

Why Moore Matters

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Draft of October, 2016

This paper was first written in 2014 for a volume that was subsequently withdrawn from the publisher by the editors. It is too long for a journal article, not yet a book.

Comments welcome!

“Dismissing without further investigation something that conflicts with what is already known is the very heart of rationality” (Stroud, *Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, 105).

0. *Prelude*

The topic of this paper is the form of external world skepticism that has been widely discussed in analytic philosophy for many decades. This form of skepticism makes a global claim: that no one knows or perhaps even has reason to believe anything at all about the world outside of one’s mind. It intends this claim to *conflict with* many of the epistemic claims and assessments that we make in ordinary life. And it understands itself to arise from *within* our ordinary epistemic practices and commitments; its aspiration is to show that skepticism inevitably follows from principles of epistemic assessment that we are committed to in the conduct of everyday life and science.

My over-riding question is whether this form of skepticism is true. I want to begin, however, with a different question. What is the relation between this form of external world skepticism and epistemological theorizing?

The epistemological literature offers a familiar pattern. An epistemologist offers a sophisticated new theory of knowledge, the semantics of “knows”, perceptual justification, etc., and then shows how the theory can be used to defeat the skeptic. Perhaps epistemologists proceed in this way simply because “this is how it is done” – a matter of recent disciplinary sociology and inertia. Perhaps not. Is there a good reason for proceeding in this way?

Here's one familiar thought: we need to build an epistemological theory in order to satisfactorily answer the skeptic. For example, one might try to show that one could not have any contentful thoughts about the world unless one is not globally wrong in the way the skeptic supposes one might be: global error is unintelligible (Davidson). Or one might develop a counterfactual theory of knowledge that allows that one can know that one has a hand even if one does not know that one is not a handless brain in a vat (Nozick). Or one might think that to satisfactorily reply to skepticism we need to show how we could gain knowledge of a world of objects around us, using resources that do not themselves involve any of the things we take ourselves to know about the world. Perhaps, for instance, one might try to argue that there is an all-powerful, benevolent God who guarantees the basic reliability of one's cognitive faculties (Descartes). Perhaps one might seek to show that the best explanation of our sensory experience, described in a way that does not yet presuppose any commitments about the world, is that it is caused by a world of objects largely as we take them to be (Vogel, eg). Or perhaps one might seek an account of perceptual justification which explains how having an experience as of a hand warrants believing that there is a hand in front of you (Pryor, eg). Whatever strategy one takes, the thought here would be that epistemological theory is needed if we are to understand fully why we can be content with the claims of ordinary life.¹

Here's another common thought: A satisfactory resolution of external world skepticism will have significant pay-off in the form of epistemological theory. As John Greco puts it, "...skeptical arguments are useful and important because they drive progress in philosophy. They do this by highlighting plausible but mistaken assumptions about knowledge and evidence, and by showing us that those assumptions have consequences that are unacceptable. *As a result we are forced to develop substantive and controversial positions in their place.*" (Greco 2000, 2-3, italics added). Epistemological theory, on this line of thought, is a benefit forced upon us by an encounter with skepticism, even if ordinary life does not stand in need of vindication from philosophy.

¹Of course, not all of the proponents of the above projects understand their projects in this way.

Here's a third thought. Maybe our best hope for coming to terms with skepticism is to show that while it presents itself as arising from materials found within our ordinary epistemic commitments, it actually rests upon substantial theoretical assumptions (Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*). On this approach, the first task is to identify the skeptic's distinctive theoretical commitments. Then we need to consider their plausibility. However, as Michael Williams puts it, "ordinary practice [may] under-determine its theoretical interpretation" (*Unnatural Doubts*, 41). If that is so, then the question of skepticism's truth will not be decided on the basis of the commitments and procedures of ordinary epistemic practice, but rather will await the conclusion of debates in epistemological theory that cannot be resolved on that basis. Here we again see epistemological theorizing figuring centrally in the encounter with skepticism. Many contemporary epistemologists seem to understand their engagement with skepticism in something like these terms. But one also wonders: If the epistemic principles and procedures that we are committed to – and think we are right to be committed to – in the conduct of everyday life and science underdetermine the choice between affirming and denying skepticism, on what basis could the decision possibly be made? I'd rather not await resolution of a debate understood in such terms.

There is the possibility of a very different kind of approach. Perhaps we can satisfactorily reject skeptical argumentation using only the commitments of ordinary epistemic life. If that were so, then there wouldn't be any need to identify and critique any particular theoretical assumptions behind the skeptic's arguments; skepticism's self-understanding would already have been shown to be false. Moreover, from that perspective the relation between epistemological theorizing and external world skepticism would be rather different than many philosophers seem to assume. Epistemological theory would not be needed for a satisfying reply to the skeptic, since the commitments of ordinary epistemic life would already suffice. Would epistemological theory be a pay-off of the encounter? It would seem not. If the commitments of ordinary epistemic life that are needed to satisfactorily respond to the skeptic vastly underdetermine the choice between rival anti-skeptical epistemological theories, then no direct payoff in terms of epistemological theory should be expected. And there will be no need to develop "substantive and controversial positions" in

epistemology, since all the work will be done by principles that we are all committed to in ordinary life. The payoff, if all goes according to plan, will be nothing but truisms, though these may aid reflective understanding even if they don't add up to a theory.

What are the prospects for this latter approach?

1. *Enter G.E. Moore*

In their insistence upon the obvious truths of ordinary life, G.E. Moore's writings on external world skepticism can be philosophically chastening. They show us, in broad outline, how to dispense with skepticism in a way that is satisfying, intellectually responsible, and yet avoids engaging in constructive epistemological theory-building altogether. His work thus reveals something very important about the relation between epistemology and ordinary life, and also about what it would take to reach a satisfying resolution of certain sorts of perennial philosophical problems.

There is a familiar distinction – going back at least to Hume – between our ordinary, non-philosophical position and the position of skeptical reflection. In the ordinary, non-philosophical position we are committed to all sorts of claims about the world and about what we know and have reason to believe. This position involves commitment to various practices and principles of reasoning, inquiry, and epistemic assessment. However, it doesn't involve commitment to any *general theories* about what philosophers call “the structure of empirical knowledge or justification,” about what is given, epistemologically speaking, in sensory experience, or even about the requirements one must meet in order to know things. In this sense, it is a *pre-philosophical* position.

We don't need a theoretical characterization of philosophical theorizing in order to recognize either this distinction or the ordinary, pre-philosophical position. They can be loosely modeled on the position we all occupied before our first epistemology course. Consider, for instance, the fact that when, in ordinary life, we judge that people know things, we don't appeal to a fully general set of standards for knowledge, nor do we think we need to. We certainly can't state such a thing. We thus aren't deploying a general account of the conditions for knowledge. Perhaps we are doing so implicitly and it can be ferreted out. Or perhaps such a thing can be reconstructed as an interpretation of our practice. Or perhaps – one might try to argue – the correct theory can't be derived from

the commitments, procedures, principles, and rules-of-thumb of ordinary epistemic life, but rather must be discovered in some other way. All of these familiar approaches recognize a gap here. It is precisely because of this gap that some people find it of interest and importance to develop a general account of knowledge. The very enterprise of seeking a general account of knowledge thus presupposes recognition of the prephilosophical position, because if there weren't such a position, there would be no need to develop such an account: the account would already appear in ordinary life. The prephilosophical position is thus one which we epistemologists inevitably recognize, even if its exact boundaries aren't clear in every instance.

Moore did not himself explicitly articulate a conception of such a position, but he had a name for it: common sense. What his writings on skepticism vividly enact – and I use this word intentionally, as Moore *does something* in these writings beyond just offer arguments – is the recognition that an intellectual step is needed if we are to get from this position to the position of the skeptical philosopher. One already has commitments before the encounter with skeptical argumentation, commitments to both factual claims and various practices of inquiry and epistemic assessment. These include such considerations as that there is a piece of paper before me, and that I know there is. From within that position, this all looks quite reasonable on the whole. What, then, are we to *do* with all of that? Moore takes these commitments as his starting point. He insists that we stand with both feet firmly in that ordinary position. He then shows us that from within that starting point, external world skepticism doesn't even get going as an epistemological problem.

It might immediately be complained, “So what? Skepticism might still be *true!*” But notice that this complaint is voiced from a position that is already outside of Moore's starting position. There is a crucial difference between saying that within a certain position a given claim is regarded as correct or true, and saying – from within that position – that it is correct or true. If we are working from within Moore's starting position, we voice our commitments about what is the case, what we know, and what we have reason to believe. We engage in our familiar practices of inquiry and epistemic assessment and evaluation. We don't stand outside and describe what that position is committed to, but rather speak from within it, asserting that certain things are the case

and that others aren't. If Moore is right, we find that we can't so much as get a plausible argument going for external world skepticism from within that position. We are thus left steadfast in our conviction that skepticism is false: we know and have good reason to believe all kinds of things about the world. This is already enough to refute any form of epistemological skepticism that aspires both to arise from within our ordinary epistemic practices and to contradict our ordinary claims to know or have reason to believe lots of things about the world around us.

To redescribe this situation by saying, "Well, okay, we conclude from within our ordinary position that external world skepticism is false, but so what? Maybe that position is wrong. Why should we privilege it anyway?", is *already* to have left that position. The same point applies if we say, "All you have done is appeal to what you *believe*. Why should the fact that you *believe* such-and-such count for anything, anyway?" Such departures from our prephilosophical position are so familiar in epistemology as to be nearly invisible. The crucial question Moore's work raises is whether they are well motivated. This is a central, guiding question to which I shall return.

My aim in this paper is to bring out the general shape of what Moore attempted and to show where we would be left if we filled in the details. I begin (section 2) by considering the reception of Moore's thought in recent epistemology, for here we find a failure of philosophical imagination – a failure to see the very possibility of an approach like Moore's. This discussion will bring out the question of the relation between our ordinary position and epistemological theorizing, identify where Moore – and we – initially stand in our encounter with external world skepticism, and highlight the crucial question of what might motivate movement out of that position (section 3). The key question in this regard is why we should think it inappropriate to reply to skepticism by making use of considerations about what we know about the world (section 4). Barry Stroud has argued that here Moore missed the underlying epistemological concerns that lead to skepticism. However, Moore has available good grounds for rejecting both the project urged by Stroud and also the underlying questions that give rise to it (section 5). The upshot is that we find no reasonable route to the skeptical conclusion from principles and procedures of epistemic assessment at play in our ordinary position (section 6). We

started out taking ourselves to know and have reasonable beliefs about a world outside of our minds, and that is where we end up. This result is compatible with the possibility that our ordinary position is deeply incorrect, but that fact should not trouble us, given the perspective from which we are approaching these issues (section 6). Crispin Wright has criticized Moore based on considerations about the transmission of “warrant”, and it might also be claimed that the epistemological role of sensory experience precludes a response like Moore’s. However, as we will see, these objections don’t require any crucially new Moorean moves. What we find here is instead simply the repetition of an unmotivated insistence that considerations about the world and our knowledge of it must not play a role in a satisfying response to skepticism (sections 7 and 8). No reasonable route to the skeptical conclusion has appeared. We consequently reject skepticism.²

What would it take to show this to be an intellectually satisfying response? One tempting thought is that here we need to appeal to epistemological theory, because otherwise we won’t be able to see *why* it is appropriate and satisfying to engage with skepticism in this way. However, Moore aims to reply to external world skepticism in a way that makes use of no epistemological theorizing nor any philosophical underpinnings whatsoever. His is an extremely minimalist response in this sense: it takes place before the work of philosophical theory-building begins. It would not be in the spirit of his response to appeal to philosophical theory at this juncture.

Fortunately, there is an alternative. We can come to see the success of Moore’s response by describing and enacting it, not by vindicating it through epistemological theorizing.

If we pursue Moore’s approach, we seek to show two things. First, that from the vantage point of our ordinary, prephilosophical position, each attempt at skeptical

² There are other strands in Moore’s epistemological work, which may not form a seamless whole. My goal here is just to highlight the significance of this one strand. Moore himself did not provide sufficient argumentation to establish that external world skepticism in fact doesn’t get started from our pre-philosophical position. It would likewise take more than one paper for me to make that case completely. For more in that direction, see my (Publication C) and (Publication E).

argumentation has failings that keep it from getting off the ground. Second, that from this same starting point, we find no reason for dissatisfaction with this situation: we don't even find any reason to be discontented on the grounds that our ordinary, prephilosophical position could just be wrong. If we succeed in showing both of those things, then we don't find any reason to give up anything that we started out committed to and we don't find any good objection to proceeding in this way. Nothing goes wrong. *So we started out committed to such and such being the case, and that is where we end up. We don't find any reason to think or do anything differently.* This would be an intellectually responsible and satisfying reply of a sort that is perfectly familiar as such in ordinary life. Nothing more is needed by way of vindication, given the vantage point from which we are working.

