

Swarthmore College

Works

Philosophy Faculty Works

Philosophy

6-1-2009

Was Moore A Moorean? On Moore And Scepticism

Peter Baumann

Swarthmore College, pbauman1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Peter Baumann. (2009). "Was Moore A Moorean? On Moore And Scepticism". *European Journal Of Philosophy*. Volume 17, Issue 2. 181-200. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-0378.2008.00300.x
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy/21>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by . It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Was Moore a Moorean? On Moore and Scepticism¹

Peter Baumann

Abstract

One of the most important views in the recent discussion of epistemological scepticism is Neo-Mooreanism. It turns a well-known kind of sceptical argument (the dreaming argument and its different versions) on its head by starting with ordinary knowledge claims and concluding that we know that we are not in a sceptical scenario. This paper argues that George Edward Moore was not a Moorean in this sense. Moore replied to other forms of scepticism than those mostly discussed nowadays. His own anti-sceptical position turns out to be very subtle and complex; furthermore it changed over time. This paper follows Moore's views of what the sceptical problem is and how one should respond to it through a series of crucial papers with the main focus being on Moore's 'Proof of an External World'. An appendix deals with the much neglected relation between epistemological scepticism and moral scepticism in Moore.

Epistemic scepticism comes in many varieties. Let us start with a form of scepticism according to which we do not and cannot know ordinary propositions - where ordinary propositions are contingent propositions about the external world. The current discussion about scepticism focuses very much on an argument of the following type (with “o” referring to an ordinary proposition, like “I have hands”, “s” to a proposition describing some sceptical scenario, like “I am merely dreaming that I have hands”, and with “K” for the knowledge-operator):

¹ This is the pre-peer reviewed version of the following article: Peter Baumann, "Was Moore a Moorean? On Moore and Scepticism", *European Journal of Philosophy* 17, 2009, 181-200 which has been published in final form at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2008.00300.x/abstract>.

Sceptical Argument (ScA)

(1s) not K(not s)

(2s) If not K(not s), then not Ko

(3s) not Ko.

Recently, Moore has often been brought in connection with if not been characterized as offering or at least suggesting an anti-sceptical argument of the following type (cf., e.g., Sosa 1999 or Pritchard 2002a and also Pritchard 2002b):

Anti-Sceptical Argument (ASA)

(1o) Ko

(2o) If Ko, then K(not s)

(3o) K(not s).

One can call anyone who argues along the lines of (ASA) a “neo-Moorean” or simply a “Moorean”. To be sure, there is more to what is nowadays called “neo-Mooreanism” or “Mooreanism”²; however, for lack of a better term I will use these terms here and apply it to any defender of (ASA). Neo-Mooreans are usually not interested in figuring out how closely they really are to the historical figure Moore. My main interest here is to understand and discuss Moore’s views on scepticism and relate it to the basic idea of Neo-Mooreanism or (ASA). Let us see what Moore has to say in defence of the claim that he or

2 For instance, in the recent debate about failure of transmission of warrant from the premises to the conclusion in arguments like (ASA) the Neo-Mooreans deny transmission failure (cf., e.g., Pryor 2004 and, as an alternative view, Wright 2002).

we do know many ordinary propositions. Let us see what kind of anti-sceptical strategy he has on offer and whether any of that comes even close to dealing with arguments like the ones just mentioned. I will come to the conclusion that Moore was not a Moorean. It will also turn out in particular that Moore's famous proof in "Proof of an External World" raises a number of puzzling issues, especially when that paper is read in the light of other papers written at about the same time. Moore's stance on scepticism is much less straightforward than many believe.

Since Moore has said quite different things about scepticism in different papers, we need to discuss his relevant papers individually. I will first take a look at "A Defence of Common Sense" (1925) (I) and then take a close look at his "Proof of an External World" (1939) (II). The latter paper is the most interesting one in our context. Some remarks Moore makes at about the time he wrote *Proof* - especially in "Certainty" (1941) - raise the problem of meta-scepticism (III). There are hints - in particular in "Four Forms of Scepticism" (1940) - to a response to meta-scepticism in some of Moore's remarks about common sense and philosophy (IV). The latter two sections are meant as further explorations relevant to (II). I attach an appendix with a less historical point and try out an anti-Moorean strategy which uses an analogy between arguments against epistemological scepticism and arguments against moral scepticism.

I. Ordinary Propositions?

In “A Defence of Common Sense” (1925) Moore presents the reader with his well-known list of ordinary propositions which he claims we do know (cf. *Defence*, 33-34; cf. also his list at the beginning of *Certainty*, 227 as well as, e.g., Skirry 2003).³ Moore defends two very interesting claims: He argues against those who deny the truth of Moore’s ordinary propositions (a) as well as against those who deny that anyone knows those propositions (b).

(a) *The Truth of Ordinary Propositions*. Moore remarks with respect to classes of ordinary propositions stating or implying that there are external objects or an external world that if negations of such propositions are true “then no philosopher has ever existed, and therefore none can ever have held with regard to any such class, that no proposition belonging to it is true.” (*Defence*, 40). One cannot truly assert (that is what Moore has in mind here) that there are no material bodies (including philosophers’ ones) or no external world simply because assertion requires a body (and therefore also an external world; for a related argument cf. Sosa 2007a, ch.1).

3 It is interesting to compare this list with the one offered by the champion of common sense philosophy, namely Thomas Reid (cf. *Essays*, 441-458; cf. also Greco 2002 on this). Reid’s list is remarkably close to Kant’s list of categories (cf. CpR A80 / B106) and it contains very diverse kinds of propositions. More importantly, one should notice that for Reid those propositions also constitute the content of principles of knowledge. Reid clearly is a foundationalist whereas Moore remains silent on questions concerning the structure of knowledge, at least in so far as ordinary propositions are concerned. This also distinguishes him from another major philosopher whose work was also concerned with common sense, namely Wittgenstein (cf. 1969). Reid also made the point that the propositions of common sense do not allow for further justification but also do not require any such justification (cf. Reid, *Essays*, 230; here Kant disagrees most clearly with Reid: cf. CpR A 84ff. / B 116ff.). Moore agrees with Reid when he points out in *Proof* that he cannot but also does not have to prove that there is one hand (while holding one up and pointing at it) (cf. *Proof*, 148-150). We will get back to that. In *Defence* Moore has little if anything to say about all this.

