

## G. E. MOORE AND THE PROBLEM OF PHILOSOPHICAL SCEPTICISM

*by*

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'Everybody, in fact, accepts innumerable propositions about things not experienced, but when people begin to philosophize they seem to think it necessary to make themselves artificially stupid.\*

*B. Russell*

1. It is a well known fact that, from the beginning philosophy has arisen whenever and wherever ordinary or Common Sense knowledge was found wanting, so that the need for a better or truer understanding of the world was awakened. Russell says that "Philosophy arises from an unusually obstinate attempt to arrive at real knowledge". \*\* But in so far as "what passes for knowledge in ordinary life suffers from three defects", namely from the fact that "it is cock-sure, vague and self-contradictory", it is only natural that philosophy, as a truer kind of knowledge, should immediately prove not only different from, but also inconsistent with, our Common Sense knowledge. Looked at from the Common Sense point of view, philosophy is, indeed, a very curious kind of intellectual activity, leading very often to quite uncommon conclusions, and this is the reason why philosophers are usually looked upon by the rest of mankind as rather original or extravagant fellows with somewhat "crooked" ideas. There is no doubt that philosophy is an unusual way of thinking, that it looks "odd" not only to ordinary mortals, but even to scientists themselves. This circumstance is obviously due to the fact that philosophers very often ask questions about things that seem rather obvious or that they artificially "create" problems where there should apparently be none. This, and the fact that interminable discussions on these strange prob-

\* B. Russell, My Philosophical Development, p. 131.

\*\* B. Russell An Outline of Philosophy, p. 1.

lems lead them nowhere, that, in other words, they seem to be unable to come to an agreement concerning their solution creates in unphilosophical minds the impression that there must be something fundamentally wrong in their whole undertaking, that they might indeed be pursuing only a will-o'-the-wisp. Not only do philosophers not add anything positive to our common sense and scientific knowledge, they also seem to take a particular delight in contradicting or, at least, finding faults with, our firmly established beliefs concerning the world. The strangeness or oddity of some philosophical views is also very much unlike that of some "scientific" explanations or theories which contradict our common sense beliefs. Whereas anyone with a good will and a little reflection can see where Common Sense went wrong and hence why the "scientific" explanation must be true, it doesn't seem to be possible for everyone to see the point where the "philosophical" view is or even might be true. Anyone with some scientific education today can easily understand the point of scientific theories that contradict his Common Sense beliefs; even such a highly abstruse and from the Common Sense point of view contradictory theory as Einstein's Relativity Theory can quite readily be admitted as true once its meaning is grasped, and no one with the required scientific back-ground would ever think of considering a man like Einstein as holding "absurd" views, simply because they are inconsistent with our Common Sense beliefs. The strangeness of some scientific theories is mainly due to a technical difficulty to understand them; but once this difficulty is overcome, they seem quite familiar and often we find it indeed almost puzzling that we shouldn't have thought of them before, that we should have for so long been misled by a Common Sense "illusion". Science is really a prolongation and an amelioration of Common Sense; and we so readily assimilate each amelioration that it would not be too exaggerated to say that science is on the way to become the Common Sense of an enlightened humanity. So far science has been so successful that even its strangest theories can count on a genuine readiness on our part to understand and incorporate them into our common stock of knowledge, whereas most "philosophical" theories have a rather slight chance of losing the air of oddity or paradoxicality they have in the eyes not of ordinary people only but in those of scientifically sophisticated people as well.

That this should be the case for "unphilosophically minded" people in general is quite understandable and only natural, but that this "strangeness of philosophy" or, better, the "puzzlement" caused by philosophical problems

and theories should also get hold of a professional philosopher and become the very occasion of his "initiation into philosophy" is a rather rare phenomenon in the annals of this discipline. This is what happened to Moore, one of the most influential of modern philosophers: "I do not think that the world or the sciences would ever have suggested to me any philosophical problems. What has suggested any philosophical problems to me is *things which other philosophers have said about the world or the sciences*"\*

