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# Revisiting Moore's Anti-Skeptical Argument in "Proof of an External World"

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## Abstract

This paper argues that we should reject G. E. Moore's anti-skeptical argument as it is presented in "Proof of an External World." However, the reason I offer is different from traditional objections. A proper understanding of Moore's "proof" requires paying attention to an important distinction between two forms of skepticism. I call these *Ontological Skepticism* and *Epistemic Skepticism*. The former is skepticism about the ontological status of fundamental reality, while the latter is skepticism about our empirical knowledge. Philosophers often assume that Moore's response to "external world skepticism" deals exclusively with the former, not the latter. But this is a mistake. I shall argue that Moore's anti-skeptical argument targets an ontological form of skepticism. Thus, the conclusion is an ontological claim about fundamental reality, while the premises are epistemic claims. If this is correct, then the conclusion outstrips the scope of its premises and proves too much.

## Keywords

knowledge – epistemology – skepticism – ontology – G. E. Moore

## 1 Introduction

This paper argues that we should reject G. E. Moore's (1959b) anti-skeptical argument as it is presented in "Proof of an External World." However, the reason I offer is importantly different from those given in debates since the 1970s, which typically focus on demonstrating whether the argument counts as a rigorous

proof.<sup>1</sup> I shall argue that the conclusion of Moore's anti-skeptical argument is an ontological claim about fundamental reality, rather than an epistemic claim about what sorts of "things" can be known with certainty. So, if the argument counts as a rigorous proof, then the conclusion outstrips the scope of its epistemic premises. Thus, Moore's anti-skeptical argument proves too much. And since we have good reason to reject similar arguments where the conclusion proves too much, we should, therefore, reject Moore's anti-skeptical argument for the existence of the external world.

To correctly understand what Moore is up to in offering an anti-skeptical "proof" of the external world requires recognizing an important distinction between two forms of external world skepticism. I call these, *Radical Ontological Skepticism* (ROS) and *Epistemic Skepticism* (ES). The former claims that our ontological explanations and theories regarding the nature of ultimate reality are false, so they cannot be known. The latter is not necessarily concerned with any specific ontological issues; rather, it is skepticism regarding our general empirical knowledge itself. Philosophers often assume that what we call "external world skepticism" deals exclusively with the latter, not the former. But this assumption is false.

In Section 2, I consider Moore's anti-skeptical argument. In Section 3, the distinction between (ROS) and (ES) is introduced. In Section 4, I argue that the skeptic's challenge should be understood in terms of (ROS), not (ES). In Section 5, I show that if the target of Moore's argument is (ES), then the argument fails to address the skeptic's challenge, and therefore, it misses the intended mark of (ROS). In Section 6, I show that Moore's anti-skeptical argument does target (ROS), contrary to what many philosophers have thought. In Section 7, I argue that, since Moore's anti-skeptical argument targets (ROS), the ontological conclusion goes far beyond the scope of its epistemic premises. I offer some concluding remarks in Section 8.

## 2 Moore's Anti-skeptical Argument

Consider a standard presentation of the skeptic's challenge:

- (1) I do not know with certainty that I am not currently and constantly being deceived by a malevolent demon, or that I am not a brain in a vat, or that I am not in some other skeptical scenario.

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion, see Lycan (2001) and Conee (2001).

- (2) If I do not know with certainty that I am not in a skeptical scenario, then I cannot know with certainty anything about the external world.
- (3) Therefore, I cannot know with certainty anything about the external world.

Moore's strategy in answering the skeptic's challenge is to show that we have at least one piece of knowledge; namely, we know that a human hand now exists. Since, according to Moore (1959b), we can know that a human hand exists, we can know *ipso facto* that the external world exists. But the phrase "knowledge of the external world" is ambiguous. It might refer to our empirical knowledge of ordinary objects such as one's hands, or it might be construed metaphysically as a claim about the ontological status of reality. Given that what is supposed to be entailed *ipso facto* by one's perception of their hands is the existence of the external world (i.e., an external object) and what is meant by "knowledge of the external world" is ambiguous, we need to make clear which interpretation is in play.

It is not obvious that "knowledge of the external world" should be understood exclusively in epistemic terms, and the appeal to an *ipso facto* entailment might be illegitimate, if the facts involved in the premises are different from the fact stated in the conclusion. We cannot assume that the skeptic's challenge targets our ordinary empirical knowledge. The "thing" that is known to exist could be any number of things: a soap bubble, a distant star, a piece of paper, or a hand. If the "thing" in question is external to the mind, then, according to Moore, it follows that the "thing" exists (Moore 1995b: 144–145). Moore thinks that the primary way that different forms of skepticism differ depends on what sort of "thing" is taken to be doubtful (Moore 1959a: 196–197). So, it would be a mistake to assume that the "thing" that is taken to be doubtful in Moore's response to the skeptic's challenge is the justification of our beliefs about the external world.

However, it is crucial that the "thing" in question refers to something external to the mind. If I know the proposition "here is a hand," then presumably, the "thing" that makes this proposition true (i.e., the existence of a hand) is external to the mind and to be met within space. According to Moore (1959b), if we can provide a plausible analysis of "human hand" such that it is taken to be an object external to the mind, then it follows by an *ipso facto* entailment that there is at least one external object, and this will be true for countless other perceived external objects. If this is correct, then it suffices to show that the skeptic's challenge can be avoided. Moore states:

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 if, by doing this, I have proved *ipso facto* the existence of external things, you will all see that I can also do it now in numbers of other ways: there is no need to multiply examples. (1959b: 144–145)

We can state Moore's anti-skeptical argument in the following way:

- (M1) Here is a hand.
- (M2) Hands are external objects.
- (M3) Therefore, there exists at least one external object.
- (M4) If there exists an external object, then there is an external world.
- (M5) Therefore, there is an external world.

