

Moore on Skepticism and Perception

Seminar 2

PHIL2120 Topics in Analytic Philosophy

28 September 2012

Reading for this seminar

Required reading:

Soames, Ch 2

Optional reading:

Moore 'Proof of the External World'

Moore, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, Ch
2,5,6

(See course website)

Outline

1. Moore on external world scepticism
2. Moore on perception

External world skepticism

External world skepticism: We cannot know that objects that are external to all our minds exist

Def: An object is external to all our minds iff it is conceptually possible for x to exist without anyone perceiving or experiencing it

Examples of external objects: hands, chairs, tables

Descartes's Dreaming Argument

Premise 1: I do not know that I am not dreaming

Premise 2: If I do not know that I am not dreaming then I do not know that I have hands

Conclusion: I do not know that I have hands

Note: 'I have hands' can be replaced by any other sentence about external objects

Moore's proof of an external world

Premise 1: Here (holding up one hand) is one hand

Premise 2: here (holding up his other hand) is another hand

Conclusion 1: Therefore there are at least two hands

Conclusion 2: Therefore there are at least two things external to our minds

Moore's argument that he has given a proof

The argument is a proof since it satisfies the following conditions:

- i) The conclusion is different from the premises
- ii) The conclusion follows from the premises (necessarily, if the premises are true, the conclusion is true)
- iii) The premises are known to be true

Moore's argument that knows he has hands when he holds up his hands

- i) It is obvious that he knows he has hands, just as it is obvious that you know you are hearing my words
- ii) Comparison with proof of misprints on a page
 - a) Disagreement about misprints
 - b) Settled by pointing that out
 - c) We would be perfectly happy to accept such a proof in real life
 - d) But if we can know that there are three misprints in this way, then Moore knows he has hands when he looks at them

The skeptic's response

Facts about what we would ordinarily be happy with excepting are irrelevant since it might be that what we ordinarily say is wrong

The skeptic has a powerful argument that we don't know we at hands, and this argument also shows that we do not know that there are 3 misprints on a page either

Moore has done nothing to reduce the force of this argument

Soames's defense of Moore's proof

Moore's reply to the skeptic's response is in effect to:

- i) Ask for a justification for the claim that we don't know that we have hands, and
- ii) Claim that any attempted justification will rely on a theory of knowledge that is less certain than the common sense proposition that we know that we have hands

Example of a theory of knowledge that the skeptic might rely on

K1) In order to know that p one must have evidence that conceptually entails p

K2) If E is part of our evidence then we couldn't possibly be mistaken about it

While Moore accepts that K1 and K2 have some intuitive plausibility, he claims that they aren't as certain as the proposition that we know we have hands

Where the skeptic goes wrong according to Moore

- The skeptic assumes that we can be certain about what knowledge is before we decide whether paradigm cases of knowledge are genuine
- But this is backward! We are more certain that some paradigm cases of knowledge are genuine than we are about the nature of knowledge.
- Indeed in constructing a theory of knowledge, one fundamental test is that it be consistent with our common sense knowledge about cases of knowledge

The real job of philosophy according to Moore

- The job philosophers of knowledge is not to prove or refute that we have hands
- Rather, it is to construct a theory of knowledge that is i) consistent with obvious cases of knowledge, and ii) explains how such knowledge arises

The sense data theory of perception

The sense data was endorsed by Moore and was the dominant theory of perception in the first half of the 20th century (and before)

The sense data theory: What we immediately see in visual perception are mental objects (called sense data) rather than external objects

Features of sense data (according to Moore)

- i) Sense data must be perceived in order to exist
- ii) Sense data are private objects: two people can't experience the same sense data
- iii) Since data appear exactly as they are
- iv) Sensed data do not exist in any public space

Argument that we sometimes see sense data

If you look at a pen and press your finger against the side of your eye, then you see two images of the pen.

In this case, at least one of these images is not an external object but is a sense datum.

Other plausible cases of sense data: i) hallucinating a dagger, ii) afterimages

Argument 1 that we always see sense data

Cases where we hallucinate are very similar to cases of normal perception

The most plausible explanation for this similarity is that in both cases we are seeing sense data

Argument 2 that we always see sense data

Principle B: Whenever something looks white, rectangular, small, etc., to you, you are seeing something that is white, rectangular, small, etc.

If two people x and y are looking at an envelope then the object immediately seen by x will look to have a different shape and colour from y .

Hence, by principle B, the things immediately seen by x and y will have different properties, and hence won't be identical.

Argument 2 that we always see sense data (cont)

Hence, x and y can't both be immediately seeing the envelope.

Rather than thinking that either x or y is special, it is more plausible to think that neither x and y are immediately seeing the envelope, but are rather immediately seeing distinct sense data.

Given this, it is plausible that we always immediately see sense data rather than external objects

Problem

Given the sense data theory,

- i) What is the difference between a hallucinatory experience and a normal one?
- ii) How do we know that we are not hallucinating?

Moore's attempt at a solution

More attempts to solve this problem by attempting to give an analysis of (A) which explains how we can know it to be true.

A. I see this and this is a table

More, however, plausibly isn't able to find a satisfactory analysis which is able to do this.

Analysis A*

A*. There is exactly one thing of which it is true both that it is a table and that it bears R to this sense datum that I am now seeing

Options for what R is:

- i) R is the relation of causation (the most popular view)
- ii) R is a unanalysable relation (Moore's preferred view)

Problem with analysis A^*

If we can never immediately see the things that stands in R to our sense data, how do we know that there are any such things?

Analysis A**

A**. I am seeing a certain table-like visual sense datum; and if I were to walk a little to the site, then I would have a certain other slightly different table-like visual sense data; and if I were to put my hand down, then I would have certain tactile sense data of hardness and smoothness, and so on, and so on, and so on.

Prob 1: Difficult to spell out A** so that it only refers to sense data (and not external objects)

Prob 2: Seems to be inconsistent with the commonsense proposition that there are external objects, and that we see them.