



SEÇÃO EPISTEMOLOGIA & FILOSOFIA DA LINGUAGEM

Moore against the sceptics

Moore contra os céticos

Moore contra los escépticos

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Abstract: Moore's "Proof of an external world" and his "Four forms of scepticism" have long puzzled commentators. How are these adequate responses to sceptics? How, for that matter, is the so-called proof of an external world even pertinent to the challenge of scepticism? The notion of relativized burdens of proof is introduced: this is a burden of proof *vis-à-vis* one's opponent that one takes on when trying to convince that someone of something. The relativized burden of proof is a making explicit (in the topic of rational discourse) the truism that if you argue with someone with the intent of trying to convince that someone of something, and if you fail to, you have not met your own conversational goal. Assuming Moore is implicitly relying on the notion of relativized burdens of proof illuminates his approach in these papers.

Keywords: Burdens of proof. Debates. G. E. Moore. Knowledge. Scepticism.

Resumo: A "Prova de um mundo externo" de Moore e suas "Quatro formas de ceticismo" há muito intrigam os comentaristas. Como são essas respostas adequadas aos céticos? Até que ponto a chamada prova de um mundo externo é pertinente para o desafio do ceticismo? A noção de ônus da prova relativizada é introduzida: este é um ônus da prova *vis-à-vis* o oponente que se assume ao tentar convencer alguém de algo. O ônus da prova relativizado é tornar explícito (no tópico do discurso racional) o truismo de que se você argumentar com alguém com a intenção de tentar convencer alguém de algo, e se você não conseguir, você não encontrou sua própria conversação meta. Assumir que Moore está implicitamente contando com a noção de fardos relativizados da prova ilumina sua abordagem nesses artigos.

Palavras-chave: Ônus da prova. Debates. G. E. Moore. Conhecimento. Ceticismo.

Resumen: La "Prueba de un mundo externo" de Moore y sus "Cuatro formas de escepticismo" han desconcertado a los comentaristas durante mucho tiempo. ¿Cómo son estas respuestas adecuadas a los escépticos? ¿Cómo, en ese caso, la llamada prueba de un mundo externo es siquiera pertinente al desafío del escepticismo? Se introduce la noción de cargas de prueba relativizadas: esta es una carga de prueba frente al oponente que uno asume cuando intenta convencer a alguien de algo. La carga de la prueba relativizada es hacer explícito (en el tema del discurso racional) la obviedad de que si discutes con alguien con la intención de tratar de convencer a alguien de algo, y si no lo logra, no se ha encontrado con su propia conversación. objetivo. Asumir que Moore se basa implícitamente en la noción de cargas de prueba relativizadas ilumina su enfoque en estos artículos.

Palabras clave: Carga de la prueba. Debates. G.E. Moore. Conocimiento. Escepticismo.



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Introduction

I start with an overview of the assumptions—those of a full-blown epistemic position, really—that this paper relies on. My view needs a label; call it “Starting Point Epistemology” (SPE). I don’t argue for that position here—that takes more than one *book* to do right²; but I do attempt a self-contained philosophical backstory in section 2. My aim here, however, is to draw some corollaries about two of Moore’s papers (1939, 1959a) that seem to have puzzled *every* philosopher who has ever discussed them. I show on textual grounds that Moore is presupposing assumptions of SPE (without saying so).

I *won’t* go so far as to claim that Moore consistently interprets himself as doing this because part of the problem with interpreting Moore is that he rarely offers an overview of his argumentative strategies—at least not the ones he uses in these papers. This, all by itself, is enough to generate plenty of puzzled commentary, since commentators have to provide overviews of his motivations all by themselves; and without Moore’s guidance, they all do it differently.

One last item before I start. I offer a modest bit of new apparatus that belongs, properly, to the topic of rational debate. The new apparatus twists the classical notion of burdens of proof that’s presupposed in (evaluating outcomes of) debates; my modification is best understood as introducing burdens of proof that are *relativized* to debating opponents. The (somewhat idealized) picture is this: in a debate, each agent starts from a given position—a set of (tacit and explicit) assumptions. Relativized burdens of proof are understood as the considerations that each agent can rationally take seriously as bearing on whether, as individuals, they should shift from their initial positions. As I’ll show, these relativized burdens of proof can differ between opponents in the same debate, and so the outcomes of such debates can *legitimately* differ according to each agent. As burdens of proof are normally understood in debate settings, they’re tie-breakers. If two opponents deadlock

on an assumption, one of them, the proponent or opponent, has the burden of proof, and thus loses the argumentative tie. As I’ll show, this isn’t how we judge the debates we have with others *when we’re directly involved in them* (as opposed to adjudicating them as independent third parties).

1 Starting Point Epistemology

Knowledge is easily had. Describe it as a *low-maintenance* propositional attitude: Floor-cleaning robots, drones, autonomous vehicles, insects, rodents, orcas, and humans *all* know things. An agent acquires knowledge by employing reliable processes pretty much the way that epistemic externalists have long argued they do; one immediate implication of this is that agents—and their knowledge—are fallible. In an appropriate sense (which *isn’t* metaphysical) agents *can* fail to know something by a reliable process that (in other circumstances, and much of the time) otherwise enables them to know things. Among such processes are the uses of an agent’s senses, judgements that those agents draw, information they get from cohorts, and the like. How reliable an agent’s use of such processes must be to yield knowledge is and must be a shifty matter. This isn’t because of contextual sensitivity as some would have it, but only because the otherwise invariant word “know(s)” is vague.