Although Moore is surely not the only person to be "puzzled" by some apparently paradoxical assertions of philosophers, he is, to my knowledge, "unique" in that he became a "philosopher" himself simply because of such a "puzzlement". Nobody would call a Diogenes a "philosopher" merely because he found Zeno's puzzlement about the unsolvability of the problem of motion unworthy of serious attention and tried to dismiss it by walking forwards and backwards, nor would we call even Dr. Johnson a philosopher because he thought to have "refuted" Berkeley's arguments with a simple kick. The ordinary procedure in philosophy as an intellectual activity is this: someone first sees a "*problem*" where everybody thought we have "genuine knowledge" and then he proposes a solution which often will be inconsistent with our ordinary beliefs; whereupon someone else will try another solution, in so far as he will find that it is not only a "genuine" but also an "important" problem, and feel that all other solutions are not satisfactory enough. The history of philosophy is the long story of successive but often unsuccessful attempts at solution of some recurrent and obstinate problem which the human mind generates by an irresistible logical urge. And it is obvious that philosophical discussion of such problems is possible and practicable only on the assumption that they are not only "genuine" but also worthy of the highest consideration.

As to Moore's position in philosophy, it is unique in that he isn't puzzled directly by some age-old philosophical problems themselves, but by the fact that such "problems" could have ever been raised at all! So he seems to be attracted to philosophy not because its problems are highly interesting and thus deserving serious attention, but simply because they are so "strange!" Moore's approach to philosophy is thus determined mainly by a desire to inquire into whether philosophy as such is really worth studying or whether

\* Cf. G. E. Moore: *An Autobiography* in "The Philosophy of G. E. Moore", ed. P. A. Schi'pp, p. 14. My italics.

all those paradoxical questions raised by philosophers really make any sense at all. This is fundamentally a "negative" approach and in this Moore seems to join company with those "positivists" who consider philosophy, traditionally understood, as either "moonshine" or "nonsense."

2. To be more precise, what puzzled Moore directly was not so much some curious problems philosophers seemed to delight in raising as certain "strange" theories they propounded in order to solve them. So it is more in keeping with Moore's own way of thinking to consider first the puzzling statements of some philosophers which deeply disturbed him. Of course, not all philosophical statements are puzzling or paradoxical; only those statements were puzzling to him which seemed to hurt his robust Common Sense. "It seems to me that what is most amazing and most interesting about the views of many philosophers, is the way in which they go beyond or positively contradict the views of Common Sense." \* Among these Moore considers such as the following:

'There are no material things' or 'Matter does not exist.'

'There are no other minds.'

'Physical objects exist only while being perceived' or 'no material thing exists unperceived.'

'Time is unreal.'

'Space is unreal.'

'We do not know for certain that there are other minds.'

'We do not know for certain that there is anything existing independently of us', etc., etc.,....

I think the "oddity" of these statements is more acutely felt when they are expressed in question-form, as for example: 'Does matter exist?', 'Do physical objects exist unperceived?', 'Is time real?', 'Can I ever know for certain that there are other minds?', etc.,.... It is obvious that this sort of questioning is indeed very strange when contrasted with what we call an ordinary or scientific question, such as: 'In how many days does the moon revolve around the earth?' or 'What is this made of?', or 'What is the cause of lightning?', etc.,... By asking such questions we either want to learn about a new fact we

\* Moore: *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, p. 2.

are ignorant of, or to have it explained. But what is it that we are asking when we ask 'Is time real?' What is it that we want *to know*?

