

What do philosophers do? Maddy, Moore (and Wittgenstein) II

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I want to start by thanking the editor, Juliette Kennedy, for inviting me to contribute to this volume in honor of Professor Penelope Maddy. This gives me an opportunity to engage with the views of a philosopher and a colleague I greatly admire. As my title suggests, however, it also gives me an opportunity to pursue our conversation further. For we first engaged on the occasion of the *Symposium* on Maddy's latest book *What do Philosophers Do? Skepticism and the Practice of Philosophy* (2017), held at the Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association (San Diego 2018), published in the same year in the *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism*. Professor Maddy kindly responded to my comments, particularly on G. E. Moore and his celebrated "Proof of an external world" (1939), by putting forth an extremely interesting reading of some key passages in that and other works by Moore. While appreciating the subtlety of her analysis, I remain unconvinced and I welcome this opportunity to explain why.¹

1. Coliva on Maddy's Moore

In my commentary (Coliva 2018) on chapter 3, "The cure and beyond", of Maddy's (2017) book, I took issue with the following reasoning:

¹ Since Professor Maddy did not respond to my comments on her reading of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* in writing, I will not pursue that part of our conversation here.

- i) that Moore, in the “Proof”, is engaging with a skeptic;
- ii) that he is doing so by arguing that he has perfectly good evidence that he is not dreaming;
- iii) that he is aware that this evidence will not assuage a skeptic’s doubts, because they depend on “extraordinary dreaming” (Maddy 2017, p. 31) rather than ordinary dreaming;
- iv) and yet he is convinced that one should not be moved by this kind of challenge and should rather dismiss it as inappropriate or misguided. For no challenge based on extraordinary dreaming should be taken seriously.

As a result, and *contra* a skeptic, according to Moore

- v) we can know perfectly well that there is a hand here, where we see it, even if we cannot prove we are not dreaming *in the extraordinary sense in which a skeptic would require us to prove that we are not* – that is, in the sense that would require us to be able to prove it independently of any sensory evidence we take ourselves to have for thinking that we are awake.

The passages in Maddy’s reconstruction I disagreed with are (i), (iv) and partly (v). Regarding (i) – that Moore is engaging with a skeptic –, by appealing to his “Reply to my critics” (1942), I claimed he was rather taking issue with an idealist. Thus, I claimed that his target was someone who denies the existence of material objects, rather than someone who denies that we can know of their existence. The key passage reads as follows:

I have sometimes distinguished between two different propositions each of which has been made by some philosophers, namely (1) the proposition “There are no material things” and (2) the proposition “Nobody knows for certain that there are any material things”. And in my last published writing, my British Academy lecture called “Proof of an external world” ... I implied with regard to the first of these propositions that it could be *proved* to be false in such a way as this; namely, by holding up one of your hands and saying “*This* hand is a material thing; therefore there is at least one material thing”. But with regard to the second of these two propositions, which has, I think, been far more commonly asserted than the first, I do not think I ever implied that *it* could be *proved* to be false in any such simple way; e.g., by holding up one of your hands and saying “I know that this hand is a material thing; therefore at least one person knows that there is at least one material thing”. (Moore 1942, p. 668)

I did not take issue with (ii) – that Moore takes himself to have good sensory grounds for holding that there is hand where he sees it. Indeed, I myself (see Coliva 2010, chapter 1) have repeatedly insisted on that, even though I did not insist on that in my commentary.² Nor have I objected to (iii) – that he is aware that his evidence will not cut any ice with a skeptic, since the latter is basing her doubts on extraordinary dreaming. Indeed, in my commentary I have exploited this very idea to insist that Moore was aware of the peculiarities of the skeptical challenge and did not think of himself as engaging with, let alone responding to it, in “Proof of an external world”.

² There will be more on this in §2.

