

Discussion Notes

IN DEFENSE OF MOORE'S "PROOF OF AN EXTERNAL WORLD"

In his *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, Barry Stroud finds it "an extremely puzzling philosophical phenomenon" that Moore, in his proof of an external world, seems so oblivious of the fact that his arguments do not actually address the philosophical problem of an external world at all.¹ The reason that they do not, according to Stroud, is that they operate *within* material-thing discourse (this is clearly what Stroud has in mind in describing Moore's arguments as "internal") whereas the philosophical problem rests on arguments that place the legitimacy of the entire discourse itself in doubt (thus stand outside of it, or in Stroud's notation are "external").² Thus, in a manner of speaking, Moore has tried to walk on water. What he needs to do if he is to resolve the philosophical problem of an external world is first to establish the legitimacy of material-thing discourse itself before appealing to it, not the other way around. I am trying here, of course, to represent Stroud's claim: a claim, incidentally, that almost all philosophers familiar with Moore's proof of an external world have been inclined, in one form or another, to make.

Before setting forth my defense of Moore's proof of an external world I want to lay out a few preliminary observations.

First of all, but of little consequence, I shall continue to make use of Stroud's terms "internal" and "external" as these terms are used by Stroud (not, for instance, as Moore uses them in his paper, "External and Internal Relations," in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1919-20).

Second, it needs to be noted that Moore himself never fully addresses Stroud's particular objection to his proof of an external world or any of its look-alikes. To be sure, having already, without discernible qualification or qualm, set forth his proof of an external

world—"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'"³—Moore does some paragraphs later advert to the possible claim that he will need to prove "for one thing, as Descartes pointed out, that I am not now dreaming."⁴ But not only is this possible undercutting of his proof's premises referred to merely in the way of a belated after-thought but it is brushed aside with no more than the passing remark that "I have, no doubt, conclusive reasons for asserting that I am not now dreaming; I have conclusive evidence that I am awake."⁵ Moore's cavalier treatment of this sort of objection to his proof may not demonstrate quite that he was unaware of its existence but it surely demonstrates that he was not at all concerned with its existence. Thus, to all intents and purposes he seems to think that in citing the premises of his "proof" he is citing simple, unchallengeable evidence for and against competing hypotheses: the one that we can know that external or material objects exist and the other that we can not.

One can account for this blind spot in Moore's vision, I believe, as due to the empiricistic stance that he constantly assumes in his philosophizing: as if the philosophical problems he is dealing with rest upon one's failing to note observable details (details of the various senses of words or of what is presented by one's senses, and so on) and are resolvable accordingly. In this solvent, the objection that Stroud makes tends to dissolve and get lost.

It should be understood, therefore, that the defense of Moore's proof of an external world that I am underwriting is not one that I find Moore himself advancing. It is, however, one that Moore, consistent with principles that he does uphold or suggest, could advance. Let me clarify. It is Stroud's particular objection that I mean to be responding to. I realize that other objections might be made and have indeed made to Moore's proof. I shall not only leave the latter untouched but leave untouched those parts of Moore's proof that they pertain to. I shall, for example, go along with Moore's claim that in saying, "Here is one hand" one means to be referring to an external object, a material thing, and should so be understood.

Now, for reasons already made clear, Moore may not, in his

proof, go directly from its "internal" premises—these already having been put in doubt in so far as they are taken to assert the existence of material things by the "external" conclusions of the skeptic—to its conclusion that there exist external objects. There is, however, a principle adhered to by Moore that can be used to disarm the "external" conclusion of the skeptic which puts in doubt those premises. Obviously, this principle cannot be "internal" to material-thing discourse nor even on the same plane (as it were) of the skeptic's "external" conclusions. It must be external not only to material-thing discourse but to the "external" skeptical conclusions that place in doubt that discourse; for if on merely the same referential level as the latter, rather than a higher level, it could not adjudicate between the premises of Moore's proof and the skeptic's conclusions embracing those premises.

This principle, which is suggested and tacitly applied in much of Moore's philosophizing, might descriptively be called "the principle of weighted certainties," namely, the principle that says that we ought never give credence to that of which we are less certain over that of which we are more certain.⁶ On the face of it this principle is not only quintessentially rational but it applies to propositions at any level of discourse; thus, to those stating skeptical "external" conclusions embracing material-thing discourses as well as the "internal" propositions of material-thing discourse and the propositions implied by them.

Let us then apply this "external" principle to the two assertions, Moore's "internal" statement, "Here is one [material or externally existent thing, this] hand," and the skeptic's "external" proposition, "No material or externally existent thing can be known to exist" or any of his arguments purporting to establish the latter. "Of which are we the more certain?" we ask. Can the answer be in doubt? Not at all. Thus, on quintessentially rational grounds we vindicate the philosophical adequacy of Moore's proof of an external world. Simultaneously, of course, Stroud's objection, and its various look-alikes, fall to the ground.

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1. Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 126.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 117 ff.
3. G. E. Moore, "Proof of an External World," in *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), p. 146.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
5. *Loc. cit.*
6. See, for instance, Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense" in *op. cit.*, p. 40, "...since I am more certain that they have existed and had some views...than that they have held any views incompatible with it...".