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HOW TO REID MOORE

By John Greco

Moore's 'Proof of an External World' has evoked a variety of responses from philosophers, including bafflement, indignation and sympathetic reconstruction. I argue that Moore should be understood as following Thomas Reid on a variety of points, both epistemological and methodological. Moreover, Moore and Reid are exactly right on all of these points. Hence what I present is a defence of Moore's 'Proof', as well as an interpretation. Finally, I argue that the Reid–Moore position is useful for resolving an issue that has recently received attention in epistemology, namely, how is it that one knows that one is not a brain in a vat?

Some years ago, G.E. Moore held up one hand and then another, and claimed to have thereby proved that external things exist. Moore's subsequent paper, 'Proof of an External World', has since evoked a variety of responses from philosophers, including bafflement, indignation and sympathetic reconstruction.[1]

Philosophers have disagreed not only about the success of Moore's alleged proof, but also over what he was trying to do in the first place. For example, some have interpreted Moore as an ordinary-language philosopher. According to Norman Malcolm, 'The essence of Moore's technique of refuting philosophical statements consists in pointing out that these statements *go against ordinary language*'.[2] Alice Ambrose took a similar view:

> It is clear that Moore is in effect insisting on retaining conventions already established in the language about the usage of the words 'know' and 'believe', and that the consequence of what he says is the preservation of the linguistic *status quo*.[3]

As Barry Stroud points out, however, Moore effectively repudiates any such interpretation. In Moore's reply to Ambrose, he says flatly 'I could not have

[1] G.E. Moore, 'Proof of an External World', presented on 22 November 1939, and published in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 25 (1939), pp. 273–300, repr. in Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Collier, 1962), pp. 126–48, to which page numbers below refer.

[2] N. Malcolm, 'Moore and Ordinary Language', in P.A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore* (La Salle: Open Court, 1942), pp. 343–68, at p. 349.

[3] A. Ambrose, 'Moore's "Proof of an External World"', in Schilpp, pp. 395–417, at p. 415.

supposed that the fact that I have a hand proved anything as to how the expression "external objects" *ought* to be used'.[4]

Stroud's interpretation of Moore's proof seems no more plausible, however. According to him, the question whether we know anything about the external world can be taken in an internal or an external sense. In the internal sense, the question can be answered from 'within' one's current knowledge; hence one can answer it by pointing out some things that one knows, such as that here is a hand. In the external sense, however, the question is put in a 'detached' and 'philosophical' way:

> If we have the feeling that Moore nevertheless fails to answer the philosophical question about our knowledge of external things, as we do, it is because we understand that question as requiring a certain withdrawal or detachment from the whole body of our knowledge of the world. We recognize that when I ask in that detached philosophical way whether I know that there are external things, I am not supposed to be allowed to appeal to other things I think I know about external things in order to help me settle the question.[5]

According to Stroud, Moore's proof is a perfectly good one in response to the internal question, but fails miserably in response to the external or 'philosophical' question. In fact, Stroud argues, Moore's failure to respond to the philosophical question is so obvious that it cries out for an explanation – hence Malcolm's and Ambrose's ordinary-language interpretations. Stroud (p. 119) offers a different explanation for Moore's failure to address the philosophical question: '[Moore] resists, or more probably does not even feel, the pressure towards the philosophical project as it is understood by the philosophers he discusses'. Or again (p. 125), 'we are left with the conclusion that Moore really did not understand the philosopher's assertions in any way other than the everyday "internal" way he seems to have understood them'. The problem with this interpretation, of course, is that it makes Moore out to be an idiot. Is it really possible that Moore, the great Cambridge philosopher, did not understand that other philosophers were raising a philosophical question?

I shall opt for a more straightforward and more generous interpretation of what Moore is doing in his 'Proof of an External World', one on which it does not matter that Moore fails to answer the sceptic's external question, or that he otherwise fails to answer the sceptic in a non-question-begging way. I shall argue that Moore is following Thomas Reid on a variety of points, both epistemological and methodological. Moreover, I shall argue that Moore and Reid are exactly right on all of these points. Hence I shall be

[4] Moore, 'A Reply to My Critics', in Schilpp, pp. 533–677, at p. 674.

[5] B. Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 117–18.

offering not only an interpretation of Moore's paper, but a defence of it as well.

My evidence for the proposed interpretation is, first, that we know that Moore was familiar with and admired Reid.[6] Secondly, interpreting Moore as following Reid makes otherwise puzzling and dubious aspects of 'Proof of an External World' both clearly intelligible and eminently plausible. Finally, the proposed interpretation shows how Moore's 'Proof of an External World' is related to other works of Moore's, by showing how all of these fit into the context of a broader philosophical project. I shall argue for my substantive thesis, that the Reid–Moore position is correct, largely by letting Reid speak for himself. But I shall also add my own two cents' worth where appropriate, and at the end of the paper I shall show how the position neatly addresses an issue in epistemology that has received recent attention.

Here is the interpretation in a nutshell: in giving his proof, Moore knows full well that the sceptics will not be satisfied with it. Moore is not trying to give the sceptics something that they will be satisfied with. 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. When Moore gives his proof, therefore, his tongue is in his cheek. (There is a common sort of joke among analytic philosophers, and it is very British as well: that is, to give someone what they literally asked for, even though you know that it is not what they want.) It is not that Moore does not understand the sceptics' question, or that he does not understand what sceptics want when they request a proof that external things exist: he understands perfectly well what the sceptics are requesting, and he is challenging a variety of assumptions behind that request.

