

## On G. E. Moore's "Proof of an External World"<sup>†</sup>

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### Abstract

A new reading of G. E. Moore's "Proof of an External World" is offered, on which the Proof is understood as a unique and essential part of an anti-sceptical strategy that Moore worked out early in his career and developed in various forms, from 1909 until his death in 1958. I begin by ignoring the Proof and by developing a reading of Moore's broader response to scepticism. The bulk of the paper is then devoted to understanding what role the Proof plays in Moore's strategy, and how it plays it.

### 1. Introduction

In "Proof of an External World,"<sup>1</sup> G. E. Moore claims to give a rigorous proof of the existence of an external world, as an alternative to Kant's "Refutation of Idealism." The Proof proceeds as follows: after some preliminaries concerning what one might mean by an external object, Moore holds up one hand and makes a certain gesture while declaring, "here is one hand." He then holds up his other hand, makes a similar gesture, and continues, "And here is another." It follows (*per* Moore) that two external objects exist, and thus there is an external world.

Most readers have reacted to the Proof with confusion. On its face, the argument is clearly unsatisfactory, and the idea that Moore thought he could refute external world scepticism in this way defies credibility.<sup>2</sup> Some commentators have responded by trying to "save" the Proof as an argument

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<sup>1</sup> Moore (1939). Henceforth, I will refer to both the proof proper and, when no ambiguity is possible, the entire essay as "the Proof."

<sup>2</sup> I should note immediately that some readers of Moore, most notably Baldwin (1990) and Sosa (2007), argue that Moore never intended his Proof to be a refutation of scepticism, or even an attack on the sceptical philosopher's position. Rather, they take Moore to be arguing against a form of idealism. I think it is possible to square the remarks often cited in support of the anti-idealism reading of the Proof, such as those in "A Reply to My Critics" (see footnote 14), with the perhaps more common reading that Moore is (also) attempting to refute scepticism. In

against scepticism. Malcolm (1942) and Ambrose (1942), for instance, argue that the Proof is doing something other than what it appears to do. Ambrose takes it that Moore is (inadvertently) revealing that the sceptic has suggested an unacceptable revision to ordinary language, whereby knowledge statements would be excised from ordinary speech; the Proof serves to remind the reader that a certain way of speaking is correct after all. Similarly, Malcolm thinks that the Proof shows that the sceptic's claims "*go against ordinary language*" (Malcolm 1942, p. 349), and that Moore is really making a (unstated) paradigm case argument about knowledge. A more recent reading by Soames (2003) takes the Proof to be ironic: Soames thinks Moore is offering a performance designed to reveal the futility of the epistemological debate surrounding scepticism. But none of these is well supported textually, by the Proof itself or by Moore's other writings.<sup>3</sup>

The failure of such readings suggests that we should understand the Proof as written, that is, as an attempt to refute scepticism by appeal to empirical knowledge. But if this is correct, then Moore does not fare well. Not only does he fail to refute the sceptic, but as Stroud (1984) puts it, "Moore gives the impression of having no idea what the sceptical philosopher really wants to say or do" (Stroud 1984,

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particular, Moore presents the Proof as an alternative to Kant's "Refutation of Idealism" (Kant 1929, pp. B274f), where Kant is clear that "problematic idealism," i.e. Cartesian scepticism, is the target of his Refutation. (NB: here and elsewhere, I refer to the Kemp-Smith translation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, as this is the version Moore used.) Moreover, as Stroud (1984, p. 137) points out, if Moore proves that an external world exists, then it follows that he proves that knowledge of the external world is possible. For these reasons and others, many commentators on the Proof do take it as a response to scepticism. I am working in that tradition.

<sup>3</sup> Moore explicitly disavows the Ambrose reading in his "A Reply to My Critics" (Moore 1942). He does not address Malcolm's reading directly, but it seems clear that it is equally unacceptable. The central problem with both the Malcolm and Ambrose readings is their picture of what the sceptic is up to: both think that scepticism amounts to suggesting "*a more correct way of speaking*" (Malcolm 1942, p. 350). But Moore is clear that the sceptic he is concerned with actually holds that we do not know external facts and not merely that we should not speak in certain ways. For more on this line of response to Malcolm and Ambrose, see Stroud (1984, pp. 88-96). Fratantaro (1998, pp. 10-18) also offers a compelling response to Malcolm, and Forster (2008) replies to Ambrose. Soames, meanwhile, rests his reading on an early essay, "Hume's Philosophy" (Moore 1909), and on Moore's 1910/11 lectures, later published as *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (Moore 1953). From these, Soames extracts the idea that Moore's response to scepticism has something to do with the sceptic's theory of knowledge. I do not see an argument about the sceptic's theory of knowledge in either of the sources that Soames draws from. See Forster (2008) for a more detailed response to Soames. I should add that there are certain features of Soames' argument that are similar to the reading I will propose here, though the differences are more substantial. See footnote 26 for more on Soames' relation to the present reading.

p. 124). Stroud's diagnosis of the failure is as follows. He argues that one can draw a distinction between "internal" and "external" perspectives on knowledge. From the internal perspective, a question "is answered by actually establishing some truths in that area or by finding out what has been established by others." The external perspective, meanwhile, requires "a certain withdrawal or detachment from the whole body of our knowledge of the world" (Stroud 1984, p. 117). The philosopher's question is asked from this external perspective. We ask, "how do we know external objects exist?" from a perspective that does not permit any of our knowledge about external objects to be relevant. From the internal perspective, Moore's proof makes perfect sense and is undoubtedly correct; from the external perspective, meanwhile, it fails utterly. And so Stroud is "left with the conclusion that Moore really did not understand the philosopher's assertions in any way other than the everyday 'internal' way" (Stroud 1984, p.125).<sup>4</sup>

Stroud's conclusion seems just, if we take the Proof in isolation. But it is clear from Moore's other work that he *does* understand scepticism. In his very first response to scepticism, the 1909 essay "Hume's Philosophy," for instance, Moore clearly describes the external question:

It seems to me that [the sceptical] position must, in a certain sense, be quite incapable of disproof. So much must be granted to any sceptic who feels inclined to hold it. Any valid argument which can be brought against it must be of the nature of a *petitio principii*: it must beg the question at issue. ... I can only prove that I do [know external facts], by assuming that in some particular instance, I actually do know one. That is to say, the so-called proof must assume the very thing which it pretends to prove. ... And the sceptic can, with perfect internal consistency, deny that he does know any [external facts]. (Moore 1909, pp. 159-160)

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<sup>4</sup> I take it this is the reading Maddy (2007) has in mind, too, when she contrasts Moore with the practitioner of the austere flavor of naturalism she calls "second philosophy." The second philosopher gets the question, but does not think she can answer it; Moore does not get it, and so errs in trying to reply. Clarke (1972), too, takes Moore to be answering the question in a peculiarly internal way.

He makes remarks to similar effect in the much later essay “Certainty” (Moore 1959a, p. 248).<sup>5</sup> But with this understanding of scepticism, Moore must know that the Proof will never satisfy the sceptic.

Indeed, he appears to acknowledge as much in the discussion following the Proof, when he writes,

Some people understand ‘proof of the external world’ as including a proof of things which I haven’t attempted to prove and haven’t proved. ...what they really want is ... a general statement as to how *any* propositions of this sort [i.e. here is a hand] may be proved. (Moore 1939, p. 149)

He goes on to say that he cannot do this, as any proof of his premises would require him to “...prove for one thing, as Descartes pointed out, that I am not now dreaming” (Moore 1939, p. 149).

