

G.E. Moore's Defence of Knowledge Based on Common Sense

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Abstract—G.E. Moore's name is closely associated with the Defence of a common sense position in the history of philosophy. It is true that Moore brought common sense, as he understood it, to the centre stage of philosophy by making knowledge derived through common sense not only a worthwhile pursuit in philosophy but also the yardstick for judging the truth of philosophical theory. However, Moore's philosophy deviates much from common sense and an inconsistency in his position is quite apparent as soon as he espouses the empiricism of sense-data.

One possible charge is that common sense position, as generally understood, is something akin to naïve realism but Moore's position on perception is inconsistent with naïve realism. However, this is a trivial problem given the fact that Moore himself is not following those rules of common sense that he delineates as early as 1910 in his paper "What is Philosophy?" and in 1925 in "A Defence of Common Sense". Thus Moore's stand, we find, does not come up to his own yardstick. In this paper first we will see what Moore means by a common sense position and second, we will see the inconsistencies resulting from this.

G.E. Moore, in his writings, has tried to establish what he understood to be the truths of common sense, those facts which are understandable by everyone and at least appear to be beyond any doubt. In this endeavour of his he put forward certain propositions which seem indisputable to common sense. At the same time he conceived of certain principles deviance from which would definitely amount to a deviation from the common sense position. The present paper tries to explore whether Moore himself was true to those principles and rules of common sense that he devised and did it lead to inconsistencies in his position given his espousal of sense data empiricism..

It is generally believed that the common sense position, is something closer to naïve realism but if we look at Moore's position on perception we find that it is not so and naïve realist position has been avoided by him. The significant question that comes to our mind, besides this, is whether Moore himself is following those rules and principles of common sense that he delineates in his paper "What is Philosophy?" and then again in "A Defence of Common Sense". The present paper

will discuss Moore's common sense position exploring what Moore means by a common sense position and second, whether this leads to inconsistencies in his philosophical position.

Much before his "A Defence of Common Sense" Moore points out the basic features of what he called a common sense view in his article "What is Philosophy?". Here apart from explaining what he means by common sense, he delineates the different ways in which philosophers make three important departures from a common sense position either (1) by contradicting its beliefs, or, (2) by adding something important to its beliefs, or, (3) by doing both.

Here Moore defines common sense view thus: "There are, it seems to me certain views about the nature of Universe, which are held, now-a-days, by almost everybody. They are so universally held that they may, I think, fairly be called the views of Common Sense....it has, I think very definite views to the effect that certain kinds of things certainly are in the Universe and as to some of the ways in which these kinds of things are related to one another."¹ Thus according to Moore, the common sense views are those which are held universally or by almost everyone and they are about the nature of the universe or we can say, about the things that exist in the universe and (2) these views also relate to the way in which things are interrelated as understood by everybody.

Common Sense position can be seen as a set of definite assertions on the substantial nature of the universe. These are some "views about the nature of universe" or the views about the *substantial* nature of the world, in the sense of what are the substantial kinds of things in the universe and how they are interrelated. The principal criteria here for judging the truth of such views are their 'universality' and their 'definiteness'.

Moore delineates here three ways in which some philosophers have deviated from the common sense position on the issue by holding certain views about the substantial nature of the universe that either add something new to or contradict common sense. These are: first, the add something significant

to the common sense view, i.e. they recommend the existence of some substantial kinds of thing or things over and above what is held by common sense. Second, they positively contradict some views of common sense like, for instance, the view that we do not know whether there exist any material objects at all; or that there may be other minds and material things in the universe but we cannot know it. Moore calls these the *sceptical* views. Third, there are those which both add to as well as contradict common sense view. For instance, those positively denying space, material things and those positively denying many other things. Under this category Moore considers views like those which 'begin by considering "the appearances of material objects"'. Moore, at this point, accommodates the views that analyse the universe in terms of the relation between sense data and material things, within the definition of those philosophical positions that according to him do not either add to or contradict the view of common sense. Thus he goes on to delineate two views which he considers to be quite consistent with common sense. Like for instance the view that these appearances are not in space, they exist only so long as they appear to someone. Or that some of the appearances are really 'parts of the *surfaces* of the objects': are really situated in space and continue to exist even when we are not conscious of them. Moore concludes that between these views *Common sense does not pronounce*.

