

G. E. Moore and the Problem of the Criterion

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Abstract: In this paper, I offer an understanding of G.E. Moore's epistemology as presented in, "A Defence of Common Sense" and "Proof of an External World". To frame the discussion, I look to Roderick Chisholm's essay, *The Problem of the Criterion*. I begin by looking at two ways that Chisholm believes one can respond to the problem of the criterion, and, referring back to Moore's essays, explain why it is not unreasonable for Chisholm to believe that he is following a line of reasoning that Moore might take. I then show why I believe Chisholm is actually trying to do something quite different from what Moore was, and thus misses Moore's actual point. I conclude that Moore is best understood as rejecting traditional epistemological concerns. By forcing Moore to deal with a traditional epistemological problem, it will become clear how bold Moore's "epistemology" is.

The problem of the criterion arises because

[t]o know whether things really are as they seem to be, we must have a *procedure* for distinguishing appearances that are true from appearances that are false. But to know whether our procedure is a good procedure, we have to know whether it really *succeeds* in distinguishing appearances that are true from appearances that are false. And we cannot know whether it does really succeed unless we already know which appearances are *true* and which ones are *false* (Chisholm, 1973, p. 1).

Another way to think about the problem of the criterion is to ask two pairs of questions:

A) *What* do we know? What is the *extent* of our knowledge?

B) How are we to decide *whether* we know? What are the *criteria* of knowledge

(Chisholm, 1973, p. 12)?

One cannot answer question A until one answers question B and one cannot answer question B until one answers question A.

According to Chisholm, there are at least two possible responses to the problem of the criterion, besides resorting to skepticism. One response is what Chisholm calls a methodist approach. The methodist believes that one has arrived somehow at a criterion of knowledge—an answer to question B—and can then go on to pick out particular instances of knowledge—an answer to question A. The other response is what Chisholm calls the particularist approach. The particularist believes that one does somehow know particular cases of knowledge—an answer to question A—and can then go on to determine a criterion that successfully picks out further instances of knowledge—an answer to question B—based on the *particular* instances. Chisholm sees himself as a particularist continuing the tradition of Thomas Reid or the “great twentieth century English philosopher, G.E. Moore,” whom Chisholm takes to be the prime example of a particularist. I will refer to portions of Moore’s essays to show his particularist characteristics and how Chisholm could understand himself as filling in gaps in Moore’s epistemology (Chisholm, 1973, p.20). I will conclude that, based on Chisholm’s understanding of the problem of the criterion, it is not unreasonable for Chisholm to view Moore as a particularist.

1. Chisholm, Moore and particularism

Chisholm maintains that there are in fact many things that one knows. Moore makes the same claim in “A Defence of Common Sense.” Moore states: “I begin, then, with my list of truisms, every one of which (in my own opinion) I *know*, with certainty, to be true. The propositions to be included in this list are the following” (Moore, 1925, p.

194). Moore then goes on to name several things, such as there exists a human body, that it is his body, there are other human bodies, the earth has existed for many years, there are material objects, et cetera (Moore, 1925, pp. 194-5). It is just these type of specific and *particular* knowledge claims that Chisholm views as the starting point of the particularist position. It is important to note that both Chisholm and Moore are talking about actual instances of knowledge, not mere beliefs.

By reviewing the particular instances of knowledge Chisholm contends that the particularist can go on to abstract criteria of knowledge. Moore could be understood as engaging in this abstraction process in both of his essays. In “A Defence of Common Sense,” Moore states that he is “going to begin by enunciating, under the heading (I), a whole long list of propositions [... et cetera],” articulating an answer to question A. Moore goes on to say that next he will,

under the heading (2), state a single proposition which makes an assertion about a whole set of *classes* of propositions—each class being defined, as the class consisting of all propositions which resemble *one* of the propositions in (I) in a certain respect. (2), therefore, is a proposition which could not be stated, until the list of propositions in (I), or some similar list, had already been given (Moore, 1925, p. 193).

Chisholm would understand Moore, at this point, to be engaging in a process to abstract an answer to question B.

Another example of where Chisholm might interpret Moore as engaging in the abstraction process is in Moore’s essay “Proof of an External World.” Moore states that he

can give a rigorous “proof of the existence of things outside of us” (Moore, 1990, p. 81).

Moore’s proof is as follows:

By holding up my two hands and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right, “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 (Moore, 1990, p. 81).

It seems reasonable that Chisholm could take Moore’s proof as an example of particularism in process. Moore holds up his hands and with a gesture says “Here is one hand”, an answer to question A. He then proves/abstracts to the existence of external things, an answer to question B—i.e. one has determined whether one knows, in relation to external things.

