Abstract

The current standard interpretation of Moore's proof assumes Moore offers a solution to Kant's famously posed problem of an external world, which Moore quotes at the start of his 1939 lecture "Proof of an External World." As a solution to Kant's problem, Moore's proof fails utterly. Similarly, a second received interpretation imputes an aim of refuting metaphysical idealism that Moore's proof does not at all achieve. This study departs from the received interpretations to credit Moore's stated aim for the proof Moore performed in his 1939 lecture. Moore's announced aim was to impose a counter-example to an explicitly stated presupposition of Kant's problem of an external world. Moore's proof would thus subvert Kant's famously posed problem. There is not, however, some rival external world problem that Moore commends in place of Kant's problem.

Key words: epistemology, the external world, skepticism, Kant, Wittgenstein
Moore performed the proof of an external world, known as “Moore’s proof,” in his 1939 lecture “Proof of an External World.” (127-50) The opening of Moore’s lecture quotes Kant’s problem of an external world where the *Critique of Pure Reason* famously declares lack of a solution to Kant’s external world problem a “scandal to philosophy.” (Bxxxix) Subsequently, following an extended preliminary technical discussion (129-45), Moore introduced his performance of Moore’s proof with an announcement of his aim. His introduction cites a presupposition that the *Critique of Pure Reason* stated together with the famous formulation of Kant’s problem of an external world. Kant’s problem’s presupposition denies that any proof that does not solve Kant’s problem can be a satisfactory proof of the existence of external things. The aim Moore’s introduction announces for his performance of Moore’s proof is to impose a counter-example to Kant’s problem’s declared presupposition:

> Kant declares to be his opinion ... that there is only one possible proof of the existence of things outside of us, namely the one which he has given, I can now give a large number of different proofs, each of which is a perfectly rigorous proof. (145)

As Moore understood, and his rebuttal to an objection makes explicit, a proof that can solve Kant’s problem must conclude that skepticism is false about external things. So the point of Moore’s proof is to illustrate that there can be a satisfactory proof that there are external things from premises that do not also imply that skepticism is false about external things.

Unfortunately, received assessments of Moore’s proof follow the standard interpretation that overlooks Moore’s stated aim. The standard interpretation supposes Moore’s proof offers a solution to Kant’s problem: “… Moore sets himself the task of doing what Kant had earlier set himself to do” (Baldwin 2010; see Stroud 1984: 84). Assessments that follow this interpretation include disparagements of Moore’s proof as futile “hand waving,” as a ‘simple-minded *petitio,*” as apt for
caricature, and “useless.” Similarly, influential current commentaries I discuss below proceed from the standard interpretation to assume, contrary to Moore’s stated aim, that Moore’s proof aimed “to marshal a response to skepticism.” (Wright 2002: 337) On a second received interpretation that also overlooks Moore’s announced aim, “Moore’s ‘Proof’ is not a refutation of scepticism, nor was it intended to be. It was intended to be a refutation of idealism: as such it is a total failure” (Baldwin 1990: 295; cf. Sosa 2009: 8).

Current assessments that grant Moore’s proof offers a successful proof of its conclusion include some that treat Moore’s proof as a failure when “directed at a skeptic” (Pryor 2004: 369). Others, that assess Moore’s proof as philosophically irrelevant (Stroud 1984: 125-6), Thompson Clarke’s hyperboly amplifies: “almost as though he [Moore] had had a philosophical lobotomy” (Clarke 1972: 757). Scott Soames would allow Moore's proof to escape utter inadequacy because it is intended ironically: "Would anyone who believed that a proof of the external world was needed be satisfied by Moore's Proof? No. ... [Moore intended] to show that there is no need for such a proof in the first place" (Soames 2003: 23). These current assessments overlook Moore's stated aim that directs Moore’s proof at Kant’s famously posed problem of an external world, not at a skeptic.

Here, it may help to caution against a colloquial use of the expression "refutation of skepticism," which Moore’s lecture does not employ. Colloquially, any proof may be said to be a generic refutation of skepticism about its conclusion. So a proof that concludes that there are external things and a starkly contrasting proof that has as its conclusion that skepticism is false about external things may each be said, using the colloquial expression, to be a “refutation of skepticism about external things.” Similarly, proof of any conclusion implies, but does not prove, that skepticism about that conclusion is false. Any objection to Moore's Proof that depends on collapsing these distinctions cannot avoid missing the point of Moore’s Proof.

Section 1 of this study recounts Moore’s generally neglected introduction that announces the point of his performance of Moore’s proof, and supplies a full quotation of Kant’s problem’s presupposition that Moore cites and explicitly targets. Section 2 sets out Moore’s proof, including an often-overlooked key circumstance of its performance. Section 3 attends to features of Moore’s performance that locate Moore’s proof solely in his 1939 lecture independent of, inter alia, his 1903
“Refutation of Idealism” and his 1925 “A Defense of Common Sense.” Sections 4 and 5 set out Moore’s somewhat compressed closing rebuttals to a contrasting pair of anticipated objections. Section 6 considers some leading current commentary that overlooks the stated aim of Moore’s proof.

1. Moore’s introduction

Moore opened his 1939 lecture “Proof of an External World” by reproducing Kant’s famously posed problem of the existence of external things:

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 1959: B xxxix).

Moore’s lecture discloses his aim for Kant’s problem only after an extended preliminary technical discussion. Then, in the introduction Moore gave his performance of Moore’s proof Moore cites as Kant’s “opinion,” but he does not quote, the additional restriction Kant’s problem imposes. Kant’s statement of his problem confides parenthetically that a proof that solves Kant’s problem of an external world must not only be a satisfactory or “strict” proof, but also satisfy a presupposition of singularity:

… strict (also, as I [Kant] believe, the only possible) proof of the objective reality of outer intuition (B xxxix).

