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**Scott Soames: Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century,
Volume 1**

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CHAPTER 1

COMMON SENSE AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

CHAPTER OUTLINE

1. *The commonsense view of the world*

Propositions about ourselves and the world that we all know to be true

The absurdity of denying such knowledge

Implications for philosophy

2. *The conception of philosophy as analysis*

Examples of analysis: perceptual knowledge and ethical statements

George Edward Moore was born the son of a doctor, in 1873, in a suburb of London. He studied classics—Greek and Latin—in school, and entered Cambridge University in 1892 as a classical scholar. At the end of his first year he met Bertrand Russell, two years his senior, who encouraged him to study philosophy, which he did with great success. He was especially drawn to ethics and epistemology, which remained his primary philosophical interests for most of his career. After his graduation in 1896, he held a series of fellowships at Trinity College for eight years, by the end of which he was recognized as a rising star in the philosophical world. Along with Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein, he would remain one of the three most important and influential philosophers in Great Britain until his retirement from Cambridge in 1939.

Although highly regarded for his many contributions to philosophy, G. E. Moore was probably best known as the leading philosophical champion of common sense. His commonsense view, expressed in a number of his works, is most explicitly spelled out in his famous paper, “A Defense of Common Sense,” published in 1925.¹ There, he identifies the propositions of “common sense” to be among those that all of us not only believe, but also feel certain that we know to be true.

¹ G. E. Moore, “A Defense of Common Sense,” in J. H. Muirhead, ed., *Contemporary British Philosophy* (2nd Series), 1925, reprinted in G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (London: Collier Books, 1962), 32–59. (All references will be to the Collier edition.)

Examples of commonsense propositions that Moore claimed to know with certainty are given in (1):

- 1a. that he [Moore] had a human body which was born at a certain time in the past, which had existed continuously, at or near the surface of the earth, ever since birth, which had undergone changes, having started out small and grown larger over time, and which had coexisted with many other things having shape and size in three dimensions which it had been either in contact with, or located at various distances from, at different times;
- 1b. that among those things his body had coexisted with were other living human bodies which themselves had been born in the past, had existed at or near the surface of the earth, had grown over time, and had been in contact with or located at various distances from other things, just as in (1a); and, in addition, some of these bodies had already died and ceased to exist;
- 1c. that the earth had existed for many years before his [Moore's] body was born; and for many of those years large numbers of human bodies had been alive on it, and many of them had died and ceased to exist before he [Moore] was born;
- 1d. that he [Moore] was a human being who had had many experiences of different types—e.g., (i) he had perceived his own body and other things in his environment, including other human bodies; (ii) he had observed facts about the things he was perceiving such as the fact that one thing was nearer to his body at a certain time than another thing was; (iii) he had often been aware of other facts which he was not at the time observing, including facts about his past; (iv) he had had expectations about his future; (v) he had had many beliefs, some true and some false; (vi) he had imagined many things that he didn't believe, and he had had dreams and feelings of various kinds;
- 1e. that just as his [Moore's] body had been the body of a person [namely, Moore himself] who had had the types of experiences in (1d), so many human bodies other than his had been the bodies of other persons who had had experiences of the same sort.

Finally, in addition to the truisms in (1) that Moore claimed to know about himself and his body, he claimed to know with certainty the following proposition about other human beings:

2. that very many human beings have known propositions about themselves and their bodies corresponding to the propositions indicated in (1) that he [Moore] claimed to know about himself and his body.

The propositions indicated by (1) and (2) constitute the core of what Moore called the “Common Sense view of the world.”² His position regarding the propositions of common sense is that they constitute the starting point for philosophy, and, as such, are not the sorts of claims that can be overturned by philosophical argument. Part of his reason for specifying these propositions in such a careful, painstaking way, was to make clear that he was **not** including among them every proposition that has commonly been believed at one or another time in history. For example, propositions about God, the origin of the universe, the shape of the earth, the limits of human knowledge, the difference between the sexes, and the inherent goodness or badness of human beings are **not** included in what Moore means by the truisms of Common Sense—no matter how many people may believe them.

Although he did not attempt any precise characterization of what makes certain propositions truisms of Common Sense, while excluding from this class other commonly believed propositions, the position he defended was designed and circumscribed so as to make the denial of his Common Sense truisms seem absurd, or even paradoxical. Of course, he fully recognized that none of the propositions in (1) are such that their denials are contradictory; none are necessary truths—i.e., propositions that would have been true no matter which possible state the world had been in. Nevertheless the propositions in (1) about Moore would have been very hard for **him** to deny, just as the corresponding propositions about other human beings, mentioned in (2), would be hard for **them** to deny. This is not to say that no philosophers have ever denied such propositions. Some have. However, Moore maintains that if any philosopher ever goes so far as to deny that there are any true propositions at all of the sort indicated in (1), and mentioned in (2), then the mere fact that the philosopher has de-