So Moore cannot intend the Proof to satisfy the sceptic. But then, what *does* he intend it to do? I think the answer lies in a deeper understanding of how Moore responds to scepticism in his other work. Here I will argue that the Proof plays a unique and essential part in the execution of an anti-sceptical strategy that Moore worked out early in his career and developed in various forms, from 1909 until his death in 1958. I will start by ignoring the Proof and by developing a reading of Moore’s broader response to scepticism. In section 2, I will reconstruct another recent reading of Moore’s anti-sceptical strategy, by Lycan (2007), which I will take as my starting point.<sup>6</sup> I think much of what Lycan says is correct, though as I will argue, his reading of the strategy is incomplete. In the subsequent two sections I will explore several points of Moore’s strategy that Lycan’s reading does not capture. Then, once the full strategy has been established, I will return to the Proof, in section 5. The core of the paper will be

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<sup>5</sup> Stroud notes the remarks in “Certainty” and acknowledges that “...from time to time Moore is lured further towards seeing things in the philosopher’s way than I think is consistent with his total immersion in the non-‘philosophical’ or everyday understanding of the remarks philosophers make” (Stroud 1984, p. 120). But as Stroud sees it, such passages reflect moments of weakness on Moore’s part, as he begins to see the glimmer of something that he cannot quite make out and is disinclined to explore. Stroud still does not think that the argument in the Proof reveals any understanding of the sceptical position.

<sup>6</sup> I might note that I have been working on a reading of the Proof based on its role in Moore’s broader anti-sceptical strategy for some time, independently of Lycan’s paper; I only came across his paper more recently. But Lycan and I agree on enough that I think my view is best developed in relation to his.

devoted to understanding what role the Proof plays in Moore's strategy, and how it plays it. In the final section, I will offer some brief concluding remarks on the effectiveness of the strategy I describe.

## 2. Lycan (2007) and "Four Forms of Scepticism"

Lycan (2007) surveys each of Moore's anti-sceptical attempts, from Moore's 1910/11 lectures, published later as *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (Moore 1953), to "Four Forms of Scepticism" (Moore 1959b).<sup>7</sup> As Lycan sees it, Moore does not land on his real strategy until "Four Forms of Scepticism." I should note immediately that I will argue against this part of Lycan's position: I think that the anti-sceptical argument Lycan ultimately attributes to Moore is an accurate reading (with important caveats, which I discuss in section 4), but I think Moore has a relatively mature version of it in place by 1918 (if not 1909), as I will argue in section 3. But first, let me develop what Moore's strategy is supposed to be. Since Lycan takes "Four Forms of Scepticism" to represent the best example of Moore's best anti-sceptical strategy, I will start there.

"Four Forms of Scepticism" is the last<sup>8</sup> paper in which Moore directly confronts scepticism. Moore takes Bertrand Russell's scepticism as his target.<sup>9</sup> He identifies four kinds of things<sup>10</sup> that Russell takes to be doubtful (the four forms indicated in the title) and goes on, in "pages and pages" of "exegesis and criticism" (Lycan 2007, p. 92), to reconstruct Russell's arguments for scepticism. But the real punchline of the essay comes on the last page. Moore is treating external world scepticism and scepticism about other minds. He has identified a series of assumptions (in this case, four<sup>11</sup>) necessary as premises for Russell's argument. But then he says,

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<sup>7</sup> He skips over "Hume's Philosophy" (Moore 1909).

<sup>8</sup> Though published for the first time in *Philosophical Papers* (Moore 1959c) along with "Certainty", "Four Forms of Scepticism" was delivered many times until 1944, whereas "Certainty" was only delivered once, in 1941.

<sup>9</sup> Moore locates Russell's arguments in *Analysis of Matter* (Russell 1927a) and *An Outline of Philosophy* (Russell 1927b).

<sup>10</sup> The four things are personal identity, memory, other minds, and the external world.

<sup>11</sup> These assumptions are (1) one cannot know things about the external world "immediately"; (2) things about the external world do not follow logically from things one *does* know immediately; (3) that if (1) and (2) are true, then

...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* 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. ... Nay more: I do not think it is *rational* to be as certain of any one of these four propositions, as of the proposition that I do know that this is a pencil. (Moore 1959b, p. 226)

Lycan takes this passage to represent Moore's clearest statement of his anti-sceptical strategy. The key, Lycan thinks, is that Moore's "point against the sceptic is *comparative*" (Lycan 2007, p. 93).

Let me spell this out. Suppose the sceptic offers a deductively valid argument in favor of his conclusion. Moore points out that such an argument cuts both ways: given that the argument is valid, there are always two ways to understand it: either as an instance of *modus ponens*, i.e. in favor of the sceptical conclusion, or of *modus tollens*, i.e. against the sceptic's premises. As Lycan puts it,

So far, we have no more reason to accept the conclusion on the strength of the premises than to reject one or more of the premises because the conclusion's denial is more credible. We must make a comparative judgment: is it more rational to accept each of the premises and also the conclusion, or is the conclusion implausible enough that we should reconsider and reject one of the premises? (Lycan 2007, p. 94)

In other words, the sceptic's argument presents a choice between accepting the sceptic's conclusion and rejecting one or more of her assumptions. But put in this way, there is only one rational choice to make.

Lycan writes, "A purely philosophical assumption—n.b., a *bare* assumption, because we are talking about an undefended premise—could not possibly be as rationally credible as an everyday fact supererogatorily well supported by perception and short-term memory" (Lycan 2007, p. 95).

I think Lycan gets the comparative argument just right. Supposing the sceptic's arguments are valid, Moore points out that there is a choice involved in accepting the sceptic's conclusion. Making this choice requires us to compare two sets of propositions and decide which is more plausible, or even, more strongly, which is more rational to accept. I also think that there is more to Moore's strategy, but

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one's beliefs about the external world are based on "analogical or inductive" arguments (Russell's phrase); and (4) one cannot have certain knowledge based on analogical or inductive arguments. See (Moore 1959b, pp. 225-226). It is the last of these that Moore finds suspect.

before I describe what I take that to be and why it is important, I want to draw attention to some principal virtues of Moore's argument on the reading offered so far. (These virtues will carry over to my reading.) The first virtue is that the comparative argument is emphatically not question begging.<sup>12</sup> Moore does *not* say, "but I know that I have hands and thus scepticism is false," full stop, nor does he take for granted anything that the sceptic argues is problematic, or up for debate, or the question at issue. What Moore does is much more subtle, and much more effective. The plausibility comparison between the sceptic's premises and "I know that this is a pencil" occurs at a level of consideration where the *only* question at hand is whether it is more rational to accept such and such a set of propositions or such and such other set of propositions.<sup>13</sup>

This idea deserves to be spelled out in a little more detail. The beauty of the comparative argument is that Moore does not have to say that his reasons for believing that "I know that this is a pencil" are *conclusive* in order to reject scepticism.<sup>14</sup> If he did, the argument *would* be question begging,

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<sup>12</sup> Or, to use the language that Crispin Wright has developed to diagnose the problems with Moore's argument (see Wright 1985, 2002, 2004, 2007), the comparative argument is not a case of "transmission failure" because Moore does not need to assume anything about scepticism to make a plausibility comparison between two sets of propositions.

<sup>13</sup> Nelson (1990) makes a similar point about the comparative argument (which he calls the "principle of weighted certainties"), in response to Stroud. He argues that the comparative argument is suitably external because it happens at a level where none of Moore's ordinary knowledge is assumed. I do not see how this could work, however. The plausibility comparison requires appeal to other things we believe about the world, whereas Stroud's external question explicitly disqualifies any such information. In running the plausibility comparison, Moore does not need to know that "this is a pencil" in advance, but he does have to draw on various things he believes about the world and pencils, etc., to adjudicate between the two possible sets of propositions.

