

Introduction to Philosophy II // Spring 2017

Handout 5

Critique of idealism: Moore, Russell

CHARACTERISING IDEALISM. Moore begins by noting the counter-intuitive assertions made by (unspecified, anonymous) idealists. He mentions two such assertions, but in fact, they are equivalent to each other (or so it seems to me). Namely, that the external world (the ‘universe’) is very different from what it appears to be. That is, it is different from how it appears to our common sense. Well, as we saw, Berkeley disagrees. Indeed, Hume disagrees too: the ‘vulgar view’, which is presumably the view of the common sense, is different from the ‘philosophical view’ which is the view, roughly speaking, of the materialists. 433

At all events, Moore insists that there are many claims that the idealists have to prove. His task in the paper is not to show whether reality is spiritual or not—i.e. not to ask whether the idealist conclusion stands. It is only to show that an idealist argument to that effect is not sound. 435

The claim that Moore disputes is the Berkeleyan claim that: 436

Esse is percipi (‘To be is to be perceived’). (5-1)

He immediately claims that the ultimate conclusion that the idealist has to establish is that *esse* is *percipere*. We should not worry about this or other somewhat torturous claims in 436–440. The conclusion, in any case, is that ‘*Esse is percipi*’ is a necessary synthetic proposition. Important in this conclusion is the claim that it is *necessary*. Moore is going to claim that the idealists confuse between sensation and its object, and that the two *can be* distinct. More exactly, he aspires to show that some claims of the idealists bring in support of (5-1) are false, and that without them (5-1) is not believable. 440 442 444

CONSCIOUSNESS AND ITS OBJECTS. Sensations of blue and sensations of green have something in common. This something Moore labels ‘consciousness’. But they also have something distinct. And this something Moore labels ‘object of consciousness’. 444

Then, I think, two separate arguments follow. Suppose someone says, ‘Blue exists’ and ‘Both blue and consciousness exist.’ These are two different statements, by the reason just given. 445

Suppose further that someone says that ‘Blue exists’ is the same as ‘The sensation of blue exists.’ But if a sensation of blue exists, then consciousness exists. So, the speaker here says that ‘Blue exists’ is the same as ‘Consciousness exists’, but this is false, again by the reason given. (Alternatively, the speaker may claim that ‘Blue exists’ is the same as ‘Blue exists and consciousness exists’, and this is false for the same reason.)

These failures are of meaning. The two statements considered are not synonymous. This seems true, but largely irrelevant, as far as Berkeley is concerned. Moore offers another argument. Consider this claim:

The existence of blue is inconceivable apart from the existence of the sensation of blue. (5-2)

Here Moore simply says that we might conceive that blue exists without at the same time conceiving that the sensation of blue exists.

SEPARATING SENSATIONS AND OBJECTS. The argument for this last claim is given only some pages later. The exact structure of Moore’s argument is a matter of discussion, but here is a simplified paraphrase. Consider the statement: 447

There is a sensation of blue. (5-3)

How should I analyse it? Well, what is affirmed is the existence of a sensation. But what of ‘blue’. I need to look again at another statement:

There is a sensation of green. (5-4)

It is a different statement. Once again, what is affirmed is the existence of a sensation. How different is this sensation from the sensation described in (5-3)? Eureka: it differs by its quality!

So we now say that (5-3) should be analysed as:

There is a blue sensation (5-5)

and (5-4) should be analysed as:

There is a green sensation. (5-6)

That is, the idealist is taken to mean by (5-2) that the only way for blue to exist is to be a quality of the sensation. A blue flower and a blue bead are different, because their qualities are different. A sensation of blue and a sensation of green are now claimed to be different for the same reason. 448

IDEALISM REFUTED. Very well; suppose this indeed is a representation of the idealist position. What is Moore's objection against it? As far as one can tell, just this: that even if it is reasonable to speak of blue sensations, I am also aware that my sensations are relational. They are sensations *of* something. So my blue sensations are also sensations *of* blue, and that blue which is the object of my sensation is not the same as the blue which is the quality thereof. 450

Moore concludes with an emphatic affirmation of realism. Merely to have a sensation is to be aware of something that can be separated, conceptually and in imagination, from the sensation itself. This shows us the way of breaking out of our own ideas and sensations. 451

SENSE-DATA, MATTER. Russell begins by rephrasing Berkeley's views that sensible objects are not the 'real objects'. Sensible objects are collections of sensible qualities, and those qualities depend on the situation of the observer. There is, furthermore, no distinction between those qualities, such as smell or taste, that are more or less intuitively observer-dependent, and those qualities, such as shape, that are not. Real objects are supposed to have qualities independent of the situation of the observer. On closer inspection, what we perceive is not real objects. 2-3

An influential terminology is then introduced. The immediate contents of experience, what we perceive directly, are 'sense-data'. Experiences of awareness are termed 'sensations'. Real objects are termed 'physical objects', while their collection is 'matter'. 4

Russell further notes that almost all philosophers agree that there are physical tables, and that they cause our sensations. Well, Berkeley disagrees! And Hume's sceptical position, though not his practical position, also goes against it. Most philosophers, Russell also says, disagree about the nature of those physical tables. 6

RUSSELL ON IDEALISM. The short discussion Russell gives has important parallels with Moore. There is, he claims, an ambiguity in the word 'idea'. It can mean sense-data, the content of our immediate experience. But there is also a sense of 'idea' that corresponds to a mental act. We can try to unpack this by first considering the following utterance: 21

A brilliant idea occurred to me today—how to prove Goldbach's conjecture! (5-7)

Here I mean to say that I had a happy *thought*, a mental act, an act of apprehension, as Russell puts it.

Then consider this utterance:

The idea of my late sister came to my mind in a flash. (5-8)

This sounds a bit strained in the modern usage (I think), but is still fine in Berkeley's jargon and that of his predecessors. Here I am talking not about an act, but rather its object. In the case of (5-7) I was thinking about the GC, and the idea was just that act of thinking. The act itself was not an object of any thinking (though it could have been). In the case of (5-8) the idea was what I was thinking of, not the act itself.

This is the reason, Russell claims, that Berkeley was able to get away with his inference. All he was entitled to conclude, after, for example, imagining an unconceived tree, is that the idea of a tree, as an act of thinking about that tree, was in his mind. He was wrong to infer that the idea of a tree as an object of imagining was in his mind. 20