

Metaphilosophy, Once Again

Chapter 3

Ordinary Language Philosophy Reconsidered

How strange if logic were concerned with an 'ideal' language and not with *ours*. For what would this ideal language express? Presumably, what we now express in our ordinary language; in that case, this is the language logic must investigate.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks*

When philosophers use a word—'knowledge', 'being', 'object', 'I', 'proposition', 'name'—and they try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: Is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home? What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

I

Neither ordinary language philosophers (broadly speaking) Moore, Wittgenstein, Austin, Ryle, Grice, Strawson, Bousma, Ambrose, Toulmin, Wisdom or Malcolm nor ideal language philosophers Russell, Carnap, Bergmann, Reichenbach, Schlick, C. I. Lewis or Ayer have much presence anymore. The issues that they engaged in and that divided them may seem passé. By now it might be said both groups are part of the history of philosophy. Well, of course they are and even with their being such near contemporaries, they are for us part of the history of philosophy. We no longer make philosophical music with any of them or with the movements they inspired. I want here, extending what I argued in the previous two chapters and perhaps whipping a dead horse, to

make a renewed defense of both common sense and of ordinary language philosophy. (They are not and should not be taken to be the same. I want to stress for both of them their historic importance and even more their continued relevance and their role, perhaps paradoxically, in my own *not-quietist rejectionism*: what I have called my anti-Philosophy philosophy.¹ This is not to say that any of those ordinary language philosophers listed above would have endorsed it. But they, unwittingly and unintentionally, as I shall try to show, led us down that path in certain ways and, my admiration for Friedrich Waismann to the contrary notwithstanding, far away from his path (Waismann 1968). For a glimpse into one important bit of ordinary language philosophy's import, reflect on how metaphysics was done by the English neo-Hegelians, some of whom Russell and Moore attacked, and how analytical metaphysics is done now.² I have in mind near contemporary old time metaphysicians such as Bradley, McTaggart, Bosanquet, Blanshard, and Weiss. This kind of metaphysics—a clearly recognizable sort—clearly has been devastated. It is all but vanished from the philosophical scene. But it is unclear whether this devastation has travelled to latter, more analytically attuned philosophers doing metaphysical work, namely Kripke, David Lewis, Thomas Nagel, Armstrong, Brandon and van Inwagen.³ Metaphysics, as some wish, may not be dead but metaphysics done in the way the former group did it is dead. (Blanshard's way a bit less so than McTaggart's.) Moore's and Wittgenstein's arguments, and roughly following them (though somewhat differently) Ambrose's, Ryle's, Malcolm's, Austin's, Toulmin's, were effective in bringing about that death. There was a historic turning that is not likely to be reversed. Moreover, we did not need Rorty for that. Indeed Rorty is not charmed by a Moorean common sense approach linked to ordinary language philosophy or just taken by itself. I will attempt in the next part of this chapter to show how the ordinary language philosophers' way of going about philosophy puts the stopper on some currently fashionable ways of going about philosophy.

II

I will in this section try to show something of the Moorean-Wittgensteinian influenced way of philosophically doing things that finished off that old metaphysical way of doing philosophy, at least as it was done in the English speaking world. I am thinking here centrally of the English neo-Hegelians. I will stress here such analytical philosophy's Moorean side having given expression to the Wittgensteinian side in the previous two chapters. Moore and Wittgenstein are by no means the same.⁴ But they, taken together, were very effective here. I have in mind in particular some ways they affected Alice Ambrose and Norman Malcolm who were students of both of them. Ryle and Austin both were important ordinary language philosophers as well as teaching at Oxford. But they importantly went on their own ways, though still in an ordinary language tradition. They all have a lot in common with Moore and Wittgenstein, but are themselves importantly different.⁵

Now for the Moorean attack—Malcolm called him the “Great Refuter—of classical metaphysics and epistemology (Malcolm 1952, 365). I start with Moore's famous *A Defense of Common Sense* and its relation to ordinary language philosophy (Moore 1959; originally published in 1925). I should first note that though Moore speaks of the common sense view of the world, his account, as both Ambrose and Malcolm realize, is actually very distant from common sense (Ambrose 1952; Malcolm 1952). What Moore called the plain man would be very puzzled about such statements as ‘There are material objects’, ‘We are conscious beings’, ‘We have bodies’, ‘People live for a number of years’, ‘Time is not unreal’, ‘Most of us have been on or near to the surface of the earth all our lives’, ‘Space is unreal’, ‘You cannot know for certain there are experiences other than your own’, ‘We do not know the truth about any material thing’, ‘It is the case that everything we see is really a part of our brains’, ‘No material thing exists unperceived’, and ‘The world is our idea’. Talk and argument about such matters would seem to be crazy-talk to someone, innocent of philosophy, rooted in common sense. (It will seem so to some philosophers as well.)

Plain people would find these sentences very puzzling. Malcolm even says that if you stop to think about such sentences, you will begin to see that “all of them are queer sentences” (Malcolm 1970, 41). What, to ask a Wittgensteinian question, if anything, do they mean? When, to go Wittgensteinian, would we employ them? Would we ever use them except in esoteric philosophical situations which would make little sense to plain people, let alone have any importance for them? And how are they, *or are they*, matters of common sense? They are not like beliefs of common sense, many of which come and go over time and place, and many are moralistic, e.g., ‘The earth is flat; the earth is round’, ‘Marriage must be monogamous; there cannot be legitimate polygamous marriages’, ‘Gay marriages are illegitimate’, ‘One must not eat meat on Friday; one can eat meat whenever one likes’, ‘One must eat kosher’, ‘Morality requires belief in God; morality does not require it’, ‘The father is the head of the family; the mother is’ or ‘Families are much happier without a single culturally determined head’, etc., etc. Different things over cultural space and historical time are regarded as common sense and often required at certain times and places. What is common sense in Kansas is not common sense in Helsinki, to say nothing of Kabala Catholicism and Protestantism and Judaism and most Moslems do not have blasphemy laws but in some places they exist and are enforced. What is just common sense varies over time and place.