<sup>14</sup> In other words, Moore does not need to *prove* that "I know that this is a pencil", or even that "this is a pencil". It is worth noting that in his "A Reply to My Critics" (Moore 1942), Moore distinguishes his proof of an external world—which he believes he has given—from a proof of *knowledge* of the external world, which he does not believe he can give. So Moore is ready to acknowledge that a proof of "I know that this is a pencil" will not be forthcoming. These remarks of Moore's are sometimes taken as evidence that Moore is not concerned with scepticism in the Proof after all. (Recall footnote 2.) But I do not think this is correct. There is an important relationship between assertions that *p* and assertions that "I know that *p*" for Moore. Indeed, it is an instance of Moore's paradox to say "*p*, but I don't know that *p*." (This is not to say that *p* implies anyone's knowledge of *p*; it is merely *assertion* of *p* by someone amounts to a knowledge claim.) I take this to mean that the ordinary reasons one might have for believing that "this is a pencil" when presented with a pencil also amount to reasons for believing that "I know that this is a pencil", and thus that these first-order considerations, while not amounting to a proof of any kind, would be the relevant ones to bring to bear in the comparative argument.

since the sceptic argues that none of Moore's reasons could be conclusive. Rather, the argument involves a comparison between two collections of propositions, along with the (perhaps) inconclusive or incomplete reasons one has for believing those propositions and whatever other considerations might go into determining whether a particular proposition is plausible, such as how well it conforms with one's expectations or how consistent it is with other things one knows. In presenting the comparative argument, you do not need to *know* anything about any of the propositions being compared. But after the comparative argument is through, and one set of propositions has been shown to be more plausible or more certain than the other, then you *do* know something: you know how to make the choice between the two versions of the sceptical argument. In other words, you go into the comparative argument with suspended judgments about whether "I know that this is a pencil" is true. You then determine that it *is* more plausible that "I know that this is a pencil" is true than that any of Russell's assumptions are true. And finally, on the basis of this determination, you recognize that you should choose the *modus tollens* version of Russell's argument. But by this you conclude that one of Russell's assumptions *must* be false, deductively, at least insofar as Russell's assumptions cannot all be true if the more plausible "I know that this is a pencil" is true. At no point have you had to assume your conclusion, or anything else that is in question, in making this argument. And by the end, you are entitled to reject the sceptic's argument without qualification.

A second virtue is closely related: the comparative argument does not privilege any kind of statement or knowledge, either perceptual or of common sense.<sup>15</sup> It does not need to. It is not the case that "I know that this is a pencil" is more certain or more plausible than any of Russell's assumptions

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<sup>15</sup> Perhaps privileging some class of propositions or knowledge in this way would, in some contexts at least, count as begging the question, and so this virtue would collapse into the other. But the point is still worth emphasizing, if only because some authors have suggested that Moore's Proof is not question begging because some kinds of knowledge are privileged. For instance, Davies (2004), Greco (2002), and Pryor (2000, 2004), all argue that Moore's Proof is *not* question begging (or, is *not* an example of transmission failure) because Moore's premises have a special status.

because “I know that this is a pencil” (or even “this is a pencil”) has some special propositional status; rather, it is more plausible simply because we have all sorts of ordinary evidence to support the claim that it *is* a pencil<sup>16</sup> and relatively little evidence at all in favor of Russell’s assumptions. And as a third virtue, the comparative argument does not trade on any particular criterion of plausibility or rationality or any story about how such judgments are made. *Any* good criterion will do. As Lycan puts it, “Although the epistemology of such judgments is both important and controversial, it is a meta-issue in the present context. Actual, real-life plausibility comparisons do not wait upon epistemology” (Lycan 2007, p. 98).

So on my view, Lycan correctly identifies a central component of Moore’s strategy and highlights some of its main virtues. I will take Lycan’s reading, as described thus far, as the starting point for the rest of my analysis. But from here on, Lycan and I part ways. Lycan takes it that the comparative argument accounts for Moore’s full strategy against scepticism (at least in “Four Forms of Scepticism”); I think there are important elements of the strategy that Lycan’s account overlooks. But before I can describe these elements properly, I need to establish another aspect of my reading of Moore’s anti-sceptical strategy, namely that (*contra* Lycan) Moore uses versions of the comparative argument throughout his career. Each of the instances of the comparative argument is a little different, and it is only with the full diversity of these versions of the argument laid out that it can be fully understood. So in the next section, I will describe the versions of the comparative argument that appear in Moore’s other writings; then in section 4, I will return to the question of how Lycan’s reading should be expanded.

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<sup>16</sup> Recall footnote 14. One’s reasons, here, are that it looks like a pencil, even when you look carefully under good lighting. Indeed, close examination reveals that “Ticonderoga,” the name of a well-known pencil manufacturer, is written right on the pencil. It feels like a pencil, what with its characteristic hexagonal shape. You can write with it and erase what you have written with India rubber. It smells like wood and fits nicely in a pencil sharpener. Etc.

### 3. The anti-sceptical strategies in Moore's earlier writings

So how does Moore respond to scepticism in his other work? In "Certainty," which was written during the same period as "Four Forms of Scepticism," Moore takes the Cartesian dream argument as his target. But he structures the argument differently than in "Four Forms of Scepticism": rather than begin with the exegesis and conclude with the comparative argument, he starts by setting up the comparison. He concedes that, *if* he is dreaming, it is quite likely that he does *not* know that he is standing up. But if this argument is valid as an example of *modus ponens*, then its contrapositive is an equally valid example of *modus tollens*: he explains, "...it follows that it is also true that if I *do* know that I am standing up, then I do know that I am not dreaming" (Moore 1959a, p. 247). Logically, these are equivalent; the question, then, becomes a matter of picking one over the other. "The one argument is just as good as the other, unless my opponent can give better reasons for asserting that I don't know that I'm not dreaming, than I can give for asserting that I do know that I am standing up" (*ibid.*). And so, Moore's goal is to identify the "premises and reasonings from them, which I think have led so many philosophers" (*ibid.*) to prefer the *modus ponens* interpretation of the conditional over the *modus tollens* interpretation. I take setting the problem up in this way to be a clear instance of the comparative argument: the strategy is to compare the sceptic's reasons for believing her premises with Moore's reasons to believe that he is not dreaming.

But beginning the discussion of scepticism with this *modus ponens/modus tollens* argument threatens to overshadow the real structure of the argument. By the time he makes the comparative move in "Four Forms of Scepticism," he has already worked to undermine Russell's assumptions, and so the comparative argument seems well motivated. In "Certainty," on the other hand, Moore leads with a form of the comparative argument, before showing that there are any problematic assumptions in the sceptic's argument. It is easy to misread Moore here, so it is worth emphasizing that he handles the argument carefully. He does *not* counter the sceptic's dream argument by asserting its contrapositive.

Moore acknowledges that to do so would be to miss the point altogether, explaining that to use the evidence of his senses to argue that he *does* know that he is standing (and by implication, that he is not dreaming) would beg the question. Instead, Moore makes the more modest point that the sceptic's conditional *alone* is not sufficient to motivate scepticism. In addition, one needs to make a choice between accepting the sceptic's premises and rejecting the sceptic's conclusion.

