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Wittgenstein on Moore's Defence of Commonsense

In this paper I wish to focus on Wittgenstein's observation on Moore's defence of commonsense.This paper can be divided into two parts: The first part will dealt with Moore's characterization of common sense and how he defended commonsense. In the second part we will deal with Wittgenstein's observation on Moore's defence of commonsense.Let us discuss the first part.

In the paper "A Defence of Common Sense", published in 1925, Moore committed to a philosophy of Commonsense realism.He does this by listing a number of propositions of common sense which he claims to know with certainty to be true, for example, "There exists at present a living human body , which is my body ,'' "Here is one hand ,and here is another", "The earth had existed for many years before my body was born ," and so on (Moore, *Defence* 165 – 166). His defence of commonsense beliefs and ideas is also displayed in the essay "Moore and Ordinary Language" of Norman Malcolm.There he rejected some philosophical statements, put forwarded by the idealist metaphysician and the sceptic,on the assumption that they go against commonsensebeliefs and ideas are as follows: "There are no material things", "Time is unreal", "Space is unreal", "No one ever perceives a material thing" etc. (Rorty).In Some Main Problems of Philosophy (1953) Moore not only formulates the essential characteristic of common sense but also shows how he comes to its defence. In describing the essential features of common sense, he takes it for granted that it is accepted by almost everybody (common man). The essential features which everyone shares ,as Moore conceives, consists in believing 'that there

are in the universe enormous numbers of material objects' (Moore, *Main Problems* 2).He does not define what is meant by commonsense but gives as example human bodies, animals, plants, mountains, stones, grains of sand, minerals soils, drops of water in rivers and seas, things manufactured by men , such as houses and chairs and tables and railway engines, and 'besides all these things upon the surface of the earth' (Moore, *Main Problems* 3) the earth itself and the sun and the moon and the stars. Every material objects, in the common sense view, is situated in space and time. That means 'each of them is, at any given moment, at some definite distance from all the rest' and that they are distant 'in some one or other of a quite definite set of directions' (Moore, *Main Problems* 5) and 'each of them either did exist in the past, or exists now, or will exist in the future' (Moore, *Main Problems* 11).The second of the main belief regarding commonsense is the belief in the acts of consciousness. According to Moore there are various instances of the acts of consciousness like hearing, feeling, remembering, imagining, desiring, dreaming etc.These acts of consciousness are attached to the bodies. (Moore, *Main Problems* 7)However there are vast majority of material objects to which no acts of consciousness are attached (Moore, *Main Problems* 8). The third of the main belief associated with the views of commonsense is that we do really know that there are material objects and acts of consciousness and that they have the properties that he has listed.Not only that but 'we believe that we know an immense number of details about particular material objects and acts of consciousness, past, present and future. We know,' he continues,'most, indeed about the past, but a great deal about the present, and much also about the future' (Moore, *Main Problems* 12).This is all about how Moore characterize commonsense. Now let us see how Moore comes to its defence.

In the essay 'A Defence of Common Sense' Moore begins by giving a long list of propositions, every one of which he claims to know with certainty to be true. These propositions fall into three groups. The propositions of the first group are that there exists , and has for some time existed , a human body which is his body;that during the time that it has existed, this body has been ' in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth,' that there have existed many other things, 'also having shape and size in three dimensions,'from which it has been at various distances and with some of which it has been in contact, that among these things have been other human bodies of which the same propositions are true , that many of these bodies have ceased to exist, that the earth had existed for many years before he was born, and that during many of those years a large number of human bodies had at every moment been alive upon it, and had, in very many cases, ceased to exist before he was born. The second group of propositions consist , in outline, of the propositions that since his birth he has had many different experiences , that he has often perceived his own body , and other things in its environment, including other human bodies; that he has often observed facts about these things , such as the fact , which he is observing as he writes, that a particular mantelpiece is nearer to his body than a particular bookcase, that he is aware of facts which he is not at present observing, such as that his body existed on the previous day and was then for some time nearer to the mantelpiece than to the bookcase, hat he has had expectations with regard to the future, that he has held many beliefs, both true and false, that he has thought of imaginary things without believing in their reality, that he has had dreams, that he has had feelings of many different kinds , and that many other human beings have had similar experiences. Finally, the third group consists of the single proposition which states with regard to many other human beings, who resemble Moore in that, *mutatis mutandis*, the propositions of his first two classes are also true of them, that each of them has

frequently known, with regard to himself and his body, propositions corresponding to those that Moore has listed. (Moore, *Philosophical Papers* 32 - 35)This is how Moore defended commonsense. And his defence in each case is signaled by the use of the phrase 'I know with certainty… to be true', where the blank in each case is filled by proposition belonging to Common Sense for e.g., 'The earth has existed for many years before I was born'.So, we have discussed two things: Moore's characterization of common sense view of the world and his defence of it.