However, while these various things are all true of what has been taken to be common sense at some times and places none of them are relevant to upsetting of Moore’s or to ordinary language philosophers’ work. Moore’s list of beliefs that he gives in his *A Defense of Common Sense* would be assented to if they were put to them by what Moore called ‘plain people’ when they saw what they were meant to affirm or deny by Moore when he was confronted with such strange and paradoxical metaphysical or epistemological views, views very different from anything plain people believed in or even thought about. Views Moore lists as common sense beliefs are views that they would consider crazy when confronted with them. They would in this context take these ‘common sense truisms’ that Moore used to contest these metaphysical or epistemological views as very odd

indeed. Still, what Moore calls these common sense views are something that are obviously true and are plainly incompatible with one or another of these metaphysical or epistemological views. This being so, these esoteric metaphysical views could not be true if these common sense views were true. And these common sense views certainly are true. That being so, those metaphysical views cannot be true. Indeed, we all would in our ordinary practical affairs simply and rightly assume them (Murphy 1952). There is no room for doubt here. Even philosophers who in their metaphysical moments claimed belief in such metaphysical views, who indeed then claimed reason required them, would still assent to these truisms when they were not in what Hume called their “philosopher’s closet”. They would show this in their behavior and what they would assent to. Moreover, they did not have the slightest doubt about the certainty of these truisms which contradicted these metaphysical and epistemological views. When they entertained such doubts, they were in a dream world.

I want now to show how Moore and in this respect Mooreans such as Ambrose, Murphy, Malcolm and Bousma make a sound case for that, though sometimes with some minor modifications of Moore’s views, but essentially in what Moore regarded as a common sense denial of esoteric metaphysics (if that isn’t pleonastic) with the English neo-Hegelians being paradigms of people with such absurd views. Moore and what I have called the Mooreans undermined these strange metaphysical views and successfully defended, as I have just characterized it, a common sense non-metaphysical view of the world. I shall utilize Moore’s articulation of it (Moore 1952, 667-777; 1953, 1-27; 1959, 32-39 and 127-50).

Moore begins with a list of truisms which he takes to be certainly true and as being wholly true. Moore is well aware that the propositions on his list are truisms that normally are not worth asserting. However, on certain *philosophical* occasions they are. They are propositions, Moore, as we have seen, asserts, that he knows with certainty to be true and wholly true. Moreover, he claims, these are propositions that people who can even rudimentarily think know with certainty to

be wholly true (Moore 1959, 34-35). These commonplaces—as will be seen to be such once stated and the point of asserting them grasped—are incompatible with the crucial statements that these esoteric metaphysicians make. If Moore's commonplace statements are true (wholly true) then those metaphysical statements (propositions) which contradict them are false and known with certainty to be false. Such metaphysical claims plainly are in contradiction with common knowledge as construed by Moore—bits of common sense that we know with certainty to be true. But since these contradicting truisms are certainly true and wholly true, these metaphysical propositions are false.

I shall now state some of Moore's list of common sense propositions—a list of propositions he claims to know with certainty to be true. Here is his list in part:

There exists at present a living human body, which is *my* body. This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continuously ever since, though not without undergoing changes; it was, for instance, much smaller when it was born, and for some time afterwards, than it is now. Ever since it was born, it has been either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth; and, at every moment since it was born, there have also existed many other things, having shape and size in three dimensions (in the same familiar sense in which it has), from which it has been *at various distances* (in the familiar sense in which it is now at a distance both from that mantelpiece and from that bookcase, and at a greater distance from the bookcase than it is from the mantelpiece); also there have (very often, at all events) existed some other things of this kind with which it was *in contact* (in the familiar sense in which it is now in contact with the pen I am holding in my right hand and with some of the clothes I am wearing). Among the things which have, in this sense, formed part of its environment (i.e. have been either in contact with it, or at *some* distance from it, however *great*) there have, at every moment since its birth, been large numbers of other living human bodies, each of which has, like it, (*a*) at some time been born, (*b*) continued to exist from some time after birth, (*c*) been, at every moment of its life after birth, either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth; and many of these bodies have already died and ceased to exist. But the earth had existed also for many years before my body was born; and for many of these years, also, large numbers of human bodies had, at every moment, been alive upon it; and many of these bodies had died and ceased to exist before it was born. Finally (to come to a different class of propositions), I am a human being, and I have, at different times since my body was born,

had many different experiences, of each of many different kinds: e.g. I have often perceived both my own body and other things which formed part of its environment, including other human bodies; I have not only perceived things of this kind, but have also observed facts about them, such as, for instance, the fact which I am now observing, that that mantelpiece is at present nearer to my body than that bookcase; I have been aware of other facts, which I was not at the time observing, such as, for instance, the fact, of which I am now aware, that my body existed yesterday and was then also for some time nearer to that mantelpiece than to that bookcase; I have had expectations with regard to the future, and many beliefs of other kinds, both true and false; I have thought of imaginary things and persons and incidents, in the reality of which I did not believe; I have had dreams; and I have had feelings of many different kinds. And, just as my body has been the body of a human beings, namely myself, who has, during his lifetime, had many experiences of each of these (and other) different kinds; so, in the case of very many of the other human bodies which have lived upon the earth, each has been the body of a different human being, who has, during the lifetime of that body, had many different experiences of each of these (and other) different kinds (Moore 1959, 33-34).

III

Has Moore made his case? Has he so swiftly and decisively with such truisms refuted such a pervasive and longstanding philosophical tradition, both metaphysical and epistemological? Like Norman Malcolm and Arthur Murphy, I think he has. But many others have thought that he has begged the question. However, can we justifiably take such a swift way with dissenters? Can we so easily and directly overthrow a ubiquitous philosophical tradition? Does this conviction of Malcolm, Murphy and myself finally just rest on animal faith? I shall argue that it does not. But even if it does, we should remember George Santayana's claim that animal faith in certain circumstances is not so bad. When push comes to shove, it *may* have to suffice for a philosopher who would be unrelentingly tough-minded (Ryle 1971, 153-69).