According to Moore, we can know the proposition "here is a hand" simply by holding up one's hand and waving it around. So, (M1) should be understood as an ostensive demonstration of one's knowledge of this proposition. In this way, (M1) is epistemic.<sup>2</sup> That is, it denotes an epistemic attitude or state that one might take towards the propositions "here is a hand." We can, therefore, interpret (M1) as Moore as saying: "I *know* that this thing in front of me is a hand." But we should not paraphrase (M1) as saying: "there is a hand," since this would be an existential quantification. And since Moore is attempting to provide a proof of the existence of external objects, interpreting (M1) as "there is a hand" would beg the question against the skeptic and the argument would not count as a rigorous proof (Moore 1959b: 146). Rather, knowledge of the conclusion must be inferred from knowledge of the premises. So, even though the premises are epistemic, since they are known through perception, it does not automatically follow that the conclusion regarding the existence of the external world must also be epistemic.

Perhaps one would object by claiming that if the proposition "here is a hand" can be known immediately through perception, then the conclusion can be known immediately too. And if this is correct, then we will have at least one reason to think that the conclusion targets (ES). But this would be a mistake. To see why, let us consider the second step in Moore's anti-skeptical argument, which involves showing that the argument counts as a rigorous proof. Moore claims:

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that by saying that this premise is epistemic what is meant is that it is non-ontological. That is, it does not entail any ontological commitment. It is important that the premises of Moore's argument are epistemic in this way, if the argument is to avoid the charge of begging the question against the skeptic.

But did I prove just now that two human hands were then in existence? I do want to insist that I did; that the proof which I gave was a perfectly rigorous one; and that it is perhaps impossible to give a better or more rigorous proof of anything whatever. Of course, it would not have been a proof unless three conditions were satisfied; namely (1) unless the premises which I adduced as proof of the conclusion was different from the conclusion I adduced it to prove; (2) unless the premiss which I adduced was something which I *knew* to be the case, and not merely something which I believed but which was by no means certain, or something which, though in fact true, I did not know to be so; and (3) unless the conclusion did really follow from the premises. (1959b: 146)

According to this second step, if Moore's anti-skeptical argument is rigorous, the following three conditions must be met:

- (Condition 1) The proof must be free of any errors of reasoning—*it must be valid.*
- (Condition 2) The premises must be known to be true—*it must be sound.*
- (Condition 3) The proof must not beg the question—*it must not be circular.*

Moore argues that all three conditions have been met, so the argument is a rigorous proof. If it were the case that the conclusion could be known immediately through perception, then the proof would be circular. To claim that one knows with certainty that they are not in a skeptical scenario (i.e., to deny the skeptical hypothesis), one must do more than appeal to perception, since the skeptic will grant that we seem to have perception of ordinary objects. So, the conclusion that the external world exists is not an epistemic claim about what sorts of things can be known with certainty. Of course, this alone does not show that the argument targets (ROS), but it does suggest that we should not automatically assume that it targets (ES).

### 3 Two Forms of Skepticism

Let us grant that the proof is rigorous, insofar as all three conditions have been satisfied. Since we need to disambiguate what is meant by "knowledge of the external world," which requires determining whether the conclusion targets (ROS) or (ES), we need to consider in more detail what exactly is meant by

these two forms of skepticism. While I am not offering a definition of either form of skepticism, the rough idea can be stated as follows:

*Radical Ontological Skepticism* (ROS): consists in a subject *S* holding that no human being knows anything about *X* because their beliefs about *X* are false.<sup>3</sup>

*Epistemic Skepticism* (ES): consists in a subject *S* holding that no human being knows anything about *X* because their beliefs about *X* are unjustified.

To my mind, (ES) represents the standard approach philosophers have taken toward the skeptic's challenge—it calls into question the justification one has for some belief.

Conversely, (ROS) is more direct than (ES): it is not merely the claim that one's belief that "there is an external world" is unjustified, as would be the case for (ES). It denies that one has knowledge of the external world because it denies that anyone has true beliefs about the external world.<sup>4</sup> If Alex believes that "reality is as it appears to be," then, according to (ROS), Alex's belief is false. In this way, (ROS) claims that the ultimate ontological status of reality is beyond the ability of anyone to know with certainty, not because their ontological beliefs are unjustified, but because they are false. This is important, since (ROS) entails (ES), but the converse does not hold. Alex's belief about reality might be unjustified, but true.

What about the negation of Alex's belief that "reality is as it appears to be"? Should we say that this belief is true? No, because according to (ROS), all of our ordinary beliefs about reality are false, including the belief that "reality is not as it appears to be." But they are not false in virtue of the external world. Rather, (ROS) says our ordinary beliefs about the metaphysical nature of ultimate reality are false, *if and only if*, it is true that there is no external world. Indeed, it is only on the assumption that there is an external world that our concepts regarding the metaphysical nature of ultimate reality are understood as having

3 According to (ROS), beliefs and propositions about the external world are not false in virtue of some feature of the external world. Rather, the concept of an external world is itself incoherent. So, beliefs and propositions about the external world are false insofar as they contain a meaningless constituent. In this way, beliefs and propositions containing a meaningless expression can still have a truth value. Of course, it is debatable whether meaningless beliefs and propositions are best understood as being false or as lacking a truth value. While I think that they can have a truth value, I am merely noting the disagreement and will not defend this view here.