Moore understood this presupposition of singularity to credit a proof that solves Kant’s problem as the only possible satisfactory proof that there are external things. So the introduction Moore gave the performance of Moore’s proof announced that he aims to illustrate a proof of the existence of external things that both satisfactorily proves its conclusion and violates the requirement that Kant’s problem presupposes:
It seems to me that, so far from its being true, as Kant declares to be his opinion, that there is only one possible proof of the existence of things outside of us, namely the one which he has given, I can now give a large number of different proofs, each of which is a perfectly rigorous proof. (145)

Moore confirmed in the rebuttal that dispels an objection at his lecture's close, which section 5 discusses below, that Moore's proof imposes a counter-example to the presupposition of Kant's problem by illustrating a satisfactory or "perfectly rigorous" proof of the conclusion that there are external things from premises that do not also imply that there is knowledge of external things or that skepticism is false about external things.

As may be needless to say, Moore did not dispute Kant's command of the general distinction between proof of a conclusion and proof that the conclusion is known or that skepticism about the conclusion is false. Neither does Moore dispute the general implication of Kant's problem that it is possible that there be some satisfactory proof that concludes that skepticism is false.

The whole of Moore's lecture confirms that its argument aims specifically at Kant's problem as Moore understood it, by abstaining from discussion of any solution to Kant's problem. Moore's lecture abstains, even where Moore divulges his negative opinion of the solution the Critique of Pure Reason offers: "But I [Moore] think it is by no means certain that Kant's proof is satisfactory" (128). Further, the question Moore's 1939 lecture announces as his general topic asks:

[What sort of proof, if any, can be given of “the existence of things outside of us”?... To discuss this question was my object when I began to write the present lecture. (127)

Moore's attention to Kant's problem, and not to its solution, recalls his earlier Socratic caution against "the attempt to answer questions, without first discovering precisely what I question it is which you desire to answer" (Moore 1903: vii).
Moore devoted his 1939 lecture to imposing, and defending, the counter-example he performed that aims to subvert Kant’s stated problem of an external world. Notably, Moore’s lecture does not oppose Kant’s problem on behalf of some rival problem of an external world.

2. Performance

Moore’s performance before his lecture audience follows this somewhat abridged script:

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’ . . . by doing this I have proved *ipso facto* the existence of external things . . . (145-6)

Preliminaries that Moore settles in the extended passage that precedes his performance (129-45) adopt some Kantian distinctions that Moore introduced, in part, to avoid dispute about interpreting his proof’s conclusion; in part, to discourage suggestion that the inference Moore’s proof draws is enthymematic.

A manifest, but silent crucial preliminary to Moore’s performance is the set-up that locates all subjects of Moore’s proof in his lecture audience, within sight of his hand gestures. Moore allows it to go without saying that, unlike its premise, the conclusion of Moore’s proof is not a result subjects can know just by visual sense perception. The set-up that confines Moore’s subjects to the viewers of his performance excludes any hallway auditors who do not see Moore’s performance, readers of the lecture’s published text, as well as anyone whose knowledge of Moore’s performance rests second-hand on some subject’s testimony. Moore is the one subject who has additional, non-perceptual knowledge of the premise and charge over its demonstration. As these features that are peculiar to its performer make no contribution to Moore’s proof, the lecturer himself participates as just another subject. So Moore’s performance provides the occasion for all his subjects to gain visual perceptual knowledge of the premise. Props for Moore’s performance are the hands he displays within sight of all subjects, but he could have used shoes, soap bubbles, prosthetic hands, or other external things his lecture mentions. Aside from helping to direct his auditors’ attention, Moore’s narration is
entirely dispensable. We readers of “Proof of an External World” rely on Moore’s narrative as testimony about the storied occasion, 22nd November 1939, when the premise of Moore’s proof was true and subjects who viewed his performance could gain perceptual knowledge of the premise of Moore’s proof. 7

Moore’s performance supplies the premise of Moore’s proof that can be fully stated only with indexical terms that fix the place and time of Moore’s performance.

(H) Here is one hand, and here is another.

From (H) it follows that

(X) There are external things.

Subjects for Moore’s proof are witnesses who see Moore’s hand gestures on the occasion (H) records when they acquired knowledge of (H) and from (H) inferred Moore’s proof’s conclusion (X). Moore and the subjects in his audience acquire visual perceptual knowledge of (H), and each deduces (X). So their satisfying an unmentioned routine Closure Principle can supply to the subjects of Moore’s proof knowledge that (X) is true. It follows that Moore’s performance offers a satisfactory proof of its conclusion, that there are external things. The premises do not also imply that skepticism is false about external things. Consequently, Moore’s proof imposes his promised counter-example to a stated presupposition of Kant’s problem of an external world.

Moore defends the inference he treats as non-enthymematic from (H) to (X) in the preliminary expository passage that elicits from Kant a mutually agreeable interpretation of “things outside of us.” 8 Hands, like the soap bubbles Moore cites as exemplary external things, are of a sort that can exist when not perceived, whether or not, like some soap bubbles, they ever do exist when not perceived:
I shall have proved that there are now “things outside of us”...if I can prove that there now exist two sheets of paper, or two human hands, or two shoes, or two socks, etc. (145)

Moore acknowledges Kant’s “transcendental” sense in which “external” means “existing as a thing in itself distinct from us.” Moore notes, “it is notorious that he [Kant] himself held that ... if ‘external’ be used in that [transcendental] sense, from the proposition [(H)]...it will not follow that there are external things.” (139) As he passes over this sense of “external,” Moore comments: “What this supposed [transcendental] sense is I do not think that Kant himself ever succeeded in explaining clearly; nor do I know of any reason for supposing that [other] philosophers ever have used “external” in a sense, such that in that sense things that are to be met with in space are not external.” Without pause, Moore sets aside further questions to ask: “But how about the other sense, in which, according to Kant, the word ‘external’ has been commonly used -- that which he calls ‘empirically external’?” (139)

