

THE ELEMENT OF SKETPICISM IN MOORE'S THEORY OF EMPIRICAL KNOWLEDGE

I

A consideration of G. E. Moore's views regarding empirical knowledge reveals that the problem of relation between sense data and physical objects is closely related with the analysis of perceptual statements of common sense. For him it is one thing to know that perceptual statements, like, 'I see a human hand,' or 'This is a human hand,' are true, and it is quite another thing to know the meaning of such statements. That this is so is clear, as he points out, from the fact that although one may *know* the meaning of a statement in the sense of *understanding* the meaning of it, yet one may not know the meaning of a statement in the sense of knowing the correct *analysis* of that statement.¹ Referring to this last point Moore raises two questions as to what could have been meant by such statements.

The first question is this : what is it that one is actually perceiving when one perceives that this is a human hand, or that this is a part of the surface of a human hand? According to Moore what is actually perceived is always a sense datum such that in perceiving this datum one is *not* perceiving the whole human hand, since a hand has many parts (e. g., its bones inside it, its other side, etc.) which are quite certainly *not* parts of this sense datum.

This leads to the second question which is this : If this sense datum which one is actually perceiving in perceiving a human hand is *not* the whole of the human hand, then can it be a part of the surface of the hand ?

As Moore puts it,

Am I, in this case, really knowing about the sense datum that it *itself* is part of the surface of a human hand? Or, ... that even here I am *not* knowing, with regard to the sense datum that it is itself part of the surface of a human hand? and, if so, what is it that I am knowing about the sense datum itself? ²

I shall not discuss here the various answers suggested by

different thinkers to this question; rather, I shall be concerned only with Moore's treatment of this problem. Some readers of Moore have suggested that his answer to this question leads to skepticism regarding empirical knowledge which Moore has always wanted to avoid. A passage indicative of such a suggestion is to be found in Murphy's paper "Moore's 'Defence of Common Sense'":

If we had to be knowing what only a correct epistemological analysis, not yet satisfactorily performed, would disclose when we know that "this is a hand," there would thus be considerable ground for scepticism about common sense knowledge after all. In fact, the assumption that something of the sort must ultimately be what we are knowing, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, is one of the most familiar sources of such scepticism. Moore rejects the sceptical conclusion, but he seems, at least at times, to have retained the assumption from which it was naturally derived.... Once common sense statements are interpreted in the context of their familiar use and testable validity, the claim that they are "ultimately" about the way in which sense data belong to or represent material objects, becomes extremely unpalatable.... Moore has here reverted to a theory incompatible with the Philosophical commitments of his defence of common sense.³

The aim of this paper is to investigate how far and in what sense Moore's treatment of this question is suggestive of skepticism. From Moore's discussion of this particular issue about the relation of sense data to physical objects (or their surfaces), it seems important that a distinction be made between two different aspects of this problem, viz., the aspect which relates to the question: what is the *epistemological relation* between sense data and physical objects? and the aspect which relates to the question: what is the *ontological relation* between sense data and physical objects?

The specific question regarding the former aspect is this: How is the *knowing* of physical objects (or their surfaces) related to the *knowing* of sense data? It seems to me that it is pretty clear from Moore's strong adherence to common sense realism that

he is not a skeptic regarding the epistemological relation between sense data and physical objects; but that is a theme for another paper.

In this paper I propose to deal only with the latter aspect of the problem, viz., the ontological relation between sense data and physical objects; since, it is precisely Moore's treatment of this issue that seems to have attracted some of his reviewers to look for skeptical elements in his views. (It should, however, be mentioned that the discussion of the subject in this paper will be illustrated with the case of visual perception only.)

