

## MOORE AND WITTGENSTEIN ON THE INSULATION OF SCEPTICISM FROM EVERYDAY LIFE by ANDY HAMILTON

### ABSTRACT

This paper arises from work on Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, and my underlying concern is as much with Wittgenstein's response to Moore's Proof, as with the latter's viability. In elucidating the Proof, one must consider two opposed accounts of the relation of scepticism and everyday belief. The first, which underlies the received interpretation of Moore as a dogmatic proponent of commonsense, places sceptical and everyday practice on the same level. The second account – apparently advocated, for instance, by Stroud – insulates scepticism and everyday belief from each other. Each of these opposed positions is implausible, I will argue. Scepticism and everyday doubt and belief are not insulated from each other, but neither do they operate on the same level. The difficulty is to nuance their relationship correctly. Although Moore is not a naïve dogmatist, his way of showing how scepticism relates to everyday belief is unsatisfactory. My view, following Baldwin, is that there is interaction but non-equivalence between these practices. However, I argue that Baldwin is too uncritical of Moore, and neglects an interesting analogue, in the case of knowledge, of Moore's paradox concerning belief.

### Moorean propositions

"There exists at present a living human body, which is *my* body. This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continuously ever since, though not without undergoing changes...Ever since it was born, it has been either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth; and, at every moment since it was born, there have also existed many other things, having shape and size in three dimensions...from which it has been *at various distances*...Among the things which have, in this sense, formed part of its environment... there have, at every moment since its birth, been large numbers of other living human bodies, each of which has, like it, (a) at some time been born, (b) continued to exist from some time after birth, (c) been, at every moment of its life after birth, either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth; and many of these bodies have already died and ceased to exist. But the earth had existed also for many years before my body was born; and for many of these years, also, large numbers of human bodies had, at every moment, been alive upon it; and many of these bodies had died and ceased to exist before it was born. Finally (to come to a different class of propositions), I am a human being, and I have, at different times since my body was born, had many different experiences...e.g. I have often perceived both my own body and other things which formed part of its environment, including other human bodies...[list continues]."

Moore also claims that other people know for certain comparable truisms about themselves; and that the fact that they do is also generally known for certain: "each of *us*...has frequently *known*, with regard to *himself* or *his* body and the time at which he knew it, everything which, in writing down my list of propositions in (1), I was claiming to know about myself or *my* body and the time at which I wrote that proposition down."

### Moore's Proof

Moore develops his version of Kant's "Refutation of Idealism" which was intended to prove "the existence of things outside us". If he can prove the existence of any such objects, Moore holds, he will have proved the existence of an "External World". This he believes he can do. Moore argues that in fact he can now provide "a large number of different proofs, each of which is...perfectly rigorous", of which one is:

...holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, "Here is one hand", and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, "and here is another" ("Proof" 166).

This demonstration, Moore holds, is a "perfectly rigorous" proof of the existence of external objects; he knows the premises to be true, and they entail the conclusion:

I knew that there was one hand in the place indicated by combining a certain gesture with my first utterance of "here" and that there was another in the different place indicated by combining a certain gesture with my second utterance of "here". How absurd it would be to suggest that I did not know it, but only believed it, and that perhaps it was not the case! You might as well suggest that I do not know that I am now standing up and talking — that perhaps after all I'm not, and that it's not quite certain that I am! ("Proof" 166)

The gist of Moore's proof:

Premise Here is a hand

Conclusion There is a material world (since any hand is a material object existing in space) where the premise is asserted in a context where Moore is, as he supposes, holding his hands up in front of his face, in good light, in a state of visual and cognitive lucidity, and so on. Moore concedes that he has not given proofs of the Proof's premisses, and that if these are required, he has not given a Proof of the External World. However, he believes that no such proofs can be given: "I should need to prove for one thing, as Descartes pointed out, that I am not now dreaming". However, Moore insists that "I can know things, which I cannot prove". So, he concludes, the complaint that his Proof is ineffective because he does not know the premisses, is groundless.

### **Two poles of interpretation of the relation of scepticism and everyday life**

(1) Allegedly Moorean equivalence of sceptical and everyday practice, which places them on the same level. To treat them as on a level is to treat sceptical doubt as if it were akin to ordinary doubt; it is to endorse the received interpretation of Moore as a dogmatic proponent of commonsense.

(2) Radical dichotomy which insulates each from the other.

Each of these opposed positions – and also their resulting interpretations of Moore, whose position is more complicated than may appear – are implausible, I will argue. Scepticism and everyday doubt and belief are not insulated from each other, but neither do they operate on the same level. The difficulty is to nuance their relationship correctly. Although Moore is not a naïve dogmatist, his way of showing how scepticism relates to everyday belief is unsatisfactory.

My view, following Baldwin, is (3) there is interaction but non-equivalence between these practices. Epistemic norms and everyday judgments interact. However, Baldwin is mistaken in endorsing Moore's distinction between proving that *p*, and proving that I know that *p* – a distinction which supports insulation

### **Is Moore a dogmatist? (1) commonsense reversal of scepticism is substantive argument**

Dogmatism = dominant interpretation of Moore, interpretation (1) above – from early papers by Malcolm, Ambrose and Lazerowitz in the Schilpp volume onwards.

Baldwin: we need a formulation of the sceptical dialectic which shows the importance of Moore's "common sense" affirmations of certainty and yet avoids his dogmatic insistence that knowledge does not need to be vindicated in the face of sceptical argument.

Although Moore's Proof is highly laconic, it involves a core strategy of the reversal of the sceptical train of reasoning, as well as dogmatism. He argues, on the basis of his conviction that the sceptical conclusion must be false, that he knows the denial of the sceptical hypothesis, responding to the sceptic's *modus ponens* with the corresponding *modus tollens*:

S knows that he has two hands

If S does not know that he is not dreaming, then S does not know that he has two hands

Therefore: S knows that he is not dreaming.