Because knowledge attributions can be correctly applied to such a wide swath of kinds of agents, there are few necessary and/or sufficient conditions on agents having knowledge—certainly none of the necessary conditions that philosophers have traditionally required of them. Knowers needn’t be capable of providing justifications for their own beliefs; they needn’t be aware of their own knowledge; they needn’t even be conscious (drones and autonomous vehicles aren’t). A conscious agent who’s aware of her own beliefs or purported knowledge can know something, but nevertheless, not believe she knows it; she needn’t even believe the thing itself that she knows.³

To stress the point again, and to amplify it: that

² It takes at least two: Azzouni (2020) and Azzouni (forthcoming). I apologize, because now this sounds like an *advertisement*.

³ Timid-student examples, when sufficiently spelled out, show this. See the discussion of these cases in Azzouni (2020).

an agent knows what it knows implies — all by itself — nothing about what it believes or what it knows about what it knows. Cognition needn't be accompanied by correct metacognition, or even by metacognition at all. When agents attempt to justify themselves, however, something sophisticated — something above and beyond sheer knowledge — is involved. The agent is thinking *about* her purported knowledge, or her beliefs, and she's asking, specifically of them, whether they're justified. This is full-blown metacognition: she's asking herself whether she knows what she thinks she knows.

What *is* a justification? Justifications, generally, *describe* reliable processes by which agents *can* come to know things: a justification can thus be used to rebut a challenge to the effect that an agent has no justification for what she believes by providing a way *she's aware of* that she *could have* come to know what she claims to know. But how an agent *justifies* herself can (and often does) come apart from how the agent did come to know what she knows.

An example: I see a statement in a mathematics textbook (a corollary of a major result, say, which I haven't seen before). I know, *by virtue of reading the statement in the textbook*, that it's true. The textbook, that is, is authoritative; and (as importantly) the result is right. It's not that I only know that the statement is true *after* I read the proof and understand it. Almost everyone, however, who attempts to claim to know the statement will justify themselves by instead citing the proof directly and not merely relying on the authority of the textbook.

2 Relativized burdens of proof

Debates occur among groups of agents who provide justifications to one another when responding to the challenges they've been presented with; debates, thus, are sophisticated events — insects don't argue with one another, perhaps neither do even intelligent nonhuman primates (perhaps they only fight). Because of this, debates

are metacognitive processes: agents challenge and respond to challenges to knowledge claims: more accurately, they respond to challenges to what they take themselves to know, since they may discover that their reasons for thinking they know something aren't good ones.

Agents start from specific cognitive positions. They know certain things—whether they realize it or not. They also metaknow and metacognize: they take themselves to know certain things or not to know them. They're aware of *some* of the beliefs that they have.

A contemporary disagreement among epistemologists is one about who, knowledge-claimant or knowledge-opponent, has the traditionally-construed burden of proof. Klein (e.g., 2003) and Aikin (2011), for example, assert that the knowledge-claimant always has the burden of proof. Aikin (2011, p. 175) writes (italics his): "... if you're claiming you know, then *you* have the burden of proof."⁴ Thus, the knowledge-claimant always has the obligation to present a justification for his claims if an opponent raises an objection. (A lot of philosophers have this view; and possibly—this is a sociological claim — most do.) Williams (2001), on the other hand, has a more complex position (shared in some of its details with Brandom, and apparently anticipated by Austin and Wittgenstein) according to which there are certain sets of presuppositions, in a context, that aren't open to challenge. Both knowledge-challengers and knowledge-claimants, thus, have distinctive epistemic responsibilities they must meet: sometimes the burden of proof is on one of them and sometimes it's on the other. Challengers, specifically, must responsibly recognize that some assumptions—in some contexts, anyway — are beyond challenge.

Starting point epistemology may seem positively anarchistic in comparison to Williams' just-described Default and Challenge conception of epistemic disagreement. To begin with, as I mentioned, burdens are relativized to individuals. When I describe an epistemic agent as starting in a particular (epistemic) place, *I mean it*; what's

⁴ All italics in quotations are the authors' unless I indicate otherwise.

rational for that agent to decide vis-à-vis certain challenges, turns on where that agent starts, what knowledge that agent takes herself to have, and what methods of knowing she thinks she should rely on. So, for example (an extreme example), an agent may recognize that he's no good with arguments; he's easily tricked by them. Such an agent may (rationally!) decide he shouldn't be moved by arguments at all: his ways of learning about the world don't include those particular tools, but instead (perhaps) reliance on certain authority-figures. Williams' Default and Challenge conception, in contrast, relies on assumptions about certain shared public frameworks: if we're debating a point about geography, for example, certain challenges aren't to be responsibly raised—in this case those involving dream arguments, whether matter exists, or if countries are real entities.

There's much more to say about SPE (and much more is needed to justify it) but pagination is short, and I must get to Moore.

3 Is Moore being weird when he asserts that he knows he has hands?

This, I claim, is one of Moore's central assumptions: Sceptical challenges are just like any other ordinary challenge to knowledge. *Many* epistemologists disagree.⁵ They think, instead, that something *special* happens when sceptical (philosophical) concerns get going — something that *doesn't happen* when a non-philosopher wonders whether this is actually a watery cup of *coffee* (and not the tea he thought and hoped it was). There are several variations of this scepticism-is-really-special view. Some philosophers think (or sound like they think) that doubt-talk — when attempted in a distinctively philosophical way — doesn't make sense. The sceptic, on this view, has violated one or another condition on cogent speech.⁶ Others think that sceptical concerns do make sense (no genuine violations of language

use are occurring); but the sentences such concerns are couched in have different meanings from (otherwise identical) ordinary statements in non-philosophical contexts.