For subjects of Moore's Proof who acquire perceptual knowledge of (H) from Moore's performance, Moore prompts an inference to the intermediate conclusion:

\[(H+)\text{There are at least two human hands.}\]

\[(H+)\implies (X),\text{ since hands, rocks, soap bubbles are each external things. Since } (H+) \text{ is so well known as to merit David Lewis's label “Moorean fact,” why should Moore not offer a proof of } (X) \text{ that relies on } (H+) \text{ as its sole premise? An answer Moore’s 1939 lecture may suggest notes the indexical ingredients in premise } (H) \text{ and offer as disqualification of } (H+) \text{ that it is reproducible and portable. A subject can know that } (H+) \text{ is true from testimony, without current sense perception of any human hands. Moore's lecture presently reformulates } (H) \text{ with both its spatial and temporal indexes articulated.}\]

To emphasize that the sort of proof he performed suffices for a satisfactory proof of its conclusion, Moore compares an exemplary proof that all can acknowledge is satisfactory. The
example starts from three separate sightings of misprints; it concludes that the number of misprints on a given page is at least three:

   Suppose, for instance, it were a question whether there were as many as three misprints on a certain page in a certain book. A says there are, B is inclined to doubt it. How could A prove that he is right? Surely he could prove it by taking the book, turning to the page, and pointing to three separate places on it, saying 'There's one misprint here, another here, and another here' . . . (147)

The exemplary proof satisfies the trio of requirements Moore lists: its premises differ from the conclusion; the premises are known; and the conclusion follows from the premises. (146) A routine Closure Principle, which Moore again leaves unstated, allows subjects who know the premises to gain knowledge of the conclusion that they infer. So the exemplary proof can indeed relieve doubt that there are at least three misprints. Like Moore's proof, the exemplary proof has premises that do not also imply that skepticism is false about the conclusion it does derive.

   Moore also rebuts a gainsayer who would deny that subjects who witness his performance earn knowledge of premise (H):

    How absurd it would be to suggest that I did not know it, but only believed it, and that perhaps it was not the case! You might as well suggest that I do not know that I am now standing up and talking - - that perhaps after all I'm not and that it's not quite certain that I am! (146-7)

For a veteran subject of Moore's proof, Moore's assertion can serve as reminder that during Moore's performance she acquired knowledge of Moore's proof's premise (H) by visual perception of gesturing human hands. Similarly, the lecturer currently knows, without advertised display, that he is standing up talking, as a subject in Moore's audience may know she is currently seated and silent. The reminder at last prompts Moore explicitly to supply (H) its temporal index:
The first was a proof that two human hands existed at the time when I gave the proof . . .

(148)

Moore issues no additional allegations of absurdity, as his lecture considers no additional gainsaying that merely denies, and offers no reasoned support for denying, that subjects gained perceptual knowledge of Moore’s proof’s premise (H).

Unfortunately, some influential commentaries suppose that knowledge of Moore’s proof’s premise rests on nothing other than Moore’s mere dismissal of gainsaying. One commentator contends that Moore “...takes it to be a requirement ... that he should know the premisses of his proof to be true. How can he show this to be so? ...It is here that Moore makes the straightforward assertion of knowledge ... “I [Moore] certainly did at the moment know...” 9 This comment evidently overlooks the circumstance of Moore’s performance of his proof within sight of an attentive lecture audience. Moore and the other subjects of Moore’s proof know its premise (H) by visual perception. Also, if “an assertion of knowledge” is an assertion that (H) is known, the performance of Moore’s proof issues no such assertion.

Moore’s use of “certain” assigns no superlative level to subjects’ certainty of (H) above an epistemic level that matches his own certainty, as he says, “that I am now standing up and talking”:

And if such a thing as that could ever be certain, then assuredly it was certain just now that there was one hand in one of the two places I indicated and another in the other. (147)

An objection from Wittgenstein turns from the question Moore anticipates of whether subjects gain knowledge of (H) to the separate question of how subjects gain knowledge of Moore’s proof’s premise. Wittgenstein supposes that the premise specifies Moore’s own hands and questions how Moore himself knows that the premise is true. His objection denies that Moore’s sight of his hands could be evidence for the premise: “My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it. That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of
my hand as evidence for it” (Wittgenstein 1969: section 250). However, as noted above, premise (H) of Moore’s proof does not imply that the hands its subjects see are Moore’s hands. Also, since Moore does not grant that his proof yields a conclusion that is any less certain than its premise, Moore reveals no allegiance to the assumption of Wittgenstein’s objection, that (H) must be less certain than any evidence that confers certainty on (H). Further epistemic issues, including questions of just how their sense experience contributes to subjects’ perceptual knowledge of (H), Moore’s 1939 “Proof of an External World” does not raise or address.

Moore adds a proof that concludes that there were in the past external things:

How then can I prove that there have been external objects in the past? Here is one proof. I can say: ‘I held up two hands above this desk not very long ago; therefore two hands existed not very long ago; therefore at least two external objects have existed at some time in the past, Q. E. D.’ (147).

A subject’s memory knowledge that (H) was true can suffice for her current knowledge that there were external things in the past. This subordinate proof is available just to the subjects of Moore’s proof who previously knew (H) by visual perception.

Below, sections 4 and 5 turn to a contrasting pair of objections that Moore anticipated, and rebutted, at the close of “Proof of an External World.” The next section considers objections Moore could not have anticipated for the reason that they depend on supposing mistakenly that Moore’s published work presents Moore’s proof elsewhere than in his 1939 lecture.

