

THE DOMAIN OF JUSTIFICATION : COMMON SENSE

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I

Common Sense

If it could be shown that the common sense view of the world is rationally justified, then many epistemological difficulties would be removed. For the common sense view of the world is universally held and it constitutes the point of departure, the background, the "given", from which inquiries into the nature of the world start. The rational justification of the common sense view of the world would guarantee that at least the epistemological starting point is securely established. The classic attempt to provide this guarantee is G. E. Moore's.

It is convenient to have a label to designate those who dispute the rational justifiability of the common sense view of the world; "sceptic" will be used for this purpose. "Scepticism" will mean, then, in this context, all views that dispute that the common sense view of the world is the secure foundation of our empirical inquiries¹.

The plan of this paper is to present the common sense view of the world ("common sense" from now on), and then to argue for its primacy. Both the presentation and the argument originate with Moore, but where his position is weak it will be supplemented by stronger arguments. So the position to be examined is perhaps more accurately described as Moorean, rather than Moore's, defence of common sense. The difficulty the Moorean defence faces is that while it is true that common sense is primary, it does not follow that it is rationally justifiable. And so sceptics can accept the primacy of common sense and deny that empirical inquiries have a secure foundation. The primacy of common sense, however, has

considerable significance. For it establishes where inquiries must start and it also provides some of the data to which any empirical inquiry must do justice. Hence the adequacy of empirical inquiries partially depends upon their conformity to common sense.

“Common sense” may be used normatively and descriptively. In its normative use “common sense” means “good, sound judgment”, the opposite of being hairbrained, flighty. In its descriptive use “common sense” means “common knowledge”, “common belief”, “what is generally accepted as true”, “Common sense” is used here exclusively in the descriptive sense. This avoids accusing anyone who questions common sense of lacking in sound judgment, a charge which Moore did not always eschew making.

Moore in “A Defence of Common Sense”² presents a list of hardcore common sense beliefs. Common sense, includes these beliefs and it may include many more in addition. The statements expressing these beliefs fall into three groups. Into the first group belong statements about one’s body, such as that it exists and has existed for some time, that it is a human body, that it has occupied various positions in contact with or close to the surface of the earth, that there exist other bodies as well as other things each of which has shape and size in three dimensions, and that some of these other human bodies ceased to exist before one’s body was born. The second group comprises statements about one’s experiences such as that one has often perceived his own body and other things in the environment, that one has often observed such facts as that his body is closer to the mantelpiece than it is to the bookcase, that one is aware of facts which he is not now observing, that one has expectations about the future and many beliefs of various kinds some of which are true and others are false, that he had dreams, imagined things, and also that there exist very many other human bodies which had experiences of a similar kind. The third group consists of the single statement that just as one knows that the statements belonging to the first two groups are true of himself, so also very many human beings know statements of a similar kind to be true of themselves³. Moore claims that these statements are “truisms, every one of which (in my own opinion) I *know* with certainty to be true”⁴.

Moore offers two clarificatory remarks. The first is that “all propositions ... (listed), and also many propositions corresponding to each of these, are *wholly* true”⁵. He thereby rejects the interpretation that the statements are only partially true, or that they may be partially false.

The second clarificatory remark concerns the distinction between

the meaning and the analysis of these statements. Moore writes :

I have assumed that there is some meaning which is *the* ordinary or popular meaning of such expressions as "The earth has existed for many years past". And this, I am afraid, is an assumption which some philosophers are capable of disputing ... It seems to me that such a view is as profoundly mistaken as any view can be. Such an expression as "The earth has existed for many years past" is the very type of unambiguous expression, the meaning of which we all understand. Anyone who takes a contrary view must, I suppose, be confusing the question whether we understand its meaning (which we all certainly do) with the entirely different question whether we *know what it means*, in the sense that we are able to *give a correct analysis* of its meaning. The question of what is the correct analysis ... is, it seems to me, a profoundly difficult question ... But to hold that we do not know what ... is the analysis of what we understand by such an expression, is an entirely different thing from holding that we do not understand the expression.⁶

