**Scepticism and Knowledge: Moore's Proof of an External World**

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A profitable way of approaching the issue of analytic philosophy's reflections on scepticism and knowledge is by looking at the history of Moore's "Proof of an external world". The paper, first appeared in 1939, has been the object of different and contrasting interpretations since then and is nowadays at the core of a large debate in epistemology. In §1 I will present the paper to place it in its proper context, in §2 I will consider some classical interpretations of it and in §3 the ones which have fostered the on-going debate. In so doing I will assess all of them from a historical point of view, pointing out how they are all somewhat wanting as renditions of Moore's strategy. In §4 I will put forward my own interpretation of the historical Moore, as it were. Finally in §5, I will return to the present-day debate and sketch a further interpretation—Wittgensteinian in spirit—which may be of interest to contemporary discussions on the topic.

## 1. Moore's Proof of an external world

Moore's proof of an external world is often presented without mentioning its original context and, moreover, as if it was directed against scepticism about the external world. Things aren't that simple, though. For "Proof of an external world" (PEW) is a long essay divided into two parts. In the first and much longer one, Moore takes his lead from Kant's famous observation, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

> It still remains a scandal to philosophy … that the existence of things outside of us … must be accepted merely on *faith*, and that, if anyone thinks good to doubt their existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by any satisfactory proof. (B xxxix)

Moore claims that Kant wasn't able to give a successful proof of the existence of things outside of us and that his own proof will remedy the situation. However, before presenting it, he introduces a series of terminological distinctions, meant to clarify the meaning of the expression "things outside of us". According to Moore, the philosophical tradition in general, and Kant in particular, erroneously believe that the following expressions are equivalent:

(A) "things outside of us";

(B) "external things";

(C) "things which are external to our minds";

(D) "things which can be met in space";

(E) "things presented in space".

According to Kant, all these locutions are synonymous because they make reference to phenomena as opposed to noumena. The former are necessarily presented in space—the pure form of sensibility which allows us to perceive outer things. In contrast, according to Moore, these expressions can't be equivalent because he doesn't subscribe to Kant's transcendentalism, either about empirical objects, or about space.

Hence, according to Moore, (E) doesn't entail (D), although (D) entails (E). For there may be things which are presented in space and yet can't be met within it. For instance, pains or itches are presented in a part of one's body, yet can't be met in space. Moreover, according to Moore, (C) doesn't entail (D), although (D) entails (C). For example, animals' pains are external to our minds, yet can't be met in space. Finally, with respect to (A) and (B), if they are taken to be equivalent to (C), the point just made would hold in their case too. But they could also be taken as synonymous with (D). Hence both points just made would hold for them as well. Be that as it may, since for Moore "physical object" means "an object which exists independently of being perceived by us (human beings)", he thinks that by giving a proof of the existence of physical objects he will *ipso facto* prove that there are things which can be met in space and that are external to us, no matter how (A) and (B) are read. However, this latter claim is *prima facie* problematical. For Moore himself points out that animals' pains are external to human minds as we can't perceive them. But it doesn't follow from this that they are what we intuitively regard as physical objects. Thus, the right thing to say is that a physical object is everything *that we could perceive*, which, however, exists independently of the fact that we actually perceive it. With this clarification in hand, let us now turn to the proof itself.

By holding up his hands in front of himself and in clear view, Moore makes a gesture with the right hand and says:

(1) "Here is a hand";

then, making the same gesture with the left hand, he says:

(2) "Here is another";

he then concludes:

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

Since the conclusion concerns the existence of objects which can be met in space, Moore claims that (3) entails

(4) "There are physical objects";

and hence, that he has proved

(5) "There is an external world".

It must be stressed that up to this point Moore's proof is directed against an idealist who denies that there is an external world, by denying that there are objects that exist independently of the fact that we actually perceive them. Furthermore, the proof is clearly based on the idea of presenting instances of physical objects, in order to support the claim that there is an external world. Thus, it proceeds just like a proof of, say, there being misprints in a book—that is, by presenting specific instances of the category of misprint.

Still, it is clear that an idealist could concede both premises—(1) and (2)—and the conclusion—(3)—and yet deny that that entails that there are physical objects—(4)—, if by "physical object" one

meant objects existing independently of being perceived by us. Hence, an idealist wouldn't take Moore's performance to show the truth of (5).[1]

Moreover, it must be noticed that up to this point nothing has been done to show that the premises are *known* to be true and aren't merely assumed to be such; nor to show that the conclusion of the argument is known. Hence, up to now, Moore's proof has no bearing whatsoever against scepticism. In fact, some years later, Moore himself maintained, in response to his critics,[2] that his proof was directed merely at an idealist and not against a sceptic. For, in his opinion, in order to take issue with a sceptic he should have *proved* that he knew its premises. In particular, he should have proved that he wasn't dreaming. But Moore himself candidly acknowledged that he couldn't have proved such a thing. For all his evidence would have been compatible with the hypothesis that he might be dreaming of it.[3]

The interesting question is therefore the following. How come that most readers of Moore's paper have taken his proof as directed at a sceptic?[4] Furthermore, given Moore's explicit pronouncements, is this reading legitimate? In order to answer both these questions, we have to take into consideration the sequel of Moore's paper where he claims that his proof is a rigorous one because:

(a) the premises are different from the conclusion;

(b) they are known to be true and aren't merely believed to be true;

(c) the conclusion really follows from the premises.

For, given (b) and the fact that the inference is valid, it follows that also the conclusion of the argument is known.[5] Hence, if it is true that Moore knew that there were two hands, it follows that he also knew that there was an external world and *this* is clearly an anti-sceptical thesis.

This, however, raises the following issue: how could Moore maintain that he knew that his premises were true, from which it follows that he also knew the conclusion of his argument, while holding that he was unable to prove that he knew them, and that that was necessary in order convincingly to oppose scepticism?

I think the most charitable interpretation of Moore's claim, which can also explain the interest Moore's work stirred in other philosophers such as Wittgenstein is as follows. If one is a

[1] Alternatively, if by "physical objects" one meant something compatible with idealist theses, such as objects that afford the possibility of occurrent perceptions, (4) would follow, but not (5), if by "external world" one meant a world populated by objects that exist independently of being perceived by us. Obviously, since Moore has painstakingly defined "physical object" and "external world", the alternative reading just presented is *not* the intended reading of Moore's proof, as he himself made clear in "A reply to my critics" (RMC 669-70).

[2] See RMC 668.

[3] PEW 149: "How am I to prove now that 'Here's one hand and here's another'? I do not believe I can do it. In order to do it, I should need to prove for one thing, as Descartes pointed out, that I am not now dreaming. But how can I prove that I am not? I have, no doubt, conclusive reasons for asserting that I am not now dreaming; I have 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". In fact the problem is not that one could not mention all of one's available evidence in favor of "I am not now dreaming", contrary to what Sosa 2007 claims. Rather, it lies in the fact that, for a Cartesian sceptic, all that evidence would be compatible with the hypothesis that one were merely dreaming of it.

[4] A notable exception is Sosa 2007, 52.

[5] Unless one denied the Principle of closure for knowledge—according to which, if you know that *p* and you know that *p* entails *q*, you know that *q*—as Dretske 1970 and Nozick 1981 did. Moore, however, never proposed such a thing.

philosopher of common sense, it doesn't matter how much a sceptic can press one to give a justification for one's *claims* to knowledge. Hence, it doesn't matter if one doesn't know *how* one knows that here there are two human hands, or, more precisely (cf. §4), if one can't *prove* that one knows it. For such an ignorance is entirely consistent with the fact that one *does know* such a thing (as Wittgenstein himself had already argued in the *Tractatus*). In support of this interpretation consider what Moore in effect writes in PEW:

> I certainly did at the moment [in which the proof was given] *know* that which I expressed by the combination of certain gestures with saying the words "There is one hand and here is another". I *knew* that there was one hand in the place indicated by combining a certain gesture with my first utterance of "here" and that there was another in the different place indicated by combining a certain gesture with my second utterance of "here". 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! (146)
>
> I can know things, which I cannot prove; and among things which I certainly did know, even if (as I think) I could not prove them, were the premises of my (…) [proof]. (150)

We will come back to this issue in §4. Before doing so, however, let us now turn to some influential interpretations and assessments of Moore's proof. As we shall see, they are all interesting both as attempts to make sense of it and for their conceptual relevance for subsequent and contemporary epistemology. Yet—I will argue—they all somehow fail to take proper measure of Moore's strategy.