3. Elsewhere

The audience for Moore’s 1925 memoir “A Defense of Common Sense” must take, or leave, Moore’s written word for it that he does know what he testifies to knowing: “In answer to this question ['But do I really know ...?'], I think I have nothing better to say than that it seems to me that I do know them, with certainty” (Moore 1925: 44). For Moore’s audience in “Proof of an External World,” testimony makes no contribution to the knowledge they gain. Unfortunately, conflation of Moore’s 1939 lecture with his 1925 memoir has prompted some to assume the subjects of Moore’s
proof owe their knowledge of its premise, not to visual sense perception, but somehow to common sense: "Proof of an External World... [issues] an appeal to common sense (though he [Moore] does not actually use the phrase) in order to provide a refutation of idealist doubts about the existence of the external world". (Baldwin 1993: viii; cf. Soames 2014: 225) A current objection to Moore's proof also overlooks its subjects' visual perceptual knowledge of premise (H) to suppose that there is needed testimony that Moore fails to provide his audience: “Moore doesn’t seem ready or able to offer any considerations at all in favor of the claim that he has a hand.... This is why Moore's 'proof' strikes us as so unsatisfactory” (Pryor 2000: 518). Conflation of the argument of his 1939 lecture with Moore's 1925 memoir that prompts disregard for the role of visual sense perception in Moore's proof may help account for Wittgenstein's misdirected objection: “The wrong use made by Moore of the proposition 'I know...' lies in his regarding it as an utterance as little subject to doubt as 'I am in pain'....” (Wittgenstein 1969: section 178).

Moore's 1942 "A Reply to My Critics" uses "refutation of p" to mean "proof of the conclusion that not-p," where Moore corrects a critic's comment about the already famous proof in his 1939 "Proof of an External World." The critic says "wrongly...that my refutation was intended to be a refutation of 'Nobody knows that there are external objects,' whereas it was only intended to be a refutation of 'There are no external objects'..." (Moore 1968: 673-4). Moore's correction declines to add that this critic also overlooks his 1939 lecture's stated aim and accomplishment. In the terminology of Moore's "Reply," however, the alternative to Moore's proof's offering "a refutation of 'Nobody knows that there are external objects'" would credit Moore's proof as a counter-example to the presupposition of Kant's problem that only a "refutation of 'Nobody knows that there are external objects'" can be a satisfactory "refutation of 'There are no external objects'".

The argument of Moore's later "Four Forms of Skepticism" is foreign to Moore's 1939 lecture that eschews both claims to second-order knowledge and claims of comparative levels of certainty.10 This well-known passage from "Four Forms of Skepticism" lists four assumptions that together imply it is false that "I do know that this is a pencil." In "Four Forms of Skepticism" Moore reports this comparison: “It seems to me more certain that I do know that this is a pencil... than that any single
one of these four assumptions is true, let alone all four”. (Moore 1940-44: 226) Not so well known is the emphatic reservation that closes “Four Forms of Skepticism”:

And how on earth is it to be decided which of two things it is rational to be most certain of?

(Moore 1940-44: 226)

Moore abides by this caution throughout “Proof of an External World,” where he abstains from second-order epistemic claims generally.

Moore’s 1941 lecture “Certainty” also departs notably from the argument in “Proof of an External World.” Moore’s 1939 lecture duly bars any current dreamer from service as a subject of Moore’s proof, as section 4 notes below, because (a) a subject who gains perceptual knowledge of premise (H) cannot also be dreaming. Moore adds that he himself “has conclusive evidence that I am awake,” but in 1939 Moore does not grant that (b) having knowledge or conclusive evidence that he is not dreaming is necessary for a subject to gain perceptual knowledge of Moore’s proof’s premise (H). In “Certainty” Moore reaffirms (a): “From the hypothesis that I am dreaming, it would, I think, certainly follow that I don’t know for certain that I am standing up ....,” but grants (b): “I agree...that if I don’t know that I’m not dreaming, it follows that I don’t know that I am standing up”. (Moore 1941: 247) This endorsement of (b) in “Certainty” departs from his 1939 lecture. I note both the editorial caution by Casimir Lewy (Moore 1959: 251), and, in Moore’s “Preface” dated September 1958, Moore’s reference to “bad mistakes...[in “Certainty’] which I cannot yet see how to put right”. (Moore 1959: unnumbered page) Whether granting (b) is among these “bad mistakes,” Moore did not say.

Thirty years earlier, in “Hume’s Philosophy,” his argument anticipates neither the task of subverting Kant’s problem in “Proof of an External World” nor Moore’s performance of his proof. In 1909 Moore implied rather that second-order knowledge is indispensable:

How is the skeptic to prove to himself that he does know any external facts? He can only do it by bringing forward some instance of an external fact, which he does know; and in assuming that he does know this one, he is, of course, begging the question ... The sceptic can, with
perfect internal consistency, deny that he does know any. But it can, I think, be shown that he has no reason for denying it. (Moore 1909: 159-60)

The specimen Moore “brings forward” in 1909 exhibits a subject’s having knowledge of an “external fact.” By conceding that he is begging the question by “assuming that he does know,” Moore declines to offer any defense against gainsaying that would dispute his claim that what he does “bring forward” is knowledge of an external fact. Evidently, in 1909 Moore was not prepared either separately to defend, or to avoid issuing second-order knowledge claims on behalf of a specimen of his knowledge of an “external fact.” In contrast, the specimens Moore’s performance in his 1939 lecture may be said to “bring forward” for the lecturer and for the other subjects of Moore’s proof to see, and thereby to gain knowledge that there are external things, are gesturing hands. ¹¹

Moore’s 1903 “The Refutation of Idealism” aims its argument to refute a characteristic idealist metaphysical doctrine, “whatever is experienced is necessarily so,” that implies generally that anything known to exist is also necessarily known. (Moore 1903: 12) In contrast with this 1903 article, Moore’s 1939 lecture aimed to refute the epistemic doctrine the Critique of Pure Reason stated as a presupposition of Kant’s problem of an external world: that any satisfactory proof that external things exist must be a proof that concludes that it is known that external things exist or that skepticism is false about external things.