In my commentary, however, I did insist, *contra* (iv) that, for Moore, that challenge is not simply to be dismissed as inappropriate or misguided. It would be so, according to Maddy's Moore, because it would be based on the conflation between ordinary dreaming – whose obtaining (or not) can be ascertained based on various empirical criteria – and extraordinary dreaming – whose obtaining (or not) could not be ascertained thus. On Maddy's reading, Moore objected to the legitimacy of the Cartesian skeptical challenge for it would ultimately require something impossible of us – that is, prove that we are not dreaming independently of *any* sensory (and possibly other “ordinary”) evidence we take ourselves to have for thinking that we are awake. On the contrary, I have maintained that, in “Proof”, Moore did not take himself to be engaging with a Cartesian skeptic and that the very little he says about Cartesian skepticism does not seem to support such a strong reading.³ In particular, I have maintained that far from deeming the Cartesian challenge somewhat illegitimate, he did try to meet it, albeit unsuccessfully in my opinion, in other writings he was notoriously dissatisfied with – namely, “Four forms of skepticism” (1959a) and “Certainty” (1959b).⁴ He did so by proposing his famous “gambit”. That is, the argument whereby since his grounds for holding that he is awake and seeing a hand seem stronger to him than his skeptical opponent's for saying that he might be asleep and dreaming of seeing a hand, his claim that he knows that there his hand there is on more secure a ground than his opponent's denial of it.

³ There will be more on this in §2.

⁴ These papers were composed between 1940 and 1944 and were published only posthumously in 1959.

Thus, I think that Moore, in the “Proof”, did not object to the legitimacy of the skeptical challenge. If he ever did so, it was only in later writings, which, as I pointed out, he was not satisfied with anyway. Yet, on closer inspection, even then did Moore not dismiss the skeptical challenge as illegitimate due to its being based on the conflation between ordinary and extraordinary dreaming. For, no matter how unpersuasive his gambit was, it was based on the conviction – surely objectionable by the lights of a Cartesian skeptic – that his sensory evidence as of a hand in front of him would be more solid a ground than anything a skeptic would be using to insinuate that he might just be dreaming of it and on the commonsensical belief that he was more certain of being awake and holding a hand in front of him than of anything his opponent could use to claim the opposite.

In fact, already in “Proof”, did Moore state:

How absurd it would be to suggest that I did not know it [that there was a hand when he asserted each of the premises of his proof], but only believed it, and perhaps it was not the case! You might as well suggest that I do not know that I am now standing up and talking – that perhaps after all I’m not, and that it’s not quite certain that I am! (Moore 1939, pp. 146-147)

I take this passage to express the characteristically commonsensical reaction of dismay vis-à-vis philosophical pretensions.

In “Four forms of scepticism”, Moore writes:

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" (1959a, pp. 222-223).

He also writes:

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 I did not know that] is true, let alone all four (Moore 1959a, p. 226).

And in "Certainty" he wrote:

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 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 (Moore 1959b, p. 247).

Given the conclusion – that the two arguments are on a par – it is normally agreed that Moore himself acknowledged the impotence of his “gambit” and was therefore dissatisfied with the paper, to the point of never licensing it for publication.

Nevertheless, the reason why Moore’s reasoning would be objectionable by the lights of a Cartesian skeptic is that she too would use the same kind of evidence Moore would appeal to but point out that it would be entirely compatible with the possibility that it might be dreamt of. Should Moore then appeal to the coherence between that evidence and further evidence made available to him by his senses, a skeptic would simply insist that that evidence too could be merely be dreamt of. One might of course object to metaphysical possibilities *tout court*, or, more mildly, to the fact that a metaphysical possibility would show anything relevant regarding what we know and take ourselves to know, or with respect to what is in fact the case. To the best of my knowledge, however, Moore never explicitly said anything along these lines, which sound much more attuned to some of Wittgenstein’s “therapeutic” ideas.

Hence, I do agree with that part of (v) that says that, for Moore, we can know perfectly well that there is a hand here, where we see it, even if we cannot prove we are not dreaming, yet not for the reason Maddy proposes – that is, Moore’s dismissal of the Cartesian skeptical challenge as based on the conflation between ordinary and extraordinary dreaming (and between the kind of ordinary and extraordinary evidence which dismissing each of these hypotheses would in fact require). Rather, I maintained that Moore considered that challenge legitimate and yet endorsed, in his 1939 paper, a kind of proto-externalist account of knowledge such that one may know that P (e.g. “Here is my hand”) even though one is unable to prove how one knows that P. By rejecting the KK principle, according to which knowledge of how one knows that P is necessary for

knowledge of P, Moore then maintained that he did know that there was a hand where he seemed to see it, even if he was unable to prove how. And, in particular, even though he was unable to prove it to a Cartesian skeptic's satisfaction, because he would not have been able to prove that he was not dreaming. Indeed, it is worth noticing that, towards the end of "Proof", Moore writes:

How am I to prove 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. (Moore 1939, p. 149).