## 2. Some classical interpretations of Moore's proof

### 2.1 Norman Malcolm: ordinary language and common sense

In his 1942 paper "Moore and ordinary language" Norman Malcolm aims to show, contrary appearances notwithstanding, how Moore's proof of an external world is both a confutation of scepticism and a good response as such. According to him, the real essence of Moore's strategy consists in clarifying how sceptical doubts, once made explicit, go against *ordinary language*. In his view, that suffices to confute them.

According to Malcolm, when a sceptic says "It cannot be known with certainty that physical objects exist" or "We can't know with certainty that statements about physical objects are true" he isn't expressing empirical judgments, but making grammatical statements. For they don't say that it is a contingent empirical fact that *sometimes*, when certain statements about material objects are made and prefixed by the verb "to know", what is said is false. Rather, they say that such statements are *always* false. This is so, according to Malcolm, because any empirical proposition is liable to an infinite number of verifications that can't (logically) be exhausted. Hence, our knowledge of empirical claims can only be probable and not certain. According to Malcolm, who follows Ayer[6] on this, a sceptic then proposes a *revision* of our ordinary language which consists in forbidding any expression of the form "I know with certainty that *p*", where *p* is an empirical proposition and in substituting it with an expression such as "It is highly probable that *p*".

Moore's response to scepticism, on Malcolm's reading of it, is thus as follows. Let us consider a *paradigmatic case* of sure-fire knowledge, such as that this, which I hold up in front of me in good

[6] Ayer 1940, 44.

lighting conditions, while I am cognitively lucid, is my hand. It would be nonsense to say "It is highly probable that there is a hand here". If a child who was learning language said such a thing, we would correct him by saying "It is *certain* that there is a hand here and it is not just merely probable". According to Malcolm, Moore's answer to the sceptic appeals to our *language sense*, reminding him of the fact that there is an ordinary use of the locution "to know with certainty" in which it is applied to empirical statements. But, then, if "I know with certainty that *p*", where *p* is an empirical statement, is an expression of our ordinary language—that is to say, it has a perfectly accepted usage within our linguistic community—it can't be maintained, with a sceptic, that it is self-contradictory. For, otherwise, it couldn't be used to describe any kind of situation and couldn't have the ordinary use it does in fact have—as Moore reminds us of. The only partial criticism that Malcolm raises against Moore is that it fails to convince the sceptic of his mistake because he doesn't clarify that his argument is a logico-linguistic one, rather than an epistemic-empirical one and also because it fails to make explicit the origin of the sceptical mistake.

Malcolm's understanding of the sceptical position is surely contentious, though. For a sceptic usually takes for granted our ordinary use of "to know (with certainty)". He does so in order to show how it seems to be a necessary condition upon the correct usage of those expressions that one be able to give reasons in favour of what one claims to know (with certainty). He then maintains that, with respect to beliefs about physical objects, it may be shown—in different ways depending on which sceptical argument is at stake—that one doesn't really have a justification to believe what one takes to know. Hence, assuming the classical tripartite definition of knowledge as justified true belief, a sceptic concludes that one doesn't know what one claims to know.

As we saw, however, Malcolm bases his interpretation of scepticism on Ayer's understanding of it. So—it may be argued—his considerations may well be effective against at least that particular kind of sceptic. We will come back to this counter in a moment. What must be stressed for now, however, is, first, that there is no textual evidence that Moore's sceptic is whom Malcolm (and Ayer) take(s) him to be. Secondly, that even if it were, Moore's response, on Malcolm's interpretation of it, would leave out a great number of sceptical positions and would engage with one of the least interesting ones. For Malcolm's sceptic's position depends on the finitude of human cognitive capacities. So it leaves it open in principle that a creature without such cognitive shortcomings, yet exercising *the same kind of cognitive faculty*, could have sure-fire knowledge of propositions about material objects. However, the best sceptical arguments—such as the Cartesian and the Humean ones—purport to establish a stronger result. Namely, that by exercising the very same cognitive capacities we usually employ—however freed from all defects and limitations ours might have—*nobody* could get to know with certainty a proposition about physical objects.

Moreover, Moore's proof, on Malcolm's understanding of it, could hardly be effective against its opponent, even as Malcolm represents him, because it would be based on a *petitio principii*. For Moore would be trying to counter a sceptic by saying that he does have certain knowledge of an empirical proposition and that it would be nonsense to claim that it is only probable. This, however, would mean assuming in the premise what one should prove.

Let me point out, however, that Moore's position is subtler than that. For, on the one hand, he sharply distinguishes between knowledge and the conditions of its obtainment and, on the other, the possibility of *proving* that they are indeed satisfied. He also recognises that the latter is what needs to be done in order to confront scepticism. However, Moore also thinks that acknowledging the impossibility of meeting this challenge doesn't impugn the fact the he knows the premises of his proof and hence its conclusion. So, first of all, Moore proposes a gambit, which, if successful, would diminish the impact of sceptical arguments. For, if one can somehow stop the inference from

the impossibility of proving that one knows that *p*, to the fact that one doesn't know that *p*, one would have greatly lessened the force of sceptical arguments which make play with such an inference. Secondly, he also puts forward some considerations to try and meet the sceptical challenge. For he argues that the sceptical—evidently Cartesian—argument which appeals to the hypothesis of dreaming in order to cast doubt on the fact that we may be able to prove that we are not dreaming, and thus on the fact that we have knowledge of some ordinary empirical propositions, isn't *reasonable*. For either there are absolutely *no* reasons to think that we might be dreaming in the circumstance of Moore's proof;[7] or they are indeed *weaker* than the reasons we have to think that we are not dreaming.[8] Hence, admitting such a hypothesis wouldn't be *sensible*.

Now, I don't mean to suggest that Moore's gambit and counter to the sceptic are successful. Yet, he had at least the merit of devising a move, which, if successful, would greatly weaken the force of the sceptical challenge. On Malcolm's reading of him, in contrast, he would simply be begging the question and do so in an utterly obvious way.

In a later paper—"Defending common sense" (1949)—Malcolm raises totally different criticisms against Moore's proof.[9] There, he focuses on the use that Moore makes of the verb "to know" in relation to his truisms. According to Malcolm, the correct use of the expression "I know (with certainty) that *p*" requires that:

(i) There be an open question and a doubt to be removed;

(ii) That the person who makes the assertion be able to produce reasons in favour of his claim to knowledge;

(iii) That it be possible to make an inquiry that could determine whether *p* is the case.

According to Malcolm, none of these features is respected by Moore's use of that expression. The first one isn't because when Moore says "I know that there is a hand here", there is no doubt that it be so. An objection that Malcolm takes into account is that Moore is here responding to *a philosophical kind of doubt*—to the question "How do you know that there is a hand here?". Clearly, however, Moore would merely believe to be answering the sceptic, for it can only be an

[7] FFS 222: "I don't see any reason to abandon my view that I do know for certain (…) that I am not dreaming now. And the mere proposition, which I admit, that percepts of the same kind *in certain respects* do sometimes occur in dreams, is, I am quite certain, no good reason for saying: this percept *may* be one which is occurring in a dream". See also PEW 149: "I have, no doubt, conclusive reasons for asserting that I am not now dreaming; I have conclusive evidence that I am awake: but that is a very different thing from being able to prove it".

