

# Chapter 8

## Mr. G. E. Moore's Discussion of Sense Data



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1 **Abstract** In this chapter, Mary Collins Swabey critiques G. E. Moore's discussion  
2 of sense data.

3 Whatever one's point of view in philosophy, one can hardly fail to respect the spirit  
4 in which Mr. G. E. Moore discusses its problems. Rarely are to be found such high  
5 standards of earnestness, lucidity and scrupulousness as he brings to philosophical  
6 writing; and whether or not one agrees with the narrower program of investigation,  
7 to which such a method as he seems to propose might limit philosophy if adopted  
8 to the exclusion of other methods, one can not but acknowledge that his ideal is, in  
9 point of scientific rigor, unbiased candor and precision, worthy of philosophy in the  
10 truest sense. Yet admiration of Mr. Moore's powers of acute analysis need not act as a  
11 deterrent to others from engaging the same problems, even though they may despair  
12 ever of achieving his subtlety in drawing distinctions, for the very genuineness and  
13 impartial spirit of his inquiry rather provokes and invites further scrutiny of the  
14 problems to which he calls attention. It is, then, in the hope of exploring perhaps  
15 some further possibility that I shall undertake to consider Mr. Moore's discussion of  
16 sense data in his recent collection of essays,<sup>1</sup> and in particular the manner in which  
17 sense data may be related to physical objects.

18 Let us suppose, as Mr. Moore supposes, that I am looking at two coins, one a  
19 half-crown, the other a florin, both lying on the ground some distance away. As both

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<sup>1</sup> Moore, G. E., *Philosophical Studies* (1922), Ch. V.

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20 are situated obliquely to my line of sight, the visual sense data (or “sensibles” as Mr.  
 21 Moore calls them) which I “directly apprehend” in looking at them are elliptical rather  
 22 than circular. In addition, the half-crown is farther away than the florin so that its  
 23 sensible is visibly smaller than that of the florin. Now without bothering to define, if  
 24 we could, what we mean here by physical objects, and without describing “sensibles”  
 25 further than by saying that: they are all those entities, whether experienced or not,  
 26 which are of the *same sort* as those that are experienced in experiences of images,  
 27 sensations proper, the sensory part of dreams, “after-images” and hallucinations, let  
 28 us see if there are any propositions which can be asserted as true about these physical  
 29 objects, and if so, in what sense they are true, and in what manner the objects are  
 30 related to certain sensibles. To begin with, Mr. Moore assumes that he knows the  
 31 following propositions to be true, since “no one,” he says, “will deny that we can  
 32 know such propositions to be true,”<sup>2</sup> although there are very different views as to their  
 33 meaning: (a) that I am *really seeing two coins*; an assertion which at least amounts to  
 34 the statement that the visual experiences constituting my direct apprehension of the  
 35 two elliptical patches of color *are* “sensations proper” and not hallucinations or mere  
 36 images; (b), (c), (d), (e) that the upper sides of the coins are *really* approximately  
 37 circular, although the visual sensibles are merely elliptical; that the coins *have* another  
 38 side, though I don’t see it; that the upper side of the half-crown is *really larger* than  
 39 that of the florin, although its visual sensible is *smaller* than that of the florin; lastly,  
 40 that both coins continue to exist even when I turn away my head and shut my eyes.  
 41 Obviously all these propositions, which we have here grouped together have to do in  
 42 one way or another with my certainty that there is a distinction between sensibles and  
 43 the physical objects themselves; while the last especially emphasizes my certainty  
 44 that the objects continue to exist even when the experience of the sensations proper  
 45 ceases. But let us stop to consider whether one is really justified in assuming that he  
 46 knows the foregoing propositions to have absolute certitude.

47 First of all, am I right in assuming, as Mr. Moore assumes, that I know the propo-  
 48 sition to be true that (a) *I am really seeing two coins* in the sense of experiencing  
 49 sensations proper? Can I, in any given experience, accept as absolutely certain that  
 50 the sensibles I “directly apprehend” are those of sensation rather than of hallucination  
 51 or mere image? On the contrary, as it seems to us, the evidence clearly indicates the  
 52 very opposite, viz., that one has no right to assume that he knows any proposition to  
 53 be true, in which statement is made distinguishing the sensibles of a present experi-  
 54 ence as of *one specific type* rather than another. All sorts of considerations bear this  
 55 out. There is the evidence, for instance, of certain psychological experiments that,  
 56 under proper circumstances, even trained observers are unable to distinguish in their  
 57 experience between sensations and mere images. Thus it was found that if under  
 58 elaborately controlled conditions, an observer was asked to fixate a certain point and  
 59 to imagine a banana, while at the same time the outline of a banana faintly colored  
 60 by a projection lantern was presented to him at that point on a dark screen, he almost  
 61 invariably mistook the perceived outline of the banana for the mere image of his

