

## **The Practicality of an External World**

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### **Abstract**

This essay aims to identify the central epistemological argument of G.E. Moore's 'Proof of an External World' (hereinafter 'PEW') as well as its application in the following scholarly work on it and examines it on the realisation of Moore's three conditions for a good proof: First (section 1), it checks validity and concludes that both arguments are valid. Second (section 2.1), it considers circularity of the arguments and establishes that a sceptic can rightfully object to Moore as him failing to address her objections by begging the question. Third (section 2.2), it examines soundness and contends that, in spite of 2.1, Moore can know his premises, as, by way of a pragmatist notion of truth, a dissolution of the issue is offering itself cogently.

### **The Form of Moore's Arguments, Epistemologically**

Divergent readings of PEW have led to debate on whether the nature of its core argument is epistemological or metaphysical. [MP] This essay will investigate solely its epistemological implications and for that purpose, I<sup>10</sup> will frame the structure of Moore's 'proof' (hereinafter 'the proof') as follows:

- iv. Here is a hand.
  
- v. There is another.

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<sup>10</sup> This interpretation is common. Cf. a shorter version in [Wright]

vi. If there is a hand here and another there, then two hands exist.

) (4) Two hands exist<sup>11</sup>

(5) Each specific hand is a specific thing.

) (6) Two things exist.

(7) If there are things, i.e. if things exist, there is an external world.

) (8) There is an external world.

Conclusions (4) and (8) are applications of modus ponens,<sup>12</sup> while (6) is derivable in predicate logic with identity. Translated into a formalised argument, the proof, stated in what I take to be the most explicit and text-immanent formulation, is clearly valid.

Whilst not demonstrated as such in PEW, scholars have often [MP] drawn Moore's argument up as a response to different sceptical arguments. There are many and indeed many different sceptical arguments, but the ones relevant to this discussion (hereinafter S) are those that challenge the knowability of Moore's premises and are schematically opposable to PEW in the following valid way:

(A) If S is true, then Moore does/can not know the veracity of the

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<sup>11</sup>There are thousands of different things that would, instead of (4), be sufficient for the proof. Thus, (5

<sup>12</sup> Modus Ponens is a technical term for a logically valid form of argument and denotes the following basic inference: (1) if P then Q. (2) P is true. (3) Therefore, Q is true

proof. (B<sub>1</sub>) S is true.

) (C<sub>1</sub>) Moore does/can not know the veracity of the proof.

Exemplary for S would be that Moore could, unbeknownst to him, merely be dreaming to have his hands in front of him and stand in a lecture hall. The force of the sceptical challenge hinges not on whether or not Moore really is dreaming, it is not an empirical matter. It problematises that Moore *can* not know whether he really holds his hands in front of him. A response (hereinafter ‘the response’) to this is what has come to be known as a ‘Moorean Shift’ - changing the opponent’s modus ponens to a modus tollens,<sup>13</sup> which are, once more, both formally valid methods of argumentation:

(A) If sceptical argument S is true, then Moore does/can not know the veracity of the proof. (B<sub>2</sub>) Moore does (and, antecedently, can) know that the proof is true.

) (C<sub>2</sub>) There is an external world.

## 2 **Reevaluating the Problem**

In PEW, Moore asserts that ‘[his argument] would not have been a proof unless three conditions were satisfied’ and checks their satisfaction, positively. [PEW] I covered the third one, validity, in section 1. Two remain to be re-checked: whether the arguments are non-circular and whether Moore knew his premises.

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<sup>13</sup> Modus tollens, similarly to modus ponens, is a logically valid form of argument, but ‘the other way around’: (1) If P then Q. (2) Q is not true. (3) Therefore, P is not true.

## 2.1 Circularity and Question Begging

Moore, in an attempt to demonstrate that his conditions are satisfied in PEW, claims that

(4) is different from (1) and (2), and he does so rightfully, for they are of exemplary nature: named references of (4) - mere instantiations of a general claim. Thus, the conclusion could be true, whilst the premises were not. But he omits that, as the proof is one of an external world, the first conclusion entails (5)-(8) and misses the issue at hand.

For truth to be transmitted from the premises to the conclusion (this is now no longer a formal matter), the former must establish the latter independently of it. If they fail to do so, the argument assumes what it is trying to prove. The central proposition (the aim) of the proof is (8) and as such, it must be both affirmable and deniable. So we can infer that (8) can be denied; by a sceptic, for instance.

But to be able to believe that (1) and (2) are true, one *first* has to believe that (8) is true. Since if one does not presuppose that (8) is true, the perceptual warrant - which is the lynchpin for Moore<sup>14</sup> - one has for (1) and (2) is naught, as it could, after all, be an hallucination or dream Moore falls prey to. But (8) is the very thing in contention; so, as Moore has to affirm what the sceptic denied *already* in his premises, his opponent can accuse him of begging the question - a circular way of argumentation.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. his emphasis on indicating by gesture

The response, whilst in itself not circular, is also inflicted by question begging. This holds, as the proof is contained in (B<sub>2</sub>), which was just shown to be circular.