[8] FFS 220: "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 [from which it would follow that he didn't know that] is true, let alone all four. (…) Of no one of [them] 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 [them], 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?".
See also C 247: "I agree, therefore, with that part of this argument which asserts that if I don't know now that I'm not dreaming, it follows that I don't *know* that I am standing up, even if I both actually am and think that I am. But this first part of the argument is a consideration which cuts both ways. For, if it is true, it follows that it is also true that if I *do* know that I am standing up, then I do know that I am not dreaming. I can therefore just as well argue: since I do know that I'm standing up, it follows that I do know that I'm not dreaming; as my opponent can argue: since you don't know that you're not dreaming, it follows that you don't know that you're standing up. The one argument is just as good as the other, unless my opponent can give *better* (my italics) reasons for asserting that I don't know that I'm not dreaming, than I can give for asserting that I do know that I am standing up".

[9] For a reconstruction of the genesis of this paper, its relationship to Wittgenstein's conception of claims to knowledge with respect to psychological self-ascriptions and to *On Certainty*, see Coliva 2010b, ch. 2

ironic response to the question "How do you know it?" to answer "Because I know it". This, however, according to Malcolm, shows that a sceptic raises a doubt where there is no reason to do so. According to Malcolm, then, the second feature of the grammar of "to know" is violated by the fact that Moore claims to know that he has a hand, but he is unable to give reasons in favour of that, or indeed a proof of it. Finally, according to Malcolm, Moore goes against the third feature of the correct use of "I know" for there is no inquiry that could determine that that really is a hand. For touching and observing it would make it plain that one had misunderstood the nature of sceptical doubts, which can't be silenced by ordinary empirical investigations.

Several things are worth noticing. First, regarding Malcolm's contention that Moore's use of "to know" hasn't respected (i)—that there be a doubt to be removed—it has to be observed that of course there was no "real" or "ordinary" doubt. Indeed, Moore would very much agree on that. If, then, one considers a sceptical doubt, it should be kept in mind that its removal wasn't Moore's aim in PEW. Moreover, he was perfectly aware that he couldn't have responded to such a kind a doubt —which depends on asking for a proof of the fact that he knew the premises of his proof—just by saying "because I know it".

Secondly, regarding the allegation that Moore didn't give reasons in favour of his claim to knowledge, it should be noticed that he repeatedly said that he knew there were two hands because of his perceptual evidence.[10] Hence, an inquiry could have settled the "ordinary" issue of whether that was the case—(iii). However, that wouldn't have settled the philosophical issue of proving that he really knew that there were two hands. But, as we have seen, Moore never thought or claimed to have done so.

Finally and more generally, one could object, and Moore himself did so, that his use of "I know" was *peculiar*, given the circumstances of its use, where there was no doubt about the existence of his hands, but not mistaken. As Moore wrote to Malcolm in 1949 (LM 214), despite this oddity he was using "I know" *in the sense* in which it is ordinarily used. This, in turn, clarifies how Moore's and Malcolm's conceptions of meaning are utterly different. In Moore's view, an expression maintains its usual meaning even if it is used in circumstances other than the ones in which it is typically employed. In Malcolm's view, in contrast, just like for the later Wittgenstein, the meaning of words is given by the rules which govern the various circumstances of their use.

The same difference may be noted by considering Moore's and Malcolm's debate over philosophical doubts. Malcolm maintains that a philosophical doubt arises where there is no real doubt about the fact that, for instance, there is a hand here. One may then think that it would be correct to say "There is no doubt that there is a hand here" and hold that that would be equivalent to "I know that there is a hand here" or even to "It is certain that there is a hand here". From this, it would follow that Moore would be right in saying "It is certain that there is a hand here". But, according to Malcolm, a sceptic's mistake isn't that of doubting where one doesn't usually do so, but, rather, of doubting where a doubt *cannot be raised*, on pain of nonsense. Hence, in such a context, "There is no doubt that there is a hand here" isn't equivalent to "It is certain that there is a hand here"; rather, it means "To doubt that there is a hand here would be nonsense". Thus, it is clear how, on Malcolm's reading of him, Moore's mistake would consist in failing to see how the impossibility meaningfully to raise doubts in such a context goes together with the impossibility of making any meaningful claim to knowledge. This, from a logico-linguistic point of view, for

[10] In support of this reading of Moore, see C 243: "A third characteristic which was common to all those seven propositions [viz. propositions about material objects in Moore's surroundings] was one which I am going to express by saying that I had for each of them, at the time when I made it, *the evidence of my senses* (…). In other words, in all seven cases, what I said was at least partly *based* on 'the then present evidence of my senses'".

Malcolm (and Wittgenstein), boils down to the view that if one cannot say that something isn't known, one cannot say that it is known either.[11]

In his letter to Malcolm (LM 215-6), Moore discusses this objection and points out how the crucial difference between him and Malcolm (and hence between Wittgenstein and him) is a different conception of meaning and of the legitimacy of philosophical doubts. As already remarked, for Moore words retain their meaning even when employed outside the usual contexts of their use. Moreover, according to Moore, contrary to Malcolm and Wittgenstein, philosophical doubts are nonsensical because they go against the common sense picture of the world. But they are not nonsense because they violate some linguistic norm. Therefore, Moore thinks it legitimate to oppose them by maintaining that the common sense picture of the world is indeed certain, despite a sceptic's claims to the contrary.

### 2.2 Thompson Clarke and Barry Stroud: at the origins of contextualism

In the paper "The legacy of skepticism" (1972) Thompson Clarke introduced a distinction between plain talk and philosophical talk. In his view, the former is what is produced within all our usual linguistic practices, with their characteristic embedment in non-linguistic activities. The latter, in contrast, is what is produced while doing philosophy. Philosophical talk extrapolates from any ordinary practice and from non-linguistic activities, to consider language in its own right. While in plain talk the conditions of meaningful discourse are subject to pragmatic constraints—such as relevance, and other forms of appropriateness[12]—in philosophical talk these limitations are removed and words are considered as such. Any well-formed sentence of natural language can be subject to philosophical analysis. A philosophical question, like the sceptical question about the foundations of our knowledge, is formulated within philosophical talk and, according to Clarke, it is perfectly legitimate, since it satisfies a deep intellectual need that isn't fulfilled by any of its counterparts in plain talk.[13]

According to Clarke, Malcolm's interpretation of Moore (as well as Wittgenstein's) conflates the peculiarity of Moore's use of "to know" with its alleged lack of sense. Clarke then points out that if Moore's use is taken to be part of plain talk, it reveals a *philosophical lobotomy*, since Moore means to oppose philosophical theses. If, in contrast, it is taken as part of philosophical talk, it is *dogmatic*, since it doesn't face the sceptical challenge of explaining *how* he knows that there are two hands where he seems to see them (and consequently, that there is an external world) and simply counters "Because I do".

Barry Stroud's interpretation of Moore's proof closely resembles Clarke's, which is explicitly mentioned as its inspirational source. However, according to Stroud, Moore's proof is given within plain talk. If so, it is a *good proof*, but, obviously, it can't have any anti-sceptical bearing, since it doesn't even face the sceptical challenge. From the inside, it is a good proof because it appeals to the greater degree of certainty possessed by the premises of Moore's argument over the degree of certainty possessed by those premises which, within plain talk, would be necessary in order to maintain that he may only be dreaming of having two hands. Still, none of this shows that a doubt about Moore's knowledge of his premises is *impossible*. Hence, the proof fails to address the philosophical issue and, for this reason, when it is considered from the outside, in the way in which confronting the sceptical challenge requires, it can't be successful.

[11] OC 58.
[12] See Grice 1975.
[13] Clarke 1972, 292.