4 There may be similarities with the distinction between Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism.

meaning. But, if there is no external world, then the concept of an external world is itself incoherent.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Alex's belief that "reality is as it appears to be" and its negation are false in virtue of the fact that these propositions contain incoherent concepts, not because of some way that the world is or might be.

Notice, however, that according to (ES), Alex's belief that "reality is as it appears to be" is unjustified but meaningful. So, on this way of construing the skeptical challenge, if Alex's belief that "reality is as it appears to be" is false, then its negation is true. But this is problematic, since (ES) tells us that all of Alex's beliefs about the external world are unjustified. Why should we think that Alex's belief that "reality is not as it appears to be" is true but unjustified? Thus, (ROS) is far more radical than (ES), because it tells us that our beliefs about the external world are false just in case the claim that there is no external world is true.

To get a better grip on this point, notice that (ROS) is not merely an *ad hoc* denial of one's beliefs about reality, rather it can be understood in terms of an independent argument for the claim that there is no external world. Consider, for example, Unger's (1979b) appeal to the sorites paradox to show that, contrary to commonsense, there are no ordinary objects. Unger says:

We may begin by supposing that there are heaps, and that a million beans typically arranged gives us an instance of that concept. But, then, removing a single peripheral bean gently from such a typical heap, it seems, will not leave us with no heap before us. Hence, we must conclude that even when we have but one bean left, or none at all, we still have a heap of beans. But this is absurd. Hence, we have reduced the original supposition of existence to an absurdity, and we may generalize accordingly. This, we may say, is an *indirect argument* that there are no heaps, and that our concept of them is not a coherent one. It is also, I believe, an adequate argument. (1979b: 118)

Unger suggests that, "in any philosophically important sense, there is no paradox here" (Unger, 1979b: 118). This is because we have a valid argument for the non-existence of heaps, and it is only our commonsense that forces us to think that the argument must be unsound. But by all reasonable standards, the argument is.

Additionally, Unger (1979b: 117) attempts to show that this argument will generalize to all ordinary objects showing that we have no good reason to

5 Here I am using "external world" and "ultimate reality" interchangeably.

believe that such things exist. And Unger attempts to defend an extreme form of nihilism, which asserts that “I do not exist and neither do you” (1979a: 236). Here is how Unger describes this radical view:

Now, there is nothing especially unfortunate in this as regards the human condition. For as regards almost everything which is commonly alleged to exist, it may be argued, in like manner, that it in fact does not. There are, then, no tables, or chairs, nor rocks or stones or ordinary stars. Neither are there any plants or animals. No finite persons or conscious beings exist, including myself Peter Unger: I do not exist. (1979a: 236)

My claim is that it is only a short step from Unger’s nihilism to the claim that there is no external world. In this way, Unger’s nihilism about ordinary objects illustrates how just how radical (ROS) is in comparison to (ES), and how the skeptic might attempt to argue that the concept of an external world is itself incoherent.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4 Radical Ontological Skepticism

Why should we think that the skeptic’s challenge targets (ROS)? Either it targets some version of (ES) or (ROS). Some think that if the real skeptic’s challenge is (ES), then providing a refutation of it would be straightforward. For instance, Rudd suggests just that:

For if philosophical scepticism really tells me that I cannot know that I am currently sitting typing, then surely it must have gone wrong somewhere, and we ought to be able to find out where! But if it does not directly challenge such everyday assertions, then we may find that it is not as implausible, or as open to refutation, as has often been supposed. (2000: 260)

But even if the skeptic’s challenge is not as easy to refute as Rudd suggests, it could, at least in principle, be refuted by considering the justification for each

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6 It should be noted that Unger’s arguments illustrate how the skeptic might attempt to show that all of our ordinary beliefs about reality are false. In this way it helps to illustrate (ROS). Of course, one could object that the arguments do not generalize, or one could argue that they only show that our language contains vague terms and predicates, not that there are no ordinary objects.



of our ordinary knowledge claims individually. For example: if it is understood in terms of showing that my belief that “right now I am typing these words” or your belief that “right now I am reading these words,” are unjustified, then all it would take to refute the challenge would be for me to type these words and for you to read them. Thus, the skeptic’s challenge would be immediately undermined in my typing and your reading these words. But if the skeptic’s challenge targets (ROS), then this strategy is not available, since one might be dreaming, a brain in a vat, or in a computer simulation at the very moment they are attempting to refute the skeptic’s challenge. And given that the skeptical hypothesis has managed to endure in both philosophy and popular culture, it is reasonable to claim that it is not merely a challenge to the justification of our ordinary knowledge claims. This is one good reason to deny that it targets (ES). We should, therefore, reject the claim that the skeptic’s challenge targets (ES). It follows that the skeptic’s challenge targets (ROS).

Furthermore, if the skeptic’s challenge claims that the concept of the external world is meaningless, then we can understand it as calling into question our ability to prove that the proposition “I do not know with certainty anything about the external world” is false. To my mind, this is the right approach because it does a better job of capturing our intuitions regarding the skeptical hypothesis, often described by using stories involving evil demons, brains in vats, the matrix, or living in a computer simulation. Such stories all involve a challenge to our belief that reality is the way it seems to be. That is, they cause us to think, if only for a short time, that our beliefs about the external world are false. These stories are not typically taken to cause us to think that our beliefs about the external world are unjustified. For example, even if the computer simulation theory causes me to think my beliefs about my hands are all false, this would not change my perception of having two hands or my apparent justification for such beliefs. The reason we find these fanciful stories jarring is precisely because they call into question the nature of reality itself. Thus, they give us reason to think that our beliefs about reality are false. If we cannot know what the true ontological status of ultimate reality is, because we might be living in a computer simulation, then our beliefs about reality are doubtful.

