AN UNTENABLE DUALISM

Terence Moore

MOORE: I need your help.

LOCKE: What's the problem?

MOORE: It's about a dualism that's rife in the twenty-first century. I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say it's an intrinsic element of the intellectual climate of our age. So much so it goes unnoticed, worse, unquestioned.

LOCKE: I'm intrigued. Tell me about this dichotomy of yours?

MOORE: It's the distinction between objective and subjective accounts of our experience of the world and our behaviour in it. Crudely put, objectivity is good, subjectivity, bad. But I believe the dualism is untenable.

LOCKE: Where does this dichotomy show up?

MOORE: Everywhere. In the press, the media, politicians, the general public, but especially scientists, natural and social.

LOCKE: Why them especially?

MOORE: Nearly every discussion of the importance of science nowadays assumes that science is sharply distinguished from the rest of our culture.

LOCKE: How do they say it's distinguished?

MOORE: By its methods – formulating and testing hypotheses by linking systematic observations of the natural world with controlled experiments. Basically the tacit assumption is the results achieved are 'objective'. Other pursuits of knowledge are 'subjective'.

doi:10.1017/S1477175612000012
Think 31, Vol. 11 (Summer 2012)

LOCKE: Now I need *your* help. What do you understand by the words 'objective' and 'subjective'?

MOORE: A number of things. Essentially I suppose those who seek 'objectivity' seek to eliminate from scientific enquiry the human element, the personal. It's part of the goal to make scientific judgements appear value-free.

LOCKE: And 'subjectivity'?

MOORE: Being 'subjective' is accepting the importance of the personal, of feelings, opinions, reactions. Think of wine. The judgements of connoisseurs, for example, are personal. You might not think so but even mathematicians can be connoisseurs, can be personal. Connoisseurs of the elegance of simplicity, preferring one proof rather than another because it appears simpler.

LOCKE: And you're convinced the dichotomy is false?

MOORE: Absolutely. The reason I need your help is that I believe that in 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding' there's a grenade, that properly primed, would explode the distinction, show it to be fundamentally wrong.

LOCKE: Are you talking about my ideas on Morality and Personal Affirmation?

MOORE: Partly, yes. But I want to dig deeper than your thoughts on personal affirmation. It's your notion of 'secret reference' I need to explore more with you. One of its consequences you spell out at some length is the necessarily provisional and uncertain nature of our understanding of each other's language. Can we push that further? Using your idea of 'secret reference' I think we can demonstrate that the process of scientific enquiry also has, ultimately, an ineluctable subjective trace. In short, I believe you can free us from the shackles of 'objectivity', demonstrate once and for all that the disjunction between objective and subjective accounts of our knowledge of the world is an untenable dualism.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175612000012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

LOCKE: I'd welcome the chance to demonstrate something successfully, since I failed so miserably with morality!

MOORE: There's nothing wrong with being wrong. So long as you recognise the wrongdoing!

LOCKE: I may be able to help, but first I have a question for you. What lies behind this twenty-first-century commitment to objectivity?

MOORE: I'm not enough of a historian of science to answer that. I can only speculate.

LOCKE: Speculate away!

MOORE: Well, an obvious place to begin might be the dawn of the Age of Reason, generally known as the Enlightenment.

LOCKE: When would you date that dawn?

MOORE: A convenient date would be the founding of the Royal Society, in your prime time! Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton were early members.

LOCKE: I was a Fellow too, you know! Its full title might help your search for the origins of a commitment to objectivity. We knew it as The Royal Society for the Improving of Natural Knowledge.

MOORE: Wasn't Boyle a friend?

LOCKE: More than a friend, Robert was my scientific mentor.

MOORE: Didn't he ask you to carry out some research on the minerals in the Somerset mines and record the temperature?

LOCKE: He did and I did. But it wasn't a success. I wasn't cut out for that sort of research. With Isaac, however, it was a different story. We corresponded not about his optics, his mathematics, but about our different interpretation of the letters of St Paul. You have to recall

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in those days we had two books to read, the Bible and the Book of Nature.

MOORE: Actually I want to go back a bit earlier in time to find when the seeds of the Age of Reason were sown.

LOCKE: Where are you starting then?

MOORE: With Copernicus.

LOCKE: Copernicus! Nicolaus Copernicus, the Polish astronomer. If my memory serves me right, wasn't he round about the mid-fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth century? That's quite a bit earlier. But why Copernicus?

MOORE: Well, it was Copernicus who was prepared to abandon the immediate evidence of the senses, the ultimate subjective experience, in favour, or so it appeared, of exalting the mind, reason, the objective perspective.

LOCKE: I don't quite follow.

MOORE: In his book, *De revolutionibus orbium coelistum*, completed 1530, he rejected the evidence of the senses, which presents us with the irresistible evidence of the sun rising daily in the East, travelling across the sky to set in the West. Instead, making the sun the centre of the universe, he advanced the heliocentric model of the solar system.

LOCKE: True, but what follows?

MOORE: To all and sundry, especially the Catholic Church, this was obviously nonsense. Our language tells us quite clearly, 'The sun rises and the sun sets.' The evidence of our eyes was, they thought, irresistible. For them, Ptolemy was right.

