Moore's Unyielding Hand: A Robust Defence of Common Sense against Radical Skepticism

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Abstract— *This paper offers a robust defense of G.E. Moore's common-sense response to radical skepticism. Against the skeptic's claim that we cannot know anything about the external world, Moore famously argued that his certain knowledge of common-sense propositions (e.g., "Here is one hand") serves as a proof that an external world exists. Critics dismiss this as a facile begging of the question, arguing that Moore simply assumes what the skeptic denies. This paper contends that this charge of circularity, while logically valid, misunderstands the dialectical force of Moore's argument. Rather than attempting to convince the skeptic on their own impossible terms, Moore's proof performs a foundationalist function. It exposes that the skeptic's premises are less certain than the common-sense truths they purport to undermine. By holding up his hand, Moore shifts the burden of proof, forcing the skeptic to explain why we should deny our most basic, action-guiding convictions in favor of abstract, hyperbolic doubt. The paper concludes that while Moore's argument may not be a logical refutation, it is a pragmatically necessary and epistemically legitimate vindication of everyday knowledge. It establishes that common-sense certainty provides a more stable and reasonable starting point for epistemology than the skeptical hypothesis.*

Keywords: Moore's Proof; Skepticism; Common Sense; Begging the Question.

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of radical skepticism concerning the external world represents one of the most formidable and enduring challenges in the history of epistemology (Audi, 2010). It questions the very foundation of human knowledge, proposing that for all we can tell, we might be brains in vats, deceived by an evil demon, or living in a computer-simulated reality. This skeptical hypothesis threatens to undermine the vast edifice of our empirical knowledge, from the mundane awareness of objects in our vicinity to the sophisticated claims of modern science. The philosophical responses to this challenge are varied, ranging from intricate transcendental arguments to complex theoretical revisions of the nature of knowledge itself.

Amidst these sophisticated, and often highly technical, replies stands one of the most famously straightforward and intuitively powerful retorts: G.E. Moore's common-sense proof of an external world. In his 1939 paper, "Proof of an External World," Moore performed a simple yet profound act. He held up his hands, made a certain gesture, and stated, "Here is one hand," and after repeating the process with his other hand, concluded, "Here is another." From these two premises, he inferred that at least two external objects exist, therefore proving that an external world exists. This argument, breathtaking in its simplicity, has been a source of philosophical fascination and controversy for decades.

The prevailing criticism, advanced by influential figures such as Bertrand Russell, is that Moore's proof constitutes a blatant *petitio principii*, or begging the question (Russell & Moore, 2015). The skeptic's entire challenge is to demonstrate how we can know such common-sense propositions in the first place. To simply assert them as premises is, from the skeptic's perspective, to assume precisely what is in doubt. Consequently, Moore's argument is often dismissed as philosophically naïve, a failure to engage with the depth of the skeptical problem on its own terms. It is seen as a rhetorical trick rather than a substantive philosophical refutation.

This paper, however, will mount a robust defence of Moore's common-sense response. It will argue that the standard criticism, while logically valid, fundamentally misconstrues the nature and purpose of Moore's argument. Moore was not attempting to defeat the skeptic on the skeptic's own impossibly rigorous terms—a task that may indeed be logically impossible. Instead, his proof serves a different, yet critically important, dialectical and foundationalist function. It forces a comparison of certainty between the skeptic's abstract hypotheses and our ordinary common-sense convictions.

The central thesis of this paper is that G.E. Moore's common-sense response to radical skepticism, far from being a trivial begging of the question, is a pragmatically necessary and epistemically legitimate manoeuvre. It successfully shifts the burden of proof onto the skeptic, demonstrating that the grounds for our common-sense beliefs are, in practice, far more certain and secure than the premises required to generate the

skeptical doubt. Moore's argument exposes radical skepticism as an intellectually parasitic position that cannot outweigh the foundational certainty of everyday knowledge.

