

Handout #2: G. E. Moore

1. The Proof of the External World

1. Here is one hand. [Said w/ appropriate gesture.]
 2. Here is another. [Said w/ appropriate gesture.]
- Therefore,
3. There are at least two (“external” or “material”) things.
- Therefore,
4. The external (or material) world exists.

2. What is a Proof?

Three Necessary Conditions:

- (1) Doesn't “beg the question.”
- (2) Must know the premises.
- (3) The conclusion must “follow from” the premises.

The Key Questions: Must one not only *know* the premises but *prove* them if the argument is to constitute a genuine *proof* of the conclusion? Can one know something without being able to prove it?

3. Proof, Evidence and Reasons

“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. I could not tell you what all my evidence is; and I should require to do this at least, in order to give a proof. . . I know things, which I cannot prove; and among things which I certainly did know, even if (as I think) I could not prove them, were the premises of my two proofs.”

4. The Dreaming/BIV Argument

In “Four Forms of Skepticism,” Moore goes on to examine skeptical arguments for the claim that he does not know that he has hands. They begin with Russell's claim that it is logically (and conceptually) possible that any given experience (or percept) is had during the course of a dream or caused by a machine or evil genius. Moore takes this claim to raise three important questions. The skeptic requires particular answers to these questions if he is to mount a successful argument for the claim that Moore doesn't know that he has hands.

Question 1: What kind of possibility do we have in mind when we say that for any given experience of mine *e* it is *possible* that *e* is not a veridical perception of an object but instead (part of) a dream or hallucination?

Question 2: For any given experience of mine *e* is it (in the relevant sense) possible that *e* is not a veridical perception of an object but instead (part of) a dream or hallucination?

Question 3: If this is possible (in the relevant sense) does it follow that I don't know for certain that *e* is not (part of) a dream or hallucination?

5. Question 1

(a) "Possibly hallucinatory" can't mean that the proposition that *e* is part of a dream or hallucination does not entail a contradiction. That is true but it does not present any obstacle to my knowing the falsity of the proposition in question (short of an argument that one can only know that self-contradictory things are false).

(b) "Possibly hallucinatory" can't mean that the proposition that *e* is part of a dream or hallucination is logically compatible with everything I know. That would beg the question in favor of the skeptic. After all, Moore claims and the skeptic denies that Moore knows that he has hands; this is then the question at issue. Thus, the skeptic cannot merely assert that Moore does not know that he has hands without begging the question at issue.

Moore concludes that the skeptic must mean: (c) that the proposition that *e* is part of a dream or hallucination is logically compatible with everything I know *immediately*. But what is "immediate knowledge"? This is a term of art. Unless the skeptic can define "immediate knowledge" in an intuitive way, his argument can't have any applicability to knowledge as we ordinarily conceive of it.

I think we can best understand the skeptic as arguing that the proposition that *e* is part of a dream or hallucination is logically compatible with *all of my perceptual and introspective evidence or the reasons for which I hold my perceptual and introspective beliefs*. This is equivalent to Moore's claim so long as *my perceptual and introspective evidence or the reasons for which I hold my perceptual and introspective beliefs = my immediate knowledge*.

6. Question 2

Answer: yes. The proposition that *e* is part of a dream or hallucination is indeed logically compatible with all of my immediate knowledge. The proposition that *e* is part of a dream or hallucination is logically compatible with all of my perceptual and introspective evidence or the reasons for which I hold my perceptual and introspective beliefs.

7. Question 3

Moore is unconvinced that the skeptic has a good reason for supposing that **if** for any given experience of mine *e* it is (in the relevant sense) **possible** that *e* is not a veridical perception of an object but instead (part of) a dream or hallucination **then I don't know** for certain that *e* is not (part of) a dream or hallucination.

Is there an argument for this infallibilist assumption? If the skeptic doesn't have an argument for this claim is he nevertheless justified in making this assumption? Is it a conceptual truth?

8. Moore and the Burden of Proof

Let p be the proposition that Moore knows that he has hands. Let q be the proposition that if for any given experience of Moore's e it is in the relevant sense possible that e is not a veridical perception of an object but instead (part of) a dream or hallucination, then Moore doesn't know for certain that e is not (part of) a dream or hallucination. Moore argues that he **feels more certain** that he knows p then he is that q is true. And he argues that he is **rational** to feel more certain of this.

How, he asks, can the skeptic show that it is more rational to suppose that q is true than that p is known?

Moore thinks that this maneuver allows him to turn the skeptic's argument on its head. Recall the "Main Argument."

- (1) You don't know that you are not a brain in a vat (BIV).
 - (2) You know that if you have hands, then you are not a BIV.
- Therefore,
- (3) You don't know that you have hands.

Moore says it is just as legitimate to argue:

- (a) You know that you have hands.
 - (b) You know that if you have hands, then you are not a BIV.
- Therefore,
- (3) You know that you are not a brain in a vat (BIV).

Is Moore right about this or has he made some mistake about the dialectical strategy of the skeptic? Who has the so-called "burden of proof"?

9. Perceptual Evidence

Is Moore right in saying that he has *conclusive* evidence and reasons for believing he has hands even though he cannot prove this claim? What are the reasons for which Moore believes he has hands? What is his evidence for this claim?

A. Evidence of the senses: Moore remarks that we use the expression 'evidence of the senses' in such a way that it is conceptually confused to say "Jones last night was only dreaming that he was standing up but all the time he had the evidence of his senses that he was."

So if the skeptic is right, I cannot be certain that I have the evidence of my senses.

B. Sensory experience: Let us use the expression “sensory experience” in such a way that this experience which I certainly am having will be a sensory experience whether or not it merely consists in the having of dream images.

Moore allows that if it is not certain that he is not dreaming at the then current time then it is not certain that all of his experiences are not mere dream images.

But Moore persists, “If he is dreaming it may be that he is only dreaming that dreams have occurred; and if he does not know that he is not dreaming, can he possibly know that he is not only dreaming that dreams have occurred?”

Question: Can you spot the inconsistency in this argument? What does it mean to say that someone has **only** dreamt that dreams occur?

10. Moore’s Positive Reply

Moore admits it is possible that all of his sensory experiences are mere dream images. He also admits that if his sensory experiences are the only experiences he is having, he cannot know that he is not dreaming. But Moore nevertheless insists that he still knows that he is not dreaming because he has distinct experiences: **memories**, and he insists that it **probably impossible** that he have all his current sensory experience *and* all of his memory experiences but that he nevertheless be currently dreaming.

Questions: What are memory experiences supposed to be doing here? Why does Moore think it **crucially less likely** that the conjunction of his sensory and memory experiences be mere dream images than that his sensory experiences alone be mere dream images?

Task: Provide an argument for this claim on Moore’s behalf.