This may be an approach that is unfamiliar in contemporary analytic philosophy. But if you are standing where Moore urges us to stand, what could be a better way to show a response to be intellectually satisfactory than to try it out for yourself and find yourself both satisfied and unable to identify any reason for dissatisfaction?

2. *Moore's Standpoint and Contemporary Epistemology: A misunderstanding*

Let's begin by recalling what, exactly, Moore did. Moore held up both hands, declaring while doing so, "Here is one hand, and here is another." He concluded, "So there are objects external to the mind" ("Proof," 166). Since he certainly knew the premises, he said, he also knew the conclusion.³ He likewise claimed in a lecture that he knew that he was not dreaming; he knew, he said, that he was standing up, and since he couldn't know this if he was dreaming, he must not be dreaming ("Certainty," 191ff). He rejected a skeptical argument of Russell's in part on the ground that he did know that his current experience was not produced by a malicious demon ("Four Forms," 224). And in response to several skeptical arguments he maintained that he could clearly reject the principles upon which these arguments were based, since he did after all know, e.g., that

³ See, for instance, *Main Problems*, 126 (reprinted in Baldwin, ed., 1993, 78). The point is strongly suggested but not explicitly stated in "Proof", 166-7.

there was a pencil in front of him (“Four Forms,” 196-226; *Main Problems*, chapter 6 (“Hume’s Theory Examined”). In each case, Moore did not merely offer an argument; he engaged in a rhetorical performance, using reminders and small turns of phrase (“This, after all, you know, really is a finger: there is no doubt about it” (“Perception,” 228); “I *do* know that I held up two hands above this desk not very long ago. As a matter of fact, ... you all know it too. There’s no doubt whatever that I did” (“Proof,” 168)) which eased his audience into a certain position in relation to skeptical argumentation: a position in which (to speak from within it) we freely make use of our knowledge about the world around us, and about how to go about inquiry and epistemic assessment, in order to dismiss both the skeptical claim and arguments in its favor.

There is nothing dialectically improper about such a response. Granted, it is unlikely to convince someone who actually believes that we no have reason to believe anything about the world around us. But even in response to such a person, there is nothing in principle epistemically objectionable about Moore’s procedure. If you think that I know nothing about English history, I can perfectly appropriately reject your charge by pointing out something that I *do* know, such as that King Harold the II lost the Battle of Hastings in 1066. And if you attempt to argue for your claim in a way that depends upon claims about English history that I know to be false, I can appropriately point that out as well. So if something is wrong with Moore’s procedure, more needs to be said to bring out what it might be.⁴

Still, there is a deep-seated tendency in recent epistemology to think that Moore’s responses are not adequate by themselves but need shoring up or vindication by being placed within a substantive epistemological theory. For instance, Earl Conee writes,

Does being some such common sense proposition confer any sort of epistemic merit, and if it does, what sort, how much, and why?

Without answers to these questions, a reliance on this common sense to oppose skepticism is not fully reasonable. Satisfactory answers to these general epistemic questions will include general epistemic claims. In at least this way a proponent of common sense beliefs needs abstract epistemology

⁴ For further discussion of this point, see my (Publication C).

in order to give that category of beliefs a telling role in philosophical arguments (2001, 58-9).

This sort of complaint privileges epistemological theory in our encounter with external world skepticism. Rather than seeing us as standing in our ordinary position and asking what is to move us to a position in which we come to think the skeptical claim might well be right (and so feel the need for epistemological theory to ward it off), this approach sees our ordinary position as in need of vindication before we may stand in it and reply from there to skeptical concerns. This is a mistake, both as an interpretation of Moore and, I will argue, as a matter of getting a clear view of our relation to external world skepticism. Moore's performances do not depend, for either their legitimacy or success, on commentary from a developed epistemological theory.

To illustrate this point, I want to consider several recent approaches to Moore, beginning with an interpretation offered by John Greco (2002). Greco aims to provide a "defense" of Moore's "Proof" by showing it to "fit into" (546) the epistemological framework of Thomas Reid, which Greco deems to be "exactly right" (545). This underlying epistemological framework, Greco claims, both illuminates the point of Moore's procedures and secures their success.

Greco takes Moore to have adopted six principles from Reid.

"E1: Not everything we know is known by proof" (549).

"E2: External objects are known by perception, not by proof" (549).

"E3: The evidence of sense is no less reasonable than that of demonstration" (551).

"M1: One should not try to prove what is not known by proof" (552).

"M2: Rather than trying to prove that external things exist, or that we know that external things exist, we should take a close look at the sceptic's reasons for saying that we do not know this" (553).

"M3: Common sense has defeasible authority over philosophical theory" (554).

These principles can have the air of mere truisms dressed up in philosophical jargon. So understood, it is plausible enough that Moore would accept them. Moore clearly accepts M2 and M3, as can be seen in the way in which he responds to particular skeptical arguments by critically scrutinizing their premises (as in “Four Forms of Scepticism”) and refuting them by appealing to his knowledge of the world. He would clearly accept E1, since he says at the end of “Proof of an External World” that though he can’t prove “here is one hand and here is another”, he knows it to be true (169-70). E1 follows from that claim. Moore would presumably accept something like E2 as well: a natural explanation of how he knows “here is a hand” is that he *sees it*, and since he seemingly takes it that adducing that latter fact, which he presumably knows perfectly well, would not constitute a proof then and there, it seems that he would be content enough to say something like that he knows “here is a hand” by perception. E3 also seems to be something he’d be willing enough to endorse, at least on one plausible understanding of the phrase “the evidence of sense”. If seeing things is a way of coming to know about them, then surely it is a route to highly reasonable beliefs. A similar point applies to M1’s talk of “what isn’t known by proof”. If the phrase refers simply to the sort of case at hand, in which Moore thinks he can’t prove something that he knows, then M1 would offer sound advice. If something is known but can’t be proven, then there is no point in trying, nor is there any need.

However, these same forms of words can take on a very different significance depending upon how they are placed in a larger body of theory. Greco’s Reid – and hence, his Moore – is a *reliabilist foundationalist* who holds that we have a number of naturally reliable faculties (including, notably, sensory perception) which issue epistemologically basic beliefs – different sorts of beliefs for different faculties – that have positive epistemic status just in virtue of arising from those faculties and quite independently of the positive epistemic status of any other beliefs. These beliefs then provide the material starting points for demonstrative and non-demonstrative reasoning. Epistemological claims such as E1-E3, understood as Greco’s Reid understands them, thus carry with them very specific epistemological commitments, for instance, about the justificatory structure and basis of our knowledge of contingent matters about the world around us. This faculty-based foundationalist picture is what gives specific content to

talk in these principles of “what is known by proof” versus “what is known by perception”, as well as to the phrase “the evidence of sense”.

This picture thus shapes the correct understanding of M1-3 for Greco’s Reid, and hence for his Moore. M1’s “what is known by proof,” is, on this understanding, what is arrived at by the naturally reliable operation of our faculty for demonstrative inference when it takes known inputs. Likewise, M3 is given its specific content because of its placement within this theory: “common sense” becomes those things which “we know immediately, by the natural operation of our cognitive powers, as opposed to that which is known only by special training or by reasoning” (Greco, 554). The special epistemic authority of “common sense”, so understood, thus arises from the *prima facie* favorable epistemic status of these beliefs in virtue of the way in which they – unlike the claims of philosophical theory – immediately arise from the natural operation of our cognitive powers. M2, too, takes its place within this larger picture: since “here is a hand” isn’t “known by proof” in the sense of that phrase specified by the theory, one shouldn’t try to prove it, and so one should instead consider how the arguments for skepticism might go awry.

Notice, however, how little of this picture one *has* to take on in order to proceed as Moore does. One can obviously endorse M2 and M3 without placing them within this theoretical framework. In fact, if one’s concern is to understand whether and how one might be made to move from one’s ordinary, pre-philosophical position to a genuine concern that external world skepticism might be true after all, then one would surely endorse M2 and M3; one would focus critically on the skeptic’s arguments in a way that gives one’s ordinary commitments defeasible authority. And while Greco’s Reid gives content to talk of “common sense” by tying it to the deliverances of certain cognitive faculties, Moore never does any such thing. The phrase “common sense”, in Moore’s usage, simply amounts to a convenient summary or synoptic label that doesn’t purport to capture anything about what these claims’ defining characteristics are or what gives them some special status beyond the fact that they are part of the position from which we start when we encounter skeptical argumentation.

It might seem that Moore’s claim to know things that he can’t prove commits him to a substantial epistemological theory distinguishing what is “known by proof” from

what is “known by perception”. However, we can instead understand this distinction simply as a summary statement of certain aspects of the commitments that are involved in our starting position. Suppose that Moore is using “prove” and “perceive” in perfectly ordinary, pre-philosophical ways. Moore grants that in certain circumstances he could get “what might be called a proof” of “here is a hand”. For instance, if there were reason to think that what was before him was merely an artificial mock-up of a hand, then, he says, “someone might be said to get a proof” 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” (“Proof,” 169). Given what Moore grants about this case, he *could* say that in the usual sort of case, in which no such fraud is suspected, it is simply unclear what would be wanted if one was asked to prove, say, that there is a table here. (What would it *be* to prove such a thing, if not simply to show the person the table?) But of course, one might know there is a table there nonetheless.

Moore recognizes, however, that within the context of a particular kind of epistemological project the request for proof gets construed in a very particular way. He writes, regarding the skeptically-inclined philosopher,

what they really want is not merely a proof of these two propositions (“Here’s a hand and here’s another”), 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” (“Proof”, 169).

What Moore has in mind here is a general account revealing how any claims about the existence of external things – or about one’s knowledge of such things – can be shown to be correct without presupposing either any such claims or that one knows any such claims. Such an account is precisely what the skeptic demands. But we don’t demand any such thing in everyday life, which is Moore’s starting position. Moore’s insistence that he can know things “without proof” can thus be read as nothing theoretically thicker than this: he can know things even in cases in which he would be utterly nonplussed by the demand to “prove” them and even if it is not possible to provide the distinctive kind of vindication of his knowledge claims which the skeptic requires.

In short, then, while certain aspects of Moore's position could be expressed in the words appearing in Greco's principles, we can see these not as arising from a substantial epistemological theory but rather as a manifestation of the fact that he is working from within his "ordinary", everyday certainties and epistemic practices *prior to and independently of underwriting by any particular philosophical theory* (even a theory that would seek to legitimate such a stance), such that they can provide a defeasible standard for the assessment of philosophical claims in skeptical argumentation and elsewhere. This stance leads him to claim that he *does* after all know that he is standing, giving a lecture, etc., even though he can't "prove" these things or that he knows them: that he *does* know them would be, for Moore, among the initial commitments of the position from which the inquiry begins and to which it is accountable.

Greco isn't alone in missing the significance of this possibility. It is often suggested that Moore's "Proof of an External World" rests upon an incipient proto-externalist view according to which a mature adult can have a satisfactory epistemic position despite being incapable of providing anything by way of an answer to the question, "How do you know?" or "What reason do you have to believe that?"⁵ However, Moore could perfectly well grant *both* that in the circumstances involved in his proof of an external world we can know that there is a hand here even if we can't prove it *and also* that something would be going badly wrong if a mature adult claimed to know that there is a hand here but could offer nothing whatsoever in favor of the belief (not even such things as, eg, "Well, I can see it"). And once we see this point, we can see that his "Proof" need not depend on proto-externalism any more than it needs to presuppose a position like that of Greco's Reid. All it requires is a willingness to draw out and make explicit the commitments of our initial, pre-philosophical position, commitments which may not themselves add up to anything like a substantive theory of knowledge or reasonable belief.

⁵ This has recently been suggested by Coliva in her discussion of Moore's Proof (2010, 47ff.). Sosa (1999) has likewise suggested an externalist move for Moore, as has Baldwin, *G.E. Moore*, chapter 9.