Hence, the "internal"/"external" dialectic is as follows: it is possible to doubt from the inside only when there are *actual reasons* to doubt that *p*, or when there are *stronger* reasons to doubt of it than the ones one can produce in favour of one's claim to know that *p*. Since, however, with respect to the premises of Moore's proof there are no such reasons—or at any rate, they aren't stronger than the ones in favour of holding those premises—any form of scepticism appears, from the inside, totally misguided.

From the outside, in contrast, any doubt is legitimate, inasmuch as it is possible or conceivable. Thus, it is perfectly right to doubt of the fact that the premises of Moore's argument be known, because one can raise hypotheses, such as the one from dreaming, that would call into question any supposed instance of sensory based knowledge regarding physical objects. Therefore Moore, by failing to show why a merely possible doubt—like the Cartesian one—is illegitimate or, in effect, no doubt at all, doesn't address the sceptic, whose challenge is raised at the purely philosophical level. According to Stroud, Moore's strategy is wanting because it provides no account of why our knowledge from the inside is legitimate and because it offers no diagnosis and solution (or dissolution) of what, in his view, the sceptical mistake would amount to.

This way, Stroud introduces a sort of *evaluative lobotomy* that, however, can help clarify the relationship between *ordinary* and *philosophical discourse*. This, in turn, is, on Stroud's view, what is really at stake in the debate over scepticism and common sense. From such a perspective, Moore's proof is interesting because—its failure notwithstanding—it *contradicts* scepticism while being *compatible* with it. It contradicts it because it claims that we do have knowledge both of its premises and of its conclusion. Still, it is compatible with it because such a claim is made in a context other than the sceptical one. Similar considerations would apply in the other direction too—that is, scepticism contradicts common sense, yet it is compatible with it.[14]

Hence, on Stroud's view, Moore's mistake consists in failing to appreciate that if this is the right description of the relationship between ordinary and philosophical discourse, then his negation of the sceptical thesis can't be a confutation of scepticism. Thus, "the price of philosophical skepticism's immunity (…) would be the corresponding immunity of all our ordinary assertions to philosophical attack".[15]

It is worth noticing how Clarke's and Stroud's interpretations somehow connect with contemporary contextualist as well as relativist positions about knowledge ascriptions.[16] According to contextualism, there are different contexts, determined by different standards about what must be the case in order for knowledge to obtain. So, what may be known in a context may turn out not to be so in a different one. Accordingly, this is what happens in the passage from ordinary contexts to philosophical ones. Moore's proof could thus be correct in the ordinary context, yet fail as an anti-sceptical weapon. Contemporary contextualism therefore provides only a strategy of damage limitation against scepticism, rather than a rebuttal of it. For, as we just saw, the price to pay to philosophical scepticism, in order to make our ordinary knowledge immune to it, is to let it turn out right in its own context. A corollary of this view is that, contrary appearances notwithstanding, "knowledge" is a context-sensitive term (or concept), like ordinary indexical terms such as "I" and "yesterday", which pick out different people and days, respectively, according to the context of

[14] Intuitively, however, Stroud's claims are dubious. For, if "knowledge" is context sensitive in the way proposed, there would be no real contradiction between scepticism and common sense, because, in order to have a contradiction, *p* should be both known and not known *in the same context*.

[15] Stroud 1984, 127.

[16] Cohen 1999, DeRose 1992, MacFarlane 2005. Travis 1989 too, but under the influence of some Wittgensteinian elements as well. For a discussion of the latter, in connection with Wittgenstein, see Coliva 2010b, ch. 2.

their utterance. Therefore, also the extension of "knowledge" varies according to shifts in context of utterance (or of assessment, on the relativist variant of contextualism).[17]

Let us now consider Clarke's and Stroud's interpretations from a historical point of view, by turning to the issue of whether their readings tally with Moore's explicit pronouncements. As we saw before, in his letter to Malcolm Moore claims that he is using the verb "to know" according to its ordinary meaning. Furthermore, he maintains that his use of "I know" in relation to the premises of his proof is meant to engage with his philosophical opponents, contrary to what Stroud says.[18] Hence, on the one hand, according to Moore, it is with an ordinary conceptual repertoire that one enters philosophical discourse, contrary to what Clarke claims. On the other, in his view, there is no separation between philosophy and common sense, in such a way that statements respectively made in those different contexts could contradict each other yet somehow be compatible with one another, as opposed to what Stroud holds. These two claims together amount to the view that, according to Moore, the concept of knowledge isn't context-sensitive;[19] nor is there any hint that he may have favoured a relative view of truth, in such a way that opposite knowledge ascriptions could turn out both to be true, when assessed on the basis of different standards of evaluation, respectively held by common sense and scepticism.

Finally, and most importantly, on Moore's own understanding of scepticism, the latter arises when the issue of showing *how* one can know what one claims to know, and thus *prove* that one does indeed know it, is raised. To ask such a question doesn't produce a change of context according to Moore. Nor does it show the context-sensitivity of knowledge, let alone the relativity of knowledge ascriptions to different standards of evaluation. On the contrary, it depends on making use of an invariant concept and yet ask *a different question*. Not whether it is known that *p*, but, rather, *how* one can *prove* that *p* is known (if indeed it is). Moore, moreover, agrees that he isn't able to answer such a question. Yet, as we have repeatedly seen, he refuses to agree with the sceptic that because one can't answer it, it follows that one doesn't know that *p*. This, however, isn't simply a dogmatic and unphilosophical position, as Clarke claims.[20] Rather, it depends on a specific conception of the relationship between the conditions of knowledge and their obtainment and the possibility of proving that they are in fact the case.[21]

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[17] This may be a problematic claim for it seems to entail that speakers are blind to the semantics of "to know" in a way in which they aren't to the semantics of indexicals and demonstratives.

[18] For a similar objection to Stroud's interpretation of Moore, see McGinn 1989, ch. 3.

[19] Travis 1989, 165-6, who is sympathetic to Moore's claim that he knows the premises of his proof, and who supports contextualism about knowledge ascriptions, clearly recognises this point and actually deems it the source of the failure of Moore's anti-sceptical strategy.

[20] McGinn 1989, 49-53 rightly notes that Moore is directly engaging with scepticism and isn't confining his claims to knowledge merely to ordinary contexts. Yet, she herself shares the view that he is being dogmatic and, hence, somewhat unphilosophical, by failing to diagnose what is wrong with scepticism. In contrast, and as will become apparent in the following, I think Moore is proposing a subtler, though not obviously successful move.

[21] According to Travis (1989, 192-6), however, Moore appreciated the context-sensitivity of *proofs*, though he confined it to the premises of his own proof of an external world. So, on Travis' reading of PEW, Moore agreed with a sceptic that he could not prove "Here is one hand" and "Here is another". Yet, he claimed that he knew them nonetheless, because, according to Travis, he thought that, *in given contexts*, they simply couldn't be proved. Still, he held that on different ones they might well be. From a textual point of view, however, Travis' interpretation of Moore as a proto-contextualist about proof has nothing on its side. For he never explicitly claimed that, in different contexts, such a proof could in fact be given. As Michael Williams has repeatedly claimed, this was actually one of Wittgenstein's intuitions, not Moore's. Nor did Moore ever claim that he lacked evidence for holding the premises of his proof (fn. 10). Hence, if he thought that no proof of the premises of PEW could be given, he thought so while having in mind a rather special notion of proof, whose absence was compatible with his having evidence and grounds for those very premises. Thus, I think we can safely conclude that Moore was neither a contextualist about knowledge nor about proof.

Thus, to conclude: Clarke's and Stroud's interpretations of Moore's proof—though interesting in their own right, as well as in light of contemporary debates on semantic contextualism and relativism—are deeply at odds with Moore's own understanding of his proof. Thus they can't be taken as faithful interpretations of what Moore was up to.

## 3. The contemporary debate on Moore's proof: Wright and Pryor

Let us now turn to the interpretations of Moore's proof that are at the origin of much contemporary debate on the topic.

