosophy, although all definition states an equation between two expressions, the definiendum and the definiens.

Anyhow, taking the chief purpose of a definition in view, a bi-verbal definition fulfils it quite well. To the question 'what do we define'?, an expression or what the expression stands for?, J. S. Mill's answer in *A System of Logic* was, "All definitions are of names and of names only; .."³² By the word 'name' he meant the same as word or symbol or expression. Irving M. Copi in *Introduction to Logic* expressed the same point more directly when he said, "definitions are always of symbols for only symbols have meanings for definitions to explain".³³ Again to Russell, "A definition is a declaration that a certain newly introduced symbol or combination of symbols is to mean the same as

certain other combination of symbols of which the meaning is already known".³⁴ Here he is in agreement with Mill to whom again "a definition is a proposition declaratory of the meaning of a word."³⁵ Russell adds, "a definition is concerned wholly with symbols, not with what they symbolize".³⁶ His account affords a 'stipulative definition'. Thus he is also restricting it to one kind of definition only, though bringing home to us two very important truths about definition: viz., (i) a definition is of symbols or expressions alone, and (ii) a definition is conventional as it is a declaration. However, Russell's view, like that of Moore, is restrictive, for he also confines it to 'stipulative definition' only. Keeping in view the chief purposes of definition, any such confinement is unwarranted and need be avoided.

The chief object of language is to express thought, for it is the most important vehicle of thought. Definition is needed to make this vehicle effective and true to its purpose. The various purposes of definition are (i) to increase vocabulary, (ii) to clarify meaning, (iii) to express theoretically, (iv) to eliminate ambiguity and remove vagueness, and (v) to influence attitude or stir up emotions of one's hearer or reader in a certain definite way. Thus, any symbol or expression which serves one or more of these purposes is a definition, truly speaking. There is no warrant for restricting definition to any one of these purposes only, as Moore and Russell have done. And once these undue restrictions are removed symbols like 'good' become legitimately definable. We may not agree with W. E. Johnson to take definition in such a wide sense as to include, what he calls, 'ostensive definitions'³⁷; but do not agree with Moore either to restrict it to the sense he calls 'the most important sense'. The plausibility whatever of his view on 'good' draws upon two basic assumptions mentioned above. None of these assumptions, however, are warranted for, as we have seen in the course of our discussion. (i) a definition is always of symbols, and never of objects or concepts,

and (ii) a definition cannot be restricted to stating right analysis of an object for a concept. The purpose of a definition, as we have seen, is to state the right meaning and usage of a word or symbol ; a definition is one of the most important verbal propositions.³⁸ This is the only important sense of definition, and in this sense the word 'good' is surely definable.

NOTES

1. *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge University Press, 1956, p. 8.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
8. *An Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, George Allen, London, 1960, p. 182.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *A System of Logic*, Longmans, London, 6th Ed., Vol. I, p. 153.
11. Oxford University Press, 1961, Chps. III, IV.
12. G.E. Moore. *op. cit.*, p. 9.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
14. L. S. Stebbing, *A Modern Introduction to Logic*, Methuen, London, p. 441.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 424.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 441.
17. *Ibid.*
18. J. S. Mill *op. cit.*, p. 150.
19. L. S. Stebbing, *op. cit.*, p. 442.
20. B. Russell, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
22. *Ibid.*, Ch. 13.
23. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1956, p. 11
24. Macmillan, London, 1947.

25. *A Modern Elementary Logic*, revised by C.W.K. Mundle, U.P., 1961, p. 121.
26. G.S. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
27. J. S. Mill, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid*, pp. 162-63.
30. L. S. Stebbing, *op. cit.*, p. 421.
31. *Logic*, 1901, Pt. I, p. 104.
32. J. S. Mill, *op. cit.*, p. 162.
33. Macmillan, New York, 2nd. Ed., 1966, p. 99.
34. L. S. Stebbing, *op. cit.*,
35. J. S. Mill, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
36. *Principia Mathematica*, joint work by B. Russell & A. N. Whitehead, First pb. 1910, Introduction.
37. W. E Johnson, *op. cit.*, cf. , 'ostensive definitions'.
38. J. S. Mill, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

