Moore 1960, Proof of the External World

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Question 1: What is the "external world"? Why, according to Moore, does Kant think the expression 'outside us' is ambiguous? What, if anything, is the distinction between something being "presented in space" and its being "a thing to be met with in space"?

Kant: "scandal" to philosophy that no one (before him!) had proven the reality of the external world.

> Moore: What exactly are we asking?

"Things outside us" → "external things" → "things external to our minds" → "things to be met with in space" (129).

> E.g. My body, animals' bodies, tables, chairs, etc.

"Physical objects" is too narrow: *shadows* can "be met in space."

> If we're careful with our quantificational term, we'll say "*whatever* can be met in space"

Kant (mistakenly) assumes: "thing to be met with in space" ⇔ "thing presented in space" (129-30). Counterexamples to both directions:

Right-to-left:

– Hallucinations, seeing double, bodily pains, *afterimages*.

> White star on a black background.

– Things "to be met in space" must be *intersubjective*: must be possible that others perceived *that very thing* as well (131).

Left-to-right:

– "*x* is presented in space" ⇒ "*x* is perceived." Yet "*x* is to be met in space" only entails "*x might* be perceived" (134).

Worry: does "there are things to be met in space" entail "there are things external to my mind"?

> Moore: "Yep!" (136)

"*x* is in my mind" implies that (*x*'s existence at *t* entails that I was having an experience at *t*) (140).

> This gives the relevant sense of "external to my mind".

"*x* is external to our minds" ⇏ "*x* is to be met in space" (142).

> Counterexample: sensations of animals.

But things "to be met in space" are things that can exist without anyone having an experience; therefore "*x* is to be met in space" ⇒ "*x* is external to our minds" (143).

> "I think, therefore, that from any proposition of the form 'there is a soap-bubble!' there does really follow the proposition 'there is an external object!', 'there's an object external to all our minds!' " (143).

Question 2: What did Moore prove, if anything? What lessons from Moore's "proof" can we draw about philosophical skepticism? Drawing on 'Proof of an External World', and Moore's argument in 'A Defense of Common Sense', suggest what lessons (if any) we can draw about the relationship between philosophy and common sense.

A warm-up: Is the square of an odd integer always odd?

> $1^2 = 1$; $3^2 = 9$; $5^2 = 25$...

Proof. Let n be an odd integer. Then n is 1 more than an even integer, so $n = 1 + 2m$ for some integer m. Therefore, $n^2 = (1 + 2m)^2 = 1 + 4m + 4m^2 = 1 + 4(m + m^2)$. This is 1 more than $4(m + m^2)$, an even number, hence n^2 is odd.   □

> (Lieback 2011: 4)

Assumptions:

(P1) All and only odd integers can be obtained from adding 1 to an even integer.

(P2) All and only even integers k can be written as $k = 2m$, with $m \in \mathbb{Z}$.

(P3) $\mathbb{Z}$ is closed under exponentiation and addition.

Requirements to be a proof (144):

(1) Premises are different from conclusion.

(2) We *know* the premises to be true, rather than merely being justified in believing them.

(3) The conclusion does in fact follow from the premises.

> We couldn't cite the fact that if n is odd, then n^2 is odd; but we *could* cite equally general facts about integers.

> We could not have cited Goldbach's conjecture, despite the overwhelming inductive evidence for it (holds up to 4×10^{18}).

Preliminaries aside, a proof of the external world:

Proof. "I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By 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." (144). Therefore there exist at least two things to be met in space; hence there exist at least two things outside of our minds. Which is just to say that there is an external world. □

Does it count??

It fits our three criteria:

(1) "Here is a hand, and here is another" differs from "there are at least two hands."

(2) "Here is a hand, and here is another" was clearly known.

(3) The conclusion follows from the premises (via existential generalization).

> "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!" (145)

Are there *other* conditions necessary for a genuine proof?

"Perhaps there may be; I do not know; but I do want to emphasize that, so far as I can see, we all of us do constantly take proofs of this sort as absolutely conclusive proofs of certain conclusions – as finally settling certain questions, as to which we were previously in doubt." (145)

> Examples: the proof that the square of an odd integer is odd; the proof that there are at least three misprints on a page in a given book.

Objection: "We want *more*, Moore!"

> What, exactly, is desired?

Maybe one wants a proof of the premises? (147) But:

(i) Such a demand, applied universally, simply cannot be met for *any* proposition.

> Infinite regress.

– Apply to everything *except "self-evident" truths*? Problem: many apparently self-evident claims have turned out to be false.

> Frege's Basic Law V; parallel lines never intersect; an object can always go faster; nothing is bigger than an infinite set; etc.

(ii) Applied non-universally, the demand *can* be met. I can prove that here is a hand by citing the facts that (a) here is my arm and (b) my arm is connected to a hand.

Maybe "what they really want is not merely a proof of these two propositions, but something like a general statement as to how *any* propositions of this sort may be proved" (147).

– But this is not a fair demand. I gave no such general explanation of how we can know/prove mathematical truths in the course of my proof that the square of an odd integer is odd; and if forced to try, I would fail, so we would have to conclude that what I gave *isn't* a proof.

Conclusion:

Moore's "proof" is as proofy as any proof gets.

Lesson to be drawn: philosophical skepticism about the external world is mistaken, and obviously so; it is as mistaken as skepticism about whether the square of an odd number is odd.

BUT being obviously mistaken $\neq$ not worth discussing

– The objector may re-re-frame the worry: not a demand for a "full" explanation of our knowledge, but rather a demand for a *contrastive* explanation.

  - E.g. given the intuition that in some sense we cannot "rule out" being BIVs.
  - E.g. given the intuition that it is mysterious what numbers are, and hence how we could come to know such things about them.

– One can know all sorts of Moorean facts while still being puzzled as to *how* we know them, given worries like those above. The value of philosophical skepticism lies in its ability to stimulate the search for answers to such questions.

Finally, what lessons can we draw wrt the connection between philosophy and common sense?

– There is no privileged place to stand. Philosophical theses are often shown to be wrong on the basis of common sense. Common sense is often shown to be wrong on the basis of philosophy. Science gets thrown into the mix as yet another player.

Main point is a **parity claim**: Moore's proof is *just as good* as Lieback's. Since we accept the latter in all but the most arcane contexts, we ought to do the same for the former.

"How can we know such things, given fact *F*?"

E.g. contextualism about knowledge, or formalism in philosophy of mathematics.

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience. A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions readjustments in the interior of the field... Re-evaluation of some statements entail re-evaluation of others, because of their logical interconnections – the logical laws being in turn simply certain further statements of the system, certain elements of the field. [...] no statement is immune to revision.

– W.V.O. Quine, *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*