LOCKE: Claudius Ptolemy, second century, eminent astronomer. Now we're going back even earlier!

MOORE: The same. In his book, *The Almagest* he declared the sun, the stars, the planets revolve around the earth.

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LOCKE: You must admit that to an earthbound observer it does look like that. The Earth does not seem to move, does it? Appears in fact completely at rest. Easy to conclude the Earth is the centre of the universe.

MOORE: In short the geocentric view.

LOCKE: Presumably the Church would have nodded comfortably. Why else would God have created the universe?

MOORE: The fact is that while Copernicus' model of a sun-centred solar system undoubtedly simplified Ptolemy's complex model, it was wrong. Though not for the reasons the Church and others rejected his view. It was not until Kepler's laws of planetary motion proposed elliptical, not Copernicus' circular, orbits for the movements of the planets that the heliocentric system won general acceptance.

LOCKE: Granted all that. But how does this make Copernicus a possible father of your untenable objective/subjective dualism?

MOORE: Well, I'm only speculating but it seems to me Copernicus in effect abandoned relying on the evidence of immediate experience to explain the solar system. Instead he advanced his heliocentric theory based on reason.

LOCKE: You're saying he abandoned the anthropomorphism of the senses for the anthropomorphism of our reasoning.

MOORE: If by that you mean Man's perspective shifted from relying upon the data supplied by the senses to listening to his voices of reason, then yes. But in apparently exalting reason, in essence the objective, something important's got left out and, alas, never put back.

LOCKE: What?

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MOORE: Imagination. To create a heliocentric model of the solar system Copernicus had to imagine a state of affairs that was believed not to exist. Creative acts of the imagination, backed by a reasoning mind, change our understanding of the world. And that's what Copernicus did!

LOCKE: I think I see. Your point is that acts of the imagination are essentially subjective, personal acts. Acts that may or may not be supported by reason.

MOORE: Exactly. What is first imagined must then be tested. As I see it there is no absolute disjunction between the subjective and the objective. The so-called 'objective' is rooted in the subjective. However what most certainly does exist are degrees of subjectivity. And that's where I particularly need your help.

LOCKE: Of course. As you suggest the key might lie in my account of 'secret reference'.

MOORE: Exactly. As I recall we discussed 'secret reference' in our first Conversation. What was it we agreed?

LOCKE: Let me recap briefly. I reminded you that the first 'secret reference' served as my solution to a problem I saw as underlying our use of language.

MOORE: I remember the problem.

LOCKE: All right. You tell me.

MOORE: In Book III of the essay you had insisted on a radical and apparently weird view of meaning. You claimed words had no meaning.

LOCKE: Not quite. I actually said words have no meaning – comma.

MOORE: After the comma?

LOCKE: Words have no meaning, until each of us independently creates a meaning for ourselves by

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filtering public words through private processes in our own minds.

MOORE: Your conclusion: meanings in the last resort are mind-dependent, personal, subjective.

LOCKE: Right. What's wrong is that by and large individuals don't recognise that they are the ones who create meanings. Without acknowledging it they act as if the words they use have the same meaning for others as they do for them.

MOORE: You call this 'acting as if' secret reference.

LOCKE: You, I recall, like to call it 'tacit supposing'.

MOORE: Well, I like to think tacitly supposing my words are exciting the same meaning in your head as they do in mine is a reasonable working hypothesis. I can at least begin conversing believing the words I'm using have a uniform meaning.

LOCKE: It's a plausible working hypothesis but false, as we regularly discover when we find ourselves misunderstanding each other. Acknowledging secret reference is a necessary step towards avoiding misunderstanding each other, but it's not in itself sufficient. There's another factor I don't think we mentioned earlier – time.

MOORE: Time? What do you mean?

LOCKE: As well as acknowledging 'secret reference' it helps if we've known our interlocutor for some time. I recall my great friend William Molyneux saying to me once when he was staying over, 'I think I'm getting to know you well enough to begin to understand what you're talking about.' Very perceptive, William. He saw that the better we know people, the more intimate our conversation, the closer our private meanings may become. But it's not the first secret reference that bears on your untenable dualism as much as the second.

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MOORE: I don't think we've ever talked about the second secret reference.

LOCKE: Tell me what you believe it is.

MOORE: Your second secret reference claims that in using language we believe that words stand for things in the world.

LOCKE: Or to use your language, we tacitly suppose words as I said '. . . stand for the Reality of Things'.

MOORE: And as I recall you immediately chide us for forgetting what words really stand for.

LOCKE: I have it here, Book III, Chapter II, '. . . *it is a perverting* of the use of words and brings unavoidable Obscurity and Confusion into their Signification whenever we make them stand for anything but those Ideas we have in our own Minds.' What does that say for the possibility of being 'objective'?

MOORE: It says that being objective is ultimately impossible. Your second secret reference helps us recognise that though we may step back from some aspects of ourselves, certain feelings, prejudices, ingrained reactions, we can never step wholly outside in seeking to understand the world. In short we're all ultimately victims of our own tacit supposings.