In the remainder of the paper I shall proceed as follows. In §I, I shall go over some salient aspects of Moore's 'Proof of an External World', including some remarks about what he intends to be proving, the proofs themselves, and some remarks which Moore makes in response to anticipated objections. In §II, I shall discuss some epistemological principles from Reid, and in §III, I shall discuss some methodological principles. In §IV, I shall look at some objections to what I have said so far. In §V, I shall apply the

[6] See K. Lehrer, 'Reid's Influence on Contemporary American and British Philosophy', in S.F. Barker and T.L. Beauchamp (eds), *Thomas Reid: Critical Interpretations* (Temple UP, 1976), pp. 1–8; and J. Haldane, 'Thomas Reid: Life and Work', in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 74 (2000), pp. 317–25. As Lehrer notes, one of Moore's early papers contains frequent references to Reid, 'The Nature and Reality of Objects of Perception', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 6 (1905–6), pp. 68–127, repr. in Moore, *Philosophical Studies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), pp. 31–96.

Reid–Moore position to the question, much discussed in recent epistemology, of how it is that one knows that one is not a brain in a vat.[7]

I. MOORE'S 'PROOF OF AN EXTERNAL WORLD'

Moore tells us that he is able to prove that external things exist, and that, in fact, he can give us many such proofs. But what is meant by 'external things'? By way of explanation, Moore tells us (p. 128) that 'external things' means 'things external to our minds', as opposed to 'external to our bodies'. Thus external things are 'things which are to be met with in space', our bodies included (p. 129). Examples of such things would be 'the bodies of men and of animals, plants, stars, houses, chairs, and shadows' (p. 136). If you can prove that any two such things exist, Moore says, you will *ipso facto* have proved that there are external things in the relevant sense.

Well, Moore thinks (p. 144), *that* is easy!

> 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'. 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: there is no need to multiply examples.

Moore (p. 146) thinks he can also prove that external things have existed 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 some time in the past, Q.E.D.'

I shall now look at some remarks that Moore makes by way of elaboration, and by way of answering some anticipated objections to his proofs. All of these remarks, I shall argue, tie into points that we can find in Reid.

First, Moore insists that the first proof he gave is a 'perfectly rigorous one'. And indeed (p. 144), 'that it is perhaps impossible to give a better or more rigorous proof of anything whatever'. One thing that a proof requires is that one knows its premises. But he certainly did know that here is one hand and here is another, Moore (p. 145) insists: 'How absurd it would be to suggest that I did not know it.' He says similar things (p. 146) regarding his second proof: 'This is a perfectly good proof, provided I *know* what is

[7] For example, see K. DeRose, 'How Can We Know that We're Not Brains in Vats?', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 88 (2000), Supp. Vol., pp. 121–48; and S. Cohen, 'Basic Knowledge and the Problem of Easy Knowledge', forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

asserted in the premise. But I *do* know that I held up my two hands above this desk not very long ago. As a matter of fact, in this case you all know it too. There's no doubt whatever that I did.'

Next, Moore responds to philosophers who he 'is perfectly well aware' will not be satisfied with his proofs. One reason why some will not be satisfied, he says, is because they want Moore to prove his premises, i.e., they want a proof that 'Here's one hand and here's another'. Moore's reply to this sort of dissatisfaction is important for the proposed interpretation. First, he admits that he has not given any such proof. Secondly, he says that he does not think that any such proof can be given. Here (p. 148) are his reasons why such a proof is not possible:

> How am I to prove now that 'Here's one hand, and here's another'? 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?

Moore's next comments are especially interesting:

> 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 you a proof.

Finally, Moore considers one more source of dissatisfaction with his proofs: some will think that if he has not proved his premises, then he does not know them at all. This is a common view among philosophers, Moore thinks (p. 148), but one that is clearly wrong: 'I can 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'.

It seems to me that everything Moore says in these passages is exactly right. Moreover, we can see better that he is right by turning to various observations and arguments advanced by Thomas Reid.

II. EPISTEMOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES IN REID

I have elsewhere described Reid as defending a moderate and broad foundationalism.[8] His foundationalism is 'moderate', in the sense that he does not require infallibility for knowledge. Neither does he require indefeasibility or unrevisability, or some other high-powered epistemic status. It is 'broad', in the sense that he allows a wide variety of sources of both foundational and non-foundational knowledge. For Reid, introspective

[8] See my 'Reid's Critique of Berkeley and Hume: What's the Big Idea?', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 55 (1995), pp. 279–96.

consciousness, perception, memory, testimony, deductive reasoning and inductive reasoning are all possible sources of knowledge. For present purposes, I can emphasize Reid's point that demonstrative reasoning (or proving) is only one source of knowledge among many. Here, then, is the first principle on which Moore follows Reid:

E1. Not everything we know is known by proof.

Reasoning in general is defined by Reid as follows.[9]

> Reasoning is the process by which we pass from one judgement to another, which is the consequence of it.... In all reasoning, therefore, there must be a proposition inferred, and one or more from which it is inferred. And this power of inferring, or drawing a conclusion, is only another name for reasoning; the proposition inferred being called the *conclusion*, and the proposition or propositions from which it is inferred, the *premises* (*IP* VII i, p. 475a).