This would certainly not impress anyone who denies the existence of the external world. They can happily concede that one cannot truly assert the non-existence of the external world if the fact that one asserts it (in Moore's sense of the word) implies that there is an external object, namely the body of the person who makes the assertion. But still: Couldn't one think it (without asserting it in Moore's sense of "asserting")? At least for the dualist about mind and body there is some room to move here, given the idea that the thinking of thoughts does not require that the thinker has a body which is part of the external world. Moore would have to show that even the thinking of a thought requires the existence of an external object (e.g., a physical body). There is no such argument in Moore. If, however, Moore wanted to restrict his point to assertions (in his sense of the word), then he would have to show that there are assertions in the first place. He doesn't do that. And if he tried to do that, then, presumably, he could also proceed rather more directly and try to show that his ordinary propositions are true - without taking the detour of making his point about assertions. Moore is in no better epistemic position (probably rather in a worse position) with respect to "Someone is asserting that o" than with respect to "o".

Moore's point about assertion is thus correct but not relevant; he does not offer a serious argument in *Defence* against those who deny the existence of the external world or any of his ordinary propositions. Given all that, it is not surprising to see Moore admit, honest as he was, that "I have, I think no better argument than simply this – namely, that all the propositions in (1) [i.e., on his list] are, in fact, true." (*Defence*, 42).

(b) *Knowledge of Ordinary Propositions*. If one denies the truth of ordinary propositions, then one should also deny knowledge of such propositions. This, however, lands one, according to Moore, in an outright contradiction. Moore is concerned with the view that ordinary propositions are not known even though widely held (cf. Defence, 42). The sceptic should notice, so Moore, that the assumption that there is a widely held view implies the truth of ordinary propositions (cf. Defence, 43). But couldn't the sceptic accept that and simply point out that ordinary propositions are true but not known to be true? Not according to Moore:

“It is true that a philosopher who says 'There have existed many human beings beside myself, and none of us has ever known of the existence of any human beings beside himself', is only contradicting himself if what he holds is 'There have *certainly* existed many human beings beside myself' or, in other words, 'I know that there have existed other human beings beside myself'. But this, it seems to me, is what such philosophers have in fact been generally doing. They seem to me constantly to betray the fact that they regard the proposition that those beliefs *are* beliefs of Common Sense, or the proposition that they themselves are not the only members of the human race, as not merely true, but *certainly* true; and *certainly* true it cannot be, unless one member, at least, of the human race, namely themselves, has *known* the very things which that member is declaring that no human being has ever known.” (Defence, 43; cf. also "Hume's Philosophy" 1909), 158-159).

If Moore were just defending a knowledge account of assertion here (cf., e.g., Williamson 2000) – which he doesn't – according to which one is not entitled to assert "p" if one does not know that p, then there would be no contradiction. The sceptic would not be entitled, according to Moore, to make his assertion if it is true (and probably also not if it is false). But certainly he could think it without contradiction.

Does Moore rather defend the view here that "p" entails "Certainly p" and also "I know that p"? This view is not plausible at all and neither is this interpretation of the above passage. If that view were correct, the sceptic would indeed contradict herself because what she is saying would entail something like "I know that other human beings exist but nobody knows that other human beings exist".⁴

However, we probably have to read the passage just quoted in a weaker sense: Whoever asserts that p, also asserts that certainly p, and, with that, also that they know that p. In other words (with "A" for "the speaker asserts that" and "c" for "certainly"):

$A_p \rightarrow A_{cp}$;

$A_{cp} \rightarrow AK_p$.

This reading is more charitable to Moore (also because indexical sentences like "I know that p" do not express propositions, only utterances of such sentences do). Now,

4 This kind of analysis would lend itself to a solution to Moore's Paradox: "It's raining but I don't believe it" would entail "I know it's raining"; the latter would, according to a standard view of knowledge, entail "I believe it's raining"; all this would finally lead into the contradiction "I believe it's raining but I don't believe it". Interestingly, Moore does not use this kind of idea in his analysis of Moore's Paradox (cf. A Reply to my Critics, 542-543). Perhaps he was not that convinced of it.

$A(p \text{ and not } Kp)$

entails – if an assertion of a conjunction is an assertion of each conjunct – both that A_p and that $A_{\text{not } Kp}$. The former, however, entails – given the principles above – that AKp . Thus, the speaker turns out to be asserting two mutually incompatible propositions. If by asserting “ p and not Kp ” the speaker asserts all these things, it is also true that

$A(Kp \text{ and not } Kp)$.

This would certainly be an assertion with a contradictory content.⁵

The main problem with all this is, of course, that

$p \rightarrow cp$

and

$cp \rightarrow Kp$

as well as

$A_p \rightarrow Acp$

and

$Acp \rightarrow AKp$

5 One might, again, try to use this for a solution of Moore's Paradox.

are all false. Furthermore, it is a moot point whether the assertion of a conjunction really involves the assertion of each conjunct. Apart from that: Can one not deny that ordinary propositions are known without asserting or even holding that they are widely believed (cf. for this and some other points Cole 1991, 43-45)?⁶

Again, Moore is honest enough to make it clear that in the end he hasn't got an argument that would support his claim to know ordinary propositions: "I think I have nothing better to say than that it seems to me that I *do* know them, with certainty." (44). It is interesting to see that, at least in *Defence*, Moore has not got much more to offer than the simple statement that he does in fact know ordinary propositions (and that we do, too). This clearly won't satisfy the sceptic: Not only would it not convince her but she would probably not even acknowledge that Moore has made a move in the philosophical debate. It is also remarkable that nowhere here does Moore deal with a sceptical argument like the one mentioned at the beginning (ScA). He also does not offer an anti-sceptical argument with a conclusion which denies that we are in a sceptical scenario, like (ASA):

(1o) Ko

(2o) If Ko, then K(not s)

(3o) K(not s).