Clarke (1972, p. 756) gives this example:

Suppose a physiologist lecturing on mental abnormalities observes: *Each of us who is normal knows that he is now awake, not dreaming or hallucinating, that there is a real public world outside his mind which he is now perceiving, that in this world there are three-dimensional animate and inanimate bodies of many shapes and sizes ...* In contrast, individuals suffering from certain mental abnormalities each believes that what we know to be the real, public world is his imaginative creation.

The italicized remarks — in this context — Clarke claims, are ordinary non-sceptically-understood "plain" remarks, although the very same forms of speech aren't when uttered by epistemologists raising sceptical concerns or defending our knowledge against them.

A variant on this move is (Williams (1996)) that there are challengeable theoretical presuppositions behind sceptical doubts that aren't presupposed by doubts that arise among non-philosophers. Or — this too is a variant of the same move—the word "know" itself is context-dependent (e.g., DeRose (2009)), and specifically in philosophical contexts, the standards for knowledge are peculiarly high.

None of this is true; more importantly for the purposes of this paper, Moore would deny it all.

A different suggestion for why sceptical doubts are special ones is that the sceptic's ways of raising doubts are very general, and *that* marks them as peculiarly philosophical. Stroud (1984, p. 113), for example, writes, in perplexity, about Moore, "How could he have missed the fact that philosophical scepticism is not to be refuted in [Moore's way] because it comes from a general challenge to all our knowledge of the world?" But, first, it isn't true that *general* challenges to

⁵ Among them, Wittgenstein, Clarke, Stroud, Williams, and Cavell, but also epistemic contextualists who think the "philosophy room" is an intellectual safe room, where epistemic concerns can be triggered that would ordinarily be rebuffed otherwise. If Bernard Williams (1978, p. 61, 67) is right, then Descartes, too, regards his method of hyperbolic doubt as one that, as Williams says, plays no "rational role within ordinary life." The same attitude — that philosophical scepticism is special—also emerges by rhetorical undermining when Wright (1985, p. 435) writes, against Moore, "It is quite unphilosophical to seek strength in the reminder that our deepest convictions conflict with [the sceptic's conclusion]."

⁶ E.g., Malcolm (1949) and Malcolm (1942). Cavell (1979), later, claims something similar.

knowledge are peculiarly philosophical. How general a possibility-challenge is (exactly how much presumed knowledge it undermines) depends on the specific possibility being raised—what I'll call the *scope and range* of the knowledge-challenging possibility. A recent issue in *physics* is a holographic-principle concern, whether the universe — contrary to appearances — is only a two-dimensional "simulation." This certainly *looks* like a sceptical concern (because of its broad implications, i.e., "is space really two-dimensional? Are *we* all actually *flat*?"⁷). This possibility-challenge, however, seems driven only by the apparent implications of certain physical theories. It's a general concern *alright* ... but specifically from *physics*. A desperate maneuver is to say that the physicists engaging with this current concern have "gone philosophical" the way Leibniz and Newton (and Clarke) did over absolute space. Do I really need to respond to this suggestion about either case? All of this illustrates, of course, how Quine (1960) is right that philosophical thinking is genuinely continuous with scientific thinking (and, in turn, with the thinking that we engage in during "ordinary" life).

Second, without substantial argument, it's unprincipled to say that raising doubts about narrowly-construed particular items (or sets of sentences) is acceptable non-philosophical doubt, but generality — beyond a certain point — makes that doubt philosophical and peculiar. Beyond a certain point, of course, global scepticism may bite its own tail (go paradoxical, that is). But that's a different matter.

The only genuine *datum* for viewing sceptical doubts as odd is something that's widely noticed by philosophers: The typical sceptical scenarios that are used to challenge knowledge in philosophical contexts, dreams, bodiless brains in vats, evil demons, etc. *don't* arise outside of those contexts — Hollywood, aside. Quine's (1981,

p. 475) explanation is humdrum: the skeptic is overreacting. This is insufficient. What needs to be shown by a *diagnosis* of sceptical scenarios is that philosophers make mistakes by offering *these* possibility-challenges, or at least, they draw mistaken conclusions from them. That is, if we're supposed to take seriously the idea, (i) that sceptical doubts are ordinary doubts—arising from the same methods of challenging our presumed knowledge that everyone else uses — but that, (ii) the sceptic is overreacting in drawing his conclusions, then it must be shown that dreams, bodiless brains in vats, evil demons, and so on, don't arise outside philosophical contexts because there is something wrong with them *as challenges to our purported knowledge*.⁸

Claims that certain assertions of *knowledge* are *abnormal* — not at all like cases where ordinary people claim to know things — are as popular among philosophers as claims that sceptical doubts are special (they're two sides of the same coin). Consider the widespread response to Moore's (1939) remark that he knows he has hands. It's widely suggested that this is a palpably peculiar thing for him to say. Relatedly, it strikes philosophers (at least officially—in print, I mean) as just *weird* that Moore uses his knowledge claim about his hands in a *proof* of the external world. Wittgenstein (1969), throughout, is concerned with his impression that there is something very off about Moore's proof and Moore's claims to know what he knows. For example (but there are many), Wittgenstein (1969, 63e, § 481) writes, "When one hears Moore say 'I *know* that that's a tree', one suddenly understands those who think that that has by no means been settled." In the next paragraph, Wittgenstein says: "The matter strikes one all at once as being unclear and blurred. It is as if Moore had put it in the wrong light." And (1969, 64e, § 487): "What is the proof that I *know* something? Most certainly not my saying I know it." Wittgenstein's *attitude* about this, more

⁷ Notice: the holographic-principle concern isn't *completely general* — not *everything* is in doubt. But, similarly, Stroud's external-world scepticism isn't undercutting *everything* either. Introspective reports aren't in doubt.