LOCKE: And 'secretly referring', or 'tacitly supposing' have to be personal acts, ineluctably subjective.

MOORE: So we're agreed, the dualism is untenable. Even for practising scientists, the best of whom may try the hardest not to be influenced by their preconceptions, feelings, wishes, hopes.

LOCKE: In its absolute form the dualism, as you call it, is untenable, yes. But it's not as simple as that. As you said earlier, there are degrees of subjectivity.

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MOORE: True. What I think we need to replace the dualism is a spectrum of subjectivity. Whilst no statement is objective, statements can be more or less subjective.

LOCKE: That sounds a better way of looking at it. You're wanting to replace a black/white dichotomy with a scale or gradient of some kind, measuring degrees of subjectivity. Interesting. Have you an example we could look at?

MOORE: Well, there's an important proposition bedevilling the twenty-first century. So important it arouses strong feelings for and against. If we look at the language these views are expressed in, we might get pointers to a possible direction in which to look.

LOCKE: What's the statement?

MOORE: 'Global warming is man-made.'

LOCKE: That's at least two problems of understanding. First, what do individuals believe counts as global warning?

MOORE: Global warming, people believe with varying degrees of understanding, refers to the global-average temperature increase that has been observed over the last hundred years or more. Because temperatures are measurable and comparable with temperatures of other times, there's pretty much agreement that our Earth is warming. The controversy comes with the judgement.

LOCKE: I know a little about temperature. It was the temperature in the Somerset mines Robert wanted me to measure. The judgement your scientists are making is that this rise in temperature is due to human influence.

MOORE: The majority, yes. More specifically, the claim is that the increase is caused by growing concentrations of greenhouse gases resulting from human activities such as the burning of fossil fuels, rapid deforestation, polluting the oceans. In brief, global warming is man-made. Others disagree.

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LOCKE: So we should look at the language in which each party expresses its view.

MOORE: There's an awful lot of it. I'll take just two examples. The first seems to me less subjective. Some in old language might be tempted to call it 'objective'. The other strikes me as clearly more subjective. The first is from a scientist, a professor of Mathematical Astrophysics at Cambridge University, Nigel Weiss. He affirms the pronouncements of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC. The IPCC's findings stress the view that humans are the most likely cause of global warming. In his support Weiss countered the sceptics view that sunspot activity is a more significant cause of climate change than human influence. He wrote: 'Although solar activity has an effect on the climate, these changes are small compared with those associated with global warming.' He added: 'Any global cooling associated with a fall in solar activity would not significantly affect the global warming caused by greenhouse gases.'

LOCKE: The language strikes me as measured, offers testable claims, challengeable for truth. One could, for example, look at whether other astrophysicists agree with his account of the effects of sunspot activity. What's the other example?

MOORE: It's from a documentary on our television Channel 4 called, *The Global Warming Swindle*. In it man-made climate change is called '. . . a lie . . . the biggest scam of modern times'. It continues, 'The truth is that global warming is a multibillion dollar worldwide industry: created by fanatically anti-industrial environmentalists, supported by scientists peddling scare stories to chase funding, and propped up by complicit politicians and the media, . . . solar activity is far more likely to be the culprit.'

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LOCKE: That language would certainly register on my scale as more subjective. The use of words like 'swindle', 'lie', 'scam', 'fanatically', 'peddling', 'propped up', all seemed aimed to inflame the passions, subdue the impulse to reflect, analyse.

MOORE: To appeal to the emotional rather than the cognitive level.

LOCKE: If that's how you put it these days. The different assessments on sunspot activity would need following up.

MOORE: I could of course have reversed the examples. Found measured language for the second position, inflaming language for the first. The point was not the truth of the positions, but to demonstrate the character of the language.

LOCKE: In this case the language of the first is clearly less subjective than the second.

MOORE: But still not objective.

LOCKE: No, not objective. In the last resort astronomer Weiss's own tacit supposings must colour his view of the material world. And these personal views must underlie his language. It cannot be otherwise.

MOORE: We agree. However far in our judgements we are able to step back from our immediate feelings, we can never step entirely outside our selves. Your second reference, our tacitly supposing words stand for 'the reality of Things', has undoubtedly helped to demonstrate the dualism is untenable. If words cannot stand for anything other than ideas in our minds, then a personal element must always remain with us. Nothing else is possible.

LOCKE: Let's think instead then about a spectrum of subjectivity.

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MOORE: A rating perhaps from high subjectivity at one end to low subjectivity at the other, depending upon the types of expression used. The lower the level of subjectivity the higher the confidence in the user and their language.

LOCKE: You could put it that way. Frequency of certain types of expression could be significant. Frequency matters.

MOORE: At the very least a spectrum wouldn't countenance pure objectivity.

LOCKE: Acknowledging a spectrum of subjectivity should put us in a better position to assess the believability of a judgement. Might make it easier to understand why we might be inclined to accept as true what certain people say, and not others.

MOORE: Truth! I think we need a Conversation on your account of Truth.

LOCKE: [Hacking cough] Another evening, perhaps.

MOORE: Agreed. Take care with that chest of yours!

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175612000012 Published online by Cambridge University Press