### 3.1 Moore and Humean scepticism: Wright's interpretation of the proof

In a paper titled "Facts and certainty" (1985) Crispin Wright has put forward another reading of Moore's proof, which is widely debated nowadays, although mostly from a conceptual point of view, rather than as an interpretation of Moore's actual thought. According to him, it is important to make explicit the *grounds* on which Moore claims to know the premises of his proof in the circumstances in which the proof was offered. As is apparent, in those circumstances, the assertion "Here is a hand" was based on his *sensory evidence*. Indeed, Moore himself made clear, though not in PEW, that his claim was based on those very grounds (cf. fn. 10).

That Moore was basing his claim on his available evidence may appear obvious, but it isn't within the historiography on the proof. For it has been denied that Moore made explicit the *criterion* on the basis of which he could assert his premises.[22] In response to such a claim, it must be noted that Moore certainly said he couldn't prove that he knew his premises, but, as we have repeatedly seen, he equally denied that that entailed the fact he didn't know them *in those very circumstances*—that is to say, when he was holding up his hands in front of him, in clear view, and could thus perfectly well *see* them. Hence, Moore didn't mean to deny that he was justified in holding his premises. Rather, he denied that the inability to prove, against a sceptic, that his grounds were sure-fire could impugn his knowledge—on whatever bases the latter might have been achieved.

According to Wright, then, if Moore's grounds are made explicit, it becomes immediately evident why the proof fails. He reconstructs it as follows:

(I) A given proposition describes the salient aspects of my experience at the time in question;

(II) I have a hand;

(III) Therefore, there is an external world.

In fact (I) amounts to saying that there is a proposition which correctly describes the relevant aspects of Moore's experience in the circumstances in which his proof was given. For instance: "I am perceiving (what I take to be) my hand". According to Wright, (II) is then inferred from (I) and (III) follows from (II) since a hand is a physical object. Moreover, given that the premises are known, according to Moore, so would be the conclusion.[23]

[22] See Malcolm 1949; Stroll 1994, ch. 4, 50-2 and Sosa 2007.

[23] Wright 2002 puts forward another possible rendition of Moore's proof where (II) isn't *inferred* from a proposition about one's experience such as (I). Rather, it is simply grounded in one's experience. On Wright's view that makes no difference with respect to the eventual diagnosis of the proof because in this case too one's perceptual warrant would depend not just on one's available experience but also on having independent warrant that there is an external world.

However, on Wright's view, it is clear that (I) can ground (II) only if one can already take it for granted that one's experience is being produced by causal interaction with physical objects. Hence, any sensory experience can warrant a belief about empirical objects only if it is already assumed that there is an external world. However, in order *justifiably* to go from (I) to (II), one needs already to have a *warrant* for (III). Hence, the proof is *epistemically circular* (or *question begging*). For antecedent and independent warrant for (III) is needed in order to have warrant for (II) in the first place,[24] given one's current sensory experience, as described in (I).

Ironically enough, then, Moore's proof—on Wright's understanding of it—rather than being a response to scepticism instantiates the template of a powerful form of scepticism, that Wright calls "Humean", as opposed to "Cartesian". The difference between these two forms of scepticism resides in the fact that while the latter makes play with uncongenial scenarios, such as the hypothesis that one may be the victim of a sustained and lucid dream, whereby one would be systematically unable to tell whether one is dreaming or not, the former doesn't. From such a starting point, the Cartesian sceptic then claims that for any specific empirical proposition we take ourselves to know on the basis of our sensory experience, it is metaphysically possible that it be produced in a non-standard way. From the impossibility to exclude that this is the case, he takes it to follow that we don't know *any* such empirical proposition. Consequently, that we don't know (III)—that there is an external world.[25]

Humean scepticism, in contrast, merely draws on the kind of epistemic gap between having a certain kind of evidence, and warrantedly forming a belief about a domain which goes beyond the one immediately testified by one's experience, presented by inferences such as the (I)-(II)-(III) argument just offered, or indeed inductive inferences—whence the title of "Humean" for this form of scepticism. To repeat, in order warrantedly to go from the first premise, which is about one's sensory experience, to the second, which is about an object whose existence is independent of one's experience, warrant for the conclusion of the argument—that there is an external world—must be independently available. Since, however, by sceptical lights, there is no way of getting such an independent warrant, the argument fails to provide warrant for its conclusion. Wright calls this phenomenon "failure of transmission of warrant". For the need of an antecedent warrant for the conclusion in order warrantedly to go from (I) to (II) prevents the warrant one *may* after all have for (I)—if somehow the sceptic was wrong in claiming that independent warrant for (III) could not be attained—to be *transmitted* to (II) and thus to (III). That is to say, Moore's proof cannot either give one a *first* warrant to believe (III), or *further epistemic support* for the warrant one might already have to believe it.[26]

If Wright's reading of Moore's proof were correct, it would be devastating. For, regardless of Moore's insistence that despite being unable to prove that he knew his premises he knew them nonetheless and notwithstanding the fact that—given the Principle of closure—one would know the

[24] Warrant for (II) is a necessary condition for having knowledge of it, on the tripartite conception of knowledge. Since nowhere to my knowledge does Moore impugn the tripartite account, lack of such a warrant would impugn one's alleged knowledge of (II), also by Moore's lights. So, the fact that Wright is talking about warrant while Moore talks of knowledge, though certainly inaccurate from a historical point of view, makes no substantial difference from a conceptual one—or so it seems to me.

[25] Cf. Wright 1985, 2004a, b, Coliva 2008, 2010a.

[26] These qualifications are important in order to clarify the difference between "transmission failure" and the failure of the Principle of closure for epistemic operators (fn. 5). There is an on-going discussion about whether, once granted the specific conception of the architecture of empirical warrants recommended by Wright, Moore's proof could at least enhance the previous warrant one might have for (III), once the Principle of closure is retained. Be that as it may, there is substantial agreement that, given that conception of empirical warrants, the proof couldn't give one a first warrant to believe its conclusion.

conclusion, he may have indeed had the former piece of knowledge, without actually being in a position to *acquire* knowledge of the conclusion, or indeed somehow *enhance* it, *by running his proof*. So, interpreted this way, Moore's proof would simply be no proof whatever of (III)—viz. that there is an external world. For, characteristically, proofs are means which allow us to *extend* our knowledge from their premises to their conclusions and thus provide us with reasons for *first* believing them, or else with reasons which should *enhance* our epistemic support for believing them. On Wright's reading of it, in contrast, Moore's "proof" would dramatically fail to do so.

Now, two things are worth pointing out. First, things might be different if Wright's attack were meant to impugn merely Moore's ability to *redeem* his knowledge of (III)—viz. the ability of *proving* that he did really have it—, as Wright's more recent discussions of Moore's proof seem sometimes to suggest,[27] and if this de-coupling could be matched by endorsing an externalist notion of knowledge (and/or warrant). In such a case Moore's proof could establish that its conclusion is known—since its premises would be—and yet, just as Moore held, fail at *proving*, against scepticism, that either the premises or the conclusion be known. We will come back to this issue in §4.

Secondly, Jim Pryor has recently challenged the correctness of Wright's views upon the structure of empirical warrants. If Pryor were right, it would certainly come as a relief for the proof's prospects of success. Hence, we must now turn to a discussion of this rejoinder.

### 3.2 Moore's comeback: Pryor's dogmatist interpretation

Jim Pryor in "What's wrong with Moore's argument?" (2004) claims that the proof is fine, from an epistemological point of view. In particular, it doesn't exhibit failure of warrant transmission. For, on Pryor's understanding of the structure of perceptual warrants, it suffices, in order to possess such a warrant, merely to have a certain course of experience while lacking any reason to doubt that there may be an external world, at least when what is at stake is the justification of what he takes to be *perceptually basic beliefs*.[28] Hence, there is no need, on his view, to possess an independent warrant for the conclusion of that argument, viz. that there is an external world.