⁸ I can't do that here. See Azzouni (forthcoming).

than anything Wittgenstein specifically *writes*, has been amazingly influential.⁹

Stroud (1984, p. 86), similarly, speaks of Moore's "curious performance"; he writes: "once we are familiar with the philosophical problem of our knowledge of the external world, I think we *immediately* feel that Moore's proof is inadequate" (italics mine). Williams (1996, p. 42) writes of the "puzzling character" of Moore (1925) and Moore (1939). At the very beginning of Pryor's (2004, p. 349), after giving a version of Moore's proof, he writes: "*Something* about this argument sounds funny." Pryor is clearly implying that the argument sounds funny *when anyone first hears it*. Coliva (2007, p. 2) says that, despite the proof being valid, it remains the case "that Moore's proof strikes (almost all of) us as an *obviously* annoying failure, and does so *immediately*, on first encounter. The question is, *why?* What can be wrong?"¹⁰

This collective experience of *that's so weird* that's directed towards Moore whenever he makes remarks about his hands and uses that bit of knowledge in proofs of the external world *should* strike the rest of us as a pretty labored mishearing of something quite natural. The sensation of oddness is at best due to the unusualness of Moore's remarks, and the unusualness of his proof. This specific knowledge claim about hands is, of course, one rarely made (actually, it's a claim most of us have never made except for those unlucky few of us who have awakened in *hospitals* after certain accidents). But if someone *challenges* Moore's knowledge of the existence of his hands (or his knowledge of an external world) by *simply asserting* that Moore *doesn't* know that he has hands (or that there *are* hands), or if someone laments the "scandalous" fact that no one has a proof of the external world, then stating that "I know I have hands," or giving a proof of the existence of the external world (on the basis of the knowledge that one has hands) would be a *straightforward* way of responding.

Moore (1939, p. 145-146) illustrates the straightforwardness of his proof by describing how the same phrasing can demonstrate knowledge of misprints in a book: "There's one misprint here, another here, and another here." Imagine this is said to someone who has just (proudly) *asserted* without argument: "there are no misprints in *my* book." The same sort of response is appropriate in both cases. Someone *asserts*, "You have no hands." The response is (simply) to exhibit your hands. Someone *asserts*, "There is no proof of the external world." The response is (simply) to exhibit a proof.

The straightforwardness of Moore's remarks and proof stands apart from the question of whether Moore's proof is to the point, or successful, or instead "begs the question." (*Non sequiturs*, specifically, don't strike us as "odd" or "weird" or as "*obviously* annoying failures." They strike us as ... well, *non sequiturs*—as *mistakes*.) That we normally don't make such statements about our knowledge of our possessing hands is only the other side of *this* coin: we don't (usually) face what we'd take to be *annoyingly silly* denials of our knowledge of our hands, and so we don't usually need to express out loud this sort of dramatic (slightly defensive) counterclaim in response. And it's completely pertinent to note that when we *are* attacked about something we think it's *obvious* we know, we do — somewhat defensively — assert that we *know* such-and-such, just like Moore does.

A real-world example: A group of conspiracy theorists had decided (among other absurdities) that a certain person didn't exist: Rachel North, who had been obsessively blogging about an explosion she had witnessed—really, an explosion *that she had been in*. The journalist Jon Ronson met with her one afternoon. He (2011, p. 189) writes, "The last thing she said to me when I left that afternoon was, 'I know I exist.'"

⁹ I say "amazingly influential" because I'm about to argue that Wittgenstein is here exhibiting only tone-deafness, and *his tone-deafness* is what's been influential.

¹⁰ Coliva (2007) goes on to diagnose this failure. I'll shortly deny that the proof is a failure, let alone an obviously annoying one.

Philosophers never acknowledge the *deliberate* tone of exasperation Moore adopts in the face of someone denying he has hands, a tone of exasperation that's *completely appropriate* if his opponent is challenging (without good reason) knowledge Moore takes himself to obviously have. Moore's response is a perfectly ordinary response, that is. Moore (1939, p. 145) writes:

How absurd it would be to suggest that I did not know it, but only believed it, and that perhaps it was not the case! You might as well suggest that I do not know that I am now standing up and talking—that perhaps after all I'm not, and that it's not quite certain that I am!

Moore's (largely nineteenth-century British) style of expressing outraged exasperation is dated, although any moderately literate American should be able to hear the tones, nevertheless. A contemporary (American) expression of outraged exasperation looks like this: "Hello!?! Hands?! In your fucking face!???" Expressing exasperated outrage *in public* at someone's denial of obvious facts is common these days if only because of the behavior of a recent president of the United States, and his unfortunately-still-in-office Congressional enablers.