However, let us turn to the kinds of dissent from Moore that have been made and thought by some to be compelling. Moore, it is frequently thought, begged the question in asserting that he knows for certain his 'common sense' propositions on his list directed at his also listed paradoxical

metaphysical and epistemological propositions. Moore does not have that unassailable force for his defense of common sense that Moore claims for them. Consider ‘The earth has existed for many years past’ or ‘The external world exists’. Suppose a philosopher says of them that if you mean so-and-so by ‘earth’ and so-and-so by ‘exists’ and so-and-so by ‘external’ then yes, but if instead you mean so-and-so by these words, then no. What we philosophers, the claim goes, mean to be saying is typically a very difficult matter leading to very difficult questions and, the skeptical philosopher tells us, that this being so I cannot, if I would be open minded, make up my mind what to say or believe—or at least not as decisively so as Moore believes. Moore says of a philosopher taking that view that his view “is as profoundly mistaken as any view can be” (Moore 1959, 37). ‘The earth has existed for many years past’ and that Moore has a body are unambiguous propositions the meaning of which we all understand. There is no ground for making such an iffy dance about them. Anyone who takes—tries to take—a contrary view must, Moore has it, be confusing the questions about whether we understand their meaning, which we certainly do, and recognize their truth as well as we also certainly do, with the entirely different question of whether in knowing what these sentences mean we, in knowing we know that, are able to *give a correct analysis* of their meaning (Moore 1959, 37). Knowing the *meaning* or *use* of a word or phrase is one thing; knowing the *analysis* of a word or phrase is another. Knowing the *meaning* of a sentence is one thing; and knowing its *analysis* is another. We can know the meaning (use) of, for example, of the word ‘two’ while remaining at sea about its analysis. We may, to put it more simply, understand or know something without being able to say how we know we know it. I know now that I am writing this, but I still may not be able to say how I know it. Moore goes on to say,

It is obvious that we cannot even raise the question how what we do understand by a word or sentence is to be analyzed unless we do understand the word or sentence. So soon, therefore, as we know how a person who uses an expression is using it in its ordinary sense we understand his meaning (Moore 1959, 37).

We realize that about the two sentences mentioned above and about the word 'two'. We know quite routinely and unproblematically their meaning and that is a necessary condition for their being analyzable. Is it not *parti pris* to say that we do not really understand the meaning of something until we know how to say how we know it or to give an analysis of it?

Moore did not want just to know the meaning of 'The earth has existed for many years past' and 'The external world exists'; he wanted to know as well something distinct concerning those sentences, namely their truth and indeed their certain truth. He claimed he did know them to be true and indeed certainly true and wholly true. But knowing their meaning or even their correct analysis would not yield us that. And we could know their truth and even be certain of that without their analysis. Even if they were *a priori* propositions, which they are not, we would have to know that the use of their terms which is an empirical matter (something we would have to learn empirically) before we could know these propositions (sentences, if you will) were *a priori*. We would have to know, that is, the meaning of 'young dog' and 'puppy' before we could know that 'Puppies are young dogs' was *a priori*.

Given the above, it is unclear what work *analysis* can do here or even whether we should concern ourselves with analysis. We would have to know the sort of things I mentioned above for analysis even to begin. We would have to know how we establish 'Puppies are young dogs' is true and that it is differently established than 'Rattlesnakes are poisonous' and how we establish the truth of 'The earth has existed for many years past rather than just five minutes ago complete with fossils'. It is established to be true in ways more like 'Rattlesnakes are poisonous' than like 'Puppies are young dogs', but still not entirely differently than the latter. We need, before we can engage in analysis, to know how to use ordinary language. We need, that is, normally to understand and speak (if we can speak) or read (if we can read and if our language has been written) our ordinary language or some natural language. We need, in short, to have some natural language. And it is important to remember that *knowing how* and *knowing that* are different. We need to know

something empirical about snakes and something empirical about rattle snakes and something vague about the age of the world, e.g. that it has existed for many years past. Where does analysis come in over these matters? I am skeptical that it comes in anywhere. It seems to me superogatory. We know, and know it certainly, that the earth did not come into being five minutes ago with its fossils and the like. But how do we know it? Can this be a real question? Do we need *analysis* here?

So what is the point or rationale of analysis or, indeed, something conceptually more primitive than that? Exactly what is analysis? What kind of clarification, if any, does analysis yield? Does it help in establishing the truth of what we have mentioned in the previous paragraph? *Perhaps* it helps a little in establishing the ways to determine the truth or falsity of sentences like those mentioned above. It may help us establish whether sentences (or at least some) are *a priori* or empirical or something entirely different.

I will now make a brief digression. It is an advertisement for what will come in my final chapter. It is about my skepticism concerning the wonder working of analysis for philosophy. (Remember some analytic philosophers have said that philosophy is analysis.) I am as skeptical of 'philosophy as analysis' as I am of 'analysis is not enough' or 'analysis is enough' or 'what is it to get enough analysis?'. And when, if ever, do we have complete clarity? Or is not that the aim of analysis? If it is not, what is its aim? Do we have much, if any, idea of how to answer these questions? And can we plausibly say the aim, or even *an* aim, of philosophy is analysis? Do we have any idea of what counts as 'complete clarity'? More humbly, what counts as clarification, particularly when we are trying to do philosophy? Most fundamentally my skepticism is about whether analysis will do much, if any, work and, if so, what sort and what is it to even ask that.