Thus, he was perfectly aware that there was a Cartesian challenge he was not capable of meeting. Not so much, in my opinion, because, as he says, he was unable to list all his evidence for believing to be awake, but, rather, because all that evidence would have been compatible with the hypothesis that he was merely dreaming of it.

Thus, surely Maddy and I give an overall different assessment of Moore's performance. For she thinks he was ultimately right about his claim to knowledge regarding (at least) the premises of his proof, and even winning against his opponent, as he correctly exposed the skeptical challenge as illegitimate, because of its being based on the conflation between ordinary and extraordinary dreaming. In contrast, while I agree that Moore was right in his claim to knowledge regarding his

premises, I do not think he produced a satisfactory proof, for reasons I have elaborated elsewhere (see Coliva 2015, chapter 3). Furthermore, I do not think he had an adequate strategy against Cartesian skepticism. For neither the externalist maneuver just rehearsed, nor his famous gambit or the appeal to his current conclusive but incomplete evidence could have cut any ice with such a skeptic.

2. Maddy on Coliva's Moore

In her "Reply" to my commentary, Maddy (2018) mainly takes issue with my denial of (i) – that in "Proof" Moore was engaging with a skeptic. She recognizes that in Moore (1942) he himself claimed that he was refuting (or trying to refute) idealism rather than skepticism. However, she mentions three reasons that give her pause.

The first one is that in the discussion of Kant's idea of "things to be met with in space" Moore notices that, for Kant, they are not "things external to our minds". Maddy then contends that this is a brand of idealism and that, if that "were the target of the paper, we should expect some serious argumentation at this point" (Maddy 2018, p. 232). However, she continues, we only find a quick dismissal of Kant's views consisting in noticing that Kant never managed to explain clearly in what sense things to be met with in space would not be external to our minds (cf. Moore 1939, p. 139). Maddy thinks that such a cursory remark displays no real engagement with idealism.

I beg to disagree. First, let me notice that Moore's remark may be cursory, but the direct engagement with Kant's ideas and terminology is the main bulk of Moore's paper and that it occupies about eighteen pages out of twenty-three. By contrast, there is only a quick mention of

Cartesian skepticism in the whole “Proof”, consisting of less than ten lines. If numbers matter, and typically they do, it is odd to suggest that Moore was not really engaging with Kant’s idealism.

Second, the fact that what Moore says is not powerful an argument or a response, by the lights of his opponent, does not mean that he is not engaging with idealism. Indeed, he is, and he is quite bluntly dismissing it (or at least Kant’s version of it) by accusing Kant (and other philosophers who followed him in this) of having been unable to clarify what they meant. In fact, Moore is contesting the intelligibility of Kant’s distinction between a transcendental and an empirical sense of “things to be met with in space”, such that, on the former account, plants and other objects would turn out *not* to be external to our minds. For Kant “things to be met with in space” in the transcendental sense are not external to our minds because they are phenomena which, as such, constitutively depend on the forms of pure sensibility – space and time – and on categories, which are all *a parte subjecti*. For Moore, in contrast, they are external to our minds because he thinks, as he explains later in “Proof”, that they do not depend on anyone’s experiencing them. Hence, the only legitimate sense of “things to be met with in space” is the empirical one, for Moore, which makes it analytical that they are external to our minds, as they can exist independently of anyone’s mind. Personally, I think this is the key move in the paper and, if it were correct, it would be dialectically very powerful. For if it is true that there is only one intelligible sense of “things to be met with in space” – namely, the empirical one – and that the transcendental one is spurious, then clearly (transcendental) idealism would be a dead-end and Moore’s further proof would just be teasing out the consequences of this conceptual truth.

Third, and connectedly, it should be kept in mind that, at this stage in the paper, Moore is trying to make precise what *he* means by “things outside of us”, which he eventually considers to be

equivalent to “things to be met with in space” in the non-transcendental and merely empirical sense that he thought was the only clear and admissible one. It is only by assigning a clear meaning to “things outside of us” that, according to Moore, a rigorous proof of their existence can be given.