Understanding the meaning of the expression is to know how to use it; being able to give the correct analysis is to know the true philosophical account of the expression. So one may know perfectly well when to say "The table is brown", without knowing whether idealism, naive realism, or phenomenism gives the proper analysis of the statement. Moore's point is that philosophers who doubt common sense beliefs confuse knowing their meaning with being able to give the correct analysis. They must know what each of these expressions means for "It is obvious that we cannot even raise the question how what we understand by it is to be analyzed, unless we understand it."⁷

The fundamentally important question that Moore has to face is : what justification is there for claiming that common sense beliefs are known with certainty if it is admitted that their correct analysis is not known? Or, to put it slightly differently : how does it follow from one's knowing the meaning of a common sense expression that one has the right to claim that the expression is certainly true ? The final answer is that one has no such right.

II

The Primacy of Common Sense

The kingpin of the Moorean defence is the removal of common sense from the ranks of competing theoretical options. Theories, at some point or another, must rest on pretheoretical data, and common sense is thought of as providing that data. The implication is that theories must do justice to the data with which they start, and so it is to common sense that such theories must do justice. It cannot be the legitimate result of a theory that it contradicts the data which it is supposed to explain -- for such contradiction is an infallible sign of something having gone awry. What is true of theories in general is true also of philosophical theories. If a philosophical theory starts with common sense, it cannot end by going against its own starting point. This is the significance of Moore's remark that

This, after all, you know, really is a finger : there is no doubt about it : I know it, and you all know it. 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 premises which is, beyond comparison, less certain than is the proposition which it is designed to attack⁸.

The consequence is not that common sense beliefs are necessarily true, nor even that they are contingently so; they may well turn out to be false. However, if a belief is part of common sense, then it is a belief that one has all the reason for holding and no reason at all for doubting. For common sense is the most secure part of our system of beliefs.

Strictly speaking, common sense cannot be proven if we mean by "proof" a conclusion that logically follows from proven premisses. And if the only proper use of "to know" is in cases where error is logically impossible, then nobody knows that any common sense belief is true. But, of course, if by "proof" is meant "giving good reasons to believe and removing grounds for doubt", then there is a proof of common sense. Furthermore, if "to know" is used to mean "to have a right to believe and it being unreasonable to doubt", then we do know that common sense is true. And this leaves very little scope for scepticism. For though sceptics can claim that it is logically possible that common sense is false, logical possibility is not a proper

ground for doubt. If all that scepticism about common sense amounts to is a reminder that it is not self-contradictory to deny common sense, then it has been rendered harmless.

We must ask, however, what reason there is for thinking of common sense as primary and of theoretical concerns as secondary, and further, whether it is true that no sceptical attack can succeed against common sense.

Common sense and physiology

One reason for accepting the primacy of common sense is that it is physiologically basic. This means that, apart from a very small minority with genetic or acquired abnormalities, people come to hold common sense beliefs, because this is the information that their senses provide. It is simply a fact about human beings that they perceive the world in five sense modalities. So in the most innocuous possible sense, it is "natural" for human beings to believe that what they see, hear, taste, touch, and smell exists.

An immediate objection is that there is no "pure" perception because whatever is perceived is subject to interpretation. The interpretation reflects a conscious or unconscious theoretical bias, and this may and does change what is perceived. Perception is influenced by past experience, expectations, by the accepted categories of classification. Since these change from person to person and especially from culture to culture there is nothing that is "naturally" perceived.

In reply, let us take a particular case to argue about. Suppose that the perception in question is what a musically knowledgeable person in this culture would describe as listening to a Bach recording being played. It goes without saying that interpretation has an enormous role in this description of the event. Nor, of course, is the statement that "I am listening to a Bach recording" part of common sense. Consider what would happen if the same piece of music was heard by a snake-charmer with his basket still shut, a toned deaf burglar poised outside the window, and a New Guinea headhunter. Their respective interpretations would, of course, be vastly different. But beyond their interpretations we find that they all hear sounds. The sounds are interpreted variously, but the raw material is perceived by all.

