

11-22-2010

## Making Something of Moore's Proof

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### Recommended Citation

Theis, Benjamin (2010) "Making Something of Moore's Proof," *Macalester Journal of Philosophy*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 11.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/phil/vol7/iss1/11>

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## Benjamin Theis

### "Making Something of Moore's 'Proof'"

G. E. Moore gives in his *Philosophical Papers* what he calls a "proof of an external world" (127-50). The proof is easy enough to repeat here. Basically, he starts by holding up his two hands and making a certain gesture with the right, saying "Here is one hand." Making a similar gesture with the left, he states, "And here is another." This he takes as a proof that two hands exist which entails, as he has previously explained, that external objects exist. He contends that this meets the three conditions for a rigorous proof (in fact, he remarks that "it is perhaps impossible to give a better or more rigorous proof of anything whatever" [Moore, 146]): the premise was different than the conclusion, the premise is known (by him, but the point is that we all know it) to be true, and the conclusion follows from the premise.

I think it is clear to anyone with a basic acquaintance with, and understanding of, skeptical arguments that something is wrong with Moore's proof. There is a definite feeling that Moore has missed the point somewhere. Looking at Moore's three conditions, I think it is also clear that the problem is that he somehow failed to fulfill his second condition. At the same time, however, there is a certain appeal to the argument. Michael Williams writes, "...although we are all certain that the skeptic cannot be dismissed in this way, it is not entirely certain why not" (Williams, 43). The goal of this paper is to first demonstrate (partially) what is wrong and what is appealing in Moore's argument and then, with this knowledge in mind, to see what can be gained. It is my claim that not only does Moore's proof fail to refute skepticism, any help it provides in dealing with the skeptic is of little importance or force.

One immediately striking aspect of the proof is its length. As Williams puts it, "Moore's responses to skepticism are almost unique in being as short and to the point as the skeptic's own arguments" (Williams, 43). I think this is a big part of its appeal. Skeptical arguments can basically be explained to anyone, regardless of how many philosophy classes they've taken or books they've read. I think Moore wants the refutation of these arguments to be similarly accessible. Also, I think there is a great desire for the answer to skepticism not to involve much work. What I mean is that skepticism is a ridiculous viewpoint. No one can actually be a skeptic. In a sense (though one which I intend to argue is merely superficial), arguments against skepticism that are quite long, and involve a lot of study in philosophy, conflict with this. As a respected philosopher, Moore is able to say what would be ignored coming from an "ordinary" person.

Regardless of the nobility of this motivation, Moore basically makes two mistakes. The first is an "adversarial" mistake. That is, he makes use of the metaphor of there being an actual skeptic that he is arguing against. This way of talking can be quite helpful in discussing skepticism, but it carries with it a danger of losing sight of the real problem. The skeptic doesn't exist, and arguments useful against an opponent can have little effect resolving a paradox. A quote from a different part of the *Philosophical*

*Papers*, "Certainty," is relevant in showing Moore's mistake. In discussing the skeptical argument and his response, he states:

The one argument is just as good as the other, unless my opponent can give better reasons for asserting that I don't know that I'm not dreaming, than I can give for asserting that I do know that I am standing up (Moore, 247).

I think this argument can be quickly modified to suit the present discussion without violating the intent of Moore's proof. The skeptic can not give better reasons for asserting that we don't know that external objects exist than we can give for knowing that "Here is a hand." This is of course true (in fact, this may be part of the justification for the claim that one can't be a skeptic), but it is clearly an argument against an opponent. It doesn't seem to be of any help against skepticism outside of the "adversarial" metaphor. In fact, if Moore thinks it is good enough to counter the skeptic by saying, "the one argument is just as good as the other", then the situation is actually intolerable in the paradoxical setting. It means that there *is nothing to choose* between the skeptical view and the common-sense one--and hence no superiority in the common-sense view.

Unfortunately for Moore, I think the proof has another big problem which may even make his argument ineffective against an opponent. Moore thinks his proof is doing something different than it actually is. Barry Stroud provides an analogy (Stroud, 102-13). Consider a murder taking place in a house being investigated by a "master detective" and his younger assistant. First, the assistant argues that the murderer must have been one of the guests, running in and out of the room while the butler was on the phone. The master detective points out that there is a large table in the room and none of the guests would have been able to run around it, perform the bloody deed, and get out of the room in the short time of the phone call. In this case, the detective points to something they both know (the existence of the table, as well as the human and time limitations) to refute the assistant's conclusion.

As a second case, consider that later the assistant consulted a list of the guests and, after eliminating each one from suspicion, concluded that it must have been the butler. Again the veteran detective refutes him by saying that the list may not be complete.

Moore, Stroud claims, believes his proof to be similar to the first case. Examples given by Moore (e.g., how we prove there are three misprints on a page [Moore, 147]) to explain what he thinks is going on in his proof bear strong resemblance to the first case. The way Moore sees it, he is like the detective and the skeptic is like the assistant. Moore's claims point out what is mutually known and shows the consequences of this. In this way the skeptic's conclusion, like the assistant's in the first case, is refuted.

However, Stroud argues that Moore's proof is really analogous to the second case. The skeptic is pointing out what we do not know, much as the master detective claims that the completeness of the list is not known. Imagine that the assistant responded to this by saying, "But I know the butler did it, so the list must be complete."

To successfully make his claim about the guilt of the butler, the assistant has to have some sort of additional reasons for believing the list is complete. Asking all the guests if they know of anyone not on the list, or checking with the doorman to see if anyone else came or left, might be examples of such independent justification.

Moore, then, is like the assistant here. His claim, "Here is a hand," requires some background justification. If we are genuinely agnostic about the existence of the external world, we cannot know that "here is a hand." We certainly cannot use such a proposition to demonstrate the existence of an external world.