A similar point applies to the recent “Moorean Dogmatist” approach to empirical justification. Pryor (2000) traces external world skepticism to the requirement, roughly, that in order to know or have good reason to believe anything about the external world, one must have *independent, antecedent reasons* for believing that one is not dreaming or being deceived by an evil demon – reasons that do not involve or depend upon any considerations about the external world. Pryor responds with a theory of perceptual justification according to which an experience as of *p* can provide *prima facie* (defeasible), immediate justification for believing that *p* – a justification that depends solely upon that experience itself, not upon any of one’s beliefs about the world or justifications one has for other beliefs about the world. This view denies the skeptical requirement, since on this view one can have justification for believing that there is a hand in front of one merely in virtue of having an appropriate experience. In fact, Pryor (2004) defends a course of reasoning that runs as follows:

1. Experience as of a hand before me.
2. (Based on that experience): Here is a hand.
3. (Based on that belief): So, I am not a bodiless spirit being deceived by an evil demon.

As Pryor sees things, this could be how someone comes to know – for the first time – a claim like (3), and thus comes to know of the existence of an external world.

It is striking how little of this is part of Moore’s responses to skepticism.⁶ Moore’s own “Proof” doesn’t include a step like that from (1) to (2), and Moore does not appeal to a theory of perceptual justification like Pryor’s in his response to skepticism.⁷ Nor does

⁶ To be fair, Pryor doesn’t present his view as an interpretation of Moore. But he does present it as an interpretation of the *kind of thing* Moore is up to. What I want to bring out is that this is to misunderstand the kind of engagement with skepticism that appears in Moore’s texts.

⁷ Moore does on occasion suggest such a theory, but that is in the very different context of trying to provide an account of our epistemological relation to the world via perception. For Moore, such theorizing does not underwrite the response to skepticism; rather, the response to skepticism comes first. (For more on this, see section 3.)

he need to. He doesn't even need to think that a mature adult could come to know a claim such as (3) for the first time by making an explicit inference from a premise such as (2). All he needs is this: that one can reasonably believe and even know things about the external world even if the best reasons one has for such claims as that there is an external world and that one is not dreaming (or being deceived by an evil demon) all unavoidably involve or depend upon considerations about the external world. And Moore did think this. He thought that he knew that there are external things, and he thought that he had no better reason in favor of the existence of such things than the one provided by the consideration that here is one hand and here is another.⁸ He likewise thought that he knew that he was not dreaming, and he thought it perfectly appropriate to appeal to his knowledge of the world to dismiss the suggestion that he might be ("Certainty," 191-4). These commitments do not require him to accept a view like Pryor's. If they are indeed part of our starting position when we encounter skeptical argumentation, then that will be enough; nothing "deeper" or philosophically "heftier" will be needed. Read this way, the burden of Moore's "Proof" isn't to reconstruct a line of reasoning by which we could gain knowledge for the first time that there are external things. It is, more simply, to indicate absolutely decisive evidence, of a sort we all possess, that it is true that there are external things.⁹

⁸ See his discussion of the sense in which he has provided a "proof", where he writes that "it is perhaps impossible to give a better ... proof of anything whatever" ("Proof," 166). In a closely related passage he writes, "And similarly, if the object is to prove *in general* that we do know of the existence of material objects, no argument which is really stronger can, I think, be brought forward to prove this than particular instances in which we do in fact know of the existence of such an object" (*Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, 126).

⁹ This is fortunate, because Pryor's version of Moore's argument arguably runs into a problem from the point of view of our ordinary epistemic practices, summarized on page [XX-XX] below. For this reason it is all to the better if Moore's response to external world skepticism does not depend upon or require commitment to "Moorean Dogmatism". (Here my reading of Moore accords with Ram Neta's proposal that "By

Methodological discussions likewise often seek a vindication of Moore through philosophical theorizing. Thomas Kelly, for instance, begins with a conception of a “Moorean fact” as a proposition which is “invulnerable” to being undermined by means of philosophical arguments (2005, p.180). Kelly traces this conception to a view about belief revision.

We should, I think, view the Moorean ... as one who thinks that, according to what are in fact the correct norms of belief revision, philosophical considerations are simply not the kind of thing which could undermine another select class of propositions, ‘the Moorean facts’” (p. 186-7).

Kelly’s Moorean thus takes there to be two classes of propositions, ‘Moorean facts’ and ‘philosophical considerations’, which are related to each other in a certain way by the correct norms for belief revision. This is itself already a substantive epistemological position, and not one to which, on my reading, Moore is committed, since (as we will see) Moore’s position allows that any given starting commitment could be overturned in the process of our encounter with skepticism. Moreover, Kelly argues that one could derive this norm from a metaphilosophical commitment to a particular version of reflective equilibrium as a methodology for philosophical theory construction, with the result that some beliefs about particular cases would be “immune to being subsequently overturned on the basis of philosophical argument” (p. 196). Kelly thus offers a way to vindicate Moore’s approach on the basis of epistemological theory, and the vindication ultimately depends upon the resolution of a debate about the proper methodology for philosophical theory construction. This is, again, an interpretation of Moore on which the philosophy comes first.

By contrast, I am proposing a way of reading Moore on which it would be a mistake to ask, “What particular epistemological theory underwrites Moore’s responses to skepticism?”, or to charge (as Conee does above) that Moore’s responses must rest upon a framework of general epistemological principles. Such questions and complaints

Moore’s lights, his Proof is not intended to give us knowledge that we might not already have” (Neta, 2007.)

would miss the kind of work in which Moore is here engaged. Vindication of the approach would come, rather, through *seeing it work* when we steadfastly take it up.

William Lycan (2007) is one of the few commentators to have seen the possibility that Moore is working from a position that does not presuppose or require vindication through positive epistemological theorizing. According to Lycan, Moore's signal contribution rests in one of his signature rhetorical moves: asking whether it is more certain – or, as he sometimes puts it, more rational to believe – (a) that the premises of some deductively-valid skeptical argument are true, or (b) that one does indeed know, eg, that there is a pencil here. As Lycan emphasizes, any deductively valid argument ultimately forces such a comparative judgment upon us regarding the relative rational certainty of the premises versus the denial of the conclusion. On Lycan's reading, then, Moore simply deploys a familiar and inevitable procedure in his response to skepticism.

I find Lycan's interpretation philosophically inadequate, for two related reasons. Exploring them helps reveal the significance of the shift in perspective that Moore encourages us to take.

First, Lycan's version of Moore's anti-skeptical strategy invites Conee's question (p. [] above): Why should we think it of any significance in this context that we find particular propositions very certain? Don't we need an epistemological theory to explain why we should give any weight to our judgments of comparative certainty in our encounter with skeptical argumentation? Lycan asserts that we don't (2007, 97-8), but he does not explain why not. To see why not, you need to make more thoroughly the shift that Lycan has begun.

Second, consider the standpoint from which the comparative judgment is made. If we start from a neutral position, without any of our ordinary commitments, and ask which is more certain – the premises of a skeptical argument or that we know that there is a pencil here – we have no ready basis on which to make the judgment. We are stranded on the high seas of epistemology, contra Lycan's intent. If, by contrast, we are working within our ordinary, pre-philosophical position, then there are ample relevant considerations ready-to-hand, starting with the fact that I see the pencil right there. That is to say, it is the fact that we are standing, with Moore, in the ordinary, pre-philosophical position that leads to our ready agreement with his comparative judgments. But from that

position, the judgment of comparative certainty does not do any essential work. It is sufficient to appeal (speaking now from within our ordinary, prephilosophical position) to such facts as that this is a hand, that we aren't dreaming, and that I see a pencil right there. That is, standing in the pre-philosophical position, the judgment of comparative certainty is otiose. All the crucial work is already done when I appeal to the manifest facts.¹⁰

I said that these two points are related. This is because once one sees that what is doing the real work is that Moore is speaking from within the pre-philosophical position and asking what reason can be given for changing his view, we can also see that Conee's question lapses. From within that position, we say to the skeptic, in effect, "You've proposed that not-p. But that's clearly false, because it conflicts with X, Y, and Z, which

¹⁰ This point raises a question of Moore interpretation. What, then, was he *doing* with his comparative arguments? I think that it is best to read them rhetorically. Taken at face value, they are strikingly bad. "X is more certain than Y, so X is certainly true and Y is clearly false" is a lousy argument. So is "It is more rational to believe X than to believe Y, so I should believe X and reject Y as false." As I have emphasized Moore's rejection of the premise of the skeptical argument is best viewed as based instead on the fact that *he manifestly knows that there is a pencil here*. From this viewpoint his comparative judgments would best be viewed as rhetorical maneuvers that function to jolt us back into the pre-philosophical position if we begin to stray from it. "Right," one thinks, "There really is no doubt whatsoever that I know that there is a pencil here." And it is arguable that this is how Moore intended them to function. At one point he puts the comparative judgment this way: "I think we can safely challenge any philosopher to bring forward any argument in favour either of the proposition that we do not know it, or of the proposition that it is not true, which does not at some point rest upon some premise which is, *beyond comparison*, less certain than is the proposition which it is designed to attack" ("Some Judgments of Perception," in Moore, *Philosophical Studies*, p. 228, italics added). The rhetorical force of the italicized words is to remind us that the proposition in question – e.g., that I know that this is a pencil here before me – is *manifestly true* and *there is no doubt about it whatsoever*.

are all true – and you’ve offered no reason for thinking anything else.” From within that position, there would be nothing more that needs to be said. And so far, we would have been given no reason not to rest content with where we are.

3. *How Moore Does Epistemology*

The structure of Moore’s anti-skeptical position is revealed in some under-appreciated aspects of his argumentative strategy.

“A Defence of Common Sense” begins with a list of propositions, including propositions about things external to the mind, that Moore avers we all know with certainty. His “defence” amounts to this: he argues that those philosophers who would doubt or deny these propositions (or doubt or deny that we know them) contradict themselves or fall into incoherence *because of ways in which they are committed to precisely these very propositions*. Importantly, he does not provide a philosophical characterization of the class of “common sense” propositions and then offer a philosophical theory in defense of privileging them in philosophizing. Nor does he offer an epistemological theory on which the deliverances of some faculty called “common sense” are generally trustworthy. Rather, he reminds us that we too really do believe his “common sense” propositions, and he argues that we can’t reasonably get from this starting point to a position in which we consistently doubt or deny them. This is a “defence” conducted from within our ordinary pre-philosophical position and without vindication through constructive philosophical theory-building.

The argumentative strategy of papers such as “Certainty” and “Four Forms of Scepticism” accords with this aspect of the “Defence”. Moore scrutinizes the argumentation that is supposed to move us from our prephilosophical position to the skeptical conclusion. He repeatedly confronts this argumentation with commitments drawn from our prephilosophical starting position, commitments such as that he knows he is standing up (“Certainty,” 191), that he knows this is a pencil (“Four Forms,” 226), and that it isn’t good reasoning to move from “A’s may on occasion fail to be associated with B’s” to “It is not known with certainty that this A is so associated” (“Four Forms,” 220, 222, 224). The point, as he explicitly says, is to show that these arguments “do not

give me any reason to abandon my view” (“Four Forms,” p. 222). Once that is shown, he takes the anti-skeptical work to be done.

Of course, Moore did engage in philosophical theory-building. However, it is very important to see what he was up to. It may not be precisely what one might have thought. In particular, it is not the sort of enterprise that could serve the vindicatory aspirations of the interpretations canvassed above.

In section IV of the “Defence,” Moore turns to the project of providing what he calls an “analysis” of propositions about external objects and our epistemological relation to them. He introduces this section by saying that he is turning to a question of “a very different order” (127). This wording is crucial. Moore insists that we already understand these propositions independently of engaging in these analytic projects, and he maintains that they are quite certainly true, but he argues that the question of how such propositions are “to be analysed is one to which no answer that has been hitherto given is anywhere near certainly true” (133). So, for Moore, this question is of a “different order” insofar as it concerns analyzing a position that is *taken to be certainly true* and was *already fully adequately defended* in the earlier sections of the paper. Moore’s many avowals of uncertainty regarding the correct analysis of our epistemological relation to external objects (and of the nature of sense-data and their role in this relation), as well as his changing views on this matter over the years, are a mark of this same attitude: if a proposed analysis leaves us puzzled about how we can know anything about the world, that is – in the first instance – a strike against the analysis. (Only “in the first instance,” because it could turn out that what been revealed is an incoherence in our starting position. On this, see below.)