Now let us discuss the second part as to how Wittgenstein criticises Moore's defence of commonsense. Wittgenstein 's criticism is mainly preoccupied with the analysis of the phrases 'I know' and 'I am certain' rather than his characterization of it and that is fully displayed in his book 'On Certainty'. More precisely, he criticizes Moore's way by which he comes to its defence.This does not suggest that Wittgenstein bears a totally different outlook of disobeying commonsense or wants to defend the idealist and the sceptic positions which Moore refuted. Rather his interest lies elsewhere. Being a subscriber of commonsense realism he criticizes the way Moore defended commonsense.

In order to criticize Moore's defence of commonsense, Wittgenstein fastens his attention to the use of the phrase 'I know with certainty … to be true.'He argues that Moore's use of the phrases 'I know' or 'I am certain' is altogether faulty because he has failed to realize their correct use and hence his defence of commonsense is not sound.

In order to determine the validity of the argument which Wittgenstein put forwarded,we have to know his contention about how a meaning of a word is to be determined. In his later writings i.e. in the Blue Book and Philosophical Investigations he contends that in order to

understand the exact meaning of a word or phrase or sentence, we have to put it in a context or situations in which it is used. In Wittgenstein's language we have to understand it's meaning by placing it in a language – game, where it is used. In order to understand the word 'red' we have to put it in a context or situation where it is used.That is we have to know how the word 'red' is applied in a concrete situations. In order to make it clear he gives example of the primitive language game where the speaker calls the word 'slab', 'bricks' etc. and the hearer responses at those calls. Here the hearer understands what the speaker intends to say because they share a common conceptual framework,an identical social surroundings which means - an identical form of life.That means he maintains that it is not only the particular language – games to which we must attend in order to see how various expressions are used but something more inclusive and basic than language-game should be taken into account , which he calls 'world – picture'. It represents an entire framework of propositions, concepts,beliefs,and practices – in short a 'form of life'. By 'form of life' Wittgenstein means an underlying agreement in conceptual framework, beliefs,practices, social surroundings,cultures, way of life etc.

In On Certainty when he speaks of the world- picture then he wants to mean that it is something that is shared and it makes communication possible. It provides the framework within which particular agreements and disagreements,doubts and settlement of doubts, making mistakes and correcting them can take place. The world –picture of one proposition may vary from the world-picture of another proposition and of the same proposition at different times. Again, no one proposition can be said to have an identical world-picture throughout history.Wittgenstein note the differences in the world- picture seriously and considers what is involved when a world –picture is shared and the possible ways people might come to adopt a different world-picture from the one they already have.Differences in the world-picture also

makedifferences in the logical status of a proposition. But Moore failed to note these facts. He takes an unchangeable, unique, universally accepted framework of commonsense into consideration and thus failed to study the use of the phrases 'I know' and 'I am certain'.

Wittgenstein criticism focus on the analysis of the expressions 'I know' and 'I am certain' which is attached to every proposition Moore have put forwarded in his defence of commonsense. According to Wittgenstein we must not only consider them in a particular language-game or situations or context in which they are used but also against the background of a particular 'world – picture', more precisely 'a form of life'. Moore fails to note these differences and he assimilate all uses, for e.g. , of 'I know' or ' I am certain' , to one kind or another.The most basic thing which Wittgenstein try to convey is that taken in isolation, apart from the context the proposition for e.g., "I have two hands", cannot be considered as belonging to a particular world- picture and thus, it has no uses. Its logical role and status will depend upon the circumstances or context in which it is used and on the world – picture to which it belongs. If anyone doubts the proposition in question then it should also be considered in a particular language-game. For Wittgenstein says in On Certainty:

> If e.g. someone says "I don't know if there's a hand here" he might be told "Lookcloser". — This possibility of satisfying oneself is part of the language-game.Is one of its essential features (2e).

And also:

> If anatomy were under discussion I should says: "I know that twelve pairs of nerves lead from the brain."I have never seen these nerves, and even a specialist will onlyhave

observed them in a few specimens. – This just is how the word "know" is correctly used here.