There is a skepticism engendered, in part, by what I have said about Moore and analysis. If we can engage in analysis of a term or phrase only if we already know its meaning or know, that is, its use. We can then, and only then, according to Moore, engage in analysis. But how then does

analysis help us to gain more clarity and if it does, what kind of clarity? And is it an understanding, if indeed it is any understanding at all, that will enable us to better understand what is going on in the world or even in our talk of the world or of our talk about the talk of the world? Or am I raising pseudo-problems here? I don't want to say no clarification can be made; that would be absurd and undermine my own activity. Yet what is, if anything, *philosophical* clarification? And in philosophy is clarification enough? I remain skeptical about all these matters. What more, if anything, can analysis come to than just having an understanding of a word's or phrase's use? But the plain person, if he has a natural language, has that. Why philosophy? Does philosophy just come to an understanding of our talk about the talk of the world? Isn't it enough to have a good understanding of our own world which we can probably only grasp by knowing our talk of the world? Without some rudiments of that, we remain blindfolded. This is a necessary condition but it is not sufficient. So what more? And does it have anything to do with philosophy? And, if so, what?

I do not say that philosophical analysis does not do any work. I just question if it has much significance. If some philosopher says, 'The totality is what is necessary to make sense of things', 'Being not beings is what is essential to the world' or 'Not just a linguistic turn is needed but a transcendental turn as well to make sense of things', some debunking analysis is required or we are in the swamp. On the surface, at least, all these above *mentioned* sentences are nonsensical. They are, though in a somewhat more disguised form, as bad as 'For enlightenment we need to see the unseeable'. Before we are out of the swamp we must give some clarification and say clearly what we mean, if we mean anything, when such things are said. Why not call this analysis? If it is said instead that these remarks are *sui generis* and cannot be analyzed but must be taken just as they are, it looks like we are being obscurantist and evasive. But a lot more needs to be said about this, including an analysis of 'analysis'. Does this come to a pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps? I will return to these matters in the final chapter.

Like Ambrose, Malcolm and Murphy, I think there is something of crucial importance in Moore's defense of common sense and in the defense of ordinary language (Moore 1959, 32-59; Ambrose 1970, 86-88; Malcolm 1952, 343-68; 1970, 39-55; Murphy 1952, 299-318). I think as they do, that it is an important turning point, indeed an advance, in how many philosophers do philosophy and of how they conceive of their doing it. Malcolm, notwithstanding the above, thinks that Moore importantly misconceived what he was doing in his so-called defense of common sense. Yet paradoxically Malcolm thinks that Moore's defense of common sense (what he misleadingly called common sense) was the most important thing he did and will make his mark in the history of philosophy (Malcolm 1980, 38).

Malcolm seeks to show what Moore really achieved as distinct from what Moore *thought* he was achieving. Moore, according to Malcolm, was defending, without being clear about it, ordinary language as correct language, not common sense. I want to distinguish these conceptions. I think Malcolm's reading is an attractive conception and puts Moore more firmly in the ordinary language tradition of doing philosophy and more nearly in a Wittgensteinian way of doing philosophy, a way that both Malcolm and Ambrose follow and something I would call a broadly Moorean-Wittgensteinian conception of what philosophy should be. It could, I think not improperly, be called a meta-philosophy as Ambrose does call it, though it is radically different from Moore's conception of his own activity. Often, though not always, Moore's practice, but certainly not his tone, is Wittgensteinian. I shall first distinguish these two meta-philosophical conceptions and then argue that, though distinct, they can and should also live in peaceful coexistence, both doing important work. (Here I am more like Murphy and less like Ambrose or Malcolm.)

When Moore argued famously that when metaphysical philosophers argued there are no material objects that we never know any substantial thing for sure, that time is unreal, that we can only be aware of appearances and never of reality, they were making *seemingly* empirical claims, though grand ones, that were absurdly false but not unintelligible or nonsensical and that one can

refute them and decisively so by attending to one's ordinary knowledge, to attending to concrete *paradigms* of substantive things that we know with certainty to be true. This is Moore's conception and is how Murphy, in his under celebrated article, characterizes Moore's defense of common sense (Murphy 1952, 343-68). With his paradigm examples, e.g. 'Here is a hand' or 'I took a walk after lunch', Moore, translating into the concrete, relies (*pace* Malcolm) on empirical facts to establish his case though here he also gives them a conceptual twist, e.g. 'If there is a hand then there is a material world'. But appealing to empirical facts, other than linguistic empirical facts, is a no-no for Malcolm, Ambrose and ordinary language philosophers generally, but not for Moore or Murphy. Though isn't such an appeal in Moore's context plainly justifiable? And Moore and Murphy were as adamant as Wittgenstein and Ryle were that philosophical questions are not empirical questions and do not rest on empirical foundations. Ambrose and Malcolm will say Moore should be treated more hypothetically. It doesn't matter, they said, whether there really is a hand in Moore's proof of the external world but only that 'If there is a hand then there is a material world' is a logical or conceptual truth. But is it? Well, yes, if it is a logical claim of what Ryle calls 'the informal logic of the employment of expressions'. And it seems, at least, to be (Ryle 1971, 318).

On Malcolm's understanding these English-Hegelian metaphysicians were not at all saying absurdly false empirical things (as Moore and Murphy appear to believe) but that we cannot (logically cannot) know such things as time is real, material objects exist, and that we cannot (logically cannot) know that we cannot know anything of a substantive sort with certainty. Malcolm has it that (*pace* Moore's intentions) ordinary language philosophers were not resting their claims on matters of empirical fact but were saying that we cannot know or even understand what the esoteric metaphysician is saying. We can't do that because what they say is nonsense. Moore is telling us, by contrast, that since we do know these common empirical truisms for sure, that it cannot be the case that statements that are incompatible with the, as these metaphysical statements are, could be true. But these paradoxical metaphysicians claim to know these things.

But what they claim is not nonsense but plainly absurdly false. But has Moore shown this? Are Moore and the English neo-Hegelians instead just trading counter-assertions? Have neither proved nor established anything?