Additionally, there is a kind of phenomenology associated with the experience of (ROS) that is different from the phenomenology, if any, associated with (ES).<sup>7</sup> When one is initially confronted with (ROS), it is not uncommon

7 The phenomenology that I claim is associated with (ROS) is similar to but not necessarily the same as that which is discussed by DeRose (1995). See also, Pritchard (2002: 289–290, 298–299).

that they are jolted by the possibility that what they take to be the most obvious facts about reality are false. There is a phenomenology similar to the fight or flight experience one has when confronted with a threat. This is because when one is confronted with (ROS), one tends to experience it as a threat. Phenomenologically speaking, this is a radical position to find oneself in, since it conflicts globally with everything, not merely with our ordinary empirical knowledge. If, however, the skeptic were to confront one with the claim that her beliefs about reality are unjustified, it is not clear that such a challenge would have the same sort of phenomenology as the claim that one's beliefs about the external world are false.

Take Unger's skepticism about ordinary objects. If these arguments purport to show that our beliefs about ordinary objects are unjustified, we might feel a bit annoyed or curious, but it is not clear that we would have a threatening experience. Indeed, it is not even clear that there would be any sort of phenomenology associated with this sort of skepticism. But, if they purport to show that our beliefs about the existence of ordinary objects and even our own existence are false, as Unger suggests, then it is entirely reasonable to think that we would have an experience similar to that of being threatened. When we are confronted with the sort of radical skepticism that Unger's arguments present us with, there is an associated phenomenology that is missing in cases involving epistemic skepticism. Thus, we can distinguish between (ROS) and (ES) by appealing to the sort of phenomenology that is associated with each form of skepticism. The skeptic's challenge should, therefore, be understood in terms of (ROS), not (ES), since the phenomenology associated with someone confronted with the skeptic's challenge matches (ROS) better than (ES).

## 5 A Potential Problem for Moore's Anti-Skeptical Argument

The goal of this section is to argue that, if the skeptic's challenge targets (ROS), then Moore's anti-skeptical argument should be rejected on grounds that it misses its intended target.

Notice that, if the skeptic's challenge targets (ROS), then it does not have as much to do with knowledge as is commonly thought. But this does not imply that the skeptic's challenge has nothing to do with knowledge, since, as we previously saw, (ROS) entails (ES). We cannot know with certainty the correct ontological explanations and theories of ultimate reality, if all our beliefs regarding our ontological explanations and theories of ultimate reality are false. But it still might be the case that I can make true knowledge claims about

many things, though my beliefs about ultimate reality are false. For instance, I can know that I have two hands without knowing the deep ontological story concerning those objects. As Rudd suggests, “what the skeptical arguments call into doubt is not our ability to make ordinary knowledge-claims, but the ability of philosophers to justify any ontological interpretations of those claims” (2000: 252). If our beliefs about the ultimate ontological status of reality are false, it follows that we cannot justify our ontological interpretations and analysis of ordinary knowledge-claims, but it does not follow that we have no justification for such claims.

Consider a familiar skeptical story.<sup>8</sup> Imagine that the environment in which Sam has lived her entire life was, in reality, not as it appears. Rather, Sam’s “apparent” environment is wholly controlled by an evil demon. All of the discernible macroscopic events and goings-on that Sam observes are completely controlled by the demon’s interventions. And this evil demon is so clever that all of the interventions (i.e., all observable phenomena) are completely undetected by Sam. There is literally no way for Sam to pull back the curtains, so to speak, and discover that it is really the demon who is intervening and controlling everything that she perceives.

Suppose also that Sam’s experience of the world around her is severely impoverished. Sam’s strange experience is as follows: colored objects always move from the left to the right. But, let us say that what causes Sam’s experience of the movement of these colored objects is the demon playing a game of billiards. Still, Sam’s experience of the objects’ movements has been of such regularity that she is able to form the following generalizations: “red ones move x-wise,” “green ones move y-wise,” “black ones move z-wise,” and so on. Let us add that, through a very sophisticated process of refinement against her experience, Sam has developed a highly accurate theory of the movement of these objects, such that she is able to make highly detailed predictions that she then treats as metaphysical explanations of the phenomena observed. Of course, we know that these explanations are not true, since, by stipulation, we know that the evil demon’s interventions in a game of billiards are the ultimate source of the phenomena that Sam observes. Sam is able to make these predictions and create impressive explanations because throughout her limited experience, there has been one pattern of the movement of these colored objects, but the pattern could change at any given moment.

The question that I want to consider is this: is Sam’s belief that “this object is red” justified? If we construe this story in terms of (ES), then we can say

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8 This response is reflected by the intuitions one might draw from Bouwsma’s (1949) skeptical scenario.

that, given her evidence, Sam is justified in believing that “this object is red.” If, however, we construe the story in terms of (ROS), then we should say that Sam’s belief is unjustified, since the belief is false. If we interpret the skeptic’s challenge as calling into question whether one’s beliefs are justified, then we can make knowledge claims about ordinary objects that we take ourselves to know immediately through perception without knowing anything about the true ontological status of ultimate reality, in the same way that we can interpret Sam’s belief as being justified. For this reason, the better interpretation of the above skeptical scenario is that it targets (ROS), not (ES).

