

**SCEPTICISM AND ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY:
G. E. MOORE**

Stella Villarrea
Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

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1. Introduction

One of the distinctive marks of analytic epistemology is its treatment of scepticism about knowledge of the external world. If we consider the fundamental role that scepticism had always played in traditional theories of knowledge, the somewhat secondary role it plays in analytic epistemologies will surprise us. The general view within analytic circles maintains that knowledge *is* possible, so that the only interesting issue is to find its conditions of possibility¹. From this perspective, the task of refuting scepticism does not appear as necessary. When scepticism is introduced in the discussion, it is as a useful tool to evaluate the insufficiencies of different theories in explaining what knowledge is. Therefore, the aim is not showing *that* the sceptic is wrong, but showing *how* he is wrong². In short, either silence around scepticism, or its use as a methodological tool are the immediate consequences of an extended view, according to which epistemology would be immune against the sceptical challenge.

This situation has changed in part during the last years, when abundant works about the success or failure of the different types of scepticism has appeared, and when the importance of dealing with scepticism for the success of any theory of knowledge has been accepted³. But notwithstanding the actual proliferation of research about scepticism in analytic spheres, there is an issue that has not been properly dealt with yet. I mean the discussion about the reasons why analytic epistemology has frequently considered scepticism as harmless. I think studying the beginnings of analytic philosophy can throw some light onto this problem. It is often said that analytic philosophy lacks a historical perspective, even regarding itself. My essay attempts to contribute to the development of such a historical memory, by showing the

¹ Chisholm, Roderick: *Theory of Knowledge*, 2^a ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977.

² Stroud, Barry: *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.

Pollock, John: *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*. London: Hutchinson, 1987.

³ Williams, Michael (ed.): *Scepticism*. Hants, England: Dartmouth, 1993.

conceptual line that links the beginnings of analytic philosophy with current research about scepticism. In this sense, the study of the philosophical position of G. E. Moore, one of the fathers of analytic philosophy, illuminates our understanding of the displacement of scepticism from its former central place in epistemological discussions.

2. Moore's original proposal: the justification of a proposition only requires that there is no reason to deny it

Moore's epistemological project aims at the following objective: to show the validity of everyday or common sense beliefs against sceptical claims. Under common sense beliefs he understands, for example, the belief that the Earth has existed for many years; that there were and are three dimensional objects, like the human body; that we are surrounded by other people that feel, think and have different experiences; and other such beliefs. With this problem in mind, he explores a strategy of argumentation which, in my opinion, is new in the history of philosophy. Such a strategy consists in saying that if there is no reason that justifies denying our common sense beliefs, then we are justified in holding them. Thus, throughout his writings Moore tries to find a reason to deny, for example, that there is an external world. After various attempts, he arrives at the conclusion that there is no reason to deny the existence of the external world. Hence, we are justified in believing its existence.

Moore's first two articles - 'The refutation of idealism' (1903) and 'The nature and reality of objects of perception' (1905-1906) - have not received the attention of many scholars. In my opinion, however, the study of those two articles is vital to understand Moore's original strategy of justification, for they contain in a nutshell much of what he would later develop about scepticism.

In effect, a hint of Moore's original approach to the justification of our common sense beliefs can already be found in his first article 'The refutation of idealism'⁴.

"The question requiring to be asked about material things is thus not: What reason have we for supposing that anything exists *corresponding* our sensations? but: What reason have we for supposing that material things do *not* exist, since *their* existence has precisely the same evidence as that of our sensations?" ('The refutation of idealism', 30).

He then tries to find this reason in his next article 'The nature and reality of objects of perception'⁵. Where he there looks for a justification of our belief in the existence of the world, he introduces the notion of justification in terms of good reasons:

⁴ Moore, George Edward.: 'The refutation of idealism', in his *Philosophical Studies*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922.

⁵ Moore, G. E.: 'The nature and reality of objects of perception', in his *Philosophical Studies*, *ib.*

"A good reason for a belief is a proposition which is true, and which would not be true unless the belief were also true." ('The nature and reality of objects of perception', 35).

Hence, a proposition is a justification for a belief if its truth is related to the truth of the belief. Now, what proposition can serve as a justification of the belief in the existence of the world? In this article, Moore suggests that the only way to justifiably believe in the existence of the world, is to suppose that the proposition 'There are sense-contents' is true.

"If our observation gives us any reason whatever, for believing in the existence of other persons <and, hence, of the world>, we must assume the existence, not only of our own perceptions, thoughts and feelings, but also of some ... 'sense-contents'". ('The nature and reality of objects of perception', 79).