² Moore, “A Defense of Common Sense,” see especially pp. 32–45.

nied this provides a convincing refutation of his own view. Assuming, as Moore does, that any philosopher is a human being who has lived on the earth, had experiences, and formed beliefs, we can be sure that if any philosopher has doubted anything, then some human being has doubted something, and so has existed, in which case many claims about that philosopher corresponding to the claims Moore makes about himself surely must be true. Moore expresses this point (in what I take to be a slightly exaggerated form): “the proposition that some propositions belonging to each of these classes are true is a proposition which has the peculiarity, that, if any philosopher has ever denied it, it follows from the fact that he as denied it, that he must have been wrong in denying it.”³

But what about Moore’s claim that he **knows** the propositions in (1) to be true, and his further, more general, claim (2)—that many other human beings **know** similar propositions about themselves to be true—can these claims be denied? Certainly, the things claimed to be known aren’t necessary truths, and their denials are not contradictory. Some philosophers have denied that anyone truly knows any of these things, and this position is not obviously inconsistent or self-undermining. Such a philosopher might consistently conclude that though no one knows the things wrongly said in (2) to be known, these things may nevertheless turn out to be true after all. Though scarcely credible, this position is at least coherent. However, such a philosopher must be careful. For if he goes on to confidently assert, as some have been wont to do, that claims such as the proposition that human beings live on the Earth, which has existed for many years, are commonly believed, and constitute the core of the commonsense conception of the world, then he is flirting with contradiction. For one who confidently asserts this may be taken to be implicitly claiming to know that which he asserts—namely that certain things are commonly believed by human beings generally. But that means he is claiming to **know** that there are human beings who have had certain beliefs and experiences; and it is hard to see how he could do this without taking himself to **know** many of the same sorts of things that Moore was claiming to know in putting forward the propositions in (1). Finally, unless the philosopher thinks he is unique, he will be hard pressed to deny that others are in a position to know such things as well, in which case he will be well on his way to accepting (2).

³ Ibid., p. 40.

Considerations like these were offered by Moore in an attempt to persuade his audience that the commonsense view of the world, as he understood it, should be regarded as so obviously correct as to be uncontentious. In this, it must be said, he was very persuasive. It is very hard to imagine anyone sincerely and consistently denying the central contentions of Moore's commonsense point of view. Moore himself was convinced that no one ever had. For example he says:

I am one of those philosophers who have held that the 'Common Sense view of the world' is, in certain fundamental features, *wholly* true. But it must be remembered that, according to me, *all* philosophers, without exception, have agreed with me in holding this [*i.e.*, *they have all believed it to be true*]: and that the real difference, which is commonly expressed in this way, is only a difference between those philosophers, who have *also* held views inconsistent with these features in 'the Common Sense view of the world,' and those who have not.⁴

After all, Moore would point out, philosophers live lives that are much like those of other men—lives in which they take for granted all the commonsense truths that he does. Moreover, this is evidenced as much in their profession of skepticism as in anything else. In propounding their skeptical doctrines, they address their lectures to other men, publish books they know will be purchased and read, and criticize the writings of others. Moore's point is that in doing all this they presuppose that which their skeptical doctrines deny. If he is right about this, then his criticism of their inconsistency is quite a devastating indictment. Reading or listening to Moore, many found it hard not to agree that he was right.

Despite its obviousness, Moore's view was, in its own way, extraordinarily ambitious, and even revolutionary. He claimed to know a great many things that other philosophers had found problematic or doubtful. What is more, he claimed to know these things without philosophical argument, and without directly answering the different skeptical objections that had been raised against such knowledge. How he was able to do this is something we will examine carefully in the next chapter.

For now, I wish to emphasize how Moore's stance is to be contrasted with a different, more skeptical, position that philosophers have sometimes adopted toward the claims of common sense. The skeptic's

⁴ Ibid., p. 44.

position is that of being the ultimate arbiter or judge of those claims. The philosopher who takes this stance prides himself on **not** taking pre-philosophical knowledge claims at face value. Given some pre-theoretically obvious claims of common sense—e.g., that material objects are capable of existing unperceived, that there are other minds, and that perception is a source of knowledge about the world—the skeptical philosopher typically asks how we could possibly know that these claims are true. He regards this question as a challenge to **justify** our claims; if we in the end can't give **proofs** that satisfy his demands, he is ready to conclude that we don't know these things, after all.

Worse yet, some philosophers have claimed to be able to show that our most deeply held commonsense convictions are false. When Moore was a student at Cambridge just before the turn of the century, this radically dismissive attitude toward common sense was held by several leading philosophers who were his professors and mentors. Among the views advocated by these philosophers were:

the doctrine that time is unreal (and so our ordinary belief that some things happen before other things is false),

the doctrine that in reality only one thing exists, the absolute (and so our ordinary conception of the world as containing a variety of different independent objects is false), and

the doctrine that the essence of all existence is spiritual (and so our view that there are material objects with no capacity for perceptual or other mental activity is false).