Pryor, however, thinks that although Moore's proof is perfectly in order from an epistemic point of view, it is not successful against a sceptic. In particular, it is *dialectically ineffective* for, according to him, a sceptic will think it is (likely) *false*[29] that there is an external world. For such a reason he will not consider Moore's experience as of a hand in front of him sufficient for warrant of the corresponding empirical belief. Starting off with an unwarranted premise—at least by a sceptic's

[27] Wright 2004a, 167, 210-1 and Wright 2007.

[28] "Here is a hand" would be such a perceptually basic belief. If one found this claim odd, Pryor would allow substituting it with "Here is a pinkish expense". I am not sure whether Moore himself would be happy with that substitution. Bet that as it may, the important point (for both) is that perceptually basic beliefs would be about physical objects.

[29] This is indeed a contentious rendition of the sceptical position, for a sceptic is no idealist! Rather, on the basis of philosophical arguments he holds an *agnostic position* and, in particular, that it can't be warrantedly believed either that there is an external world, or that that there isn't. But, as already noticed, Cartesian and Humean sceptics reach this position for slightly different reasons. The former think that since all our perceptual evidence is compatible with the hypothesis that we might be dreaming of it, no single belief about specific physical objects can be warranted and therefore known. From that, they conclude that our belief about the fact that the whole category of physical objects isn't empty is unwarranted and unknowable. Humean scepticism, in contrast, directly shows the latter belief to be unwarrantable and thus unknowable because any warrant one may produce for it would in turn depend on already having warrant for it. See Coliva 2008, 2010a.

lights—the proof won't be able to confer warrant upon its conclusion and hence to convince a sceptic that there is an external world.

Pryor, however, doesn't think that the sceptical doubt is legitimate. He holds it is a "disease" we shouldn't catch, or else cure ourselves of.[30] Yet, this judgment is at odds with the claim that Moore's proof would fail for dialectical reasons when propounded against a sceptic. For reflect: if Pryor is right in thinking that the proof is epistemically correct, by being presented with it one should—if rational—give up one's disbelief in the existence of an external world. Hence, on Pryor's account of the proof, it could be dialectically ineffective only against a—as it were—*stubborn* kind of sceptic.[31] That is to say, it would be ineffective only against a sceptic who resolutely—and by Pryor's lights, irrationally—denied that just by having a certain course of experience one would thereby get a warrant for a belief about a specific material object like "Here is a hand", and could thus discard hypotheses that are incompatible with it—e.g. the dreaming hypothesis—while also acquiring a warrant for the conclusion of the argument, i.e. "There is an external world".

Although such an outcome would be very sympathetic to Moore's proof a few things must be noticed, if Pryor's story were meant to provide a historically faithful interpretation of the proof.[32] First, Moore never explicitly argued for the view about perceptual warrants that Pryor sees as the key to the proof's epistemic success. No doubt he made explicit the grounds of his proof—that is, the fact that he believed its premises on the basis of his perceptual evidence. But he never said that that would be sufficient, by itself, to give one a warrant—or indeed knowledge—of certain propositions about physical objects such as "Here is a hand". On the contrary, one of the main tenets of Moore's philosophy of perception is his appeal to sense data. Now, it merits emphasis that any such account would entail a conception of perceptual warrant (and therefore knowledge) as dependent on some extra element beside the occurrence of the sense datum itself—at least unless the latter were taken to be identical with some part or other of a physical object.[33] Such an extra element would presumably be the (warranted) assumption that the experience one is having be produced by causal interaction with physical objects.

Indeed in FFS Moore explicitly said that he agreed with Russell that propositions about specific material objects in one's surroundings aren't known *immediately*, but always on the basis of some "analogical or inductive argument".[34] Thus, it is almost certain that he didn't endorse in PEW[35] the conception of the structure of empirical warrants (or of knowledge) that Pryor has recently put forward and which has served as basis for his interpretation of Moore's proof.

Moreover, it should be kept in mind that Moore raised the issue of having to prove that he wasn't dreaming because he realised that that was what stood in the way of *his opponent's* recognition that the premises of his proof were known. If so, however, and this brings us to the second point worth noticing, Pryor's and Moore's understanding of what would be needed to confront a sceptic would dramatically diverge. For, on Pryor's account it would suffice simply to remind him that in order to possess a perceptual warrant for "Here is a hand" it is enough to have a certain course of experience, when there is in fact no reason to doubt that there is an external world *and* that the conditions are such that no doubt of that kind is reasonable. On Moore's view, in contrast, it should

[30] Pryor 2004, 368.
[31] Coliva 2010a.
[32] —which is something Pryor may well not be interested in doing.
[33] A view that Moore considered and rejected in DCS, iv.
[34] FFS 226.
[35] But it should be kept in mind that Moore wrote FFS in between 1940 and 1944, thus after PEW.

be *proved* that, on those circumstances, such a doubt would be unreasonable. Indeed Moore thought he could make some gesture in that direction, and accordingly said that the *grounds* for thinking that he might have been dreaming of his hand were *weaker* than the ones available to him to claim knowledge of his premises, or even totally *non-existent*.[36]

True, this move is unsuccessful, once coupled with other things Moore says. For, if it is legitimate to distinguish between, on the one hand, knowledge and the conditions of its obtainment and, on the other, the ability to prove that they are satisfied, as Moore claims, and if, as he argues, the sceptical challenge concerns such a proof, merely to insist that one does know that there are hands and that, given one's evidence, the hypothesis that one may be dreaming is less supported, or even unsupported by it, can't exclude the metaphysical possibility that it be the case. Hence, Moore didn't succeed in proving that he wasn't dreaming. Accordingly, he also failed to prove that he knew the premises of his proof, contrary to what he thought he should have done in order to counter a sceptic. Still, it is clear that he saw and characterised the sceptical position not as a "disease", but as a genuine challenge, that arises out of asking a kind of question that can't be answered by simply exposing the structure of empirical warrants. It is to such a question and to its legitimacy that we shall now turn.

## 4. Having knowledge and being able to prove that one does

In order finally to assess Moore's proof from a historical point of view, we need to consider the issue of the relationship between, on the one hand, having knowledge and the conditions of its obtainment and, on the other, the possibility of *proving* that those conditions do in fact obtain and thus that one really has that knowledge one takes oneself to have, in such a way as to be able rationally to claim or redeem it. The "How do you know?" kind of question that the sceptic typically asks is meant to raise that issue. Hence, that question, when voiced by a sceptic, isn't a simple request of what the *grounds* of one's knowledge are. Rather, it is meant as a request of a proof of what one claims to know. To exemplify once more with the premises of Moore's proof, Moore can say that his ground for holding that there is a hand in front of him is his current visual experience. A sceptic, however, is precisely questioning Moore's ability to prove that his experience is indeed veridical in those circumstances.

Hence, according to Moore, the sceptic holds the following view of the relationship between having knowledge and being able rationally to redeem it:

1) If you can't show how you know that *p*—that is, *prove* that you do know it—, and can't, therefore, rationally redeem your claim to knowledge, you don't know that *p*.

Moore, however, thinks that this entailment doesn't hold. Why? I submit that it is because he was in fact endorsing a *somewhat externalist* conception of knowledge. The *caveat* is apposite because he never proposed anything which would suggest his leaning towards one of the views that, *later on*, would have been qualified as externalist—let it be reliabilism, relevant alternative theories, counterfactual analyses, etc. All he seems to have done is to introduce a certain kind of move, which would then become the typical externalist manoeuvre. Namely, the move according to which one can know that *p* even if one is unable to prove that one does. In other words, Moore denied (1).

[36] See fn. 7-8.