Now it seemed to Moore that some philosophers simply questioned what in principle is "unquestionable", that is, what is "self-evident", or that they were doubting things which are really "indubitable." He felt that it makes perfect sense to ask 'What time is it?' but not 'Is there time?' or 'Is time real?'; to ask 'What objects are there in this room?' but not 'Are there physical objects?'; to ask 'How does this body move?', but not 'Is motion possible?' Don't we all *know* that there is a *before* and an *after*, that there are physical objects such as chairs and tables, that things move slowly or quickly, this way or that? How is it that we come to ask whether all these things "exist" or are "real?" What is it that we want to know by asking such curious questions? We always talk meaningfully about tables and chairs just as we meaningfully talk of being early or late, of planning to spend our next summer-vacation on the sea-side, and tell the driver to take us to Picadilly Circus. All these things we perfectly know and do; how is it then that philosophers, who know, say and do the same things, come to the idea of asking whether time is "real", whether there "really" are material things or whether there "really" is such a thing as movement? What is even more unconceivable for Moore's Common Sense is the fact that not only do philosophers indeed ask such plainly odd questions, but that they usually "answer" them in the negative! One of those answers which seemed to him "perfectly monstrous" was the proposition of his teacher Mc Taggart to the effect that "Time is unreal."\* What particularly puzzled Moore was the fact that philosophers holding such paradoxical views should in their every-day life talk and behave just like plain people. How is this obvious discrepancy between the philosopher's everyday beliefs and behaviour on the one hand and his philosophical or "metaphysical" theories on the other to be explained? Does not his behaviour in this respect look just as grotesque and illogical as that of Chaplin's millionaire friend in "City Lights", who is so friendly with him when drunk, but dismisses him as soon as he becomes sober?

Although Moore is deeply disturbed by this strange behaviour in some philosophers, he is none the less wholly aware of the fact that there must be a serious reason why they should hold views so utterly incompatible with our most "reasonable" Common Sense beliefs, that it cannot be explained away

\* Cf. An Autobiography, p. 14.

by saying that they simply want to be extravagant or that they are incapable of straight thinking. Indeed, he could not ignore the fact that people such as Berkeley, Hume, Bradley, Mc Taggart and Russell were in possession of an impeccable logic, that there could hardly be found any flaw in their reasoning. "*Philosophical or sceptical views contradicting Common Sense are not badly founded*"; "I think there really are very strong arguments in favour of this view" (that, namely, we only know sense-data); "They are so strong that I think none of us can really be sure that this view.... is not a correct one"\* But, in spite of all this, Moore is deeply convinced that, by the simple fact that they *contradict* Common Sense beliefs, they *must* be false and that it should be possible to "show" that they are indeed *false*.

3 . Deeply puzzled and disturbed in his Common Sense by the strangeness of philosophical arguments, Moore devoted himself to the "defense" of Common Sense against the onslaughts of sceptical doubts. His most important papers in this respect have the following titles: *Refutation of Idealism, A Defense of Common Sense, Proof of an External World*. But, as we examine these so-called "proofs" or "refutations", we are at once struck by their peculiarity: unlike all other known proofs in philosophy, they use a completely new tactic, which mainly consists in showing that some philosophical statements do indeed "contradict" Common Sense beliefs and that, the latter being true, the former must be false. This, of course, looks at first sight disarmingly naive, since it is not difficult to see that what Moore has to prove is whether Common Sense beliefs are *really* true, as he thinks they are. And the interesting thing is that Moore is well aware that it is "logically" impossible to *prove* that they are true; so what remains to him to do is to *show* that they are known to be true by everyone, and that, consequently, they do not even need an extra proof, but that to hold views "contradicting" them is a sufficient proof that such views are false.

In fact, in all his argumentations Moore starts out from the assumption that "the Common Sense view of the world is, in certain fundamental features, *wholly* true".\* Once this much is admitted, then, to show that a philosophical view is false or even "absurd", all we have to do is to contrast it with a Common Sense truism. Let me give you a few examples of Moore's admirable new "tactic":

\* *Some Main Problems*, p. 53-54; also cf. 84, 87, 107, 111, 119, 135, etc.,...

\* Cf His *A Defense of Common Sense*, in "Contemporary British Philosophy", II, p. 207.

- I a. Philosophical Thesis: 'There are no material things' (Berkeley)
  - b. Common Sense antithesis: 'Here is one hand and here's another; so there are at least two material things' (Cf. *Proof of an External World*)
  - c. *Ergo*, the philosophical thesis is false.
- II a. Phil, thesis: 'Time is unreal' (McTaggart, Bradley)
  - b. Common Sense antithesis: 'If you mean that no event ever follows or precedes another event, you are certainly wrong: for after lunch I went for a walk, and after that I took a bath, and after that I had tea.'
  - (Cf. *The Conception of Reality* in "Philosophical Studies")
  - c. *Ergo*, the philosophical thesis is false, etc. . . . .