This survey helps confirm that Moore’s published work includes Moore’s proof only in his 1939 lecture “Proof of an External World.”

4. Premise known by visual perception

Moore devoted the close of “Proof of an External World” to a pair of objections that stem from opposed traditions in epistemology. The two issue contrasting demands for some additional proof of Moore’s proof’s premise, which Moore’s responses separately rebut.¹² Neither objection disputes that generally proof of a conclusion is not also a proof that the conclusion is known. Also, neither of Moore’s rebuttals merely reminds that a proof can have premises that are not themselves proven. Each objection does protest that there is some “point in question” Moore’s proof fails to resolve:
... I am perfectly well aware that, in spite of all that I have said, many philosophers will still feel that I have not given any satisfactory proof of the point in question. (148)

Moore's separate rebuttals distinguish the two objections.

The first objectors condemn Moore's proof generally for superficiality and implicitly for philosophical irrelevance. They grant that Moore's proof is faultless so far as it goes; they do not dispute that Moore's subjects gain knowledge of premise (H) or that an outcome can be that its subjects know its conclusion (X). Moore specifies the supplement these objectors demand:

I can make an approach to explaining what ... [these first objectors] want by saying that if I had proved the propositions which I used as premises in my two proofs, then they would perhaps admit that I had proved the existence of external things, but, in the absence of such a proof (which, of course, I have neither given nor attempted to give), they will say that I have not given what they mean by a proof of the existence of external things (149).

Moore states this objection in terms of what "some people mean by a proof of an external world." However, these objectors do not differ from Moore about the requirements for a satisfactory proof. Their objection aims rather at the reliance by Moore’s proof on subjects’ visual sense perception to provide knowledge of its premise. The first objectors insist on a proof that derives Moore’s conclusion that there are external things from premises anchored more profoundly than in knowledge a subject can gain by visual sense perception. Moore’s rebuttal does not dispute that his proof should be dismissed as superficial and his performance could be omitted as superfluous, in case there were a proof of the sort these objectors demand. Further, Moore’s rebuttal does not at all discourage theorizing and experimenting on questions of how sensory experience contributes to a subject’s gaining perceptual knowledge of results such as premise (H) of Moore’s proof. Moore’s rebuttal argues, rather, that the result of imposing a supplement that suits these objectors yields an effort to prove the conclusion of Moore’s proof that is irremediably flawed.
Moore first contrasts this objection with a demand for proof of Moore’s proof’s premise (H) that fails to raise any objection at all:

If one of you [subjects of Moore’s proof] suspected that one of my hands was artificial he might be said to get a proof of ...[(H)], by coming up and examining the suspected hand close up, perhaps touching and pressing it and so establishing that it really was a human hand.

(149)

By “establishing that it really was a human hand,” Moore means supplying a proof of (H). He should not be taken to say merely that those among Moore’s Proof’s subjects who are myopic or suspicious can supplement their earlier viewing by scrutinizing Moore’s hands from a closer vantage, perhaps adding exploratory pokes that further confirm (H). A subject could prove (H) by closer scrutiny that allows the subject first to gain knowledge of some result that implies (H), for example:

(H”) Here are two gloveless human hands.

Of course, a result such as (H”) can imply (H), only if (H”) alone implies (X). So an unqualified demand for some proof or other of premise (H) is one that is met by merely multiplying examples that differ insignificantly from Moore’s proof.13

Moore understands that the supplement the first objectors would add to relieve Moore’s proof’s superficiality would be rather a proof of (H) from premises (S) that not known by sense perception but are known rather by introspection. (S) may include the premise: It appears that (H). Consequently, since (H) implies (X), the first objection requires (S) to suffice to imply (X). Moore rebuts:

...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. (149)
Moore’s rebuttal argues that from premises (S) it does not follow that (H); so the proof of (H) the first objectors would add yields a result that fails to imply (X). His argument credits Descartes:

How am I to prove . . . [(H)]? I do not believe I can do it. In order to do it, I should need to prove for one thing, as Descartes pointed out, that I am not now dreaming. But how can I prove that I am not? I have, no doubt, conclusive reasons for asserting that I am not now dreaming; I have conclusive evidence that I am awake: but that is a very different thing from being able to prove it. (149)

There is something Descartes “pointed out” that both exempts Moore’s proof, and burdens a subject of the first objectors’ proposed proof, with a futile task. These objectors must conclude that (not-D) just from premises (S); that is, from premises a subject can know just by introspection, and without appeal to sense perception, that she is not merely dreaming that (H).

Moore’s rebuttal leaves implicit his answer to a question of just what Descartes pointed out that sets the first objectors this task of proving (not-D). The answer is not that dreaming excludes the objector’s proposed proof from having premises that imply that (H) is true. Moore’s well known quip about some Duke of Devonshire discourages taking his rebuttal to overlook a result of its punch line: “He once dreamt that he was speaking in the House of Lords and, when he woke up, found that he was speaking in the House of Lords” (Moore 1940-44: 245). What is excluded when a member of Moore’s audience dreams that (H) is not that (H) is true, but that she gains visual perceptual knowledge that (H). So a dozing member of Moore’s audience would miss her opportunity to serve as a subject of Moore’s proof, in case she was dreaming during Moore’s performance. Further, she would miss her opportunity, even in the utterly unlikely event that, synchronously with Moore’s exhibition, she dreamt of Moore performing Moore’s Proof just as he did. Evidently, Moore credits Descartes with having “pointed out” a general principle, which Moore explicitly instances elsewhere: “From the hypothesis that I am dreaming, it would, I think, certainly follow that I don’t know that I am standing up...” (Moore 1941: 245).
(D-Prin) Dreaming excludes a subject from currently gaining visual perceptual knowledge of results such as (H).