The sceptic in contrast argues:

S does not know that he is not dreaming

If S does not know that he is not dreaming, then S does not know that he has two hands

Therefore: S does not know that he has two hands.

"Certainty": In the concluding section of "Certainty", one of Moore's last writings, he explicitly accepts a closure principle, but argues that the objection to which it gives rise cuts both ways – the sceptical argument from closure can be turned on its head. His conclusion is now more modest: "I agree...that if I don't know now that I'm not dreaming, it follows that I don't know that I am standing up, even if I both actually am and think that I am. But this [consideration] cuts both ways. For, if it is true, it follows that it is also true that if I do know that I am standing up, then I do know that I am not dreaming. I can therefore just as well argue: since I do know that I'm standing up, it follows that I do know that I'm not dreaming; as my opponent can argue: since you don't know that you're not dreaming, it follows that you don't know that you're standing up. The one argument is just as good as the other, unless my opponent can give better reasons for asserting that I don't know that I'm not dreaming, than I can give for asserting that I do know that I am standing up."<sup>1</sup>

[Wright on transmission]

### **Is Moore a dogmatist (2): Internal and external questions**

Stroud argues that Moore assimilates sceptical questions to everyday questions of the form "Are there any major rivers in North Africa?", and so what he says seems irrelevant to the philosophical issues: "the philosophical sceptic's denial of our knowledge [is] the outcome of an investigation into the basis of all the knowledge or certainty we think we have about the world around us. That is why...we feel it is not a 'sufficient refutation' of that scepticism simply to bring forward 'a particular case . . . in which we do know of the existence of some material object' [in Moore's words]. The philosopher's assessment of all of our knowledge of the world around us is meant to apply to *every* particular case in which we do think we know of some material object, so no case that could be brought forward would escape that scrutiny".<sup>2</sup> However, he goes on to concede the possibility that the sceptic's totalising "investigation" might not be a coherent project: "Only if there is an intelligible general question about knowledge which...Moore [cannot] answer...in the way he does will there be some deficiency in [his] remarks against philosophers" (p. 112). However, the objection to scepticism would not then be Moore's, but the reason why the project is incoherent. This of course is Wittgenstein's position.

In the terminology which Stroud develops, Moore gives an "internal" response to scepticism, which cites actual methods of establishing truths in a given area – as opposed to an "external" response which detaches itself from our body of knowledge, questioning it all simultaneously. Moore holds that what we know of external things follows trivially from our knowing many of the things we already know. He may be mistaken in this view, Stroud argues; perhaps the response to scepticism requires an "external" conception.

Moore is not a naïve, internal-standpoint dogmatist, therefore; he recognises that scepticism cannot be silenced by procedures that settle everyday disputes. But the way that Moore develops this claim is unpersuasive. He holds that **sceptical doubt is doubt about whether one knows, rather than about whether p**; that there is a distinction between proving that p and proving that one knows that p. According to Baldwin, in taking myself to prove that p, I

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<sup>1</sup> In Philosophical Papers (New York: Collier Books, 1962). (Baldwin ed. pp. 171-96); quotation Baldwin ed. pp. 190-1.

<sup>2</sup> Stroud, The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism, p. 120, 109.

take my belief to be reliable; but I do not thereby take myself to have proved that my belief is reliable. In giving his Proof, Moore wants to show that he knows that there is an external world; but he does not claim to be proving that this belief is correct – that it is a refutation of scepticism. [= **proof that I (Moore) know that p, rather than proof that p**]

Moore wants to show that his Proof is effective, that its premisses are known to be true. His appeal to our convictions is meant to show that he does know them to be true, without being able to prove this. [Wittgenstein's diagnosis is better]

To reiterate, scepticism and everyday doubt and belief are not insulated from each other, but neither do they operate on the same level. The difficulty is to nuance this relationship correctly. Baldwin is absolutely correct in holding that sceptics do not have to adopt an external viewpoint – that our epistemic practices have enough internal strains for them to work on. Talk of "internal" and "external" questions – of "stepping outside" ordinary practice – is confusing and unnecessary, and should be replaced by the notion of "critical reflection". Consider Wittgenstein's position; he is clearly not a naïve dogmatist, but nor does he recognise an external standpoint. He holds that the sceptic posits a doubt beyond ordinary doubt, and that this is an illusion: "a doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt".

### **Questioning the received interpretation of Moore**

Although Moore is not a naïve dogmatist, his way of showing how scepticism relates to everyday belief is unsatisfactory. In fact, his distinction between proving that p, and proving that I know that p, does support insulation. But this distinction is tenuous at best.

Clearly the distinction exists in the third-person; one can prove that p, without proving that X knows that p. But one cannot do so where X = oneself. [Externalism?] Moore – and Baldwin – are quite mistaken in thinking that one can believe that something is doubtful without actually doubting it. That is the insulation claim, applicable, according to some of its proponents, to Cartesian scepticism; but it is too strong. Perhaps under the influence of Moore, Baldwin overlooks a Moorean paradox about knowledge that supplements Moore's Paradox concerning belief. The result is another example of the implausible assumption that anything conceivable in the third-person is also conceivable in the first-person.

Consider:

P, but I don't know that p

Not-p, but I know that p

[He knows that p, but not-p is a different kind of paradox to the preceding]

Andy Hamilton, Dept. of Philosophy, Durham University, Durham DH1 3HP  
[a.j.hamilton@dur.ac.uk](mailto:a.j.hamilton@dur.ac.uk) [www.andyhamilton.org.uk](http://www.andyhamilton.org.uk)