To develop this defence, this paper will first delineate the precise nature of the skeptical challenge, drawing from its historical formulations. It will then provide a detailed exegesis of Moore's proof and his broader common-sense philosophy. The core of the paper will be dedicated to analysing the primary objection of question-begging and articulating a multi-faceted defence of Moore's approach. This defence will integrate insights from later philosophers who have developed Moorean strategies, particularly Ludwig Wittgenstein and his notes in *On Certainty*. Finally, the paper will conclude by affirming the enduring value of Moore's response as a vindication of our epistemic practices.

THE ANATOMY OF RADICAL SKEPTICISM

Radical skepticism about the external world is not a single argument but a family of arguments designed to show that our beliefs about a mind-independent reality are unjustified (Butchvarov, 1998). Its power lies in its ability to create a logical gap between our evidence—which is constituted entirely by our subjective experiences, sensations, and thoughts—and the external world these experiences are supposed to represent. This gap, the skeptic argues, is unbridgeable, leaving our empirical knowledge without a secure foundation.

The historical pedigree of this problem is immense. Its most potent modern formulation originates with René Descartes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641/1984). Descartes embarked on a project of methodological doubt, systematically rejecting any belief that could possibly be doubted. He quickly identified that the senses are sometimes deceptive, and therefore, cannot be fully trusted. But his most devastating move was the creation of the "evil demon" hypothesis. Descartes entertained the possibility that "some malignant demon, who is at once exceedingly potent and deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me" (Descartes, 1984, p. 15). This scenario is a historical precursor to the modern "brain in a vat" thought experiment.

The logical structure of the skeptical argument can be formalized as a paradox, as clearly outlined by Barry Stroud (1984). It presents three propositions that seem individually plausible but are collectively inconsistent: (1) I know that I have a hand (a common-sense proposition); (2) If I know that I have a hand, then I know that I am not a handless brain in a vat (a closure principle linking knowledge of ordinary things to knowledge of the denial of skeptical hypotheses); and (3) I do not know that I am not a handless brain in a vat (the seemingly undeniable force of the skeptical doubt). One cannot hold all three to be true; one must be rejected.

The skeptic's strategy is to defend proposition (3). They argue that my sensory evidence for believing I have a hand—the visual experience of a hand, the tactile sensations—is *identical* to the evidence I would have if I were a mere brain in a vat being artificially stimulated to have precisely those experiences. Since my evidence cannot discriminate between the "good case" (having a hand) and the "bad case" (being a handless brain in a vat), I cannot know that the bad case is not my actual situation. Therefore, I cannot know that I have a hand.

This argument leverages what is known as the "underdetermination" principle. The total evidence I possess is equally compatible with two radically incompatible hypotheses: the normal world hypothesis and the skeptical hypothesis. If my evidence does not favour one over the other, then my belief in the normal world is not justified. The skeptical challenge is thus to explain how, given this underdetermination, knowledge of the external world is even possible. It demands a justification that transcends our subjective experiential basis, a task that seems insurmountable.

G.E. MOORE'S COMMON-SENSE PROOF

G.E. Moore's response to this deep and troubling problem is delivered with deliberate and almost provocative simplicity. His paper "Proof of an External World" (1939) begins by acknowledging that philosophers have often claimed that rigorous proof of an external world is impossible. Moore immediately sets out to challenge this consensus directly. He first clarifies what is meant by "external object," defining it simply as something that is "to be met with in space" and whose existence does not depend on being experienced (Moore, 1993, p. 166).

Moore then states that he can prove such things exist, and he does so as follows: "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'" (Moore, 1993, p. 166). From these two premises, he validly deduces that two external objects exist, and therefore, an external world exists. Q.E.D.

The sheer simplicity of this act is its genius and the source of its controversy. Moore is acutely aware that this "proof" will seem unsatisfactory to many philosophers. He anticipates objections, particularly the Kantian claim that a proof of an external world must be based on a priori reasoning rather than empirical premises. Moore rejects this, arguing that his proof perfectly satisfies the standard logical conditions for a proof: the premises are different from the conclusion, they are known to be true, and the conclusion follows deductively from them.

