

### Seminar 3: Moore's Journey from Idealism to Realism to Common Sense

#### Part 1: Becoming G.E. Moore

##### Early Days: Kantian Freedom and Extreme Realism

Moore entered Cambridge University as an undergraduate in 1892 intending to study classics. There he met another undergraduate, Bertrand Russell, who convinced him to switch to philosophy. His teachers included the Absolute Idealist, J.M.E. McTaggart and the ethicist Henry Sidgwick, both of whom had an influence on him that was reflected in his 1896 thesis "The Metaphysical Basis of Ethics", which articulated a position he would later repudiate in *Principia Ethica*, 1903.

His 1898 paper "Freedom" reflects his early idealism, which was centered on Kant's view that space and time aren't real, but rather are imposed on experience by our minds. Reflecting on Kant's view, Moore distinguished the natural world as *the totality of appearances in space and time* from timeless, unchanging Reality as it is in itself. Because, for Moore, time was unreal, these appearances were not parts of Reality. Indeed, he regarded the idea that there is something that is the totality of things in space and time as an impossible conception. Although his paper agrees in part with Kant, it also criticizes Kant for not being idealist enough. The target is Kant's discussion of human freedom, which, Kant argues, must be real if morality is to make sense. However, freedom is difficult to accommodate because (i) all actions and choices occur in time, and (ii) every temporal event has a temporal cause that necessitates it. Moore argues that while (i) seems undeniable and (ii) is a central Kantian thesis (with which Moore then agreed), they lead to the view that any choice an agent makes is one the agent couldn't have failed to make, which seems to be a denial of freedom.

The orthodox Kantian response hinges on the view that everything in time is a mere (phenomenal) appearance of a (noumenal) reality. That reality, in the case of a human agent, is the *transcendental self*. *The activity of this being appears in time as the empirical self, which is a collection of mental states and events standing in causal relations to each other and to external appearances*. So, the agent must appear to be causally determined. But since we are really transcendental selves, this verdict is only provisional. We can't know our (transcendental) selves to be free or unfree, because the categories of our understanding are limited to appearances. But we do know that we can't be moral agents if we aren't free. So, Kant *postulates* that we are free.

Moore observes the Kantian must agree (i) that all actions and choices occur in time, (ii) that every temporal event has a temporal cause that necessitates it, and (iii) that transcendental realities standing behind appearances are unchanging and timeless (because time only applies to phenomenal appearances). Thus, the Kantian *should* conclude that our transcendental selves aren't capable of *free choice* because they aren't capable of *action or deliberation* (both of which require time) at all. Every appearance is what it is because of the Reality of which it is an appearance; but constituents of Reality don't *do* anything. So, Moore contends, Kantian Transcendental Freedom is just the role of Reality in determining the world of appearance. Since it has nothing special to do with action or choice, it has nothing to do with morality. It applies as much to gunpowder as it does to human beings. What is surprising is that at this stage of his career, Moore *didn't* regard this as a *reductio ad absurdum* of Kantian or Idealist metaphysics.

In 1899, he criticized the Absolute Idealist F. H. Bradley for backsliding when discussing the nature of judgment. Moore argued that Bradley should have realized (i) that the bearers of truth and falsity are propositions, which are not in, or dependent on, the mind, (ii) that propositions are made up not of subjective ideas, but of objective concepts, (iii) that truth is *unanalyzable*, and (iv) that everything, propositions included, are made up of concepts.

“A proposition is constituted by any number of concepts, together with a specific relation between them; and according to the nature of this relation the proposition may be either true or false. What kind of relation makes a proposition true, what false, cannot be further defined.”

On this picture, the true proposition *that o is red* is a structured complex of concepts in which redness bears the relation *being predicated of and instantiated by* o; the false proposition *that o is green* is a complex in which *greenness* bears only the relation *being predicated of* to o. The primitive relation that distinguishes truth from falsity is instantiation. Finally, the object o is itself just a complex of concepts it instantiates.

For Moore at this time, all possible objects of thought *subsist*, or “have being.” Thus, *there is* both a car in my garage and a monster I have imagined. Both are constituents of reality, *not ideas in my mind*. *Existing things* are located in time; merely subsisting things aren’t. For the car to exist is for the unanalyzable property *existence* to be one of the concepts of which it is a composed; for the monster not to exist (but merely subsist) is for existence not to be among the concepts that compose it. Both true and false propositions exist or subsist. The true ones are facts; the false ones aren’t. *At this stage, Moore was no longer an Idealist; he was what is called an “extreme metaphysical realist.”*

Soon, he would mature into a thinker with a different and powerful lesson. *We know that philosophy, more than most other theoretical enterprises, is rife with obscurity, confusion, and absurd speculation. So, when its attempts at grandeur lead to theses inconsistent with our strongest pre-philosophical convictions, it is usually not because we have finally grasped the nature of Reality, but because the philosopher has gone astray.* But Moore hadn’t yet reached this point.