For Moore, then, skepticism is dealt with before the work of philosophical theory-building begins. What would give us reason to think skepticism is correct is something about or in our starting position that points in that direction. A proposed analysis might appear to provide some such reason, but resolution of the issue would take place by considering more carefully the commitments of our prephilosophical position. The fundamental question here is thus what happens when we attempt to attain reflective understanding of the commitments of ordinary epistemic life. Do we find anything that gives us reason to discount or set aside some or all of those commitments? Moore makes

no claim that this will not or could not happen. It is possible that we will find considerations that warrant downgrading or doubting some or all of our ordinary judgments about what we know or have reason to believe. It could be, for example, that we will find a fundamental conflict – for instance, that some principle of epistemic assessment to which we are committed has the consequence (given certain undeniable facts) that we can't know that there is a pencil here. Moore's crucial point is that nothing like any such reason in favor of skepticism has yet been identified. Given that this is so – and assuming that our survey has been exhaustive enough – there is nothing more that needs to be done. In this regard, the ordinary position does not require or await vindication by philosophical theory.

This pattern is particularly clearly displayed in the first seven chapters of the early (1910-11) lectures, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*. The first chapter begins with a recitation of “common sense” beliefs which we all share. This passage is introduced with the phrase, “we certainly believe...” (p. 2), but this wording is quickly dropped (though it occasionally recurs) and is replaced here and elsewhere with outright assertion of the relevant propositions and sometimes even with the claim that we know them to be true.¹ The rhetorical effect – with which we effortlessly go along – is that we are *speaking from within our view of the world*, stating manifest truisms. Moore then takes these as the starting points for his subsequent investigations of perception, sense-data, and knowledge. Rather than appealing to constructive epistemological theory in order to determine whether we know of the existence of external things, he proposes “to answer the principal objections of those philosophers who have maintained that we certainly do not” (27). The subsequent defense in chapter 6, “Hume’s Theory Examined,” is conducted on the same plane as the “Defence”. Moore highlights certain skeptical puzzles that arise from his account of perception when combined with certain epistemological principles – principles which have not been shown to arise from any “common sense” views. In response he makes use of his starting-point commitments, highlighting that because we do, after all, know that this is a pencil, and because no plausible reason has been offered in favor of the epistemological principles at play, we can reject these epistemological principles: “the strongest argument to prove that Hume’s principles are false is the argument from a particular case, like this in which we do know

of the existence of some material object” (126). No reason has been found to give up our initial commitments or to change our view.

It is noteworthy that what has been interpreted as Moore’s “particularism” in epistemological method (Chisholm, 1973), is a *downstream consequence* of his starting point in our pretheoretical position, not something which itself rests upon an epistemological-cum-methodological theory in the way we saw Kelly (2005) suggest. Moore does regard our ordinary, pre-philosophical judgments about what we know and don’t know as providing a *prima facie* constraint for epistemological theorizing (*Main Problems*, 143).¹¹ This is because we *do* start with some commitments to particular judgments and to principles and practices of assessment, and the question, from where we are in fact standing, is whether we can find some good reason to call any of that into doubt. From this vantage point, a proposed epistemological thesis that would deny that we know, e.g., that this is a pencil, is *ipso facto* suspect, because it conflicts with *manifest truths*. Admittedly, to put it this way is to speak from within our ordinary, prephilosophical position at a particular stage in the inquiry. But that is precisely where Moore is standing. He has, so far, found no reason to stand anywhere else.

Of course, a philosopher might engage in various counterfactual exercises. One could suppose that some or all of these manifest truths are incorrect or in doubt and then consider where one would be left if that were so. Likewise, one could pretend that one is in an initial position in which one suspends judgment on these matters. But if one keeps one’s eye on the ball, it is clear that no such exercise could reach the conclusion, voiced with full commitment, that one does not have nor can have any knowledge or reasonable beliefs about the external world. The most that would be yielded is that *if* certain things were so, then one couldn’t have knowledge or reasonable belief about the world, or that *if* certain things were so, then that is what one would be forced to conclude. But so what? Our actual position is one in which – to speak from within it – those things are not so. The crucial question is whether we have good reason to *actually* regard these initial

¹¹ He sometimes casts the point in simple inductivist terms (eg, *Some Main Problems*, 143), but this is inessential. He likewise might well have noted that the judgments in question are defeasible.

commitments with suspicion or worse, so that what we should *actually* conclude would be shaped in these ways. Moore's crucial contention is that no such reason has emerged.

Moore's point requires a shift in perspective that can be very hard for philosophers to maintain. There is a tendency to demand that we take up a position, imagined as "neutral", in which we stand outside of ordinary life to argue that skepticism is false and thereby vindicate the beliefs of ordinary life. But why accede to this demand? The question is whether there is any good reason, available to us in our prephilosophical starting position, for taking up this "neutral" position and for thinking that what we find, if we do so, has any significance at all for whether we know anything about the world around us. From Moore's point of view, the path to skepticism will be blocked if we can find no reason for taking up this "neutral" position, and if we can show, from within our ordinary starting position, that no good reason has been offered in skepticism's favor. We will then be left where we started, and we will declare that we do know a great deal about the world around us indeed. Moore's underlying approach will then have been vindicated on its own terms.

4. *Has Moore Missed the Point?*

It might be said that there is an obvious good reason for leaving our ordinary, pretheoretical position: we want to find out whether that position is *right*. This thought underlies a fundamental objection to any anti-skeptical strategy which appeals to considerations about the external world and our knowledge of it. Barry Stroud, for instance, sees an attempt to provide a fully general "assessment of all of our knowledge of the world" lying at the very beginning of the line of thought that leads to skeptical argumentation (1984, 111). What we want to know, he suggests, is whether we actually *do* know *any* of the things that we take ourselves to know about the world. To answer that question, Stroud says, "we cannot appeal to one thing known about the world in order to support another; all of it is meant to be in question all at once" (118). Stroud's suggestion, then, is that there is a distinctive question of assessment that, once raised, prevents us – in that context of inquiry – from acceptably making use of what we know about the world. A response like Moore's is thus blocked from the get-go.

Mere generality does not have the effect that Stroud stresses. If I simply ask, “Do I know anything at all about the world around me?” *one* straightforward and seemingly appropriate (though obvious) answer would be to say “Yes” and to mention one of the many things I know. Still, I think that it is undeniable that we can all feel the tug of Stroud’s question. It is perhaps best to think of it as a fully generalized version of a familiar sort of reflective, self-critical epistemic assessment. For instance, I can ask in a reflective moment, “What do I *really* know about the assassination of JFK?” In answering that question, I can’t acceptably reflect, “Well, Kennedy was shot by Lee Harvey Oswald. So I *do* know something about the Kennedy assassination after all.” That piece of knowledge isn’t available to be used in that way in the course of the critical reassessment. Stroud’s thought, then, is that this familiar aspect of our epistemic practices can be generalized to apply to one’s knowledge of external things as such. I can ask, in a reflective moment, “What, if anything, do I really know about the world external to my mind?”, thereby raising a general question of critical epistemic self-evaluation. Once I’ve done that, Stroud suggests, I’m precluded from making use of my ordinary commitments about the world external to my mind or about what I know of that world. Those commitments become – relative to my inquiry – mere psychological facts about myself as soon as the question of reflective scrutiny gets applied to them, and so I must establish their credentials before I am entitled to work from within them. From this position, we wouldn’t be able to respond to skeptical argumentation in the way that Moore proposes. The demand for a vindictory epistemological theory now appears irresistible.

It is important to see that the later stages in the skeptical inquiry – in particular the introduction in a critical mode of the skeptic’s distinctive possibilities that one is dreaming, being deceived by an evil demon, or just a brain in a vat – do not *by themselves* have this effect. In fact, without the framing provided by Stroud’s question of general epistemic assessment, it would be perfectly in accord with the epistemic commitments of ordinary life for Moore to reject such possibilities by appealing to other considerations about the world. For instance, if someone said, “But you don’t know that there is a pencil here, because for all you know you might be dreaming,” Moore could correctly reply, “No, I do know that I am not dreaming, because my current experience is nothing like a

dream. Dreams don't have certain features possessed by my current experience." If it is suggested that it is at least in some sense possible that one could have a dream that is phenomenologically identical to a waking experience, Moore could accept the point and yet note that there is no reason to think that anything of the sort ever actually goes on. In both these replies, he would make use of his background knowledge of what dream experience is like for creatures like us. And if it is suggested that Moore might be the victim of an evil demon's deceptions, he can perfectly appropriately respond that he surely is not, since there are no evil demons. So if a skeptical argument hopes to get anywhere by offering such possibilities, all the crucial action must already have taken place off-stage. Something must have been done already to preclude appealing to things we know about the world.¹²

Though Moore himself did not offer precisely these responses, there is no reason – so far – why he couldn't have. As I have argued at length elsewhere (Leite 2010, 2011a, 2013, 2015), it is not – from the vantage point of our ordinary, prephilosophical epistemic commitments – inherently objectionable to reject such hypotheses on the basis of things one takes oneself to know about the world.

One key point here is that even if a certain possibility were such that its obtaining would undercut one's reliability or epistemic authority regarding a certain domain, one may nonetheless acceptably appeal to considerations in that domain to support dismissing

¹² For this same reason, much of the recent literature is badly mistaken in thinking that the skeptical argument can be sufficiently motivated either in terms of the simple closure principle argument ("If you know p about the world and know that p entails that you aren't being deceived by an evil demon, then you know that you aren't being deceived by an evil demon; but you don't know that you aren't being deceived by an evil demon; so you don't know p") or the so-called "argument from ignorance" ("If you don't know you aren't being deceived by an evil demon, then you don't know p about the world; you don't know you aren't being deceived; so you don't know p about the world"). In both cases, all the action has taken place off-stage, in the defense of the claim that you don't know you aren't being deceived by an evil demon -- and in particular in motivating the requirement that you can't appeal to your knowledge about the world at this juncture.

that possibility out-of-hand in inquiry and epistemic evaluation – so long, that is, as one doesn't lack all information about the issue and there is nothing in the possibility's favor and no reason to suspect that it obtains. Consider, for instance, the suggestion that children of brunets suffer from severe and pervasive perceptual and cognitive deficits compensated for by confabulation and perceptual infilling. If, like me, you are the child of a brunet, you will nonetheless quite properly reject this possibility out of hand: it clearly does not obtain, given what we know about hair color, genetics, and brain functioning. But in thus dismissing this hypothesis, you will rely on considerations about which you would be unreliable if the possibility obtained.

The same goes for the familiar skeptical hypotheses. Standing where Moore stands, with both feet in our ordinary, prephilosophical position, we will take there to be no reason to suspect that we are dreaming right now or being deceived by an evil demon, and so, given everything else we know, these possibilities are quite appropriately dismissed out of hand in a way that relies on our background knowledge of the world.

Stroud sometimes suggests that such replies are rendered objectionably dogmatic simply by the fact that the skeptic puts forward the skeptical possibilities as a *criticism* of our ordinary claims to know (1984, 121). He offers the example of a detective's assistant who claims to know, on the basis of a list of people given to him by a murdered duke's social secretary, that only the butler could have done it. When the master detective points out that the social secretary could have been an accomplice and so the list cannot be trusted, the assistant cannot acceptably reply, "No, the social secretary must be trustworthy, and the list must be impeccable, since I know that the butler did it." Why, Stroud asks, should we be any more impressed by Moore's claim that he can't be dreaming, based as it is on things he takes himself to know about the world? Isn't Moore likewise simply insisting on his knowledge in the face of a well-placed objection? (1984, 108, 113)

The answer is this: the mere attempt at criticism doesn't have any such effect. If, like Moore, we are standing with both feet in our ordinary, prephilosophical position, we will find a fundamental disanalogy between the master detective's apt criticism and the familiar skeptical hypotheses: there is reason for suspicion that the secretary's list was not accurate, but there is no reason to suspect that I am dreaming right now or being

deceived by an evil demon. As we have seen, this difference licenses dismissing the skeptical hypotheses by making use of knowledge claims that would indeed become suspect if the skeptical hypotheses had some reason in their favor.

Of course, one would run into trouble in vindicating the claim to know that these possibilities don't obtain – and one will feel a consequent need to develop an epistemological theory to vindicate our claims to knowledge of the external world – if something has *already* been done to preclude one from making use of other things one knows about the world. That is why something like Stroud's question of general assessment is so important. It secures the needed limitation, and thus provides the background framework that is needed if the skeptical inquiry is to reach a negative conclusion, but it also appears to do so in a way that arises out of our ordinary, prephilosophical starting point. Until Stroud's objection is faced, then, no response like Moore's can be intellectually satisfying.

