

MOORE ON COMMONSENSE

DR. ARIFA FARID

The role of commonsense in philosophical inquiry has been very controversial. When the father of philosophy Thales declared water to be the ultimate substance, and Heraclites substituted it with fire, they deviated from commonsense. The Eclectics had a special distaste for commonsense. Parmenides looked contemptuously at the “way of belief” which is commonsense level of knowing. Zeno’s paradoxes were actually an attack on commonsense. They were meant to show the absurdity of commonsense level of conceiving things. Socrates often refuted some of the commonsensical or commonly held believe, e.g. life is preferable to death, with the help of his dialectical method. (See Apology and Crito) Plato discredited both the common man and commonsense world and instead declared the reality of world of Ideas revealed, in his opinion, to the philosopher. It was not until Aristotle that faith in some of the commonsense beliefs was restored. Aristotle was truly the first commonsense philosopher. He criticized Plato for duplicating the world, and endorsed the world accessible to common man.

In modern philosophy the picture is very different. Here we note that most philosophers, while arguing for or against any theory, feel prone to appeal to commonsense as their ultimate judge. Contradictory hypotheses have been maintained by these philosophers, each appealing to commonsense to prove his thesis. Descartes begins his Discourse on Method by glorifying commonsense in these words: “Good sense is, of all things among men, the most equally distributed.”⁵² He often appeals to commonsense for rejecting commonsense beliefs. This is ironical Locke endorses Descartes’ faith in commonsense, and appeals to it frequently. Berkeley especially appeals to commonsense while rejecting the commonsense world.

⁵² Rene Descartes. The Discourse on Method. Reprinted in Man & the Universe: The Philosophers of Science. Edited by Saxe Commins & Robert N. Linscott. (The pocket Library pl954), p. 163.

In the contemporary British Philosophy, G.E. Moore is the strongest advocate of commonsense philosophy. The purpose of this paper is to delineate Moore's position as a commonsense philosopher. While indentifying Moore's position, I shall also underline different senses in which the word "commonsense" is understood.⁵³

Section I

1. Ordinarily by commonsense is meant a body of beliefs held in common by all men as true, including those who repudiate it. In his "Defence of Common Sense"⁵⁴ Moore alludes to number of propositions which every one of us knows with certainty. A few such propositions are the following: "There are a number of human bodies existing which are like my body," "My body is at a distance from that mantlepiece," "The Earth has existed for several years in the past, and its inhabitants had been in contact with each other." Moore argues that these propositions are believed to be true even by those philosophers who are out to refute them. These are some basic truisms which no philosopher can refute without absurdity. Philosophers frequently use such phrases as "we" or "us" while arguing for their theses. This shows that they already have a firm belief in their own existence and the existence of other people. Moore shows the absurdity involved in such assertions of a philosopher, as "No human being has ever known of the existence of other human beings with certain." (Moore points out that this will amount to saying that "There have been many other human beings besides myself and none of them (including myself) has ever known of the existence of other human beings." Indicating the absurdity of the above and similar assertions Moore tries to show that no philosopher can ever sincerely doubt these commonsense beliefs, though he might pretend to do so.

2. By commonsense is sometime meant acceptance of some beliefs that are commonly held though not universally held. Some examples of commonsense beliefs of this class are, belief in the existence of God, belief in

⁵³ Edwards Pauls. Editor-in-Chief, The Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. and the Free Press, New York), Vol. II, pp. 155-59.

⁵⁴ G.E. Moore: "A Defence of Common Sense. Reprinted in 20th Century Philosophy: The Analytical Tradition. Edited by Morris Weitz 1966. (The Free Press New York), pp. 98-124.

immortality of soul, and so forth. These beliefs can be appropriately classified as a common man's beliefs. Moore does not plead for some such beliefs that a common man may hold. Moore is not interested in establishing or refuting them. He argues for those beliefs only which are held to be true by all men without exception. They are assumed even by those who reject, and question them.

3. Commonsense is many times referred to as a way of knowing such that it requires no evidence or proof to hold certain propositions. When some propositions are known indubitably and without any mental effort, they are said to be known by commonsense. Commonsense is often identified with intuition. It is sometimes understood to be a faculty of primary truths. Philosophers have sometimes meant by it an intuitively-based common consent. Moore accords to commonsense in this sense also. He draws a number of propositions (some of which have been alluded to before) about which he is confident that they are known with certainty and no extra effort of mind is required to understand them. They are ordinary truths that are known in the ordinary way. But the fact that such truths are ordinary and are known in the ordinary way does not disqualify them for being truths. Moore's defence of commonsense is a defence of such ordinary truths which hardly deserve any mention, but disregard of which has caused a lot of misunderstanding and confusion about the nature of knowledge. Such ordinary truths as "I have a body," or "my body is at a distance from that mantle piece," and a number of similar truths about material objects are known with certainty to every one of us. They should not be ignored or disregarded simply because they are labeled as commonsensical. Moore sees no reason to disregard them. Nor does he think that he needs to draw any sophisticated logical arguments to refute those who disregard such simple unsophisticated truths.