Any current dreamer is disqualified from service as subject of Moore’s proof by (D-Prin). In contrast, a subject is not barred while dreaming, or as a result of what she dreams, from acquiring knowledge of results such as (S). Consequently, as Moore’s rebuttal can conclude, the objectors who demand proof of Moore’s proof’s premise (H) just from premises such as (S) are saddled with a task of proving (not-D) from premises that are known as (S) can be known, just by introspection. The outcome burdens the first objectors with an impossible task.

Moore puts this outcome indirectly by confiding, for his own part, that he cannot prove (not-D), and he leaves implicit, though unmistakeable, that neither can these objectors derive (not-D) just from premises known by introspection. Here, Moore’s rebuttal emphasizes the stark contrast his 1939 lecture observes between the proof Moore performed that concludes (X), that there are external things, on one side, and, on the other, any similar proof aimed to conclude that (not-D) is true. There is no variant of Moore’s Proof that can conclude that the subject is not dreaming. Also, Moore’s disavowal of any proof that concludes that (not-D) helps confirm that his lecture does not require that subjects for Moore’s proof have second-order knowledge of the perceptual knowledge they gain of premise (H). Such second-order knowledge could be offered as premise from which to argue that not-(D) is known.

It must be said nevertheless that the answer is unhelpful that Moore volunteers to the question, Why, despite having “conclusive evidence” that (not-D), can he not prove (not-D)? Moore answers: "I could not tell you what all my evidence is; and I should require to do this at least, in order to give you a proof" (149). If by “all my evidence” Moore includes all evidence that would suffice for a proof, Moore’s answer amounts to a mere restatement that he cannot prove (not-D). If construed more widely, then the task of mobilizing “all my evidence” imposes an unwanted demand on proofs generally that Moore’s proof, in particular, fails to satisfy.

Moore’s acknowledgement of his own inability to prove (not-D), that applies as well to the first objectors, serves to deny that the first objectors’ premises (S), which can be known by
introspection, can provide any satisfactory proof of (not-D). Consequently, the first objectors’
proposed repair for the superficiality their objection alleges in Moore’s proof is defenseless against
Moore’s rebuttal: if introspective knowledge cannot suffice for a proof of (not-D), and a subject’s
gaining perceptual knowledge of (H) implies (not-D), then introspective knowledge cannot suffice for

gaining knowledge of (H). Moore’s rebuttal rejects the supplement to Moore’s proof the first
objectors demand because of its ludicrous implication that a satisfactory proof of an external world
could have subjects all of whom are dreaming.

Moore’s rebuttal to the first objectors’ allegation of superficiality confirms that subjects’
perceptual knowledge of Moore’s proof’s premise (H) is not dispensable.

Moore closed his 1939 lecture by anticipating, and rebutting a second objection that he
contrasts with the first. Although both these anticipated objections demand proof of premise (H), the
first objectors Moore rebutted demand a proof of Moore’s proof’s conclusion that does not have
premises known by visual sense perception. The second objectors deny that Moore’s proof can be a
satisfactory proof of its conclusion, unless Moore adds premises of an “extra proof” sufficient to imply
that (H) is known and, consequently, sufficient to imply that skepticism is false about external things.
Moore’s rebuttal to the second objection confirms that the target of his argument in his 1939 lecture
“Proof of an External World” is Kant’s presupposition in his famously stated problem of an external
world.

5. Conclusion, there are external things

The second objectors Moore anticipated, unlike the first, “want a proof of something I
[Moore] have not proven.” Also unlike the first objectors, the second objectors’ demands do not
merely advance their own preferred alternative to Moore’s proof. These objectors contend rather,
because Moore offers no such “extra proof,” that Moore’s performance fails to provide a satisfactory
proof of its conclusion (X) that there are external things:

...[T]hey think that, if I cannot give such extra proofs, then the proofs that I have given are
not conclusive proofs at all. And this, I think, is a definite mistake. (149)
The “definite mistake” Moore rejects is that any such “extra proofs” are necessary for Moore’s performance to be a conclusive proof of Moore proof’s conclusion (X). Silently, Moore credits these objectors with granting that the reasoning of Moore’s Proof is valid. So the objection he addresses is that without “extra proof” Moore’s performance fails to prove its conclusion that there exist external things contends that lack of “extra proof” bars subjects of Moore’s proof from gaining knowledge of its premise (H).

Moore’s rebuttal to the second objectors duly denies that any “extra proof” of (H) is required for subjects of Moore’s proof to gain knowledge that (H) is true:

I can know things which I cannot prove; and among things which I certainly did known, even if (as I think) I could not prove them, were the premises of my two proofs. (150)

Moore’s defense of this rebuttal to the second objection recurs to his lecture’s start where Moore quotes the Critique of Pure Reason’s statement of Kant’s problem of an external world:

…[T]his view that, if I cannot prove such things as these, I do not know them, is, I think, the view that Kant was expressing in the sentence which I quoted at the beginning of this lecture, when he implies that so long as we have no proof of the existence of external things, their existence must be accepted merely on faith. He means to say, I think, that if I cannot prove that there is a hand here, I must accept it merely as a matter of faith – I cannot know it. (150)

The view that without “extra proof” that provides knowledge of (H) subjects cannot gain knowledge of (H) Moore abbreviates here by saying “if I cannot prove such things as these, I do not know them.” Similarly, Moore refers to the restriction Kant’s problem presupposes, by saying “so long as we have no proof of the existence of external things, their existence must be accepted merely on faith.” That is, no validly reasoned proof that concludes that external things exist can have a premise such as (H) that is known, unless some “extra proof” adds premises sufficient to have as its conclusion that (H) is
known. Such an “extra proof” would suffice to conclude that skepticism is false about external things and, therefore, that Kant’s problem is solved. Here, Moore confirms that he understands Kant’s famously posed problem in “the sentence which I quoted at the beginning of this lecture” to include its presupposition of singularity, that a proof that solves Kant’s problem of an external world is the one satisfactory proof that external things exist.