The force of Moore's argument does not rest on its logical form, which is indeed impeccable, but on the epistemic status of its premises. Moore is not merely *asserting* that here is a hand; he is claiming to *know* it with absolute certainty. In

his other works, particularly "A Defence of Common Sense" (1925), Moore provides the philosophical backbone for this claim. He lists a number of "truisms" that he knows with certainty to be true: that he has a body, that he was born in the past, that the Earth has existed for many years, and so on.

These common-sense propositions, Moore argues, form a framework of unquestionable knowledge. They are known with a certainty that is greater than the certainty of any philosophical argument that might be used to challenge them. For Moore, the mistake of the skeptic is to demand a proof for these framework propositions from a position *outside* the framework itself. But any such proof would necessarily rely on premises that are less certain than the common-sense truths they are trying to prove or disprove. Moore's gesture, therefore, is a defiant stand *within* the common-sense framework, challenging the skeptic to provide a reason to doubt his hand that is more certain than his knowledge of the hand itself.

THE CHARGE OF QUESTION-BEGGING AND THE STANDARD CRITICISM

The most immediate and persistent criticism leveled against Moore's proof is that it is a textbook example of the logical fallacy of *petitio principii*, or begging the question. This fallacy occurs when an argument's premises assume the truth of the conclusion, either explicitly or implicitly. Critics argue that Moore's proof is viciously circular because the skeptic's challenge is precisely about whether we can know the premises—"Here is a hand"—in the first place.

Bertrand Russell, in his *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (1948), articulated this criticism succinctly. He argued that from the skeptic's perspective, Moore's premise ("I have a hand") is not a given fact but is itself the very point in question. "The argument fails because it must assume the very thing that is in doubt… The doubt that the skeptic raises is whether our senses ever give us true knowledge of things not ourselves. To assume that they do is to beg the question" (Russell, 1948, p. 157). For Russell, Moore's proof is not a refutation of skepticism but merely an affirmation of the common-sense view that the skeptic already knows about and is deliberately calling into question.

The criticism gains further traction when viewed through the lens of the underdetermination argument. The skeptic's point is that Moore's sensory evidence—the visual and tactile experiences of a hand—is neutral between the realistic interpretation (that a real hand exists) and the skeptical interpretation (that he is a handless being fed those experiences by a deceiver). By simply asserting the truth of the realistic interpretation, Moore is *assuming* that the skeptical hypothesis is false. But the entire force of the skeptical argument is to show that he cannot make that assumption without independent justification, which seems impossible to obtain.

Furthermore, the skeptic can argue that Moore's appeal to the certainty of his common-sense beliefs is merely psychological, not epistemological. The fact that Moore

feels utterly certain that he has a hand does not logically preclude the possibility that he is mistaken. Philosophical history is replete with examples of beliefs that were once held with utmost certainty but were later shown to be false (e.g., the geocentric model of the universe). The skeptic contends that feeling certain is not equivalent to possessing knowledge, especially in the face of a logically coherent alternative scenario that explains the feeling of certainty away.

This line of criticism concludes that Moore's proof, while perhaps rhetorically effective in reinforcing the convictions of those who already believe in an external world, does nothing to engage with or defeat the logical structure of the skeptical argument. It is a refusal to play the philosophical game by its rules, and as such, it is dismissed as a philosophically inadequate response. The skeptic remains untouched in their logical stronghold.

A FOUNDATIONALIST DEFENCE: THE CERTAINTY OF THE COMMON-SENSE FRAMEWORK

To defend Moore against the charge of question-begging, one must challenge the skeptic's foundational assumption: that all beliefs must be justified from a position of neutral, external arbitration. A powerful defence interprets Moore as a kind of foundationalist, arguing that common-sense propositions like "Here is a hand" are properly basic. They are not justified by other propositions but are themselves the foundation upon which all other justifications and inquiries rest.