4. By commonsense is often meant certain truths which cannot be made evident by deductive proof, but there is always absurdity in holding opinion contrary to them. Zeno's paradoxes are a distortion of such commonsense truths. Such truths are easily distorted by dialectical reasoning and therefore it is hard to defend them by arguments, but their denial leads to absurd conclusion. Moore defends such truths when he defends commonsense. He shows the absurdity involved in some philosophers' claim

that we cannot know with certainty that we exist or other people exist. Moore points out that if this is true, then all philosophical discussions and controversies should come to an end, because, it would imply that no one has ever held any views about these matters, as no one has ever lived. It would imply that since Moore's fellow philosophers are never known with certainty to have lived, Moore can safely disregard what they supposedly have said. This is a very interesting conclusion which Moore shows to follow without any laborious reasoning. Moore's philosophical opponents might feel irritated by such a reply. They might think that Moore is not serious. But Moore certainly does not want to make fun, and he is very serious. He wants the idealists, and his other philosophical opponents to realize that their views are queer and that commonsense view is not funny and stupid.

5. By commonsense is sometimes meant some propensities to believe in certain ways. Sometimes when definite reasons are lacking in favour of or against a certain proposition and when there is a state of indecision .as far as arguments go, we have a propensity to believe in a certain way about a certain matter. Our belief in free will would be an example of it. Whatever may be the arguments in favour of or against free will, but, that we all have a propensity to believe that we are free to some degree, can hardly be denied. Moore defends commonsense in this sense also. In "The Status of Sense Data", Moore examines the question, whether sensible exist when they are not perceived ? He writes:

"I think perhaps a certain amount of weight ought to be attached to our instinctive belief that certain kinds of sensible do" i.e. exist when unperceived."⁵⁵

However, we are not sure as to what extent Moore would rely upon some of our propensities to believe. But he would, perhaps, rely upon these propensities more than on some sophisticated arguments through which we draw extravagant conclusions about reality. Here it is important to remember, that Moore is not a critical commonsense realist like Price. (Cf Sanders Peirce's "Fixation of Belief")⁵⁶. He would perhaps admit much more

⁵⁵ G.E. Moore: "The Status of Sense Data" in Philosophical Studies (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1931), pp. 168-96.

⁵⁶ Sanders Peirce: "Fixation of Belief." Reprinted in Classical American Philosophers. Edited by First H.Max (Century Crafts Inc. New York), pp. 54-70.

as true than what Pierce would admit as true on the basis of commonsense. Moore believes in a naive world accessible to laymen as well as to philosophers, despite the philosophers' attempts to disown it.

Section II

Norman Malcolm in his article "Moore and Ordinary Language"⁵⁷, comes up with a different interpretation of Moore. According to Malcolm, Moore's defense of commonsense is, above all, a defense of ordinary language. In Malcolm's opinion, Moore regards philosophical paradoxes as the result of rejection of ordinary language. When philosophers reject certain propositions such as "there are material things," or "there are bodies," they intend to imply that these propositions mean something different from what they are ordinarily, understood to mean. In doing this they are rejecting ordinary language. Moore is interested in pointing out that the above or similar propositions should not be taken to mean anything different from what they assert. There is no sophisticated meaning behind the ordinary meaning. Ordinary language is the correct language. To philosopher's assertion "no material things exist unperceived," Moore would reply "What you are saying is absurd, for no one perceived my bedroom while I was fast asleep last night and yet it. certainly did not cease to exist".

Malcolm points out that when Moore gives such replies he is certainly not begging the question though apparently he might seem to do so. He thinks that the essence of Moore's technique of refuting philosophical statements consist in pointing out that the philosophers' sophisticated statements misrepresent the meanings of ordinary language statements. To the philosopher's statement "we do not know for certain the truth of any statement about material things," Moore's reply would be, "Both of us know for certain that there are chairs in this room and how absurd it would be to say that we do not know but only believe it and that, perhaps it is not the case--how absurd it would be to say that it is highly probable and not certain."

Now what kind of a reply is Moore giving in the above or similar statements? According to Malcolm, Moore is simply saying that in ordinary

⁵⁷ Norman Malcolm: "Moore and Ordinary Language" in *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore*. Edited by Arthur Schilp Paul (Tud Publication Co. New York 1952), PP.

language when we use such words as “material things”, we mean such objects as tables and chairs. In ordinary language “knowing” means knowing with certainty and not simply believing. Moore’s argument is that, it would be absurd to say that a person who is sitting on a chair is only believing that he is sitting and not really knowing it with certainty. Moore is indicating that ordinary language does not function the way philosophers understand it. If a child who is sitting on a chair says that is only probable that he is sitting on a chair, and does not know with certainty that he is actually sitting on a chair, we shall immediately correct him and tell him that the word “probable” does not behave in the ordinary language in the way in which he is employing it, and that he should employ the word “know” instead of “probable” in the present case to express his thought. Ordinary language does not misrepresent facts: whereas philosophers distort facts by employing sophisticated language in interpreting ordinary language statements.

