Moore's proof

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1. TWO KINDS OF SKEPTICISM

We can distinguish two kinds of skeptical perspectives on some domain of beliefs.
One kind of skeptic claims that the beliefs in question are false. Such a skeptic might do this by arguing that the beliefs are internally incoherent or contradictory, or by presenting independent arguments for a thesis which contradicts them.

A second kind of skeptic might not argue directly that the beliefs in question are false, but only argue that they are unjustified. For example, a skeptic of this kind about the existence of God might not argue that God does not exist, but only that we have no good reason to believe that God exists, or can't know that God exists. This is the sort of skepticism about the external world which Moore was trying to refute.

2. TWO ARGUMENTS FOR EPISTEMIC SKEPTICISM ABOUT THE EXTERNAL WORLD

Here are two intuitively plausible arguments for skepticism about the external world:

2.1. The argument from indistinguishability

Let REALITY be a world in which there are external objects; let DREAMWORLD be a world in which there are no external objects (other than you), but in which everything 'seems the same' to you as in reality. Then the skeptic can argue as follows:

P1. If an agent cannot distinguish between two situations, then that agent cannot know which of those two situations obtains.

P2. We cannot distinguish between REALITY and DREAMWORLD.

C1. Therefore, we cannot know whether REALITY or DREAMWORLD obtains.

C2. Since there are external objects in REALITY but not in DREAMWORLD, we cannot know whether there are any external objects either.

2.2. The argument from lack of evidence

P1. For an agent to know that p is true, that agent must have evidence which rules out the possibility that p is false — i.e., is inconsistent with p's falsehood.

P2. Our only evidence about external things is sensory evidence about how things appear to us.

P3. Hallucinations and illusions — cases in which we have sensory evidence about how things appear to us, but things are not the way they appear to us — are possible.

C1. Therefore (by P2 and P3), we never have evidence which rules out the possibility that external things do not exist.

C2. Therefore (by C1 and P1), we cannot know that external things exist.

For now, it is important to note the form of these skeptical arguments: both begin from a certain premise about what is required for knowledge, and proceed to show that we fail, in our beliefs about the external world, to meet this requirement.

3. Moore's distinction between things presented in space and things to be met with in space

Moore begins the article by trying to get clear about the class of things whose existence is doubted by the skeptic; he does this by distinguishing between things presented in space and things to be met with in space.

These two classes of things are distinguished by the fact that things presented in space (but not to be met with in space) are such that (i) they can only be perceived by one person, and (ii) they exist only if they are perceived. What the skeptic about the external

world, or external things, doubts is the existence of things which can be met with in space. Things to be met with in space are such that there is no contradiction in the claims that, first, they exist, and, second, they are not experienced.

(Moore discusses the category of things 'external to our minds', and takes the skeptic to be arguing that there are no things in this category. For our purposes, we can ignore this extra step. According to Moore's definitions, if something is to be met with in space, then it is also external to our minds; so if we can give an anti-skeptical argument that there are some things to be met with in space, this will also be enough to show that there are some things external to our minds.)

4. MOORE'S ANTI-SKEPTICAL ARGUMENT

4.1. Moore's three criteria for a good argument

Moore wants to go on to give a proof that skepticism about the external world is false; before we consider that argument, we should ask what is required of an argument for it to be a good argument against skepticism.

Moore gives us three criteria (p. 146):

1. The premises must be different from the conclusion.
2. The premises must be known to be true.
3. The conclusion must follow from the premises.

We can break down our evaluation of Moore's arguments into two questions: (i) Does Moore's argument meet these conditions? (ii) Are these criteria really sufficient for proof?

4.2. The proof

Moore thinks that he can prove that the skeptic about the external world is wrong. His simple proof is as follows:

> P1. Here (holding up one's left hand) is one hand.
> P2. Here (holding up one's right hand) is another.
>
> _____
>
> C1. Therefore, there are at least two hands.
> C2. Therefore, there are at least two things to be met with in space.

4.3. Does the proof meet each of the three criteria?

The proof clearly meets the first condition. The conclusion does not even entail the premises, so they can hardly be identical.

We'll discuss the second condition at some length when we turn to skeptical replies to Moore's argument. But Moore is at pains to point out that this is certainly the sort of thing we ordinarily take ourselves to know:

> "How absurd it would be to suggest that I did not know it, but only believed it, and that perhaps it was not the case! You might as well suggest that I do not know that I am now standing up and talking — that perhaps after all I'm not, and that it's not quite certain that I am!"

It also looks very plausible that the proof meets the third condition. P1 and P2 plainly entail C1. And if there are two hands, doesn't it follow that there are at least two things to be met with in space?

5. SKEPTICAL RESPONSES TO MOORE'S ARGUMENT

How might a skeptic respond to Moore's argument? By either calling into question Moore's criteria for something's being a proof, or by calling into question Moore's claim that his proof meets those criteria.

5.1. Moore does not know the premises of his argument to be true

It is not plausible to doubt either that the premises are different from the conclusion, or that the conclusion fails to follow from the premises. So, it might seem, the best bet for the skeptic is to argue that Moore does not in fact know the premises of his argument to be true. After all, if the skeptic is maintaining that we do not know that external things exist, shouldn't the skeptic also maintain that we do not know that we have hands?

