

## How Moore Beat the Skeptic

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One afternoon in 1939, G. E. Moore held up his hands. He proceeded to make a certain gesture, first with his right hand and next with his left, while uttering the words, “Here is one hand and here is another.” Moore famously claimed to have thereby proved the existence of external things.<sup>1</sup>

Moore was quick to add that he was “perfectly well aware” of what is surely true: that “many philosophers will feel that I have not given any satisfactory proof of the point in question” (p. 148). Moore went on to argue, however, that such philosophers, provided they accept his standards of what is to count as a proof of the existence of external things, are mistaken. I want to show that Moore was right on this point, and provably so.

Moore was concerned to refute a certain kind of skeptic, a skeptic who denies that an argument that I will call “Moore’s Primary Proof” constitutes a proof of its conclusion.

### MOORE’S PRIMARY PROOF

- (1) Here is a hand. [Uttered while making certain gestures.]
- (2) Here is another hand. [Uttered while making certain gestures.]

*Therefore,*

- (3) There exist external things.

The skeptic, we will suppose, accepts

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<sup>1</sup>Moore, “Proof of an External World,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 25 (1939). Reprinted in Moore’s *Philosophical Papers*, George Allen and Unwin (1959), pp. 126–148. The quotation above is from p. 146 of the reprinting; all future page-references will be to this edition.

## MOORE'S STANDARDS OF PROOF

An argument constitutes a proof of its conclusion if and only if

- (i) Its conclusion is different from each of its premises;
- (ii) Its conclusion follows from its premises; and
- (iii) Each of its premises is known.<sup>2</sup>

It would take a fool, not just a skeptic, to deny that Moore's Primary Proof satisfies condition (i) of Moore's Standards of Proof. Whether or not condition (ii) is satisfied depends on what relation we take "follows from" in that condition to express. To be sure, (3) is not a logical consequence of (1) and (2); but given what (1), (2) and (3) mean, (3) could not be false while (1) and (2) are true—and in that sense, (3) does follow from (1) and (2).<sup>3</sup> Since that sense of "follows from" is a perfectly reasonable one, the skeptic Moore is concerned to refute is a skeptic who denies that Moore's Primary Proof satisfies condition (iii) of Moore's Standards of Proof. The skeptic denies, that is, that Moore's utterance of "Here is a hand," made while making certain gestures, expressed a proposition that was known, at the moment of utterance, to be true.

I said that I wanted to show that such a skeptic is provably mistaken. It is time to explain what I mean by that. I won't be showing that it can be proved that what our skeptic denies is true, that it can be proved that the premises of Moore's Primary Proof are known. Just as Moore found himself unable to prove the *truth* of his premises (p. 149), I find myself still more unable to prove in addition their epistemic impeccability. What I will show, rather, is that a skeptic who denies that Moore's premises are known *on the ground that those premises cannot be proved* is provably mistaken. Moore said at the end of his lecture that proof is not required for knowledge. I will show that not only was Moore right in saying this, but that it can be *proved* that he was right—it can be proved that proof is not required for knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

My proof that proof is not required for knowledge is just an elaboration of Moore's own remarks to that effect, when he says, right at the end of his lecture (p. 150), that "I can know things, which I cannot prove;

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<sup>2</sup>This is from p. 146. "Known" in (iii) should perhaps be "known by Moore."

<sup>3</sup>Indeed, the bulk of Moore's lecture can be seen as a sustained argument intended to convince us of just this point.

<sup>4</sup>Proved, that is, provided we accept Moore's Standards of Proof. I don't wish to take a stand here on the question of whether we *should* accept those standards. For arguments that we should not accept them, see Crispin Wright, "(Anti-)sceptics Simple and Subtle: Moore and McDowell," forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*; for an opposing view, see James Pryor, "Is Moore's Argument an Example of Transmission-Failure?" unpublished ms.

and among things which I certainly did know, even if (as I think) I could not prove them, were the premises of my... proof.” Recall that the first premise of Moore’s Primary Proof was the premise

(1) Here is a hand. [Uttered while making certain gestures.]

The argument I take Moore to be suggesting in the above remarks is this:

#### MOORE’S SECONDARY PROOF

(4) Premise (1) cannot be proved.

(5) Premise (1) is known.

*Therefore,*

(6) Proof is not required for knowledge.