Maddy’s second reason consists in noticing that, by saying that a thing to be met with in space is something that could exist without being perceived and without anyone’s having any experience of it (cf. Moore 1939, p. 144), Moore is merely presupposing the falsity of idealism, while offering no real argument against it (cf. Maddy 2018, p. 233). I agree with Maddy’s judgement, but again, I am more inclined to conclude that Moore was not successfully engaging with Kant’s transcendental idealism rather than not engaging with it at all. As a partial excuse for Moore’s attitude, as we have just seen, one can insist on the fact that Moore was mainly trying to make clear what it meant, for him, to talk of things outside of us, and external to our minds. Hence, he was not considering each and every argument idealists could use to support their views (let them be transcendental idealist ones or phenomenalist ones). Furthermore, he thought of himself as having to provide that clarification to *then* be able to offer a proof of the existence of an external world. That proof famously proceeded via exhibition – “here’s a hand, and here is another” – and exemplification. For hands are instances of things to be met with in space and are thus outside of us and external to our minds (in the empirical sense that Moore takes himself to have clarified and somewhat defended previously in the paper). Moore then took the foregoing to establish the conclusion – “an external world exists”. Of course, an idealist would have not analyzed the premises and the phrases “external to our minds” and “to be met with in space” as Moore proposed, and would not have counted the exhibition of Moore’s hands as an exemplification

capable of establishing that the category of physical objects, understood *à la* Moore, is not empty. Hence, the proof is entirely question-begging. That Moore did not see that is the startling aspect of his proof any Moore scholar is going to be wrestling with. But, again, the fact that the proof is unsuccessful – albeit for reasons difficult to pin down, as the long history of its exegeses shows – is something not many interpreters have seriously questioned.

Maddy's third and last reason comes from Moore's "Reply" to his critics, where, once confronted with the phenomenologists' analysis of "material object", according to which no such object could be external to our minds, he claims that "with this meaning of 'there are no material things' ... it is really impossible to prove that that statement ["There are no material things"] is false in the way I gave" (Moore 1942, p. 670). Maddy then takes Moore to be showing little interest in idealism (of a phenomenologist brand). Once again, I beg to disagree. For to say that he could not prove wrong the phenomenologist analysis of the meaning of "material object" (and of "hand" as well) by appealing to common sense is not to say that he was not engaging with his opponent's view. Rather, it is merely to recognize that common sense cannot prove idealism wrong. Yet, for Moore, this is consistent with the retention of the idea that common sense is right and idealism wrong. For, after all, to be a philosopher of common sense means, at least in part, to remain convinced that common sense would always have the upper hand vis-à-vis philosophical pretensions and analyses, even when one cannot prove the latter wrong. That is why Moore often dismissed them quite off hand.

In short, I think that Maddy cannot reconcile the sense of philosophical hopelessness Moore's writings elicit with her admiration for his overall stance, and that she is constantly trying to make him come out better in philosophical argument than he did. I confess to be less of a sympathetic

reader. While I agree that Moore pointed out many interesting things and was surely right in claiming to have knowledge of the premises of his proof, he never succeeded in giving either a satisfactory proof of the existence of an external world or a credible refutation of Cartesian skepticism, as he himself acknowledged and never claimed to have provided.⁵ As he wrote:

How am I to prove now that 'Here's one hand, and here's another'? I do not believe I can do it. I should need to prove for one thing, as Descartes pointed out, that I am not now dreaming... I have conclusive reasons for asserting that I am not now dreaming...but that is very different from being able to prove it. (Moore 1939, p. 149).

In partial defense of Maddy, there is a passage in "Proof" that might give the impression that Moore thought that the Cartesian skeptical challenge is illegitimate, but which, on closer inspection, does not show that, in my opinion. It is worth quoting it in full:

But I am perfectly well aware that, in spite of all that I have said, many philosophers will still feel that I have not given any satisfactory proof. And I want briefly, in conclusion, to say something as to why this dissatisfaction with my proofs should be felt. One reason why, is, I think, this. Some people understand 'proof of an external world' as including a proof of things which I haven't attempted to prove and haven't proved...If I had proved the propositions which

⁵ As we saw in §1, in his "Reply" he clearly claimed he was not responding to Cartesian skepticism in "Proof" and he was dissatisfied with his attempts to respond to skepticism in "Four forms of scepticism" and in "Certainty".