I've so far focused on surface impressions by denying the widespread philosophical view that there's a special (or weird) *phenomenological* quality to either sceptical challenges or to straightforward knowledge claims about hands. I've suggested that such impressions are due to the rarity of these speech-acts, and a concomitant failure by philosophers to sufficiently imagine the situation Moore thinks he's in (one, unfortunately, that we've *all* been in—especially if we unwisely converse with conspiracy theorists). A second possible (and peculiarly professional) reason for *philosophers* sensing a twilight-zone weirdness in Moore's "curious performance" is the mistaken impression that Moore's proof *is* a response to a sceptical *argument*. It simply is *not*. As Moore (1939, p. 126) makes clear, he offers his proof *only*

because Kant claims such a proof isn't to be had (or, something almost as bad, that only a proof as long as the *Critique of Pure Reason* is available). To show this is wrong, Moore simply describes what (he thinks) the requirements on a proof are, and then shows his proof meets them. When Pryor (2004, p. 370) criticizes Moore's proof, by saying,

Nowadays, it's commonly agreed that an adequate *philosophical response* to the skeptic need not be capable of rationally *persuading* the skeptic that the external world exists, or that we have justification to believe it exists. ... What it *does* have to do is diagnose and explain the flaws in the skeptic's reasoning. ... Clearly Moore's argument, by itself does little to discharge those responsibilities,

he's missing the point of Moore's proof. To discharge the responsibilities Pryor mentions, Moore must analyze sceptical arguments and evaluate them (something he does *in other articles*, notably his (1959a) — see the next section). In his (1939), he's only *giving a proof*—a proof that a very famous philosopher has claimed it isn't possible to give.¹¹

4 Moore's responses to certain sceptical arguments

I'll now indicate how powerful relativized burden-of-proof considerations are by illustrating Moore's *successful* use of them.¹² In my discussion, therefore, I'm relativizing burdens of proof in Moore's favor. Why do this? Because Moore wonders whether he, Moore, should rationally yield to any of these arguments. That is, I show that Moore makes several countermoves that presuppose that his challenger has accepted the relativized burden of proof *with respect to him*. (That is, his sceptical opponent is officially trying to establish that he, Moore, should yield to these arguments.)

But first, let's notice that it's pretty common to deny that Moore is responding *as a philosopher* to other philosophers (in particular, to those philosophers who call themselves sceptics). Instead, many claim that Moore is, instead, opposing the

¹¹ Pryor isn't alone in missing the point of Moore's proof. Williams (1996, p. 11-12), in presupposing Moore's proof is supposed to refute sceptics, misses the same point. Others do as well. Many others.

¹² It's a subtle textual question whether (i) Moore really *is* using these (and only these) techniques, and whether (ii) he's knowingly doing so. I explore these questions as well in what follows.

sceptic by pretending to be a non-philosopher (the “plain man”), and that, while play-acting—pretty implausibly—as an ordinary guy, he’s either willfully, or confusedly, misinterpreting the sceptic’s words and intentions. It’s also common to think that Moore has bungled this role—that he fails to carry through his “plain man” performance consistently, or, at least, that he fails to speak as any plain man would in Moore’s circumstances.¹³

There are good reasons to doubt this. First, Moore never claims *not* to be a philosopher. Second, Moore spends most of his time in these articles looking carefully at the details of the arguments of other philosophers—Russell’s, in particular. Finally, this interpretation of Moore’s strategy doesn’t fit with what he says about his own motivations and methods of doing philosophy (MOORE 1942, p. 14). He became a *philosopher*, he tells us more than once, because he found the things philosophers said puzzling. He took his philosophical calling, therefore, to be one of figuring out what these philosophers meant and whether they were right. That *doesn’t* presuppose that these philosophers—sceptics, for example—are therefore wrong and that his job is to defend common sense against them. Whether this *subsequently* becomes his job depends on the outcomes of his analyses of what these philosophers are saying.

Moore doesn’t need to be doing anything special (or have any special skills) to be a philosopher, apart from a certain familiarity with philosophical issues, and a certain familiarity with (as well as an alert wariness towards) philosophical jargon. His audience is almost exclusively philosophers (a point he acknowledges); and the kinds of sceptical arguments he’s concerned with and raises against his own purported knowledge are ones he (and everyone else) knows philosophers primarily raise; none of this shows anything more than the usual disciplinary borders that are otherwise insignificant. Philosophy is continuous with science and ordinary life (paraphrasing Quine); and, specifically, epistemology isn’t a special subject—it’s just the same old thing we all do all the time. This, anyway, is how I’m interpreting Moore’s response

to the sceptic in his (1959a) and how I interpret his proof of an external world in his (1939).

Consider, specifically, Moore’s *Four Forms of Scepticism* (MOORE, 1959a). Although Moore knows that many philosophers discuss scepticism, he analyzes sceptical arguments only with respect to Russell’s two books, (RUSSELL, 1927a; RUSSELL, 1927b). *Why them?* He doesn’t say. But the practice of targeting a specific opponent is common, and understandable: idealizing somewhat, a philosopher, out to refute an argument, attacks what strikes her as the best version of it. If that version exists in print, she cites it or improves on it. Austin (1962, p. 1), a typical philosopher, speaking of three books that he eventually excoriates (in both senses), writes,

I find in these texts a good deal to criticize, but I choose them for their merits and not for their deficiencies; they seem to me to provide the best available expositions of the approved reasons for holding theories which are at least as old as Heraclitus—more full, coherent, and terminologically exact than you find, for example, in Descartes or Berkeley.

