

Moore's proof of an external world

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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. We have seen skeptical arguments of this kind from Bradley, who argued that our ordinary beliefs about, e.g., things standing in relations to each other are false. We can call this *metaphysical skepticism*.

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. Call this *epistemic skepticism*.

2 Two arguments for epistemic skepticism about the external world

Moore's target is skepticism about the external world. Following are two intuitively plausible arguments for epistemic 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.
- P2. Our only evidence about external things is sensory evidence about how things appear to us.
- P3. Hallucinations — cases in which we have sensory evidence about how things appear to us but in which there is no existing external thing presented — 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. Examples of the two classes of things. What the skeptic about the external world, or external things, doubts is the existence of things which can be met with in space.

(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.

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:

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|---|--|
| P1. Here (holding up one’s left hand) is one hand. | |
| P2. Here (holding up one’s right hand) is another. | |
| <hr/> | |
| 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.

The second condition is trickier. Here is what Moore says about this:

“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!”

We’ll return to this point below.

It also looks very plausible that the proof meets the third condition. Could P1 and P2 be true, and yet C1 false? 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.

5.2 *Proof is required for knowledge, and Moore does not prove his premises to be true*

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?

5.3 *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:

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|--------------------------------|--|
| 1. There is an external world. | |
| <hr/> | |
| 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:

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|---|--|
| 1. If what theists believe is true, God exists. | |
| 2. What theists believe is true. | |
| <hr/> | |
| 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. | |
| <hr/> | |
| 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’ (Wright (2002)): 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? What does this show? (For defense of Moore’s argument on this matter, see Pryor (2004).)

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?

5.5 *Moore’s proof ends in a standoff*

Perhaps, rather than trying to demonstrate to Moore that he does not know his premises to be true, the skeptic should focus on the weaker claim that Moore has not shown that the principles about knowledge used in the skeptical arguments listed above are false. So what we have is a conflict between those skeptical principles and Moore’s premises, and Moore’s argument provides us with no way to decide between them. So maybe the situation is a standoff: the skeptic is unconvinced by Moore, and vice versa.

A Moorean reply: are you more sure of the fact that you have hands, or of certain abstract claims about knowledge?

Can something be a proof if it does not convince someone who fully understands the premises and conclusion? If the skeptic remains unconvinced, does that show that Moore has failed to prove the existence of the external world?

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 and what must be taken on faith is exhaustive.

Philosophical methodology, and the question of whether the starting point of philosophical thought should be with commonsense particular claims that seem secure, or abstract philosophical claims which have some intuitive support.

References

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