The evidence in Moore's writings that he would deny (1) is plenty.[37] For instance, in PEW, he quite explicitly said that neither he nor anyone else *may have been able to prove* the truth of his premises:

> [If what is required is a general proof for the existence of physical objects], (t)his, of course, I haven't given; and I do not believe it can be given: if that is what is meant by proof of the existence of external things, I do not believe that any proof of the existence of external things is possible. (149)

Yet, he was adamant that such an impossibility wouldn't have impaired the fact that he did know them. To repeat the relevant quotation:

> I can know things which I cannot prove; and among the things which I certainly did know, even if (as I think) I could not prove them, were the premises of my (…) [proof]. (150)

In the recent literature on scepticism it is often remarked that if one makes this kind of move, one will then face some "crisis of intellectual conscience" or "angst".[38] That is to say, it is conceded that one may know that *p*, even if one is unable to prove it. Yet, one wouldn't be able to reassure oneself that one does. Scepticism, on this reading, wouldn't directly challenge one's knowledge but, rather, one's ability rationally to *redeem* it. Hence, scepticism wouldn't be characterised by (1), but by:

2) If you can't show how you know that *p*—that is *prove* that you know it—, and can't therefore, rationally redeem your claim to knowledge, you may know that *p*, but you can't reassure yourself of it.

Thus, scepticism brings about an "intellectual crisis", at least *prima facie*, because, even supposing that through a gift of nature, as it were, we knew that *p*, we would also feel the intellectual need to be able to prove that we really do.

The problem then becomes that of explaining the sources and legitimacy of this intellectual need. The issue is subtle, yet, I believe, of the utmost epistemological and meta-epistemological significance. In particular, a supporter of this view, will have to claim that we have just an externalist notion of knowledge—which makes us hold that we know that *p* even if we can't say how—and then a sort of self-reflective spontaneous attitude which forces us to look for an explanation of how that knowledge may have come about. Scepticism would thus be due to such a deeply-rooted human attitude. Yet, it would have no bearing on whether we possess knowledge. One may then try to explain why, adaptively, it would be useful for us to have such an attitude; by saying, for instance, that it forces us to make inquiries, which sometimes show that we don't really know what we thought we knew. Hence, that attitude prevents us from indulging in mistakes. Moreover, such inquiries into the sources of our knowledge may actually increase it, by providing an explanation of how it comes about. A case in point, which exemplifies both aspects, is that of chicken sex tellers. For, by inquiring into their ability, it was discovered that it is based on the operations of the sense of smell and, thereby, the incorrect belief that it depended on sight and touch was removed. One may then say that the price to pay, its advantages notwithstanding, is that at times such a self-reflective attitude gets in the way of our recognition of our real epistemic status and makes us worry when there is no need to. The circumstances in which Moore claimed to know that there was a hand where he seemed to see it would just be an example of this down-side of our

[37] Sosa 2007, 50 concurs with this appraisal.

[38] The former phrase is Wright's (2004a, 167, 210-11); the latter is Pritchard's (2005); similar remarks have been made by Stroud 1994.

self-reflective attitude. For clearly he knew that there was a hand in what appeared to be cognitively optimal conditions. But, of course, if our self-reflective attitude kicks in and demands that we provide a proof of the fact that those are indeed optimal conditions, how could we accomplish such a task? We could only set into operation the same cognitive faculties in the same kind of optimal conditions for which the problem of how we could prove them to be reliable and optimal respectively, was raised. Hence, we would be caught up in a circle which would prevent us from being able to prove that we know what we take ourselves to know.[39] Yet, an externalist should simply insist that despite our worries, we do know what we take ourselves to know and that that is all we need to care about. Furthermore, he should add the recommendation that we had better tame our self-reflective attitude whenever its setting into motion would get in our way by raising challenges that can't, *in principle*, be met. This kind of explanation would also have a meta-epistemological consequence: the traditional epistemological project that takes seriously the sceptical challenge of proving that one knows what one takes oneself to know is rooted in a kind of attitude that, though natural, isn't always legitimate. Hence, we should ultimately give up that project.[40]

In my view, Moore somehow anticipated, in many respects, the kind of approach that epistemic externalists have developed after him. It remains, however, that most of his contemporaries, and in particular Wittgenstein, were firmly rooted in an internalist conception of knowledge and, accordingly, thought that Moore was altogether missing the point. Equally, it is true that Moore did not develop that "externalist" strategy and, in particular, did not offer a diagnosis of why the sceptical challenge would be illegitimate by the lights of an externalist epistemologist. These two things together may explain both why he was criticised by his contemporaries and why, also nowadays, quite independently of one's epistemological preferences, which may even go in that very same direction, one may find Moore's strategy somewhat unconvincing. Yet, it is obvious that he had the great merit of individuating a series of propositions, in PEW as well as in DCS, for which it is a genuine challenge to understand whether we bear an epistemic relation to them. Moreover, he had the merit of expressing, perhaps inappropriately, the commonsensical intuition that no matter how unprovable these propositions turn out to be, we would never give them up. This was the important lesson Wittgenstein learnt from Moore and which, I think, can be of interest to contemporary epistemology as well, once further developed.

## 5. Moore's proof: a Wittgensteinian assessment

So much for the "historical" Moore, as it were, which has let us see that his views would best be developed within a broadly externalist framework about knowledge (and/or warrant), which addressed also the issue of the legitimacy of the sceptical challenge of proving that one knows the premises of the proof.[41]

However, Moore's proof could be of interest also to theorists of an internalist persuasion. They would presumably be united in thinking that it ultimately teaches us that our warranted or even known empirical beliefs rest on assumptions which can't in turn be known or (at least evidentially) warranted. The problem, from their point of view, would then be whether this lesson is after all compatible with an anti-sceptical position; or whether it would play straight into a sceptic's hands.

[39] For a discussion and different appraisals of these forms of "bootstrapping" arguments, see Sosa 1994, Cohen 2002 and Wedgwood 2010.
[40] For an analysis of different options on the issue of knowledge and their bearing on the legitimacy of scepticism, see Coliva 2010b, ch. 1.
[41] Sosa 1994, Pritchard 2005, 2007 provide, in my opinion, such a development, though in different ways.

I actually believe this is one of the main problems Wittgenstein was addressing in *On Certainty*. Before looking at his proposed solution, however, let me point out that it is often thought that his assessment of the proof was rather disparaging and probably based on several misunderstandings or, at least, on different views about meaning and knowledge, which caused him and Moore to pass each other by. I think this assessment is largely correct, if we focus on Wittgenstein's claims in OC about Moore's use of "I know" in relation to the premises of his proof and if we insist on his failure to distinguish between the conditions that must be fulfilled in order for *knowledge* to be attained and what makes *claims* to knowledge correct.[42] I won't go over this aspect of Wittgenstein's critique here,[43] for we have already seen at least the gist of it by presenting Malcolm's assessment of the proof (§2.1). What I would like to point out, rather, is what Wittgenstein thought Moore's proof could nevertheless teach us. One negative lesson we have already seen by discussing Wright is that the proof can't give one a warrant to believe its conclusion. For, in order to have a perceptual warrant for one's specific empirical beliefs, it is necessary already to *assume*—at least—that there is an external world, while having a certain course of experience. Wittgenstein, however, never thought that such an assumption could rationally be grounded, let alone known. Rather, he held the view that our relationship to "There is an external world" wasn't epistemic in nature and that this was, positively, what paying attention to Moore's proof would teach us. Namely, that at the bottom of our epistemic practices lie assumptions which can't be warranted or known, yet can't be doubted either, contrary to what a Humean sceptic would have us believe.