Perhaps there is interpretation involved even in the experience of hearing sounds. Could it not be that the headhunter does not hear it as a continuous melody, but merely as a series of discrete auditory stimuli? This too is possible, but it does not alter the fact that they all hear sounds. The fact that given a stimulus of a certain sort people

will have auditory, visual, olfactory, etc., experiences, establishes that common sense is physiologically basic. For common sense is that part of human experience that a human being cannot help having. The compulsion comes from being human.

Common sense being physiologically basic does not mean that if a belief is part of common sense, then it is true, nor that it is free of interpretation. For it may well be that the human physiological apparatus consistently misinforms, and, so, while our experiences are physiologically determined, they are misleading. And it is also possible that an animal or an extraterrestrial being would perceive the same stimulus and interpret it differently from the way we do. The point of arguing for common sense being physiologically basic is not to attempt to render it immune to criticism or falsehood, but to establish it as the base from which any human being must start. The primacy of common sense amounts to no more, and to no less, than the recognition that the point of departure for theories about the world is not arbitrary, but determined by the human physiological apparatus.

Not only are the modalities in which human beings perceive the world determined by our physiology, but the repertoire of possible responses is also bound by the capabilities of the human body. Consumption and elimination, pain and pleasure, sleep and wakefulness, rest and motion, maturing and aging are some of the inevitable dimensions of being human. Of course there are immense individual, cultural, and historical differences between people. But these differences are due to the manner in which different people at different times and in social groups coped with the limits imposed by their bodies. Common sense marks the outer limits of human possibility; variations and differences occur within these limits.

The primacy of common sense does not mean, however, that these limits cannot be overcome. Pain can be alleviated and pleasure produced by manipulating the brain; sleep may be induced and wakefulness artificially sustained; consumption can be replaced by intravenous injections and elimination drastically reduced; the time when aging is controlled need not be very far distant. And, of course, scientific instruments can be used to supplement existing senses and thereby enormously enlarge the humanly perceivable part of the world. Telescopes and microscopes enable us to perceive what is too far off or too small; X-ray machines and ultra-violet sensors inform us of what we could never perceive by relying upon the senses only. None of this, however, changes the fact that even the most sophisticated scientific instruments must be calibrated with reference to the human senses and the success or failure of all techniques

designed to manipulate physiological functions must be judged by the criterion of human experience. X-ray functions well if we can actually *see* what is otherwise beyond our reach, and pain is alleviated only if the person suffering from it no longer *feels* it. Common sense is primary, because it is the view with which a normal human being must start. Refinements and alterations and the acquisition of depth and breadth occur against the background of common sense, but it is common sense which is being refined, altered, deepened, or broadened.

Common sense and problems

The other reason for accepting the primacy of common sense is that it forms the background against which very many problems occur. Normal human habits and expectations are basically influenced by the picture of the world that common sense provides. But our habits and expectations, justifiably derived as they are from common sense, are sometimes disrupted and disappointed. Dangers, threats, surprises and problems occur, and they indicate that there is more to the world than common sense has allowed for.

These problems may be primitive, such as the occurrence of pain without injury, the failure of limbs, for no apparent cause, to carry their accustomed burden, the occasional unreliability of the senses, natural disasters like earthquakes or tidal waves. Or the problems may be social, such as coping with undeserved humiliation, with authority, insanity, or injustice. Yet another source of problems has to do with great surges of feeling in oneself, such as grief at the death of some one loved, or the experience of naked, gratuitous evil.

Common sense is adequate when everything is going as expected. But when the routine is upset and expectations are basically disappointed, when crises occur, then the picture of the world that common sense presents must be supplemented and made more sophisticated. Scientific theories, religions, metaphysical systems all attempt to provide answers where common sense has proved inadequate. Part of the task of such theoretical efforts is to construct a picture of the world that is capable of accommodating anomalies which proved too difficult for common sense. In so doing, theories may help solve practical problems by presenting a picture of the world that renders events understandable and thereby help people feel at home in it.