Consider Moore's example of the misprints:

> "Suppose, for instance, it were a question whether there were as many as three misprints on a certain page in a certain book. A says there are, B is inclined to doubt it. How could A prove that he is right? Surely he could prove it by taking the book, turning to the page, and pointing to three separate places on it, saying 'There's one misprint here, another here, and another here': surely that it is a method by which it might be proved! Of course, A would not have proved, by doing this, that there were at least three misprints on the page in question, unless it was certain that there was a misprint in each of the places to which he pointed. But to say that he might prove it in this way, is to say that he might be certain that there was. And if such a thing as that could ever be certain, then assuredly it was certain just

> now that there was one hand in one of the two places I indicated and another
> in the other." (147)

One thing Moore is pointing out here is that in many circumstances, we are perfectly happy to say that we know things which are in relevant respects analogous to the premises of his proof. One moral you might take from this is that if the skeptic is going to deny that Moore knows the premises of his argument to be true, he should provide some positive reason for denying this. Each of us come to the argument thinking that we do know things about misprints, and hands; for the skeptic to convince us otherwise, we should demand an argument.

Let's consider two ways a skeptic might construct such an argument.

5.1.1. Proof is required for knowledge

One such attempt is to say that proof is required for knowledge, and that since Moore not only fails to prove his premises but also claims to be unable to provide such a proof, he can't for this reason know them to be true. Moore discusses this reply on pp. 149-150.

Can 'Nothing is known without a proof' itself be proven? Does this matter?

5.1.2. From standard skeptical arguments

But the skeptic doesn't have to, implausibly, say that proof is required for knowledge. After all, each of the standard skeptical arguments discussed at the outset can be used to show that Moore does not know that he has hands. Why aren't those arguments good enough to convince us that Moore does not know the premises of his argument?

One thing Moore might say in reply is that these arguments have premises, too; and premises which are, on reflection, on much less solid ground than his. Compare, for example, the following three claims:

- I have hands.
- If an agent cannot distinguish between two situations, then that agent cannot know which of those two situations obtains.
- For an agent to know that p is true, that agent must have evidence which rules out the possibility that p is false — i.e., is inconsistent with p's falsehood.

Of which of these three claims are you most confident? To which do you think you should assign the highest credence? If, as seems plausible, the answer is the first one, then it seems irrational to let a skeptical argument convince us that one of the premises of Moore's argument is false.

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5.2. Moore's argument would not convince a skeptic

Suppose that someone is already a convinced skeptic about the external world. Would Moore's argument convince him or her? It seems not. Does this show that something is wrong with Moore's argument? Does it show that it falls short of proof? An analogy: a skeptic about the axioms of a mathematical theory, or about a particular inference in one of Euclid's proofs.

5.3. Moore's argument is circular/begs the question

The replies above are attempts to show that Moore's proof fails to meet the criteria for proof he provides. A different sort of reply grants that his proof meets those criteria, but denies that the criteria are sufficient for an argument to be a genuine proof. The skeptic might argue that we should have an extra, fourth condition which says that the proof cannot beg the question, or be circular, and that Moore's argument fails to meet this extra condition.

Moore's criteria do, of course, rule out the sort of circularity or question-begging illustrated by the following argument:

> 1. There is an external world.
> C. There is an external world.

Since the premise is identical to the conclusion, this argument fails to meet Moore's first condition on proofs. But, the skeptic might say, there are examples of arguments which are question begging which meet this first condition.

Consider, for example, the following proof of God's existence:

> 1. If what theists believe is true, God exists.
> 2. What theists believe is true.
> _____
> C. God exists.

This argument meets Moore's first condition, since neither of the premises is identical to the conclusion; but it still seems to be circular in some sense.

Suppose, to take a different example, you come across someone who appears to be walking their dog. You take yourself to know that they are walking their dog. But can you know that they are not walking a very realistic doggy-shaped robot? Of course! You can give the following argument:

> 1. A is walking a dog (and is not walking anything else).

2. No dogs are robots.

_____

C. A is not walking a doggy-shaped robot.

This argument also seems, in a way, question-begging, even though it clearly meets Moore's first condition. So what is it that makes these arguments question-begging, despite the fact that they do not use their conclusion as a premise?

One idea is that they are examples of what is called 'transmission-failure' (the term is due to Crispin Wright): maybe it's the case that Moore could only be justified in believing the premises of his argument if he is antecedently justified in believing the conclusion: that is, in order to be justified in believing the premises, one needs *first* to be justified in believing the conclusion. It seems reasonable to say that any argument which fits this model is guilty of begging the question.

The above cases of the dog and belief in God seem to fit this model. Does Moore's argument? Could someone be justified in believing the premises without ever even having considered the conclusion?

5.4. The idealist skeptic

A different kind of idealist skeptic might grant the conclusion that at least two hands exist, but doubt whether it follows from this that there are at least two things to be met with in space.

Can an argument akin to Moore's original proof be constructed against this new skeptical position?

6. THE POINT OF MOORE'S ARGUMENT

Why does he begin with the quote from Kant? Not to try to give the same kind of proof Kant tried to give; rather, in part, to undercut the idea that the distinction between what can be proven on the basis of abstract philosophical principles and what must be taken on faith is exhaustive.

What's partly at issue here are questions about philosophical methodology, and the question of whether the starting point of philosophical thought should be with commonsense particular claims that seem secure, or very general philosophical claims which have some intuitive support.