There are many kinds of reasoning, but the most important distinction, Reid thinks (p. 476b), is that between demonstrative and probable. A proof, then, would require demonstrative reasoning. But not everything that we know is known by proof, Reid insists. In fact, not everything we know is known by reasoning in general, nor could it be. Rather, reasoning in general 'is like a telescope, which may help a man to see farther, who hath eyes; but, without eyes, a telescope shews nothing at all'. In other words, reasoning in general, and demonstration in particular, need premises. Hence reasoning can extend knowledge, but we must admit other sources of knowledge as well.

The second epistemological principle on which Moore follows Reid is

E2. External objects are known by perception, not by proof.

First, perception gives us knowledge of *external* objects, or objects that exist even when no one is perceiving them.

> Ideas are said to be things internal and present, which have no existence but during the moment they are in the mind. The objects of sense are things external, which have a continued existence (*IP* III vii, p. 358a).

Secondly, perception does not involve proving, nor any kind of reasoning at all.

> If, therefore, we attend to that act of our mind which we call the perception of an external object of sense, we shall find in it these three things: – *First*, Some conception or notion of the object perceived; *Secondly*, A strong and irresistible conviction and

[9] All references to Reid are to *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (*Inq*) and *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (*IP*), both in Reid, *Philosophical Works*, ed. H.M. Bracken (Hildesheim: Olms, 1983).

> belief of its present existence; and, *Thirdly*, That this conviction and belief are immediate, and not the effect of reasoning (*IP* II v, p. 258a).
>
> ... it is not by a train of reasoning and argumentation that we come to be convinced of the existence of what we perceive; we ask no argument for the existence of the object, but that we perceive it; perception commands our belief upon its own authority, and disdains to rest its authority upon any reasoning whatsoever (p. 259b).

This is not to say that the perception of objects is never learnt or acquired. Most perception, Reid thinks, is acquired perception (*Inq* VI xx, p. 185a). But even acquired perception is devoid of reasoning.

> This power which we acquire of perceiving things by our senses, which originally we should not have perceived, is not the effect of any reasoning on our part: it is the result of our constitution, and of the situations in which we happen to be placed (*IP* II xxi, p. 332b).

Perception does not involve reasoning, because reasoning is grounded on prior beliefs acting as premises. But perception is grounded in sensory experience, which produces a belief in the external object either by nature or by acquired habit.

> When I grasp an ivory ball in my hand, I feel a certain sensation of touch. In the sensation there is nothing external, nothing corporeal. The sensation is neither round nor hard; it is an act of feeling of the mind, from which I cannot, by reasoning, infer the existence of any body. But, by the constitution of my nature, the sensation carries along with it the conception and belief of a round hard body really existing in my hand (*IP* VI v, p. 450a).
>
> In acquired perception, the sign may be either a sensation, or something originally perceived. The thing signified, is something which, by experience, has been found connected with that sign (*IP* II xxi, p. 332a).

Perceptual signs, Reid observes, become the grounds for belief without becoming objects of beliefs themselves. For example, sensations are able to act as signs for external objects, even though the sensations themselves are not noticed at all.

> There is, no doubt, a sensation by which we perceive a body to be hard or soft.... We are so accustomed to use the sensation as a sign, and to pass immediately to the hardness signified, that, as far as appears, it was never made an object of thought, either by the vulgar or by philosophers; nor has it a name in any language. There is no sensation more distinct, or more frequent; yet it is never attended to, but passes through the mind instantaneously, and serves only to introduce that quality in bodies, which, by a law of our constitution, it suggests (*Inq* V ii, p. 120a).

But if we do not even think about sensations in the typical case, then we do not typically have beliefs about them, and they do not act as premises in our reasoning. In other words, perception is not a kind of reasoning.

The third epistemological principle on which Moore follows Reid (see *IP* II xx, p. 328a) is

E3. The evidence of sense is no less reasonable than that of demonstration.

In other words, the evidence of reasoning (or demonstration, or proof) should not be privileged over the evidence of perception.[10] Here (*Inq* VI xx, p. 183b) Reid finds the sceptic about perception to be inconsistent:

> Reason, says the sceptic, is the only judge of truth, and you ought to throw off every opinion and every belief that is not grounded on reason. Why, sir, should I believe the faculty of reason more than that of perception? – they came both out of the same shop, and were made by the same artist; and if he puts one piece of false ware into my hands, what should hinder him from putting another?

In fact, Reid observes, reason and perception are in the same boat with respect to their trustworthiness:

> The imagination, the memory, the judging and reasoning powers, are all liable to be hurt, or even destroyed, by disorders of the body, as well as our powers of perception; but we do not on this account call them fallacious (*IP* II xxii, p. 335a).
>
> They are all limited and imperfect.... We are liable to error and wrong judgement in the use of them all; but as little in the informations of sense as in the deductions of reasoning (*IP* II xxii, p. 339a).

