There are certain propositions which philosophers, at one time or another, have said we 'unthinkingly assume' or 'instinctively believe'. One such proposition is that there are about us entities, 'physical objects', which can and do exist unperceived. To say that this is something we unthinkingly assume is to imply that it is a matter for dispute whether it is true. Talk of 'unthinking assumptions' is thus tied up with the idea that the philosopher's job is somehow to justify, or else show to be unjustified, what we ordinarily neither question nor think of questioning.

In this essay I shall try to show that the justification for which the philosopher searches cannot be what we ordinarily mean by 'justification'; and I shall try to do this by showing that if we use the terms 'assumption' and 'belief' in this connection we cannot be using them as we ordinarily do. If the justification the philosopher looks for is not what we ordinarily mean by 'justification' then the products of his searches cannot have the sort of significance they would have if it were.

I shall consider two questions which could be asked by the words, 'Are there physical objects?' The first is what I shall call 'a question within the realm of physical objects'. The second I shall call 'a question about the realm of physical objects'. I shall try to show that, in the ordinary sense of 'assumption', it would be absurd to say that in answering either of these questions in the affirmative we are making an assumption, justified or unjustified.

A QUESTION WITHIN THE REALM OF PHYSICAL OBJECTS

Some philosophers have sometimes treated the words, 'Are there physical objects?' as if they had asked a question within the realm
of physical objects, that is, a question about what is in the world in the way in which, ‘Is there a sheet of paper in the drawer?’ and, ‘Are there unicorns nowadays?’ are questions about what is in the world.

For example, J. McT. E. McTaggart, in *Some Dogmas of Religion*, questioned ‘the possibility of matter existing independently of spirit’, and concluded his reflections with:

The result is that matter is in the same position as the Gorgons or the Harpies. Its existence is a bare possibility to which it would be foolish to attach the least importance, since there is nothing to make it at all preferable to any other hypothesis.

W. T. Stace, in an article entitled ‘The Refutation of Realism’, discussed the proposition that some entities sometimes exist without being experienced. He came to the conclusion:

It will follow that the realistic position that they do exist is perfectly groundless and gratuitous, and one which ought not to be believed. It will be in exactly the same position as the proposition ‘there is a unicorn on the planet Mars’. I cannot prove that there is no unicorn on Mars. But since there is not the slightest reason to suppose that there is one, it is a proposition which ought not to be believed.

And G. E. Moore, in his *Proof of an External World*, concluded, first, that to prove that there are objects external to our minds it is sufficient to show that there are, for example, soap-bubbles, sheets of paper, hands, shoes, and socks, and secondly, that one can show this by, for example, holding up a hand and saying ‘Here is a hand’. It was this article which he began with a quotation from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, ‘It still remains a scandal to philosophy . . . that the existence of things outside of us . . . must be accepted merely on faith, and that, if anyone thinks good to doubt their existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by any satisfactory proof’.

The things which McTaggart, Stace and Moore say in these passages have this in common: just as one can conceive a hand, so one can conceive Gorgons and Harpies, and even a unicorn on Mars. One can imagine the sort of circumstances which would lead astronomers or space-explorers to say, ‘Now we know there are