But why, on a Wittgensteinian perspective, can't assumptions such as "There is an external world" be doubted? In Wittgenstein's view, this can't be due to the fact that since this is a proposition of common sense (or is at least entailed by it), it is known no matter what, as Moore held. Nor could it be because we have some kind of non-evidential warrant—call it "entitlement"—for it, as Wright has been arguing for lately,[44] partly followed by Williams.[45] For it is true that Wittgenstein wrote that "it belongs to the *logic* [my emphasis] of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted" (OC 341). However, it would be a mistake to infer from this that he thought that we would be non-evidentially warranted in assuming propositions such as "There is an external world". In fact Wittgenstein resolutely denied that our basic assumptions are either true or false (OC 196–206); either justified or unjustified, known or unknown (OC 110, 121, 130, 166) and, lastly, either rational or not rational (OC 559). Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that by the time of OC, Wittgenstein was using the term "logic" (mostly) as a synonym of "grammar", which was in turn understood in a broad sense so as to include not only linguistic rules but also other kinds of *norms*, such as those of *evidential significance*.[46] That is to say, those "hinges" (OC 342) that must stay put if our experience is to give us a warrant for ordinary empirical beliefs. So, I take the gist of OC to be that our relationship to propositions like "There is an external world" is resolutely *non-epistemic*. For they are normative in nature—though rules of evidential significance rather than of meaning—and can't therefore be sensibly doubted.

Moreover, since assuming "There is an external world" is, according to Wittgenstein, a condition of possibility of all empirical warrants both in favour of specific empirical propositions and of

[42] In Coliva 2010b, ch. 2 have addressed more fully these views and criticized those readings of OC, such as Morawetz' (1978), Williams' (2004a, b) and Pritchard's (2010) that argue that in OC Wittgenstein drew such a distinction.
[43] I have done it at length in Coliva 2010b, ch. 2.
[44] Wright 2004a.
[45] Williams 2004a, b. Williams exploits the idea of non-evidential warrants and further argues that in OC Wittgenstein thought that the presuppositions of our epistemic language-games are true. He then concludes that Wittgenstein held they were known, even if they couldn't be claimed to be known. Notice, however, that for Williams this doesn't apply to "There is an external world", as he argues that Wittgenstein thought that was sheer nonsense. I beg to disagree, though I can't expound on this issue here. I discuss Wright's and Williams' positions at length in Coliva 2010b, ch. 3.
[46] Wright 1985 and Moyal-Sharrock 2005 have made this point.

reasonable doubt about them, that proposition is susceptible neither of epistemic support, nor of doubt, since all empirical reasons—including those which would make a doubt about it *rational*—would presuppose taking it for granted. Yet, for Wittgenstein, a doubt which *can't* be supported by reasons would also violate the criteria that govern the use of "to doubt" and would thus be *meaningless*. Therefore, no rational and intelligible doubt could be raised with respect to "There is an external world" in his view.

Of course, nowadays, not many epistemologists would agree with the claim that "There is an external world" is a norm and with a conception of meaning whereby if doubt is unsupported by reasons it is meaningless. In these respects contemporary epistemology is much more Moorean in spirit than Wittgensteinian. So, an interesting question is how much of Wittgenstein's overall, radically non-epistemic approach to Moore's proof one could retain in the context of a present-day, broadly internalist epistemology.

My own view[47]—which I can only sketch here—is that a new Wittgensteinian should abandon the normative conception of assumptions such as "There is an external world", while insisting that that proposition can't be warranted—either evidentially or non-evidentially. In order not to play straight into a sceptic's hands, however, he should then point out that that assumption is constitutive of what we, as well as sceptics, take *epistemic rationality* to be. For epistemic rationality constitutively depends on the practice of producing, assessing and withdrawing from empirical beliefs. Such a practice, in its turn, depends on taking for granted that there is an external world, so that we can take our sensory evidence to speak for or against beliefs about physical objects in our surroundings. A new Wittgensteinian should then insist that the assumption that there is an external world—as unwarranted as it is—lies *within* the scope of epistemic rationality if only at its *limit*, for it is its condition of possibility. To notice this, moreover, allows a new Wittgensteinian to diagnose the (Humean) sceptical mistake as due to the failure of appreciating the width of our own notion of epistemic rationality, which extends also to those assumptions that—while unwarranted and unwarrantable—make it possible.[48] Finally, a new Wittgensteinian should maintain that to say that an unwarrantable assumption is constitutive of epistemic rationality does not provide one with a non-evidential warrant for that very assumption, contrary to what Wright and Williams have recently claimed. Rather, it simply provides one with a reason for the second-order claim, as it were, that sceptics are wrong to think that just because that assumption isn't warranted, it falls outside the scope of epistemic rationality.[49] Hence, the sceptical challenge would in fact be *dissolved*, rather than solved. It wouldn't be solved because no warrant for the assumption that there is an external world would be provided. Yet, it would be dissolved because the argument that moving from the recognition that such as assumption is unwarranted aimed to show that it lies outside the scope of epistemic rationality would be blocked.

It is worth pointing out how such a new Wittgensteinian account would have a bearing also on the assessment of Moore's proof. For, as I have argued elsewhere,[50] it would lead one to acknowledge that the proof exemplifies a deeper and more basic kind of failure of transmission of warrant than the one first presented by Wright. Accordingly, an argument such as Moore's would exhibit this new kind of failure of warrant transmission because merely *assuming* its conclusion—as opposed to

[47] See Coliva 2010c, already anticipated in Coliva 2007 and further developed in Coliva 2010d-e.

[48] Wright's diagnosis, in contrast, is that it consists in failing to see the width of our notion of *warrant*, which would include both evidential and non-evidential ones.

[49] Hence, I submit, our notion of epistemic rationality is captured by the following disjunction: holding an empirical proposition true is epistemically rational if (and only if) either we have evidential warrant for it or, while unwarrantable, it is itself a condition of possibility of acquiring evidential warrants for other empirical propositions.

[50] In Coliva 2010c-e.

also *having warrant* for it[51]—would be necessary in order to have warrant for its premises in the first place. Therefore, Moore's proof could not be used to produce warrant for its very conclusion. If so, however—and this is indeed an important consequence—we would also explain why, in a limited amount of cases, the Principle of closure across known entailment for epistemic operators such as warrant would fail. For Moore's proof would be a valid argument whose premises are warranted—given the assumption that there is an external world and a certain course of experience. Yet, by allowing for such a kind of transmission failure, it would then turn out that the warrant one does have for its premises can't give one warrant for the conclusion. Thus, by going Wittgensteinian we would also—surprisingly, perhaps—vindicate Fred Dretske's and Robert Nozick's views on the Principle of closure.

So, to sum up and conclude, the study of Moore's proof from a historical point of view points out two broad ways of understanding it, which we may call, for convenience, "externalist" and "internalist", respectively. The former, which, to my mind, is more philologically accurate and sympathetic to Moore's overall strategy, needs to be developed along two dimensions. For it will have to rely on an externalist notion of knowledge and develop a response against the legitimacy of the sceptical challenge. The latter, in contrast, will find epistemic fault in Moore's proof, yet will take it show an important point; namely that we can't have (at least evidential) warrants for assumptions such as "There is an external world". This opens up the problem of explaining how such an outcome is compatible with an anti-sceptical position and, I have argued, one profitable way of meeting this challenge is to endorse what I have called a new Wittgensteinian position, alternative in many important respects to both Wright's and Williams' readings of *On Certainty*. Whatever the fate of such an account, it remains that it bears testimony to the interest and relevance that Moore's proof, as well as Wittgenstein's work still have for contemporary epistemology.

**Works by Moore and list of abbreviations**

C "Certainty", 1959, reprinted in PP, 227-251.
DCS "A defence of common sense", 1925, reprinted in PP, 32-59.
FFS "Four forms of scepticism", 1959, reprinted in PP, 196-226.
LM "Letter to Malcolm", 1949, reprinted in SW, 213-216.
PEW "Proof of an external world", 1939, reprinted in PP, 127-150.
PP *Philosophical Papers*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1959.
RMC "A reply to my critics", in P. A. Schillp (ed.) 1942 *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, Evanston and Chicago, Northwestern University.
SW *Selected Writings*, London-New York, Routledge, 1993.

**Works by Wittgenstein and list of abbreviations**

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[51] The reader will recall that this is in fact Wright's account of transmission failure we briefly presented in §3.1.

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