Moore insists that he knows the premises of his proof, i.e., that here is one hand and here is another. He also (p. 145) claims to know this as well as anything: 'I certainly did at the moment *know* that which I expressed by the combination of certain gestures with saying the words "Here is one hand and here is another".... 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!' Here Moore is simply following Reid's (E3) above: the evidence of perception is perfectly good evidence, and not less good than the evidence of, for example, mathematical demonstration. Hence Moore's reasoning from his perceptual knowledge is 'perfectly rigorous', and 'it is perhaps impossible to give a better or more rigorous proof of anything whatsoever' (p. 144).

The present interpretation also helps us to understand Moore's comments (p. 148) regarding dreaming:

> 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 you a proof.

[10] Reid is not entirely consistent on this point. See *IP* II xx, p. 330a, where he says 'the evidence of reasoning, and that of some necessary and self-evident truths, seems to be the least mysterious, and the most perfectly comprehended'.

The passage may be read like this: 'I certainly know that I am not dreaming, because I can *see* that I am awake. My conclusive evidence for my belief that I am awake and not dreaming is my sensory experience. But I cannot give *you* that evidence – it is not propositional evidence, and so I cannot cite it as premises from which I can demonstrate that I am not dreaming, as I would have to do in order to prove it.'

Reid does not say exactly the same thing. In one place Reid claims to know that he is not dreaming, but confesses that he does not know how he knows (*Inq* II v, p. 107b). But the present position on how one knows that one is not dreaming, or how one knows that one is awake, is perfectly consistent with everything Reid does say.

In sum, Moore's remarks in 'Proof of an External World' are both intelligible and plausible in the light of Reid's three epistemological principles above. All of those principles are perfectly correct, in my view, and Moore's remarks follow from them straightforwardly. But Moore does not follow Reid only on epistemological points. He also follows him on some important methodological points as well.

III. METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES IN REID

Reid's methodological principles concern how one should proceed in doing epistemology, and in particular, how one should proceed in addressing the sceptic. The first methodological principle I want to discuss is

M1. One should not try to prove what is not known by proof.

Reid gives us several reasons for adopting this principle. First, reason is most open to error when in this sort of employment: 'One is never in greater danger of transgressing against the rules of logic than in attempting to prove what needs no proof' (*IP* VII iv, p. 486a). In particular, he thinks, attempts by philosophers to prove the existence of external things have gone terribly wrong. 'Des Cartes, Malebranche, and Locke, have all employed their genius and skill to prove the existence of a material world; and with very bad success' (*Inq* I iii, p. 100b).

Secondly, when one sees the fallacy of such arguments, one is apt to doubt that which was to be proved (*IP* I ii, p. 231a):

> When men attempt to deduce such self-evident principles from others more evident, they always fall into inconclusive reasoning: and the consequence of this has been, that others, such as Berkeley and Hume, finding the arguments brought to prove such first principles to be weak and inconclusive, have been tempted first to doubt of them, and afterwards to deny them.

The last reason why we should not try to prove what is not known by proof is that people who deny first principles are not fit to be reasoned with, and therefore reasoning is no remedy for the problem. For example (*IP* I ii, p. 232b),

> ... by my senses, I perceive figure, colour, hardness, softness, motion, resistance, and such like things.... If any man should think fit to deny that these things are qualities, or that they require any subject, I leave him to enjoy his opinion as a man who denies first principles, and is not fit to be reasoned with.

One should not try to prove that which is not known by proof. But there are other strategies for responding to philosophers who deny first principles. First, such principles can be 'illustrated', or can 'be placed in a proper point of view' (*IP* I ii, p. 231b). Secondly, the denial of first principles is not only false, but absurd. And this allows another strategy for responding to their denial (*IP* VI iv, p. 438b):

> ... to discountenance absurdity, Nature hath given us a particular emotion – to wit, that of ridicule – which seems intended for this very purpose of putting out of countenance what is absurd, either in opinion or practice.
>
> This weapon, when properly applied, cuts with as keen an edge as argument. Nature hath furnished us with the first to expose absurdity; as with the last to refute error. Both are well fitted for their several offices, and are equally friendly to truth when properly used.

Moore employs both strategies. Hence he holds up his hands for all to see, placing two external objects 'in a proper point of view'. And he insists 'How absurd it would be to suggest that I did not know [that here is a hand], but only believed it, and that perhaps it was not the case!'. Moore goes on '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!'. Of course the sceptic *would* insist on just that, and Moore very well knows it. He is ridiculing his sceptical opponents, as he was when he gave his proofs in the first place.

A second methodological principle that Moore adopts from Reid is this:

M2. Rather than trying to prove that external things exist, or that we know that external things exist, we should take a close look at the sceptic's reasons for saying that we do not know this.

Reid and Moore have each been understood as simply insisting that we know what the sceptic denies that we know. But neither do this. Rather, each is a brilliant critic of sceptical arguments. Thus Reid takes a careful look at numerous arguments from Berkeley, Hume and other sceptical philosophers, and offers sharp analyses of where they go wrong. Moore does

a little of this at the end of 'Proof of an External World', but much more so in 'Four Forms of Scepticism'. In the latter paper he offers devastating criticisms of several sceptical arguments from Bertrand Russell, by first disambiguating Russell's claims, and then showing how each of Russell's arguments rests on either (a) an assumption that is implausible, (b) an assumption that is clearly false, or (c) a fallacy in reasoning.[11]

Of course there is no guarantee that we shall always be able to identify a mistake in the sceptic's reasoning. We must analyse sceptical arguments one at a time, and there is no guarantee that the next one will not be better than the last. However, adopting Reid's methodology turns the tables on the sceptic in a way that is absolutely essential in mounting a successful response to scepticism. For the consequence of (M1) is that one gives up the impossible task of proving what is not known by proof. The consequence of (M2) is that one replaces that task with something more promising. There is still no guarantee that one wins this game, but at least there is no guarantee that one loses it.