So although Moore does not make the comparative point as effectively in "Certainty" as he does in the last paragraph of "Four Forms of Scepticism," a version of the strategy is present.<sup>17</sup> What about Moore's earlier work? I think the strategy is clearly present in "Some Judgments of Perception" (Moore 1918). Moore writes,

This, after all, you know, really is a finger: there is no doubt about it: I know it, and you all know it. And I think we may safely challenge any philosopher to bring forward any argument in favour either of the proposition that we do not know it, or of the proposition that it is not true, which does not at some point, rest upon some premiss which is, beyond comparison, less certain than is the proposition which it is designed to attack. (Moore 1918, p. 228)

Though brief, these remarks are crucial to understanding the full strategy; I will return to them in sections 4 and 5. But let me highlight a few things about this passage now. The first point to note is that Moore frames his response to scepticism as a *challenge* to the sceptic to bring forth an argument against the claim "I know that this is a finger." The second thing to note is the quantifier structure. Moore claims that, given any argument for scepticism, the goal would be to identify the premises involved in *that* argument and then make the comparative argument with those particular premises.

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<sup>17</sup> Lycan takes it that the whole argument in "Certainty" amounts to saying that the sceptic has not proved his point, as Moore does on the final pages of the essay. But this ignores Moore's comments earlier in the essay, quoted above, that the sceptic's argument provides a choice between two alternatives, and that making this choice requires us to compare the sceptic's reasons for thinking that one does not know she is not dreaming with her reasons for believing that she knows she is standing up.

Finally, as it is phrased here, Moore is expressing his conviction that the strategy will work, rather than executing it. But the strategy he describes is nevertheless the mature one.<sup>18</sup>

One can go further back, still, to the arguments against Hume's scepticism in "Hume's Philosophy" (Moore 1909) and *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (based on 1910/11 lectures, but published in 1953). Even there, elements of the mature strategy are already in place, though it remains inchoate. In "Hume's Philosophy," for instance, Moore writes,

Hume does not, therefore, bring forward any arguments at all sufficient to prove ... that he cannot know any external fact. And, indeed, I think it is plain that no conclusive argument could possibly be advanced in favour of [this position]. It would always be at least as easy to deny the argument as to deny that we do know external facts. (Moore 1909, p. 163)

I do not think that he has yet perfected the strategy, here, because he does not yet set it up as a direct comparison between two sets of propositions. But it is nonetheless clear that he is already close to both the comparative argument and the corollary attempts to identify and disqualify the assumptions of the sceptic's argument.

In *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, meanwhile, Moore comes even closer. He argues that "I know that this pencil exists" is "much more certain than any premiss [sic] which could be used to prove that [it is] false" (Moore 1953, p. 125).<sup>19</sup> Here there really is a direct comparison, though in this case Moore does seem to claim that he knows "this pencil exists" up front, and so he risks begging the question against the sceptic in a way that I have argued the mature version of the comparative argument does not. So despite the similarities to his later argument style, he does not yet have the full

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<sup>18</sup> Lycan acknowledges this passage, and a similar passage from *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (partially quoted below). But he says that Moore makes nothing more of them until "Four Forms of Scepticism." I suspect that our different understandings of "Certainty" vis a vis the comparative argument explains why Lycan puts less weight on these early remarks. If one accepts that Moore had come up with the strategy as early as 1918, it becomes a puzzle as to why he would not have used it in "Certainty"—or the Proof, for that matter.

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, what Moore says here is that "I know that this pencil exists" and "this pencil exists" are *both* more certain than any premise that could be used to prove them false, and "also much more certain than any other premiss which could be used to prove that they are true" (Moore 1953, p. 125). Compare this with the remarks in footnote 14, regarding proving the premise "I know that this is a pencil".

strategy in place. But whether the mature argument was perfected in 1909 or 1918 does not particularly matter. The point is simply that Moore's mature anti-sceptical strategy was the same in both "Certainty" and "Four Forms of Scepticism," and that Moore already had the elements of the strategy worked out long before. These observations suggest exploring the comparative argument in more detail by looking at its use across Moore's writings, as I will do presently. It also justifies attempting to understand the relation between the Proof and the comparative argument, as I will do in section 5.

#### **4. The comparative argument reconsidered**

I hope that I have by now established that the comparative argument appears in various forms as early as 1909, and that its mature version is described in 1918 and executed, with varying degrees of success, in both "Certainty" (written in 1941) and "Four Forms of Scepticism" (written between 1940 and 1944). With this complete landscape to consider, let me return to the question of how the comparative argument fits into Moore's strategy. To start, recall that the comparative argument only appears explicitly on the final page of "Four Forms of Scepticism" and that the rest of the essay involves extensive detailed critical exegesis of Russell's arguments, bordering on tedium. I claim that this exegesis does real work. For each of the four forms of scepticism, Moore endeavors to reconstruct Russell's arguments. He identifies Russell's explicit premises, states them as baldly as possible, and rejects ones that seem clearly wrong. In cases where the premises appear harmless, Moore tries to show how Russell reasons from them, identifying logical gaps along the way. These gaps can be understood as points at which additional, implicit assumptions or premises are needed, or where stated premises need to be strengthened and the stronger versions defended. And so, before offering his comparative argument, Moore strives to lay bare just *what* assumptions and premises, stated and

unstated, Russell requires, and to offer reasons for thinking that these assumptions are implausible or require defense.<sup>20</sup>

Without this additional, exegetical step, I think a strategy built on the comparative argument fails. Lycan assumes that the sceptic's premises are always "philosophical" in some damning sense. But how do we know this is true? In other words, Lycan's version appears to disqualify the sceptic's premises automatically, without entertaining the possibility that they are just ordinary claims that anyone would accept (i.e., of a kind with "I know that this is a pencil"). Stroud, who thinks scepticism *does* follow from perfectly ordinary, uncontroversial claims about knowledge, offers just this response to Moore's concluding remarks in "Four Forms of Scepticism":

From the "assumptions" said to be behind Russell's sceptical conclusion it does indeed follow that Moore does not know that this is a pencil. But if those "assumptions" are nothing more than truths unavoidably involved in any general assessment of our knowledge of the world, Moore does not successfully refute them. (Stroud 1984, p. 111)

This reply has force against Lycan's Moore. The comparative argument only succeeds if "I know that this is a pencil" really is more plausible than the conjunction of the sceptic's assumptions. If the sceptic begins from a place that is every bit as plausible as "I know that this is a pencil" then there may be no easy way to choose between his premises and "I know that this is a pencil." Likewise the sceptic may

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<sup>20</sup> Since Lycan seems to ignore this part of the argument, perhaps I should give some specific examples to show how it works. Take Moore's response to Russell's scepticism about memory, for instance. Moore argues that for Russell to reach scepticism about our knowledge of the past, he must assume that "...we can only know with certainty that so-and-so is true, if the 'so-and-so' in question belongs to some class of which it is true that no member of that class ever 'leads us into error'" (Moore 1959b, p. 216). But Russell does not offer any argument for this assumption. Moore writes, "If the principle is true at all, that it is true seems to require some further argument, which Russell does not supply" (Moore 1959b, p. 216). And without an argument in favor of this apparently questionable assumption, Moore does not see why he should take the memories that he has always taken to be reliable before to be doubtful. So in this case, Moore identifies an unstated and undefended assumption, and points out that for Russell's argument to succeed, this additional premise needs some justification. As a second example, take Moore's reply to the dream argument with regard to memory. Here he argues that there is a modal fallacy in Russell's argument: Russell reasons from "there are some dream experiences in some respects like some waking experiences" to "*this* experience could be a dream experience." Moore points out that Russell requires a stronger premise than he argues for in order to derive his conclusion, namely something like "*any* waking experience is in all respects indistinguishable from a possible dream experience" (See Moore 1959b, pp.119-120). See also footnote 24.

begin with premises whose plausibility cannot be easily determined. Suppose the sceptic cites a surprising but well documented neuroscientific discovery about the nature of our belief forming mechanisms, and somehow manages to argue from that starting point to a sceptical conclusion.<sup>21</sup> Then it might not be clear how to determine which alternative is most plausible. At the very least, establishing the plausibility of the sceptic's premises would require a detailed review of the scientific literature, and perhaps some new studies.