Different theories aim at different goals, but there is a feature they all share : the point of any theory is the solving of some problem. And of course the presence of problems not only gives point to a

theory, but it also provides a way of evaluating it. The success or failure of a theory depends, in part, upon the extent to which it is capable of solving the problem that gave rise to it.

There are very many problems whose roots are other than the conflict between common sense expectations and subsequent anomalous experience. Problems may occur because two or more theories, designed to supplement common sense, give contrary accounts of a segment of the world; or they may be due to disagreement about the nature of the theory that is needed; problems may be methodological or logical, arising in the course of the construction of theories; another type has to do with the discernment of the practical, political, or moral implications of various theories. All these problems, however, are parasitic upon theories, and theories arise because common sense is disappointed. The primacy of common sense derives from its being, directly or indirectly, the background to very many problems.

There is a picture that goes with the primacy of common sense. The picture is true, but the questionable uses that have been made of it cast a shadow over it. The picture is that in certain ways all men, everywhere, respond to their environment similarly. The type of information they can receive and the type of responses they are capable of making are similar because all men, in virtue of being members of the species, are similarly built: they are equipped with the same physiology.

Common sense is the label for the worldview that a human being cannot help having. The reasons for accepting common sense are that the world certainly seems to be as common sense depicts it and when one responds to the environment on the assumption that it really is that way, then by and large the responses are successful.

The truth is, however, that the responses are not always successful. Furthermore, there are situations in which common sense prompts no response at all, or even worse, in which it prompts a harmful one. Because common sense is occasionally inadequate, it has to be improved, and various theories aim at improving it. Such theories, be they scientific, religious, political, or philosophical, may solve the problems that common sense was incapable of handling. But no matter how sophisticated the human theoretical approach becomes, the primacy of common sense remains indisputable. For the ultimate test as well as the initial starting point of all theories must be the original problem situation that is composed of common sense and some anomaly or another. And the "must" derives its force from the physiological boundaries that human beings inevitably have.

III

The Rational Justification of Common Sense

The justification of common sense does not follow from its primacy. For it may be that common sense is physiologically basic and that it gives rise to problems that prompt various theories, and that, at the same time, common sense beliefs are false. A sceptic may admit that the world comes to us filtered through our physiology and deny that there is any rational justification for accepting those beliefs that are physiologically based. The sceptical position is that common sense can be rationally justified only if some reason is given for the reliability of our method of acquiring information. The argument for the primacy of common sense does not provide such a justification. The discovery of a necessary starting point is compatible with the starting point being rationally indefensible.

A possible argument at this point is to combine the primacy of common sense with pragmatism. The sceptical challenge could perhaps be met then by offering as a rational justification of common sense our practical success in coping with the world when acting on the assumptions of common sense. But this argument fails to counter the sceptic.

The very general reason for its failure is that there are independent sceptical objections against each of these positions. Pragmatism is open to objection, *inter alia*, on the grounds that pragmatic justification cannot be a rational justification. For success in action is determined by the achievement of goals, and the rationality of the goals cannot be pragmatically decided. Thus either there is no rational justification of any goal, or goals can be justified rationally, but such a justification cannot be pragmatic.

The difficulty pragmatism faces is in no way lessened if the goal turns out to be coping with the environment on the basis of common sense. For the sceptic can accept that all human beings pursue this goal, and still question its rational justifiability. It is after all possible that all human beings pursue an irrational goal. And of course the importance of the sceptic's question emerges when common sense faces a religious, moral, mystical, or political challenge which may dictate going against common sense in pursuit of an allegedly more worthwhile goal. Common sense and pragmatism have no rational answer ready to cope with asceticism, theocracy, nazism, kamikazi pilots, and transcendental meditators.

Another difficulty that sceptics can point at is that reliance upon

common sense is not all that successful. The majority of human practical achievements is due precisely to having gone beyond common sense. If we relied on common sense only, our species would be in no better position than any other. The spur to success is the anomaly with which common sense cannot cope. The challenge is either met, or the species is endangered. So pragmatism and common sense are not very happy bedfellows.