⁶ According to an even weaker reading of the above passage, Moore is saying that whoever asserts that p implies (e.g., in the sense of implicature) that cp and that Kp. Similar objections apply here.

Why not? In order to see clearer here, let us look at *Proof* where one might expect some kind of anti-sceptical argument (cf. also Williams 2004, 76, 87-88 for the different aims of *Defence* and *Proof*).

II. A Proof?

Moore's famous proof of an external world can seem so simple and straightforward that one can easily oversee its tricky aspects. He claims to be able to prove that two human hands exist by "holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, 'Here is one hand', and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, 'and here is another'." (Proof, 146). In addition, Moore claims to "have proved *ipso facto* the existence of external things" (Proof, 146; cf. also *Certainty*, 242-243).⁷ – I will start by looking at certain formal aspects of Moore's proof (a, b) and then move on to the core point: Moore's claim that he knows the premise that there is a hand but cannot and does not have to prove that premise (c-f). All this helps us better understand better what Moore was up to and how little that has to do with contemporary "Mooreanism" (g, h).

(a) *Question Begging?* The most common reaction to this proof is to object that it is question-begging (for a sophisticated revival of that view cf., e.g., Wright 1985, 2002; cf. also Lemos 2004, 88-91). This seems to be, interestingly, also Moore's own view in 1909,

⁷ But cf. also Greco 2002, 546 who holds that Moore did not really want to prove that external things exist because he thought we can know this simply by perception (cf. also 549, 551 where Greco traces this view back to Reid); his proof is, according to Greco, only "tongue in cheek". This, however, does not seem very plausible: First, it is not clear at all from Moore's texts that he held this view; second, it is not easy to see how perception could deliver information about the veridical nature of its deliverances. I cannot go more into this and Greco himself does not say much more about it.

in *Hume's Philosophy*, 30 years before he published *Proof*. Moore says about the position that one cannot know external facts: "It seems to me that such a position must, in a certain sense, be quite incapable of disproof. So much must be granted to any sceptic who feels inclined to hold it. Any valid argument which can be brought against it must be of the nature of a *petitio principii*: it must be the question at issue." (cf. *Hume's Philosophy*, 159-160; cf. also 163). This is astonishing because it seems that 30 years later Moore is offering exactly that kind of proof. Has he, in the meantime, forgotten what he wrote 30 years earlier? Did he have a completely different position back then, one that is sometimes seen as a misunderstanding of what Moore is really doing in his *Proof*? I think there is a different explanation. Moore only talks (in *Hume's Philosophy*) about the thesis that one cannot disprove that anybody knows external facts (or prove that we do know external facts); he is not talking about the possibility of proving that there is an external world. We will come back to this distinction later.

(b) *Ipsa Facto Proofs*? Let us get back to Moore's proof and begin with the claim that by proving that there are two hands he has "ipso facto" proved that there are external things. Moore holds that from "There are hands" follows "There are spatial objects" or "There are external objects" (cf. *Proof*, 137; cf. also, for an opposing view, Campbell 1945, 16-21). It is not quite clear what he means by "follows" here (whether an analytic entailment, given that the meaning of "hand" has it that hands are spatial or external objects, or some logical relation in which case he would need another premise) but let us leave this aside for a moment. More interesting is what he is getting at with this. Moore holds that, given the above entailment, it is "clear that ... if you have proved that two

plants exist ... you will *ipso facto* have proved that there are things to be met with in space [or external things, for that matter; PB]: you will not require *also* to give a separate proof that from the proposition that there are plants it *does* follow that there are things to be met with in space [or external things, for that matter; PB].” (Proof, 137-138; note that Moore speaks of plants here, not of hands; cf. further 145, 146, 147). The general idea behind this seems to be captured by the following closure principle for proofs (taking “SP” for “S has proven that”):

(CP) ((Necessarily: $p \rightarrow q$) and (SPp)) \rightarrow SPq.

(CP), however, seems clearly false. Consider mathematics and explain why it took so long to prove Fermat’s famous conjecture. Moore’s proof that there are two hands is not *ipso facto* a proof that there are external objects. Moore needs an additional argument. One could either think of an argument relying on analytic entailments: Given that the meaning of “hand” determines that hands are external objects, we can infer from “There are hands” that there are external objects. Or one could think of modus ponens: There are hands; if there are hands, then there are external objects; hence, there are external objects. In *Certainty*, Moore makes a parallel argument for “knowledge” instead of “proof”: He suggests that knowledge of ordinary propositions is *ipso facto* knowledge of the existence of an external world (cf. *Certainty*, 243-244). Similar objections apply to this case. But let us focus on the epistemological status of the premises of Moore’s proof; I take this to be the crucial part of Moore’s project. Let us leave aside the problems relating to the step from

the existence of hands to the existence of an external world. The crucial question is, as it turns out, whether anyone can know things about the world, like Moore's proposition concerning his hands.

(c) *Knowledge of the Premise*. Moore claims that he knows the two premises of his proof: namely that “here is a hand and here is another one” (Proof 146-147). It is important to note why Moore makes this claim. One might be tempted to assume – especially if one thinks of the current discussion about scepticism – that in order to establish that one knows that there is an external world one needs to proceed from known premises: If I don't know the premises, then I cannot gain knowledge of the conclusion by inferring it from the premises. However, Moore is not interested in proving that he knows that there is an external world; he is only interested in proving that there is an external world (cf. his "A Reply to my Critics" (1942), 668-669; cf. also Stroud 1984, 107, Baldwin 1990a, 289-293, 1990b, 131-133 and Sosa 2007b, 52-53; cf. however Wright 1985, 434 but also Wright 2002, 330 and Svensson 1981, 102-103). We will come back to this point later. The reason why Moore thinks he has to know the premises rather has to do with his (epistemological rather than mathematical) notion of a proof: A proof requires knowledge of the premises (cf. Proof, 146). Someone could attack his proof of an external world by doubting that he knows the premises. And this would be a very legitimate move.