Although this is a typical philosophical practice, it’s especially relevant to Moore because this is how an epistemic agent *should* proceed if she takes her opponent to have the burden of proof relative to her. The agent should find the best version of the argument posed against her, improve on it as best she can, and then find fault with it (if she can). Why should she try to improve it? Because: it isn’t pertinent that a specific *person* has the relativized burden of proof. That might be important to professional debaters — especially if they hope to embarrass their opponents in public (as so many debaters apparently hope to do). But if an agent is only worried about a challenge to (some of) her presumed knowledge, it doesn’t help *her* to refute a poor argument when she *knows* a better one exists.

So, Moore doesn’t simply pose sceptical scenarios against himself (as Descartes does) by recalling some dream or other that he once had. Instead, he does what anyone should do who

¹³ See Stroud (1984, chapter III), Clarke (1972), and Malcolm (1942).

already takes himself to know about dreams, to *already* know that he's not dreaming, and especially who *already* takes himself to know there are sceptical arguments against his knowing these things. He carefully looks *at those arguments*. This is typical (MOORE, 1959a, p. 197):

When he wrote these books, Russell held, so far as I can make out, with regard to each of the four kinds of "things" which I shall describe, that no human being has ever known for certain anything of that kind, and I shall give you quotations from these books to show why I think that this was his view. Now I can't help thinking that I myself have often known for certain things of all the four kinds, with regard to which Russell declares that no human being has ever known any such thing for certain; and when he says that no human being has ever known such things, I think he implies that I haven't, and that therefore I am wrong in thinking that I have. And the question I want to discuss is simply this: Was he right in thinking that I haven't, or am I right in thinking that I have?

Moore isn't just worried about who's right; he's also wondering what Russell's argument *is*. I've mentioned already that it's usually thought that having the burden of proof in a debate means losing ties. But notice these straightforward implications of (from the knowledge-claimant's point of view) the *knowledge-challenger* having a relativized burden of proof: If the claimant doesn't understand the challenger's argument, *the challenge fails*; if the claimant finds the challenger's argument murky or unclear, *the challenge fails*; if the claimant can't make sense of the challenger's words, *the challenge fails*; if the claimant thinks the challenging argument validly and soundly relies on premises, but she believes those premises are less plausible or (at best) only as plausible as opposing premises she already takes herself to know, *the challenge fails*; if the claimant thinks the challenger is relying on assumptions she's unsure how to evaluate, *the challenge fails*; if the claimant thinks that the inference from the premises (that she accepts) to a conclusion looks right, but she is far less sure of the inference than she is that the conclusion is wrong, *the challenge fails*.

Two points I should stress (again) before continuing: First, notice that the challenger hasn't meet the relativized burden of proof — even if, in fact,

the argument *does* make sense (and, specifically, makes sense to the *challenger*). The challenger, that is, can legitimately see the challenge as *succeeding* (relative to *him*) despite the challenger also recognizing that he has failed to meet the burden of proof *relative to the knowledge-claimant* — one that he accepted by challenging her.

Second, the issue is about whether the claimant is *rationally obliged* — or (more weakly) reasonable — to give up a knowledge claim because of a challenge. The rules of a public debate are different. If the *audience* (or judge) sees that a claimant hasn't grasped a challenging argument that they (the audience or judge) see *is* cogent, that claimant *loses*. But this *isn't* the appropriate stance when evaluating whether a claimant, starting from her own position of purported knowledge, has been rationally pushed from that position by a challenge. Moore, in other words (and like every other epistemic agent), is *on his own*.

Moore carefully evaluates Russell's various arguments — this involves subsidiary concerns with Russell's words, and what they mean. Doing so is natural enough because Russell's argument is couched in words, and Moore needs to know if these words are being used correctly. If not (which, for example, he decides is true of Russell's use of "remember"), he must try to reconstruct a candidate successful argument in words that *are* used correctly. Moore also notices several ambiguities in Russell's phrase, "logically possible," and teases them apart to see whether — on each possible interpretation—an argument favorable to Russell's sceptical conclusion can be constructed. Much of the time (that is, for many *many* pages ...), as far as Moore can tell, he unearths only fallacies and failures. If your opponent has accepted the relativized burden of proof, and you can't make out his argument, *his challenge fails*. Consider this passage (MOORE, 1959a, p. 221) — italics his:

[...] I cannot help agreeing with Russell that I never know immediately such a thing as 'that person is conscious' or 'This is a pencil', and that also the truth of such propositions never follows logically from anything which I do know immediately, and yet I think that I do know such things for certain. Has he any argument for his view that if their falsehood is *logically possible*

(i.e. if I do not know *immediately* anything logically incompatible with their falsehood) then I do *not* know them for certain? This is a thing which he certainly constantly assumes; but I cannot find that he anywhere gives any distinct arguments for it.

The statements Moore takes himself to know include straightforward items about the objects and persons around him, for example "that man is conscious." Even if Moore agrees with Russell about the non-immediate nature of some of his knowledge, without an argument that *that fact* undercuts what he takes himself to know, Russell's relativized burden of proof nullifies the sceptical force of their agreement on this — and Moore is explicit about Russell's lack of an argument. There are some considerations, Moore thinks, that Russell relies on that explain why he "constantly assumes" what he assumes. Moore (1959a, p. 221-222) writes:

So far as I can gather, his reasons for holding it are the two assumptions which he expresses when he says: "If (I am to reject the view that my life is one long dream) I must do so on the basis of an analogical or inductive argument, which cannot give complete certainty" (*Outline*, page 218). That is to say he assumes: (1) My belief or knowledge that this is a pencil is, *if* I do not know it immediately, and if also the proposition does not follow logically from anything that I know immediately, in some sense "based on" an analogical or inductive argument; and (2) What is "based on" an analogical or inductive argument is never certain knowledge, but only more or less probable belief. And with regard to these assumptions, it seems to me that the first must be true in some sense or other, though it seems to me terribly difficult to say exactly what the sense is. What I am inclined to dispute, therefore, is the second: I am inclined to think that what is "based on" an analogical or inductive argument, in the sense in which my knowledge or belief that this is a pencil is so, may nevertheless be certain knowledge and *not* merely more or less probable belief.

