Introduction

If the burden of the previous chapter was to deal with the second of the five principal tasks facing the common sense philosopher, namely, justifying the claim that common sense beliefs ought to be treated as default positions, then the object of this chapter and the next is to broach the third of these tasks, that is, to provide a general account of what Moore took to be the most striking fact about the work of many philosophers. Moore writes,

> It seems to me that what is most amazing and most interesting about the views of many philosophers is the way in which they go beyond or positively contradict the views of Common Sense: they profess to know that there are in the Universe most important kinds of things, which Common Sense does not profess to know of, and also they profess to know that there are not in the Universe (or, at least, that, if there are, we do not know it), things of the existence of which Common Sense is most sure.

(1965, p. 2)

And as the list of philosophical extravagances provided at the outset of this book suggests, it is not just the odd one or two philosophers who have parted company with common sense. On the contrary, this seems to be a general tendency within mainstream Western philosophy.

Moore noted that this tendency takes three distinct forms. A philosopher could, first and foremost, simply deny that a certain common sense belief or set of beliefs is true or is known to be true. This route is taken by sceptics, for example, who notoriously deny that we do in fact
know what we commonly think we know. It is also taken by those who maintain that the world is significantly or perhaps even radically other than common sense takes it to be. We will have occasion to discuss several examples of this kind of departure from common sense in Chapters 5–9. Secondly, a philosopher might go beyond common sense by claiming to establish the truth of claims or the existence of entities undreamt of by common sense. For example, Moore thinks that philosophers who postulate the existence of God or life after death are adding to but not contradicting common sense (ibid., p. 17–18). Plato’s postulation of the realm of the Forms would also serve as a clear example of a philosopher’s going well beyond common sense. Finally, the third possibility is to combine the first two, that is, to both deny certain common sense beliefs while also going beyond common sense in the manner just described. Berkeley is a good example of a philosopher working in this vein since he denies that there are material objects in the ordinary sense while asserting the existence of God.

Now the philosopher’s tendency to go beyond common sense is not in and of itself particularly surprising. It has already been noted that common sense does not have a complete view of the universe, and that it is one of philosophy’s goals to provide a complete account of all that is. Consequently, it is only to be expected that philosophers will have made claims that go beyond common sense in the sense Moore identified. Even common sense philosophers will go beyond common sense in this respect when trying to provide a complete metaphysical description of what is implicit in our everyday dealings with the world. Taking leave of common sense in this fashion is thus perfectly harmless and entirely in order as long as one’s additions do not contradict common sense beliefs and their status as default positions. My point then is that the truly amazing and most interesting fact about the work of many philosophers is simply their tendency, explicitly or implicitly, to deny common sense beliefs. And at some point the common sense philosopher will want to provide an explanation of this curious fact. That is, at some point, we will want an answer to Searle’s question, expressed in his characteristically direct and pungent language: “Why is it that when we start studying philosophy, we are almost inexorably driven to deny things we all know to be true?” (1999, p. 9).

There are at least three reasons for attempting to answer this rather depressing question. The first is simply to address our natural curiosity on this issue. Is it not interesting in and of itself that such a brilliant collection of thinkers would maintain such a bizarre collection of theories? Secondly, providing an explanatory account of this