III

The specific question concerning the ontological relation between sense data and physical objects is this: Are sense data identical with surfaces of physical objects? And, if they are not identical with physical surfaces then what sort of relation can they have to them? Moore holds the question regarding the relation of sense data to physical objects (or their surfaces) can be definitively answered only if a correct analysis of perceptual statements about physical objects is available. But so far we do not have any analysis of these statements which is free from obvious difficulties. Any such analysis, in its turn, depends upon definite answers to certain basic questions regarding the ontological status of sense data; for instance, questions like, Do sense data, at least some of them, exist unperceived (in the same sense in which we know that physical objects do)? Or, Are sense data physical in the sense that they occupy some physical space just as physical objects do? Moore's final answers to these questions seem to be inconclusive; in other words, it may be said that he has not given any final answers to these questions. On the one hand, he has claimed that he is strongly inclined to believe that at least some sense data do exist unperceived¹ and do occupy space⁵ which is occupied by the corresponding surfaces of physical objects; he has claimed that there are good reasons (though not conclusive ones) to think that at least some sense data so exist, and as such, there are good reasons to believe that some sense data may be identical with physical surfaces. But, on the other hand, he also recognises

that there are some good reasons (though not conclusive ones) to doubt whether they are so identical with physical surfaces. Although Moore has not given any definite answers to questions regarding the ontological status of sense data, it seems from his latest writings that he is *more inclined* to hold that sense data *do not* exist unperceived and they *do not* occupy publicly observable area of space, and as such, they *are not* identical with any area of a physical surface. He writes at one place of his "A Reply to my Critics" :

I am inclined to think that it is impossible that.....any sense datum....should exist unperceived, as it is that a headache should exist unperceived.⁶

In another passage of the same work, he says :

I know perfectly well that, if my present situation had been different from what it is....then the part of the surface of my hand....would have looked to me of a somewhat different colour from that which it now looks to me....But, if so, the *directly seen object*, which would then have "corresponded" to that piece of surface cannot possibly be identical with the piece of surface in question. And if *it* is not, then certainly nothing else which I am directly seeing is identical with that piece of physical surface.⁷

It is on the basis of passages like these that I have said above that he is *more inclined* to hold the views regarding sense data that I mentioned there; but these passages should not be taken without qualifications since there are also passages which exhibit the fact that these views are not completely free from hesitations. Consider the following passage :

....I do now not only feel sure but *know*, with regard to this object I am seeing which is part of the surface of my hand, *that* it is part of the surface of my hand. And also I do *now*, at the very same time, feel some doubt as to whether a certain object, which I am *directly seeing*, is identical with the object which I am seeing which is part of the surface of my hand. But to say that I feel doubt as to this, is to say that it is *possible* that it is identical. And *if* it is identical, then I am both feeling sure of and doubting

the very same proposition at the same time. I do not say, of course, that I *am* doing this. I only say that, so far as I can see, I don't *know* that I'm not.⁸

And yet at another place he says :

And this is the truth. I am strongly inclined to take both of these incompatible views. I am completely puzzled about the matter, and only wish I could see any way of settling it.⁹

IV

Moore persistently continued, until his very last work, his search to discover the nature of the ontological relation between sense data and physical objects. In his last paper, "Visual Sense Data," he explicitly says that the relation between a sense datum and the corresponding physical surface cannot possibly be one of identity. His final observations as to what this relation can be, if it is not one of identity, are very much based upon certain distinctions that he has made in this connection.

The first distinction is between the two referents of the demonstrative 'this' or 'that', and the second between two different senses or modes of seeing (or, more generally, perceiving) corresponding to the two referents of 'this' or 'that'.

In the paper "Visual Sense Data", Moore says that the demonstrative 'this' in perceptual statements like 'This is a penny', or 'I am seeing this', or 'That is a human hand', etc., *refers to or denotes* two different objects at the same time and not only one, as it is ordinarily supposed to. On the one hand, the demonstrative 'this' or 'that', in such statements, is short for a phrase of the kind Russell has called a definite description; in such a usage, the word 'this' or 'that' in Moore's view, refers to or denotes that part (or area) of a physical surface which we are *seeing*; and yet, on the other hand, it also denotes, at the same time, another object which we are *directly seeing* in apprehending how the surface of a physical object which we are also seeing at the same moment, *looks to us*; and in this case the object referred to is a sense datum. The point that Moore wants to emphasise is that if the demonstrative 'this' (or 'that') in the statement 'This (or that) is a penny', is *short for a definite description* denoting or referring to the physical surface which satisfies that