A Moorean defender of common sense is obliged, therefore, to offer other than pragmatic arguments for the rational justification of common sense. And Moore does offer two related arguments for passing from the primacy to the rational justification of common sense : first, a negative one, that any argument against common sense involves the person so arguing in inconsistency; and second, a positive argument, that common sense is justified because one has all the reasons for accepting it and no reason at all for rejecting it.

The negative argument : scepticism is inconsistent

One of Moore's arguments for the inconsistency of scepticism is developed in the course of examining some epistemological views of Hume⁹. Commenting on Hume's scepticism, Moore writes :

These sceptical views he did not expect or wish us to accept, except in philosophic moments. He declares that we cannot, in ordinary life, avoid believing things which are inconsistent with them; and, in so doing, he, of course, implies incidentally that they are false : since he implies that he himself has a great deal of knowledge as to what we can and cannot believe in ordinary life¹⁰.

The structure of Moore's argument is as follows : first, Hume believes in his philosophical moments that we cannot know any facts about the external world; second, Hume states that in ordinary life he and others cannot help holding beliefs that are inconsistent with the philosophical belief that we cannot know any facts about the external world; third, knowing the truth of Hume's statement, namely, that in ordinary life he and others cannot help holding beliefs that are inconsistent with Hume's philosophical belief, depends upon the possibility of knowing at least one fact about the external world, namely, that in ordinary life he and others cannot help holding beliefs that are inconsistent with Hume's philosophical belief; fourth, since Hume himself implies that he knows what are the ordinary beliefs of himself and others, it follows that Hume's

philosophical belief is mistaken, because knowing the ordinary beliefs of himself and others is knowing at least one fact about the external world.

Moore's argument can be generalized so that it supports all common sense beliefs against scepticism. The first part of the generalized argument concerns the method of refuting philosophical beliefs that are inconsistent with common sense beliefs. The refutation consists in showing that the person holding the philosophical beliefs also holds the common sense beliefs that the philosophical beliefs contradict.

The second part derives from the recognition that the refutation of philosophical beliefs cannot be only that they are inconsistent with common sense beliefs. For the sceptic could counter it by abandoning his common sense beliefs. The refutation must be based both on the inconsistency and the primacy of common sense. It is this combination that makes it impossible for the sceptic to disavow his common sense beliefs.

Moore's refutation of Hume's position then is that Hume, in his common sense phase, believes that he and others know many facts about the external world. In his philosophical phase, however, Hume denies that he or anyone knows any facts about the external world. Yet in his philosophical phase Hume makes statements that imply that he knows facts about the external world. And so Hume implies that his own statements expressing the philosophical beliefs in question are false.

Criticism of the negative argument: psychological and epistemological scepticism

Given the primacy of common sense, Moore's objection decisively refutes Humean scepticism. A strengthened version of scepticism, however, can accept the primacy of common sense and reject Moore's objection by insisting on two distinctions.

The first is between scepticism about knowledge and scepticism about reasoning. Humean scepticism is directed against the possibility of knowledge. "Knowledge" is understood to be properly applicable only if the possibility of error has been excluded, and since error is possible in the case of all factual statements, Humean sceptics conclude that no factual statement can be known. The Moorean rejoinder is to point at the arbitrariness of this definition. As frequently as not, we use "knowledge" to describe situations in which doubt would be unreasonable. So if the sceptic's point is merely to remind one that in the case of factual knowledge the

logical possibility of error is ever-present, then scepticism can be given its way. But the sceptic's gain is at the cost of triviality, for the issue is really whether or not there are good reasons for accepting any belief. And Humean scepticism leaves Moore free to assert that there are the best of reasons for accepting common sense beliefs. It is quite trivial to insist, as the sceptic does, on the inapplicability of the strict sense of "knowledge", for the inapplicability is based on an arbitrary verbal preference.