## **2.2 On the Knowability of Hands**

Moore does not specify what it is to know things. The analytical canon - post-Gettier - holds that for something (such as Moore's premises) to be known, it has to be a true, justified belief, with adequate links between these conditions. [Bieri p. 77–78] I will consider the first two of these requirements. As truth of the premises would also entail soundness of Moore's arguments, I will consider it separately. Thereafter, I will tackle the issue of justification of his claims.

### **2.2.1 Three Takes on Soundness**

Moore, guardian of common-sense, defends what can be called loosely 'the layman's perspective'. To any non-philosopher, it is of such abundant clarity<sup>15</sup> that there is an external world that any debate seems superfluous. Moore, although engaging in that debate, too seems to be unwilling to give this stance up and will defend his intuitions as being sufficient for knowledge - implying that his premises are, i.a., true - no matter what: *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!* [PEW]

But if the rich history of philosophical scepticism has brought certainty

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<sup>15</sup> "I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again 'I know that that's a tree', pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: "This fellow isn't insane. We are only doing philosophy.'" [Wittgenstein §467]

to anything, it is the fact that not all concede Moore's intuitions as objectively true.

I will outline one such sceptical position (held by an imaginative sceptic, to which I will for now remain impartial) that poses a significant challenge to Moore in a bit more detail. My sceptic is in some form agnostic<sup>16</sup> concerning the question on whether there is an external world. Such a non-committal alleviates her from the burden to prove existence or non-existence of the world<sup>17</sup>. But the sceptic is thus also someone who purports to know an S, as outlined in section 1. Furthermore, this sort of scepticism is local, not global, as it does not doubt everything altogether, but only withholds committing itself to the truth of a proposition or its negation in exchange for asserting that this withholding is necessary. Local is preferred to global scepticism, as, in order for an objection of a sceptical challenge to be relevant, it must consider its propositional content to be coherent and meaningful. 'Real' (if there can be such) global scepticism ends in infinite regress, an endless doubt without footing.<sup>9</sup> To this sceptic, whose argument seems plausible so far, Moore's arguments seem both faulty because, as presented in section 2.1, they are indeed begging the question.

But this agnostic sounds eerily familiar, if one recalls one of Moore's ending remarks: *'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 [...]*

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<sup>16</sup> Exemplary for an agnostic position is, as in 1, that we can not know about the existence of the external world because we, unbeknownst to us, might be dreaming.

<sup>17</sup> It plays no role for present purposes whether the non-commitment is due to the belief that we can not *right now* know that there is an external world, or that we can not know *it at all*.

*that I am not now dreaming.*' [PEW] But if Moore was so acutely aware (even more explicitly so in [Reply]) of this challenge, how are we to assess his arguments<sup>18</sup>. Following Wittgenstein, I believe that Moore was not confused, but somehow '*perfectly right*' [Wittgenstein §397], as even after taking the strongest sceptic, the agnostic, into account, his arguments, still, 'look' sound. I offer a reconciliation of this tense situation by way of a pragmatist notion of 'truth'. For brevity's sake, I can only outline how the relevant aspects of such a theory can be *applied* here.

Instead of asking for the conditions of a good proof, one can, one step prior, demand for inspection whether the conditions for a good problem are satisfied. Typically, a good problem is one for which there is some challenge, causing doubt of hitherto accepted beliefs, to defeat. As, unless we meet a particularly mischievous sceptic (remember, this includes the agnostic), the outcome of her argument will be overruled by practical behaviour - one will carry on living *as if* there really was an external world. The *practical* becomes the *conceptual* [Peirce]. But now this acting *as if*, which is linking up experiences coherently and to the best explanation, has given sufficient reason to end the debate altogether, which inclines us to hold it, along with Moore's premises, to be, instrumentally, 'true'<sup>19</sup>. Whether we could demand more from a set of beliefs than to be functioning when seeking to find an account of known truths is a question beyond the scope of this essay.

## 2.2.2 Foundations and Justifications

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. [Wittgenstein §115].

<sup>19</sup> Relevant are: [Wittgenstein §§2, 4, 7, §§218–222].

When pressed by questions such as ‘You can not know whether there is an external world because of S. How can you claim to?’ or simply ‘How do you know that there is an external world?’, the scholars’ Moore’s response essentially consists of saying ‘But I do know it, because I know it.’, which, as previously noted, seems like an unsatisfying reply.

I identify the issue in different accounts of what is foundational. A sceptic demands a rational causal justification [Bieri p. 293–296] proving a necessary (non-)existence, while (my proto-pragmatist) Moore is content with conceptualised content of his action (or, dependent on the reading, perception) as foundational knowledge to justify further knowledge.

These different criteria for justification clearly hinge on what ‘truth’ is taken to mean, as shown in the previous question. Which to adopt decides whether we can move a step closer to Moore’s second condition (remember, the ‘adequate links’-condition has not been approached yet).

### 3 **Conclusion**

Moore’s arguments remain ineffective vis-à-vis an agnostic, as the proof is circular and the response, or what it was reduced to in 2.2.1, tautologous.

However, there is a strong case to be made that, in spite of this, one need not get convinced by objections to PEW, as Moore’s insistence on the truth of practically unchallenged intuitions is, in the eyes of a pragmatist, the sensible thing to do. (Dis-)agreement is deeply contingent on the epistemological approach one takes to the arguments.