(d) *Knowledge without Proof*. What does Moore then say in favour of his claim to know that, say, there is a hand? He makes a remark that is not very encouraging: “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!” (Proof, 146; cf. also Hume's *Philosophy*, 157-158 where he quickly adds

that this should not be considered as an argument). And this from a philosopher who, according to some legend, once used the example “There is a window” in a public lecture, pointing at a wall, when it turned out that there only was a painted window (cf. also Certainty, 227-228 as well as his "Commonplace Book 1919-1953", 193; for a different anecdote cf. Matson 1991, 7)! More interesting are the remarks Moore makes right toward the end of *Proof*. There he points out, in Reidian spirit, that he cannot prove his premises but also does not have to (cf. *Proof*, 148-149; cf. also Greco 2002, 549). One might suspect that Moore is trying to avoid an infinite regress implied by the thesis that all knowledge of some proposition requires knowledge of some other propositions; accordingly one could expect him to propose some kind of epistemic foundationalism. However, Moore does nothing like that when it comes to ordinary propositions of common sense; never does he characterize ordinary propositions as in some sense “basic” or knowable in a non-inferential way. This makes it a bit difficult to figure out how Moore could think that he does not need a proof of his premises.

(e) *No Need to Prove the Premise*. Moore explains (in the last paragraph of *Proof*) why he does not have to prove his premises, namely that “here is one hand and here is another”: One can know that p without being able to prove that p (*Proof*, 150; cf. also Hume's *Philosophy*, 159-160, 163). It is not clear what reason Moore had for this claim (cf., e.g., Landesman 1999, 27-30, and Greco 2002, 548).⁸ One way to go would be to say that one can know some proposition without being able to base it on further reasons (whether deductive or non-deductive). Some knowledge, one could say (but not Moore), is

8 Moore says that the view that one cannot know without proof can “be shown to be wrong – though shown only by the use of premises which are not known to be true, unless we do know of the existence of external things.” (*Proof*, 150). I have to admit that I cannot make much sense of this passage.

non-inferential and basic; perceptual knowledge might be an example. Or one (but not Moore) could hold an externalist account of knowledge according to which knowledge does not always require reasons. In both cases, however, it would remain mysterious both why Moore would not simply claim to have perceptual or “externalist” knowledge of the external world and why he thought he could not know he is awake and not dreaming (as we will see in a moment). Ultimately, it thus also remains unclear what according to Moore entitles him to claim to know that “here is one hand and here is another”. Was his *Proof* rather meant for the purpose of preaching to the converted (cf. Greco 2002 and also Pryor 2004 and Williams 2004, 78 here)?

(f) *Inability to Prove the Premise*. Things are even more puzzling. Moore believes that he cannot prove that there is a hand because that would involve proving that he is not merely dreaming that there is a hand. And this cannot be done, according to Moore (cf. *Proof*, 149, and also Greco 2002, 548).⁹ Apart from the question why one should not be able to prove that: Why does he need to prove that he is not dreaming in order to be able to prove that there is a hand? We have seen that knowledge does not require proof. And proof requires knowledge of the premises but not proof of the premises. Moore might still be able to claim to know that he is not dreaming. He could construct a proof that there is a hand like the following one:

9 Moore adds the following puzzling remarks: “I have, no doubt, conclusive evidence that I am awake: but that is a very different thing from being able to prove it. I could not tell you what all my evidence is; and I should require to do this at least, in order to give you a proof.” (*Proof*, 149). How can he have conclusive evidence but no proof? Which notion of conclusive evidence is operative here and could make this statement plausible? And why is it necessary for having conclusive evidence to be able to tell what it is? Why can Moore not do that? But cf. Greco 2002, 551-552 and Sosa 2007b, 55, 57.

Alternative Hands Argument (AHA)

(1h) I am not merely dreaming (just falsely imagining or hallucinating, etc.) that there is a hand

(2h) If I am not merely dreaming (just falsely imagining or hallucinating, etc.) that there is a hand, then there is a hand (given my current experience)

(3h) There is a hand.

In *Four Forms* Moore does indeed claim to know that he is not dreaming at the moment: “I think I know for certain that I am not dreaming now.” (*Four Forms*, 222; cf. also 216-225; however, cf. also *Certainty*, 247-250 and the remarks below on that). Perhaps Moore thought (in *Proof*) that some propositions can be known even if they cannot be proven by us (ordinary propositions) whereas other propositions cannot be known without proof (philosophical propositions). I do not know how Moore or anyone could make this distinction in the relevant way (see below) but at least it would make sense of Moore’s point that he cannot prove that there is a hand.

If we read *Proof* in the light of the remark from *Four Forms* that he can know that is not dreaming at the moment, even if he cannot prove it, then that would (see above) make it seem mysterious why he cannot prove that there is a hand. Apart from that, the question would still be how exactly he can still know that he is not dreaming at the moment. And: If he can simply know that he is not dreaming, then why can he not also simply know that there is an external world – in which case no proof would have been necessary? The fact that he thought a proof is necessary suggests that he thought in *Proof* that he can neither

know nor prove that he is not dreaming. This, however, backfires badly: If Moore cannot even know that he is not dreaming, then the pressing question is how he can know that there is a hand? There is nothing in *Proof* which would suggest that one can know one has hands even if one does not know one is not dreaming. The question is thus wide open how Moore could think he has proven anything in *Proof*.

(g) *First Conclusion: Moore and Mooreanism.* If Moore thought (in *Proof* but not in *Four Forms*) that he cannot claim to know he is not in a sceptical scenario, then we can also say the following. The anti-sceptical argument which is nowadays known as the “neo-Moorean” is not only not Moore’s but on top of that Moore thought (at least in *Proof*) that it does not work. Given that Moore claims to know ordinary propositions, we can only speculate what he would have thought (in *Proof* - but see below) about

(ASA)

(1o) Ko

(2o) If Ko, then K(not s)

(3o) K(not s).