Scepticism, however, is much stronger than Moore allows for. The target of the sceptical attack is the process of reasoning and not any of its products. Sceptics attack the possibility of knowledge, true belief, or well-grounded opinion only indirectly. Their primary objection is against the lack of rational grounds for reasoning itself. If scepticism is understood in this way, then Moore's argument that we have the best reasons for accepting common beliefs and no reason at all to reject them needs to be supplemented by some account of what makes such reasons good ones.

Moore does attempt to provide this addition. The reason for accepting common sense beliefs is that their denial is inconsistent. The supposed inconsistency is not logical; the sceptic is not accused of formal self-contradiction. The charge against him, as we have seen, is that his philosophical beliefs are directly contradicted by his behaviour. He says he doubts, but he does not act as if he doubted. And he does not act that way because he, like everyone else, accepts the primacy of common sense. The sceptic has fallen into the trap of supposing that his philosophical beliefs could be incompatible with his common sense beliefs, when in fact the former presupposes the latter. Moore conceives of his task to be to remind the sceptic that this is so.

But it is Moore that needs to be reminded of a second distinction, namely, between psychological and epistemological scepticism. Moore regards the sceptic as a neurotic who in one moment is gnawed by doubts and in the next acts as if his doubts did not exist. Hume, the sceptic, is rapped on the knuckles for lacking in sound judgment and common sense, normatively interpreted. Hume, the billiard player, is praised for coming to his senses. In a word, Moore thinks of scepticism as if it were a psychological attitude. And it may be that Moore is right about Hume, as well as about some other sceptics. But, as we have seen, the philosophically important kind of scepticism is epistemological. The sceptic's behaviour can be indistinguishable from anybody else's, and the sceptic may accept all the common sense beliefs that Moore accepts. Epistemological scepticism is based on the argument that common sense beliefs, as

indeed all others, lack rational ground, and Moore has not met this argument. The charge of inconsistency can be levelled only against the psychological sceptic. The epistemological sceptic accepts and acts on common sense beliefs, it is merely that he denies their rational warrant. Epistemological scepticism is not inconsistent.

The positive argument : common sense is reasonable

In his celebrated "Proof of an External World"¹ Moore offers a proof of one common sense belief; it is, of course, easily applicable to very many others.

I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, 'Here is one hand', and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, 'and here is another' ... But did I prove just now that two human hands were then in existence? I do want to insist that I did; that the proof which I gave was a perfectly rigorous one; and that it is perhaps impossible to give a better or more rigorous proof of anything whatever.¹²

Moore insists on the proof being rigorous for it meets the necessary requirements: the premisses are different from the conclusion, the premisses are known to be true, and the conclusion follows from the premisses.

The questionable part is the second requirement. Moore's argument in favour of having met it is:

I certainly did at the moment *know* that which I expressed by the combination of certain gestures with saying the words 'There is one hand and here is another'. I *knew* that there was one hand ... and that there was another ... How absurd it would be to suggest that I did not know it, but only believed it, and that perhaps it was not the case'.¹³

Moore suspects that even after this clinching argument there may be some residue of dissatisfaction with his proof. He says:

I am perfectly aware that ... many philosophers will still feel that I have not given any satisfactory proof of the point in question ... I can make an approach to explaining what they want by saying that if I had proved the

propositions which I used as *premisses* in my two proofs, then they would perhaps admit that I had proved the existence of external things, but, in the absence of such a proof ... they will say that I have not given what they mean by a proof ... Of course, what they really want is ... something like a general statement as to how *any* propositions of this sort may be proved. This, of course, I haven't given; and I do not believe it can be given.¹⁴

The dissatisfaction, Moore argues, is due to the mistaken belief of very many philosophers that if a proposition is not proved, then it is unjustified to claim that one knows it. But Moore says :

I can know things which I cannot prove; and among things which I certainly did know, even if ... I could not prove them, were the premisses of my two proofs.¹⁵

Much of the apparent perversity of the argument disappears if the two senses of "proof" are recalled. In the first sense "proof" is what there is in favour of a conclusion that logically follows from premisses which are themselves conclusively established. In the second sense, a conclusion may be "proven" if there are good reasons for accepting the premisses from which it follows.