Finally, Reid thinks that success at this new game is more than just promising. For once the tables have been turned in this way, the sceptic incurs a heavy burden of proof. This is directly related to the third methodological principle on which Moore follows Reid:

M3. Common sense has defeasible authority over philosophical theory.

Common sense, according to Reid, is a gift of nature. It concerns that which we know immediately, by the natural operation of our cognitive powers, as opposed to that which is known only by special training or by reasoning. Hence the knowledge of common sense is found universally among healthy human beings, and occurs at an early age. In fact, Reid thinks, it is reflected in the structure of all human languages (*IP* VI v, p. 440b). For present purposes, it is important to note that Reid closely associates common sense with the knowledge of first principles.

> We ascribe to reason two offices, or two degrees. The first is to judge of things self-evident; the second to draw conclusions that are not self-evident from those that are. The first of these is the province, and the sole province, of common sense (*IP* VI ii, p. 425b).

> Such original and natural judgements are ... a part of our constitution; and all the discoveries of our reason are grounded upon them. They make up what is called *the common sense of mankind*; and, what is manifestly contrary to any of those first principles, is what we call *absurd* (*Inq* VII, p. 209b).

The first principles of common sense have a great authority. Specifically,

[11] Moore, 'Four Forms of Scepticism', in *Philosophical Papers*, pp. 193–222.

they have authority over speculation and theory, both in general and in philosophy in particular. This is partly because speculation and theory are unreliable, as is demonstrated by the history of science. '[Scientific] discoveries have always tended to refute, but not to confirm, the theories and hypotheses which ingenious men have invented' (*IP* I iii, p. 235b).

In philosophy too, however, we should be wary of conjectures that contradict common sense. For example, Reid finds that Berkeley's arguments against a material world rest on the dubious assumption that we can have no conception of anything unless there is some sensation in our minds that resembles it. Reid observes that this hypothesis has wide currency among philosophers, 'but it is neither self-evident, nor hath it been clearly proved; and therefore it hath been more reasonable to call in question this doctrine of philosophers, than to discard the material world' (*Inq* V viii, p. 132b). For this reason, he thinks, it is legitimate to argue against a philosophical theory by invoking common sense. In fact, in one place (*IP* II xiv, pp. 302b–3a), Reid uses arguments against Hume which are reminiscent of Moore's proofs. Here the target is Hume's thesis that the immediate object of thought is never an external object, but always some image or perception in the mind:

> ... I beg leave to dissent from philosophy till she gives me reason for what she teaches. For, though common sense and external senses demand my assent to their dictates upon their own authority, yet philosophy is not entitled to this privilege. But, that I may not dissent from so grave a personage [i.e., Hume] without giving a reason of my dissent: – I see the sun when he shines; I remember the battle of Culloden; and neither of these objects is an image or perception.

Reid does not think that common sense is infallible or that its first principles are indefeasible. On the contrary, it is possible to be mistaken regarding first principles.[12] The point is rather that one needs a *good reason* for rejecting common sense in favour of a philosophical position. Hence it is 'more reasonable' to question Berkeley's unsupported principle than to accept scepticism about the material world. Moore makes a similar point at the end of 'Four Forms of Scepticism' (p. 222):

> What I want, however, finally to emphasize is this: 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.... And what I can't help asking myself is this: is it, in fact, as certain that all these four assumptions are true, as that I *do* know that this is a pencil and that you are conscious? I cannot help answering: it seems to me *more*

[12] Perhaps we should say more precisely that it is possible to be mistaken regarding what counts as a first principle. This is because, by definition, first principles are true. Nevertheless, Reid thinks we can err with regard to what really is a first principle and what is not. For example, see *IP* I ii, p. 231a.

> 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, let alone all four.

Common sense has defeasible authority over philosophical theory. To think the contrary is only philosophical arrogance, which is both misplaced and ill advised.

I return now to Stroud's interpretation of 'Proof of an External World'. According to Stroud, the question whether external things exist can be raised in an ordinary and 'internal' sense, or in a philosophical and 'external' sense. However, Stroud thinks, Moore 'resists, or probably does not even feel' the external sense that philosophers intend.

My interpretation allows the following reply on behalf of Moore. His paper is a response to Kant's and other philosophers' request for a proof that external things exist. If we take that request in an internal sense, in which we are allowed to proceed from things that we know, then Moore agrees with Stroud (a) that such a proof is easy, and (b) that it is of no consequence, i.e., of no importance philosophically. The reason why it is of no consequence, Moore thinks, is that we do not know external things by proving their existence, but by perceiving them. If we take the request for a proof in the external sense, in which we are required to prove the thing in question without relying on any knowledge of the external world, then again Moore agrees with Stroud (a) that such a proof is impossible. However, he insists (b) that this is still of no consequence. And the reason why is the same as before: we do not know external things by proving their existence, but by perceiving them. Failure to answer Stroud's external question amounts to this: that we cannot prove the existence of external things from a set of premises restricted in a certain way. But this is of no more consequence than that we cannot prove Euclid's theorems from a set of axioms restricted in a certain way. Nor can we know mathematical truths by perception, nor truths about the present by memory. Nothing follows from this except that these are not the ways in which we know such things.