#### Questioning the Appeal of Idealism 1901-02

His criticism of Absolute Idealism intensified in when he criticized McTaggart, who argued that Reality is a morally perfect community of immortal persons related in mutual love, existing outside of time, which, like matter, is merely an appearance. Moore criticizes this vision for failing to take seriously McTaggart’s doctrine that time is unreal. Because it is unreal, both the persons and the Absolute Reality they make up must be timeless and unchanging. Like the natural numbers, their existence is outside of time. *But, Moore insists, this isn’t what we are interested in when wondering about our own mortality.* We want to know whether we will live forever and, if so, what that existence will be like. Since what McTaggart tries to establish is merely a static and timeless existence in which we have no interest, and of which we have no understanding, he is not justified in treating its value to us as the value of an infinite prolongation of our temporal lives.

For Moore, the problem was inherent in the doctrine that time as unreal. Does it mean that some things – the best and most real – are timeless and unchanging, while others – much worse and mere appearances – are temporal, and so subject to change and passing away? Or does it mean that everything is timeless and unchanging, even though some things (wrongly) appear to change? For Moore, the Idealists obscured the fact that neither was plausible by equivocating between them.

Moore tied these points together in a critique of the ethics of Absolute Idealism. On the one hand, if Reality is timeless, perfect, and complete, then there is no action, no imperfection, and no scope for ethics. Since the whole of Reality is, for the Idealist, present in each of its parts, each part must be perfect as it is. On the other hand, if there is timeless and perfect Reality *plus* other things -- unreal “appearances” -- then the appearances can have no effect on the value of Reality. So, Moore argued, they can’t have any *real* value. Either way, there is no scope for ethics. For ethics to make sense, Reality can’t be as the Absolute Idealists say it is.

### The Refutation of Idealism 1903

Moore's target:

"Modern Idealism asserts that it [the universe] is *spiritual*. There are two points about this assertion to which I wish to call attention... (1) that the universe is very different... from what it seems, and (2) that it has... a large number of properties which it does not seem to have... When the whole universe is declared to be spiritual, it is meant not only that it is in some sense *conscious*, but that it has what we recognize in ourselves as the *higher* forms of consciousness. That it is intelligent; that it is purposeful; that it is not mechanical."

It is hard to read this description of Moore's target without a sense of incredulity. He emphasizes how far it is from what we pre-philosophically think, which was why many found it so significant and potentially life-changing. Moore doesn't dismiss it for its pretensions, but he does have a subtext: any view as revisionary as that has to be supported by strong arguments.

He reconstructs the Idealist's master argument as starting from the premise that *esse is percipi, to exist is to be perceived (or experienced)*. Why, he wonders, do the Idealists believe that? He argues that it can't be analytic, because it can't be turned into a logical truth by putting synonyms for synonyms. He then claims that it isn't a *self-evident synthetic a priori* truth either. Nor, he assumes, can it be proven from self-evident truths by self-evident steps. Despite all this, he thinks he knows why the Idealists take it to be obvious.

"Idealists... must assert that whatever is experienced, is *necessarily* so. And this doctrine they commonly express by saying that 'the object of experience is *inconceivable* apart from the subject.'... What I suggest then is that Idealists hold [this doctrine]... because they think it is an *analytic* truth in the restricted sense that it is proved by the law of contradiction alone... [T]he Idealist maintains that object and subject are necessarily connected, mainly because he fails to see that they are *distinct*... When he thinks of 'yellow' and when he thinks of the 'sensation of yellow,' he fails to see that there is anything whatever in the latter which is not in the former. This being so, to deny that yellow [the thing seen] can ever *be* apart from the sensation of yellow [the experiencing of it] is merely to deny that yellow can ever be other than it is... *To assert that yellow is necessarily an object of experience is to assert that yellow is necessarily yellow.*"

He continues:

"Of course the proposition [that yellow = the sensation of yellow] also implies that experience is distinct from yellow – *else there would be no reason for insisting that yellow is a sensation*: and... [thus] the argument both affirms and denies that yellow and [the] sensation of yellow are distinct."

