Hume's Theory Examined

by G.E. Moore (1953)

… I think, therefore, those philosophers who argue, on the ground of Hume's principles, that nobody can ever know of the existence of any material object, are right so far as the first step in their argument is concerned. They are right in saying: *If* Hume's principles are true, nobody can ever *know* of the existence of any material object—nobody can ever know that any such object even probably exists: meaning by a material object, an object which has shape and is situated in space, but which *is not* similar, except in these respects, to any of the sense-data which we have ever directly apprehended. But are they also right in the second step of their argument? Are they also right, in concluding: *Since* Hume's principles are true, nobody ever *does* know, even probably, of the existence of any material object? In other words: Are Hume's principles true?

You see, the position we have got to is this. If Hume's principles are true, then, I have admitted, I do *not* know *now* that this pencil—the material object—exists. If, therefore, I am to prove that I *do* know that this pencil exists, I must prove, somehow, that Hume's principles, one or both of them, are *not* true. In what sort of way, by what sort of argument, can I prove this?

It seems to me that, in fact, there really is no stronger and better argument than the following. I *do* know that this pencil exists; but I could not know this, if Hume's principles were true; *therefore*, Hume's principles, one or both of them, are false. I think this argument really is as strong and good a one as any that could be used: and I think it really is conclusive. In other words, I think that the fact that, if Hume's principles were true, I could not know of the existence of this pencil, is a *reductio ad absurdum* of those principles. But, of course, this is an argument which will not seem convincing to those who believe that the principles are true, nor yet to those who believe that I really do not know that this pencil exists. It seems like begging the question. And therefore I will try to shew that it really is a good and conclusive argument.

Let us consider what is necessary in order that an argument may be a good and conclusive one. A really conclusive argument is one which enables us to *know* that its conclusion is true. And one condition, which must be satisfied, if an argument is to enable us to know this, is that the conclusion must really follow from the premisses. Let us see, first, how my argument compares with that of my opponent in this respect.

My argument is this: I do know that this pencil exists; therefore Hume's principles are false. My opponent's argument on the contrary is: Hume's principles are true; therefore you do not know that this pencil exists. And obviously in respect of the certainty with which the conclusion follows from the premiss, these two arguments are equally good. If my opponent's conclusion follows from his premiss, my conclusion must certainly also follow from mine. For my opponent's conclusion does not follow from his premiss, except on one condition, namely, unless the following hypothetical proposition is true: *If* Hume's principles are true, then I do not know that this pencil exists. But if this proposition is true, then *my* conclusion also follows from my premiss. In fact, both arguments depend in this respect on exactly the same hypothetical proposition—the proposition which both I and

my opponent have admitted to be true: namely that: If Hume's principles are true, then I do not know that this pencil exists. Neither conclusion follows from its premiss, unless this proposition is true; and each does follow from its premiss, if this proposition is true. And this state of things is an excellent illustration of a principle, which many philosophers are, I think, apt to forget: namely, that the mere fact that one proposition coheres with or follows from another does not by itself give us the slightest presumption in favour of its truth. My conclusion coheres with my premiss, exactly as strongly as my opponent's coheres with *his*. And yet obviously this mere fact does not give the slightest presumption in favour of either.

Both arguments, therefore, equally satisfy the first condition that is necessary to make an argument conclusive. Both equally satisfy the condition that the conclusion must follow from the premiss. What other condition, then, is necessary if an argument is to enable us to *know* that its conclusion is true?

The second condition, that is necessary, is this: Namely that we should *know* the premiss to be true. Obviously, I think, this condition must be satisfied, if the argument is to enable us to *know* that its conclusion is true. It is not sufficient merely that the premiss should *be* true, if we do not *know* that it is so. For suppose that the premiss is true, and the conclusion does follow from it, and *yet* I do not *know* that the premiss is true. How can this state of things possibly enable me to know that the conclusion is true? Obviously so long as this is the whole state of the case, I shall be just as far from *knowing* that the conclusion is true, as if I had never thought of the premiss at all. The argument may be, and is, a good argument in the sense that the conclusion does follow from the premiss, that the premiss is, in fact, true, and that, therefore the conclusion also is in fact true. But it is not a good argument in the sense that it can possibly enable either me or anyone else to *know* that the conclusion is true. The mere fact that the premiss *is* true will not, by itself, enable anyone whatever to know that the conclusion is so. If anybody whatever is to be enabled by the argument absolutely to *know* the conclusion, that person must himself first absolutely *know* that the premiss is true. And the same holds not only for absolute certainty but also for every degree of probability short of it. If any argument whatever is to enable me to know that its conclusion is in any degree probable, I must first know that its premiss is probable in at least the same degree. In other words, no argument is a good one, even in the sense that it enables us to know its conclusion to have any probability whatever, unless its premiss is at least as certain as its conclusion: meaning by “certain,” not merely true or probably true, but *known* to be so.

The only way, then, of deciding between my opponent's argument and mine, as to which is the better, is by deciding which premiss is known to be true. My opponent’s premiss is that Hume’s principles are true; and unless this premiss not merely *is* true, but is absolutely known to be so, his argument to prove that I do not know of the existence of this pencil cannot be conclusive. Mine is that I do know of the existence of this pencil; unless this premiss not only *is* true, but is absolutely known to be so, my argument to prove that Hume's principles are false cannot be conclusive. And moreover the degree of certainty of the conclusion, in either case, supposing neither is quite certain, will be in proportion to the degree of certainty of the premiss. How is it to be decided which premiss, if either, is known? or which is the more certain?