Duly, the defense Moore gives his rebuttal that traces the second objection to Kant’s problem’s presupposition does not add any unfounded claim to have second-order knowledge that premise (H) of Moore’s proof is indeed known; neither does Moore weigh the comparative level of certainty of (H) against the certainty level of the second objectors’ requirement that only a proof with premises that imply that skepticism is false about external things can be a satisfactory proof that there are external things; he issues no “neo-Moorean” claim that the Kantian requirement on which the second objectors rely amounts to a skeptical hypothesis that Moore knows to be false. Moore does not support his rebuttal by disparaging the second objectors’ own prospects of successfully fulfilling their demand for some “extra proof” that would suffice to imply that skepticism is false. Neither does Moore appeal to the fact that, routinely, proof of a conclusion does not require any additional proof that the conclusion is known or additional proof that skepticism is false about such conclusions. Rather, Moore adds just this sanguine rationale:

Such a view, though it has been very common among philosophers, can, I think, be shown to be wrong – though shown only by use of premisses which are not known to be true, unless we [Moore and his lecture audience] do know of the existence of external things. (150)

Moore acknowledges that he lacks any non-question begging good reason for maintaining, against the second objectors, that Moore’s performance is a satisfactory proof of (X) with no need of supplement by “extra proofs.” Immediately, Moore makes clear that this acknowledgement issues no belated concession. On the contrary, Moore credits his rebuttal to the second objectors with safely rejecting their merely tendentious objection that denies Moore’s subjects know (H):
I [Moore] should say, therefore, that those, if any, who are dissatisfied with these proofs merely on the ground that I did not know their premises, have no good reason for their dissatisfaction. (150)

Moore's rebuttal requires no non-question begging support, because the second objectors themselves "have no good reason" for denying that subjects can gain knowledge of Moore's proof's premise. As Moore observed, their objection applies the presupposition he cited earlier in Kant's famously posed problem of an external world. That is the very presupposition to which Moore's performance of Moore's proof imposes a counterexample. An immediate result of sustaining Moore's proof, which result his 1939 lecture leaves unspoken, subverts Kant's famously posed problem of an external world.

Moore's rebuttal confirms that the point of Moore's proof is to impose a counter-example to Kant's problem's stated presupposition by supplying a satisfactory proof that there are external things that cannot also conclude that there is knowledge of external things or that skepticism is false about external things. The objection Moore anticipated misses the point by condemning Moore's proof as an unsatisfactory proof of its conclusion that there are external things just for the reason that it cannot also conclude that there is knowledge of external things or conclude that skepticism is false about external things. More generally, any objection that Moore's proof fails to relieve skepticism about external things similarly misses the point of Moore's proof.

6. Current objections

Crispin Wright offers as a datum this report of uniform reactions to Moore's proof:

Everyone on first reading feels [that Moore's proof] blatantly begs the question. (Wright 2002: 330) 14

As explanation of just how Moore's Proof begs the question, Wright presents his widely discussed idea of transmission failure: “...transmission may fail in a case where there is warrant for the premises in the first place only because the conclusion is antecedently warranted.” Wright contends
that Moore’s Proof suffers from transmission failure because its subjects’ experiences cannot provide them warrant for (H) unless some hypotheses are antecedently “in place.” Wright’s argument specifies, “among the hypotheses that need to be in place in order for ... Moore’s experience - - to have the evidential force that Moore assumes [is]...the hypothesis that there is indeed a material world.... So the ‘Proof’ begs the question” (Wright 2002: 337). The issue I raise here concerns, not Wright’s widely discussed allegation of transmission failure, but the reported datum that proceeds from his stated assumption that Moore’s proof aims “to marshal a response to skepticism.” (Wright 2002: 337) Evidently, a survey question that could elicit Wright’s datum would ask, “Does Moore’s performance of his proof successfully marshal a response to skepticism about external things?”

Unfortunately, however, the expression “a response to skepticism” fails to distinguish, on one side, a proof that would solve Kant’s problem by concluding that skepticism is false about external things from, on the other side, the proof Moore aimed to subvert Kant’s problem that concludes that there exist external things. A question noted earlier that Moore’s 1939 lecture introduced at its start could serve as replacement for the indeterminate question in Wright’s reported survey. Moore’s question asks: “[W]hat sort of proof, if any, can be given of ‘the existence of things outside of us’?” (127)

Imagine replacing a survey that yields Wright’s reported datum with a survey that asks instead: “Is Moore’s proof one sort of proof of the existence of external things that is satisfactory?” Participants’ responses to this question, predictably, would leave Wright’s explanation of why “Everyone on first reading feels [that Moore’s proof] blatantly begs the question” deprived of its explanandum.

James Pryor starts from the datum presupposed by his question that asks, “why Moore’s argument sounds so unconvincing.” Pryor’s answer would explain that “what’s wrong with Moore’s argument” is just that “anyone who had doubts about its conclusion couldn’t use the argument to rationally overcome those doubts” (Pryor, 2004: 351 emphasis in original; Pryor 2012: 283-8).