Hence, the problem of the existence of external world depends on whether we can affirm that the sense-data exist. But, can we justifiably affirm that the sense data exist? It is precisely when answering this question that Moore abandons the traditional approach to justification. For Moore tries to justify the belief in the existence of the sense-data, not by finding a reason to hold it, but rather by showing that there are no reasons to doubt it. This new approach to justification can be seen in the following two quotes, where Moore asks himself:

"Is there then any reason to think, for instance, that *none* of the colours which I perceive as occupying areas of certain shapes and sizes really exist in the areas which they appear to occupy?" ('The nature and reality of objects of perception', 90)

And he answers:

"I think it is plain that we have no reason to assert, in any case whatever, that a perceived colour does *not* really exist in the place where it is perceived as being, *unless* we assume that that very same place really is occupied by something else -- *either* by some different sensible qualities or by material objects such as physical science supposes to exist. ('The nature and reality of objects of perception', 95).

At this point I need to make some remarks. I have introduced Moore's discussion about sense-data only because it is an early example of Moore's search for a new kind of justification. But my focus in this paper is to show Moore's strategy of justification. Therefore, I will put aside all the questions

specifically related to sense-data, such as why Moore thinks that the existence of sense-data is a reason for the existence of the world, or whether his argument against denying the existence of sense-data can be accepted.

Thus, we have seen how Moore does not want to confirm that the sense-contents *do* exist, but to analyse whether it is sensible to suppose that they do not exist. Through this strategy, Moore tries to hold the existence of the world indirectly: if we lack grounds to justifiably deny its existence, that is, if we lack grounds to doubt it, then we are justified to affirm it. In other words, only if there are reasons to doubt the existence of external reality does it make sense to doubt it. And unless we give these reasons, our daily beliefs will not be threatened. With this approach, Moore leaves the burden of proof to the sceptic who denies that our beliefs in the existence of the world are justified.

3. The thesis of the degrees of certainty

The above strategy of justification for common sense beliefs is intimately linked to Moore's defense of what I will call the 'thesis of the degrees of certainty'. This thesis highlights that our beliefs present us with different degrees of certainty, and holds that their justification depends on the degree of certainty that accompanies them. As a consequence, if a certain belief presents us with a higher degree of certainty than another belief, then we will be justified in holding the former.

The thesis of the degrees of certainty has an immediate application to the sceptical debate. Thus, a pervasive claim in Moore's writings is his insistence that we are less certain of sceptical argumentations than of non-sceptical claims. In other words, we are more certain of our daily beliefs than of any doubt about them⁶. According to this thesis, it is not necessary to state that our belief in the existence of the world is certain, but it is only necessary to show that such a belief has a higher degree of certainty than sceptical doubts. Examples of the thesis of the degrees of certainty can be found throughout Moore's writings. I have chosen one that appears in his article 'Some judgements of perception' (1918-1919).

"This, after all, you know, really is a finger: there is no doubt about it: I know it, and you all know it. And I think we may safely challenge any philosopher to bring forward any argument in favour either of the proposition that we do not know it, or of the proposition that it is not true, which does not at some point, rest upon some premiss which is, beyond comparison, less certain than is the proposition

⁶ Moore, G. E.: 'Hume's philosophy' and 'Some judgements of perception', in his *Philosophical Studies*, *ib.*

Moore, G. E.: *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*. Georg Allen & Unwin, 1953.

Moore, G. E.: 'Proof of an external world' and 'Four forms of scepticism' in his *Philosophical Papers*. London: Georg Allen & Unwin, 1959.

which is designed to attack. The questions whether we do ever know such things as these, and whether there are any material things, seem to me, therefore, to be questions which there is no need to take seriously: they are questions which it is quite easy to answer, with certainty, in the affirmative." ('Some judgements of perception', 228).

4. Moore's rejection of scepticism

From that strategy of justification and from the thesis of the degrees of certainty, Moore derives the following conclusion: we do not have reasons to doubt our everyday beliefs. Hence, we are justified in holding them. Scepticism should not worry us.

A further consequence of this kind of argumentation is Moore's assertion that our everyday beliefs do not need any proof, and correspondingly, that no philosophical argument can take away their validity. This view appears, for example, in his article 'Hume's philosophy' (1909).

"The only proof that we do know external facts lies in the simple fact that we do know them. And 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. And in particular it may, I think, be easily seen that the arguments which Hume uses in favour of this position have no conclusive force.