There is no need to add new examples, since the general scheme of Moore's proofs is almost the same: namely to show that some "philosophical" views go against Common Sense, that they are all statements which a philosophically unsophisticated person finds absurd, that they are "paradoxical." But when this is all to it, then Moore's alleged "refutations" are no genuine refutations; in other words, they all beg the question. A genuine refutation should be able to produce reasons as to why Common Sense beliefs are true; Moore simply takes it for granted that they are. In that case, they do not need to be "defended."

Now, where does Moore's alleged "proof" fail to achieve its aim? Obviously in his taking for granted that the Common Sense theses are *known to be true*. But how, one may ask, isn't the whole point of "sceptical" arguments that they are not, or even *cannot* be, known to be true? It is exactly at this point, I think, where sceptically minded philosophers try to impose upon 'knowledge' too restricted a meaning (a meaning that differs *too* widely from our ordinary use) that Moore parts company with them. But before showing where the fundamental cleavage between Moore and his sceptical antagonists lies, I would like to point out once again and in a more systematic way how near Moore comes to the standpoint of his opponents.

First of all, Moore never tires of emphasizing again and again that mere belief, even a strong feeling of certainty is far from constituting real knowledge: "We are all quite certain that men do sometimes *believe* propositions

which they do not really *know* to be true. Sometimes they not merely believe them, but *feel* very certain that they are true; and yet, *in spite of the fact that they feel very certain*, they do not really *know* them to be so."\* As is obvious, Moore is far from assuming that a Common Sense belief must be considered as being *known* to be true merely because it is *believed* to be so with certainty. He thus makes it quite clear that a feeling of certainty, though perhaps necessary, is never sufficient to constitute knowledge. This implies that even an apparently self-evident Common Sense belief may turn out to be false. Hence even self-evidence does not in itself suffice to guarantee knowledge. This is one point.

The second point is that Moore is also far from overlooking the purport and logical significance of "sceptical" arguments. On the contrary, he accompanies the sceptic almost to the end of his destination to part company with him only at the very last moment. To put it in another way, he follows and even reproduces the sceptic's arguments in the most precise and meticulous manner from a logical point of view, but refrains from deducing the same consequence from them as the sceptic. I will try to explain why, but first let me illustrate.

To take the first statement in I b above: "Here is one hand and here's another". Now, Moore holds that if this statement is true, then the conclusion "there are at least two material things" follows deductively. But he also holds that we cannot "prove" it to be true and the reasons he gives for this are the same as the ones given by a sceptic:

"How am I to *prove* now that 'Here's one hand, and here's another?' I do not believe I can do it. In order to do it, I should need to prove for one thing, as Descartes pointed out, that I am not now dreaming. But how can I prove that I am not? I have, no doubt, *conclusive reasons* for asserting that I am not now dreaming; I have *conclusive evidence* that I am awake; but that is a very different thing from being able to prove it. I could not tell you what all my evidence is; and I should require to do this at least, in order to give you a proof."\*\*

To take another example of how well aware Moore is of the point of "sceptical" arguments, consider the following passage:

\* Cf. *Some Main Problems*, p. 89. My italics.

\*\* Cf. *Philosophical Papers*, p. 149. My italics.



"I cannot help agreeing with Russell that I never know immediately such a thing as 'That person is conscious' or 'That is a pencil', and that also the truth of such propositions never follows logically from anything which I do know immediately, and yet *I think that I do know such things for certain.*" \*

In all arguments of this kind the chief sceptical move is to show that there is always an unbridgeable *logical gap* between the evidence and the conclusion, that from premises expressing our immediate experiences, however extensive, no conclusion follows logically as to what goes beyond these experiences. I may thus have certain experiences that may constitute *conclusive evidence* for my being certain that I am awake, and yet the evidence I have, however *conclusive* from a practical point of view, does not logically *justify* me in drawing the conclusion that I am awake. There will always remain a logical gap between my premises and my conclusion, because in all such inferences what the conclusion asserts inevitably exceeds what is assumed in the premises. In other words, the premises do not logically imply the conclusion.