While Chisholm may admit that Moore did not explicitly endorse a full particularist theory, it seems clear that Chisholm definitely saw Moore heading in that direction. In response to someone like Hume—whom Chisholm considers a prototypical methodist—who would deny knowledge of certain aspects of the external world because the criteria that Hume holds prohibits the possibility, Chisholm paraphrases Moore in order to criticize the methodist position. Chisholm imagines Moore raising his hand and saying “I know very well this is a hand, and so do you. If you come across some philosophical theory that implies that you and I cannot know that this is a hand, then so much the worse for the theory” (Chisholm, 1973, p. 21).

The point here was to briefly sketch two possible responses to the problem of the criterion, and to demonstrate why Chisholm would believe that Moore could be considered

a particularist. First, Chisholm believes that there are only three possible responses to the problem of the criterion—i.e. skepticism, particularism, and methodism. Chisholm dismisses skepticism as a viable option, and Moore can definitely be understood as rejecting skepticism. Moore says nothing that on close examination could be construed as a methodist approach, a point for which I did not argue, but think can reasonably be granted. Further, Moore does provide answers to question A. Moore does claim to know particular things, and in this sense, Moore can be said to be a particularist. Finally, some of what Moore says can be understood as going from the particular instances of knowledge to either a criterion of knowledge or at least a more general answer to the first part of question B—“How are we to decide *whether* we know” (Chisholm, 1973, p. 12)? For all of the above-mentioned reasons, it is not unreasonable for Chisholm to consider Moore a particularist.

2. Why Moore is not a particularist

I will now discuss why I believe Chisholm is only half-right in calling Moore a particularist. Moore is only a particularist insofar as he answers question A, and holds particular instances of knowledge. Pace Chisholm, who seems to think that Moore has a tacit notion of justification—viz. a particularist one—I believe Moore is best understood as rejecting most epistemological concerns—including a theory of justification. Instead of advocating his own position, Moore spends the majority of both of the essays poking holes in and tripping up other epistemological/metaphysical theories. There is, therefore, good reason to assume that Moore would not want to fall back into the same theoretical problems he spent so much time pointing out. I contend that Moore presents a fourth response to the

problem of the criterion. Moore rejects the problem. He may grant that others can deal with it if they want to, but, from his perspective, it only results in empty wrangling.

I will again look at the two “arguments” that were used above in support of the abstraction process of a particularist approach. In “A Defence of Common Sense,” Moore first enunciates a whole list of things he knows under the heading (I). I would agree with Chisholm that all of those things are an answer to question A. Moore then goes on to articulate the propositions under heading (2). Unlike what was said above, where I conceded that Chisholm could construe Moore as engaging in an abstraction process, I believe that Moore is actually merely articulating further *particular* instances of knowledge. I believe this latter interpretation is more consistent with what Moore actually says. Moore says that the “whole long list of propositions” under the heading (I) are propositions “which (in my own opinion) I *know*, with certainty, to be true” (Moore, 1925, p. 193). He also says that (2) “is also a proposition which (in my own opinion) I *know*, with certainty, to be true” (Moore, 1925, p. 193). Since Moore uses the exact same phrasing to describe the propositions of (I) and the proposition of (2), I contend Moore must view them as the same type of knowledge—i.e. particular instances of knowledge, an answer to question A.

Chisholm could object that if (2) is just like (I) as opposed to (2) being a different type of claim—namely an answer to question B—why would Moore claim that (2) “could not be stated except by reference to the whole list of truisms [...] in (I)” (Moore, 1925, p. 195). I believe that Moore should be interpreted as meaning exactly what he says. (2) is articulated in *reference* to (I); that is, the propositions of (I) help to provide the content of (2). This becomes clear as Moore articulates what exactly (2) expresses. (2) states that

many of those in the class of human beings have at one time or another had experiences just like Moore himself had in (I) and have known many of the things that Moore himself knows, as articulated in (I).

I have also stated that Chisholm could interpret Moore's argument in "Proof of an External World" as an example of the particularist abstraction process. James Pryor paraphrases Moore's argument as follows:

Moore looked at his hands and argued:

- (1) Here are two hands.
- (2) If hands exist, then there is an external world.
- (3) So there is an external world (Pryor, 2004, p. 349).

By structuring Moore's proof as a *modus ponens* argument, it can easily be seen that Moore is not engaging in anything like an abstraction process, as Chisholm might contend. This being said, I am not sure that Moore, at least in relation to the other things he says in "Proof of an External World," would fully agree that *modus ponens* is exactly the type of argument he was making. I personally find step 2—"If hands exist, then there is an external world"—out of sync with Moore's views. I tend to believe that Moore had a more linguistic/psychological notion of step 2. Instead of the material conditional, I suggest that Moore probably had in mind something along the lines of "hands are just the sort of things one means when one speaks of things that exist outside of us."

