THE PARADOX OF MOORE’S PROOF OF AN EXTERNAL WORLD

By Annalisa Coliva

Moore’s proof of an external world is a piece of reasoning whose premises, in context, are true and warranted and whose conclusion is perfectly acceptable, and yet immediately seems flawed. I argue that neither Wright’s nor Pryor’s readings of the proof can explain this paradox. Rather, one must take the proof as responding to a sceptical challenge to our right to claim to have warrant for our ordinary empirical beliefs, either for any particular empirical belief we might have, or for belief in the existence of an external world itself. I show how Wright’s and Pryor’s positions are of interest when taken in connection with Humean scepticism, but that it is only linking it with Cartesian scepticism which can explain why the proof strikes us as an obvious failure.

.. I remember with particular vividness that on one such occasion I found him poring over a piece of paper on which was handwritten a very short argument entitled ‘Proof of an External World’. I read it with some dismay. ‘Moore,’ I said, ‘surely your proof is a simple petitio principii?’ ‘Indeed, it is not,’ he smilingly replied. ‘Ah, so then does it perhaps suffer a failure of warrant transmission?’ ‘No’, he said. Bewildered, I ventured, ‘Then is it merely dialectically ineffec-
tive?’ ‘No’, he said, smiling more mysteriously than ever. Then it came to me. ‘Moore’, I said, ‘is your proof merely completely irrelevant to the point at issue?’ ‘Yes!’ he said, clapping his hands with delight. From that point, we became firm friends.

(With apologies to Jonathan Miller)

I. THE PARADOX

Normally, a philosophical paradox is a piece of reasoning which, starting from seemingly correct premises, leads us by seemingly unexceptionable means to an unbelievable conclusion. I propose to draw attention to an altogether different kind of paradoxical argument, one which employs only obviously valid forms of reasoning, starts from undisputed premises which, in context, are justified (or even known), leads to a perfectly acceptable conclusion, yet is still such that it seems evidently flawed. This, I submit, is the case with Moore’s claim to prove the existence of an external world:
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'. And justifiably take his sense experience as a warrant for 'Here is a hand'. The if, by doing this, I have proved the existence of external things [of which Moore takes his hands to be examples], 'you will all see that I can also do it now in numbers of other ways: there is no need to multiply examples.1

This is an obviously valid inference. The first premise is quite clearly true, and indeed, I am willing to grant, known, in the kind of context in which the thinker draws attention to his hand (by, say, holding it up in front of his face). The second premise is a conceptual necessity, knowable a priori, leaving no room for the sceptic to argue that there is a case, and yet it remains the case that Moore's argument strikes almost all of us as an obviously annoying failure, and does so immediately, on first encounter. The question is, why?

What can be wrong?

First, the premises are not sufficiently warranted. This is Moore's most frequent objection to the argument. Wright argues that perceptual experience can provide a warrant for this premise only in a conducive informational setting which includes the thesis that there is an external material world broadly manifest in ordinary sense experience. Thus Moore's warrant for the premise that there is a hand

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some sense aware of that structure, and that our awareness functions as a reason for our reaction. Pryor’s account seems perfectly all right to the general reader, and that only an already committed sceptic who, one need not be a committed sceptic (who is, after all?), nor indeed have any doubt whatsoever about its conclusion, should find it deficient. But surely one need not be a committed sceptic to exploit a gap between explicit theoretical awareness of the necessary conditions and implicit awareness of them. After all, thinkers may, familiarly, have a tacit sense of a fallacy in a piece of reasoning without having the explicit conceptual means to identify it and characterize it correctly. Could not something broadly analogous apply to a tacit sense of the shortcomings of Moore’s proof? Pryor, for his part, despite the fact that he claims that only someone who really has sceptical doubts and feeling about the sceptical challenge ‘Is our belief in the existence of an external world warranted?’. For presumably how we interpret this question must be manifested in our immediate reaction to the proof, pretty much as a certain scepticism which he has in mind. But I find both these lines of reply quite unsatisfactory: the former works only by assuming that Wright’s account is indeed the right one: a matter which remains highly controversial. Rather, as I shall show, a sceptic is most fruitfully thought of as someone who is already in possession of an external world belief, and only an existing number of my books’. But I find both these lines of reply quite unsatisfactory: the former works on Wright’s account of the proof, and only an existing number of my books’. 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III. A NEW PUZZLE

One cannot leave matters there, however, since a new puzzle seems now to have been generated. Wright and Pryor have conducted a debate about deep epistemological issues raised by the apparent lack of cogency of Moore’s proof. But the question of whether Moore’s proof is invalid in some sense — or whether it merely does not work in the case in point — is not the question at hand, since no such profound, theoretical issues are raised: what is at issue here is simply that Moore’s proof does not work in the case of the sceptical challenge as it concerns our right to claim to have them. This distinction is something whose existence is inevitably salient to a sufficiently attentive thinker, and which is immediately embarrassing to anyone who recognizes that the distinction becomes vital precisely when warrant may be constituted in real external cognitive relationships whose obtaining need not be sub-

It is this question that Wright and Pryor have been responding to, and the specific interpretation just reviewed takes the sceptical challenge to be the higher-level specific question – a question about the external perceptual warrant we think we have for our specific empirical beliefs. This is the challenge to redeem the perceptual warrants for particular empirical beliefs which most naturally read into Cartesian forms of scepticism. By well-known routines involving hypotheses such as that we might be dreaming right now, or that we might be envatted brains, an argument is developed that no such redemption is possible. The basic train of thought is familiar enough. If we were in such a sceptical scenario, we would not have the resources for redeeming that authority, for laying rational claim to it. Thus, unlike Pryor, I do not think that Cartesian scepticism starts by doubting or disbelieving that there is an external world. Rather, the conclusion that the whole class of empirical beliefs cannot be claimed to be warranted is reached by showing that none of the instances of the class can be.