To begin with, his arguments ... depend upon two general assumptions. ... And both of these assumptions may, of course, be denied. It is just as easy to deny them, as to deny that I do know any external facts. And if these two assumptions did really lead to the conclusion that I cannot know any, it would, I think, be proper to deny them: we might fairly regard the fact that they led to this absurd conclusion as disproving them." ('Hume's philosophy', 160).

As Moore says three pages after:

"It would always be at least as easy to deny the argument as to deny that we do know external facts." ('Hume's philosophy', 163).

Moore's strategy is, clearly, a *reductio ad absurdum* of scepticism. Thus, if the sceptical argument concludes that this hand does not exist, then something is wrong with the argument.

We can now appreciate an important development in Moore's approach to justification. In effect, at this point of his philosophical career he no longer analyses *whether* our everyday beliefs are justified, but affirms that they are. In this sense, the two last articles mentioned, namely, 'Hume's philosophy' and 'Some judgements of perception', introduce an important theoretical change in relation to the earlier article mentioned above, 'The nature and reality of objects of perception'. Such a development shows that Moore drew

theoretical conclusions from his own philosophical research.

5. Criticisms

As expected, Moore's approach gave birth to numerous criticisms. A feature common to many of them is the opinion that Moore's position was a naive, and therefore, a non-philosophical way of getting rid of scepticism⁷. However, I think that such an interpretation of his epistemology must be re-examined for the following reasons.

First, it is not true that Moore introduces either the strategy of justification mentioned above or the thesis of the degrees of certainty *ad hoc* to get rid of scepticism, and that he therefore begs the question. On the contrary, Moore gives us reasons to defend those approaches as the only way that either the epistemologist, or someone who is not an expert in philosophical issues, has to justify their everyday beliefs. I have shown before how these reasons appear in one of his first articles, namely, in 'The nature and reality of objects of perception'. I sustain that Moore's confidence in the usefulness of both elements to refute scepticism is not *ad hoc*, but the result of previous philosophical analysis where he had shown that other strategies of justification inevitably failed.

Second, I think Moore's position cannot be judged as naive since he realized, either explicitly or implicitly, its limitations. Towards the end of his career, and especially in the last article he published in life, 'Certainty' (1941/1959)⁸, he recognized two of the difficulties that his position raised.

The first difficulty is the lack of a metacriterion to evaluate the criterion based on the degree of certainty that accompanies our beliefs. Without such a metacriterion, Moore would need to accept that it is possible to distinguish beliefs which are knowledge from those which are not knowledge by introspection and without argumentation. This kind of internalism faces, obviously, numerous problems. Moore was conscious of the difficulties which he expressed drawing a distinction between subjective and objective certainty.

"There is, therefore, a clear difference in meaning between 'I feel certain that ...' on the one hand, and 'I know for certain that ...' or 'It is certain that ...' on the other. ('Certainty', 239).

The second difficulty Moore mentioned is the impossibility of dealing successfully with the dream-hypothesis. It is worth mentioning that in 'Certainty', as well as in his former

⁷ Clarke, Thomas: 'The legacy of skepticism', *The Journal of Philosophy* 69, 1972.

Burnyeat, Myles: 'Examples in epistemology: Socrates, Theaetetus and Moore', *Philosophy* 52, 1977.

Stroud, Barry: *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.

⁸ Moore, G. E.: 'Certainty', in his *Philosophical Papers*, *ib.*

article 'Four forms of scepticism' (1940-44/1959)⁹, Moore worked hard to refute the validity of using the dream-hypothesis to conclude the impossibility of knowledge about the external world. His arguments are very interesting, and deserve a more detailed study than the one I am able to devote here. These considerations notwithstanding, it cannot be forgotten that Moore's last claim is the recognition that, unfortunately, the dream-hypothesis leaves the door open to scepticism.

"I cannot see my way to deny that it is logically possible that all the sensory experiences I am having now should be mere dream-images. And if this is logically possible, and if further the sensory experiences I am having now were the only experiences I am having, I do not see how I could possibly know for certain that I am not dreaming." ('Certainty', 250).

It might be precisely because Moore recognized these difficulties that he did not draw in its entirety the theoretical conclusions that could be derived from his position. On the one hand, Moore thought that the strategy of justification, which consists in pointing out the lack of reasons for doubting, and the thesis of the degrees of certainty were not only adequate, but the only way to achieve justification. But, on the other hand, he was always reluctant to accept those strategies once and for all. In effect, throughout his writings Moore also explored more classical strategies of justification, where he tried to find reasons for *believing* justifiably that there is an external world. This fact led to contrasting claims, and explains why in 'A defence of common sense' Moore sustained that it was not necessary to prove that the point of view of common sense was adequate, whereas in 'Proof of an external world' he felt obliged to offer proof of the world's existence.