Without further discussion of Pryor’s contribution, it must be said that the assessment by Pryor’s question that supposes Moore’s proof “so unconvincing” relies on Pryor’s stated assumption that “Moore’s argument is directed at a skeptic”. (Pryor 2004: 369) When Moore’s proof is understood as directed, not at all at a skeptic, but at Kant’s problem and its stated presupposition, Moore’s effort may appear more convincing.
Barry Stroud’s standard interpretation of Moore’s “Proof of an External World” assumes Moore’s proof aims to solve Kant’s problem. Stroud says:

[Moore] takes [Kant’s problem] to…express the complaint that a proof of the existence of things outside us has never been given. Whether that is what Kant complains of is open to question…but Moore thinks there is no doubt that he can meet the challenge (Stroud 1984: 84).

Stroud objects, not that Moore’s Proof fails to provide an unexceptionable proof of its conclusion, nor that it fails to provide knowledge of its conclusion or fails to achieve a goal of dispelling skepticism about external things. Stroud contends that Moore’s proof offers no response at all to a philosophical problem. Stroud’s objection explains this irrelevance with a distinction that credits Moore’s proof with answering a non-philosophical question. Stroud protests that Moore is oblivious to this distinction, which Stroud says “we recognize,” that contrasts philosophical with non-philosophical questions of “whether I know there are external things”:

We can ask whether Moore’s proof is a good one – whether he knows what he claims to know and legitimately establishes his conclusion on that basis. If so, he has proved that there are external things. We can also ask whether Moore refutes philosophical skepticism and answers affirmatively the philosophical problem of the external world. I think we do immediately feel that the answer to this second question is ‘No’ (Stroud 1984: 86).

Moore’s proof responds with an answer to Stroud’s non-philosophical question that Stroud finds unexceptionable. To the second, philosophical question of whether Moore’s proof “refutes philosophical skepticism and answers affirmatively the philosophical problem of the external world,” and whether Moore even acknowledges a goal of dispelling philosophical skepticism, Stroud contends that Moore’s proof is “completely irrelevant.” Since Stroud maintains that his distinction between the non-philosophical and philosophical questions of “whether I know there are external
things” is one that “we recognize,” he duly acknowledges that the distinction could not fail to be available to Moore himself. Stroud ends with a view of Moore as “an extremely puzzling philosophical phenomenon,” and with no answer to his residual question, “How could Moore show no signs of acknowledging [Stroud’s philosophical question of whether we know there are external things]? ... That is the question about the mind of Moore that I [Stroud] cannot answer” (Stroud 1984: 125-6).

Stroud’s puzzlement stems from his standard interpretation that supposes Moore’s proof aims to solve Kant’s problem and overlooks Moore’s announced aim for Moore’s proof.

This study has departed from the received interpretations to credit Moore’s stated aim for the proof Moore performed in his 1939 lecture ‘Proof of an External World.” The outcome sustains Moore’s Proof against widely received objections.
1 Parenthetical page numbers in the text are to the reprint in Moore 1959.

2 “Could Moore really imagine that he had refuted the radical sceptic with this argument?” (Maddy: 2017: 164). “Most people think, contra G. E. Moore, that you cannot get out of radical skepticism by waving your hands” (Roush 2010: 265).

3 “…like Dr Johnson’s before him -- the episode of simple-minded petitio which it always seemed” (Wright 2002: 337).

4 “He is content to keep crossing the room in front of the doubting Zeno, as it were” (Stroud 1984: 140).

5 “…an argument that starts from one’s seeing a hand in front of one would be…useless for Moore’s purpose – if…we identify his purpose by taking his performance at face value” (McDowell 2009: 236).

6 One interpretation credits Moore with effectively combatting a version of skepticism by employing Moore’s proof ironically: “Moore’s point, rather, is that we do not know that external things exist by proving this. On the contrary, we know that external things exist by perceiving them, and therefore sceptics are misguided in wanting a proof in the first place” (Greco 2002: 456).

7 Notably, (H) does not imply that the hands that subjects see are Moore’s hands. So (H) cannot prompt a current “Brain in a Vat” sceptical hypothesis, that Moore is an otherwise disembodied human brain. (Pace Greco 2002: 560f). Contrast the meditator in Descartes’s First Meditation: “I am here, sitting by the fire …holding this piece of paper in my hands…” (Descartes 1984: 13).

8 Cp. “How he [Moore] knows ... that there is an external world ... is by combining the thing he knows by perception ... with something else that he knows by philosophical means” (Sosa 2009: 6).

9 Cp. “Moore simply asserted that we do have knowledge of such things ... that he has hands...” (Bonjour 2010: 77; see Baldwin 1990: 291).

11 *Cp.* “By Moore’s lights, his Proof is not intended to give us knowledge that we might not already have, but rather to display to us the knowledge that we already have...” (Neta 2007: 83). “[Moore gives] an exhibition of knowledge [that proceeds] by means of an appeal to the audience’s beliefs concerning what is known” (Baldwin 1990: 291).

12 *Cp.* “As Moore acknowledges there, he cannot *prove* his premises...” (Weatherall 2015: 14); “Moore says that his proof is perfectly satisfactory ... even though, as he admits, he is not able to ‘prove [its premises]’” (Pryor 2000: 518).

13 Moore does not pause to grant, in one colloquial sense of “prove,” that Moore’s proof’s subjects’ visual sense perception already sufficed to “prove” its premise (H); that is, colloquially, it suffices for someone to “prove it” just that he or she can convey knowledge that (H).

14 John McDowell’s agreement is qualified: “Moore may intend something more subtle” (McDowell, 2009: 233 n. 14).
References


Littlefield Adams.