As a student, Moore was perplexed by these and related doctrines.⁵ He was particularly puzzled about how the philosophers who advocated them could think themselves capable of so completely overturning our ordinary, pre-philosophical way of thinking about things. From what source did these speculative philosophers derive their alleged knowledge? How could they, by mere reflection, arrive at doctrines the certainty of which was so secure, that they could be used to refute our most fundamental pre-philosophical convictions?

As Moore saw it, conflicts between speculative philosophical principles and the most basic convictions of common sense confront one

⁵ See Moore's "An Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, vol. 1, edited by P. A. Schilpp (La Salle, IL: Library of the Living Philosophers, 1968).

with a choice. In any such case, one must give up either one's common-sense convictions, or the speculative philosophical principle. Of course, one ought to give up whichever one has the least confidence in. But how, Moore wondered, could anyone have more confidence in the truth of a general philosophical principle than one has in the truth of one's most fundamental commonsense convictions—convictions such as one's belief that there are many different objects, and many different people, that exist independently of oneself? In the end, Moore came to think that one's confidence in a general principle of philosophy never could outweigh one's confidence in convictions such as these. In other words, Moore came to think that philosophers have no special knowledge that is prior to, and more secure than, the strongest examples of what we all pre-theoretically take to be instances of ordinary knowledge. As a result philosophers have nothing that could be used to undermine the most central and fundamental parts of what we take ourselves to know.

The effect of Moore's position was to turn the kind of philosophy done by some of his teachers on its head. According to him, the job of philosophy is not to prove or refute the most basic propositions that we all commonly take ourselves to know. We have no choice but to accept that we know these propositions. However, it is a central task of philosophy to **explain** how we do know them. And the key to doing this, Moore thought, was to analyze precisely **what it is that we know** when we know these propositions to be true.

Moore turned his method of analysis on two major subjects—our knowledge of the external world, and ethics. Regarding the former, the basic problem, as Moore saw it, may be expressed as follows: (i) knowledge of the external world is based on our senses; but (ii) the basic data provided by our senses are sense experiences, which are merely private events in the consciousness of the perceiver; while (iii) our knowledge of the external world is knowledge of objects that are not private to us, but rather are publicly available to all; thus (iv) there is a gap between the privacy and observer-dependence of our evidence, on the one hand, and the publicity and observer-independence of the things we come to know about on the basis of this evidence, on the other. Moore struggled for most of his professional life trying to explain how this gap could be filled.

The second area in which he employed his method of analysis was ethics. He thought that the central task of ethics was to answer two fundamental questions: *What kinds of things are good (bad) in them-*

selves? and *What actions ought (ought not) we to perform?* Answers to the first question were to be provided by theories of the form:

For all x , x is good (bad) in itself iff x is so and so.

Answers to the second question were regarded as parasitic on answers to the first. According to Moore, the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined solely by the goodness or badness of its consequences. Thus, on his view, if we could determine precisely what is good and what is bad, we could, in principle, decide which acts are right and which are wrong—or rather, we could decide this, if we also had full knowledge of the total consequences of different actions. Of course, we don't, and never will, have such knowledge. Still, if Moore is right about the connection between the moral character of an action and the goodness or badness of its consequences, then we might be in an enviable position. If, in such a position, we could settle questions about what is good and bad (in itself), then our moral uncertainties about which acts to perform would be reduced to ordinary empirical ignorance about what their consequences are. Although we might not know what was morally required of us in a particular case, we would know precisely what factual considerations would settle the matter; and in cases of particular importance we might set out to gather the evidence needed to make our moral obligation clear.

In the end, however, Moore could not fully endorse this picture. Rather, he believed, there was an intractable problem preventing one from proving, or providing compelling arguments for, any philosophical theory of the form *For all x , x is good in itself (bad in itself) iff x is so and so*. For reasons we will explore, he thought that one could give arguments for such a theory only if one could analyze goodness (and badness) into simpler, component parts. However, he also thought he had found a way of demonstrating that this is impossible, because goodness is a simple property that cannot be further broken down into any conceptually more basic constituents. Although goodness may be directly apprehended, it cannot be defined, or analyzed. Because of this, Moore thought, we can no more prove that one thing is good, whereas another is not, by philosophical argument, than we can prove that one thing is yellow, and another is not, by philosophical argument. In the case of the color, we must simply look; in the case of goodness we can only consult our moral intuition. We cannot **prove** any philosophical theory of the good. The most we can do is to clear away conceptual confusions, and thereby allow our moral intuition to work properly. This devastating and

perplexing conclusion occupied a central position in ethical theory in the analytic tradition for the next fifty years.

Our task in the next three chapters will be to carefully examine and evaluate the central tenets of Moore's position regarding knowledge of the external world, the analysis of moral notions, and the role of reason and argument in ethics.