4. Not only does Moore recognize the point of "sceptical" arguments which make us aware of a logical gap in our most fundamental Common Sense beliefs, he even goes so far as to admit that sceptical views contradicting Common Sense may be and often are "extremely plausible."\*\* But, on the other hand, he feels that they are also "*difficult to believe*" (p. 135); and although sceptical doubts are said to rest on "self-evident" arguments (p. 149), Moore finds that arguments supporting Common Sense beliefs are more "certain" (p. 150). Against the sceptical thesis, for instance, that "no part of space can exist except when it is being directly apprehended by someone", Moore argues in this way: "It is, I think, chiefly because all these things (his own counter-arguments)... seem to me so certain, that I myself am convinced that this supposed self-evident proposition is false. Unless these Common Sense beliefs seemed so certain to me, I should not, I think, be convinced that it was false. But quite apart from the question of evidence *against* it; I confess I cannot see the smallest evidence in its favour; it does not seem to me to have any self-evidence at all" (p. 150).

As we see, all of Moore's argumentation amounts to no more than this: We feel absolutely certain that our Common Sense beliefs are true, since they

\* Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 225. My italics.

\*\* Cf. *Some Main Problems*, p. 87.

are self-evident. Indeed, after a painstaking analysis of one of Hume's "sceptical" theses he can find no stronger or better argument to refute them than this: "I do know that this pencil exists" (p. 119), "therefore, Hume's principles are false" (p. 120). The interesting point is that Moore finds this sort of argument "conclusive", since the premise "I do know that this pencil exists" is, according to him, "known immediately" (p. 125).

Now it is plain that this sort of argumentation is quite similar to that of the famous Dr. Johnson, who answered Boswell's question concerning "free-will" in this way: "Sir, we *know* our will is free and there's an end on't!" The same Dr. Johnson is also the author of an equally famous "refutation" as conclusive as his above "proof", namely his refutation of Berkeley's idealistic arguments by kicking a stone and getting his foot hurt.

A "Johnsonian" attitude towards puzzling or paradoxical philosophical views is surely a sign of a robust and healthy Common Sense spiced with a pinch of humour. But what Dr. Johnson's "refutation by a kick" amounts to is nothing more than his immediate common-sensical reaction towards a philosophical paradox. What he was in fact doing was to show that he simply could not, as a man in his senses, take seriously such utterly absurd views as those of Bishop Berkeley. But, whereas Dr. Johnson was unscrupulous enough to dismiss the Bishop with a simple kick, thus proving himself a worthy disciple of his Greek master Diogenes, Moore approaches his opponents' views with the utmost gravity and tries, by exacting analyses, to convince them that, by holding views incompatible with Common Sense they are indeed contradicting themselves! But, unfortunately, Moore's elaborate arguments cannot be said to be more successful than Dr. Johnson's simpler methods; it would even seem that Dr. Johnson's kicking tactic is much more effective, since by its very dumbness and brevity it can better bring home its point, namely by showing that there is no other way of "refuting" a logically flawless but common-sensically absurd view than by ridiculing it! Another advantage of this method is that nobody would ever think that this kind of argument has anything to do with philosophy . . . . However, Moore is naive enough to believe that a more "theoretical" or "philosophical" way of refuting philosophical paradoxes can be found although his own arguments amount, at the end, to no more than this: "Here is one hand, and here is another, *ergo*, the external world exists. Q . E . D ."