description, and at the same time, *refers to* or *denotes* a *sense datum* corresponding to the physical surface, then the statement 'This (or that) is a penny' is a statement about *two* objects at once, and not about only one. Moore points out that although in some of his earlier works he has maintained that the ultimate or the principal subject of any perceptual statement is always a sense datum, that does not conflict with his later claim that such a statement is always about two objects at once. For, he observes, when he has said that a sense datum is the ultimate or real subject of a perceptual statement, he has not meant that the sense datum necessarily has to be also the *only* subject of statement; rather, the claim "implies that it is *not* the only subject."¹⁰

In order to explain the relation between the two referents of 'this' or 'that', he relates this distinction with that between 'seeing' (or 'seen') and 'directly seeing' (or 'directly seen'). He explains the latter distinction in the following way: in any case of seeing an object, the perceiver has a whole visual field which consists of at least two objects (although usually more than two); for instance, if X is seeing the envelope on the table, he is also seeing, in the sense of being aware of, other things or their surfaces (e. g., the tablecloth, the typewriter, some loose sheets of paper etc.) on the table; all these things constitute X's whole visual field, although he is really looking at only one thing, viz., the envelope. Now, whenever X is presented with such a visual field which he is seeing, he is also presented with a direct visual field corresponding to the visual field being seen, which he is directly seeing. Just as it can be said that X can pick out the envelope from his visual field as the object he is seeing, it can also be said that X can pick out an object from his direct visual field, viz., a whitish coloured patch of a certain shape which he is directly seeing. This directly seen object which has been picked out from other directly seen objects in the rest of his direct visual field, is a visual sense datum corresponding to the surface of the envelope which he is seeing in his visual field.¹¹

Now, Moore relates this distinction with that between the two referents of 'this' or 'that'. When the word 'this' refers to

an object which is directly seen, the referent of 'this' is a sense datum; when the word 'this' is short for a definite description, it refers to an object, answering the description, which is seen; in this case, the referent of 'this' is a physical surface. But the important point is that in such a situation both the referents are present at once or simultaneously. And this is a fact which, according to Moore, we do not usually recognise in our everyday perceptual experiences; we do not recognise that whenever we are seeing a physical object or any part of its surface, we are also directly seeing some object which is directly given to the senses, namely, a sense datum; and about which we are not sure whether this directly seen object is identical with the surface of the physical object that we are seeing. Moore mentions these two points as follows:

(1) ... the function "X is seeing a physical object" entails the function "X is seeing a sense datum" (X = "is seeing some object *directly*"), or, in other words,...the sense in which we use "see" when we say that we see a thing which is a physical object, is such that the seeing of a physical object *necessarily involves* the seeing of a sense datum, and also (2) ... there is some reason to think that no sense datum which we are (directly) seeing is ever identical with any physical surface which we are seeing; or, in other words,... though the seeing of a physical object necessarily involves *directly seeing some* object, yet there are good reasons.... for thinking that no physical object and no physical surface is ever *directly seen*, and that therefore the seeing of a physical object necessarily involves the *direct seeing* of an object which is not a physical reality at all.¹²

He explains and illustrates this relation with a standard case of visual perception of a physical surface under ordinary and normal conditions, i. e., where one is not seeing the object double etc., and is seeing the physical surface in continuity (i. e., without any of its parts being hidden by some other object); for instance when one is looking at a white wall. The white wall which one sees without any coloured glasses on, would look different if one looks at it with some coloured glasses on. If one looks at the same white wall with blue glasses on, that wall—which is white

and not bluish-white—looks bluish-white to one. According to Moore this is just another way of saying that in such a situation one *directly* sees an expanse which really is of a bluish-white colour, and which at the same time has to the surface of the wall which is white, a specific relation—“... a relation which entitles (one) to assert that, in directly seeing that bluish-white expanse, (one is) seeing the surface of the wall which is *not* bluish-white”.