To make out the case that we cannot know these paradoxical things, statements like 'Space is unreal', 'Time is unreal', and 'Things cannot exist unperceived' cannot be true, we need, Ambrose and Malcolm claim, to show that to claim them involves a self-contradiction. Moore is not denying, on Malcolm's understanding, that sometimes an empirical possibility is in reality known to be an empirical actuality and that we have conclusive evidence for that. Rather, on Malcolm's reading, the paradoxical philosopher, the Moorean, should be taken to be claiming, is actually making a logically self-contradictory claim on the order of 'The unhearable was heard'. It can, instead, be shown by the method of translation into the concrete that the paradoxical philosopher is violating ordinary language by showing that he was making noises or making a mark or a series of marks that are unintelligible like 'Green smiles loudly' though, of course, not in such an undisguised way. Or turning it around: faced with the claim that time is unreal, the Moorean philosopher says, 'After lunch I had a walk and therefore time is real'. It does matter whether he really walked after he had lunch but that that such a truism as 'After lunch I had a walk' could possibly (empirically so) be true and often is and thus it cannot be contradictory to assert time is unreal. Here the appeal is to linguistic use, the appeal is to ordinary language.

IV

Has Moore actually shown that 'There are no material objects', 'Time is unreal', 'No unperceived objects exist', or 'No unperceived objects can exist' are all incoherent because self-contradictory or indeed incoherent in any other way or, for something quite different, manifestly absurd or just absurd? Has he shown that these sentences, when we try to assert them can, or just do, answer to nothing? But wouldn't that mean that 'There are material objects', 'Time is real',

'There are unperceived objects' are *logical* truths, at least in what Ryle calls informal logic, and their denials self-contradictory (Ryle 1971, 318)? But clearly they are not formal logical truths; they are also not *a priori*. So they are not logical truths of even informal logic. So hasn't something gone wrong with the Ambrosian and Malcolman reading of Moore's argument and that there is something wrong with their reading of his defense of common sense as a defense of ordinary language and not of common sense?

Suppose instead that we abandon the claim that Moore in his defense of common sense can show or needs to show that the metaphysical philosophers' paradoxical claims are either nonsense or self-contradictory and that Malcolm's once famous "Moore and Ordinary Language" is in some ways off the mark. Moore lists some metaphysical statements made by many philosophers, including distinguished ones, which Moore believes are at least false and indeed plainly so. Let us now say controversially empirically false. Still, they are now, we should take it, true or false, allegedly in some way *necessary* empirical statements, taken to be similar in logical status to 'Human beings are mortal' or perhaps to 'Space has objects'. Malcolm, following Moore, in "Moore and Ordinary Language", lists twelve philosophical statements which, as we now read Moore, are to be taken to be empirically necessary but not as being *a priori* truths, self-contradictory or in any other way contradictory (Malcolm 1952). I shall only list four but that reduction is made arbitrarily, for convenience without distortion, to shorten matters.

- (1) There are no material things.
- (2) Time is unreal.
- (3) No material thing exists unperceived.
- (4) We do not know for *certain* the truth of any statement about material things.

Moore has a common method, or so he claims, of refuting such philosophical (metaphysical) statements. It, as we have seen, has been called *translation into the concrete*.

If (1) is asserted Moore would reply, 'You are certainly wrong, for here's one hand and here's another and so there are at least two material things.'

If (2) is asserted, Moore would reply, 'You are certainly wrong; for *after* lunch I went for a walk, and then I took a bath and after that I had tea.'

If (3) is asserted, Moore would reply, 'What you say is absurd for no one perceived my bedroom while I was asleep last night and yet it certainly did not cease to exist then.'

If (4) is asserted, Moore would reply, 'Both of us know for certain that there are several chairs in this room, and how absurd it would be to suggest that we do not know it, but only believe it, and that perhaps it is not the case.'

Many philosophers believe that Moore's answers here beg the question with such metaphysical thinkers. There seems to be in what Moore does nothing like a proof or even a sound argument against them. We seem at least only to get counter-assertions. There seems to be nothing here to convince the metaphysical or even skeptical philosophers that these esoteric metaphysical claims are mistaken. There is, it is often claimed, no attempt made by Moore to show that philosophers, in making such metaphysical claims, have said something that is self-contradictory or otherwise *conceptually* impossible or even just plainly or unplainly false. Moore, some will think, has not refuted such metaphysical claims by reminding us of how language is being used: how our language-games are played or that they have violated correct language. (Think here of Waismann, 1968.)

Moore has in his attempted response to such claims of metaphysical philosophers or the skeptical philosophers (for exemplary examples, Bradley or Hume). Suppose they were just given a collection of empirical truisms without showing they can do the refuting Moore claims for them. How can these things legitimately convince the metaphysician or a skeptical philosopher like Hume that such philosophical claims as those on Moore's list (for us, just 1-4) are to be rejected? (Hume, of course, rejects metaphysical claims but on quite different grounds that does Moore.)

Moore's translation into the concrete gives us plain empirical truisms which cannot be rationally and reasonably denied. But it is not *logically* impossible to deny them. Still there is plainly strong evidence for the falsity of those paradoxical metaphysical claims. 'If there is a hand then there is at least one material thing. There is a hand. Thus there is at least one material thing.' The hypothetical sentence is a logical truth (what Ryle called an informal logical truth) or something that is logically necessary (Ryle 1971, 318). But that this is not enough to show that there are material objects is something that cannot be logically denied. For the second premise, is not a logical truth but an empirical truth that Moore thinks he has established by holding up his hand and saying 'Here is a hand'? The truth of this premise is not known by just thinking, by pure reflection. It is not a logical truth, even an informal logical truth, thus Moore has not shown and cannot show that it is logically true that there are material objects and that 'There are no material objects' is self-contradictory, informally or formally.