5. *An Answer Without Epistemological Theory*

Stroud suggests that Moore simply didn't get it. "Moore gives the impression of having no idea what the skeptical philosopher really wants to say or do," (1984, 124). Clarke is even more blunt, suggesting that Moore writes as if he had had a "philosophical lobotomy" (Clarke 1972, 757). But why should Moore be seen as offering an inadequate response within an inquiry already successfully underway? Perhaps Moore recognized what the skeptical philosopher was trying to do, but had some good reason, available from within his starting position, for rejecting the inquiry – and the limitations it imposes – altogether.

To begin, it should be acknowledged that Moore himself sometimes felt the allure of the position that results from the aspiration to critically assess all of one's knowledge of the world at once. In the final sentences of "Four Forms of Skepticism," he 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 [Russell's] four [skeptical] assumptions is true, let alone all four ... Nay more: I do not think it is *rational* to be as certain of any one of these four propositions, 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?
(222).

Until this point in the paper, Moore had been speaking from his pre-philosophical starting position, firmly rooted within his ordinary commitments. However, his final question is not posed from that position. For in that position the question is readily answerable. Moore can say all sorts of compelling things in favor of the claim that he knows this is a pencil, beginning with the fact that he can see it, whereas from within the ordinary, prephilosophical position there is nothing to be said in favor of the conjunction of Russell's four premises. Puzzlement such as Moore's only arises here when one thinks that one needs to decide the question of rationality in a way that does not make use of all of one's ordinary commitments -- that is, when one attempts to appraise the relative rationality of believing these various propositions after taking up the standpoint Stroud highlights. Here, then, Moore is not only alive to the pressures arising from Stroud's project; he is their victim.

Elsewhere, however, he explicitly resists temptation, even while recognizing full well the nature of that project. In "Proof of an External World," he writes (in a passage already highlighted) that what the skeptically-inclined philosophers "really want is not merely a proof of these two propositions ("Here's a hand and here's another"), but something like a general statement as to how *any* propositions of this sort may be proved." He continues,

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" (169, italics in original).

A "general statement as to how *any* propositions of this sort may be proved" would amount to an account that would satisfy the constraints set by Stroud's question of general critical assessment. It would explain how we could, in principle, start from some evidential base that does not include any propositions about the world around us and, without presupposing or depending upon any propositions about the world around us, proceed in a rationally acceptable way to conclusions about external things, thereby gaining knowledge of external things for the first time. Moore thus shows he is perfectly

aware of what the skeptical epistemologist wants to do and what it would take to satisfy the demands imposed by that inquiry. But he rejects in one sentence this project that has motivated legions of epistemologists since Descartes. He says, “It can’t be done,” and proceeds as if the fact that it can’t be done *has no negative implications regarding our knowledge of the world around us*. He thus insinuates that his knowing things about the world doesn’t require him to be able to do any such thing or even that it be possible.

Moore evidently thinks that in admitting that such an account isn’t possible, he has not capitulated to the skeptic. He also thinks that this attitude is not objectionably dogmatic. But what could Moore say, given his overall position, in its defense?

To approach this question, consider what happens when someone clearheadedly standing in Moore’s position considers Stroud’s question of general assessment and the project it inspires.

First, let’s get our ordinary, prephilosophical position clearly in mind. Operating within this position, Moore is committed to a great many claims to know things about the world. In many of these cases he can vindicate these claims in accordance with (to speak from within that position) the proper principles and procedures of epistemic assessment. For instance, if he asks, “Do I really know that there is a pencil here in front of me? How do I know?”, he can answer, “Yes, I do know there is a pencil in front of me. I see a pencil here now, I remember putting it here a while ago, and I haven’t moved it since.” If he asks himself how he knows it isn’t a papier-mache facsimile that someone slipped in while he wasn’t looking, he can quite rightly point out that there is no reason in favor of any such suggestion, and he can even test the pencil by trying to write with it. If he then asks whether he really knows that he isn’t dreaming or being deceived by an evil demon, he can likewise dismiss these suggestions in the ways I’ve already discussed. So, to speak from within the ordinary position, he has a great deal of evidence bearing on his various particular beliefs about the world, and he can use it well to vindicate many of his various claims to know particular things.

Now here, in rough outline, is the line of thought Stroud suggests. We begin by asking, in a mode of critical reassessment, whether we really know anything that we take ourselves to know about the world. We take that question to preclude us from making use of, presupposing, or otherwise relying upon things that we take ourselves to know

about the world, and so we demand a general account of how one could acceptably get from some sort of more restricted evidential base to knowledge of the external world. In considering what that evidential base could be, we see that it must be whatever the senses give us, described in a way that is not yet committal regarding anything about the external world. We then recognize that to have knowledge of the world on this basis we would have to be in a position to eliminate certain possibilities, such as that we are dreaming or deceived by an evil demon. But we find that this restricted evidential basis isn't sufficient – given our inability to rely on background knowledge of the world – to give us a good reason to think that these possibilities don't obtain. So, we close the inquiry by concluding that we can't really know anything about the world around us.

Imagine now that you are Moore, standing in the position of ordinary epistemic life and contemplating this line of thought.

To begin, suppose that someone says, "Limit your evidential base to include only the deliverances of the senses, described in a way that is not yet committal regarding anything about the world," and then proposes to follow out Stroud's reasoning from that point. Notice how odd it would be to close the inquiry by concluding that we don't know anything about the world! What we find is that if one utilizes only that restricted evidential base, then one can't vindicate any particular claims to know things about the world. But if one is standing in Moore's starting position, one won't yet conclude that one doesn't know anything about the world. One will just conclude that if one chooses to restrict one's evidential base in that way, then one can't tell whether one knows anything about the world. One has simply chosen to prescind from the materials one needs in order to decide the question.

Note, moreover, that this restriction in the evidential base appears *arbitrary* relative to the principles and procedures of epistemic assessment that are in play in our ordinary position. When one vindicates the claim to know that there is a pencil here, it is appropriate to make use of other things one knows about the world. For this reason, a project like Stroud's appears to deprive Moore of epistemically appropriate resources in a way that is arbitrary relative to the relevant principles and procedures. The situation looks rather like a courtroom trial in which the evidence is limited – say, for reasons of political expedience – in ways that are arbitrary in relation to the question of guilt.

Of course, Stroud doesn't think the limitation is epistemically arbitrary: it is generated, he would tell us, by the initiating question of general assessment, "What, if anything, do I really know about the world around me?" And indeed, if this restriction in the evidential base is just a straightforward application of principles and procedures of epistemic assessment that are present in the prephilosophical position, then far from being arbitrary, it is imposed by epistemic principles and procedures to which Moore is already committed.

Notice, however, how critical epistemic reassessment actually functions in ordinary life. If I ask, "What if anything do I really know about the assassination of John F. Kennedy?", there is a great deal that I can't take for granted in answering the question. But not *everything* that I take myself to know about the assassination is thereby placed out of play.¹³ I can, for instance, continue to make use of the facts, which I surely know, that John F. Kennedy was President of the United States. And I can continue to make use of my knowledge – which clearly concerns the Kennedy assassination – that certain things, such as certain autopsy reports, video recordings, and the like, *are* relevant evidence in relation to some of the questions that might be asked about how Kennedy died and who was responsible. Notice, moreover, that if I ask myself "Do I really know that Kennedy was President of the United States?", no task of showing how I could reach this conclusion from a restricted basis is imposed at all. No further inquiry is needed. The correct answer is, "Obviously, I do." The difference here concerns the epistemic reasons that bear on the case. When there is no reason whatsoever to suspect error, then the appropriate form of response to the question "Do I really know?" may be different from when there is some reason to suspect error. Given that one has all sorts of information that bears on the issue, restrictions are imposed in the evidential base only in the latter case. Of course, such questions can sometimes be a useful way of jogging one's thinking; I might ask, "Do I really know that Kennedy was President?" and realize that I have some *prima facie* reason to suspect that I might be wrong about this matter. But if I find not even a *prima facie* reason to suspect that I am wrong, I can quite properly respond simply, "Of course I know Kennedy was President." This is not an

¹³ I am grateful to Mark Kaplan for pressing this point in conversation many years ago.

epistemologically arbitrary matter of practical expedience or the like. It is a matter of what the relevant reasons support. This is about as far from objectionable dogmatism as one can get.

To speak with Moore, now, from within our ordinary position, we have no reason even to suspect that we are globally mistaken about the world around us, not even *prima facie* reason for concern. It is hence quite appropriate for us, given the operative principles and procedures of assessment, to dismiss Stroud's question of global assessment. "Of course I know all sorts of things about the external world." From Moore's standpoint in our ordinary position, the restriction in evidential base imposed by Stroud's project of global assessment is indeed epistemically arbitrary; the tribunal of Cartesian reflection is thus shown up as a kangaroo court. This is why when Moore says that it is not possible to give "a general statement as to how *any* propositions of this sort may be proved," he is neither capitulating to skepticism nor engaging in an objectionably dogmatic refusal to take it seriously. Rather, the remark highlights that such a project's failure is of no consequence whatsoever.

The point here isn't particularly about Stroud. You may never have found his question very compelling in the first place. But do you have a better way to put in place the restriction that his question would impose? (I mean this as a serious question. We will return to it.)

6. *The Concerns Behind Stroud's Question*

It is time to take stock. The upshot of reflection on Moore's response to skepticism thus far appears to be this: there is – at least so far – no reasonable route to the skeptical conclusion from principles and procedures of epistemic assessment at play in the position of ordinary life. Merely trotting out the familiar skeptical hypotheses is ineffectual by itself, and the question of global assessment doesn't, as things are, impose the limitations that would be needed in order for a negative verdict to be reached. These points suggest that when we take seriously our real starting point in epistemology, we cannot find any reason to prescind quite generally from our ordinary commitments about what we know and have reason to believe about the world. Nor do we find any reason to suspect that our most basic principles and procedures of epistemic justification and

assessment are incorrect. We started out taking ourselves both to know all sorts of things concerning a world outside of our minds and also to be proceeding quite correctly in matters of epistemic assessment, and that is precisely where we end up. This isn't to deny that there might be a line of thought that does the trick. But it would need to be provided, and any proposal would need to be scrutinized in the sorts of ways we have been considering.

Suppose, however, that no such line of thought is successful. Where would that leave us? This question returns us to the complaint – noted in section 1 – that might be expressed by saying, “Within our ordinary position, external world skepticism doesn't even get started as an epistemological problem – so what? Skepticism might still be *true!*” Here we begin to approach the most fundamental lessons of Moore's response to skepticism.

This much is true: everything could seem to us just as it does in the ordinary position – and we could say everything that I have just said in Moore's defense – even though our beliefs were wildly out of touch with reality. Moore might go through his performances and quite properly claim to know all sorts of things about the world around him, and yet be radically, globally, deceived. However, this possibility does not present any epistemic threat given the principles and procedures of epistemic assessment that are operative in ordinary life. To speak from within the position of ordinary life, we can put it this way: In ordinary life we often know things about the world, even though there are – and we recognize that there are – perfectly imaginable scenarios in which things would seem just as they do and yet we would be wrong. As I write this, I know that my spouse is in the United States. (We spoke earlier, and I consequently know a great deal about what she is up to.) I recognize that even if she had left the country, everything could *seem* to me just as it does right now. But in fact there is no reason whatsoever even to suspect that something funny is going on, so I quite contentedly say ‘I know she is in the U.S.’ This sort of position is completely satisfactory in ordinary life. The mere possibility that everything could seem just as it does and yet I could be completely mistaken is epistemically inert when there is no reason in its favor.

As this point reveals, our ordinary position is fallibilist in two subtly different senses. First, we are committed to allowing that we can know things even when we lack

evidence that entails the truth of our beliefs. Second, we recognize that even when we have evidence that is incompatible with the falsity of our belief, it may still be possible that everything could seem to us just as it does and yet we might be completely mistaken. In neither case do we take the mere possibility of error to be in any way epistemically troubling when there is no reason to suspect that it obtains.