I further contend that Moore cannot be a particularist in the way Chisholm believes him to be because he is extremely dismissive of epistemological wrangling that goes beyond what people—normal people, not philosophers—mean when they say something. Thus, in an ordinary sense, to claim "Here is a hand" is a simple statement that most

anyone understands. To overanalyze the statement, or to maintain that one does not *really* know what it means, is, according to Moore, “as profoundly mistaken as any view can be” (Moore, 1925, p. 198). I suggest that to take a simple and ordinary knowledge claim and then to in Chisholm’s words “generalize and formulate criteria of goodness—criteria telling us what it is for a belief to be epistemologically respectable” is a type of overanalyzing that Moore would find mistaken (Chisholm, 1973, p. 24). When Moore claims “Here is a hand”, that is all he means, and he assumes we all know what he means as well. To ask what is “epistemologically respectable” about it, besides being mistaken, is far from how one “ordinarily” speaks of that which one knows.

Moore claims that “to hold that we do not know what, in certain respects, is the analysis of what we understand by [...] an expression, is an entirely different thing from holding that we do not understand the expression” (Moore, 1925, p. 199). Moore is not only claiming that a correct analysis is not necessary, but, more importantly, that if one can already understand an expression, then why bother searching for the correct analysis. Likewise, one can know something without understanding what makes it “epistemologically respectable,” and Chisholm would agree that that is part of what makes a particularist a particularist. However, Chisholm and Moore part ways because Moore, I believe, would contend that if one already knows things, then why bother looking over that which one knows in order to determine what it is about them that makes them epistemologically respectable. Chisholm perhaps feels that determining what makes a particular instance of knowledge epistemologically respectable helps in order to respond to the skeptic.

It is possible that Moore would go even further and claim that, not only is there no point in looking for what makes particular instances of knowledge epistemologically respectable, but that there is no *thing* or *criterion* which causes, or results from, the epistemological respectability of particular instances of knowledge. Moore explains that there are those who would reject his proof that there are things that exist external to us because he cannot prove the premises in his proof—viz., “Here is a hand” with corresponding gesture, etc. Moore states that “what [his critics] really want is not merely a proof [...] but something like a general statement as to how *any* propositions of this sort [“Here is a hand”] may be proved” (Moore, 1990, p. 84). How Moore responds to his critics demonstrates why he would be unwilling to go along with the second part, the abstraction portion of the particularist position. Moore’s response is that, of course, a general statement of how propositions may be proved has not been “given; and I do not believe it can be given: if this is what is meant by proof of the existence of external things, I do not believe that any proof of the existence of external things is possible” (Moore, 1990, p. 84). In saying that a general statement—or criterion—cannot be given, Moore could mean either that humanity is unable to formulate a general criteria, or that there simply is no criteria. On either account, Moore would be rejecting the possibility of endorsing a full particularist position.

3. Conclusion

In demonstrating why I believe Moore would reject the second part of the particularist position, I have also suggested some common ground between Chisholm and Moore. Moore states that he knows that “Here is a hand,” and that it is all. Likewise with

the propositions under (I) and (2), Moore knows them. Chisholm quotes Spinoza as saying “In order to know, [...] there is no need to know that we know, much less to know that we know that we know” (Chisholm, 1973, p. 22).¹ However, though there is a similarity, it is only partially the case that Chisholm and Moore are like-minded. Chisholm quotes Spinoza only to explain how one can know particular things. Moore, I believe, would go much further. For Moore, in order to know, one does not need to know what it is about our knowledge that makes it epistemologically respectable.

Chisholm sees similarities between his view of particularism and his view of Moore’s ideas. Generally speaking, Moore and Chisholm agree when it comes to question A, and that is the crux of the particularist position. Further, they both reject the skeptic’s position. However, the only point of connection between Moore and Chisholm regarding question B is that they agree that some are misguided in answering it the way they do. Chisholm claims that after one has an answer to question A, an answer to question B can be developed. Moore is perfectly content with his answers to question A, and he would feel that one would be equally misguided to even deal with question B.

To conclude, my purpose in this paper was to try to clarify an aspect of Moore’s epistemology. I attempted to do this by using Chisholm’s *Problem of the Criterion*, as a way to frame a discussion of Moore’s essays, “A Defence of Common Sense” and “Proof of an External World.” The reason why Moore’s epistemology seems unclear is that one is approaching—like Chisholm—from the wrong perspective.

Chisholm holds that there are only three possible responses to the problem of the criterion, and thus assumes that Moore has to fit into one of them. However, Moore is actually doing something bolder. Moore’s “defense” and “proof” are actually rejections of

traditional epistemological problems, of which the problem of the criterion is but one. Moore does not have a theory of justification—particularist or otherwise—because he does not need one. Moore knows many things, and he believes that most everyone else does too. If instead of looking for the correct analysis of a statement, or developing a general criterion of epistemological respectability one stuck with the ordinary ways one speaks, believes and knows many philosophical headaches could be avoided.

¹ Chisholm gets his quote from Spinoza (1898).

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