In the case of Russell's scepticism, the rational choice is likely obvious to modern readers, especially after Moore has finished with Russell's argument. Russell's assumptions are nowhere near as plausible as "I know that this is a pencil." Neither are the example assumptions that Lycan produces from Moore's other contemporaries, such as McTaggart or Bradley. And perhaps the choice would have been equally obvious if Moore had simply laid Russell's assumptions out to begin with, without offering any reasons to doubt them. But this intuition belies the fact that many philosophers have taken Russell's assumptions to be not only quite plausible, but *true*. Moore himself admits that he thinks three of the four assumptions (1-3) are true (Moore 1959b, p. 226), though he is less certain of any of them than that "I know that this is a pencil."

The important point is that unless the assumptions are made explicit and evaluated independently, I think Stroud's worry is justified. Moore has to show that the antecedent of Stroud's conditional is false, that Russell's assumptions are *not* unavoidable truths at all, but rather contentious and unproven suppositions without much concrete evidence to support them. And Moore realizes this: the vast majority of the essay is devoted to showing that Russell's assumptions are *not* "truths

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<sup>21</sup> Imagine a modern-day, naturalized form of Hume's genetic argument. That any such argument would in fact lead to scepticism may be unlikely, but I think it is conceivable.

unavoidably involved in any general assessment of our knowledge of the world,” or if they are, then Russell has not shown them to be.

I think these considerations draw out a second important aspect of Moore’s strategy that Lycan’s account does not capture, which is that Moore’s strategy requires *specific* sceptical arguments to respond to. Recall the quantifier structure in “Some Judgments of Perception,” quoted above. Moore says that given any argument, he is confident that he can develop a version of the comparative argument to respond to it. But Moore does not have a panacea against scepticism. There is not a single argument that can be brought to bear against scepticism in full generality. He can only respond to particular arguments in favor of scepticism. So the strategy is not to simply assert (A) “given any argument the sceptic might make, it is necessarily the case that ‘I know that this is a pencil’ is more certain than the sceptic’s assumptions”; rather, it is to say (B) “*this particular argument* for scepticism rests on *these particular premises* that I have shown are neither argued for nor immediate, and so seem less plausible than the claim they are supposed to overrule.” That is not to say that Moore never expresses (A). He does, in “Some Judgments of Perception” and *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*. But a distinction needs to be made between the strategy that Moore uses against the sceptic, especially in his later writings, and Moore’s personal convictions or expectations about scepticism. The strategy in practice, I have argued, is expressed by (B). But Moore’s belief that the strategy will always succeed follows from his personal conviction that (A) is true. (A) may be dogmatic, unconvincing, etc., but its specific manifestation in the form of (B) need not be if the comparative argument is executed as I describe in section 2.

This last observation shows the importance of executing the strategy in a specific case. To see this point more clearly, consider what happens when you try to run the comparative argument against the general sceptical conclusion. One way to do this would be to try to identify a set of assumptions

underlying *any* sceptical argument. Maybe such assumptions exist.<sup>22</sup> But supposing you have identified a candidate assumption that you believe is necessary for any form of scepticism, I do not see how one can tell in advance that there are no *other* sceptical arguments that do not require that assumption. So this approach does not seem very good. An alternative way to do it would be to simply claim that given any sceptical argument, it *must* rest on a set of assumptions that are less plausible than “I know that this is a pencil.” This, after all, is what Moore does in “Some Judgments of Perception.” But by itself, this argument is not persuasive, even if it happens to be true. It seems dogmatic, for just the reason Stroud points out. How do you know that sceptical arguments do not rest on unavoidable truths about knowledge? Unless you can find assumptions that all sceptical arguments must make (in which case, the second generalist approach collapses into the first), the only way to guarantee that “I know that this is a pencil” is more plausible than *any* premise the sceptic might bring forward is to privilege “I know that this is a pencil” (or perhaps, “this is a pencil”), *ex fiat*. When using the comparative argument against specific sceptical argument, meanwhile, you do not need to privilege anything, as I argued in section 2.

So Moore’s strategy requires a specific argument for scepticism. But it requires slightly more than this: it also requires a *concrete* argument for scepticism. Moore has one in “Four Forms of Scepticism,” where he takes Russell’s scepticism as his target. But he does *not* have a sufficiently concrete argument to respond to in “Certainty.” There Moore complains that “I do not think that I have ever seen clearly stated any argument which is supposed to show [that I may not know I am not dreaming]” (Moore 1959a, p. 247). This may seem like it favors Moore’s position, but actually, it derails his strategy. Since he does not have a particular version of the dream argument to contend with, Moore is forced to come up with his *own* version, which he proceeds to criticize. But rebutting a reconstruction

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<sup>22</sup> Soames (2003), for instance, seems to think that Moore *can* identify assumptions of this sort—specifically, that the sceptic has to assume a special, restrictive set of epistemic norms. But I do not see how Soames can show that *every* sceptical argument needs the *same* special epistemic norms.

of the sceptical argument in this way only succeeds if Moore correctly anticipates his opponent's assumptions. In "Certainty," in his effort to avoid producing a straw man, Moore grants too much.

The problem begins in earnest at the beginning of the fourth from last paragraph.<sup>23</sup> Here Moore points out that it is a "huge step" to say that:

...since [(A)] there have been dream-images similar in important respects to some of the sensory experiences I am now having, [(B)] it is logically possible that there should be dream-images *exactly like all* the sensory experiences I am now having, and logically possible, therefore, that all sensory experiences I am now having *are* mere dream-images. (Moore 1959a, p. 249)

This argument recalls the modal fallacy that Moore identifies in "Four Forms of Scepticism," in response to Russell's version of the dream argument.<sup>24</sup> But there is a crucial difference in the way Moore proceeds in "Certainty." In "Four Forms of Scepticism," Moore identifies the fallacy and stops, pointing out that Russell requires a stronger premise than he has argued for in order to proceed. But this response works because Moore has a particular, concrete argument. There is a clear way of arbitrating as to what Russell does and does not argue for. Moore does not have this option in "Certainty," where he is reconstructing the sceptic's argument himself.

So in "Certainty," Moore allows the sceptic to continue: he imagines that there could be an argument to get from (A) to (B). Moore does not have a clear idea of what the argument would be, and so he is left to sketch out what "might be said" in support of such a conclusion. But note that already Moore is adrift. For the comparative argument to be effective, Moore would need to reconstruct the specific argument used to get from (A) to (B), identify its assumptions, and run the plausibility

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<sup>23</sup> According to a footnote to "Certainty" added by Casimir Lewy, Moore's academic executor, Moore was "particularly dissatisfied with the last four paragraphs of this paper" (Moore 1959a, p. 251n). Moore himself, in a preface to "Philosophical Papers" admits that "Certainty" contains "bad mistakes" (Moore 1959c, p. 13).

<sup>24</sup> The fallacy there is supposed to be that it does not follow from "there are some waking experiences in some regards similar to some dream experiences" that "this waking experience could be a dream experience." Indeed, one can see a striking similarity, here, to Stroud's (1984) version of the dream argument, which does seem to require that any particular waking experience could be a dream experience—a strong and highly contestable assumption. See also footnote 20.

comparison. Since he is now working with the mere possibility that such an argument could be given, he cannot identify its particular premises. The same problem occurs again soon after, when Moore suggests that “the conjunction of my memories of the immediate past<sup>25</sup> with [my present] sensory experiences *may* be sufficient to enable me to know that I am not dreaming” (Moore 1959a, p. 250).