Perhaps he would have denied closure (or at least straightforward versions of a principle of closure under known entailment), like Dretske (cf. 1970) and Nozick (cf. 1981, 172ff.), and therefore also denied (2o). Or perhaps he would have endorsed some kind of contextualism (cf. Cohen 1988, DeRose 1995, Lewis 1996). We just don’t know. It seems that it simply did not occur to him (in *Proof*) that there might be a tension between the

claim to know ordinary propositions and the denial that anyone knows the negation of a sceptical proposition. The current debate on scepticism which focuses very much on arguments like (ScA) or (ASA) was simply not Moore's debate (in *Proof*; the situation is a bit different in *Certainty*). Moore's distance to contemporary debates does not make it easier to understand what (he thought) he was up to.

(h) *Further Conclusions*. To recapitulate the discussion of *Proof* so far: Moore has very little to offer when it comes to the defence of his proof as a proof based on known premises.¹⁰ How can he claim to know that "here is a hand"? Furthermore, when one puts *Proof* into the context of *Certainty* and *Four Forms* it becomes an open question what exactly Moore thought about the nature and force of his proof.

What is also puzzling is that Moore does not take himself to argue that he knows that there is an external world; he only thinks that he is showing that there is an external world. This is puzzling for at least three reasons. First, in *Defence* (cf. 43) he argued that saying that p involves saying that one knows that p. If one applies this to the case at hand, then Moore cannot claim that there is an external world without claiming to know that there is an external world. Second, if Moore takes himself to have proven that the external world exists, then how can he deny that he knows what he has proven? Doesn't proof lead to knowledge (cf. also Landesman 1999, 23, 25 as well as Nuccetelli 2009, 183 on this)? If Moore has proven and knows that there are hands, and if the proof that there are hands is

10 Williams 2004, 78, for example, holds that "Moore's proof is completely ineffective" because Moore offers the sceptic what he does not demand: reassurance that there really are external objects. Apart from that, grounds "need to be antecedently more certain than the proposition for which they are cited as grounds ... and, in the case of Moorean judgments, it is not clear that anything meets this condition." (82) Williams also argues (81, 92-93) that Moore was confused because he argued along the following lines: It is no problem for me to claim to know which mental state I am in; since knowledge is a mental state and given factivity, I can also, without any problem claim to know the content of my mental state (of knowledge). I do not see any hint in Moore's text that he had an argument like this in mind.

ipso facto a proof that there is an external world, then how could he avoid claiming to know that there is an external world?

Finally, it is not easy to see what kind of scepticism Moore thought he could reply to (in *Proof*). It was most probably not what is currently discussed under this term. It is no coincidence that he dedicates a lot of *Proof* to the “Refutation of Idealism” we find in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (cf. A366-380 and B274-279). It is certainly also no coincidence that both Kant and Moore tried hard to refute Berkeleian idealism. Now, Kant is not trying to show that we know there is an external world but only that there is an external world. One could distinguish between “metaphysical scepticism” (dealt with by Kant) and “epistemological scepticism” (dealt with by Descartes, e.g., in the First Meditation; cf. also Nuccetelli 2009, 180-181). The former deals with the question whether there is an external world and with related questions, the latter with the question whether we can know that there is an external world. Even if one can prove or know that an external world exists, one might not be able to prove or know a particular contingent proposition about the external world (because one might be dreaming at the time of the attempted proof).¹¹ Moore was apparently dealing just with the metaphysical form of scepticism, assuming, rightly or wrongly, that he does not have to deal with epistemological scepticism when doing that. Anyway, it is not clear at all how Moore would or could have situated himself in the current debate (see above). The picture is, however, a bit different in *Certainty* to which I turn now.

11 This constitutes a case where a general proposition (that there is an external world) might be less problematic than a particular proposition (that there is a hand here right now). On this see also sec. IV below.

III. Meta-Scepticism?

It is puzzling that around the same time – 1940/1941 – Moore expressed different views on the question whether one can know that one is not dreaming at the moment. In *Four Forms* (1940) he affirmed this (cf. *Four Forms*, 222, 216-225) while in *Certainty* (1941) he left it open (cf. *Certainty*, 247-248, 250). *Certainty* is also interesting because it is here that Moore comes much closer to the contemporary debate on scepticism than in any of the other papers.

Moore clearly refers to (cf. *Certainty*, 245) the typical sceptical argument (ScA):

(ScA)

(1s) not K(not s)

(2s) If not K(not s), then not Ko

(3s) not Ko.

Also, in accordance with Neo-Mooreans (cf., e.g., Sosa 1999), he agrees with (2s) (cf. *Certainty*, 245-247). In contrast to them (and to *Four Forms*), however, he cannot make up his mind whether one can know one is not dreaming at the moment (cf. *Certainty*, 247-248, 250). Accordingly, he does not commit himself to (ASA), the typical Neo-Moorean move:

(ASA)

(1o) Ko

(2o) If Ko , then $K(\text{not } s)$

(3o) $K(\text{not } s)$.

Moore clearly points out that the argument cuts both ways: (ScA) and (ASA) are on a par (Certainty, 247, 250; but cf. also Stroud 1984, 102ff.). Moore does not quite propose meta-scepticism about (ASA) and (ScA) but comes close to it. He leaves things open almost like a Pyrrhonian. In that sense, too, Moore was not a Moorean. As we will, however, see in the next section, this is still not the whole picture and Moore could say something in favor of (ASA).

However, we have to take *Certainty* with a grain of salt, given that Moore distanced himself in the Preface to his “Philosophical Papers” from the “bad mistakes” in that paper. This makes Moore even more enigmatic.

IV. Comparative Advantages?

One more anti-sceptical argument can be found in short remarks here and there. For instance, in *Four Forms* Moore points out that the proposition that there is a pencil is more certain than Russell’s basic epistemological principles (cf. *Four Forms*, 226; for a similar point on Hume cf. Moore’s “Some Main Problems of Philosophy” (1910/1911), 125-126, 143; cf. also “Some Judgments of Perception” (1918/1919), 228, and *Hume’s Philosophy*, 160). To generalize a bit: We have more reason to believe an ordinary proposition than a sceptical hypothesis. This would tip the balance between (ScA) and (ASA) towards the

latter. One reason Moore gives in *Main Problems* is that particular (ordinary) propositions (e.g., that there is a pencil) are more certain than general (philosophical) principles (e.g., that material objects have a certain property). Even if that is so, does this suffice to show that we know particular propositions? Perhaps the difference in certainty in both cases is not that big. Moreover, even though there is a syntactic difference between particular and general propositions (depending on whether they involve quantifiers), it is not clear whether there is an epistemological difference: Do not beliefs of particular propositions involve other beliefs which are general? How could I have a belief about this pencil without having general beliefs about pencils or material objects?