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

62 imagination.<sup>3</sup> Most of us can recall analogous examples from our own experience,  
 63 as, for instance, where we have asked ourselves whether a barely discriminable  
 64 pain was real or imaginary, or again (to borrow an illustration from Mr. Russell)  
 65 when we have stood listening to a horse trot away along a hard road. For a time the  
 66 listener's "certainty" that he still hears the hoofbeats is very strong; but there comes  
 67 a moment when certainty merges into uncertainty, when he thinks perhaps it is only  
 68 his imagination or his own heartbeats. Indeed, it seems probable that there are far  
 69 more experiences than we suspect in which we are really incapable of distinguishing  
 70 between sense data of different types; but, however that may be, the very fact that  
 71 there are *some*, shows that we have no right to assume as unqualifiedly true a proposi-  
 72 tion which asserts that the sensibles occurring in a specific experience are exclusively  
 73 of a particular sort. It may well be that what defines sensibles is fundamentally some  
 74 *common* property shared among them; but whether, in experiencing a given sensible,  
 75 that sensible is "directly apprehended" by me specifically as a *sensation proper* or  
 76 as a *mere image* would seem to be a matter determined not by the experience of the  
 77 sensible itself but through the formulation of some judgment or proposition *about* it,  
 78 which attempts to express the status of the particular sensible with respect to physical  
 79 objects, to which status extremely different interpretations may be given.

80 Indeed, it may be questioned on other grounds whether we are ever justified in  
 81 affirming that we know a proposition to be true respecting particular sensibles of  
 82 our experience, not merely because we are always liable to be mistaken as to the  
 83 specific type of data in the experience, but also because it is a mistake to believe  
 84 that the subjective "certainty" which we feel in our direct apprehension of sensibles  
 85 can afford any ground for asserting the objective truth of the proposition in which  
 86 the experience is described. The mere fact that mind seemingly acquiesces in the  
 87 incursions of the data of sensory experience (neither volition nor intellect having  
 88 the power to banish them) is something very different, of course, than if sensory  
 89 experience carried in it some universal and necessary evidence of its veracity, which  
 90 alone would entitle the mind to assume the truth of a proposition affirming the  
 91 existence of certain particular sensibles in experience. The foregoing considerations  
 92 apply equally well, moreover, when we pass to the group of propositions (b, c, d, and  
 93 e) which assert in one form or another the distinction between sensibles and physical  
 94 objects. For as these propositions have also to do with affirming certain sensibles to  
 95 be of a specific type, we can not justifiably assume their truth, since any proposition  
 96 which classifies the sensibles of a particular experience as of a certain kind is always  
 97 open to falsity, and the "truth" which I ascribe to them is rather the expression of  
 98 my subjective belief, arising from the unquestioning receptivity and submissiveness  
 99 of the mind to sense data, itself a form of psychological response, and qualitatively  
 100 quite different from the apprehension of valid relations between entities.

101 But even if, unlike Mr. Moore, we find ourselves unable to assume that we know  
 102 any of the foregoing propositions to be true, we may none the less proceed to ask  
 103 if there is any possible way in which the relation of sensibles to physical objects  
 104 can be truly stated? Mr. Moore suggests four possible ways (which, however, finally

<sup>3</sup> Perky, C. W., *American Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 21, pp. 418–454.