At this point one might expect an outburst. “But couldn’t our ordinary position misrepresent the relevant epistemic principles and requirements – what knowledge requires, what is an instance of knowledge, when something constitutes a good reason or good evidence, what constitutes a reason for doubt or a reason to suspect that one is in error, what kind of grounds we need in order to have knowledge or reasonable beliefs about the world, etc? Couldn’t our ordinary position be wrong in allowing that we can possess knowledge of the world even if it isn’t possible to complete the Cartesian project that Moore rejects?” Suppose we grant for the sake of argument that this is all in some sense possible. So what? We are standing within our ordinary position, in which we are committed to the truth of certain epistemic principles and to the epistemic propriety of certain procedures of epistemic assessment. Within this standpoint we deploy the principles and procedures of epistemic justification and assessment to which we are committed, and we find that this mere possibility is inert. The crucial question is whether we have any *reason* to think that our principles and procedures of epistemic assessment are leading us astray in some such way. We would have such a reason if we found them to be in fundamental conflict, for instance, or if we found that our ordinary practices of epistemic evaluation and assessment are shaped by and responsive to non-epistemic factors (such as practical expedience) in ways that we regard as epistemically objectionable. But so far no reason has emerged for any such concern. To speak again from our standpoint within our ordinary position, it is consequently correct – epistemically so – to retain our confident commitment to our prephilosophical principles and procedures of epistemic assessment.

Admittedly, the mere conversational and practical propriety of our ascriptions of knowledge, good reasons, and the like in ordinary life is perfectly compatible with their falsehood. Some philosophers have therefore suggested that this broadly Gricean

conceptual distinction should deter our easy acquiescence in the epistemic principles and procedures of our prephilosophical position. Stroud, for instance, writes,

As long as it is even intelligible to suppose that there is a logical gap between the fulfillment of the conditions for appropriately making and assessing assertions of knowledge on the one hand, and the fulfillment of the conditions for the truth of those assertions on the other, evidence from usage or from our practice will not establish a conclusion about the conditions of knowledge (1984, 64).

However, here Stroud makes two mistakes. First, he mistakenly demands entailing evidence to be required in order to “establish a conclusion”. We don’t make any such demand in our ordinary, prephilosophical position. Second, he fails to see that in our starting position we are working from *within* our commitments, giving voice to them and reasoning from them, not drawing conclusions from data about our usage. The relevant consideration isn’t that I am inclined to *say* “I know that this is a pencil,” nor even that saying this would be appropriate on occasion, but rather that (to speak from within the ordinary, prephilosophical position) *I know that this is a pencil*. The mere conceptual distinction that Stroud points to, and the mere fact that the propriety of our epistemic verdicts does not entail their truth, does not yet give us any reason to suspect that our ordinary epistemic principles, procedures, or assessments are quite generally in error. Our prephilosophical commitments can thus countenance the Gricean distinction and remain intact.¹⁴

All this might leave one with a vertiginous sense of imprisonment in our ordinary position. One might think:

¹⁴ For further discussion of this point, see my Publication A, pp XXX-XXX. What the objector needs here is some plausible argument that in the relevant cases conversational and practical factors shape the conditions of appropriate assertion in ways that we can recognize to be incompatible with the truth of our everyday epistemic verdicts. Until such an argument is offered, we have been given no reason not to continue to maintain our commitment to the truth of many of our ordinary claims to know things about the world, to have good reasons for believing them, and the like.

“For all that has been said, everything might seem just as it does to me, and yet I might be radically deceived and fundamentally in error. I want to *get outside* – to see whether my beliefs about the world are actually correct and whether the principles and procedures I am committed to really are good ones. I take it that I know things about the world, have reasonable beliefs, that certain things are or are not reasons for believing, doubting, suspecting, etc, other things – but am I right about *any* of this? That’s what I want to know.”

This line of thought itself might lead one to “pop out” of a full immersion in one’s ordinary, prephilosophical position. What fuels this transition is the fear that one might just be unavoidably, irremediably, duped.¹⁵ From this perspective the fact that we can redescribe our entire position as one of mere *seeming* will itself seem enough to justify leaving our ordinary prephilosophical position. If we then find that because of the resulting limitation on the materials with which we may work, we can see no way to show that how things seem is how they really are, this will consequently strike us as disaster. It might well seem reasonable to conclude that one cannot have knowledge or reasonable belief about the relevant matters.

One might charge this line of thought with various errors. For instance, it arguably commits a “level-confusion” (Alston, 1980) concerning the requirements on having knowledge or reasonable belief about the world *vis a vis* the requirements on knowing or reasonably believing that one knows or has reasonable belief about the world,

¹⁵ This is distinct from a yearning for absolute certainty in the form of infallible grounds for one’s beliefs about the world (though such a yearning might be an expression of this fear). For what is sought here is not necessarily evidence entailing the truth of one’s beliefs, let alone entailing evidence about which one could not possibly be in error. After all, one could accept that non-entailing grounds about which one could be mistaken can indeed yield knowledge or reasonable belief, and yet one might still feel that there is a question to be asked here about one’s entire system of beliefs and epistemic principles and practices regarding the external world: Does that entire system give us what we want?

since it treats one's inability to show from a certain standpoint that one has knowledge as entailing that one lacks knowledge. Likewise, one might note – if one is standing within our ordinary position – that it is a distortion to use epistemic terms to describe both what one is after in this line of thought and what the negative result is. To speak from within the ordinary position, the right thing to say – right not just in pragmatic terms, but in relation to the relevant epistemic reasons – is that *we do know that we are not being duped*. The line of thought asks, “But am I right about any of this? That’s what I want to know.” And from within the ordinary position the answer is, “I am correct about a great deal of this, and I know that.” I can move from established truth to established truth to vindicate my knowledge claims, and I can do so in ways that satisfy all of the relevant requirements concerning epistemic reasons. If the question is whether my beliefs about the world are formed in a truth-conducive way, that question can be readily answered as well, in the affirmative. And I quite properly take myself to know the truth of that answer – properly not just in pragmatic or conversational terms, but in terms of the epistemic reasons relevant to the case. From this perspective, then, the conclusion of the line of thought is just wrong.

Still, from the viewpoint expressed in the line of thought these responses are apt to look like mere quibbles. They do not address either the worry or the aspiration that gets the whole thing going. But that gap reveals precisely what we are dealing with when Stroud’s question to Moore is pressed this far in spite of all that’s already been said. It is not really an *epistemic* matter at all, for starting within the ordinary, prephilosophical position there is no way to get the worry going in terms that are epistemically acceptable. What we are facing here is really something more like an existential concern relating to our various vulnerabilities as fallible and limited creatures. It *is* always possible to redescribe our position simply in terms of how things subjectively seem, and once having done that we can never show how from the remaining limited resources it could be established that things are as they seem. The mistake is to think that this result has any significance for the epistemic status of our beliefs about the world, for we have no reason whatsoever to think that it does. The task here is thus not one of philosophical theorizing, but of reconciliation to our situation. As Stanley Cavell puts it,

[The] experience I have called ‘seeing ourselves from outside the world as a whole,’ while looking in at it ... is an expression of ... wanting to know the world as we imagine God knows it. And that will be as easy to rid us of as it is to rid us of the prideful craving to be God – I mean to *rid* us of it, not to replace it with despair at our finitude” (1999, 236-7).

Moore is neither blind to the skeptical philosopher’s ambitions nor suffering from a philosophical lobotomy. Rather, he shows us how to be at home with ourselves.¹⁶

7. *Resurrecting Skepticism: Attempt 1 – A Powerful New Skeptical Argument?*

I now want to examine two significant lines of thought aimed at resurrecting the skeptical worry (one in this section, one in the next). As we will see, in the end both simply insist upon – and do not motivate – the limitation that Stroud’s question would impose.

According to Crispin Wright (1985, 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c), Moore’s “Proof” fails for reasons that point to a powerful argument for skepticism. On Wright’s reading, Moore’s proof, while appearing to begin from claims about the existence of hands, in fact must depend on a suppressed premise about Moore’s current subjective informational state:

(e) My current state of awareness seems in all respects like being aware of a hand held up in front of my face (2004a, 26).

From this, according to Wright, Moore derives:

(P) Here is a hand.

And from that:

(I) There is a material world.

This argument fails, Wright charges, because

the status of Moore’s experience as a warrant for his original premise, ‘Here is a hand,’ is not unconditional but depends upon needed ancillary

¹⁶ As I have already stressed, this is only one aspect of his work. He also engages in certain forms of theory-building. There is thus no suggestion here that philosophy is “just therapy.”

information and ...paramount among the hypotheses that need to be in place in order for the putative warrant for the premise – Moore’s state of consciousness – to have the evidential force that Moore assumes is the hypothesis that there is indeed a material world whose characteristics are mostly, at least in the large, disclosed in what we take to be routine sense experience” (2004a 26).

That is, the transition from (e) to (P) is only acceptable – only yields “warrant” for believing (P) – if one *already* has the information that (I), that is, both believes (I) and has some independent “warrant” for doing so. Wright thus charges that this argument is an example of failure of “warrant transmission”: one cannot *get* “warrant” to believe (I) for the first time through a course of reasoning from (e) to (P) and then on to (I), because “(P) is warranted only if Moore is independently entitled to [the inference’s] conclusion” (2004a, 26).

Wright urges that this objection points towards an argument for external world skepticism. In brief: One needs “warrant” to believe (I) in order to make the transition – which, it is claimed, must be made if we are to have any knowledge or reasonable beliefs about the world – from subjective information such as (e) to beliefs about the world such as (P); but the only way to have “warrant” to believe (I) would be through an inference from premises such as (P) – which can’t in fact provide such “warrant” after all, for the reason just discussed.¹⁷

This skeptical argument requires two key ideas. The first is that any particular piece of knowledge or reasonable belief about the external world must be based on subjective information of the sort typified by (e). The second is that in order to gain any knowledge or reasonable belief about the external world on the basis of this sort of subjective informational state, some background information about the existence of material things (and that one is not merely dreaming or deceived by an evil demon, etc.) must already be in play. Wright puts these claims as follows:

1. That there is no way of justifying particular beliefs about the material world save on the basis of the (inconclusive) evidence provided by our states of

¹⁷ See, for instance, Wright 2004a, 26-7.

consciousness [described in a way that is noncommittal about the external world] (2004a, 27).

2. Such evidence for any particular proposition about the material world depends for its force on collateral information that the material world so much as exists – it would not be warranted to treat how things seem to us as evidence for claims about our immediate physical environment if we were antecedently agnostic about the existence of a material world (2004a, 27).

But are these two claims among the commitments of the position within and from which Moore is working?

Wright's second claim surely captures something in our pretheoretical position. If one is going to consciously move in an acceptable way from sensory experience – described in the manner in which Wright describes it – to 'here is a hand,' one does at least need to assume that there is an external world, that one is not merely engaged in a life-long dream, and the like. It would be epistemically objectionable in ordinary life for a mature adult to reason explicitly from her sensory experience, described in subjective terms, to a conclusion about the world while consciously and explicitly remaining *entirely noncommittal* about whether she is at that moment dreaming or being deceived by an evil demon and whether there are external things. Just consider what you would think if someone said, in an ordinary context, "I am having an experience precisely as if there is a hand before me. I don't have a view about whether I am being deceived by an evil demon or even whether there are external things, so I don't have any view about whether such experiences are positively correlated with particular circumstances in an external world. Now, since I am having an experience precisely as if there is a hand before me, there is a hand before me." That would be no better than someone saying, "My lawn is riddled with hillocks and collapsed tunnels. I don't have a view about whether these things are a sign of moles. Still, I conclude that my lawn has moles."

Elsewhere I have attempted to provide an account of *why* these sorts of moves would be objectionable; the fundamental problem, I have urged, centers on requirements pertaining to responsible reasoning and deliberation on the part of a mature adult (Leite, 2011b). Wright himself offers a rather different account which depends upon ideas of "information-dependent warrant" and "warrant transmission". But however one wants to

explain the basis of the verdict, the fundamental point – the verdict of our ordinary commitments and procedures of epistemic assessment – stands. In this regard, Wright is making use of the very materials that Moore wants us to be working from and within.

However, the first key claim underlying Wright’s skeptical argument is not at all part of our ordinary commitments. That claim, recall, is that any particular piece of knowledge or reasonable belief about the external world must be based on one’s subjective conscious states, described in a way that is noncommittal about the world. In ordinary life, however, we do not require people to derive their beliefs about the world from an evidential basis that includes no information about the world. Still, we hold that people do know things about the world. For instance, I can perfectly satisfactorily justify a particular belief about the world around me by appealing to other things I know about the world around me. I am not required to make use only of information about my subjective states of consciousness described in a way that is noncommittal about the external world. I can even perfectly satisfactorily justify a perceptual belief that there is a pencil before me by noting that I see it. Here I presuppose a host of knowledge about the world and do not merely make use of “evidence provided by [my] states of consciousness”.