Apart from that, Moore seems to think that common sense is more trustworthy than philosophical scepticism (cf. Greco 2002, 554-556 but also Foster 2008). But why? In *Defence* he takes himself to show that it is trustworthy but that does, of course, not imply that it is more trustworthy than philosophical ideas. Is there really not a single philosophical idea that is more trustworthy than some common sense idea (what about the philosophical principle that knowledge entails truth as compared with the common sense idea that time is absolute?)? Bill Lycan, Thomas Kelly and Tony Coady have recently supported Moore on this point whereas Earl Conee has pointed out that arguments are still lacking (cf. Lycan 2001, Lycan 2007, 93-99, Kelly 2005, Coady 2007, 106, and Conee 2001). If one holds that there are better reasons to accept propositions of kind O than propositions of kind S, then one needs a theory of reasons which explains this and does

also not presuppose in a question begging way any propositions of kind O (or S). I doubt that there is such a theory available to us (but cf. Lycan 2007, 98).¹²

Apart from all that, it is dubitable whether common sense and philosophy are (that) different in the first place (cf. also Williams 1996, 44-45, 81-82; Cole 1991, 42 argues that even scepticism is a consequence of common sense; cf. also Coady 2007). Perhaps philosophy is nothing but a further development of common sense – where “development” would allow for both refinement and loss of insight. In that case, the argument from comparative advantages would not hold at all.

Finally, again, that Moore has better reason to believe that o than to believe that s does not entail or in any way (help to) guarantee that Moore knows that o. The reasons in favour of o would have to be much stronger than the reason in favour of s – so much stronger that Moore can claim knowledge that o.

V. Conclusion

To recapitulate the arguments in the different relevant papers by Moore: Moore offers very different arguments for quite different theses; only some of them are closely related to some of the others. With respect to some arguments (e.g., his defence of common sense) it is not so clear in what sense they are anti-sceptical. In other cases, Moore seems quite remote from the current debate on scepticism (in terms of (ScA), (ASA) and similar

12 Lycan 2007, 97-98 argues that Moore is not making any general claims about philosophical and ordinary propositions here but is only comparing the plausibility of particular propositions. However, it seems that if Moore’s argument is to have any force it needs to have more general scope and concern philosophical and ordinary propositions in general. Otherwise, Moore would face the reply “Just wait and see! Perhaps we’ll soon find a very plausible philosophical proposition”.

arguments). But even when he is not: Moore was not a Moorean. Even though one can put remarks from different papers together to construct a “Moorean”, the main tendency in his writings is not Moorean. Apart from that, the question remains open what exactly the arguments were Moore had in mind and how strong they are. All this is very interesting but also puzzling. Barry Stroud was right to remark that Moore was a philosophical enigma (cf. Stroud 1984, 126).

Appendix: A Defence of Moral Common Sense?

Things become even more puzzling when we take into account that Moore expressed sceptical thoughts concerning the possibility moral knowledge. Here is his “*Principia Ethica*” (1903):

"In order to shew that any action is a duty, it is necessary to know both what are the other conditions, which will, conjointly with it, determine its effects; to know exactly what will be the effects of these conditions; and to know all the events which will be in any way affected by our action throughout an infinite future. We must have all this causal knowledge, and further we must know accurately the degree of value both of the action itself and of all the effects; and must be able to determine how, in conjunction with the other things in the Universe, they will affect its value as an organic whole. And not only this: we must also possess all this knowledge with regard to the effects of every possible alternative; and must

then be able to see by comparison that the total value due to the existence of the action in question will be greater than that which would be produced by any of these alternatives. But it is obvious that our causal knowledge alone is far too incomplete for us ever to assure ourselves of this result. Accordingly it follows that we never have any reason to suppose that an action is our duty: we can never be sure that any action will produce the greatest value possible." (149)

Moore continues that only in the case of very few actions can we make legitimate statements concerning the probability of good outcomes (cf. *Principia Ethica*, 149-150). However, he adds with persevering scepticism that "it is plain that even this is a task of immense difficulty. It is difficult to see how we can establish even a probability that by doing one thing we shall obtain a better total result than by doing another." (*Principia Ethica*, 152). The problem has to do with the infinity of the future (cf. *Principia Ethica*, 152-152) as well with the general limits of our causal knowledge (cf. *Principia Ethica*, 159-160).

There is nothing wrong as such with being both an epistemological anti-sceptic and a moral sceptic. But why did Moore not argue for moral common sense and against moral scepticism in a way parallel to his attempts in epistemology? There is indeed such a parallel argument as I will explain soon. Whether Moore thought of it or not – it was good for him not to go down this particular road. The reason is simply that one can turn this parallel between the epistemological argument and the moral argument against Moore's

proof of an external world (as well as against recent Neo-Moorean anti-sceptical strategies). This is what I will try to show now.

The basic idea is straightforward. First, there is a tight structural analogy between Moore's proof of an external world (or Neo-Moorean arguments) on the one hand and a certain defence of moral common sense against moral scepticism such that the following seems to hold:

- (1) If Moore's (or the Neo-Moorean) epistemological argument is convincing, then the corresponding moral argument is convincing
- (2) However, the moral argument is not convincing
- (3) Hence, the epistemological argument is also not convincing

But let us take a closer look.

We can distinguish between two forms of moral scepticism (cf. also Sinnott-Armstrong 2006 here):

Metaphysical Moral Scepticism: Nothing is morally right or wrong.¹³

Epistemological Moral Scepticism: Nobody can know whether something (actions, intentions, etc.) is morally right or wrong.¹⁴

13 Sinnott-Armstrong 2006, 36 also calls this "moral nihilism". – A similar thesis can be formulated for other moral terms, like "virtuous", "vicious", "good", "bad", etc. For the sake of simplicity, I will focus on "right" and "wrong" here.