Suppose instead that we take it, as we plausibly might, that Moore, and Murphy following him, are claiming something that is just plainly empirically obvious. We could instead reasonably take Moore not to be trying to establish what is or is not conceptually and in that way logically possible or impossible, but what is empirically necessary, like 'Human beings are mortal.' That indeed is an unconventional *philosophical* stance. Philosophers are almost always after what is logically or somehow otherwise necessary. But that notwithstanding, what Moore and Murphy are doing, in reasoning in this way, is plainly rational and reasonable. Something that is here the best we can get and surely for the reasonable person sufficient. The stronger claims made for Moore may be like going for the color of heat. Some philosophers, unwittingly after the logically impossible, might say that the Moorean argument that I am about to give is not a *philosophical* argument at all. It does not make philosophical claims, but, philosophical or not, it may well be making a sound argument that will answer to philosophical claims and give us good reason to shove them aside. This is a view distinct from the above one (including Ambrose's and Malcolm's

articulation of it) but it is more in accordance with relying all the way along on what can be established empirically. (*If this is empiricism, then so be it.*)

Malcolm says in his earlier article “Moore and Ordinary Language” that these esoteric metaphysical propositions go against ordinary language and that Moore in effect shows this (Malcolm 1952). Does he do so? And if so, how does he do so and how is this, even if true, relevant to Moore’s “A Defense of Commonsense”? How does he establish that these metaphysical claims are false or does he do so? Has he shown they are contradictory? Why does a statement that goes against ordinary language establish that there is anything wrong with it? And does Moore show that they go against ordinary language? And does he show that in their going against (being incompatible with) what he takes, and rightly, to be empirical truisms establishes that these metaphysical claims are false or in any way untoward? I think so. Can this reasonably be resisted? I think not. But again is there here just a trading of counter assertions? I hope not. And I shall try to establish that it doesn’t come to just conflicting assertions.

How is any of this, even if established to be true, relevant to what I have been trying to establish here? To a plain person not caught up in philosophy, and perhaps even for some that are, those philosophical statements—Moore’s list of metaphysical statements to be resisted—are shocking, absurd, paradoxical or at the very least puzzling. When the philosopher and the unphilosophical person disagree they, initial reactions aside and perhaps the plain person’s intellectual convictions aside, seem at least not to be disagreeing about empirical facts but about what *language* shall be used to describe those facts. Ambrose and Malcolm would say they are disagreeing over what notation to adopt (Ambrose 1975; Malcolm 1952). Moore and the English neo-Hegelians seem to be disagreeing only about the correct way of speaking or about how to speak. Both esoteric metaphysician and the skeptical philosophers, when we examine the matter a bit, can be seen, in responding as they do, seem to be unwittingly engaging in a form of improper (logically improper) speech. They are doing something, though unconsciously, which is like saying

'I see something that is totally unseeable'. They are making utterances which are self-contradictory or entail utterances which are self-contradictory. Moore, after all, can plausibly be read—I did not say correctly—as showing those metaphysical assertions, though in a disguised way, are self-contradictory. Moore shows, Malcolm argues, that these claims actually function like overtly self-contradictory claims, e.g. 'I see something invisible' or 'There are round squares'. They only differ from the just mentioned sentences in not being clearly and overtly self-contradictory.

However, in the above listed claims by metaphysicians where has there been anything said which is evidently either self-contradictory or unintelligible? Don't we have here the metaphysician making rather abstract claims and shocking and utterly unrealistic ones as well? They will seem to the non-philosophical person to be crazy claims. The commonsensist seeks to refute them by confronting them with counterclaims that refute the metaphysical claims. For example, to respond to 'Time is unreal' by saying 'I had lunch after my lecture' is something that plainly could be true and unpuzzlingly so. As Malcolm rightly points out, 'I had lunch after my lecture' need not be true but only something that plausibly could be true. Moreover, things like that are often so. So it is at best false—factually false—that time is unreal. The plain person or the commonsensist philosopher shows that the esoteric metaphysician's claim that time is unreal could not be true by eliciting this plain empirical possibility which we know is often empirically true. And if so, then 'Time is unreal' is false and its denial is absurd. But isn't it true that 'Time is unreal' logically *could* be true? But do we have any idea of what it would be like for it to be true? Perhaps by having recognized that statements like 'I had lunch after my lecture' or 'I went to a film last night' are not necessarily false or meaningless, but something that plainly could be true and, that being so, then it could not be necessarily true that time is unreal. Since it is possibly true that I went to a film last night, it could not be necessarily true that time is unreal. And that statements like 'I went to a film last night' are sometimes true and evidently so it could not be true that time is unreal.

Some will, however, say that this is just a blunt counterclaim. The commonsensist refers to empirical truisms which logically speaking could be false but obviously often are not. The following should be said in response. These plain truisms are as true as anything could be or at least are truth-bearers that are true as anything can be. They can, while not being logical truths, be plain empirical truths that in most circumstances we can be certain of. They are far more certain than the metaphysical claims that in effect deny them. It is plain that it is vastly more reasonable to deny that time is unreal than to deny that professors often, or at least sometimes, have lunch after their lectures and that thus time is real. And that being true, the claim that time is unreal is either absurdly false, self-contradictory or nonsense. Take your pick! The commonsensist's proposition (to use Peirce's way of talking) plainly is vastly more rationale and reasonable than the metaphysical claim that time is unreal. And isn't this, Malcolm to the contrary notwithstanding, an issue of empirical fact? The claim that this is an empirical fact is something we can be far more secure about than any claim that time is unreal is a logical or in some other way a conceptual necessity.

We need not and indeed should not get involved in whether the commonsensist's or the metaphysician's claim or neither is about what is correct language or whether we should adopt some different notation from the one we normally use if you want to talk about the unreality of time. Perhaps they are both using correct language. Or *perhaps* à la Waismann we should be wary of talk of 'correct language' (Waismann 1968)? We can recognize, however, that the translations into the concrete that Moore engages in make it reasonable to believe that the metaphysician's claims are plainly and absurdly at best false.