The second thing that Moore implies in taking a common sense position is holding a number of beliefs which he finds commonsensical. Here he gives concrete examples of such beliefs. The examples include among other things, (1) a belief that there are "enormous numbers of material objects" in the universe, like our own bodies, bodies of other men, million of plants and animals, manufactured objects, the earth, the sun, the moon and stars, (ii) there are minds with their acts of consciousness, (iii) that there is time, past, present and future, (iv) that there is space, (v) and also, we "believe that we do really *know* all these things that I have mentioned. We *know* that there are and have been in the universe the two kinds of things—material objects and acts of consciousness",ⁱⁱ (vi) there are sciences that give us knowledge about particular things, for example, astronomy, physics, chemistry, and social sciences like history, psychology, etc. Moore begins his paper "A Defence of Common Sense" (1925) by listing out propositions under two headings. These propositions, according to him, are "obvious truisms". Under heading (1) he lists such propositions as: "There exists at present a living human body. This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continuously ever since... at every moment since it was born, there have also existed many other things, having shape and size in three dimensions...many of these bodies have already died and ceased to exist. But the earth had existed also for many years before my body was born... I am a human being, and I have, at different times since my body was born, had many different experiences, of each of many different kinds...."ⁱⁱⁱ As is clear from this definition, Moore is not freed from the Cartesian assumption of the separation of

Mind and Body. Therefore, he talks in terms of his body being born as something separate. Here we find that though Moore is talking of common sense beliefs, he ignores the point that in our ordinary common sense belief we do not separate mind and body in this way. As we have pointed out earlier, because of his Cartesian legacy and his acceptance of empiricism, Moore's common sense position could not transcend his epistemological and ontological presuppositions.

Under heading (2) Moore includes similar propositions having reference to 'each of us'. He asserts that "...each of us (meaning by 'us', very many human beings of the class defined) has frequently *known*, with regard to *himself* or his body, and the time at which he knew it, everything which, in writing down my list of proposition in (1), I was claiming to know about *myself* or *my body*...." Moore claims that all the propositions listed above are "wholly true". Thus Moore maintains that he believes in the truth of such propositions that assert the existence of material things. But he is very skeptical as to what in certain respects the correct analysis of such proposition is. Moore believes that any correct analysis of such propositions about material things must be in terms of sense data which are the objects of direct apprehension. That is, Moore being an empiricist, believes that the experience is the most basic source of knowledge and all other sources of knowledge are dependent on it. Because of this belief they sense data wield a very important position in Moore's epistemology. Moore like Locke, is facing the same problem but in a different way. Locke's ontological question of the nature of material substance and our knowledge of material objects beyond the circle of ideas assumes the form of giving a correct analysis of the propositions about material objects and this is why even when he is definite about the fact material objects can be only indirectly apprehended he remains basically indecisive about the correct nature of our apprehension of material objects. This takes the form of a question about 'the correct analysis' of propositions regarding material things. An analysis can obviously not get under way until we have specified the conditions to which the analysis must conform and unless this happens "it is impossible to determine whether the proposed analysis is correct or incorrect."^{iv} Moore specifies only later on that by analysis he means the analysis of concepts and propositions but since we find that he remains perplexed about the proposition about material things it is evident that what seems to be an analytical problem has deep ontological roots. The problem remains intractable even when Moore considers the alternative view of naïve realism i.e. visual sense data are identical with the parts of the surface of material things.

The third important point about Moore's common sense position is that he uses common sense as a method for judging a philosophical proposition. In this sense it is for him 'the most obviously logical view' that can claim a universal appeal in the sense that he seems natural to everybody who think hard on this issue. Malcolm points out that the propositions proposed by Moore are all 'queer sentences' and we never

come across them in real life as common sense propositions. That Moore's explicit assertion on direct perception of material things versus his implicit denial of such direct perception go together. This apparently inconsistent position is rooted in the acceptance of a Lockean notion of substance. Moore is not unaware of the discrepancies that an introduction of sense data might have occasioned. Second by giving these criteria Moore is perhaps trying to pre-empt any future objection occasioned by the introduction of sense data.

While addressing the question of perception he himself does not apply the criterion of common sense. While describing theories which either add to or contradict common sense view he says that the theories which both add to and contradict common sense view 'depart much further from common sense'. In the same breath he says that though the theories which deny the existence of material things and space certainly deviate from common sense, if they begin by talking of appearance of material things and hold either that these appearances are 'parts of the surfaces of the objects' or that they exist only 'so long as they appear to someone' they are not at all deviating from common sense. Similarly he defines fundamental nature of common sense view in a way which supports his own claim. He says, "...if we know that they are features in the 'Common Sense View of the World', it follows that they are true: it is self contradictory to maintain that we know them to be features in the common sense view and that yet they are not true: since to say that we know this, is to say that they are true. And many of them also have the further peculiar property that if they are features in the common sense view of the world (whether 'we' know this or not), it follows that they are true."^v Thus, Moore's defence of common sense has inner inconsistencies resulting from his characterization of common sense position in a peculiar way and the underlying ontological concerns of his philosophy.

¹G.E. Moore, "What is Philosophy?", *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.; NY: Humanities Press Inc., 1969, p.2.

²Ibid., p. 12.

³G.E. Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense," *Philosophical Papers*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., NY: Humanities Press Inc., 1970, pp. 33-34.

⁴ Paul Marhenke, "Moore's Analysis of Sense-Perception", *the Philosophy of G.E. Moore*, ed., P.A. Schilpp, La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1968, p. 258.

⁵G.E. Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense", pp. 44-45.