6. Appraisal.

It is incompatible to claim that there are no reasons to doubt our daily beliefs about the world with other claims that try to prove the existence of an external world or to refute scepticism. Such movement in two directions is one of Moore's weakest points. In my opinion, Moore's project has strength as long as he sticks to his original intuition. But, as soon as he forgets that which gives his approach its originality and novelty, that is, the strategy of justification mentioned above and the thesis of the degrees of certainty, he is unable to shut the door to scepticism.

Despite his ultimate failure, I think Moore's attempt to vindicate the validity of our everyday beliefs deserves all our respect¹⁰. He belongs to a tradition of thought, one of whose

⁹ Moore, G. E.: 'Four forms of scepticism', in his *Philosophical Papers*, *ib.*

¹⁰ In this regard, I agree with some scholars who have recently stressed Moore's importance:

Baldwin, Thomas: 'Moore and philosophical scepticism', in

biggest exponents is Hume, which recognizes the existence of a clash between the justification of our beliefs in everyday life and the justification of our beliefs in philosophical life. Moore remained determined to value everyday beliefs above the sceptical conclusions of certain philosophical attitudes, despite the distinct difficulties he encountered. This is precisely Moore's more impressive feature: he never abandoned his everyday 'I' when philosophizing. In this sense, the label of 'philosopher of common sense', frequently used to refer to him, is actually a compliment.

Moore inaugurates a new path in contemporary epistemology¹¹. His importance rests in understanding that the habitual strategy of looking for an apodictic justification of our beliefs through the search for a reason to support them, does not lead us very far. He was the first analytic philosopher to realize that the only way to defeat scepticism is to approach it from a new perspective. It is a perspective that finds a firm ground in daily beliefs and builds from them a theory of knowledge with deeply anti-sceptical features. Moore's epistemological position presented enormous advantages. Taking everyday beliefs as inviolable, prevents the epistemologist from falling into a pyrrhonic trap. We do not need to argue the confidence we have in our beliefs. We know that the world exists, and we do not need to prove it. Our only worry should be to understand what knowledge is, not whether it is possible. This approach interested many epistemologists who came after him.

COMMENTS:

- Important difference between 'The refutation of idealism' and 'The nature and reality of objects of perception':

In the first article Moore does not introduce the existence of sense-data as a hypothesis (according to Miguel), while in the second article he does.

The explanation of this fact would require an analysis of the conclusions that Moore draws from 'The refutation of idealism'.

- Important difference between 'The refutation of idealism' and other posterior articles: In the former article Moore does not consider scepticism as absurd, and thinks that scepticism cannot be refuted until we find reasons for accepting the existence of material objects. Hence, he tries to find these reasons in 'The nature and reality of objects of perception' and in other posterior articles.

Bell, D. and Cooper, N. (eds.): *The Analytic Tradition.-- Meaning, Thought and Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990.

Stroll, Avrum: *Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

¹¹ The Scottish philosopher Reid and the Spanish Balmes had explored a similar path in modern philosophy.

- The fact that Moore is an intuitionist in ethics fits into his general defence of the thesis of the degrees of certainty and of the common sense in epistemology.

The problem every intuitionist faces is to determine whether or not an intuition is adequate, that is, to distinguish true judgments about perception from false ones. An intuitionist sustains that there is no criterion to determine whether or not certain properties are present. Either you see that the object possesses certain properties or you do not see it. The consequence is the impossibility of avoiding disagreement in epistemological discussions as well as in cotidian discussions.

- Moore is not a pragmatist, but there is a way to develop his ideas that leads to pragmatism. On the other hand, there is Moore's influence on Wittgenstein's 'On certainty'.

- Moore's study can help to indicate the path that needs to be followed to answer the dominant view within contemporary philosophy where relativism, probabilism and anti-realism (and all of them allow for sceptical conclusions) are in fashion.

- Common sense beliefs are not propositions about "relations of ideas" but about "matters of fact" (following Hume's denomination).

- Since 'The refutation of idealism' one of Moore's unresolved problems had been sensorial illusions.

- Moore neutralizes the effects of sceptical argumentations. Because he knows he is standing up, he knows he is not dreaming. The burden of proof is left to the sceptic.

Moore does not follow the sceptic's game, because he refuses to say how he knows. He knows that he knows, even if he cannot say how he knows.

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