V

However, so read, isn't Moore's claim that the metaphysician's claims, e.g. 'There are no material objects', 'Space is unreal', 'No material thing exists unperceived', are bluntly and obviously

false rather than, as ordinary language philosophers have it, self-contradictory, nonsensical or unintelligible? Has Moore actually shown that it is logically impossible that these metaphysical propositions could be true or could even be false? They are not like 'Invisible things are seen or could be seen' self-contradictory, or at least, if the metaphysician's claims are true, we do not know this and at least seemingly cannot know this. 'If there are hands then there are material things. There are hands, therefore there are material things.' The first premise is *a priori* true, but the second ('There are hands') is not. It is, rather, an empirical truism. So we have a premise in that argument that is not *a priori* true and neither 'There are no hands' nor 'There cannot be hands' is self-contradictory. Thus we do not have any argument for Moore's claim which is *logically* conclusive for the second premise, though obviously true, could be denied without contradiction. Moreover, 'There are hands', though not frequently uttered, is correct language. It is not like 'Sounds are unhearable' or 'Hands are transcendent' unintelligible. So Moore's argument is not *logically* airtight. We can, of course, rightly say that to deny that there are hands is palpably absurd, but still not *logically* absurd though it is empirically so. We can nonetheless conceive of a *possible* world where this is so. 'No one has hands' is not *a priori* and it, however oddly, could be said (just as it has) in English, though in most cases it would be an absurd thing to say. But still it is not unintelligible to say it. It is correct English. Moreover, no other premise is available to show that Moore's argument that these are material objects is *logically* conclusive or that its denial is logical impossible. *Perhaps* we have not even shown that a world without objects is conceptually impossible. To do that we would have to show that 'Space without objects' is like 'The heard is unhearable'; it is improper English that violates what Ryle calls the informal logic of English (Ryle 1971, 318). Perhaps it doesn't—though it is surely strange—but that, though making it somewhat problematic (to put it mildly), doesn't make 'Space has no objects' either an *a priori* truth or self-contradictory. It is, rather, absurdly false. We have not shown that 'There are no objects' is *logically* impossible nor that 'There are no objects' is *a priori*, though it is surely true as anything

can be that it is in fact impossible. The same is true for the other metaphysical propositions listed and attacked by Moore.

Moore gives arguments against them but it has been widely felt that these arguments are not *logically* conclusive and indeed that they are question-begging. But *au contraire* to ask for anything more in the way of establishment is to ask for the color of heat.

Malcolm wants to show in his last work on this topic that Moore's translations into the concrete do not yield paradigms of common sense knowledge that refute Moore's metaphysical opponents, prominently the English neo-Hegelians (Malcolm 1970, 49). Malcolm now has it that Moore's arguments should be taken to show that the very idea of there being material objects or of there not being material objects has no use in our language so that to assert it or deny it is nonsensical. The idea that there are material objects is not, Malcolm claims, an empirical claim. Rather, the very idea of there being no material objects, Malcolm has it, is a logical impossibility. This is shown, Malcolm claims, by showing 'There are no material objects' has no use in our language. But is this so? Malcolm claims that attending to our ordinary language shows us that by showing that 'There are no material objects' is not an *empirical* impossibility but a *logical* impossibility and thus 'There are no material objects' has no use in our language. But then its negation, 'There are material objects', has no use in our language either.

However, this cannot be correct. There certainly are rocks aplenty and rocks are empirical objects. That is a plain empirical truth—a plain empirical fact—that we know with certainty to be true. 'If there are rocks then there are material objects.' 'There are rocks' is not without a use in our ordinary language, though we would normally not go around saying it. That we have little need or occasion to do so is plainly obvious. 'There are rocks and thus there are material objects' while being so is not useful. Indeed it is useless. But it is still logically proper English. We understand it if it is uttered. It is not like 'Green ideas crack tonelessly'. That is not logically proper English and thus is not intelligible. 'Things without extension are extended' has no use because it is self-

contradictory. Has Moore, and Malcolm interpreting him, established that in either way 'There are material things' or 'There are no material things' have logically come to grief? Has he shown that they are logically unintelligible and in this way nonsense?

Moore, Ambrose, Malcolm and Ryle claim that ordinary language (any natural language) is correct language. If a sentence has not a logically proper part of any ordinary language (any natural language) or any language or system of notation dependent on any ordinary language, we cannot claim that the resultant noises or assemblances of words *yield* logical possibilities or even make sense. The sentence is a pseudo-sentence. That is, it is not a part of a language or anything that could replace language as a means of communication. The four allegedly metaphysical propositions I listed speculating from Moore are not, *at least on their face*, so self-contradictory. But 'A rock is just my idea of it' or 'The world is just my idea' are not logically proper English. They violate its informal logic (Ryle 1971, 318).⁶ 'A rock is just my idea of it' or 'The world is just my idea' or 'Mountains are fictions' are not understood by us, or at least not with anything even remotely approaching intelligibility, while 'Material objects exist' and 'Time is real' perhaps are understood though they are truistic. But they are not something we need to or should go around asserting. However, that is a different matter.

The first three sentences I mentioned in the last paragraph are arguably pseudo-sentences like 'Rocks talk explicitly' or 'Marbles drink affably'. They use English words but they are not proper English sentences and are not intelligible unless made so by some radical stipulation. They are not part of any language-game or part of some linguistic practice. But 'There are material things' or 'Time is real' are. We can infer from them sentences like 'There maybe is a chair in the room' or 'Perhaps she took a walk after lunch'.

Moore should have concluded that these metaphysical propositions (Moore's list from which my four were taken) were nonsensical and not that they were obviously false for if a proposition is false (obviously or not) it could be true. That logical possibility cannot be ruled out.

