

# Moore's Proof of an External World. Just Begging the Question

Annalisa Coliva, New York

The aim of this paper is to assess Moore's Proof of an external world, in light of recent interpretations of it, namely Crispin Wright's (1985) and James Pryor's (unpublished).

In the first section I will present Moore's original proof and claim that, despite Moore's intentions, it can be read as an anti-sceptical proof. In the following two sections I will present Wright's and Pryor's interpretations of it. Finally, I will claim that *if* we grant some of Pryor's intuitions, it is true that the proof does not exhibit what Wright calls "transmission-failure" and Pryor misleadingly presents as a case of question-begging argument. I will then offer my own interpretation of what a question-begging argument is. On that basis, I will claim that, contrary to what Pryor maintains, Moore's proof is not just wanting because of a generic dialectical shortcoming, but because it begs the question after all.

## 1. Moore's Proof: Moore

Moore's proof is often presented without mentioning the actual context in which it was first produced, and it is almost always presented as an anti-sceptical proof. The dialectical setting which is usually taken for granted features two characters: a sceptic about the existence of the external world and Moore himself in his capacity of common sense philosopher, *par excellence*. As a matter of fact, however, things are not that straightforward. For "Proof of an External World" (1939) is a long essay consisting of two parts. In the first and more substantial part Moore takes his lead from Kant's famous complaint that it is still a scandal to philosophy that nobody has proved that the external world exists. He then introduces a number of distinctions which should clarify the *meaning* of the expression "external world" and he concludes that in order to prove that the external world exists, one should prove that there are things that *can be encountered in space and that exist independently of our minds*. He then moves on to the proof. By holding his hand in front of him, so that he and his audience can see it, Moore says:

(1) "Here's one hand";

then he hides it.

Then, following the same procedure, he says:

(2) "Here is another";

then he hides it.

Finally, without showing his hands again, he concludes:

(3) "There are two human hands at present".

Since the conclusion concerns the existence of objects which can be encountered in space, despite the fact that they are not currently perceived, and that, therefore, exist independently of our minds, Moore claims that (3) entails:

(4) "The external world exists".

Notice that so far Moore's proof is only a proof against an Idealist who claimed that it is not the case that there is an external world, for he would claim that objects do *not* exist independently of our minds. Such an Idealist could presumably concede the truth of the premises, although I doubt that he would concede (3) and, therefore, the conclusion of the argument. However, nothing has been done so far to show that the premises are *known* – as opposed to be presumed by both Moore and the Idealist – to be true and that, therefore, the conclusion is likewise *known* to be the case. Hence, Moore's proof, so far, can't be taken to have any bearing against scepticism.

In effect, a few years later, responding to his critics (Moore 1942), Moore himself claimed that his proof was meant to be against the Idealist and not against the sceptic. For he was aware of the fact that in order to read it as a proof against scepticism he should have *proved* that he *knew* his premises. In particular, he should have proved that he was not dreaming. But Moore candidly admitted that he could not prove that he was not dreaming, for all his evidence would have been compatible with the fact that he was dreaming. The interesting question then is this: Why is it that almost all the readers have taken Moore's proof to be an anti-sceptical proof? And, moreover, did they have the right to do so, given Moore's claims about his proof?

After producing his proof, Moore goes on to say that his proof is a rigorous one because:

- (i) the premises are different from the conclusion;
- (ii) the conclusion really follows from the premises and
- (iii) he *knows* his premises with certainty to be true.

However, according to Moore, given (iii) and the fact that the inference is valid, knowledge of the premises, should transmit to the conclusion. Hence, if Moore really knew that there were hands in front of him, then he would *also know that the external world exists*. And *this* is a claim that a sceptic about the existence of the external world would find contentious.

Now, how could Moore claim that he knew his premises (and hence his conclusion), while candidly admitting that he couldn't prove that he knew them, while also realising that that was what he should have done in order to convince a sceptic of the fact that he knew his premises? The uncharitable answer would be that Moore was confused about what he was doing. The more charitable answer, and indeed the answer which explains, to an extent, the fascination Wittgenstein felt towards Moore's work is rather the following: if you are a philosopher of common sense then, no matter how much the sceptic presses you by asking "How do you know that *p*?", "Haven't you realised that if you were dreaming that would be compatible with the evidence at your disposal but it wouldn't follow that there are two human hands where you have seen them?", you will stick to your guns, as it were, and respond: "I don't know *how* I know it, but I *do*".