I used as *premises* in my two proofs, they would perhaps admit that I had proved the existence of external things, but, in the absence of such a proof (which, of course, I have neither given nor attempted to give), they will say that I have not given what they mean by a proof of the existence of external things... In other words, they want a proof of what I assert now when I hold up my hands and say 'Here's one hand and here's another'; and, in the other case, they want a proof of what I assert now when I say 'I did hold up two hands above this desk just now'. Of course, what they really want is not merely a proof of these two propositions, but something like *a general statement as to how any propositions of this sort may be proved. This, of course, I haven't given; and I do not believe it can be given: if this 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* (emphasis added). Of course, in some cases what might be called a proof of propositions which seem like these can be got. If one of you suspected that one of my hands was artificial he might be said to get a proof of my proposition 'Here's one hand, and here's another', by coming up and examining the suspected hand close up, perhaps touching and pressing it, and so establishing that it really was a human hand. But I do not believe that any proof is possible in nearly all cases. (Moore 1939, pp. 148-149)

What Moore is denying here is the possibility of giving something like a general proof of the existence of material objects. What can be done, in his opinion, is merely to exhibit particular physical objects, like hands and pencils, from which it follows that the category of physical

objects is not empty, once it is admitted that these objects are exemplifications of that category, understood in the way proposed by Moore. Sometimes we can do a little bit more than that, by ascertaining by means of further sensory evidence whether a given object is a real, rather than an artificial hand, but only when a doubt of an entirely empirical kind has been raised. The fact that right after this passage Moore goes on to discuss the possibility of proving that he is not dreaming and admits he cannot do it may suggest that he was deeming the latter impossible too as it would be based on conflating ordinary and extraordinary evidence. But this would be a hasty conclusion based on mistaking the request of proving that one is not dreaming of seeing a hand, in a sense which would satisfy a Cartesian skeptic, which Moore is *not* deeming impossible, even though *he* says he cannot meet it, with the impossibility of giving a general proof of the existence of physical objects prior to exhibiting one of them and taking it follow from that that the external world exists.

Or else, and in further partial defense of Maddy's interpretation, and based on very thin, almost vanishing textual evidence, one might maintain that Moore, in the passage just quoted, was indeed claiming that a proof of the fact that he was not dreaming could not be given *at all*. Still, in that passage there is nothing that suggests the further "therapeutic" idea that that very request should be dismissed as illegitimate, precisely because it could not be met. Rather, and at most, the passage should be taken to show that even if the request is impossible to satisfy for him and for anyone else, one can make do. For, due to Moore's proto-externalist leanings, one can know that one is not dreaming and that there is a hand where one seems to see it, even if no one is – or indeed, could be – in a position to satisfy that skeptical request.

Finally, Maddy expresses dissatisfaction precisely with my attribution of a proto-externalist strategy to Moore. She writes: “So unlike the Plain Man with his externalist way of knowing, Moore thinks he has good arguments, good grounds [for holding that there are material things, such as hands] – it’s just that they don’t add up to proof” (Maddy 2018, p. 235). And she continues “he thinks he knows he has hands, but he can’t prove it, if proving requires to proceed ‘from scratch’” (ibid.). First, I do agree that Moore admits to his inability to prove that he is not dreaming. However, in no way does this amount to finding the Cartesian skeptical challenge illegitimate, as it would be based on the conflation between ordinary and extraordinary dreaming and evidence. Second, I do agree, as remarked in §1, that Moore thought he had grounds for his claim that he knew that there were his hands where he seemed to see them. Yet, he also insisted that he was unable to list all his evidence and that he should have done at least that, in order to start providing a proof (see Moore 1939, p. 149). Being unable to provide all his evidence and being unable to prove that he was not dreaming, thus failing to know how he knew the premises of his proof, were not, however, impediments to his knowledge of them. And *this*, I submit, is quite in harmony with an externalist way of conceiving of knowledge, by way of rejecting at least two possible interpretations of what the KK principle would require – that is, either being able to mention all of one’s evidence for P, or being able to prove that a condition whose obtaining would be incompatible with knowledge of P, and yet would be compatible with all of one’s available evidence, does not in fact obtain. As Moore himself wrote:

But another reason why some people would feel dissatisfied with my proofs is, I think, not merely that they want a proof of something which I haven’t proved [that is, the truth of the premises by ruling out that he was merely dreaming of his

hands], but that they think that, if I cannot give such extra proofs, then the proofs that I have given are not conclusive proofs at all. And this, I think, is a definite mistake...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 two proofs. (Moore 1939, pp. 149-150).