This analogy is slightly problematic (in that knowing the butler did it doesn't logically entail the list is complete in the way that knowing "Here is a hand" means there are external objects), but I think the point is clear. Moore's knowing that his hands exist is dependent on his having some independent justification that there are external objects.

I think it is fairly clear that, barring some interpretation of the proof which modifies it in a very significant way,<sup>1</sup> Moore's proof fails to refute skepticism. The question about whether an argument which is "useful" against skepticism must necessarily involve refutation is, while interesting, not within the scope of this paper. However, I hope to show that even if the answer is "no" and that some non-refuting arguments can lead to meaningful gains, Moore's proof does not fit this category.

I've mentioned two flaws in Moore's proof, but I now want to sketch a connection between them. I think of them not as two unrelated problems, but rather as specific manifestations of one that's more general: namely, a misunderstanding of the problem of skepticism. Skepticism is a paradox which follows from certain beliefs. (This may be stating the obvious, but I think it's important.) In the case of material world skepticism, certain beliefs about our mental states appeal to us, yet lead to difficulties. Briefly, we believe that mental states exist in a separate realm from the material. This lends itself to skeptical arguments using dreaming, or brains-in-vats, which play on the possibility of mental sensations consistent with perception occurring as, yet not being, the result of perception of an external realm.

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<sup>1</sup> Interpretation of any piece of work always carries with it interesting questions regarding the author's intentions. My purpose here is to see what can be gained from the proof, and issues involving what Moore actually meant are beyond the scope of this essay. At the same time, of course, these questions cannot be completely ignored. If an interpretation is radically different than what the author seems to be saying, this casts serious doubt on whether the success of this interpretation says anything about what can be gained from the original text. I'm taking it for granted that any interpretation of Moore which avoids both of the mistakes I've described is not worth considering. This carries with it problems because interpretations of this sort have been given. (I read Malcolm and Ambrose as doing this.) The only response to this that I will give here is that the burden of showing that these interpretations do in fact fit the text (especially considering the fact that Moore's language seems to go against them) is on the interpreter's shoulders.

The desire for an "easy" solution to skepticism is neglecting the fact that such patterns of belief, which, for better or worse, are quite firmly entrenched, lead to the problem. A solution to skepticism involves detangling these inconsistent assumptions. I don't think this is something that could easily be done, as it would seem to necessarily involve a major "paradigm shift" in our thinking. We need to replace appealing patterns of thought with those which are less problematic. Further, these new beliefs need to have appeal of their own, beyond the fact that they may avoid skeptical paradox. This is no easy task.

Even if this is true, I still need to say much more. Most importantly I've boldly stated the existence of a desire and then have proceeded to attribute it to Moore. This was not a big concern when I provided specific reasons that his proof failed, but now that I want to argue that any meaningful interpretation is of no use, discussion of my claim becomes essential. The basis I have is admittedly weak, but I definitely think something's there. Basically, the fact that Moore thinks that his proof is in no way unique suggests that he doesn't think anything philosophically "deep" is going on. In stating that "I can now give a large number of different proofs ... and that at many other times I have been in a position to give many others" (Moore, 145), he seems to be saying that each time he notes an external object, he has proven that external objects exist. The importance, for Moore, seems to be in the act of pointing out objects. But if what's really happening (and what Moore thinks is happening) is that "paradigm shifts" are taking place, the importance would not be on noting that his hands exist, but rather that, in making this observation, he has somehow rejected the assumptions that the skeptical paradox is based on. The fact that Moore does not point out that anything other than the obvious is going on suggests that he thinks the proof is quite easy to carry out. This seems quite clear in his statement, "We all of us do constantly take proofs of this sort as absolutely conclusive proofs of certain conclusions" (Moore, 147). Obviously, we don't constantly make drastic changes to our epistemological theories. If Moore is giving anything more than a "simple" proof, he certainly doesn't give that impression. For this reason, any interpretation which attributes anything more to him seems quite suspect.

As I've claimed, I think this larger misunderstanding is what leads to his two problems. Clearly, in neglecting the fact that it is a paradox being dealt with, he makes the adversarial mistake. His second mistake rises out of the fact that he is approaching a refutation of the skeptic in too simple a way. If he had carried out some process of questioning the assumptions involved in the skeptic's argument, he would have been stating (and would thus realize it needs stating) that he has some independent justification for the knowledge of external objects that allows him to claim, "Here is a hand." As Williams puts it, "... the situation would be quite different if Moore offered his examples as a challenge to the skeptic's essential theoretical presuppositions and not as a direct response to his conclusions" (Williams, 43).

I don't think any reasonable interpretation of Moore will be of any use in attacking skepticism, because no sensible reading can have him doing anything more than what he seems to be doing: holding up his hands and asserting their existence. I think a general thought in Moore is that of denying the damage of the skeptic's arguments. Moore, in hearing the skeptic out and then providing a solution which doesn't really

address the argument, is not giving the skeptic's arguments the credit they've previously received. I think the solution Williams eventually proposes, as well as the naturalism described by Strawson and Carnap's "internal, external" distinction, takes this one step further and questions the skeptic's very assumptions. It may very well be that thoughts like these are useful in dealing with skepticism. It may also be that these thoughts are naturally inspired by Moore's proof, but inspiration is not within the realm of "usefulness" that I want to focus on, because this seems to rely on psychological, rather than philosophical, matters. If psychological "use" is introduced, the question seems to become trivial and in effect curtails meaningful philosophical discussion. Moore's proof can inspire a variety of things, but this is not to say that Moore's proof is useful in any meaningful way.

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