





Topics in Analytic Philosophy

Skepticism

G. E. Moore (1873-1958)



Moore on skepticism

“A defense of common sense” (1925)

“Proof of an external world” (1939)

“Certainty” (1959)

“Four forms of skepticism” (1959)

Proof of an external world

“It still remains a scandal to philosophy ... that the existence of things outside of us ... must be accepted merely on *faith*, and that if anyone thinks good to doubt their existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by any satisfactory proof.” (Kant, quoted by Moore on p 147)

Outline of “Proof of an external world”

What is an external thing? (149-165)

Prove that there are some (165-170)

Moore's proof

Moore's proof

1. Here is one hand.
2. Here is another hand.
- C. Therefore, there are external things.

A good proof: three conditions

1. The premises are different from the conclusion
2. He knows that the premises are true
3. The conclusion follows from the premises

Something wrong?

Something seems strange about Moore's proof...

But what is it?

Is this a reply to skepticism?

Moore's conclusion: "There are external things"

Skepticism: "No one can know that there are external things"

Is this a reply to skepticism?

1. The premises are different from the conclusion
2. He knows that the premises are true
3. The conclusion follows from the premises

Given 2 and he knows 3, follows, given closure, that he knows the conclusion.

Is this a reply to skepticism?

Moore's conclusion: "There are external things"

A second conclusion: "Moore (or I) knows that there are external things."

Skepticism: "No one can know that there are external things"

earlier Moore on skepticism

"A defense of common sense" (1925)

On the side of common sense

"I know with certainty" the following:

My body exists.

There exist other human bodies.

The earth has existed for many years before my body was born.

I am a human being. I have had dreams. I have had many different feelings.

Other human beings have had dreams, and many different feelings.

...

A problem with skepticism?

Does the skeptic have inconsistent beliefs?

An inconsistent skeptic?

No one can know anything about the external world.

An inconsistent skeptic?

No one can know anything about the external world.

I know that there are other human beings (besides myself).

No human being (including myself) can know anything about the external world.

An inconsistent skeptic?

Suppose Moore is correct: the skeptic has inconsistent beliefs.

We still don't know what, if anything, is wrong with Stroud's argument or any other skeptical argument.

Nor does this show that skepticism about the external world is false.

Indeed, it may be that Moore is correct AND Stroud's argument is sound.

What we need

Explain what is wrong with skeptical arguments

Explain why they (sometimes) seem sound

Show that skepticism about the external world is false.

later Moore on skepticism

“Russell’s view that I do not know for certain that this is a pencil or that you are conscious rests, if I am right, on no less than four distinct assumptions...

It seems to me *more* certain that I *do* know that this is a pencil and that you are conscious, than that any single one of these four assumptions is true.” (“Four forms of skepticism”, 226)

Another Moore point

I am more certain that the conclusion of the skeptical argument is false than that all of the premises are true.

Another Moore point

I am more certain that the conclusion of the skeptical argument is false than that all of the premises are true.

For example, I am more certain that I know that this is a pencil, than that all of the premises of the skeptical argument are true.

Moore's point restated

(Weak) Skeptic's argument

(S1) I don't know that I am not dreaming.

(S2) If I don't know that I am not dreaming, then I don't know that I have hands.

(SC) So, I don't know that I have hands.

Moore's point restated

Anti-Skeptic's argument

(M1) I know that I have hands.

(M2) If I know that I have hands then I know that I am not dreaming.

(MC) So, I know that I am not dreaming.

Moore's point restated

It is more reasonable for me to believe that my argument is sound than the skeptic's argument is sound.

What we need

Explain what is wrong with skeptical arguments

Explain why they (sometimes) seem sound

Show that skepticism about the external world is false.

Moore's proof

1. Here is one hand.
2. Here is another hand.
- C. Therefore, there are external things.

What we need

Explain what is wrong with skeptical arguments

Explain why they (sometimes) seem sound

Show that skepticism about the external world is false.