It's all over for *Russell's* argument, at this point (despite most of Moore's commentators thinking *Moore* has just conceded everything the sceptic needs, by accepting that his knowledge of pencils is in some sense inferential¹⁴). Why? For one thing, Moore's challenger having accepted the

relativized burden of proof with respect to Moore means, as I've indicated: (1) If Moore finds that the challenger's argument is incomprehensible, or even just kind of hard to understand, that counts against it. He doesn't have to deny his own presumed knowledge because of an argument he doesn't fully grasp ("It seems to me that the first must be true in some sense or other, though it seems to me terribly difficult to say exactly what the sense is."). (2) If the disagreement comes down to an assumption on the part of Russell that's otherwise unsupported, but that itself bears the relativized burden of undercutting Moore's purported knowledge, he can reject it.

I won't say a lot about Moore (1959b), but it exhibits the same strategy. Moore writes (p. 245):

[Suppose] our sceptical philosopher says: It is *not* sufficient; and offers as an argument to prove that it is not, this: It is logically possible *both* that you should be having all the sensory experiences you are having, and also that you should be remembering what you do remember, and *yet* should be dreaming. If this *is* logically possible, then I don't see how to deny that I cannot possibly know for certain that I am not dreaming; I do not see that I possibly could. But can any reason be given for saying that it *is* logically possible? So far as I know nobody ever has, and I don't know how anybody ever could. And so long as this is not done my argument, "I know that I am standing up, and therefore I know that I am not dreaming," remains at least as good as his, "You don't know that you are not dreaming, and therefore don't know that you are standing up." And I don't think I've ever seen an argument expressed directly to show that it is not.

It *suffices* (if your opponent has accepted the relativized burden of proof with respect to you) to notice one of her assumptions and be able to say: "I don't *think* I've ever seen an argument [for that assumption] ..." It's *your opponent's* job to *provide* such an argument—if your opponent wants you to (rationally) move from your position because of her argument. And if it strikes you that "nobody ever has [come up with such an argument], and I don't know how anybody ever could," then your purported knowledge about logical possibility (in this case) *trumps*—in the still-living good sense of this word—the sceptic's counterclaim about

¹⁴ Four examples: Baldwin (1992), especially pages 268-69, Burnyeat (1977), especially page 396, Williams (1996), especially page 83, and Wright (1985).

logical possibility. Because Moore's commentators don't realize that Moore takes his sceptical opponent to have the relativized burden of proof, they misunderstand Moore's remark that "my argument ... remains at least as good as his." This is a tie the sceptic *loses*—relative to Moore; it's not that Moore has failed to engage with the sceptic. Baldwin (1992, p. 268) writes instead that Moore's final papers ((1959b), in particular) "end in failure, when Moore confesses at the end of [(1959b)] that he has no satisfactory refutation of sceptical arguments concerning the possibility of perceptual knowledge of the external world." Moore doesn't have to "refute" the sceptic; he needs only to recognize his greater confidence in what he takes himself to know than in the validity/soundness of the sceptic's arguments or assertions.

Moore (1959a, p. 222) concludes this way:

What I want, however, finally to emphasize is this: Russell's view that I do not know for certain that this is a pencil or that you are conscious rests, if I am right, on no less than four distinct assumptions: (1) That I don't know these things immediately; (2) That they don't follow logically from any thing or things that I do know immediately; (3) That, *if* (1) and (2) are true, my belief in or knowledge of them must be "based on an analogical or inductive argument"; and (4) That what is so based cannot be *certain knowledge*. And what I can't help asking myself is this: Is it, in fact, as certain that all these four assumptions are true, as that I *do* know that this is a pencil and that you are conscious? I cannot help answering: It seems to me *more* certain that I *do* know that this is a pencil and that you are conscious, than that any single one of these four assumptions is true, let alone all four. That is to say, though, as I have said, I agree with Russell that (1), (2) and (3) *are* true; yet of no one even of these three do I feel *as* certain as that I do know for certain that this is a pencil. Nay more: I do not think it is *rational* to be as certain of any one of these four propositions, as of the proposition that I do know that this is a pencil. And how on earth is it to be decided which of the two things it is *rational* to be most certain of?

This passage has generated much (philosophical) handwringing. What *principle* is Moore relying on? Is it something like: if an argument purporting

to undercut my knowledge is something I'm less certain of than that knowledge, I should reject it? But, as an independent free-standing principle universally applicable to debates, this doesn't seem right, or something an opponent of Moore's should accept. Worse, as Baldwin (1992, p. 270-271) indicates, it forces Moore into a dilemma about what kinds of certainty comparisons are afoot. If it's subjective certainty — how Moore *feels* — why should Moore's opponent (or even Moore) take that seriously? But if it's objective certainty, then how has Moore established this—*where's his* argument?¹⁵ Apart from this issue, hasn't Moore — in failing to be the ordinary plain man he's posing as—given Russell all he needs by accepting (1), (2) and (3)? And anyway, how do Moore's remarks about not knowing which of two things it's rational to be most certain of help his case?