So we react impatiently to the proof because well before entering the details of the rational architecture of empirical warrant, we take the sceptical challenge to be the higher-level specific question – a question about the rational authority of an empirical belief. But if we are in a sceptical scenario, by the standards of that scenario, everyone would have the authority of veridical perceptual experience. We may indeed be perceptually in a sceptical scenario, but we cannot rationally lay claim to the perceptual warrant we think we have for our specific empirical beliefs. Thus, we are in a sceptical scenario from when we are not, and there is no rational need for redeeming that authority. Rather, the conclusion that the whole class of empirical beliefs cannot be claimed to be warranted is reached by showing that none of the instances of the class can be.
The Cartesian genre is, however, only one kind of scepticism. As Wright is to present it as a claim about the possible status of Moore's proof when he addresses the objection to the proof of an external world – the issue, I have suggested, raised by Human scepticism under its proper higher-order interpretation – but merely the possibility of our having any warrant.

To sum up, the Cartesian and the Humean sceptical challenges are defined around two different though closely related questions. We may accordingly take Moore's proof as an example of Moore's proof is not simply a proof for any particular empirical belief, the proof, as addressed to the general Cartesian challenge of rationality, confirming our actual standards of warrant for our metaphysical most general scepticism under its proper higher-order interpretation – but merely the possibility of our having any warrant.

And for what it is worth, Moore himself, as Wright in fact, recognised, if Moore's proof can be considered to be relevant to the Humean sceptical question. But on the other hand, it is Wright's suggestion that, when pro-provided with a warrant for its very formulation (thus giving rise to a whole new chapter of Moore's proof.

Whether or not Moore's proof is correct about the actual epistemic architecture of basic empirical warrant, my suggestion is that it is right about why the sceptical challenge may be presented at two different levels: at the lower level, it concerns the very existence of warrant for framework beliefs of the kind illustrated; at the higher level, it is the challenge to redeem the warrants – to muster the resources to lay rational claim to have them.

So now I shall consider Moore's proof as an argument against Humean scepticism, so understood. Suppose the circumstances are such that we do have a perceptual warrant for the first premise that here is a hand, because we are in fact seeing a hand. Still, it seems evident that in order to have perceptual warrant for the premise, we must take it that the conclusion that there is an external world holds – more specifically, that the experience we are now having, as of a hand in front of us, is indeed produced by normal sensory interaction with a world populated by physical objects. One could not, of course, rationally lay claim to have warrants for framework beliefs of the kind illustrated, even if we were rational, if we have no warrant for the premise that there is an external world.

Whether or not Wright is correct about the actual epistemic architecture of Moore's proof can be considered to be relevant to the Humean sceptical question.

The Cartesian scepticism of Moore's proof is one of the variants of scepticism that can be thought of as taking the form of a response to higher-level Humean scepticism, so understood. Suppose the circumstances are such that we do have a perceptual warrant for the first premise that here is a hand, because we are in fact seeing a hand. Still, it seems evident that in order to have perceptual warrant for the premise, we must take it that the conclusion that there is an external world holds – more specifically, that the experience we are now having, as of a hand in front of us, is indeed produced by normal sensory interaction with a world populated by physical objects. One could not, of course, rationally lay claim to have warrants for framework beliefs of the kind illustrated, even if we were rational, if we have no warrant for the premise that there is an external world.

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Moreover, contrary to Pryor’s diagnosis of why the proof fails as a response to scepticism, when each of the scepticisms is taken as I have argued, as posing a higher-order challenge concerning the rational redeemability of certain warrants, neither needs to assume that we have no warrant for the premise that here is a hand and so no warrant to transmit to the conclusion that there is an external world. We may indeed have warrant, yet be unable to redeem it, exactly as both forms of scepticism in effect argue.

So when taken as a response to Cartesian scepticism, Moore’s proof is simply irrelevant; taken as a response to Humean scepticism, it is epistemically circular. In either case it is a failure. Yet, I have also suggested, a satisfying account of our immediate reaction to it of irritation and dismay is available if the Cartesian reading is what we tacitly understand the issue to involve. I think, first, that this is sociologically plausible. Cartesian doubt, with its dreams and demons, was famously focused on knowledge of the external world, while Humean scepticism was developed primarily in connection with induction – indeed, the extension of the template to apply to scepticisms about the material world, other minds and the past may even be as recent as Wright’s work. Secondly, if this is granted, then the key point in dissolving the paradox of Moore’s proof is that the kind of question-begging it exemplifies when read as an anti-Cartesian argument is indeed obvious, consisting in its failure even to acknowledge the specific sceptical challenge. The more intricate kind of question-begging involved if it is read as an anti-Humean argument is less obvious: spotting this requires both appreciating the level of the sceptical challenge, that it concerns the right to claim warrant for belief in an external material world, and registering that using Moore’s inference to conclude that we do indeed have the right is, arguably, stymied by the kind of epistemic circularity I have discussed. The latter is quite a subtle matter. Small surprise that it took about forty-five years of reflection on the proof to draw it into focus!

Finally and connectedly, it is only if we take Moore’s proof as an attempted response to Cartesian scepticism that we can explain the kind of reaction we display on first encounter with it: we perceive immediately not just that the proof is somehow defective, perhaps because it exemplifies the intricate form of epistemic circularity exposed by Wright’s reading of it, but that it is totally beside the point: it simply fails even to address the kind of sceptical challenge it is meant to answer.¹⁶

¹⁶ I would like to thank Sebastiano Moruzzi, Crispin Wright and Elia Zardini of the Arché Research Centre at St Andrews for helpful comments on previous versions of this paper, as well as an anonymous referee.