It is obvious that in a situation like this although it will be correct to say that one sees a white wall, it will not be correct to say that one sees a bluish-white wall in the same sense of ‘seeing,’ when the white wall looks bluish-white to a person he is seeing something directly which he is *not* seeing when he is seeing the surface of the same wall as white. But in any such case the perceiver also knows that the object he directly sees is definitely related with the physical surface that he sees. Since, as Moore puts it,

If I am *not* directly seeing a bluish-white expanse which has some such relation to a wall which is not bluish-white, how can I possibly know that that wall is looking bluish-white to me? It seems ... quite plain that I cannot ‘see’ in the common sense any physical object whatever without its ‘looking’ somehow to me, and, therefore, without my directly seeing some entity which has a specific relation R to the object I am said to see....And....that entity is a visual sense datum.¹³

Moore’s final observation on this issue is that the question regarding the ontological relation between a sense datum and its corresponding physical surface can be definitively answered only when we work out the correct analysis of perceptual statements—a task which is yet to be completed. But we do know with certainty that such statements are true, and we also know with certainty that the sense data we directly see, in any instance of normal cases of visual perception, are related to the corresponding physical objects, or their surfaces.

It may however be said that, at least so far as the relation between a physical surface and a sense datum is concerned, there are some elements of doubt in Moore’s views; but the element of

doubt lies *not* in not being sure as to whether or not there is a relation between a sense datum and its corresponding physical surface; or whether or not perceptual statements are *known* to be true; the element of doubt lies in not being sure as to whether or not the analyses of such statements given so far are correct. In this connection it may be worthwhile to note some of the positive comments that Moore has made, while replying to some of his critics, about his own position on this issue :

Mr. Bouwsma goes on to say...that my doubt.. *cannot be resolved*; that there is *no* way of settling the question whether the *directly seen* object ... is or is not identical with that part of the surface of my hand which I am seeing... This question, of which Mr. Bouwsma asserts so dogmatically that there is *no* way of settling it, that "there is nothing to do but to go on doubting," is the very same one about which Mr. Marhenke asserts that he "is sure no philosopher will ever find the answer to it until we know what a correct analysis is". Mr. Marhenke, then, thinks it is *possible* that it should be settled; and as to this I think he is clearly right as against Mr. Bouwsma. I, of course, do not know how this particular philosophic question is to be settled, But that ways of settling this and other philosophic questions will not some day be discovered, I certainly do not know; and Mr. Bouwsma certainly does not know it either. There is certainly something else to do besides going on doubting; and that is to go on thinking about it.¹⁴

Later again while talking about the role of analysis relative to the two languages, namely, sense data-language and common sense-language, in the context of commenting on Ayer's criticism that the question regarding the relation of sense data to physical surfaces cannot be settled by the analysis of any standard usage of words, Moore says :

It is in this last assertion of his, that the correct answer to my question cannot be discovered by the analysis of any standard usage, that he seems to have gone hopelessly wrong. His only reason for saying so seems to be that there is no standard usage either of the philosophical term

"sense datum," or of the terms "directly apprehended" or "directly seen"; and he is perfectly right that there is not standard usage of these terms. What he has failed to see is that my question can be put without any use of these expressions... and that the answer to it does depend upon analysis of expressions which undoubtedly have a standard usage in ordinary life. The expressions I mean are those which consist in saying such words as "This is a penny" or "That is a penny" *together with* some standard gesture which seems to explain what object we are referring to by the words "this" or "that"; and if we could only discover the right analysis of what is meant by such expressions, my question would be answered. It is by "going on thinking" about the analysis of such expressions as these that I hope my question will some day be answered, perhaps has already been answered in some work which I have not read.¹⁵