One wonders why Moore did not at this point repeat his earlier observation, that “many philosophers will still feel that I have not given any satisfactory proof of the point in question,” the point in question now being that proof is not required for knowledge. For our skeptic, of course, will immediately respond with a “proof” of his own:

#### THE SKEPTIC’S ARGUMENT

(4) Premise (1) cannot be proved.

(5) Proof is required for knowledge.

*Therefore,*

(6) Premise (1) is not known.

We seem to be at a stand-off. Moore, in his Secondary Proof, is assuming what the skeptic denies, in order to argue that proof is not required for knowledge. The skeptic is doing the reverse: assuming what *Moore* denies, in order to argue that a premise in Moore’s Primary Proof is unknown. The situation, it seems, is irresolvable; and it is for this reason, perhaps, that so few have been persuaded by Moore’s attempt to refute skepticism.

We *seem* to be at a stand-off; but we’re not. For Moore’s Secondary Proof *is* a proof of its conclusion (6), that proof is not required for knowledge. The Skeptic’s Argument, in contrast, is *not* a proof of its conclusion

(9), that premise (1) is not known. And if we have, as we do have, a *proof* that proof is not required for knowledge, then we have a proof that the skeptic, who denies that Moore's Primary Proof is a proof of the existence of external things, is mistaken.

Let's see first why the Skeptic's Argument is not a proof of its conclusion. Both Moore and the skeptic agree that for the Skeptic's Argument to be a proof of its conclusion that argument must satisfy the three conditions stated in Moore's Standards of Proof. The first two conditions are indeed satisfied: neither of the premises of the Skeptic's Argument is the same as its conclusion, and that conclusion does follow from those premises. But the third condition on proof is not met by the Skeptic's Argument. Consider the skeptic's second premise,

(8) Proof is required for knowledge.

The skeptic cannot acknowledge that this premise is *known*, for if it were known then it would be true, and so if it were known then, as it says, there would be a proof of it. But the skeptic cannot be in a position to give a *proof* of (8), for if she were then she would have given it immediately upon being presented with Moore's Primary Proof, and Moore would have gone home defeated.<sup>5</sup> It follows, then, that by the skeptic's own standards on what is required for knowledge (standards embodied in her second premise, (8)) the Skeptic's Argument does not constitute a proof of its conclusion that Moore's premise (1) is unknown.

What of Moore's Secondary Proof? Once again, the first two conditions on proof are clearly satisfied: neither of the premises of Moore's Secondary Proof is the same as its conclusion, and that conclusion follows from those premises. Moreover, Moore *knew* each of those premises to be true. Even the skeptic will not deny that Moore knew premise (4), since that same premise reappears in the skeptic's own argument as premise (7). The skeptic will, of course, deny that Moore knew his second premise (5), the claim that (1) is known—after all, the skeptic thinks that (5) isn't even *true*, let alone known to be true. But why should we think that the skeptic is right on this point? We have just seen that the Skeptic's Argument for the falsity of (1) does not constitute a proof, by the skeptic's own lights. And by any ordinary standard of knowledge, not only did

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<sup>5</sup>A skeptic might insist that she *does* have a proof of (8), namely the zero-premise argument with (8) as its conclusion. Since (8) is necessarily true if it is true at all, then *if* it is true, it does (trivially) follow from the premises of such an argument (in the sense of "follow from" mentioned above); and each of those premises (all none of them) is known and is distinct from the argument's conclusion. But a skeptic's insistence that this *is* a proof of (8) is then no more than an insistence that (8) is *true*. And we should not take seriously a skeptic who just *insists*, without reason, that proof is required for knowledge.

Moore *know* that there was a hand (and so premise (5) is true), he also knew that his belief that there was a hand was justified in just the kind of way that is required for knowledge—premise (5) is known. How absurd it would be to suggest that Moore didn't know that the kind of justification conferred on his belief by his perception of a hand was the kind of justification needed for a true belief to count as knowledge. “You might as well suggest that I do not know that I am now standing up and talking.” (p. 146)

Moore has thus beaten the skeptic. According to mutually accepted standards on what is to count as a proof, Moore is in a position to say that he has proved that proof is not required for knowledge. The skeptic, in contrast, is *not* in a position to say that *she* has proved that proof *is* required for knowledge. And if the skeptic hasn't proved that, then given that Moore has proved that there can be knowledge without proof, the skeptic is in no position to deny that Moore has proved the existence of external things.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Thanks to Delia Graff, Gilbert Harman, and Zoltán Szabó for helpful discussion and comments on earlier drafts.