The argument is that Moore's premises possess a species of certainty that is of a different *kind* and *order* than the premises of the skeptical argument. My knowledge that I have a hand, gained through direct perception in optimal conditions, is immediate, non-inferential, and overwhelmingly certain. In contrast, the skeptic's premise—that I cannot know I'm not a brain in a vat—rests on abstract, theoretical reasoning about possibilities. When forced to choose between the two, it is more rational to hold fast to the hand and reject the skeptical reasoning than to sacrifice the hand for the sake of a philosophical argument.

This defence does not deny the logical point that Moore's argument does not *refute* the skeptic in a knock-down, logical sense. Rather, it contends that such a refutation is both impossible and unnecessary. It is impossible because any argument against skepticism would have to use premises and rules of inference that the skeptic could also call into doubt. To demand a non-question-begging argument is to demand the impossible. It is unnecessary because the burden of proof does not lie with the common-sense believer to prove the world exists; it lies with the skeptic to show why we should abandon our deeply entrenched, successful, and certain beliefs for an outlandish hypothesis.

Moore's proof, on this reading, is not a attempt to convince the skeptic but to expose the untenable nature of the skeptical position. The skeptic is like a person who demands a proof that words have meaning in the middle of a conversation. Any attempt to provide the proof would itself rely on words having meaning, thus revealing the demand as self-undermining. Similarly, the skeptic's argument, and indeed any argument, implicitly relies on the common-sense world: it relies on the existence of language, minds, and a shared world to communicate the argument. Moore's proof makes this implicit reliance explicit.

The charge of question-begging, therefore, loses its force. It only has bite if we accept the skeptic's demand for a justification that is prior to or outside our entire system of beliefs. But if we recognize that our system of common-sense beliefs forms an indispensable framework for any rational inquiry, including skeptical inquiry, then we see that Moore is not begging the question *within* the framework. He is instead showing that the framework itself is not the kind of thing that can be justified from the outside; its authority is inherent in its role as the necessary precondition for any justification whatsoever.

WITTGENSTEIN'S SUPPORT: ON CERTAINTY AND HINGES

The most sophisticated philosophical development of this Moorean defence comes from Ludwig Wittgenstein, particularly in his final notes published as *On Certainty* (1969). Wittgenstein wrote these notes in direct response to Moore, and while he is critical of Moore's presentation, he deepens and refines the core insight, providing a powerful linguistic and epistemological framework for the defence of common sense.

Wittgenstein agrees with Moore that the propositions Moore claims to know ("I have a hand," "The Earth has existed for a long time") are absolutely certain. However, Wittgenstein argues that their role in our language and epistemic systems is not that of ordinary empirical knowledge. He calls them "hinge propositions" (German: *Angeln*). "That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn" (Wittgenstein, 1969, §341).

The analogy is perfect. A door turns on its hinges, but the hinges themselves remain fixed. Similarly, all our empirical inquiries, justifications, and doubts turn against a background of fixed, unquestioned certainties. To doubt that I have a hand is not to perform a more rigorous epistemic act; it is to step outside the language game of doubt and justification altogether. Such a "doubt" would be empty, idle, or even nonsensical because it would undermine the very framework that gives doubt its meaning. "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty" (Wittgenstein, 1969, §115).

Wittgenstein thus provides a profound answer to the charge of question-begging. Moore's proof does not beg the question because the "question" of the external world, in the radical skeptical sense, is not a genuine question *within* our language game. It is a misplaced demand to justify the hinges themselves. But the hinges are not known; they are not the result of evidence or proof. They are part of the "scaffolding" of our thought (Wittgenstein, 1969, §211), the inherited background against which distinguishing between true and false, justified and unjustified, makes sense.

For example, a student in a biology lab might doubt whether the specimen under the microscope is a plant cell or an animal cell. This doubt operates within a system of hinges: that the microscope is functioning, that her eyes are reliable, that the world outside the lab exists. For her to suddenly doubt the existence of her own hands would not be a more profound doubt; it would be a cognitive catastrophe that would bring all inquiry to a halt. Wittgenstein's point is that the skeptic, in demanding justification for the hinges, is not engaging in a more fundamental form of inquiry but is instead proposing a form of intellectual suicide. Moore's value is that he instinctively held fast to the hinges, showing that they are, in practice, more solid than the philosophical arguments that seem to shake them.