Rudd (2000) invites us to imagine the following related story in order to better understand why the skeptic’s challenge should be understood as targeting (ROS) rather than (ES). Suppose that several philosophers are having a conversation in a field, all of whom disagree about many things but agree that they have the same perceptual evidence concerning what *seems* to them to be a cow in a field. The skeptic’s challenge does not call into question that the philosophers *seem* to be perceiving a cow in a field. Rather, according to Rudd, “what they may still disagree with one another about is the fundamental ontological analysis of the fact” (2000: 254–255; my emphasis). Perhaps one of the philosophers is like Unger, a nihilist about ordinary objects and believes that, like all other ordinary objects, cows do not exist. Perhaps a different philosopher is a sense data theorist and believes that the perceived cow is actually a sense datum in her mind. And yet another philosopher might be an idealist who believes that the cow is really a mental idea in the mind of God. The skeptic puts the following problem into focus: there is no way to know with certainty which of these ontological explanations is correct. So, no ontological analysis of what they perceive to be a cow in the field should be accepted.

When the skeptic joins the conversation, she points out that each of the ontological analyses of ultimate reality that these philosophers offer are possible, but also entirely arbitrary. If this is correct, then the skeptic’s challenge is not really concerned with our empirical knowledge; rather, it is a challenge regarding our ability to adjudicate between competing ontological explanations. When the skeptic’s challenge is properly understood, it becomes clear that it does not call into question “specific empirical facts but...ontological theories which claim to tell us what the deep underlying truth about those facts is” (Rudd 2000: 255). But why should we take this to show that the skeptic’s challenge is really (ROS), not (ES)?

To get a better grip on this point, let us consider Nozick’s (1981) approach to the skeptic’s challenge. According to Nozick, a crucial part of our analysis of the concept “knowledge” involves the idea that, for *S* to know that *p*, it is necessary that *S* believes that *p*, and it is necessary that *S*’s belief that *p* appropriately

tracks the truth. In effect, this entails a denial of epistemic closure under known logical implication, which both Moore's anti-skeptical argument and the skeptic's challenge assumes. Since Nozick's definition of knowledge denies that, if Sam knows that  $p$ , and Sam knows that if  $p$  then  $q$ , then Sam also knows  $q$ , it follows that it is not necessary to exclude the possibility that we are in some far away possible world where the skeptical hypothesis obtains. We only need to show that in the actual world I am not in a skeptical scenario.<sup>9</sup> But, if we were to accept Nozick's definition of knowledge, then we must reject both the skeptic's challenge and Moore's anti-skeptical argument, since both rely on the principle of closure (Rudd 2000: 259).

If, however, the skeptic's challenge is understood as targeting (ROS), we only need to exclude ordinary, non-skeptical alternatives to our knowledge claims. As Rudd says: "On the account of scepticism I am suggesting, I can know all manner of ordinary empirical facts, even though I do not know whether or not some skeptical scenario obtains" (2000: 259). This would not be the case if the real skeptical challenge was (ES). Rudd describes this point as follows:

The valid point struggling to emerge from Nozick's vague talk of the relative closeness of possible worlds is really a point about a difference of levels of discourse. The claim "There is a table" operates on a different level from the claim "There are (or are not) mind-independent physical objects." The skeptical scenarios are not meant as remote possibilities within the world of empirical fact; they are possible explanations of why there is such a world experienced at all. If the sceptic's arguments are correct, the multiplicity of these explanations and the impossibility of deciding between them show that we do not know what is the ultimate ontological status of the world we experience. However, that would not prevent us from describing how things are in that experienced world. We can make true phenomenological claims while continuing to suspend ontological judgment. (2000: 259)

If we interpret the skeptic's challenge as claiming that our positive beliefs about the external world are unjustified, then we would have to rule out all possible scenarios where the skeptical hypothesis obtains. But, if we interpret the skeptical hypothesis as calling into question our ability to have true beliefs about the ultimate ontological status of the external world, then we need not rule out all skeptical scenarios.

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion on these points, see Rudd (2000: 258–260).

Furthermore, we can distinguish between different levels of skepticism, such that Moore's response to the skeptic's challenge fails to distinguish between two different levels of explanation: The level of empirical evidence that is available to us through perception and the level of deep ontological analyses or explanations of the ultimate nature of those things that we take ourselves to perceive (Rudd 2000: 257). If this is correct, then there are two different uses of the term 'know' that correspond to these levels, only one of which is denied by the skeptic. What is denied by the skeptic is not *that* we perceive hands, cows, and fields. Rather, the skeptic denies the ontological analysis of what we perceive, since there is no non-arbitrary way to choose which ontological explanation is correct. Rudd then offers the following objection: "since the sceptic is using 'know' in a strict sense and Moore is using it in a loose sense, then Moore's argument fails to engage with its intended target" (2000: 256). Rudd thinks that Moore fails to recognize this point and, therefore, fails to differentiate between (ROS) and (ES). If Rudd is right, we have good reason to reject Moore's anti-skeptical argument. But if Moore's anti-skeptical argument targets (ROS), then Rudd's objection fails to land a blow.

## 6 Moore's Anti-Skeptical Argument Targets Radical Ontological Skepticism

The goal of this section is to show that Moore's anti-skeptical argument targets (ROS), not (ES). There are two reasons why we should take this approach. First, if we interpret Moore's argument as targeting (ES), this will force us to attribute to him an interpretation that is less charitable than if we interpret it as targeting (ROS). Second, there is textual evidence in support of the claim that Moore targeted (ROS) and that his critics wrongly interpreted him as targeting (ES). We should, therefore, reject Rudd's claim that "Moore's attempt to refute skepticism by insisting on the truth of ordinary empirical claims involves a misunderstanding of how the skeptical argument works" (2000: 257). Moore was well aware of how the skeptical argument works and that it targets (ROS).

Suppose that someone claims Moore's proof is not rigorous because it begs the question. This interpretation will force us to attribute to Moore inconsistent beliefs regarding what is needed to prove that there is an external world. This was pointed out by Baumann (2009: 186) when it was shown that earlier in "Hume's Philosophy" (1922), Moore had argued that if external facts cannot be known, then no proof is available without begging the question. Should

we think that Moore forgot about his earlier remarks? Such an interpretation would be wildly uncharitable.