The argument for metaphysical moral scepticism could have the following form (taking “F” to stand for anything that might be required for the existence of moral right or wrong, like moral facts, reasons, truths, etc.):

Argument for Metaphysical Moral Scepticism (MMS)

(1mms) There are no moral Fs

(2mms) If there are no moral Fs, then nothing is morally right or wrong

(3mms) Nothing is morally right or wrong.

A Moorean could reply with a “Proof of a Moral World” (MW), a “defence of moral common sense” (cf. also: Bambrough 1979, 15-17):

(1mw) Murder is morally wrong

(2mw) If murder is morally wrong, then something is morally right or wrong

(3mw) Something is morally right or wrong.

(MW) does not look very promising. The problem seems to lie with the first premise

(1mw). How much force could it have against a moral sceptic? Not much really.

14 More precisely: There is nothing (actions, intentions, etc.) with respect to which anyone can know whether it is morally right or wrong. The thesis is not that nobody can know whether there is something (actions, intentions, etc.) that is morally right or wrong. For simplicity’s sake, I will go with the formulation in the text above.

Let us now look back at Moore's "Proof of an external world". Here is a condensed version of it (PW):

(1pw) Here is a hand [the speaker holding it up]

(2pw) If here is a hand, then there is an external world

(3pw) There is an external world.

The structure of (MW) and (PW) is exactly the same and in both cases all the plausibility of the argument depends on the plausibility of the first premise. (1mw) is not convincing, especially in a debate with the moral sceptic. Why should (1pw) be any more convincing, especially in a debate with the epistemological sceptic? It seems hard to defend acceptance of (PW) together with rejection of (MW). Hence, if we – as we should – reject (MW), we should also reject (PW) or Moore's proof of an external world.

One could argue that that (1mw) is not that implausible after all. However, an argument would be needed which also explains why it seems so hopeless to argue against the moral sceptic using (MW). A better objection would be to say that there is indeed an asymmetry between (MW) and (PW) and that (1mw) is much less plausible than (1pw). But why? What explains this asymmetry? Is Moore's hand-premise more secure than (1mw) simply because the criteria of application for "hand" are much more straightforward and uncontroversial than those for "morally wrong"? Well, the problem here does not seem to have to do at all with problems of correct applications of terms.

Finally, one could try to turn the tables on my argument and run the “reverse” argument: insist that (PW) is plausible, and that since (PW) is plausible (MW) must be plausible, too. However, this way we would still end up with meta-skepticism: There seems to be no way to decide which of the two views is the correct one: the one which defends (MW) using (PW) as support or the one which objects to (PW) using (MW) as a critical weapon. And that alone, one can continue, throws enough skeptical light on (1mw) and on Moore's assumption that there is a hand.

What about epistemological moral scepticism? The argument for it could look like this (taking “R” to stand for a requirement of moral knowledge, such as the ability to rule out alternative moral views or theories):

Argument for Epistemological Moral Scepticism (EMS)

(1ems) Nobody can meet R with respect to any claim that something is morally right or wrong

(2ems) If one cannot meet R with respect to any claim that something is morally right or wrong, then one cannot know whether it is morally right or wrong

(3ems) One cannot know whether something is morally right or wrong.¹⁵

A Moorean could reply with an argument for moral knowledge (MK):

(1mk) I know that murder is morally wrong (because I can meet R)

¹⁵ Again, “something” should be read in the sense indicated in footnote 11 above.

(2mk) If I know that murder is morally wrong, then one can know whether something is morally right or wrong

(3mk) One can know whether something is morally right or wrong.¹⁶

Again, the Moorean argument does not look very convincing (but cf. Lemos 2004, 170-172, 175-179). Again, the problem seems to be with the first premise (1mk). No moral sceptic would be impressed at all by it and the argument based on it.

Now look at (ASA):

(ASA)

(1o) Ko

(2o) If Ko, then K(not s)

(3o) K(not s).

The structure of (MK) and (ASA) is exactly the same and in both cases all the plausibility of the argument depends on the plausibility of the first premise. (1mk) is not convincing, especially in a debate with the moral sceptic. Why should (1o) be any more convincing, especially in a debate with the epistemological sceptic? It seems hard to defend acceptance of (ASA) together with rejection of (MK). Hence, if we – as we should – reject (MK), we should also reject (ASA) or the recent neo-Moorean template of an anti-sceptical argument (which is not Moore's argument). There are objections parallel to the remarks above on (MW) and (PW) but I won't go into them here.

¹⁶ Again, "something" should be read in the sense indicated in footnote 11 above.

As I said, Moore himself went a long way towards epistemological moral scepticism (cf., very close to Moore, Butchvarov 1989, 182-184). Even if his moral scepticism is rather based on scepticism about the applicability of terms like “good” than on some deeper sceptical argument, all this would still support our objection from morality against his proof of an external world even more. It also works against some recent Neo-Moorean arguments against the epistemological sceptic, so it seems. In both cases – epistemological and metaphysical moral scepticism -, the moral sceptic would come to the aid of his epistemological cousin. It is, to say the least, not clear whether Moore or the Neo-Mooreans can deal with both.

References

- Baldwin, Thomas 1990a, *G.E. Moore*, London / New York: Routledge.
- Baldwin, Thomas 1990b, *Moore and Philosophical Scepticism*, in: David Bell / Neil Cooper (eds.), *The Analytic Tradition. Meaning, Thought and Knowledge*, Blackwell, 117-136.
- Bambrough, Renford 1979, *Moral Scepticism and Moral Knowledge*, London: Routledge.
- Butchvarov, Panayot 1989, *Skepticism in Ethics*, Bloomington / Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Campbell, C.A. 1945, *Common-Sense Propositions and Philosophical Paradoxes*, in: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 45, 1-25
- Cohen, Stewart 1988, *How to Be a Fallibilist*, in: *Philosophical Perspectives* 2, 91-123.
- Coady, C.A.J. 2007, *Moore's Common Sense*, in: Susana Nuccetelli / Gary Seay (eds.), *Themes from G. E. Moore: New Essays in Epistemology and Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 100-118.
- Cole, David 1991, *Moore on Skepticism and Common Sense*, in: A.P. Martinich / Michael J. White (eds.), *Certainty and Surface in Epistemology and Philosophical Method. Essays in Honor of Avrum Stroll, Lewiston etc: Mellen*, 41-56.
- Conee, Earl 2001, *Comments on Bill Lycan's Moore against the New Sceptics*, in: *Philosophical Studies* 103, 55-59.