IV. SOME OBJECTIONS

In this section I shall consider two objections to what I have said so far. The first is an objection to my claim that Moore is following Reid, the second to the position which I have attributed to both Reid and Moore.

One might object to my interpretation of Moore as follows: 'You claim that in his response to scepticism, Moore is following Reid. However, central to Reid's rejection of scepticism is his rejection of the theory of ideas. Reid thought, in fact, that the theory of ideas was sufficient to ground all of

Berkeley's and Hume's sceptical conclusions. But Moore accepts a sense-datum theory about the perception of external things, and the sense-datum theory is a version of the theory of ideas. Therefore Moore's response to scepticism cannot follow Reid.'

The problem with this objection is that it associates Moore's sense-datum theory of perception too closely with the theory of ideas which Reid rejects. When Reid talks about the theory of ideas, what he has in mind is a particularly strong version of representationalism. According to that theory, external objects are not perceived directly, but only indirectly by means of ideas in the mind that resemble them. This account of perception, Reid thinks, is sufficient to entail scepticism about external things.[13] It is not clear, however, that Moore's commitment to sense-data commits him to this kind of representationalism about external things. On the contrary, what Moore means by sense-data is 'whatever are the direct objects of perception', and he leaves it open whether such things are ideas or images in the mind, or the surfaces of external objects.[14] So even though Moore thinks that we do not perceive hands directly, he thinks we might perceive the surfaces of hands directly, and the surfaces of hands are external objects, on Moore's view.

But even if Moore's sense-datum theory did commit him to representationalism about external things, it would still not commit him to the theory of ideas in the sense which Reid thinks is sufficient for scepticism. For the theory of ideas constitutes a particularly strong version of representationalism – one where the representatives of external things must be resemblances, or images, or pictures of them. And it is this stronger commitment, Reid thinks, that is essential to Berkeley's and Hume's sceptical arguments.

> [Berkeley] concludes, that we can have no conception of an inanimate substance, such as matter is conceived to be, or of any of its qualities; and that there is the strongest ground to believe that there is no existence in nature but minds, sensations, and ideas.... But how does this follow? Why, thus: we can have no conception of anything but what resembles some sensation or idea in our minds; but the sensations and ideas in our minds can resemble nothing but the sensations and ideas in other minds; therefore, the conclusion is evident (*Inq* V viii, pp. 132a).

[13] I discuss relationships among the theory of ideas, representationalism and scepticism in 'Reid's Critique of Berkeley and Hume', and in *Putting Skeptics in their Place: the Nature of Skeptical Arguments and their Role in Philosophical Inquiry* (Cambridge UP, 2000), esp. ch. 4.

[14] See for example, Moore, 'A Defence of Common Sense', repr. in *Philosophical Papers*, pp. 32–59, esp. pp. 53–6; see also 'A Reply to my Critics', in Schilpp, esp. p. 643. As Lehrer notes, Moore's earlier work is unambiguous regarding the possibility of perceiving material objects directly. In a paper first published in 1903 Moore writes 'I am as directly aware of the existence of material things in space as of my own sensations, and what I am aware of with regard to each is exactly the same – namely, that in one case the material thing, and in the other case my sensation does really exist': 'The Refutation of Idealism', *Mind*, 12 (1903), pp. 433–53, repr. in his *Philosophical Studies*, quoted by Lehrer, 'Reid's Influence', p. 4.

This argument can be reconstructed as follows.

1. The only immediate objects of thought are ideas and sensations
2. All thought of other (mediate) objects must be by means of ideas or sensations which represent them
3. In the case of external objects, the ideas or sensations which mediate our thought must be images or resemblances of those objects
4. No idea or sensation resembles any external object
5. Therefore there is no thought or perception of external objects.

Since Moore is not committed to either premise (3) or premise (4) of the above argument, he can reject the argument as well as Reid can.

Reid thinks there is another route by which the theory of ideas leads to scepticism, however, and we should see how Moore can respond to this one.

> When it is maintained that all we immediately perceive is only ideas or phantasms, how can we, from the existence of those phantasms, conclude the existence of an external world corresponding to them?
>
> This difficult question seemed not to have occurred to the Peripatetics. Des Cartes saw the difficulty, and endeavoured to find out arguments by which, from the existence of our phantasms or ideas, we might infer the existence of external objects. The same course was followed by Malebranche, Arnauld, and Locke; but Berkeley and Hume easily refuted all their arguments, and demonstrated that there is no strength in them (*IP* III vii, p. 358a).

This second argument can be reconstructed as follows.

1. All knowledge is either non-inferential, or reached by means of an adequate inference from knowledge that is non-inferential
2. All non-inferential knowledge is about our ideas or sensations
3. Therefore if we are to have knowledge of external objects, it must be by means of an adequate inference from knowledge of our sensations
4. But there is no adequate inference from knowledge of our sensations to our beliefs about external objects
5. Therefore we can have no knowledge of external objects.