Thus, so far as the knowledge of the ontological relation between sense data and corresponding physical surfaces is concerned, and the knowledge of the ontological status of the sense data is concerned, it may perhaps be said that there is some element of skepticism in his views, but only in a very qualified sense. That is, so far as the ontological relation between sense data and physical surfaces is concerned, we do *know*, according to Moore, that there is a *definite relation* between the two; what we are *not certain* about so far, is the *exact nature* of the relation between the two. If there is any element of skepticism, then it is there only in the sense in which Moore has made this acknowledgement, and only to the extent to which it is implied by this acknowledgement. But if this acknowledgement of Moore's is at all indicative of an element of skepticism, it is very weakly indicative of skepticism. This is so for the reason that from his acknowledgement it does *not* follow (a) that we do *not* know the nature of this relationship *at all*; nor does it follow (b) that we *cannot ever* possibly know the nature of this relationship. What follows at the most from this acknowledgement is only this: that so far we have not arrived at a *complete and definite* knowledge of the *exact nature* of this relation (since we have not so far arrived at a complete analysis of the perceptual statements of common sense). It is quite possible that the

discovery of a single intermediary step, not so far arrived at in the process of analysis, would make it complete and definite. And Moore has never claimed either that the analysis so far arrived at is final or that it is the only possible analysis. Rather, he has shown a strong optimism towards the possibility of finding a more precise and accurate analysis of the same.

Moore has always maintained the distinction between knowing a proposition to be true and knowing the exact analysis of a proposition; on his view one may very well know, for instance, the truth of a proposition asserting the existence of a material object, and yet one may not know the exact analysis of that proposition. In his entire theory of empirical knowledge Moore repeatedly emphasises the point that we all do know for certain that material objects exist, and we also know for certain that sense data exist; we further know that sense data are (somehow) related to material objects. His position is thus clearly in opposition with that of the skeptic.

The problem in Moore's case arises only insofar as the analyses of common sense-statements and the terms contained in them are concerned. And even regarding these statements he has never said that they *cannot* be analysed, or that we do not know their analysis at all; all that he has said is that we do not know their *complete* analyses *so far*. But the point is that the fact that we do not know the complete and exact analysis of such statements does not, by any means, affect his views regarding the knowledge of the truth of perceptual statements about material objects (or, for that matter, of statements asserting the existence of material objects). And this is perhaps the central point that has been laboured throughout his theory of empirical knowledge. His views about the unavailability of a correct analysis of such statements at the moment does not undermine his claim regarding the knowability of those statements. The point he has wanted to make and has offered justifications for is that such statements are and can be known to be true, as opposed to the skeptics' claim that such statements cannot be known to be true.

The final stand of Moore's makes it quite clear that it would be inappropriate to attribute to his views any such characteris-

ation (as some of his interpreters seem to have suggested), as that Moore himself has not ultimately been able to avoid skepticism in his own views regarding empirical knowledge.*

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NOTES

1. G. E. Moore, *A Defence of Common Sense*, in *Philosophical Papers* (New York, 1966). P. 37.
2. *Ibid.* p. 55.
3. A. E. Murphy, Moore's "Defence of Common Sense", *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. P. A. Schilpp, (New York, 1952), pp. 316-317.
4. G. E. Moore, *The Status of Sense Data*, *Philosophical Studies*, (Totowa, N. J. 1968), pp. 182-183
5. G. E. Moore, *The Nature and Reality of the objects of Perception*, *Philosophical Studies* (1961), p-93.
6. G. E. Moore, *A Reply to my Critics*, *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. P. A. Schilpp (N. Y. 1952), P. 658.
7. *Ibid.* P. 642.
8. *Ibid.* pp. 636-637.
9. *Ibid.* p. 659.
10. G. E. Moore, *Visual Sense Data*, *British philosophy in the Mid-Century*, ed. C. A. Mace, (London, 1966), p. 210.
11. G. E. Moore, *A Reply to my critics*. *The philosophy of G. E. Moore* (1952), pp. 630-631.
12. *Ibid.* pp. 644-645.
13. G. E. Moore, *Visual Sense Data*, *British Philosophy in the Mid-Century* (1966), pp. 208-209.
14. G. E. Moore, *A Reply to my Critics*, *The philosophy of G. E. Moore* 1952), pp. 637-638.
15. G. E. Moore, *Addendum to My Reply*, *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (1952), p. 680.

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