In Malcolm’s opinion, Moore’s argument is that Philosophical paradoxes arise when some ordinary language statement is misinterpreted. When Berkeley argues for “esse est percipi” he actually misinterprets ordinary language in which “there is an apple” means “an apple is physically present whether I take notice of it or not.” Most philosophical controversies are the result of attempt to find some hidden or sophisticated meaning behind the simple meaning of statements. When Moore defends commonsense he defends ordinary language as a satisfactory medium of representing facts.

However, if Malcolm is right, it might be asked of Moore, if ordinary language is suitable to express facts, then, what is the task of a philosopher? Is all philosophical activity fruitless? No. Moore thinks that the philosopher is still needed. His task consists in analyzing the meaning of the ordinary language statements. In “Some Judgments of Preception”,⁵⁸ and “The Status of Sense Data,” Moore himself undertakes an analysis of ordinary judgments such as “I see a table” or “I see a chair.” Here he attempts to explicate the meaning of such ordinary statements and comes up with his theory of sense

⁵⁸ G.E. Moore: “Some Judgments of Preception,” in *Philosophical Studies*. (Routledge and Kogan Paul London 1951), pp. 220-252.

data according to which what we immediately see when we see an object is “part of the surface of the object,” and the rest we infer.⁵⁹

It seems to me that if Malcolm is right, and if philosophical task consists in analysis, then, in analyzing the meaning of ordinary statements, Moore is committing the same error for which he condemns the philosophers; viz., trying to find new and sophisticated meaning in ordinary statements. Ryle rightly points out that when we see an object we never see the sense data but the object itself.⁶⁰ We see tables and chairs and not “part of the surface of tables,” or “part of the surface of the chair”. We do not see “patches of color,” or “glimpses of horse races.” No deep analysis required to understand what we mean by seeing “robins” or “horse races.” It is abundantly clear that we see “robins” and “horse races” and not their glimpses when we say that we see “robins” or “horse races”.

It is interesting to note that Ryle is also a defender of ordinary language. He is interested in eliminating all such theories or myths from our philosophical vocabulary which have no use in ordinary language. The theory of sense data is also the philosopher’s myth. In ordinary language we never say that we “observe” sense data. We never say that we observe “patches of color” or “glimpses of things”. If there were such things as sense data, there would have been common expressions appropriate to them.

Though Moore does not doubt the truth of the statements of ordinary language, he thinks it appropriate to analyze their meaning. But when he undertakes an analysis of statements such as “I see a table,” or “I see a chair,” he ends up with the same sophistication and deviation from commonsense for which he charges his opponents. It may be argued against him that his opponent, Berkeley, was also undertaking an analysis and interpretation of our commonsense notion of matter found in ordinary language when he asserted “esse est percipi.” In what way, then, is Moore different from his opponents?

⁵⁹ Moore, however, complains that we have no appropriate word in ordinary language suitable for expressing sense data. “The Status of Sense Data” op.cit.

⁶⁰ Gilbert Ryle. *The Concept of Mind*. (Barnes & Noble Everyday Hand Books New York 1949), 4 Pp. 210-222.

Berkeley, in his analysis of material things such as an apple, constantly appeals to commonsense. What is an apple? A jumble of qualities. It has some color, some shape, some size, some taste, and it feels hard. What is a color or a size? It is a sensation that I have when I see an object. What is taste? A sensation that I feel when I eat it. What is smell? An olfactory sensation. What are these sensations? Ideas in the mind. Thus, concludes Berkeley, an apple is nothing but a jumble of qualities or ideas in the mind⁶¹.

Berkeley's analysis of apple leads him to deny the physical reality of an apple independent of the mind. Moore's analysis leads him to deny that the observer sees the table or the inkstand. Moore may be right in his analysis and Berkeley may be wrong. But the whole question is, is commonsense approach to reality perfectly satisfactory, or do we need a philosopher to tell us, with the help of his tools of analysis, what the world is like? If Moore thinks that we have a perfect access to reality through commonsense, which is represented by ordinary language, then I do not see how can he justify his sense-data theory which is another sophistication in philosophy and a deviation from ordinary language. If Moore is an ordinary language philosopher who does not allow any sophisticated meaning of ordinary statements, then, philosophical analysis becomes an illegitimate task.

⁶¹ George Berkeley, *Principles, Dialogues and Correspondence*. Edited by Colin Murry Turbayne. (The Library of Liberal Art. Bobbs-Merril, New York, 1965).