Moore is wrong; the Idealist isn't committed to a contradiction. How does Moore fall into this error? Let us temporarily grant that the proposition the Idealist asserts -- *that yellow is necessarily an object of experience* -- is either identical with or equivalent to the proposition *that necessarily yellow = the sensation of yellow*. Next suppose (i) that asserting *that necessarily A = B* only makes sense as a way of ruling out what one takes to be *the genuine possibility that A ≠ B*, and (ii) *that If A = B, then it is no more possible that A ≠ B than it is possible that A ≠ A* – and so *if it is possible that A ≠ B, then A ≠ B*. One who believed all this would take the Idealist's insistence that yellow = the sensation of yellow as committing him to a contradiction. But Moore's premises, (i) and (ii), equivocate. If by 'possibility' we mean *what we can conceive as being so*, then (i) may be true; if we mean *what really could be so*, then (ii) may be true (if 'A' and 'B' are names or other rigid designators). But on neither sense of possibility are both true. However, this doesn't undermine Moore's critique. If the Idealists really did identify yellow with the sensation of it, and took *esse* to be *percipi* for that reason, then they were wrong because the experience of yellow *is* different from what is experienced.

Having taken himself to have refuted Idealism, Moore offers a positive theory consisting of the following theses: (i) The blue we see ≠ the sensation of blue, which is our experience of seeing it. (ii) We can conceive of the blue we see existing unperceived. (iii) Therefore, it really could exist unperceived; even in cases when what I see, hear, or touch doesn't survive my perceiving it, it is

genuinely possible for it to do so. (iv) Thus, what I perceive is *never* “in” or ontologically dependent on my mind.

(i) and (ii) are true. Although Moore wrongly thinks that genuine possibility follows from coherent conceivability, the case for his claim *that the objects of my perception could exist apart from being perceived* can be made independently. The blue surface of my jeans, the sound of the plane overhead, rough surface I touch could all exist without being perceived.

What about cases in which something looks blue, even though it really isn't, or worse, cases in which one seemingly has a sensation of blue despite the fact that nothing in one's environment even looks blue? Some will claim that in such cases we see mind-dependent things (mental images) that couldn't exist unperceived. Though Moore doesn't address this claim, there is a response available to him. First, when something in one's environment looks blue but isn't, the thing one sees *as blue* may continue to exist unperceived, which is all Moore needs. Second, in hallucination one may have an experience very like the experience one has when seeing something blue; Still, one may maintain, it's not a case of *seeing* anything as blue, since nothing is appearing blue. *No matter how much the experience resembles one of seeing something, one isn't seeing anything.* Third, one's pseudo-perceptual experience may, despite this, have propositional content. When one sees an object *o* as blue, one's visual experience *represents o as blue*, which means that one bears an attitude to the proposition that *o* is blue. Of course one doesn't see the proposition – one sees the object. But one is in a perceptual state of predicating *being blue* of *o*, which is what entertaining the proposition *that o is blue* is. In hallucination, one doesn't entertain that proposition; though one may entertain the proposition that *something here is blue*.

This view is suggested but not developed by Moore. His 1903 remarks anticipated the contemporary view, called *intentionalism*, that perceptual and cognitive states are bearers of representational content, and so are relations to propositions. Just as Moore thinks that Idealists were led astray by using a single word ‘sensation’ for both the visual experience of blue and the blue they experienced, so the modern intentionalist thinks that contemporary philosophers who believe there are phenomenal objects of perceptual experience, often called *qualia*, (over and above representational content) are led astray by using words like ‘pain’ in inconsistent ways.

On the one hand: "Pain is a feeling. Surely that is uncontroversial. To have pain and to feel pain are one and the same." On the other hand: pain is not a feeling – one's feeling of *the pain in the toe* is a mental event, and so is in the head, or in the mind, while the pain felt is (presumably) in the toe. If the distinction between *pains-as-experiences* and *pains-as-objects-of-experiences* was explicitly recognized then it would be evident that there was some question about whether pains-as-objects exist, or are as they seem to be. But almost everyone appears to be convinced that the question makes no sense at all: there are no illusions of pain – phantom limb pain is pain!" Alex Byrne

The correct Moorean response is that pains are experiences -- perceptions of damage – not the things experienced (or perceived). They are feelings, not things that are felt. But being perceptions, pain can be illusory. Although phantom pain is real – it is a pain experience – it is an experience of damage when there is none.

