

The Moorean Argument for the Full Moral Status of those with Profound Intellectual Disability: A Rejoinder to Roberts

Introduction

In a recent paper we argued that a Moorean strategy can be employed to justify our continued belief in the following proposition, even in the presence of philosophical views that entail it is false, without any philosophical argument against those views, and without any positive philosophical argument in its favour:

H>A: *Humans have an equal moral status that is higher than the moral status of non-human animals*¹

The basic idea is that our confidence in the truth of this proposition is greater than our confidence in the propositions that make up those philosophical views that entail it is false, and that this is sufficient to justify rejecting those views and continue to believe H>A.

Roberts has recently responded to our suggestion by claiming:

- (i) Although the Moorean strategy is valid, it is not powerful.
- (ii) A resort to the Moorean strategy reflects too great a pessimism about the accounts available that purport to justify H>A.²

In this short rejoinder we explain why we think that Roberts's two claims are false.

1.

In defence of (i) Roberts offers two arguments.

The first argument is that the Moorean strategy does not give us any stronger reason to believe that H>A is true than we had before, and so is not an argument 'for' the proposition. We agree that the strategy does not give us any stronger reason to believe that H>A is true than we had before, but this does not make the strategy weak. The strategy is a defensive one that enables us to resist arguments against H>A, and so resist weakening our belief in H>A. So unless all defensive strategies are weak (which, it seems clear, they are not), then the Moorean strategy is not weak for this reason. Furthermore, we agree that employing the Moorean strategy is not to give a *positive* argument for the truth of H>A, and we never intended it to be such an argument. But, it *is* an argument 'for' the view, in the sense that it gives us a justification to continue holding it in the presence of arguments against it, and this is all we intended the argument to be. (See ref. 1. p. 41) Unless resisting counterarguments is always weak (which, it seems clear, it is not), then the Moorean strategy is not weak for this reason either. So Roberts's first argument in defence of (i) fails.

Roberts also suggests here that if our strategy is a good one in this case, then it could be used to justify a continued belief in the existence of ghosts in the presence of alternative explanations from optics and psychology. This is incorrect, and belies a misunderstanding of our position. As we made clear in the paper, we allow that certain *kinds* of claims could be

used to legitimately undermine our belief in H>A (or any other strongly held belief), and broadly empirical claims such as those that issue from optics and psychology are of the right kind. Our point is that those who reject H>A do so not on the basis of any empirical claim, but on the basis of theoretical philosophical claims. And it is because of this is so that the Moorean strategy is justified in this context. (See ref. 1, pp 44-45)

The second argument that Roberts offers in defence of (i) is that there is a fundamental difference between the original context in which Moore employs the Moorean strategy and the context in which we employ it. The difference is supposed to lie in the fact that the original context is a sceptical one whilst ours is not. He says:

Moore's original argument from his confidence that he has hands to the existence of external things is unusually powerful because the sceptical arguments he opposes tend not to offer reasons to be confident about any alternatives: rather than suggesting just that we do not have hands, scepticism challenges our reasons to be confident about *any* of the possibilities... The case of moral status is fundamentally different. Each plausible argument for an account which conflicts with [H>A] is potentially capable of tipping the balance against that proposition. Such arguments are not sceptical reasons to doubt our confidence in everything: they advance opposition to the defended account relative to it. (ref. 2)

However, Roberts here misconstrues Moore's argument (at least, on the common interpretation of it that we employ in our paper, due to William Lycan).³ Moore's conclusion, on this interpretation, is not that he has hands, but that he *knows* that he has hands, and the sceptical arguments *are* supposed to advance opposition to this claim relative to it. So, there is no difference between our use of the Moorean strategy and Moore's. To be fair to Roberts, though, there is an error and a misprint in the original paper that obscures this fact, and we take the opportunity here to correct both. The misprint is on page 43 where there was supposed to be an example of a typical sceptical argument that runs as follows:

Premise 1. If S knows that S has hands, then S knows that all propositions incompatible with S knowing that S has hands are false.

Premise 2. S does not know that all propositions incompatible with S knowing that S hands are false, as the proposition *that the external world exists* is such a proposition, and S does not know that this proposition is false.

Conclusion: S does not know that S has hands.

In the proceeding text we then say:

Now consider: are you more confident that the proposition *that you have hands* is true, or (taking premise 1 as our example) *that the conditional proposition that if S knows that S has hands, then S knows that all propositions incompatible with S knowing that S has hands are false* is true? (ref. 1, p. 43)

We should not have said this, and this is the error. We should have said: are you more confident that the proposition *that you know have hands* is true than you are in the truth of

premise 1? It is this that Moore takes to be obvious on Lycan's interpretation. He makes the salient point as follows:

[It] is not that "I have hands" etc. are known in virtue of their being commonsense propositions. It is that the relevant knowledge-claims themselves are more plausible than are the premises of any philosophical argument intended to show that they are false. (ref. 3, p. 42)

At any rate, now our position has been properly stated, it should be clear that there is no difference between our use of the Moorean strategy and Moore's, and so Robert's second argument in defence of (i) fails.

2.

In defence of (ii) Roberts cites a view that, he claims, is 'one of the most compelling bases for moral theory development', viz. that the moral status of human beings can be grounded in their interests. But Roberts's comments here are puzzling. He says:

To the extent that other humans do have lesser interest than ours, we do have less reason to be concerned about them; but to the extent that humans with PIDs or otherwise are fully capable of the range of human happiness, we have every reason to consider their status full. (ref. 2)

But this, it seems, is to admit that $H > A$ is false. The argument often given by those who hold the view Roberts's cites is that humans with PIDS *do* have lesser interests than ours precisely because they are *not* fully capable of the range of human happiness. Indeed, they argue that some humans with PIDS have interests that are on a par, or lesser than, some non-human animals (e.g. dogs). And so, just as full moral status is denied of dogs, so it is denied of those humans with PIDS, and so $H > A$ is held to be false. (See, e.g. ref. 4, p. 67) So if this really is one of the most compelling bases of moral theory development, we do have good reason to be pessimistic.

References

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3. Lycan WG. Moore against the new skeptics. *Philos Stud* 2001;103:35–53.
4. Singer P. *Practical Ethics* 1993; 2nd edition. (Cambridge: CUP)