A charitable reading of Moore would attempt to make his earlier remarks consistent with what he later claimed. As Baumann states: "Moore only talks (in 'Hume's Philosophy') about the thesis that one cannot disprove that anybody knows external facts (or prove that we do know external facts). He is not talking about the possibility of proving that there is an external world" (2009: 186). If we interpret Moore as targeting (ES), then we will be forced to attribute to him the view that we can disprove the claim that we can know external facts. If, however, we interpret Moore's argument as targeting (ROS) instead, then we need not attribute to him this inconsistency. Thus, a charitable interpretation of how Moore might respond to the above objection requires construing the argument as targeting (ROS).

A different objection that is sometimes offered against Moore's anti-skeptical argument can be stated as follows: if a subject *S* knows that *p*, then *S* must be able to prove that *p*. And since Moore claims to know that *p* without providing any proof of *p*, it is not a rigorous proof. That is, if Moore knows that "here is a hand," then he should be able to offer justification for this claim. But he never does. So the argument is not a rigorous proof of the external world.

Interestingly, Moore (1959b: 146) does not give the response that one might expect. Instead of offering a supporting argument for the premise he claims to know, he suggests that none is needed. One might wonder why the proposition "here is a hand" can be known without providing a proof, but the proposition "the external world exists," cannot be known without providing a proof. Baumann (2009: 187) suggests that we could interpret Moore as attempting to avoid an infinite regress by offering some version of epistemic foundationalism. But Moore never actually argues in support of epistemic foundationalism when it comes to our knowledge of propositions about ordinary objects. So, this does not seem to be the best explanation of what Moore was up to. A better explanation is that the argument targets (ROS), not (ES). As Baumann argues:

One might be tempted to assume—especially if one thinks of the current discussion about skepticism—that in order to establish that one knows that there is an external world one needs to proceed from known premises: If I don't know the premises, then I cannot gain knowledge of the conclusion by inferring it from the premises. However, Moore is not interested in proving that he knows that there is an external world; he is only interested in proving that there *is* an external world. (2009: 187; My Emphasis)



If this interpretation is plausible, we should reject the claim that Moore's anti-skeptical argument targets (ES). But one might object by arguing that this reason relies too heavily on Baumann's interpretation of Moore's strategy in offering a response to the skeptic's challenge. However, this is not the only reason to think that Moore's argument targets (ROS).

There is powerful textual evidence in support of the claim that the indented target of the conclusion is (ROS), not (ES). Moore (1968) claims that many have interpreted him as arguing in support of the claim that *we cannot know with certainty that there are no material things* is false. But in the passage I want to now consider, he explicitly denies that he has ever argued in support of this claim. Here is what Moore says:

I have sometimes distinguished between two different propositions, each of which has been made by some philosophers, namely (1) the proposition "There are no material things" and (2) the proposition "Nobody knows for certain that there are any material things." And in my latest published writings... "Proof of an External World"... I implied with regard to the first of these propositions that it could be *proved* to be false in such a way as this; namely, by holding up one of your hands and saying "*This* hand is a material thing; therefore there is at least one material thing." But with regard to the second of those two propositions, which has, I think, been far more commonly asserted than the first, I do not think I have ever implied that *it* could be *proved* to be false in any such simple way; e.g., by holding up one of your hands and saying "I know that this hand is a material thing; therefore at least one person knows that there is at least one material thing" (1968: 668; Emphasis In The Original).

It may be tempting to interpret Moore's anti-skeptical argument as intending to show that (2), the proposition "Nobody knows for certain that there are any material things" is false. But if we take what Moore says in response to his critics at face value, namely that he was targeting (1) not (2), then these clarificatory remarks are sufficient to show that he was targeting (ROS). Since (2) involves the attitude "Nobody knows for certain," which is explicitly epistemic, this is an especially strong point. If it were true that Moore was targeting (ES), then we could conclude that (2) accurately represents the proposition that Moore argued could be shown to be false. But, since he explicitly denies that (2) represents the proposition that his argument targets, we should conclude that he was not targeting (ES). Given that the argument either targets (ROS) or (ES), and it has been shown that it does not target (ES), we can conclude that it targets (ROS). Furthermore, (1) involves the phrase "there are," which is explicitly



ontological, insofar as it is an existential quantifier. So, we can construe (1) in terms of (ROS). Thus, the conclusion of Moore's anti-skeptical argument is an ontological claim regarding ultimate reality.

## 7 Moore's Anti-Skeptical Argument Proves Too Much

I shall now argue that, if Moore's anti-skeptical argument targets (ROS), then it proves too much. In what sense would it prove too much? If we have good reason to reject *ipso facto* entailments in cases attempting to prove that numbers and colors exist, then, by analogy, we have good reason to reject the *ipso facto* entailment in Moore's anti-skeptical argument. Let us begin by considering what, specifically, is wrong with the following argument:

- (M<sub>1</sub>) Here is a hand.
- (M<sub>2</sub>) Hands are external objects.
- (M<sub>3</sub>) Therefore, there exists at least one external object.
- (M<sub>4</sub>) If there exists an external object, then there is an external world.
- (M<sub>5</sub>) Therefore, there is an external world.

Notice that (M<sub>2</sub>) is an analysis of the object referred to in (M<sub>1</sub>). Moore (1959b) attempts to show that the phrase "this is a hand" must be understood as meaning that "hands are external objects," since this is a truism of commonsense. It is no trivial matter that Moore prefaces his anti-skeptical argument with an exceedingly long discussion aimed at showing that the proper analysis of "external object" should be understood as meaning "an object external to the mind" and that such objects are to be met within space (1959b: 130, 137–139, 143–145). But, arguably, this analysis is not germane, given that the skeptic's challenge claims that our philosophical analyses of ontological theories are false.