Moore's position is that there are good reasons for accepting the premisses of his argument, but there are no conclusive reasons. He proved the existence of his hands in the second, weaker sense, but he did not prove it, and it cannot be proved, in the first, stronger sense.

The ground for Moore's suspicion that proof in the strong sense cannot be given may be the following. If a conclusion is regarded as proven if and only if the premisses from which it follows are also proven, then it is impossible to prove anything. For the premisses in question are proven only if they are conclusions of arguments whose premisses in turn are similarly proven. But these premisses too require arguments with proven premisses to back them up, and so infinite regress follows, for each proven premiss requires a proven premiss.

Sceptics, however, cannot gain any comfort from the impossibility of proof in the strong sense, for proof in the weak sense is possible. Good reasons can be given for very many propositions that function as premisses in arguments. There may be no conclusive proof of common sense beliefs, but it can be shown that there are good reasons for accepting them and no reasons for doubting them. The question is : what are these reasons ?

The first is that everybody accepts common sense beliefs, and one cannot help accepting them. The primacy of common sense guarantees that all normal human beings start out by believing that common sense presents a true picture of the world. As we have seen, however, this is not a good reason, for the falsehood of common beliefs is quite compatible with their primacy. Furthermore, common sense is inadequate to deal with many anomalies, so there is reason for thinking that it needs to be improved.

The second reason for the truth of common sense beliefs is that their denial leads to inconsistency. But this, as we have seen, will not work either, for the distinction between psychological and epistemological scepticism allows the latter kind of sceptic to accept common sense beliefs, act on them, and simultaneously to deny there being any reasons for them.

So we come to the third and last hope for a rational defence of common sense, and this is that there is no reason to doubt the truth of common sense beliefs. Common sense may need to be improved by supplementing it with theoretical explanations; these, however, do not undermine common sense, but surpass it. The fact is that there is no alternative to common sense, and when philosophers propose such theories as idealism or phenomenalism, then it is a simple matter to show that in their statement of the supposed alternative, they presuppose the truth of common sense. Their alleged refutation of common sense assumes the truth of what is to be refuted. This is not a strict proof of common sense beliefs, but it is a good reason for accepting their truth.

Criticism of the positive argument : external and internal questions

A useful way of approaching Moore's argument is to put it in terms of the distinction between internal and external questions; questions, that is, that arise within a theory and questions that are asked about a theory. The first step before applying this distinction to Moore's argument is the determination of whether or not common sense is a theory. "Theory" is sufficiently vague to allow widely different referents, so the question is not so much whether or not common sense is a theory, but rather how common sense differs from other ways of looking at the world. The primacy of common sense compels the view that the difference has to do with common sense being the necessary starting point and the background to all theories.

Moore's point then can be put by saying that the sceptical challenge to common sense may be posed either as an external or as

an internal question. Moore's proof appears perverse because it rests on the assumption that the sceptic is asking an internal question. If it is an internal question, then Moore's proof is indeed rigorous and the best there is. For the proof consists in calling attention to the testing procedures and to the use of expressions of common sense. And given these, the sceptical challenge can easily be met.

But of course the sceptic would insist that he is asking an external question about common sense, so it is question-begging to evoke common sense in attempting to answer it. This Moore denies. There could be a question external to common sense only if there were a theoretical alternative to common sense from the point of view of which the question could be posed. Not only is there no such alternative, but also, the sceptic in asking the question has accepted common sense beliefs. Furthermore, *any* candidate for being an alternative to common sense perforce accepts common sense, for common sense is primary. So there cannot be an external question about common sense. Consequently the sceptic is asking an internal question, and that Moore has answered.

The difficulty with Moore's argument is that one can accept the primacy of common sense, agree about the absence of alternative ways of looking at the world, and still ask quite sensible external questions about the rationality of common sense. There are at least three different types of external questions that a sceptic could be asking. None of these is directed at the acceptance of common sense — their target is the rationality of its acceptance.