The view of perception most naturally opposed to Moore's 1903 view is one that holds that what we directly see are mental images – which can't exist unperceived and have precisely the properties they appear to have. The idea is that what we really see is *how things appear* (to us), so what we really see are *appearances* – images of things, rather than the things themselves. Of course, the *appearances* we directly perceive have precisely the properties that things appear to have. *Since there are no appearances of appearances, they are as they seem to be.* This conclusion, which Moore works hard to resist, follows naturally enough, *if one starts with the idea that we see appearances.* But there is no good reason to start there. Since the ordinary, default view is that what is seen, heard, or touched is independent of us, abandoning it in favor of the view that the only things we ever perceive are our own

mental constructions requires powerful justification. Otherwise put, the burden of proof is on Moore's opponents.

Moore doesn't *prove* his view of perception in a way that revisionary Idealist metaphysicians and skeptics and about mind-independent objects of perception must accept. Rather, he articulates our largely pre-philosophical world view in a way that offers them few, if any, materials to build a case against us. The task for the Moorean philosopher is to develop this commonsense view more fully, after which he will turn the tables on his commonsense-defying opponent by demanding a justification of *the opponent's* premises that provides *us* with a reason for accepting *them*. This was the signature strategy of the great epistemologist that G.E. Moore was to become. He took his first major step in becoming that great historical figure in "The Refutation of Idealism."

## Part 2: Philosophy, Epistemology, and Common Sense

### Common Sense and the Aims of Philosophy: 1910-11 Lectures

The 1<sup>st</sup> lecture is an instructive indicator of the state of analytic philosophy in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In it Moore discusses what he takes to be philosophy's most important questions and outlines alternative answers. Looking back today, two points stand out. First, the conception of philosophy in the mind of this founding father of analytic philosophy is thoroughly traditional. For Moore, the most important task of philosophy is to give a general description of the whole universe – by which he means an accounting of the kinds of things we *know* to be in it--material objects, human minds, etc.--the kinds of things which, *though not known to be in it, may very well be in it* -- a divine mind or minds, human minds after death)--and the relations holding among the different kinds of things (e.g., minds *attached* to bodies). Related to this metaphysical inquiry is the epistemological task of explaining how we know anything by providing an analysis that specifies necessary and sufficient conditions for *knowledge*. Finally, Moore thinks, there are questions of *value*--the rightness or wrongness of actions, the goodness or badness of states of affairs, and even the value of the universe as a whole. *In short, metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics (traditionally conceived) make up the unsurprising the core of his conception of philosophy.* Were we to supplement this sketch with the 1910 views of Frege and Russell logic, language, and mathematics would be added to Moore's main philosophical concerns. But the overall conception of philosophy wouldn't change much. *In these early days of the analytic tradition some previously neglected philosophical topics have been given more prominence, but they haven't replaced traditional concerns, which are now addressed in new ways.*

The second thing that leaps from Moore's 1910 text is the respectful attention paid to what he characterizes as our common-sense conception of things. Here is his summary.

"There are...certain views about the nature of the Universe, which are held, now-a-days, by almost everybody. They are so universally held that they may...fairly be called the views of Common Sense. I do not know that Common Sense can be said to have any views about the *whole* Universe...But it has... very definite views to the effect that certain kinds of things certainly are in the Universe, and as to some of the ways which these kinds of things are related to one another...[W]hat 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...I wish...to begin by describing...the most important views of Common Sense: things which we all commonly assume to be true about the Universe, and which we are sure that we know to be true about it."

Moore is here signaling that the most obvious and universal of our firmly held convictions constitute our starting point in philosophy. He is open to views that go beyond Common Sense by answering

questions it leaves open. He is even willing to consider views that contradict it. But he gives the impression that those who contradict it face a very difficult task.

He characterizes common sense as confident in the existence of material things of all sorts as well as non-material minds and acts of consciousness. All of these things are taken to be *known* to exist, as is the purported fact that conscious minds are fundamentally different from non-conscious material things. Material things are claimed to be known to be capable of existing unperceived, as well as being located in space – situated at various distances from one another, with the distance of the earth, for example, being “many millions of miles from the sun in one direction, and many more millions of miles distant from the pole star in another.” Like material things, minds and their conscious acts are claimed to be known to exist at some times and not at others. Some things are claimed to be known to exist now, but not in the past; others are said to be known to have existed in the past, but not now. Common Sense further takes it to be probable that there was a time in which no acts of consciousness were associated with, or attached to, any material bodies on earth.