Moore allows that the sceptic may be able to find an argument here, as well. He asks,

What if our sceptical philosopher says: it is *not* sufficient; and offers as an argument to prove that it is not, this: It is logically possible *both* that you should be having all the sensory experiences you are having, and also that you should be remembering what you do remember, and *yet* should be dreaming. (ibid.)

What if, indeed. If the sceptic *can* provide such an argument, then Moore seems ready to admit that all is lost. And the best Moore can do in reply is to say that so far as he knows, “nobody ever has, and I don’t know how anybody ever could” provide such an argument (ibid.).

Once again, the force of Moore’s argument is lost, since he is left responding to the possibility of an argument that he does not know if anyone can make. So despite the fact the Moore *does* identify an undefended assumption (namely, the strengthening of the premise (A) necessary to get to (B)) that shows up in many common forms of the dream argument (such as Russell’s), the comparative argument lacks its force. Moore cannot say, “compare *these* assumptions with ‘I know that here is a pencil’” because he cannot definitively pinpoint the particular assumptions being used. He is left to conclude that *if* the sceptic cannot come up with a good argument, then Moore’s *modus tollens* is “just as good” as the sceptic’s *modus ponens* (ibid.). And “just as good” does not have the punch of “it is more rational to believe....”

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<sup>25</sup> Moore does not develop this idea in detail here. But there is an alternate ending to the essay that Moore cut from the final version, which gives some indication of what he might have had in mind (Moore 1993). Moore imagines a situation in which he is lying “naked on a white beach, in front of a blue sea, under a bright sun, and then suddenly had all the same experiences I have now” (Moore 1993, p. 195). Under these circumstances, he does not think he would say he knew *anything*, that he would be quite puzzled. But this is not the situation he is currently experiencing: his recent memories are perfectly coherent with his current experience.

Before moving on to consider how the Proof fits in to this strategy, let me sum up where we have gotten so far. First, I have argued that versions of this strategy show up in all of Moore's anti-sceptical writings (aside from the Proof, of course), from 1909 on. I have also argued that the full strategy actually proceeds in two steps, of which Lycan's is the second. First Moore reconstructs the sceptic's argument, identifies the premises behind it, and attempts to show that they are implausible or that we are not compelled to accept them. I have argued that this step forms a necessary precursor for the successful application of the comparative argument. Only after he has at least partially disqualified the sceptic's assumptions does Moore make the comparative move. I have also argued that for the comparative move to be effective, Moore needs to have a specific and concrete sceptical argument to consider. Moore cannot respond to the general sceptical position with the comparative argument, unless he can show that there is a set of assumptions underlying *every* sceptical argument. But this seems unlikely, and even if it were so, it would be immensely difficult to show conclusively that no other sceptical arguments *could* exist. Likewise, Moore needs to have a concrete argument, and not just an argument style, to consider, since the comparative argument is only effective if Moore can point to the *particular* assumptions that the sceptic makes, as he does in "Four Forms of Scepticism," without equivocating about what kinds of other argument a hypothetical sceptic might be able to come up with, as he does in "Certainty."

## **5. The Proof in Context**

I began this essay by noting a puzzle: it seems, from the remarks at the end of the Proof, that Moore cannot intend the Proof to satisfy the philosophical sceptic. I set out to understand what he *did* intend the Proof to do, by looking at how he responds to scepticism elsewhere. But now there is a second puzzle. Throughout his career, in essays published from 1909 to 1958, Moore uses versions of the same two-part comparative strategy against scepticism. Yet he does not even mention it in the Proof. There is no explicit comparison between "here is a hand" (or "I know that here is a hand") and the premises of

the dream argument, or Hume's principles, or anything of the sort. In fact, Moore does not even mention the sceptic's argumentation. Instead, he flatly contradicts her, on the basis of premises that she would take to be as doubtful as the conclusion. What is going on?

I think it is clear that the Proof does not have the same structure as any of Moore's other arguments against scepticism. But I claim it is nonetheless a crucial part of the same strategy. Indeed, when put in context, one can see several ways in which it complements the comparative strategy as already discussed. For instance, an important part of the comparative argument is the (admittedly simple) observation that *any* argument begins somewhere, with some collection of premises. And so in the Proof, Moore establishes with characteristic care and precision that if you grant him these particular premises—that "here is one hand" and "here is another"—he can prove the existence of an external world. Thus the Proof demonstrates that, given otherwise highly plausible premises—premises Moore claims he knows to be true—a proof of the external world can be provided after all. Indeed, one can read Moore's comments after the Proof proper as asserting precisely this: that the Proof is a rigorous argument starting with plausible premises and ending with the desired proposition, namely that there exists an external world (see Moore 1939, pp. 144-148). As Moore acknowledges there, he cannot *prove* his premises—but of course, neither can the sceptic prove *her* premises.

Indeed, one might see the Proof as following through on an implicit promissory note that arises in the comparative argument. There Moore compares the premises of a specific sceptical argument with propositions such as "I know that this is a pencil", and uses the comparison to conclude that one or more of the sceptic's premises must be false. But one might still wonder whether propositions such as "this is a pencil" or "here is a hand" (or, "I know that this is a pencil" or "I know that here is a hand," which presumably imply "this is a pencil" and "here is a hand," respectively), are themselves sufficient to prove that an external world exists. In other words, one might be convinced by the comparative argument that any particular sceptic's argument rests on faulty premises, and yet still worry that the

propositions with which Moore compares the sceptic's assumptions do not establish what Moore needs them to in order to have a convincing argument against scepticism. The Proof, then, establishes that these premises *are* sufficient after all.

These observations already go some way towards explaining the relationship between the Proof and Moore's other writings on scepticism. But it seems to me that there's something deeper going on. Recall how important it is that Moore have sufficiently specific, concrete arguments in favor of scepticism, and how badly the comparative argument suffers without such arguments. In "Some Judgments of Perception," Moore describes how to solicit the arguments he needs. He writes that "we may safely *challenge* any philosopher to bring forward any argument" (my emphasis) for scepticism whose premises are as certain as the proposition "this is a finger." So to draw out the arguments necessary for the comparative argument to be most effective, Moore issues a challenge. Given Moore's strategy elsewhere, and these considerations, I think the Proof is best read as a performance of this challenge.<sup>26</sup> In other words, it is an invocation (or perhaps, a provocation) to the sceptic to bring forth arguments in favor of the view that Moore *does not* know that he has hands, so that Moore can identify the assumptions behind the arguments and use the comparative argument to defeat them. How does this work? As Wittgenstein puts it, "when Moore says 'I know that that's...' I want to reply 'you don't know anything!'" (Wittgenstein 1972, §407). And to offer a conclusive reply to the Proof, the sceptic must show *why* it fails. This requires a careful, analytic argument in *favor* of scepticism. And such arguments are grist for Moore's anti-sceptical mill.

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<sup>26</sup> As I observed above (see footnote 3), Soames (2003) also thinks that the Proof is a performance. But the nature and purpose of the performance here is quite different from what Soames suggests. He thinks the Proof is ironic, intended to show the absurdity of the sceptical/anti-sceptical debate. I think Moore takes scepticism very seriously, but that he needs the sceptic to bring forward sufficiently careful, concrete arguments in order for Moore to be able to effectively use the comparative argument.