This, as Wittgenstein noticed, is an answer that, although it is badly expressed, because it portrays the attitude we have towards certain propositions as akin to belief and knowledge, shows a deeply right attitude towards scepticism. An attitude that can be glossed as follows: "No matter what you say, I won't give up on this". The diagnosis of the extremely unpleasant consequences of giving up on *this* – let it be the very specific premises of Moore's proof, in that very context, or its conclusion, viz. that the external world exists – and of why we cannot do it would have been for Wittgenstein to investigate in *On Certainty*.

Yet, despite my charitable interpretation of Moore's strategy against scepticism, the fact remains that he claimed that he knew his premises and that his argument was correct, from which it follows that the conclusion would be known too. In order to see whether this is really so, let's now turn to Wright.

## 2. Moore's proof: Wright

According to Wright, Moore's proof can be reconstrued as follows:

- (1) Here's one hand;
- (2) If there is one hand here, then the external world exists;
- (3) The external world exists.

Wright points out that the *warrant* Moore has for (1) is his visual experience.<sup>1</sup> Now, that visual experience would be the same in case Moore were just dreaming of having a hand. Hence, that experience could be a warrant for (1) just in case Moore were antecedently warranted in assuming that the external world exists. Thus, the warrant Moore has for (1) presupposes that he had a warrant for (3) and, therefore, cannot transmit to (3) across that (valid) inference.

According to Wright, Moore's proof exhibits what he calls a "*transmission failure*". Pryor claims that this is a new name for an old phenomenon, traditionally known as "*begging the question*". But this is misleading in my view because one begs the question against someone else just in case one produces an argument which, at some point, assumes the falsity of the thesis of one's opponent, or of what would follow from that thesis. By contrast, an argument that exhibits transmission failure is, as the name suggests, an argument in which the warrant one may have for the premises does not transmit to the conclusion, because its very being a warrant for the premises in the first place depends on the fact that one has already a warrant for the conclusion.

Thus, on Wright's view, Moore's argument would fail because one's perceptual evidence can be a warrant for (1) only if one has an antecedent warrant for the conclusion (3), viz. that the external world exists. So, as a matter of fact, the argument is ineffective not because it begs the question, but because it can't produce a warrant for (3).

## 3. Moore's proof: Pryor

According to Pryor, it is *not* true that Moore's proof exhibits a transmission failure. For, in his view, (1) is what he calls a "*perceptual basic belief*": one's visual experience has a content that can be taken at face value to form the corresponding belief, *without having to have an antecedent warrant for (3)*. Hence, one's visual experience gives one a warrant<sup>2</sup> for (1), if one has no reason to doubt (3) and despite the fact that one has no antecedent warrant for (3). So, Moore's proof, *as such*, does not fail to transmit a warrant, for one need not have any antecedent warrant for (3), in order to be warranted in holding (1) on the basis of one's visual experience. Hence, in so far as one has no reason to doubt (3), one is warranted in holding (1) and that warrant transmits to (3) across that (valid) inference.

Yet, according to Pryor, Moore's proof is *dialectically ineffective*, because the sceptic doubts (3), viz. that the external world exists. According to Pryor, if one doubts that (3), then one thinks either that (3) is *false*, or, at least, that it is *more likely to be false* than true. Thus, by doubting that (3), one would hold that the original perceptual evidence at Moore's disposal is defeated and that, therefore, Moore's proof is formally correct, but dialectically ineffective because it starts with a (more probably or altogether) *false premise*. Hence, the proof cannot convince the sceptic that his doubts are misplaced. Yet, there is nothing wrong with the proof *as such*. Rather, it fails to *persuade* one of the parties within a certain dialectical setting, given the latter's collateral beliefs.