It is clear from Moore’s examples that he recognizes our Common Sense convictions to change over time, and not to be infallible. Common Sense may be wrong, about what it takes us to know, and about the nature of the things it takes us to know about. This is apparent from our evolving knowledge of the Earth, and its place in the Universe. It is also apparent from our Common Sense conviction that what may have once been the Common Sense conviction of our ancestors – namely, that much in nature, in addition to humans and animals, is conscious – is certainly not true. Where those of us alive today may disagree with Moore is in finding it far from obvious that conscious mental states are not, in the end, a subspecies of the physical. Whatever may have been true of the Common Sense of his place and time, the Common Sense of ours leaves this question open.

So although the propositions of common sense are not necessary or a priori truths, and although they occasionally turn out to be false, they are, nevertheless, Moore’s philosophical starting point. He is willing to consider arguments against one or another commonsense proposition, but he regards it as preposterous to suppose they could be rejected *en mass*. *Each such proposition enjoys a presumption of truth that can be overturned only by bringing it into conflict with other commonsense propositions, which, as a body, carry even greater conviction.* Part of his reason for specifying his propositions of common sense so carefully was to show that he was *not* including every proposition that has been widely believed at some time or other. *For example, propositions about God, the origin of the universe, the shape of the earth, the limits of human knowledge, the difference between the sexes, and the inherent goodness or badness of human beings are not included in his Common Sense truisms – no matter how many people may believe them.*

What makes some commonly believed propositions, but not others, truths of Moorean Common Sense? He never says, but it is clear that the propositions he selected were ones he thought it would be *absurd* to deny. But absurd in what way? Since they aren’t necessary truths, their denials aren’t contradictory. Nevertheless, the denials of *some* of his propositions have a self-undermining property. For example, Moore maintains, if any philosopher denies the commonsense proposition *that some human beings who have thoughts and experiences exist on Earth*, then the mere fact that the philosopher has denied the proposition shows that he is wrong. Assuming, as Moore does, that any philosopher is a human being who has lived on Earth, has had experiences, and has formed beliefs, we can be sure that if any philosopher has doubted anything, then some human being has done so, and so has existed, lived on Earth, had thoughts, and so on.

But what about Moore’s claim that he *knows*, and others also *know*, the various commonsense propositions to be true? Can these knowledge claims be denied? Some skeptics have denied that anyone really knows many propositions that Moore takes to be fundamental to commonsense knowledge. Are such claims self-undermining? It seems that skeptical philosophers might consistently maintain that

though no one knows the propositions Moore takes to be commonly known, these things these propositions *might* nevertheless be true. Though scarcely credible, this position seems to be coherent. But such a philosopher must be careful. If he goes on to *assert*, as some have, that claims such as the proposition that human beings live on the Earth, which has existed for many years, *are commonly believed, even though they cannot be known*, then he is flirting with contradiction. For one who asserts this may be taken to be implicitly claiming to *know* that which he asserts – namely that certain things are commonly believed by human beings. But that means he is claiming to *know* that there are human beings who have had certain beliefs and experiences; and it is hard to see how he could do this without taking himself to *know* many of the same things Moore claims to know. Finally, unless the philosopher thinks he is unique, he will be hard pressed to deny that others know such things too.

In this way, Moore attempted to persuade others that the commonsense view of the world should be regarded as so obviously correct as to be uncontentious. He was, in fact, quite persuasive. It is hard to imagine anyone sincerely and consistently denying the central contentions of his Common Sense view. Moore himself was convinced that no one ever had. He says:

“I am one of those philosophers who have held that the ‘Common Sense view of the world’ is, in certain fundamental features, *wholly* true. But it must be remembered that, according to me, *all* philosophers, without exception, have agreed with me in holding this [i.e. they have all believed it to be true]: and that the real difference, which is commonly expressed in this way, is only a difference between those philosophers, who have *also* held views inconsistent with these features in ‘the Common Sense view of the world,’ and those who have not.”

After all, Moore would say, philosophers live lives like anyone else, in which they take for granted all the commonsense truths he does. This is shown as much in their profession of skepticism as by anything else. In propounding skeptical doctrines, they address their lectures to other men and women, publish books they know will be purchased and read, and passionately criticize the writings of others in which they accuse them of making mistakes. In so doing, Moore would insist, they presuppose what their skeptical doctrines deny. If he is right, then his criticism of inconsistency is well taken. Many found it hard to disagree.