PRAGMATIC AND EPISTEMIC LEGITIMACY

Beyond the Wittgensteinian analysis, Moore's response can be further defended on pragmatic and epistemic grounds. It represents a pragmatically necessary stance without which thought and action are impossible. This aligns with a broader pragmatic tradition in philosophy, which evaluates beliefs based on their practical consequences and indispensability for successful navigation of the world.

The radical skeptic proposes a hypothesis that, by its own definition, is empirically indistinguishable from reality. This renders the hypothesis practically irrelevant. As William James (1896) argued in "The Will to Believe," in matters that are "momentous, forced, and living," we have a right to adopt beliefs that are essential for action. The belief in an external world is the ultimate forced option; we cannot suspend judgment and wait for a proof that will never come. We must act, and our actions are predicated on the truth of common-sense propositions. The remarkable success of these actions—from catching a ball to performing heart surgery—provides a continuous, practical validation of the common-sense framework.

This is not a retreat into anti-intellectualism. The epistemic legitimacy of common sense is affirmed by its coherence, fertility, and explanatory power. Our common-sense view of the world forms a vast, interconnected web of belief that successfully predicts experience and allows for technological and scientific advancement. The skeptical hypothesis, in contrast, is sterile and explanatorily vacuous. It explains nothing more than the common-sense world view does, and it actively prevents any further inquiry.

Why would a perfect deceiver create a world with such consistent, mathematically elegant, and inter-subjectively verifiable laws?

The principle of credulity, defended by philosophers like Thomas Reid (1785/2002) and more recently by William Alston (1993), holds that we are entitled to trust our basic cognitive faculties (like perception) unless we have positive reasons to doubt them. The default position is trust, not doubt. The skeptic provides a mere logical possibility of error, not a positive reason. Moore's proof, therefore, is not an argument from scratch but a reminder of our default, entitled epistemic position. The onus is not on him to prove his hand exists; the onus is on the skeptic to provide a *reason* for doubt that is stronger than the massive positive evidence of a lifetime of successful interaction with hands and other objects. The skeptic fails to meet this burden.

CONCLUSION

G.E. Moore's proof of an external world, delivered through the simple gesture of holding up his hands, remains a pivotal moment in epistemology. While it is easy to dismiss it as a philosophically naïve begging of the question, a deeper analysis reveals it to be a profound and robust response to radical skepticism. Moore's genius lay in his refusal to accept the skeptic's terms of engagement. He recognized that the skeptic's demand for an external justification of the entire common-sense framework is not a reasonable request but a conceptual confusion.

This paper has argued that Moore's proof is best understood not as a failed logical refutation but as a powerful performative act that exposes the parasitic nature of skepticism. It highlights the foundational status of common-sense propositions, a status later elucidated with great depth by Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of "hinge certainties." These propositions form the immutable bedrock upon which all rational doubt and inquiry depend. To doubt them is not to be rigorous but to undermine the very possibility of meaning and justification.

The pragmatic and epistemic defence further solidifies this position. Our trust in common sense is not blind faith but a default entitlement, continuously validated by the astonishing success of our actions and scientific enterprises based upon it. The burden of proof rightly rests on the skeptic to provide a reason for doubt that is more compelling than the certainty of "Here is a hand," a burden they cannot discharge with mere logical possibilities.

Ultimately, Moore's unyielding hand does not silence philosophical inquiry; it grounds it. It reminds us that epistemology does not begin from a position of Cartesian emptiness but from within a rich, pre-existing world of known objects and practices. By holding fast to what we know with the greatest certainty, Moore provides a vital defence of human knowledge against a skepticism that, if taken seriously, would lead

not to wisdom but to intellectual paralysis. His proof stands as a lasting testament to the authority of common sense.

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