Here is the problem: unless we already accept the analysis of "here is a hand" as meaning "a hand is an external object," it is not clear why we should accept (M<sub>2</sub>). What is needed is a supporting reason for why we should accept the analysis of "this is a hand" in (M<sub>2</sub>). The skeptic can always run Moore's anti-skeptical argument in reverse in order to show that a hand is not an external object. For instance, if the conclusion is negated, then we get the following argument:

- (S<sub>1</sub>) There is no external world.
- (S<sub>2</sub>) If there is no external world, then there are no external objects.
- (S<sub>3</sub>) Therefore, there are no external objects.

- (S4) If there are no external objects, then a hand is not an external object.  
 (S5) Therefore, a hand is not an external object.

So, without an independent reason to accept (M2), it is not clear why we should accept Moore's argument rather than the skeptic's.

Moore tries to avoid this problem by appealing to an *ipso facto* entailment, claiming that one only needs to confirm their perception of having hands by waving them around and they will have thereby "proved *ipso facto* the existence of external things" (1959b: 145). But when we attempt to move from an epistemic premise to an ontological claim via an *ipso facto* entailment, we end up proving too much. As a result, this move is not available to Moore.

To see why such a move is illicit, we can consider how it is used in support of permissivism. For instance, Schaffer (2012) claims that an *ipso facto* entailment can be used to prove that numbers exist in the following way: there are prime numbers; therefore, *ipso facto*, there are numbers. Schaffer says that, in addition to numbers, the existence of properties, proper parts, and other exotic entities can be proven in the same way and asserts that, "these examples suggest that the contemporary existence debates are *trivial*, in that the *entities in question obviously do exist*." (Schaffer 2012: 79; emphasis in the original).<sup>10</sup> But is this obvious?

The claim that it is obviously true that such entities as numbers and properties exist is probably false. First, metaphysicians have failed to reach anything like a consensus on whether things such as numbers and properties exist. If what Schaffer says is true, this would be odd and in need of explanation, and it is not clear what could explain the lack of a consensus on such obvious matters. But if it is not obviously true that numbers and properties exist, this would fit the fact that metaphysicians continue to debate such matters. Second, metaphysicians engaged in ontological debates typically do not take themselves to be involved in trivial projects.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the fact that Schaffer responds to several potential objections to the argument shows that, by his own lights, most philosophers would likely be suspicious of the claim that numbers and other exotic entities obviously exist. So, even if it is true that they exist, it is not obviously true.

<sup>10</sup> Schaffer (2012) asserts that the debate about the existence of numbers is trivial in order to motivate why we should abandon a Quinean approach to ontology that focuses on what exists and instead endorse a grounding approach that focuses on questions of fundamentality or what grounds what.

<sup>11</sup> Consider, for example, Benacerraf (1973) and the literature that has grown out of such debates.

Schaffer claims that the proposition “there are prime numbers” must be true, since anyone who attempts to deny it “has *ipso facto* produced a *reductio* for her premises” (2012: 79). Schaffer goes on to claim that the proposition “commands *Moorean certainty*, as being more credible than any philosopher’s argument to the contrary” and that the argument is “as forceful as they come” (2012: 79; emphasis in the original). How might the anti-realist about numbers and properties respond? If we can prove that numbers and properties exist by appealing to an *ipso facto* entailment, then Schaffer is right—they obviously exist. But, if one agrees that it is entirely plausible that the existence of numbers and properties is a highly controversial matter, then they do not obviously exist. If they do not obviously exist, then we cannot prove that numbers and other similar sorts of things exist by appealing to an *ipso facto* entailment alone. Thus, if the appeal to an *ipso facto* entailment is problematic in arguments purporting to prove the existence of controversial entities such as numbers and properties, then, by analogy, it is also problematic in Moore’s argument.

On their own, *ipso facto* entailments do not prove anything. One has to already think that things like numbers exist in order to find such arguments persuasive. But, if you are not already in that camp, (i.e., you have independent reasons for denying the existence of entities like numbers and properties), then appealing to an *ipso facto* entailment will not count as a persuasive reason for you to think that they exist. One might be able to claim that it at least counts as a reason but not that it counts as a good reason.

Consider a similar argument: this apple is red; therefore, *ipso facto*, the color red exists. How might the anti-realist about colors respond to this argument? They might run the argument in reverse: the color red does not exist; therefore, *ipso facto*, this apple is not red. Both arguments are valid, but they cannot both be sound. So, how can we tell which of the two arguments is sound? We might think that the first argument must be sound, since it involves a truism of commonsense about colors. But is this alone sufficient to think that it is a sound argument?

The fact that it is a truism of commonsense might be a virtue of the argument, insofar as we desire for the argument to be consistent with commonsense about colors. But, this would only be a desire-satisfying virtue, not a truth-indicating virtue.<sup>12</sup> And given the empirical evidence demonstrating that creatures experience colors in wildly different ways, it is not implausible to think that the color red does not exist.<sup>13</sup> So, the second argument involves a

12 On the issues of desire-satisfying virtues and truth-indicating virtues, See Mendelovici (2018: 118–119).

13 See Hardin (1988).

truth-indicating virtue, since it provides evidence in support of the conclusion. But this alone is probably insufficient to persuade the color realist that the first argument is unsound. What is needed is independent support for one of the arguments because an *ipso facto* entailment alone is insufficient to prove anything. But this does not imply that *ipso facto* entailments are never permissible, but rather the use of them depends on whether there is general agreement regarding the relevant “facts” that are involved in the entailment.

