

Handout 12

Common sense and sense-data: Moore

WHAT ARE JUDGEMENTS OF PERCEPTION? JPs are made with regard to something one is seeing or feeling. Examples include judging: ‘That is an inkstand’, ‘That is a table-cloth’ etc. A person who is not blind can make a large number of these judgements with the greatest certainty simply by looking about. Even blind men frequently make judgements about things felt with their hands.

220

221

Further, simple JPs may be part of more complex judgements. For example, ‘That clock has stopped’ contains the simpler judgement ‘That is a clock.’.

221

JPs AND THE EXISTENCE OF MATERIAL THINGS. JPs are commonly (and rightly) taken to be judgements whose truth ‘involves’ the existence of material things or physical objects. ‘Involves’ should read as ‘entails’:

221

(12-1) [This is an inkstand] \Rightarrow [There is at least one inkstand] \Rightarrow [There is at least one material thing].

Now Berkeley defined ‘matter’ so as to maintain the existence of inkstands and trees, yet deny the existence of matter. By contrast, Moore argues for using the terms for material things or physical objects in a sense where the existence of things like inkstands, fingers, or clouds entails the existence of material things. A term is required to mean things such as inkstands, tablecloths, fingers, and clouds in a certain very important, shared respect.

222

222

223

If, therefore, ‘material thing’ is used in Moore’s defined sense, then we have the following condition:

223

(12-2) JP-existence link: The truth of relevant JPs is necessary and sufficient for asserting the existence of material things.

However, this does *not* give us an analysis of the notion of material things or physical objects. We may still be uncertain about the question, ‘What is it that we actually assert when we make such judgements?’, although Moore expressed preference for Mill’s and Russell’s view. He returns to this issue later.

223-4

Furthermore, we might not be certain that all the judgements Moore mentioned are really ‘judgements of perception’. When I say, ‘This is my hand’, am I reporting my visual experiences as they are, or am I also, say, conceptualising them? Perhaps the only judgements of *perception* are those like, ‘This is a blue patch’ or ‘This is a round shape.’

225

But Moore demurs. ‘This is my hand’ counts as a JP if I make it ‘simply because’ I perceive this something in front of me as my hand, I assert no more than what I perceive. When, by contrast, I say, ‘This is a sheep’ or ‘This probably is a sheep’ in the situation where I can’t figure out what it is and merely offer an estimate, perhaps rationally and a high degree of certainty, then this is not a JP.

REFUTATION OF SCEPTICISM AND IDEALISM. The sceptical claims come in two flavours:

227

Pyrrhonism: I can’t know the existence of a material thing.

Radical scepticism/Idealism: Material things/the external world don’t exist.

The Pyrrhonian claim is about my essential epistemic disability. The radical sceptic’s and the idealist’s claim is an ontological claim about what is out there. In the present context, because of (12-2), both positions entail the claim: ‘There are no JPs.’

227

Question 1. Explain the last claim.

Moore’s refutation is worth quoting at length (italics added):

Moorean facts A sufficient refutation of such views as these, simply to point to cases in which we do know such things. This, after all, you know, really is a finger: *there is no doubt about it: I know it, and you all know it.*

228

The certainty of Moorean facts And I think we may safely challenge any philosopher to bring forward any argument in favour either of the proposition that we do not know it, or of the proposition that it is not true, which does not at some point, rest upon some premiss which is, *beyond comparison, less certain* than is the proposition which it is designed to attack. The questions whether we do ever know such things as these, and whether there are any material things, seem to me, therefore, to be questions which there is *no need to take seriously*: they are questions which it is *quite easy to answer, with certainty*, in the affirmative.

The question of sense-data What does, I think, need to be taken seriously, and what is really dubious, is not the question, whether this is a finger, or whether I know that it is, but the question what, in certain respects, I am knowing, when I know that it is.

Moore's refutation is embarrassingly short. Facing all the sometimes elaborate arguments by the sceptic/idealist, we simply stonewall and say:

(12-3) We, and I, do know that this is my finger/hand/inkstand/...!

But, I suggest, there is a slightly better version of this argument. Moore appeals to us, fair-minded people, and wishes us all to agree that we know that this is an inkstand. But is 'know' such a concept that common folk would instantly, non-inferentially approve of (12-3)? If you ask the putative common-sense person next to you, 'How do you know that this is my hand?' or, 'Why do you say that you know that this is my hand?', he is likely to cite the relevant JP:

(12-4) I know that this is my hand, well, because I see it.

(12-4) sounds very natural. But there is no analogous explanation for seeing, so long as we adopt the common sense stance:

(12-5) I see my hand, because ... (?)

You need to leave the plane of common sense to begin filling the blanks. So the Moorean fact is not the fact of knowing, but the fact of seeing. Given that, we can have a slightly longer refutation of scepticism. For example, we refute the Pyrrhonian thus:

- (12-6) (I) I don't know the existence of this inkstand. [Pyrrhonian premiss]
- (II) If perceive this inkstand, then: I know that this is an inkstand. [from (12-2)]
- (III) I do perceive this inkstand. [Moorean fact]
- (IV) Therefore, I know that this is an inkstand. [*modus ponens*]
- (V) Contradiction!

Question 2. Construct an argument analogous to (12-6) against idealism.

THE THEORY OF SENSE-DATA. The common-sense claim of seeing may be supplemented with a philosophical theory of a proper analysis of that claim. As Moore puts it, when I see this inkstand, say, what *is* it that I see? 228

Moore isolates the following:

(12-7) **Fundamental assumption:** In the situation of making a JP, I can 'pick out' exactly that object of my perception. 229

Yet, perhaps surprisingly, even though I pick out an inkstand, say, I am *not* insisting that I see the whole inkstand, or that the whole inkstand is 'presented' to me. 230

The proper object of my perception is sense-datum. In fact, that's how we should understand this concept. We *define* sense-data as exactly the subject of the relevant JP (=what that judgement is about). This is the 'ultimate' subject of any JP. Moore now turns to exploring what this sense-datum really *is*. 231 231-2 236

SENSE-DATA IS NOT THE SAME AS SURFACE PARTS. 237

SENSE-DATA AS KNOWN BY DESCRIPTION. 248

MILL-RUSSELL AGAIN. 250