Again, if sense-data can be the external surfaces of external objects, then Moore need not be committed to premise (2). But even if sense-data are mental objects, Moore still does not have to accept premise (2). For the thesis that external objects must be represented by mental objects does not commit one to the thesis that external objects must be inferred from mental objects. In other words, representationalism does not commit one to an inferential theory of perception.[15]

[15] Moore is aware of the point. See Moore, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953), p. 125.

It is true that Moore sometimes talks as if he thinks there is an inference from sense-data to the existence of external things. For example, in 'Four Forms of Scepticism' (p. 221), he says 'But I cannot help agreeing with Russell that I never know immediately such a thing as "That person is conscious" or "This is a pencil"'. But Moore speaks very carefully about this issue, and it is important to pay attention to his hedges and qualifications. For example, he agrees (p. 222) that *if* he does not know external things immediately, then his knowledge of them must be 'in some sense' based on an inductive argument. And he says of that conditional proposition that 'this must be true in some sense or other, though it seems to me terribly difficult to say exactly what that sense is'. Nothing here commits him to the position that perception involves 'reasoning' in the sense in which Reid understands this term. In other words, nothing here commits Moore to the thesis that perception involves a 'process by which we pass from one judgement to another, which is the consequence of it', or that it involves 'a proposition inferred, and one or more from which it is inferred'. On the contrary, it seems to me that what Moore says here and elsewhere is perfectly compatible with what Reid says in the following passage (*Inq* V v, p. 125a):

> Let a man press his hand against the table – *he feels it hard*. But what is the meaning of this? – The meaning undoubtedly is, that he hath a certain feeling of touch, from which he concludes, without any reasoning, or comparing ideas, that there is something external really existing, whose parts stick so firmly together, that they cannot be displaced without considerable force.
>
> There is here a feeling, and a conclusion drawn from it, or some way suggested by it.

In short, perception involves a movement in thought from sensation to object. But we need not conceive all movements in thought as involving an inference from one proposition to another, as in reasoning proper. Hence Reid says that the sensation 'suggests' an external object: 'I beg leave to make use of the word *suggestion*, because I know not one more proper, to express a power of the mind, which seems entirely to have escaped the notice of philosophers' (*Inq* II vii, p. 111a).

The next objection I shall consider regards the adequacy of the position which I am attributing to both Reid and Moore. Specifically, Reid and Moore agree that we know external things through perception rather than reasoning. In Reid's terminology, our knowledge that external things exist is a first principle, and therefore does not admit of proof.[16] The objection, in short, is that this position is dogmatic.

[16] More exactly, such things do not admit of direct proof. Reid thinks that first principles can sometimes be proved indirectly, by *reductio ad absurdum* (*IP* VI iv, p. 439b).

But what does it mean to say that a position is 'dogmatic', or that it is 'held dogmatically'? One thing this might mean is that the person who holds the position is not willing to consider arguments against it. However, we have seen that both Reid and Moore do consider sceptical arguments against their position: they consider sceptical arguments very carefully, and find them wanting. Another thing the charge could mean is that the position is held to be indefeasible: thus although one is willing to consider arguments against the position, one insists that no such argument could overturn it. However, we have seen that Reid thinks that his position is not indefeasible. Specifically, what one takes to be a first principle might turn out not to be, and philosophers must be open to this possibility.

> Upon the whole, I acknowledge that we ought to be cautious that we do not adopt opinions as first principles which are not entitled to that character.... We do not pretend that those things that are laid down as first principles may not be examined, and that we ought not to have our ears open to what may be pleaded against their being admitted as such (*IP* I ii, p. 234a).

I see nothing in Moore that contradicts this attitude in Reid.

Finally, the charge of dogmatism might mean that one is not willing to give reasons for one's view. But if this charge is directed against Moore's belief that here is a hand, then it begs the question against the Reid–Moore position, which is that some things can be known without being based on reasons. If the charge is directed against the Reid–Moore position itself, i.e., that some things can be known without reasons, then the charge is false. Reid gives many reasons for thinking that some things can be known without reasons, as does Moore.

V. THE PROBLEM OF EASY KNOWLEDGE

Suppose, with Reid and Moore, that I can know that here is a hand without first having to prove it. For example, to know that here is a hand, it is not necessary first to prove that my perceptual faculties are reliable. Any such position is potentially open to the following problem: it now seems too easy to know all sorts of things. For example, from my knowledge that here is a hand, I can easily infer that I am not a brain in a vat, and am not merely deceived into thinking that here is a hand. Likewise, I may easily infer that I am not a disembodied spirit, deceived by a Cartesian demon. The problem in such cases is that it seems wrong that I can come to know such things by such inferences. And this suggests either (a) that I did not know my premise in the first place, or (b) that I did know it, but that I also knew other things,

such as that my perceptual faculties are reliable, and this additional knowledge is part of my grounds for the inferences I actually make.[17]

A somewhat similar problem arises for a variety of contextualist theories. As Keith DeRose notes, many contextualist positions entail the result that, at least by normal standards, one knows that one is not a brain in a vat without any evidence at all.[18] On DeRose's own view (p. 136), for example, we know because 'We're naturally disposed to reject such hypotheses as that we're brains in vats, and to thereby come to believe *and to know (with a high degree of warrant)* that these hypotheses are false, upon coming to consider them'. Some might think that this is a problematic position, and for a similar reason to that offered above. That is, just as it seems that I cannot know that I am not a brain in a vat by inferring it from 'Here is a hand', it seems that I cannot know such a thing on no evidence at all.