Everything about this passage is nicely resolved, however, if Moore is dialectically operating as if his opponent has accepted a relativized burden of proof. Conceding (1), (2), and (3), and recognizing they don't imply (4) leaves Moore with his knowledge intact. Noting that he's less certain of (1), (2) and (3) than he is of the presumed knowledge that Russell tries to use (1), (2) and (3) to undercut means that even if Moore could see an argument against those bits of presumed knowledge, that would nevertheless leave his knowledge intact. Moore doesn't need a general epistemic principle about comparisons of certainty or plausibility—objective or otherwise; he can use the far more drab fact that if you offer an argument against me that I'm less sure of than I am of the negation of the conclusion you're trying to draw, this is worse than a tie. How have you given me reasons to desert the knowledge I already take myself to have? And finally, that the issue here turns out to ultimately lean on what it's rational to be most certain of—something neither Moore nor his opponent have anything useful to say anything about—leaves Moore's knowledge intact. All of this follows from Moore taking Russell

¹⁵ Lycan (2001) defends a version of this comparison strategy and attributes it to Moore. Lycan claims plausibility comparisons don't require a background theory of any sort to be successfully deployed against an opponent. I don't think this responds to Baldwin's objection—one that Lycan doesn't consider.

(and the sceptic) to have accepted the burden of proof relative to him.

Burnyeat (1977) interprets Moore as utilizing a different general principle at this juncture, one that favors instances of knowledge ("This is a pencil") over general principles (e.g., the ones Hume offers). It strikes me as textually convincing that in earlier papers (e.g., Moore (1918-19)), Moore had adopted this way of opposing the sceptic. It's also true that Moore (1922) *does* seem to be employing a comparison argument against Hume's two principles; and I also agree that it looks like Moore may have also considered a kind of certainty-comparison principle in Moore (1918-19). *Consequently*, he's perhaps still thinking about such a certainty-comparison principle even in Moore (1959a).

Nevertheless, although the examples Moore (1959a) gives of knowledge are the same, Moore's stressing of these other aspects of the examples have been stripped from the discussion—and new elements more compatible with relativized burden-of-proof considerations have been added. We shouldn't assume, therefore, that the comparison strategy of the earlier papers is still being tacitly presupposed instead of my proposed relativized burden-of-proof strategy. It's also important to notice that Moore recognizing his sceptical opponent having accepted the burden of proof relative to him *suffices* as a systematic justification of Moore's ways of responding to that opponent in his (1959a). Moore doesn't *need* either of these other approaches. And that's a very good thing since, if Moore accepts that his sceptical opponent doesn't have a burden of proof relative to him, they don't work successfully against that sceptic, as Baldwin (1992) and Burnyeat (1977) show.

As I've noted, nearly all of Moore's critics misconstrue Moore's admitting, (1) that he doesn't immediately know that "this is a pencil" or "that man is conscious," that, (2) These things don't follow logically from anything he does know immediately, and (3) that, *if* (1) and (2) are true, his belief in or knowledge of them must be "based on an analogical or inductive argument." They assume, that is, that by making these concessions Moore gives the sceptic everything he

needs. Stroud (1984, p. 106, footnote 12) writes that Moore "does believe that 'nobody ever does know, by direct apprehension, of the existence of anything whatever except his own acts of consciousness and the sense-data and images he directly apprehends,'" and *exclaims* that he doesn't understand "how Moore fails to see the sceptical *consequences* of that sense-datum thesis." Williams (1996, p. 83) writes:

This much is true: Moore cannot both concede that his knowledge of the existence of external objects is always inferential in the way that Hume and Russell suggest and suppose that he can refute the sceptic by appealing to the greater certainty of his knowing that his pencil exists.

Yes, he *can*. To think he *can't* is *both* to misconstrue relativized burdens of proof *and* to misunderstand Moore, when he discusses sceptical arguments. Moore takes himself to *know* that "this is a pencil" and "that man is conscious." That's where he *starts*. He *also* thinks his knowledge of these things is "inferential" — but listen (again) to what he says about this to see why that "concession" doesn't matter (1959a, p. 222):

My belief or knowledge that this is a pencil is, *if* I do not know it immediately, and if also the proposition does not follow logically from anything that I do know immediately, in some sense "based on" an analogical or inductive argument...

and he later comments explicitly on the above, writing:

it seems to me that [this] must be true in some sense or other, though it seems to me terribly difficult to say exactly what the sense is.

Despite what Williams and Stroud say (and despite what the sceptical philosophers say that Williams and Stroud are — I think — interpreting correctly), this concession *isn't* incompatible with Moore knowing what he takes himself to know. Moore is right about this because the *mere* fact that something is known inferentially *doesn't* give sceptics a wedge. That depends on the epistemic properties of the *inferential link*. But second, Moore would be simply mistaken (as he correctly notes) to use such a tenuously-grasped sense

of “inference” in an argument against his taking himself to know that “this is a pencil” or “that man is conscious.” A tenuously grasped sense of “inference” resulting in an argument that’s equally tenuously grasped provides insufficient considerations for conceding that the sceptic has successfully shown *to Moore* that he doesn’t know what he thinks he knows.

Conclusion

Despite his abundant philosophical talents, Moore isn’t particularly clear-headed—at least when it comes to describing his *methods*. So, I sympathize with those who tangle over questions about what he’s up to. Nevertheless, I think if we treat him as relying (implicitly) on relativized burdens of proof, we can make sense of his work — in these two papers, anyway.

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