Does Moore offer independent support for (M<sub>2</sub>)? Moore attempts to show that the correct analysis of “this is a hand” must be “hands are external objects,” since it is a truism of commonsense. Even if this is correct, it only shows that the argument is consistent with our commonsense about ordinary objects, which is a desire-satisfying virtue of the argument, but not a truth-indicating virtue. If the appeal to an *ipso facto* entailment is allowed in the case of Moore’s anti-skeptical argument, then it should also be allowed in cases of numbers, properties, colors, and other controversial entities. But, as we saw above, an *ipso facto* entailment cannot be used to prove that such contentious entities exist. Hence, we should reject the *ipso facto* entailment in Moore’s anti-skeptical argument. For this reason, the argument itself should be rejected on grounds that it proves too much.

Someone might object by arguing that the scope of Moore’s anti-skeptical argument is narrower than what I have allowed. Moore was only interested in providing a proof that there are mind-independent things.

But we need to ask why Moore was interested in proving that there are mind-independent things. According to Moore, if it can be shown that there are things external to the mind, then it follows, *ipso facto*, that there is an external world. But we just saw that this *ipso facto* entailment should be rejected. And the fact that Moore wanted to show that there are mind-independent things in order to show that there is an external world gives us good reason to think that he was targeting (ROS), not (ES).

Perhaps what is really meant by the above objection is that Moore was only attempting to offer a plausible response to Idealism, so the argument does not really force him to take a bigger step than his legs will allow. That is, Moore’s strategy should be understood as a modest one.

Suppose that this is true. It is not obviously false that Idealism is more than a mere epistemic thesis. Indeed, *esse est percipi* is prima facie an ontological claim (see Berkeley 1957: 22–23, 33–34). Consider Moore’s (1959b) extended discussion of the “scandal of philosophy,” in which Kant was so absorbed. Moore was clearly motivated by the same ontological, rather than purely epistemic, concerns that Kant was focused on in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. If this is correct, if Moore was wrestling with the same skeptical challenge as Kant and

Kant was targeting (ROS) rather than (ES), then it is reasonable to conclude that Moore was also targeting (ROS). Here is how Baumann makes this point:

... Kant is not trying to show that we know there is an external world but only that there is an external world. One could distinguish between 'metaphysical scepticism' (dealt with by Kant) and 'epistemological scepticism'....The former deals with the question whether there is an external world and with related questions, the latter with the question whether we can know that there is an external world. Even if one can prove or know that an external world exists, one might not be able to prove or know a particular contingent proposition about the external world (because one might be dreaming at the time of the attempted proof). Moore was apparently dealing just with the metaphysical form of scepticism, assuming rightly or wrongly, that he does not have to deal with epistemological scepticism. (2009: 190)

Arguably, the core of Moore's approach to external world skepticism involved taking up Kant's project where he thought it had failed. And given that Kant's project targeted (ROS), even if Moore was targeting some version of Idealism, we still have reason to think that the intended target of the argument is (ROS), not (ES).<sup>14</sup>

## 8 Concluding Remarks

Prior to concluding, I want to consider an important moral. The distinction between (ROS) and (ES) is important for more than merely Moorean scholarship; it is also metaphysically significant.

The linguistic turn in Western philosophy brought in its wake a tendency to think that there is an essential connection between language and the world, such that either our ordinary language, a logically rigid language, or, perhaps, a metaphysically perfect language can provide the required resources to make possible a genuine "discovery" of the true ontological status of ultimate reality.<sup>15</sup> But, arguably, there are reasons to be skeptical of this language-based approach to metaphysical and ontological inquiry.<sup>16</sup> By calling attention to the significance of the ontological aspects of skepticism as it relates to Moore's

<sup>14</sup> Recall that (ROS) entails (ES), but (ES) does not entail (ROS).

<sup>15</sup> For a contemporary example of this metaphysical strategy, see Sider (2011).

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of this point, see Taylor (2019).

response to the skeptic, we bring into sharp relief the failures of ordinary language as a dependable guide to ontology and metaphysical inquiry.

This is significant both because ontological dimensions of skepticism have largely been neglected in the literature on Moore's anti-skeptical argument, and it forces us to take seriously a humble view of our cognitive ability to answer metaphysically substantive questions. Once the ontological significance of the skeptic's challenge is recognized, this allows us to do epistemology in a kind of philosopher's paradise. As Rudd rightly suggests, the skeptic's challenge only calls into question: "the notion that we can establish any philosophical account of the way the world really is. It is therefore significant for metaphysics or ontology, but not for epistemology" (2000: 260–261). So, given that the skeptical hypothesis, properly understood, focuses on ontological claims rather than the justification of our beliefs, we need not be vexed by our inability to give a satisfactory answer to the challenge.

In conclusion, we need to distinguish between a radical ontological form of skepticism (ROS) and an epistemic form of skepticism (ES). The real skeptical challenge targets the former rather than the latter. And since Moore's anti-skeptical argument targets either (ES) or (ROS), the following dilemma arises: if Moore's argument targets (ES), then it fails to provide a satisfactory response to the skeptic's challenge. But, if Moore's argument targets (ROS), then the conclusion outstrips the premises and proves too much. That is, the argument fails because it uses epistemic (i.e., non-ontological) premises and an illicit use of an *ipso facto* entailment for an ontological conclusion. I have shown that Moore's argument, properly understood, targets (ROS), not (ES), as is often assumed. Therefore, Moore's anti-skeptical argument should be rejected.<sup>17</sup>

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