Moreover, to successfully make the claim that it is logically true it would have to be shown that 'There are hands' and 'They had breakfast before lunch' are self-contradictions. But both are manifestly not. We would have to show that it is *contradictory* to deny that there are no material objects not just that it is absurd to believe there are none—so absurd that we have very little in the way of having an idea of what it would be like for it to be so. But that we have no idea of it doesn't mean that it could not be so or that we could come to have an idea of it. We would only know that it would be logically impossible to have such an idea if we could have no idea of what it would be like as we have no idea of what it would be like to have a round square. It must be something such that it would be contradictory to deny 'There are no material objects' or 'All temporal distinctions are illusory' are not contradictions. But have we established this? Instead, haven't (as Alice Ambrose argued) the metaphysicians Moore argued against seeking, though unwittingly, a change in notation (Ambrose 1975)? We have not shown 'There are no material objects' is self-contradictory but only that it is a pointless and absurd thing to say and that there is absolutely no point in challenging our notation, i.e., English, with its informal logical rules or linguistic practices. *All* natural languages so stand. To deny they are correct languages (*pace* Waismann) is without sense.

Something *seems* at least to be problematic here. It looks like we are still in a muddle. It seems at least that we should continue to ask ourselves whether it is true that 'There are no material objects' violates the informal logical rules of English (its linguistic regularities) as does 'Unhearable sounds rang out loudly'. Yet it is not clear that this has not been shown.

VI

I come back to a reading of Moore on a defense of common sense which takes those esoteric metaphysical propositions as saying something that are absurdly false but not establishable as self-contradictory or even as violations of our ordinary use of language. Their own negations are not logical truths or any other kind of *a priori* statement and their assertions are not something rooted

in a violation of ordinary use. They are infrequently used. Only some philosophers use them. But they are not violations of the informal logic of our natural languages like 'Our ideas are orange'. Moore has not shown the metaphysical assertions he criticizes to be contradictions and his non-hypothetical counter assertions have not been shown to be logical truths either formal or informal. We have with Moore's claims no instantiation of such a rationalism; no such substantive *a priori* truths or rules or principles of reason.

Waismann notes, as does Ryle as well, that there are no theorems that have been proved in philosophy; there are also no axioms that can serve as substantive principles or rules of reason that just must be accepted on pain of self-contradiction or a flight into unintelligibility (Waismann 1968; Ryle 1971, 319-25). However, what Moore's defense of common sense should stick with saying, without taking sides about whether or not ordinary language is correct language or something that must finally be relied on, is that there are some common beliefs nearly universally held at least during an extensively given time and place that are more reliable to believe than any philosophical statement or any other statement that would deny them. Take as examples the four philosophical propositions taken from Moore's list as propositions that he has refuted or at least he claimed to have refuted. Moore, let us now assume we have established, has not succeeded in showing that these four propositions are self-contradictory or that they are not intelligible or so deviant that we cannot understand them or anything of that sort. But if we just consider his commonsensical arguments against these metaphysical propositions, it is far more rational and reasonable to accept these arguments against them than to accept these paradoxical metaphysical statements. It is far more reasonable to believe that New York is east of San Francisco and Honolulu is west of San Francisco or that my desk is to the right of my window than to believe that space is unreal or merely subjective. There are all kinds of paradoxical metaphysical propositions that can be refuted in this way and more decisively than any defense of such paradoxical metaphysical statements that can be given.

If to do Philosophy is to commit yourself to a defense of such metaphysical beliefs even in the face of such certainly true common sense beliefs which are incompatible with them, then it is a good thing to say farewell to philosophy construed as such a speculated Philosophy (Rorty 1982, xiv-xvii). It seems to me that so understood Moore has made out his case and that it is a vital achievement against a world of metaphysical paradoxes or obscurantism.

Let me, in concluding, put my argument and way of reading Moore's defense of common sense briskly and *perhaps* crudely. If there are rocks, then there is a material world. There are rocks, therefore there is a material world. This argument is as sound as any argument can be. And such arguments are beyond dispute. Similar arguments can be articulated for the other metaphysical claims Moore lists. Philosophers are wont to say that the second premise in the above argument, though true, is not philosophically satisfactory because it is not *a priori* and philosophy cannot rest on any empirical results. *If* so, it is so much the worse for philosophy. For the above argument is as sound as any argument can be and such an argument does not leave room for doubt.

Notes

¹ See my “Anti-philosophy Philosophy: Some Programmatic Remarks.” *Dialogos* 64 (1994): 149-58. See also Rorty’s crucial distinction between philosophy and Philosophy in his *Consequences of Pragmatism*, pp. xiv-xvii.

² See Saul Kripke, David Lewis, Thomas Nagel, David Armstrong, Robert Brandon, Peter van Inwagen, and Barry Stroud.

³ Robert Brandon *may* be an exception. Rorty has claimed without an explanation that Brandon does not have a metaphysical bone in his body. That runs against at least a superficial reading of Brandon. I shall discuss Brandon in Chapter 5.

⁴ Their style is very different. Moore organizes his books and articles in a standard way and seeks to solve philosophical questions utilizing analysis in a standard way. Wittgenstein’s style and manner of argument is unique to him. He goes at things very unconventionally and while Moore wishes to *solve* philosophical questions, Wittgenstein wishes to *dissolve* them using his insistent therapeutic technique. He is deeply skeptical about philosophy in a way that Moore is not. They both are informalists and rely very heavily on ordinary language. But they do that for different purposes. To get a sense of the contrast compare Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* with Moore’s *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*. Yet Ambrose and Malcolm, who studied with them both, can without distortion find ways of blending their work to common purposes.

⁵ See G. E. Moore 1953 and 1959.

⁶ I have found it rather problematic to speak of the informal logic of a natural language. ‘Formal logic’ seems to be a pleonasm. Aristotle used Greek but it seems to me in doing logic he was doing something that was particular language independent. It was just accidental that he wrote his logic in Greek. And he was not concerned with the informal logic of Greek as Ryle was not just concerned with the informal language of English. But it is just an historical accident that he wrote in English as it was just an historical accident that Aristotle wrote in Greek. Ryle could have made the same point he was making when he spoke of the informal language of English if he had written instead in German, Swedish, French or Spanish or any other natural language. What he was talking about here could perhaps have been better put as the rule or norms that are common to certain practices in all natural languages. The same obtains for Aristotle. But speaking as Ryle does need not mislead or be untoward.

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