Despite its seeming obviousness, Moore’s view was ambitious. He not only claimed to know things other philosophers found problematic, he claimed to know them without directly answering traditional skeptical objections. In this way Moore offered a sharp contrast with a more traditional, philosophical position that does *not* take pre-philosophical knowledge claims at face value, but rather assumes the role of an arbiter. Given the claims of Common Sense, the arbiter challenges us to *justify* our claims. If we can’t give *proofs* that satisfy the arbiter’s demands, he is ready to conclude that we don’t know these things. Worse, some philosophers have claimed to show our most deeply held commonsense convictions to be false. As we have seen, Moore began his days as a philosopher being quite sympathetic to then leading philosophers who held, among other things, that time is unreal (and so our ordinary belief that some things happen before other things is false), that all existence is spiritual (and so our view that there are material objects with no capacity for perceptual or other mental activity is false), and that only one all-encompassing being, the absolute, really exists (and so our ordinary conception of the world as consisting of many independent things is false). Moore addressed these views as a young man on their own terms, gradually become more critical, and ultimately freed himself from them. *When he did, he often expressed puzzlement about how philosophers who advocated radically revisionist views could think themselves capable of so completely overturning our pre-philosophical convictions. From what source did they derive their alleged knowledge? How could they, by mere reflection, arrive at doctrines so certain that they could be used to refute our most fundamental pre-philosophical convictions?*

For the mature Moore, conflicts between speculative philosophical principles and commonsense convictions force us to give up one or the other. It would be nice to be able to state some principle about

how such choices are to be made, while diagnosing what mistake one is guilty of if one decides against Common Sense. Is the philosopher who denies that he can know that he is seeing, or touching, a pencil misusing, or misunderstanding, words like ‘see’, ‘touch’, ‘pencil’, and ‘know’? Is he mistaking *fallibility*, which is the mere possibility of error, for *unreliability*, with is reason not to trust? *Is he confusing the fact that one’s perceptual experience would provide no evidence for an external world, if one had antecedent reason to think that its deliverances were not reports of such a world, with the fallacy that one’s perceptions provide no evidence for an external world, if one doesn’t already know there is one?* One of the most frustrating things about Moore is that he doesn’t answer these questions. Mostly he was content with the thought that one’s confidence in a general philosophical principle could never be more secure than one’s confidence in the bedrock convictions of Common Sense. *Philosophers have no special knowledge prior to, and more reliable than, the strongest examples of commonsense knowledge. Consequently, no philosophical principle can, by itself, be used to undermine such putative knowledge.*

### Proof of an External World

Moore’s article, which was given as a lecture at the British Academy in 1939, the year of his retirement from Cambridge, begins with a quote from Kant.

“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 point of the article is *not* to provide the proof that Kant seems to have thought philosophy should provide, but to address what Moore takes to be the real scandal – namely, the acceptance of skeptical conceptions of knowledge that lead many philosophers to demand a proof. Moore divides his article into 4 parts: (i) *the thesis to be proved*, (ii) *definition of key terms in the thesis*, (iii) *the proof*. (iv) *defense of the claim that the proof meets all the usual requirements for being a proof*.

The thesis to be proved. *There are objects external to the mind.*

The key term to be defined is *object external to the mind*. *x* is such an object iff it is conceptually possible for *x* to exist without anyone perceiving or experiencing *x*. Examples include rocks, trees, tables, chairs, human bodies, hands, shadows, soap bubbles, etc. Moore uses these terms, as we all do, to stand for things which, if they exist, are capable of existing unperceived and unexperienced. So if there are tables or chairs or hands or shadows, there are things external to minds.

### *The Proof*

- Premise 1. Here (holding up one hand) is one hand  
 Premise 2. Here (holding up his other hand) is another hand  
 Conclusion 1. Therefore, there are at least two hands.  
 Conclusion 2. Therefore, there are at least two things external to our minds.

### *The Requirements for Being a Proof*

- (i) *The premises must be different from the conclusion*. Since Moore’s conclusion could be true even if the premises weren’t, it differs from the premises, and the requirement is met.  
 (ii) *The conclusion must follow from the premises*; it must be *impossible* for the premises to be true while the conclusion is false. This requirement is also met.  
 (iii) *The premises must be known to be true*.

Is this requirement met? Moore knows that any philosopher who was skeptical about the conclusion to being with will be skeptical of Moore’s claim to know the premises. Nevertheless he claims to know them. He points out that *some things must be known without proof, in order for anything to be provable*. He asks: *Why shouldn’t the claim that we have hands be one such claim?* Hearing this challenge, one



may think: *Well, yes, I know I am hearing these words, and Moore knew he had hands. But surely that can't be enough to prove what philosophers for centuries have despaired of proving? If it were enough, wouldn't that show that something in philosophy had been monumentally wrong for centuries?*

Yes, it would show that, which is precisely Moore's message. He is well aware that any philosopher who thinks that a proof of the external world is needed will reject his argument on the grounds that his premises require proof. He has no sympathy with that response, unless it is coupled with an explanation why Moore's premises require proof, but other premises don't. In issuing this challenge, Moore puts the burden of proof on the skeptic.