How does the Reid–Moore position defended above fare on this issue? Here I shall defend two claims.

First, it is consistent with that position that I know that I am not a brain in a vat, and that I know this neither by an easy inference nor by no evidence at all. How *does* one know that one is not a brain in a vat, or that one is not deceived by an evil demon? Moore and Reid are for the most part silent on this issue. But a natural extension of their view is that one knows it by perceiving it. In other words, I know that I am not a brain in a vat because I can see that I am not. Of course this position is a non-starter if one thinks that, on the basis of one's sensory experience, one must reason to the conclusion that one is not a brain in a vat in order to know it. But once we have given up the idea that perception is a kind of reasoning from experience, it becomes much more plausible that one could perceive such a thing. Just as I can perceive that some animal is not a dog, one might think, I can perceive that I am not a brain in a vat. Thus the Reid–Moore position can give a plausible account of our knowledge in some problematic cases. In particular, it allows us to say that certain cases of knowledge are neither known without evidence nor got by easy inference from other things that we know.

My second claim is that, once we give up the theoretical background which the Reid–Moore position effectively refutes, it is no longer a philosophically interesting question how we know such things; that is, it is no longer philosophically interesting whether we know them without evidence,

[17] The problem is framed in this way by Stewart Cohen, 'Basic Knowledge and the Problem of Easy Knowledge'.

[18] DeRose, 'How Can We Know that We're Not Brains in Vats?', p. 135. DeRose notes that the same result is defended in Gail Stine, 'Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives and Deductive Closure', *Philosophical Studies*, 29 (1976), p. 258; S. Cohen, 'How to be a Fallibilist', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 2 (1988), pp. 112–15; and D. Lewis, 'Elusive Knowledge', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 74 (1996), pp. 561–2.

or by an easy inference, or by perception. Rather this becomes an empirical question about how our cognition actually works.

The theoretical background which the sceptic employs, and which Reid and Moore refute, is broadly rationalist. In particular, it involves the idea that all evidential relations must be logical or *quasi*-logical, in other words, that our evidence must have some necessary relation (either logical or probabilistic) to the beliefs that it makes evident. This background makes it plausible that our knowledge of external things, which has sensory experience as its evidence, must proceed by some sort of inference or reasoning from experience. The alternative to this broadly rationalist view must be broadly reliabilist. That is, if our evidence does not indicate the truth of our beliefs by virtue of some necessary relation, then it must do so by virtue of some contingent relation. And this, of course, is exactly what reliabilism says. In short, the rejection of rationalism about evidence leads naturally to reliabilism about evidence.

And now the point is this: once we are reliabilists about evidence, inference or reasoning is not so special any more. In fact, once we are reliabilists about evidence, *evidence* is not so special any more. What matters is that however we form our beliefs, they are formed in ways that are reliable. Some of these ways might involve reasoning from evidence, some might involve evidence without reasoning, and some might involve no evidence at all.[19]

We can see that this is exactly what happens in Reid's epistemology. According to Reid, some knowledge results from our reasoning faculties, and some from the faculties that give us first principles. Among knowledge of first principles, some is grounded in experience, and some is not grounded in experience. For example, Reid thinks that it is a first principle that like causes will have like effects, and that this is known neither by reasoning nor by experience (*IP* VI v, p. 451b). Similarly, he thinks that it is a first principle that our natural faculties are not fallacious, and that this too is known neither by reasoning nor by experience (pp. 447a–8a). Moreover, all such knowledge is equally good, being equally the product of our natural constitution: 'The first principles of every kind of reasoning are given us by Nature, and are of equal authority with the faculty of reason itself, which is also the gift of Nature' (*Inq* VI xx, p. 185b).

Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish first principles from products of reasoning:

> ... there are some propositions which lie so near to axioms, that it is difficult to say whether they ought to be held as axioms, or demonstrated as propositions. The same thing holds with regard to perception, and the conclusions drawn from it. Some of

[19] I defend the present line of argument in greater detail in my 'Agent Reliabilism', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 13 (1999), pp. 273–96, and in *Putting Skeptics in their Place*, esp. ch. 7.

> these conclusions follow our perceptions so easily, and are so immediately connected with them, that it is difficult to fix the limit which divides the one from the other (*IP* VI xx, p. 185b).

Moreover, whether a given belief is the result of perception or easy inference becomes unimportant. This is because, whatever you call it, the thing is the result of our natural and non-fallacious cognitive faculties. And as such, it has positive epistemic status.

Similar things can be said regarding my belief that I am not a brain in a vat. Is such a belief 'hard-wired', so to speak, like the principle that like causes have like effects, or the principle that my natural faculties are not fallacious? Or do I perceive that I am not a brain in a vat, or do I infer it from what I perceive? I have suggested that I perceive it. It is certainly possible, however, that we do not perceive such things, but infer them from other things we do perceive. It is also possible that the belief, or something very much like it, is hard-wired. The point is that it really does not matter much from the present perspective. For if my belief arises in any of these ways, then it is the result of my natural, non-fallacious constitution, and therefore has its status as knowledge. The questions that remain are empirical questions, regarding how human beings are in fact built, and how our cognitive faculties in fact operate.[20]

Fordham University

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