## 4. Assessing the reconstructions

For present purposes, I will agree with Pryor that perceptual experience can give a subject a warrant for believing "Here's one hand". No doubt such an assumption should be further investigated. But there are some initial reasons in its favour. For instance, forming the belief that there is a hand in front of one on that basis is not unmotivated. For it is not like forming that belief on the basis of *no* evidence at all – as it would be the case if one had no perceptual experience whatsoever. Nor is it like forming that belief *contrary* to the evidence at one's disposal – after all, the content of the subject's visual experience is as of a (human) hand in front of her. Moreover, it seems odd to suppose that, ordinarily, in order to be entitled to take one's perceptual evidence at face value to form a perceptual belief such as (1) one should also have some antecedent warrant for the belief in the existence of the external world. So, let us assume for the sake of argument and in light of the previous considerations that perceptual evidence can, *in general*, give one a warrant for (1), without having to have an antecedent warrant for (3).

What remains to be seen is whether, in light of this assumption, Moore's proof is wanting because it is dialectically ineffective, as Pryor maintains. In order to assess this issue we should consider in more detail the kind of dialectical setting in which the proof is produced.

<sup>1</sup> To have a (defeasible) warrant for p is a weaker notion than knowing that p. Yet, to have a warrant for p is a necessary condition for knowing that p (according to a non-externalist notion of knowledge). So if the warrant does not transmit, a fortiori knowledge does not transmit.

<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, Pryor talks about a prima facie justification. In conversation he has pointed out to me that he takes this notion to be equivalent to the generic notion of epistemic warrant used by Wright.

Contrary to Pryor, I do not think that the sceptic<sup>3</sup> should be committed either to the belief in the non-existence of the external world, or to the fact that it is more probable that the external world does not exist. (The sceptic is no Idealist). Rather, I think that the sceptic is someone who claims that one *cannot have a warrant* for the belief that (and, *a fortiori*, one cannot know whether) the external world exists and this is a hypothesis that is compatible *both* with the existence and the non-existence of the external world. So, I take it, the sceptic is *agnostic* as to whether (3) is the case.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, the sceptic neither believes that the external world exists, nor that it doesn't.

Now, if Moore's proof is produced against an agnostic, then, as a matter of fact, it neither exhibits a failure of transmission, nor some kind of dialectical ineffectiveness, if the latter is taken to be something over and above what I have offered as the proper characterisation of a real question-begging argument. For the agnostic claims that one *can't* have a warrant for (and, therefore, can't know whether) the external world exists. However, if one can't have a warrant for (3), then one can't have a warrant for (1) either, for (1) is a belief about the existence of a material object. More explicitly, if one holds with the agnostic that one can't have a warrant for a belief of the generality of (3), then one is committed to holding that one can't have a warrant for (1) either, since (1) is just a belief about one particular material object.

However, according to Pryor's reconstruction of Moore's proof, that's precisely what isn't the case. For, according to Pryor, "Here is one hand" would be a perceptually basic belief, which would be warranted and, moreover, would be so independently of having a warrant for (3). But this is just to assume the opposite of what would follow from holding the view that one cannot have a warrant for the belief in the existence of the external world, viz. that one cannot have a warrant for that perceptual belief. In short: this is simply what I have characterised as begging the question against the best possible sceptic.

## 5. Conclusions

I have argued that despite Moore's intentions, his proof of an external world can be read as anti-sceptical argument. In presenting Wright's reconstruction of the proof I have argued that transmission failure, which is what Wright offers as a diagnosis of the failure of the proof, and Pryor takes to be a form of question-begging argument, is in fact a different phenomenon. I have then claimed that if – as there are reasons to maintain – one agrees with Pryor that there are perceptually basic beliefs, then one should also agree that Moore's proof isn't ineffective because of transmission failure. Yet, I have argued that it would be equally wrong to suppose that the proof fails because of a generic dialectical shortcoming as Pryor maintains. Rather, it fails because it begs the question against the best possible sceptic, namely the agnostic.

## Literature

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<sup>3</sup> At least, a philosophical sceptic as opposed to someone who, in ordinary parlance, professes herself sceptic as to whether *p* is the case.

<sup>4</sup> Notice that agnosticism is not tantamount to *open-mindedness*. Agnosticism is a position earned through careful consideration of the reasons pro and against *p* and by finding both of them *necessarily* non-conclusive. Agnosticism, therefore, is stable. By contrast, open-mindedness can be due to the fact that one has never considered whether *p* (or not-*p*) before. Or else, it can be due to having considered evidence both pro and against *p* without being in a position to decide (yet) which one of the two evidential sets is more compelling. Hence, open-mindedness is *not* a stable a position.