Wright, however, imports a distinctive (and familiar) philosophical conception of what is going on in such cases. He supposes that the epistemic acceptability of all of our beliefs about the world depends upon the propriety of an imagined transition from an informational state which does not yet involve any knowledge of the world. His skeptical argument, and his objection to Moore, thus presuppose precisely what is most in need of motivation. That is, Wright simply presumes, rather than motivates, a conception – not manifest in our ordinary, prephilosophical position – according to which our possession of knowledge or reasonable belief about the world is held hostage to our ability to show how such a transition could acceptably be made. Moore is not yet operating with that conception, and Wright has given him no reason to shift to it.

For the same reason, a further objection of Wright’s also lapses. Regarding his claim about the justificatory basis for our beliefs about the world, Wright comments, the thought is so far unchallenged that it is on information so conceived that the ultimate justification for our perceptual beliefs must rest. ... [O]ne

kind of material world scepticism certainly so conceives the justificational architecture of perceptual claims. So Moore is begging the question against that adversary at least” (2004a, 27).

This charge misunderstands the dialectical situation. As I have urged, Moore is not attempting to adjudicate the merits of various theories of “the justificational architecture of perceptual claims” from a position external to our ordinary commitments; he is standing in our ordinary, prephilosophical position and asking what reason, if any, he can find to change his view. If Wright’s skeptic’s theory of “the justificational architecture of perceptual claims” turns out to be in tension with our ordinary commitment to the truth of a great many claims to knowledge or reasonable belief because there is no plausible way to do what that theory demands – which is precisely what Moore takes to be the case (“I do not believe that ... [it] is possible” (“Proof,” 169) – then so much the worse for that theory, particularly if no considerations whatsoever have been offered to support it or the demands it would impose. To charge this response with objectionably begging the question is already to have taken a step outside our ordinary, prephilosophical position, without giving any reason for doing so. The response is no more objectionable than it would be to point out something I know about English history in order to rebut the suggestion that being an American, I could not possibly know any such thing.

This reply to Wright’s skeptic has the form of Moore’s characteristic response to skeptical arguments. Standing in our ordinary, prephilosophical position, we take it that we do know and reasonably believe all kinds of things about the world. So *one* of Wright’s skeptic’s premises should be denied. Which one? We concede (to put it roughly) that one could not acceptably move in conscious reasoning from one’s perceptual experience as of a hand to the conclusion “So, there is a hand here”, unless one already had beliefs – perhaps even beliefs that are in good epistemic shape – to the effect that there is a material world, one is not dreaming or being deceived by an evil demon, etc. We likewise concede that our knowledge of these latter matters depends in part upon things that we know about the world. That is certainly Moore’s view, since (as noted earlier) he thought that he had no better reason in favor of the existence of external things than the one provided by the consideration that here is one hand and here is

another.¹⁸ What has not yet been conceded to the skeptic is the crucial thought that our beliefs about the world could not be in good epistemic shape unless we could acceptably arrive at them by reasoning from a limited evidential base of sensory experiences described in a way that involves no commitments about the world.¹⁹ Wright gives us no reason to accept that further thought. Moreover, if we, like Moore, are working from within the everyday, prephilosophical position, we will see good reason to reject it. For in that position we do not require people to derive or justify their beliefs about the world in that way. Still, we hold that people do know things about the world. Since we have conceded Wright's skeptic's other premises while denying the skeptical conclusion, we consequently deny this crucial thought. We thus reject this skeptical argument.

It might be argued in response that Wright's skeptical argument is closer to our ordinary, prephilosophical commitments than I have made out. Plausibly, the core of the argument is really just the idea that for our beliefs about the world to be in good epistemic shape, we need a prior and independent warrant – one not dependent upon the rest of our knowledge of the world – for believing such things as that there is an external world and that we are not being deceived by an evil demon. And it might be maintained that Wright shows that this idea *does* arise from our ordinary, prephilosophical position, because it arises out of “common sense judgments about what constitutes cogent reasoning” (Lawlor 2015, 242). As Krista Lawlor puts it:

Wright takes pains to show that ordinary patterns of reasoning are at work in the skeptical argument. He ... begins with a homely case: you see a

¹⁸ See the references in footnote 8.

¹⁹ That this is the crucial thought can be seen in the following way. Grant Wright's skeptic that if you *were* in a situation in which your evidential basis regarding the world around you was limited to the sort of information in (e), you would need to attain an epistemically acceptable belief in (I) before you could move to beliefs such as (P) – and grant that you never could meet that requirement. No negative conclusion follows right off regarding the epistemic standing of our beliefs about the world. To reach a negative conclusion, you need to accept a further thought: *that our beliefs about the world could not be in good epistemic shape unless we could acceptably arrive at them through some such reasoning from some such limited evidential base.*

soccer ball kicked into the net. A goal! Do you thereby know a soccer game is being played? No—that’s something you needed warrant for believing before your seeing the ball go into the net can count as evidence that a goal has been scored (as opposed, say, to a re-enactment of a famous goal having been executed) (2015, 241).

Given this point, Wright invites us to compare the following two lines of reasoning:

<u>SOCCER</u>	<u>EXTERNAL WORLD</u>
I. A ball has been kicked between the white posts.	I. My experience is in all respects as of a hand before me.
II. So, a goal has been scored.	II. So, there is a hand before me.
III. So, a game of soccer is being played.	III. So, there is a material world.

In both cases, Wright urges, the propriety of the move from (I) to (II) depends upon your already possessing the information that (III). You consequently can’t arrive for the first time at an epistemically acceptable belief in (III) via this line of reasoning. This much I have granted to Wright. But the charge is that this much already suffices to show that in order for any of our beliefs about the world to be in good epistemic shape, we must possess an independent warrant for believing that there is an external world and that we are not being globally deceived. The key requirement of the skeptic’s argument thus might be thought to arise out of perfectly ordinary considerations about acceptable reasoning.

In fact, however, these considerations don’t show any such thing. What they show, at most, is that *if* one had to reach conclusions about the external world from an evidential base limited to how things seem in one’s sensory experience, *then* one would need to have an independent warrant for believing that one is not dreaming or being deceived by an evil demon, that there is an external world, and the like. It does not follow from this that our beliefs about the world cannot be in good epistemic shape unless we have an independent warrant for believing these things. That would only follow if the conditions *our* beliefs have to meet in order to be in good epistemic shape

are determined by the requirements that would apply if one had to reach conclusions about the external world from an evidential base limited only to how things seem in one's subjective conscious experience. But we have already rejected that thought; it is precisely what – working from within our ordinary, pretheoretical position – we rejected above. Wright has consequently done nothing to prevent Moore from using considerations about the world and our knowledge of it as part of a reply to the skeptical argument. From our ordinary, prephilosophical position, Wright's skeptical argument doesn't get off the ground even when we have granted his point about what constitutes cogent reasoning.²⁰

²⁰ In fact, from the ordinary, prephilosophical position it is exactly right to reject this demand for independent evidence against the skeptical hypotheses. For as I noted before, we can perfectly appropriately draw upon what we know about the world to provide good evidence that we are not dreaming or being deceived by an evil demon, and that there is an external world. Such considerations are fully sufficient grounds for rejecting the skeptical hypotheses. Independent grounds are thus not required.

This point is compatible with Wright's central observation that if you were attempting to arrive at beliefs about the world on the basis simply of how things appear to you in your "conscious subjective experience", you could not acceptably move from (I) to (II) unless you already had independent warrant for (III). It is compatible, because *that is not our situation in ordinary life*. It would be one's situation if one had reason to suspect that one is being globally deceived by an evil demon. In those circumstances, you could not acceptably infer, from considerations about the world, that you are not. Fortunately, we don't now have any reason to suspect any such thing.

To avert possible confusion, I want to be completely clear about what I think the ordinary, prephilosophical position involves here. I have not claimed that if you started out agnostic about whether there is an external world and whether you are being deceived by an evil demon, you could somehow acceptably reason your way to the conclusion that there is an external world and that you are not being deceived by an evil demon. I have not even claimed that if you lacked all background information about the world, you could somehow get knowledge that that there is a hand here, and then successfully reason your way for the first time to the claims that there is an external world and that you are not a disembodied spirit being deceived by an evil demon. What I have claimed is simply that (to speak from within the ordinary, prephilosophical position) a wide variety of considerations about the world are evidence for a wide variety of things, and this includes considerations – such as that this is a hand and that there are no evil demons – that tell decisively in favor of (indeed, entail) that there is a material world and that we are not the victims of a deceiving evil demon. Such considerations are perfectly good grounds for rejecting the skeptical hypotheses, since they entail their falsehood. That these considerations tell decisively against these hypotheses and can now be used by us in this way does not entail that you could acceptably utilize them in this way if you were in circumstances anything like those envisioned in Wright's argument.

It may help here to consider an analogy. Return again to the hypothesis, considered above, that the children of brunets suffer from pervasive cognitive and perceptual deficits, compensated for by massive confabulation and perceptual infilling. If that hypothesis is correct, then any child of a brunet would be massively unreliable. For this reason, someone who both takes herself to be the child of a brunet and has genuine reason to suspect that this hypothesis is true could not acceptably appeal to established theories in genetics, cognitive psychology, and the like in order to reason her way to the conclusion that the hypothesis is false. The same point goes for someone who starts out agnostic about the hypothesis. You can't acceptably reason as follows: "I am the child of a brunet, and I have no view at all about whether the children of brunets are subject to massive cognitive deficits impairing reasoning and perception. Now let me see: is that hypothesis true? Well, genetics, cognitive psychology, and ordinary experience all tell against it. So, I conclude that the hypothesis is false." If you had no view whatsoever about the truth of the hypothesis, and so no view about your own reliability about such matters, what were you doing starting with your premises and moving from there to your conclusion? If (as I have granted) Wright's I-II-III arguments are bad, then so is this one.

Still – and this is the crucial point – we *do* know that the children of brunets hypothesis is false. If you are unsure whether this is so, just imagine going into a cognitive psychology class and telling the students that it is not known whether the children of brunets hypothesis is false, that it is an open question whether it is true and that for all we know, it might be. No one would take you seriously, and quite rightly so. From the perspective of the ordinary, prephilosophical position, the falsity of this hypothesis is certainly something that we know. After all, there is all sorts of evidence against it. A wide variety of considerations in genetics, cognitive psychology, and ordinary experience decisively show it to be false: the hair color of one's parents has nothing to do with one's cognitive abilities. However, as we just saw, this evidence can't acceptably be deployed in reasoning to enable you to move for the first time from a position of conscious agnosticism, reasonable doubt, or lack of information on the matter to reasonable belief that the hypothesis is false. So it is part of our ordinary, prephilosophical position that one can have decisive evidence against a hypothesis even if one couldn't acceptably utilize that evidence to reason one's way to the falsehood of the hypothesis in conditions of initial agnosticism, lack of background information, or reasonable suspicion that the hypothesis is true. One may vindicate a claim to know something, such as the falsity of the skeptical hypotheses, by citing evidence which decisively supports what one claims to know – even though one could not arrive at that knowledge for the first time through an inference from that evidence in conditions in which one is antecedently agnostic or in doubt.

To put the crucial point another way: Wright supposes that if I now have and can cite good evidence for P, then if I were agnostic or in doubt about whether P, I should be able to acceptably move from that evidence to the conclusion that P, thereby arriving at an epistemically acceptable belief that P. This assumption shapes his entire discussion, showing up in remarks such as this:

In doubting a type III proposition, one would not be setting oneself against any overwhelming body of evidence. We don't have any evidence for them, for it is a peculiarity of their situation that they are beyond

A question might be raised here about epistemological theory. What is the right epistemological account of our knowledge of the world, given what we have just said regarding the demands imposed by Wright's skeptical argument? This is a perfectly reasonable question, but it is a task for the downstream project that Moore calls "analysis". That project is not at issue here, since the aim right now is to explore the anti-skeptical resources of our ordinary, prephilosophical position. What we are seeing are just some of the data to which such a project would aim to be true.