In doing so, he asks us to imagine someone claiming *that there are three misprints on a certain page*, and someone else disputing this. The first person then *proves* his claim by reading the page and pointing them out. "Here is a misprint, here is another misprint, and here is a third; therefore there are at least three misprints on the page." As Moore rightly says *it would be absurd to suppose that no such proof could be legitimate because one hadn't proved, and couldn't prove, that this meaningless jumble of letters is a misprint, that this other jumble and that third one is too*. No. We would accept the premises without proof. But if one can know that certain things are misprints, surely, one can know that other things are hands.

*Is There a Fourth Requirement on Proofs that Moore's Fails to Satisfy?*

Some contemporary philosophers think so. They contend that even if he does know his premises, his knowledge of them depends on *already knowing* the conclusion he draws from them. For them, the perceptual experience that gives Moore knowledge that he is holding up his hands does so *only because he already knows there is an external world about which perception provide information*. If we started out thinking that such experiences were only dreams, or artificially created Matrix-images, both Moore's experiences and ours would be taken to be just more dreams or images. They would neither convince us, nor provide justification for the claim that we were seeing real, existing hands, or even that hands exist. According to this critique, we may know there is an external world, but if we do, Moore's argument doesn't show that. So it isn't a proof.

To evaluate this critique, we must distinguish the role of perceptual evidence in *justifying* a belief from its role in leading us to form the belief. We also must distinguish situations in which potential evidence *fails to justify* because one has reason to believe it is inaccurate from situations in which such evidence *retains its justificatory force* despite one's recognition of *the possibility it may be inaccurate*.

Regarding the first distinction, a person suffering from a massively systematic delusion may have sufficient cognitive resources to incorporate any experience into his or her delusional scheme while retaining a set of fixed delusional beliefs. The fact that for some true propositions *p* such a person would not be moved by any experience to believe *p* doesn't show that none of those experiences provide justifying evidence for *p*. Of course, being in possession of evidence that *would justify* one's belief, if one were to come to believe *p*, is *not sufficient for knowledge of p*. *For that, one must really believe p (which must also be true). But if, due to some psychological cause, the delusion loses its hold on the sufferer, who then becomes willing to consider alternative beliefs, the justificatory force of available perceptual evidence stands ready to underwrite knowledge of p, once the agent comes to firmly believe p*. This point applies to Moore's argument. It is difficult to imagine anyone insane enough to be under the delusion that his or her perceptual experiences are merely images and impressions, providing no information about an external world. But to the extent we can imagine it, we may grant that *seeing Moore hold up his hands, and hearing him present his argument, could not be expected to persuade the sufferer to replace the delusional beliefs with beliefs in Moore, his hands, and the external world*. But, *if the agent were to suddenly snap out of it, and acquire those beliefs, he or she would then Moorean have perceptual justification for them*.

Next consider the distinction between cases in which potential evidence *fails to justify because one has reason to believe it to be unreliable* and cases in which the experience *retains its justificatory force despite one's recognition of the possibility that it could be untrustworthy*. If we had *independent reason* to believe either that there were no hands or other external objects, or that our perceptual evidence was systematically unreliable, then Moore's simple appeal to such evidence *wouldn't* support knowledge either of his premises or of his conclusion. But the skeptic hasn't given us any such *independent reason*. *All we have been given is the mere possibility that there are no hands or other external objects presented to us in perception. But the mere possibility that something isn't so is not a reason to believe that it isn't so*. Since the perceptual evidence Moore appeals to has no independently justified burden of *inaccuracy* or *unreliability* to overcome, he is justified in thinking it can play its intended role of *justifying* his claim to know both his premises and his conclusion to be true. In this way, his claim to have presented a proof of an external world can be given a plausible defense.

#### *What is the Point of Moore's Proof*

How, in light of this, we should view skepticism? Beyond providing his proof, Moore seemed to have little interest in *diagnosing* why skepticism can be so seductive. What subtle errors have given it this power? What positive lessons we can learn from its mistakes? What was the larger point of his proof? He knew that no one who thought a proof was needed would be convinced by the one he gave. He was also aware that failure to convince doesn't show that an argument isn't a proof. Still, there must be some further Moorean message he was trying to communicate. What was it?