So Moore thought that he could know that there were hands where he seemed to see them even if he was unable to prove that he did, because he was unable to provide all his evidence for such a claim, and, connectedly, to prove that he was not dreaming. Unlike a mathematician and a certain kind of philosopher who would take it to be their responsibility to show how they know and to prove that certain countervailing scenarios do not obtain, if their views have a right to be considered knowledge and not mere hypotheses, Moore thought he did have knowledge of the premises of his proof nonetheless. He thus initiated, probably *malgré lui*, a certain line of response to skepticism subsequent externalist theorists would capitalize on. Namely, a line of response that would insist on the gap between the conditions for knowledge, on the one hand, and on the conditions for knowing how one knows, on the other, and on the non-necessity of meeting the latter to satisfy the former.

Notice, furthermore, that, ironically, Moore's proto-externalism would actually be reinforced and it would turn out to be better motivated, if one were to follow Maddy in thinking that he also deemed the Cartesian skeptical challenge illegitimate. For, in that case, it would be entirely obvious and non-question-begging against a Cartesian skeptic why Moore could have knowledge of the premises of his proof even if he was unable to prove, to a Cartesian skeptic's satisfaction, that he was not dreaming of seeing his hands. For, if the request of providing such a proof were

illegitimate, and not merely impossible to meet (just for Moore or even for anyone else) – a fact, this, that, by itself, could only bring grist to a Cartesian skeptic’s mill – then surely one could not be expected to satisfy it in order to have knowledge of “here is a hand”. Conversely, externalism could nicely be combined with Maddy’s “therapeutic” reading of Moore to show that, once the Cartesian skeptical challenge has been exposed as illegitimate, we can know the premises of Moore’s proof and do so even if we cannot produce all our evidence in favor of them. For having knowledge would be independent of being able to produce the grounds – let alone, all the grounds – one’s knowledge is based on. Alas, even if the combination of Maddy’s “therapeutic” reading of Moore and of my externalist interpretation of him would actually make it for an interesting and powerful anti-skeptical account, I still think no such anti-skeptical argument is to be found in “Proof”, and for the very good reason that, as Moore himself clearly stated in 1942, and as he hinted at already in the “Proof”, Cartesian skepticism was not that paper’s target.

As the conversation between Maddy and me should have amply shown by now, that paper was a direct engagement with Kant’s transcendental idealism, which Moore dismissed as based on a (by his lights) unintelligible transcendental notion of “things to be met with in space”. Once the ground had been cleared from such a notion, and the empirical, more commonsensical notion of “things which would exist without being perceived (by anyone ever)” had been reinstated, Moore thought he could easily remedy the “scandal to philosophy” denounced by Kant. Namely, the scandal consisting in the fact 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" (Kant 1787, B, xxxix).⁶ For, once it is accepted that the only intelligible notion of "things outside of us" is the empirical one Moore is defending, and once it is admitted that instances of it can be exhibited, it then simply follows that the existence of an external world has been proved. It is only an irony that nothing of what Moore rested his confidence on would have been conceded by his opponent, as we have seen. Yet the fact that Moore's argument would not have persuaded a (transcendental) idealist is no reason to think that such an idealist was not the real target of his celebrated "Proof". What Moore's argument showed for sure, even if it turned out to be powerless against its opponent, is the force of our commonsensical picture of the world, which we take to be populated by mind-independent objects, no matter what idealists of whatever brand would have us believe. That, I submit, is Moore's main legacy, the one Wittgenstein greatly admired and tried to vindicate by devising arguments that, by showing the illegitimacy of Cartesian and other forms of skepticism, aimed to cure us from the temptation of giving in to them.⁷ But that was Wittgenstein, not Moore; and certainly not the Moore of "Proof of an external world", at any rate.

References

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⁶ Not by chance did "Proof" start with this quote from Kant.

⁷ For a discussion of Wittgenstein's several anti-skeptical strategies in *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1969), see Coliva (2010, chapter 3).

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