- DeRose, Keith 1995, Solving the Skeptical Problem, in: *The Philosophical Review* 104, 1-52.
- Descartes, René, *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, in: René Descartes, *OEuvres de Descartes* (Hg.: Charles Adam & Paul Tannery), Paris: Cerf, 1907-1913/ Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin 1964-1976 (reprint), vol. VII.
- Dretske, Fred I. 1970, Epistemic Operators, in: *The Journal of Philosophy* 69, 1007-1023.
- Foster, Paul 2008, Neither Dogma nor Common Sense: Moore's Confidence in his 'Proof of an External World', in: *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 16, 163-195.
- Greco, John 2002, How to Reid Moore, in: *The Philosophical Quarterly* 52, 544-563.
- Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason* (tr. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999.
- Kelly, Thomas 2005, Moorean Facts and Belief Revision, or Can the Sceptic Win?, in: *Philosophical Perspectives* 19 (Epistemology), 179-209.
- Landesman, Charles 1999, Moore's Proof of an External World and the Problem of Skepticism, in: *Journal of Philosophical Research* 24, 21-36.
- Lemos, Noah 2004, *Common Sense. A Contemporary Defense*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, David 1996, Elusive Knowledge, in: *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74, 549-567.
- Lycan, William G. 2001, Moore against the New Sceptics, in: *Philosophical Studies* 103, 35-53.

- Lycan, William G. 2007, Moore's Anti-Skeptical Strategies, in: Susana Nuccetelli / Gary Seay (eds.), *Themes from G. E. Moore: New Essays in Epistemology and Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 84-99.
- Matson, Wallace I. 1991, Certainty Made Simple, in: A.P. Martinich / Michael J. White (eds.), *Certainty and Surface in Epistemology and Philosophical Method. Essays in Honor of Avrum Stroll*, Lewiston / Queenstown / Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 7-24.
- Moore, George Edward, *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1903.
- Moore, George Edward, Hume's Philosophy, in: George Edward Moore, *Philosophical Studies*, London / New York: Kegan Paul / Hartcourt 1922, 147-167.
- Moore, George Edward, Some Judgments of Perception, in: George Edward Moore, *Philosophical Studies*, London / New York: Kegan Paul / Hartcourt 1922, 220-252
- Moore, George Edward, A Defence of Common Sense, in: George Edward Moore, *Philosophical Papers*, London / New York: Allen & Unwin / Macmillan 1959, 32-59.
- Moore, George Edward, Proof of an External World, in: George Edward Moore, *Philosophical Papers*, London / New York: Allen & Unwin / Macmillan 1959, 127-150.
- Moore, George Edward, Four Forms of Scepticism, in: George Edward Moore, *Philosophical Papers*, London / New York: Allen & Unwin / Macmillan 1959, 196-226.
- Moore, George Edward, Certainty, in: George Edward Moore, *Philosophical Papers*, London / New York: Allen & Unwin / Macmillan 1959, 227-251.

- Moore, George Edward, A Reply to my Critics, in: Paul Arthur Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore*, New York: Tudor 1952, 533-687.
- Moore, George Edward, *Some Main Problems in Philosophy*, London / New York: Allen & Unwin / Macmillan 1953.
- Moore, George Edward, *Commonplace Book 1919-1953* (ed.: Casimir Lewy), London / New York: Allen & Unwin / Macmillan 1962.
- Nozick, Robert 1981, *Philosophical Explanations*, Cambridge/MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nuccetelli, Susana 2009, Sosa's Moore and the New Dogmatists, in: *Metaphilosophy* 40, 180-186.
- Pritchard, Duncan 2002a, Resurrecting the Moorean Response to the Sceptic, in: *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 10, 283-307.
- Pritchard, Duncan 2000b, Recent Work on Radical Scepticism, in: *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 39, 215-257.
- Pryor, James 2004, What's Wrong with Moore's Argument?, in: *Philosophical Issues* 14, (Epistemology), 349-378.
- Reid, Thomas, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, in: Thomas Reid, *The Works of Thomas Reid* (ed.: William Hamilton), Edinburgh: MacLachlan and Stewart 1863, vol. I, 213-508.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter 2006, *Moral Scepticisms*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Skirry, Justin 2003, Three Kinds of Certainty in Moore's Defense of Common Sense, in: *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 20, 393-406.
- Sosa, Ernest 1999, How to Defeat Opposition to Moore, in: *Philosophical Perspectives* 13, 141-154.
- Sosa, Ernest 2007a, *A Virtue Epistemology. Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge*, volume I, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sosa, Ernest 2007b, Moore's Proof, in: Susana Nuccetelli / Gary Seay (eds.), *Themes from G. E. Moore: New Essays in Epistemology and Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 49-61.
- Stroud, Barry 1984, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, Oxford: Clarendon.
- Svensson, Gunnar 1981, *On Doubting the Reality of Reality*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.
- Williams, Michael 1996, *Unnatural Doubts. Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Williams, Michael 2004, Wittgenstein's Refutation of Idealism, in: Denis McManus (ed.), *Wittgenstein and Scepticism*, London and New York: Routledge, 76-96.
- Williamson, Timothy 2000, *Knowledge and its Limits*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1969, *On Certainty*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wright, Crispin 1985, Facts and Certainty, in: *Proceedings of the British Academy* 71, 429-472.

Wright Crispin 2002, (Anti-) Sceptics Simple and Subtle: G.E. Moore and John McDowell, in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65, 330-348