The first type of question has to do with the *methods* employed within common sense for settling disputes. Some methods, such as induction and deduction, are accepted as reliable; others, such as appeal to the stars or consulting oracles are judged to be questionable. The sceptic may want to reflect on the ground or warrant of this distinction. In doing this, he demands a justification for standards of rationality the appeal to which permeates common sense. Moore, in response, must either offer a justification that appeals to considerations outside of common sense, or simply stand firm and declare : this is what I do. In the first case, common sense, by itself, is inadequate to meet scepticism, in the second case, common sense judgments are admitted to lack rational justification.

The second type of question concerns the *goals* that are implicit in common sense. Here, of course, there are alternatives. Other goals are the pursuit of sainthood, self-destruction, the abnegation of the body, the transformation of the personality, the living of a desireless life, and the like. And these goals are competing with the common sense aspiration of coping with the environment so as to assure

optimal physical and psychological well-being. But all these goals have been and are questioned, and the sceptic's question to Moore is about the reason there is for favouring one over the others.

The third type of question is about the *categories* of common sense. The classificatory scheme implicit in common sense dictates how one thinks about the world; such distinctions as between real and imaginary, mental and physical, cause and effect, living and inorganic, infuse common sense. A sceptic, without wishing to deny the validity of these distinctions, might wonder about the justification of their prominence. In the hierarchy of common sense categories some are basic and others derivative. What is the reason for the organization of the hierarchy? Moore would have to appeal either to considerations external to common sense or admit his inability to offer the justification the sceptic demands.

Consequently Moore has failed to exclude the possibility of the sceptic asking external questions about common sense, and he has failed also to answer these questions within the self-imposed limitations of common sense.

IV

Conclusion

The Moorean attempt to meet the sceptical challenge fails because while it is true that common sense is primary, this does not guarantee its rationality. Human beings cannot help holding common sense beliefs, but the compulsion may lack rational warrant. Moore's arguments in favour of the rationality of common sense founder on two distinctions. Scepticism is not inconsistent, because epistemological scepticism is an attack on the rational grounds for accepting common sense, and it is not an attack on the acceptance of common sense. Common sense is not shown to be the only reasonable position, for while it is true that there are no theoretical alternatives which do not presuppose common sense, this does not make common sense reasonable. The alternative to common sense being reasonable is that nothing is reasonable. And Moore has not excluded that possibility. The sceptic, the Moorean demurrer notwithstanding, can ask perfectly sensible external questions about the rationality of common sense. And these questions both require and lack answers.

NOTES

¹ Those uneasy with this rather cavalier use of “scepticism” may care to look at my more precise account called “The Sceptical Challenge to Rationality, *Metaphilosophy*, 2 (April 1971), pp. 121-136.

² G. E. Moore, “A Defence of Common Sense”, in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, 2nd series, ed. J. H. Muirhead, (London : Allen & Unwin, 1925), pp. 193-223. It is reprinted in G. E. Moore’s *Philosophical Papers*, (London : Allen & Unwin, 1959), pp. 32-59. Page references are to the latter edition.

³ Moore, pp. 32-5.

⁴ Moore, pp. 32-3.

⁵ Moore, pp. 35-6.

⁶ Moore, pp. 36-7.

⁷ Moore, p. 37.

⁸ G. E. Moore, “Some Judgments of Perception”, *Philosophical Studies*, (London : Routledge, 1922), p. 228.

⁹ G. E. Moore, “Hume’s Philosophy”, *Philosophical Studies*, (London : Routledge, 1922), pp. 147-167.

¹⁰ Moore, p. 164.

¹¹ G. E. Moore, “Proof of an External World”, *Philosophical Papers*, (London : Allen & Unwin, 1959), pp. 127-150.

¹² Moore, pp. 145-6.

¹³ Moore, p. 146.

¹⁴ Moore, pp. 148-9.

¹⁵ Moore, p. 150.