But now it is also correct to use "I know" in the contexts which Moore mentioned, at least *in particular circumstances…* For each one of these sentences I can imagine circumstances that turn it into a move in one of our language-games, and by that it loses everything that is philosophically astonishing (82e).

Wittgenstein argues that if we examine the uses of the expressions "I know" and "I am certain" which Moore attaches to every propositions of commonsense then we find that they are not used as stated by Wittgenstein. They do not fall into any of the typical language-games where such words are actually used. So, Moore misconceives the status and the role ofthe expressions in question. His uses of the phrases in question are incorrect and hence his defence of commonsense is also inappropriate and therefore fails.

But the question arisesthat, what are the correct uses of "I know"? or when we can say that the phrases "I know" or "I am certain" have a correct uses. According to Wittgenstein,in order to determine the correct uses of those phrases two things should be noted. In the first place, when someone says "I know ….. to be certain" then it means that he is giving assurance to the hearer that the hearer can rely on him in a particular circumstances. He has that special qualification that entitles him to give assurance to other of the truth of the propositions he claims to know. In the second place, it can be said that, when one says that 'I know ...true', then it may be the case that there are reasons or grounds for accepting it as true. For in On Certainty he says:

The correct use of the expression "I know". Someone with bad sight asks me: do youbelieve that the thing we can see 'thereis a tree'? I reply "Iknow it is, I can see it

clearly and amfamiliar with it" –A: "Is N.N.at home?"---I: "I believe he is"---A "Was he at home yesterday?" –I: "Yesterday he was –I know he was; I spoke to him" –A: "Do you know or only believe that this part of the house is built on later than the rest?"---I: " I know it is : I asked so and so about it" (63e).

Again in another section he says:

I know" often means: I have the proper grounds for my statement. So if the other person is acquainted with the language-game, he would admit that I know. The other, if he is acquainted with the language-game, must be able to imagine howone may know something of the kind (4e).

According toWittgenstein, these two conditions cannot be applied to propositions which Moore listed in his defence of commonsense. For, in the first place, there is no special qualification on the part of the speaker that the hearer can rely on him.And secondly, the propositions which Moore claims to know cannot be said to be known for there are no grounds for accepting them. For in On Certainty he says:

Moore says he knows that the earth existed long before his birth. And put like that it seems to be a personal statement about him, even if it is in addition a statementabout the physical world. Now it is philosophically uninteresting whether Moore knows this or that, but it is interesting that, and how, it can be known. If Moore had informed us that he knew the distance separating certain stars, we might conclude from that he had made some special investigations, and we shall want to know what these were. But Moore chooses precisely a case in which we all seem to know the same as he, and without being able to say how. I believe e.g., that I know as much about this matter (the existence of the

earth) as Moore does, and if he knows that it is as he says, then I know it too. For it isn't

either, as if he had arrived at his proposition by pursuing some line of thought which ,

while it is open to me, I have not in fact pursued (12e).

And in other sections he says:

For it is not as though the proposition "It is so" could be inferred from someone else's

utterance: "I know it is so". Nor from the utterance together with it's not being a lie. –

But can't I infer "It is so" from my own utterance "I know etc."? Yes; and also "There is

a hand there" follows from the proposition "He knows that there's a hand there". But

from his utterance " I know …." It does not follow that he does know it(4e).It needs to be

shown that no mistake was possible. Giving the assurance "I know" doesn't suffice. For it

is after all only an assurance that I can't be making a mistake,and it needs to be

objectively established that I am not making a mistake about that (4e)."If I know

something, then I also know that I know it, etc." amounts to:"I know that"means"I am

incapable of being wrong about that". But whether I am so must admit of being

established objectively (4e).

Hence,it can be said that, it is a misuse of the phrase 'I know' on Moore's part to use it in

connection with any of the proposition he listed.

However, I concede that Moore was quite consistent in his system. In the paper 'A

Defence of Common Sense' he characterizes common sense beliefs and ideas and following that

tune he defended common sense. Wittgenstein criticizes Moore's way of defending

commonsense from his own point of view. Wittgenstein's method of analysis was not admitted

or recognized by Moore.But a criticism is right and legal if it is made by taking into

consideration the drawbacks of the system itself. So though they are both true and faithful in their own system but they both favoured commonsense beliefs and ideas and their method of analysis which is characterized by their appeal to the ordinary employment of words opens up a new era in the history of analytic movement and thus explains their contemporary influence.

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