105 reduce to two) in which sensibles can be related to physical objects, and these we may  
 106 briefly consider. The first sense in which I might conceivably be able to affirm true  
 107 propositions about physical objects would be *provided* they expressed the notion  
 108 that “*if* certain conditions were fulfilled, I or some other person, *should* directly  
 109 apprehend certain other sensibles.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, on this interpretation, what is meant by  
 110 saying that I really see two coins is some such thing as that “*if* I were to move my body  
 111 in certain ways, I should directly apprehend certain *other* sensibles, this time tactual,  
 112 which I should not apprehend as a consequence of these movements, if these present  
 113 visual experiences of mine were mere hallucinations.” If this view be accepted, the  
 114 truth of propositions concerning physical objects is to be construed in terms of the  
 115 hypothetical experiencing of certain hypothetical sensibles. Now although at the  
 116 present time this form of explanation undoubtedly enjoys great vogue, the whole  
 117 body of scientific laws being frequently so interpreted, there remains against it one  
 118 serious objection: the expressions describing the coins and other physical objects as  
 119 existing before I saw them can only be really true on this interpretation, if they are  
 120 understood in an outrageously Pickwickian sense. In other words, the only possibly  
 121 true construction of them will have to be one not only most uncommon but in which  
 122 we are privileged to say one thing and mean another, and even to state under the form  
 123 of fact something, for the present at least, quite contrary to fact. if indeed not outright  
 124 contradictory. Thus all I can mean when I know that the coins existed before I saw  
 125 them is that “*if* certain unrealized conditions had been realized, I should have had  
 126 certain sensations that I have not had.”<sup>5</sup> The difficulties here are readily apparent,  
 127 since, on the one hand, the assertion that the coins exist really tells us nothing that  
 128 would distinguish the objects themselves from the mere sensibles; while, on the other  
 129 hand, it embodies a statement not only contrary to fact but resting upon unknown  
 130 conditions, so that I am really declaring that “*if* certain unknown and unfulfilled  
 131 conditions were fulfilled, and *if* I were then to experience sensibles which I do not,  
 132 they would be sensibles of a certain sort,”—an assertion whose *truth* I have absolutely  
 133 no grounds for affirming. For these reasons it would appear to us, as it also seemingly  
 134 appears to Mr. Moore, that the interpretation of propositions about physical objects  
 135 in terms of the hypothetical experience of sensibles would have to be rejected. This  
 136 rejection would carry with it, moreover, dismissal of the second and third possibilities  
 137 suggested by Mr. Moore, since they, too, are shown finally to fall back upon a  
 138 hypothetical and Pickwickian interpretation.<sup>6</sup> The fourth and last possibility offered

<sup>4</sup> Moore, op. cit., p. 189.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>6</sup> One of these is the view that would interpret each particular physical object as being the “*cause*” of the experience of certain sensibles. But exception may obviously be taken to this, on the ground of its involving hopeless complexity, since in the example of the half-crown, for instance, the events which happen between the half-crown and my eyes, as well as events in my eyes and optic nerves, are just as much *causes* of my experience of the sensibles as is the coin itself. If an endeavor be made to meet this objection by saying that the half-crown has a particular *kind* of causal relation to my experience of certain sensibles, being, in fact, their “*source*” (and a source either “*spiritual*” or “*unknown*” in its nature), still nothing is really gained by this, since the only possible sense in which the physical object can here be said to have qualities is in the last analysis that of the Pickwickian

139 by Mr. Moore is one which he describes as “roughly identical with Locke’s view.”  
 140 According to it, physical objects with certain qualities exist (in the natural sense) prior  
 141 to my experience of them. Although not composed of sensibles, physical objects do  
 142 really *resemble* some sensibles in respect of the “primary qualities” which the latter  
 143 have. The sensibles themselves, however (whether experienced or unexperienced)  
 144 can never exist as *parts* of the objects or “anywhere in space” or “in the mind.”  
 145 Against this view, the most serious objection is that it does not make clear *how* we  
 146 can ever come to know that sensibles have a “source” at all, or that this “source”  
 147 may resemble sensibles as regards their primary qualities. Such knowledge, if we  
 148 have it, would seem to have to be immediate. Yet can we know this kind of thing  
 149 immediately? Our first argument certainly assumed that the only possible kind of  
 150 immediate knowledge is that which we have in the direct apprehension of sensibles  
 151 and in the perception of relations between directly apprehended sensibles. It follows  
 152 from this that, if we believe we know facts other than these, and which can not have  
 153 been learnt immediately, our belief must be a mere prejudice. Still, on the other hand,  
 154 how can it be shown that our belief, that the only facts we can know immediately are  
 155 sensibles and their relations, is not itself a mere prejudice? Certainly we have all of  
 156 us, like Hume, a “strong propensity to believe” that physical objects exist in a simple  
 157 and “natural” sense, and not merely in a Pickwickian one. And while this propensity  
 158 to believe may be really only a prejudice, its strength seems so much greater than  
 159 that of the prejudice that opposes it as to incline Mr. Moore apparently in its favor  
 160 and in favor of the fourth view, which follows Locke’s interpretation.