5 . Various authors have observed that Moore's tactic of refutation is no more effective than that of Dr. Johnson nor that his refutations are theo-

retically more convincing.\* A genuine refutation should in fact be able to show some logical flaw or inconsistency in a philosophical view, whereas all that Moore really achieves in his alleged refutations is to insist, even to repeat to satiety, that Common Sense beliefs are certainly known to be true, and that, consequently, any views inconsistent with them must be false. This might indeed seem a very comfortable way of proving things, but actually Moore took great pains to bring home his point. And his point was to *remind* philosophers of certain fundamental truths they seemed to forget in their inordinate logical meticulousness. Hence the accusation of "pedantry and literal-mindedness" levelled at him by some writers is quite unfair.\*\* The views he tried to defend seemed to him to have a quite privileged status compared with any other view, in that not only were they "self-evident" for everyone, but that they were universally believed to be true with certainty and, moreover, acted upon accordingly. Thus, when speaking of the Common Sense truisms, Moore uses the following phrases: 'We believe certainly', 'we are sure of', 'we are absolutely certain', 'we constantly assume with the utmost certainty', 'we cannot help believing', etc.,... And the "fundamental" Common Sense belief, according to Moore is this: "We believe that we *do* really *know* all these things."\*\*\* As, moreover, he distinguishes between "mere *belief*" and "real *knowledge*" (p. 25, 86, 89), Common Sense views or beliefs must be true in the sense of constituting "real knowledge". "Self-evidence", "conviction", "certainty" he considers as the main characteristics of such knowledge.

Now, Moore's position here is rather puzzling. On the one hand, he readily recognizes not only the point, but also the force of *sceptical doubts* concerning our most firmly established Common Sense beliefs, and even concedes that they are "unassailable" from a (formal) logical point of view. But, on the other hand, he insists that our Common Sense beliefs are not the less true, since they are "self-evident". This seems puzzling because we feel that one cannot eat one's cake (*sceptical doubts*) and have it (Common Sense beliefs) at the same time. Moore himself was surely not unaware of the apparently paradoxical situation in which he put himself by recognizing the force of *scep-*

\* Cf. M. Lazerowitz, *Moore's Paradox* in "The Structure of Metaphysics", 1955.

\*\* Cf. E. Gellner, *Words and Things*, p. 88: "It is not clear whether Moore should be called a philosopher or a pedant of such outstanding ability as to push pedantry and literal-mindedness to a point where it became a philosophy."

\*\*\* *Same Main Problems*, p. 12. My italics.

tical doubts while sticking firmly to this Common Sense beliefs. How, then, are we to explain this paradoxical situation?

The most plausible explanation that occurs to my mind is as follows: Moore felt that however strong or even "unassailable" the sceptical arguments be, they can never be as strong, i. e. *convincing* as the self-evidence of our Common Sense, and that as intellectually responsible persons we ought to *follow* the sceptic's arguments to their logical conclusion, yet refrain from ultimately drawing it. In other words, his arguments ought merely to draw our attention to some logical flaws in our most fundamental ontological beliefs, thus curing us from our ontological innocence, but they still ought not to seduce us into espousing an ontological doctrine such as Phenomenalism, for instance, which is absolutely unpalatable to our Common Sense, however perfect it may be logically! He must have felt that when it comes to a decision between two rival ontological theories, a philosophically sane mind ought to prefer the self-evidence of Common Sense to the injunctions of deductive reasoning. Hume himself, that paradigm of a sceptical philosopher, was well aware of the fact that even the most extreme sceptical philosopher will entertain the same ontological beliefs as the ordinary man in his "unphilosophical" moments and also act on them in his practical life. But the interesting point is that from this Hume drew the conclusion that as ordinary men we just have to live on "irrational" beliefs, i. e. beliefs that have no firmer foundation than mere "habit" or "custom", whereas for Moore nothing could be more *rational* than to believe and act on, something that is absolutely self-evident to our Common Sense.

Thus it would seem that the conflict between Moore, the Common Sense philosopher, and the philosophical sceptic is due to a difference of *intellectual taste* as if were, and I am even inclined to think that most, if not all, philosophical disagreements have their source in a difference of intellectual temperament. Here also lies, as it seems to me, the main difference between *science* and *philosophy*: whereas scientists have been able to agree upon some uniform methods of inquiry and the ultimate standards of truth, philosophers dispute the very validity of these standards. This state of affairs may both give us a hint as to why philosophical problems are commonly said to be "fundamental" and explain why philosophical disagreements seem to be "insuperable".