Reading the Proof as a performance in this way, various puzzling features of the essay's structure begin to make sense. In fact, the Proof seems to be constructed in a way to be particularly infuriating for anyone who takes philosophical scepticism seriously.<sup>27</sup> (Recall, for instance, Stroud's reaction that Moore just does not understand the question.) Moore begins the Proof by channeling Kant's famous "Refutation of Idealism," wherein Kant claims to definitively refute the "problematic idealist," i.e. the Cartesian sceptic (cf. Kant 1929, pp. B274f). But Moore reacts with bemused surprise to Kant's remark that it is a "scandal to philosophy" (Kant 1929, B preface p. xl) that no satisfactory proof of an external world is known. He writes, "It seems clear from these words that Kant thought it a matter of some importance" (Moore 1939, p. 127) to prove the existence of the external world, and moreover points out that it must be a matter of importance to philosophy, since Kant takes it to be a scandal to philosophy that no such proof has been given. And Moore agrees: it *is* a matter of some importance, if Kant is correct that such a proof has not been given. To make matters worse, Moore does not think it is clear that Kant's own proof succeeds. On these grounds, "the question whether it is possible to give *any* satisfactory proof of the point in question still deserves discussion" (Moore 1939, p. 129).

Why should this way of framing the problem infuriate the sceptic? For one reason, Moore feigns a kind of shock at Kant's scandal: You say we cannot prove that an external world exists? I say, old chap, that is troubling news indeed! We should get promptly to work. Of course, Moore has been

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<sup>27</sup> As a disclaimer for the remarks here and immediately following: my purpose is merely to show that, given my reading, the structure of "Proof of an External World," which otherwise might seem puzzling or ineffective, has a compelling explanation. Some of the things I say are borne out by how some philosophers, such as Stroud, *have* reacted to Moore. But the kinds of ideas I present here are necessarily conjectural: there is no direct textual evidence to support the idea that Moore did, as a matter of fact, intend the structure of the essay to work in the way I suggest. All I claim is that these features of the essay might contribute to the role I argue the Proof plays in Moore's broader strategy. That said, I think this discussion is well motivated: if I am to argue that the Proof is a particular kind of performance with a specific goal, I think it is reasonable to ask what about the performance, *qua* performance, might be understood to contribute to that goal, especially when the features of the performance that can be so identified also help explain otherwise puzzling features of the performance.

engaging with external world scepticism in his published writings and his lectures at Cambridge for 30 years. He notes in 1909 that no proof that could satisfy the sceptic is even possible (see the quote from “Hume’s Philosophy” in section 1). And so beginning with Kant’s “scandal to philosophy” as though he has just become aware of a new and pressing problem is disingenuous. But it is rhetorically effective.

It is important to remember, here, that, like most of Moore’s published essays, “Proof of an External World” was written as a public lecture. Moore delivered the Proof as the Henriette Hertz Annual Philosophical Lecture to the British Academy. The Hertz lecture is a prestigious event, and the British Academy a stodgy organization. The audience would have been filled with scholars who had studied philosophy, who were familiar with philosophical scepticism, and who had all read Kant and knew of both his famous footnote and the notorious problems faced by the Refutation. For instance, though I do not know if he was present, Norman Kemp Smith was a member of the British Academy and had given the Hertz lecture a few years previously, in 1931. One can imagine a room full of serious people gathered for a momentous occasion, squirming in their seats as the great Professor Moore announces that he has just learned of a scandal to philosophy.

Beginning the lecture in this way would be infuriating for another reason as well. Moore leads with Kant, who claims to have *refuted* external world scepticism, and moves immediately to the question of in what ways the existence of an external world *can* be proved. Nowhere in the introduction to the problem does Moore mention the legacy of the *sceptic*. Descartes and Hume do not appear in the preamble to the lecture (nor in its body, though Descartes is acknowledged at the very end).<sup>28</sup> Nor do contemporaneous sceptics, such as Russell. By focusing on the scandal of whether a certain kind of proof is possible, Moore simply ignores the fact that there is a long history of philosophers who hold not only that *no* such proof can be given, but that the would-be conclusion of the proof is *doubtful* in a

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<sup>28</sup> Of course, Descartes believed, like Kant, that he had refuted skepticism.

particularly vicious sense. Moore does not even acknowledge that Kant was responding to these philosophers with his “Refutation of Idealism.” The omission of any mention of the sceptic is especially bizarre in light of Moore’s careful focus elsewhere on the particulars of the sceptic’s argument. But I think we can now see the omission as an intentional rhetorical move. Moore intends to grant the sceptic nothing. He does not even grant the existence of well-known and standard sceptical arguments. The reason is that Moore aims to block the kinds of careless or vague allusions to such arguments against which the comparative argument is ineffective. And for her part, the sceptic’s natural reaction would be to object to Moore’s way of approaching the problem, and to respond precisely by pointing out the litany of arguments in favor of the sceptical conclusion. But as I have suggested, this is just what Moore requires, so long as the arguments offered are sufficiently precise.

The bulk of the lecture—i.e. the 17 pages of the 24 page essay that fall between Moore’s introduction and the Proof proper—is then devoted to a tedious analysis of what it means to be “outside of us” or “to be met with in space.” Moore works out the definitions of these expressions with utmost care, clarifying, he claims, the point to be proved. But the crucial thing to note, here, is that what he says would be uncontroversial to the sceptic, who would surely agree that human hands, dogs, stars, and soap bubbles are all outside of us.<sup>29</sup> After all, it is precisely objects of this sort that the sceptic would claim we do not have knowledge of. I suspect, however, that Moore would have agreed that this analysis is largely ancillary. Moore is clear in “A Defense of Common Sense” that conditionalizing assent to a proposition that has been expressed in ordinary language on the details of the analysis of that proposition is “as profoundly mistaken as any view can be” (Moore 1925, p. 37). It is easy to state facts

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<sup>29</sup> Supposing such things exist at all. At times Moore seems to either beg the question against the idealist (i.e. the dogmatic or absolute idealist, not the problematic idealist), or to dismiss the substance of the idealist’s position altogether. See for instance the discussion of soap bubbles on pgs. 144-5 of the essay. Baldwin (1990), who takes the Proof to be a failed attempt to refute these kinds of idealism, expands on what the idealist would find problematic in the analysis section of the Proof. I would argue that the casual dismissal of the idealist position that Baldwin identifies is further evidence against his reading of the Proof. See also footnote 2.

that contradict the external world sceptic using ordinary language: “here is a pencil” or “two hands exist” or “I am now standing up” are all satisfactory examples (he cites a number of others in the first paragraph of “Certainty” and later points out their relation to the sceptical thesis).<sup>30</sup> I take it that the truth value of “external objects exist,” then, insofar as it is implied by all sorts of ordinary expressions, cannot depend on the analysis of whether “external to our minds” is the same as “to be met with in space,” etc.

As additional evidence for this view, note that in “Certainty,” Moore takes it as immediate that propositions like “I am now standing up” “imply the existence of something external to the mind of the person who makes them” (Moore 1959a, p. 243). Moore is not above repeating analyses when he thinks a locution is unclear or ambiguous. But he does not repeat the analysis from the Proof in “Certainty,” which suggests that Moore held that this analysis was not, strictly speaking, necessary to make his point about hands being external objects. But let me be clear. I do not want to say that the analysis of “outside of us” that allows Moore to conclude that hands and dogs and stars *are* outside our minds is uncalled for or that Moore did not think he needed to say *anything* on this topic. Indeed, Moore does need to establish what kinds of objects count as external for his Proof to be to the point. But what I *do* want to say is that, given the remarks in “A Defense of Common Sense” and “Certainty,” Moore could not have thought that this analysis was the central and important part of his essay that the lengthy discussion devoted to it would imply.