8. *Resurrecting Skepticism: Attempt 2 – The Evidence of the Senses*

It might be wondered: Is there really no reasonable route to Wright's limited conception of evidence? A familiar tactic here focuses on what is given to us by sensory experience. To put it crudely: if what our sensory experience gives us at a moment is merely information appropriately characterized in a way that is neutral as to how the world is (as in, "it perceptually seems to me that thus & such"), then isn't our epistemic situation precisely that of starting from a limited basis that includes no knowledge of the world? And then, if we are to vindicate our claims to know things about the world around us, wouldn't we have to provide the sort of general account that Moore grants can't be provided?

The moves being made here are deeply familiar. But in fact they can be seen to be quite mistaken if we start out in our ordinary position and ask whether and how we might come to be moved away from it. Things only look otherwise if one has already imposed

supportive evidence too. As the skeptical argument shows, if confidence in them were once suspended, no evidence could make it rational to reinstate them again" (2004a, 41).

Here Wright argues from the fact that one could not rationally argue from *e* to *P* in circumstances of agnosticism or doubt to the conclusion that one *now* lacks evidence for *P*. The above considerations show that this is incorrect. It can be true *both* that one has overwhelming, decisive evidence in favor of *P*, and *also* that if one lost or never had confidence about *P* one could not rationally attain such confidence by appealing to that evidence.

In sum: Wright has done nothing to show that the many things we know about the world do not constitute excellent evidence that there is a material world, that we are not being deceived by an evil demon, etc.

a philosophical conception involving the very limitations that we are asking how to motivate.

To begin, one must again have the ordinary, prephilosophical position clearly in mind. In the ordinary position, we take ourselves to know all sorts of things about the world, things which constitute background information that can be brought into play in particular cases. Consider Moore's claim to know that there is a pencil there before him. As I noted earlier, he has a great deal of background information upon which he could draw, if necessary, to vindicate this claim. First off, he can point out that he sees the pencil – thereby bringing to bear all sorts of further background knowledge about the conditions in which his vision is reliable and the like. He also knows, let us say, that he put it there a little while ago, that he hasn't moved it, that no one has been near enough to surreptitiously replace it with a papier-mache facsimile (nor would any one have any reason to do so), and that if necessary he can pick it up, write with it, etc.

Keeping this aspect of the ordinary position clearly in mind, suppose that a theorist of the epistemology of perception now declares that all that Moore's visual experience gives him right now, epistemologically speaking, is a certain kind of visual appearance, as of a pencil there before him: visual experience doesn't, all by itself, suffice to *inform him* that there is a pencil there. Notice that from within our ordinary position this declaration does nothing whatsoever to remove his background knowledge of the world. That knowledge is still available to be called upon. No limitation is imposed of the sort that Wright's skeptical argument requires.

This point generalizes. Suppose that *in each case*, taken one by one, perception gives Moore no more than it does in the case of the pencil. Then each case looks like that of the pencil. Nothing has yet been done to lead us to think that we lack or are precluded from making use of the background knowledge of the world that we so confidently asserted a moment before. For this reason, it clearly doesn't follow from the proposed theory of perception that in each case we have none of that background knowledge after all, or that our evidence at each moment does not in fact include all sorts of information about the world. Nothing has yet been done to lead us to think that we lack or are precluded from making use of this knowledge that we so confidently asserted a moment

before. We consequently remain free to use that knowledge, as Moore did, to respond to the skeptical argument.

What this brings out is that the proposed view of sensory experience does not by itself impose the crucial restriction that is needed in order to get skepticism going, because no particular view of "the justificational architecture" of our knowledge of the world - foundationalist or otherwise - necessarily follows in its wake. A further step is needed to move us to a conception on which our evidence in each case is ultimately limited to sensory appearances described in a way that is not yet committal about the world or on which all of our knowledge of the world must be grounded, as such, on a body of sensory evidence again described in a way that is not yet committal about the world.

Precisely because it allows us to have all sorts of information about the world amongst our evidence, our ordinary position is thus not fully determinate concerning the correct characterization of the epistemic status of what is given to us in our sensory experience. Admittedly, I often know things by seeing what is going on around me. But that is merely a truism. It is compatible with a philosophical theory of knowledge on which my sensory experience alone, without the presence of any background knowledge of the world, can directly inform me about the world. But for the reason we have just been discussing, it doesn't require such a theory.

It is important not to read any of these points as insinuating an alternative theory of the epistemology of perceptual knowledge. The point is *not* that it is part of our ordinary position to hold, for instance, that our perceptual knowledge of the world is always grounded in or based on (1) some sensory information that is not yet knowledge of the world, along with (2) some background knowledge of the world. Rather, the point is that our ordinary, prephilosophical position doesn't involve commitment to any particular theory of "what perceptual knowledge consists in" or of the "underlying justificatory structure" of our perceptual knowledge of the world. In allowing background knowledge of the world to figure amongst our evidence, however, it blocks the path to skepticism.

I've been arguing that some philosophical shaping or framing – some shift away from our ordinary position – must already have taken place if one takes the familiar claim

about sensory experience to pave the way for external world skepticism. The crucial question here is this: What, given Moore's starting point, might reasonably motivate framing things in that way? That is, from within our ordinary, prephilosophical position, what – if anything – might be used to motivate excluding all of our background knowledge of the world from the resources available for a response to the skeptical argumentation?

Here are a few proposals one might try. I will only briefly scrutinize them. They do not impose any burdens that cannot be met from Moore's position.

First, we return to a proposal to which Moore himself responded ("I believe it can't be done.") The requisite exclusion of our background knowledge of the world would indeed be imposed if one also held that in order for us to know or have reason to believe anything about the world, it must be possible for an ideally rational being to start from materials that are not yet knowledge of the world and then self-consciously move from there, via epistemologically acceptable steps, to knowledge of the world. This is simply a particular version of the demand that we have been attempting, as yet without success, to motivate. It doesn't arise simply from the claim about perception, nor has it yet been shown to arise out of Moore's starting position.

A similar point applies if one places the claim about sensory experience within a picture of "our fundamental epistemological situation" as one in which we have to attain ground-level knowledge of the world *simply* from what is given to us at a moment in sensory experience (described in a way that is not committal about the world) and then build up the rest of our knowledge of the world on that basis. This picture, too, is one on which we can't be seen as possessing all of the background knowledge of the world that – to speak from within our starting position – we surely do possess at each moment. This picture is likewise part and parcel with the very picture that we were trying to see whether we could extract from materials in our starting position. Nothing has yet been done to motivate it.

Similarly, there can be a temptation to picture our "fundamental epistemological situation" as being like the situation in which a mature, fully capable adult has to attain some knowledge of the world on the basis of sensory experience, but doesn't yet know whether or not he is dreaming. But for reasons we have seen, there is no reason to regard

that as our “fundamental” situation, if we are standing within our ordinary position. Instead, it is just one difficult and unfortunate circumstance in which people can very occasionally find themselves; hardly the paradigm or structurally central case.

Finally, one can be tempted to think that these kinds of restrictions get imposed if one asks the ordinary vindicatory question, “Do I really know? How do I know?”, *serially* about each item of knowledge of the world that is offered in reply: at some point, one might think, one reaches a basic level at which the ground of one’s knowledge must not include any knowledge of the world. But as we have seen, vindicatory questions actually lapse rather quickly if one is standing in the ordinary position, and they do so for good epistemic reasons: since (as one recognizes) there is no reason whatsoever to suspect one doesn’t know, and since there are all kinds of things to be said in favor of the proposition at issue, the correct response is to dismiss the question and rest confident in one’s knowledge.

One might be tempted to reinterpret the question “How do I know?” not as a vindicatory question, but as a demand for a certain kind of theory explaining what it is in virtue of which one knows (Chisholm, 1982, section 4). But then one must think that only *a certain sort* of theory will do -- a theory that imposes the limitations in question -- and in thinking *that* one is asking for something that goes beyond the commitments of the ordinary position. One can, after all, ordinarily explain how one knows things about the world by appealing to other things one knows about the world. It might seem that it would be viciously circular to use things we take ourselves to know about the world in order to explain our knowledge of the world quite generally. (This thought might be suggested by some passages in Stroud, 2000). But if one is simply out for an *explanation*, say a scientific one, without any special vindicatory aspirations, there is nothing viciously circular here at all (Sosa, 1994; Leite, 2005). So nothing in our starting position forces us to treat any of these questions as leading to the restriction we are trying to motivate, so long as one keeps our ordinary procedures of epistemic justification and assessment in clear view.

What we are seeing is the same demand again and again in various guises. That demand doesn’t describe our ordinary position, nor has it been shown to be generated by anything within that position. We were starting from a position in which we take for

granted a great deal of knowledge of the world, and the crucial question was why, given that starting position, we should think that our possession of that knowledge depends upon how matters look when we restrict ourselves in a certain way. We haven't seen a compelling consideration in favor of that thought.

Perhaps some other line of thought could do the needed work. Any suggestions in this direction would need to be examined piecemeal. On Moore's approach, there is no final response to external world skepticism once and for all, nothing equivalent to a transcendental argument showing the impossibility, unintelligibility, or instability of the standpoint Stroud's question aims to impose.²¹ Rather, there is just the patient, ongoing work of scrutinizing the reasons and arguments that are offered. The lesson to learn from Moore is that this may well be enough.

9. *Coda: Epistemological Theory and Philosophical Satisfaction*

Suppose that this is how things turn out: We find that every skeptical argument we consider suffers from the sorts of flaws we have been discussing, and that from within the ordinary, prephilosophical position there is no good way of motivating the insistence that our response to skeptical argumentation must not make use of considerations about the world and our knowledge of it. We find no reason, from this vantage point, to think that our ordinary, prephilosophical position is leading us astray: no reason to think that the principles and procedures of ordinary epistemic assessment somehow mislead us even when we are doing it right, and no reason to think that any of the claims about the world we have appealed to are wrong. If we are standing within this position, this will look like a fully adequate basis for rejecting external world skepticism. This is a position with which we can rest content.

Of course, one might be concerned that still, this might all be mistaken: it is possible that one is just *duped*, since everything could seem just as it does and yet one could be wildly wrong. But as we have seen (section 6), our ordinary, prephilosophical

²¹ Stroud (1999) has recently attempted to establish some such claim. From Moore's point of view, this would be overkill – interesting, but unnecessary.

position swallows this possibility without a hiccup. *That* isn't a ground for serious intellectual dissatisfaction, given the position we are starting from.

As I have emphasized, Moore's response proceeds in a way that does not appeal to epistemological theory, and it does not need to do so. One might feel another source of philosophical dissatisfaction, however, on the ground that at the very least an encounter with skepticism ought to provide us with epistemological theory by way of *pay-off*. What else is the point? However, if simply by appealing to manifest truisms of ordinary life we can properly respond to the questions, motivations, and arguments that fuel external world skepticism, then we should not expect an epistemological theory as payoff. These truisms do not add up to an epistemological theory. (If they did, it would be much easier to decide amongst the various competitors!) At best they provide some of the data for epistemological theorizing and may tell against certain epistemological theories. The development of an adequate epistemological theory is thus work of an entirely different kind and comes onto the scene after skepticism has already been dispensed with.

The encounter with skepticism is philosophically important nonetheless. For one thing, we come to see the falsehood of an important philosophical position that has intrigued thinkers for many hundreds of years. That is nothing to take lightly. Moreover, seeing more clearly how our ordinary epistemic lives actually proceed enables reflective understanding. We thereby come to better "know our way about". And it is precisely this understanding that enables us to rest content despite the fear that, for all that has been said, we might just be being *duped*. For those of us who have found ourselves alive to this fear, the work Moore shows us how to do is philosophically important even if it doesn't have any immediate pay-off in epistemological theory.

Epistemologists sometimes voice another form of philosophical dissatisfaction with Moore. As Richard Feldman puts it, "Moore's remarks may not be satisfying because they fail to make clear why the skeptical argument is both appealing and wrong" (1986, p.306). Here I would ask that you speak for yourself, and not for some hypothetical interlocutor. *Is there any skeptical premise, principle, or argument that we have rejected and that you actually find appealing now?* Once you see that the Gambler's Fallacy is indeed a fallacy, there is no pressing question about why someone

might have thought otherwise; that is at best a topic of psychological curiosity. The same goes for the case at hand. Once we have found that there is no good reason in favor of a particular skeptical premise, principle, or argument, then the question of why we might have found it appealing is no longer relevant to the question of what we should believe. The crucial question is this: Is there any skeptical premise, principle, or argument that seems to you to be well-motivated *now*? If not, then we are done.

[Of course, some people think that there are. That will be taken up next in the book.]

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