161 In conclusion, encouraged by the fact that Mr. Moore has sedulously left the ques-  
 162 tion open, we may venture to suggest a further possibility. To us the first three views  
 163 appear untenable because of the contradictions involved in any attempt to construe  
 164 physical objects in terms of the hypothetical experience of sensibles under hypothet-  
 165 ical suppositions and unexperienced conditions; while the fourth seems hardly more  
 166 satisfactory, since it rests apparently on a simple “propensity to believe” in certain  
 167 things on trust without being able to adduce rational justification of our belief; and  
 168 although we may repose in such belief in certain moods of common sense, we seem  
 169 liable to withdraw our assent in moments of critical reflection. Would there not be  
 170 possible, however, a view of physical objects which should center in necessary and  
 171 indubitable considerations? For there are certain incontrovertible elements common  
 172 to all interpretations of physical objects, which, as it seems to us, might well be taken  
 173 as constituting the sense in which the existence of physical objects in any sense (and  
 174 that we do in *some* sense is here assumed without discussion), we must at least affirm  
 175 their subsistence as entities to which the “laws of thought” and the principle of unifor-  
 176 mity<sup>7</sup> apply. In other words, physical objects can not be assumed at all without at

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interpretation. Another possible view would be frankly to describe the “source” of our experience of sensibles themselves; these latter existing even when not experienced. Nevertheless, under the proper conditions these unexperienced sensibles *would* be the source of our experiencing certain sensibles, etc., but since this seems all their meaning we here recognize only another variation of the Pickwickian theme (pp. 192–194).

<sup>7</sup> If physical objects are subject to the laws of thought, they are certainly also subject to the principle of uniformity, since it would be nothing less than a denial of identity and the assertion that a thing

177 least according them “being” in the minimal sense of assuming them to *be what they*  
 178 *are* and that they behave uniformly. But if “existence” means fundamentally this, it  
 179 may be said, it has no specific meaning, for the laws of thought apply to all entities  
 180 in the universe, and hence existence as a predicate fails to denote one thing more  
 181 than another; in this sense, sensibles, for instance, would exist exactly as precisely  
 182 as much as do physical objects.

183 The whole question is so hedged with difficulties that we can only venture certain  
 184 tentatives. It seems, however, that when we compare sensibles in their ordinary  
 185 meaning with physical objects, they do not have identity in the same full sense as  
 186 the latter. For although the laws of thought always apply to sensibles, sensibles, as  
 187 compared with physical objects, are always *relatives*; they do not seem to have an  
 188 identity of their own fundamental to their relations, but *what they are* is determined  
 189 by *what they are related to*. With physical objects in general, however, this would  
 190 not ultimately seem to be the case. We conceive their nature as in some sense being  
 191 and remaining what it is fundamental to their connections, in spite of the fact that  
 192 our particular views about physical objects are undoubtedly modified by taking them  
 193 in these different connections. Whereas mere sensibles would seem to be defined  
 194 relative to possible experience, to be capable of an endless variety of interpretations  
 195 and without anything fixed and binding in their content, the physical world itself, on  
 196 the other hand, would appear to be at bottom something necessary and determinate.  
 197 What the mind ultimately seeks and finds in such a world is uniformities, necessary  
 198 connections, in a word, an “*order of nature*.” Sensibles, in so far as deductions and  
 199 systematic meanings can be discovered through them, may be said to be reclaimed  
 200 from their *prima facie* status as relatives whose opposite seems always possible to a  
 201 place in an order that holds of all possible worlds. When I look at the two coins, for  
 202 example, I apprehend certain sensibles which I recognize as relative to an indeter-  
 203 minate number of factors of experience, and as liable (through some slight alteration  
 204 in these factors) at any moment to utter change. At the same time, I recognize that  
 205 there are universal conditions governing these sensibles which determine them to be  
 206 as they are and that any event that occurs under conditions with which its operation  
 207 is connected universally. Insofar therefore as I refer these sensibles to determination  
 208 through a totality of necessary conditions, I may be said to refer them to a physical  
 209 order. Although I have no right to affirm that there actually are two physical objects  
 210 of a certain kind in existence which resemble and correspond to these sensibles, I  
 211 have at least the right to refer these sensibles with assurance to some general basis  
 212 in a universal, orderly arrangement.

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*need not be what it is* to suppose that under the same conditions an object could behave in different ways.