I think the implicit message is one he stated more explicitly in chapters 5 and 6 of *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*. The message is that prior to turning themselves into knots attempting to "answer the skeptic," philosophers should ask the skeptic to justify his claim that we can't know what we take to know. As Moore saw it, skeptics have typically based their supposedly unanswerable question "How do you know?" on restrictive theories of what knowledge is, and what is required for achieving it. The picture, in brief, is the skeptic typically proceeds follows.

- P1. *All knowledge is thus-and-so*. E.g., to know *p*, one's evidence must entail *p* – and so rule out the possibility that *p* is untrue. Nothing counts as evidence unless one couldn't be mistaken about it under any circumstances. Examples of evidence statements: statements about oneself, one's thoughts, and one's private sense experience.
- P2. Alleged knowledge of hands, misprints, etc. is not thus-and-so.
- C. Thus, no one ever knows that there are hands, misprints, etc.

Moore's reply to all such arguments is "How do *you* know that the premises of *your* argument are true?"

Restrictive premises, like Humean versions of P1 and P2 can sound plausible. If one builds the skeptical case carefully, one can give a chain of reasoning leading to something very much like, P1, P2, and C, each step of which appeals to what seem to be ordinary, commonsense views about knowledge and evidence. For example, we would normally be quite uncomfortable making any claim to the effect: *I know that S, but it is possible, given my evidence, that not S*. Moreover, if asked to imagine the possibility that a brain in a vat could be artificially stimulated to have precisely the experiences we have had in the past, are having now, and will have in the future, many of us would be uncomfortable denying that such a scenario is possible. Finally, if asked whether -- since the brain in the vat has the same experiences we do, the brain's *perceptual evidence* for its view of the world must be the same as ours -- many would be inclined to say that the brain's evidence *is* the same as ours. Taken singly, each step has intuitive appeal. Taken together, they seem to support a view according to which (i) *it is possible, given our evidence, that we have never perceived hands or misprints, and even that there are no such things, and (ii) it follows that our per-theoretic claims to know of such things are false*. Since we surely want to

preserve these claims, we need an explanation of which steps in this intuitive line of skeptical reasoning are incorrect and why. Moore doesn't tell us.

Instead he assures us that no such line of reasoning could ever be correct. Since C does follow from P1 and P2, what we learn is that one cannot simultaneously accept P1, P2, and (7).

7. I know that this is a hand/misprint (demonstrating a relevant hand/misprint).

He reminds us that, although at least one of these statements must go, nothing in the argument dictates which. So one must decide which statement or statements one has least reason to accept, and which one has most reason to accept. His point seems to be that anyone who honestly asks this question will find (7) to be the most secure, and so will reject either P1 or P2. As Moore sees it, the problem with the skeptic is that he has adopted a philosophical theory about what knowledge consists in that is far too restrictive. *The skeptic assumes we can be certain about what knowledge is before we decide whether what we all ordinarily take to be prime examples of knowledge are genuine.* But this is backwards. For Moore any philosophical theory about the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge, must be tested against what we all recognize to be clear cases of knowledge. Since these constitute *evidence* for, or against, the theory, any theory inconsistent with a substantial range of such examples is disconfirmed. *Once we see that the skeptic's assumptions about knowledge are themselves both typically unsupported by anything more than their initial intuitive appeal, and less plausible than the commonsense convictions they conflict with, we have little choice but to reject the way in which the skeptic poses the problem.* The real problem, according to Moore, is not to prove that we know that there are hands, or to deny this, but to construct a theory of knowledge that is consistent with obvious instances of knowledge, which explains how that knowledge arises.

For Moore, both the skeptic and the philosopher who tries to provide the kind of proof demanded by the skeptic accept an unjustified theory of what knowledge consists in. This conviction drives the ironic nature of his presentation. *No one who believed that a proof of the external world was needed would be satisfied by Moore's proof because anyone who demanded such a proof would already have accepted the skeptic's restrictive conception of knowledge, and so would deny that Moore knew that he was holding up his hand.* What then was Moore's purpose in presenting his proof? It was to show there is no need for such a proof in the first place. What he wants us to see is that if our knowledge of the external world presents a problem to philosophy, the scandal does not lie not the inability of philosophers to show that this knowledge meets the conditions demanded by skeptic. The scandal lies in philosophers' uncritical acceptance of the legitimacy of the skeptic's demands. That idea is very attractive. But it would have been better if it were accompanied by a positive theory of what knowledge is that made it clear at precisely which points the skeptic goes wrong, and explained how we know what we really do know.