One condition under which a premiss may be known to be true, is a condition which we have already stated. Namely, any proposition is known to be true, if we have a conclusive argument in its favour; if, that is to say, it does really follow from some premiss or set of premisses already *known* to be true. I say some premiss or *set of premisses*; and this new qualification should be noticed, because it introduces a complication. If any argument from a *single* premiss is to be conclusive, the single premiss must, as we have seen, be at least as certain as the conclusion: the conclusion cannot, by the help of any such argument, be known with more certainty than the premiss. But obviously in the case of a set of premisses, the conclusion may be *more* certain than any *single* one of the premisses. Here, too, however, each of the premisses must be known to be at least probable in some degree: no amount of premisses, which were not known to be probable at all, could enable us to know that the conclusion which followed from them all was even in the least degree probable. One way, therefore, in which a proposition can be known to be true, is if it follows from some premiss or set of premisses, each of which is already known to be so with some degree of certainty. And some philosophers seem to have thought that this is the only way in which any proposition can ever be known to be true. They seem to have thought, that is, that no proposition can ever be known to be true, unless it follows from some other proposition or set of propositions already known to be so.

But it is, I think, easy to see that, if this view were true, no man ever has known any proposition whatever to be in the slightest degree probable. For if I cannot know any proposition whatever to be either true or probably true, unless I have first known some other proposition, from which it follows, to be so; then, of course, I cannot have known this other proposition, unless I have first known some third proposition, before *it*; nor this third proposition, unless I have first known a fourth before it; and so on *ad infinitum*. In other words, it would follow that no man has ever known any proposition whatever to be even probably true, unless he has previously known an absolutely infinite series of other propositions. And it is quite certain that no man ever has thus known a really infinite series of propositions. If this view were true, then, neither my argument nor my opponent's argument could possibly be a good argument: neither of them could enable us to know that the conclusion was even in the least degree probable. And the same would be true of every other argument whatsoever. So that if this view—the view that we can never know any proposition whatever, unless we have good argument for it—were true, then it would follow that we cannot ever know any proposition whatever to be true, since we never can have any good argument for it.

If, therefore, either my argument or my opponent's, or any other argument whatever, is to be a good one, it must be the case that we are capable of knowing at least *one* proposition to be true, *without* knowing any other proposition whatever from which it follows. And I propose to call this way of knowing a proposition to be true, *immediate* knowledge. …

It is certain, then, that if any proposition whatever is ever known by us mediately, or because some other proposition is known from which it follows, some one proposition at least, must also be known by us *immediately*, or *not merely* because some other proposition is known from which it follows. And hence it follows that the conditions necessary to make an argument good and conclusive may just as well be satisfied, when the premiss is only known *immediately*, as when there are other arguments in its favour. It follows, therefore,

that my argument: “I know this pencil to exist; therefore Hume's principles are false”; may be just as good an argument as any other, even though its premiss—the premiss that I do know that this pencil exists—is only known immediately.

But is this premiss in fact known by me immediately? I am inclined to think that it is, though this might be disputed, the following reasons. It must be noticed, that the premiss is: I know that this pencil exists. What, therefore, I am claiming to know immediately is *not*, that this pencil exists, but that I know it to exist. And it may be said: Can I possibly know immediately such a thing as this? Obviously, I cannot know *that* I know that the pencil exists, unless I do know that the pencil exists; and it might, therefore, be thought that the first proposition can only be mediately known—known *merely* because the second is known. But it is, I think, necessary to make a distinction. From the mere fact that I should not know the first, *unless* I knew the second, it does not follow that I know the first *merely* because I know the second. And, in fact, I think I do know *both* of them immediately. This might be disputed in the case of the second also. It might be said: I certainly do not know immediately that the pencil exists; for I should not know it at all, unless I were directly apprehending certain sense-data, and knew that they were signs of its existence. And of course I admit, that I should not know it, unless I were directly apprehending certain sense-data. But this is again a different thing from admitting that I do not know it immediately. For the mere fact that I should not know it, unless certain other things were happening, is quite a different thing from knowing it *only* because I know *some other proposition*. The mere direct apprehension of certain sense-data is quite a different thing from the knowledge of any proposition; and yet I am not sure that it is not by itself quite sufficient to enable me to know that the pencil exists.

But whether the exact proposition which formed my premiss, namely: I do know that this pencil exists; or only the proposition: This pencil exists; or only the proposition: The sense-data which I directly apprehend are a sign that it exists; is known by me immediately, one or other of them, I think, certainly is so. And all three of them are much more certain than any premiss which could be used to prove that they are false; and also much more certain than any other premiss which could be used to prove that they are true. That is why I say that the strongest argument to prove that Hume's principles are false is the argument from a particular case, like this for in which we do know of the existence of some material object. And similarly, if the object is to prove *in general* that we do know of the existence of material objects, no argument which is really stronger can, I think, be brought forward to prove this than particular instances in which we do in fact know of the existence of such an object. I admit, however, that other arguments may be more convincing; and perhaps some of you may be able to supply me with one that is. But, however much more *convincing* it may be, it is, I think, sure to depend upon some premiss which is, in fact, less certain than the premiss that I do know of the existence of this pencil; and so, too, in the case of any arguments which can be brought forward to prove that we do not know of the existence of any material object.