Instead, I want to suggest that the long analysis of an essentially uncontroversial point, an analysis that arrives precisely at the expected conclusion, is again designed to elicit a response from the sceptic.<sup>31</sup> By belaboring *this* point, Moore feigns ignorance of where the problem of knowledge of the

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<sup>30</sup> Recall footnote 14. *Assertion* of these propositions contradicts the sceptic insofar as they amount to knowledge claims.

<sup>31</sup> Another role that this analysis plays is to nail down the sense in which the premises of the Proof do establish the existence of an external world, for the reasons described at the beginning of this section—although there, too, I

external world is supposed to lie. (I hope I have shown, by this point, that any apparent ignorance of where the sceptical problem lies really is feigned.) It is as though he is suggesting that anyone who thinks a proof of the existence of external objects has not been given, or cannot be given, is simply confused about what kinds of things count as external objects. And so, his job is to slowly and pedantically demonstrate that external objects are just ordinary things like hands or dogs or stars. Note that this understanding of the role of the long analysis also helps explain why the Proof itself happens so quickly. If Moore's goal is in part to provoke the sceptic by treating the problem of the external world as one about what kinds of objects count as external, then once it has been established that hands *are* external objects, the conclusion that external objects exist is immediate. And so the relative attention devoted to first the analysis and then the Proof, which I think seems inversely proportional to the actual importance of these parts of the essay, is consistent with and can be explained by reading the Proof as a performance in the present sense.

I have argued so far that "Proof of an External World" is structured in a way designed to provoke a certain response from the sceptic, and that this structure is intentional, as Moore is trying to elicit arguments in favor of scepticism. But these considerations concern the psychology of the sceptic. They are meant to show that any sceptic sitting in the audience as Moore delivered his lecture would be tempted to jump up and exclaim that Moore has missed the point altogether. But there is a related question that I think bears on how successful the Proof is in the role I have claimed it occupies in Moore's strategy. That is, I have argued that the Proof *demand*s or *provokes* an answer, but does it *require* one? In other words, does it have enough philosophical substance that the sceptic must show

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presume that it would be uncontroversial to the sceptic that Moore's premises, if true, imply the existence of an external world. One might worry that belaboring points that are admittedly uncontroversial to the sceptic would be a poor way to provoke a response from the sceptic. Certainly, insofar as these points are uncontroversial, the sceptic will not be inclined to reply to *them*. But the suggestion here is supposed to be that belaboring arguments that the sceptic believes are beside the point forces the sceptic to step back and remind Moore what, exactly, the skeptical argument is supposed to be: that is, what the argument's target is, how it proceeds, etc. And this is just the response Moore is looking for.

why it fails in order to maintain her view? There are two separate points to think about here. One is, how strong, philosophically, is the Proof? And the second one is, how strong must the Proof be to require a would-be sceptic to reply?

I will try to answer the second question first. One thing is perfectly clear. In order to require a satisfactory response from the sceptic, Moore does not need to actually give the sceptic what she is looking for. In other words, Moore does not need the Proof to be an attempt to refute the sceptic on her own grounds. It is just as good, even better perhaps since it avoids distractions, if Moore somehow argues (as he does) that it is unnecessary for the purpose of proving that an external world exists to give a general account of how he can prove his premises. So Moore has some latitude in the form the Proof can take, given its purposes. On the other hand, the particular form that the Proof *does* take is especially effective for Moore's purposes. The sceptic has two alternatives in replying to Moore's Proof: one is to attack Moore's conclusion; the other is to attack his premises. But any positive argument brought against either "here is a hand" or "at least two external objects exist" will be an argument in favor of scepticism, just as Moore wants on my reading.<sup>32</sup> Compare this to Kant's Refutation. There, the form of the argument involves a number of contentious premises that the sceptic can respond to *without* bringing forward an argument *for* scepticism. So some forms that the Proof might have taken, and especially the particular form Moore chooses, are more effective for his purposes than others would be, even though strictly speaking, any argument that gets to the conclusion that an external world exists should be sufficient to elicit some sort of sceptical argumentation.

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<sup>32</sup> One might see a third option for the sceptic: namely, attacking Moore's grounds for asserting his premises. This would not be the same as proving that the premises are false; instead, it would be an argument that Moore is not in a position to assert that the premises are true, or at least that he knows them to be. It is hard to see how such an argument would go, without itself being an argument for scepticism. But one way or another, here, too, one might expect the comparative argument to have bite. Any argument to the effect that Moore does not have the grounds for asserting "here is a hand" would rest on premises that Moore would be confident are less plausible than either "here is a hand" or "I know that here is a hand". I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this possibility.

But these thoughts do not answer the question of whether, whatever its form might be, the Proof needs to be philosophically robust. In one sense, the answer to *this* question depends on how lasting Moore hopes the Proof will be. To accomplish the goal I have attributed to the Proof in the short term—in the discussion period after the lecture, or in Oxbridge salons in the ensuing weeks—Moore does not need to do much at all. In fact, I think the structure of the lecture alone, along with a few remarks to the effect that a Proof *is* possible, would be sufficient to elicit the kinds of response Moore wants. All Moore needs to do is set off the appropriate alarms, raise a red flag as it were, to draw out arguments to the effect that Moore does not know that an external world exists at all. In other words, the psychological aspect of the Proof will produce the same effect in the short-term as would a proof that required a reply.

But I do not think this answer is sufficient, in two ways. The first reason is that, as I have already argued, what Moore really needs is careful, logical arguments for the sceptical conclusion. He needs the argument to have an appropriate form for his strategy to be effective: it needs to be an argument with clear premises that, either by exegesis or concrete reconstruction, Moore can identify, criticize, and then use in his comparative argument. And the quality of the responses to the Proof will depend on the quality of the Proof, as a potential refutation of the sceptic's position. In other words, were Moore to have stood before the British Academy and said simply, "But no such proof is necessary, for I *know* with certainty that an external world *does* exist," he would certainly have elicited comments of the form, "But how could you know? After all, you might be dreaming...." But as we saw in the context of "Certainty," Moore actually needs more than just reference to the dream argument to get the comparative argument going. He needs a concrete instantiation. And the only way he will get one is if the performed Proof has enough philosophical substance that would-be sceptics feel that it can only be refuted with a sufficiently careful reply.

The second reason my original answer is insufficient is that the value of the Proof is much greater, for Moore's purposes at least, if it is persistent. Yes, even if the Proof is flimsy, philosophically speaking, it may produce some arguments in favor of scepticism. But unless there really is a sense in which it is a compelling Proof, it will not have any lasting power. If the Proof lacks substance, then once the psychological effects of the presentation wear off, the sceptic will realize that there is nothing to Moore's Proof worth worrying about, no threat to her position. Such a proof could be safely ignored by future generations of sceptics, who may freely take for granted that scepticism is an established and tenable position without feeling that the details of the sceptical argument need be addressed. Descartes and Hume, after all, offer two very different routes to the same conclusion. And so long as the received view is that scepticism *is* tenable, Moore has no effective response to the sceptic, since his strategy responds to arguments for scepticism and not the sceptical conclusion.

This second response draws attention to another way in which the Proof, if sufficiently strong, can function in Moore's strategy. It concerns what might be called the dialectical situation with regard to scepticism. By this I mean that which philosophical positions are considered entrenched or established by the philosophical community at large, or even which positions are widely viewed as tenable and which positions are believed to have been ruled out, can affect how an argument is perceived by the community, and thus how persuasive the argument is. I do not think there can be any hard and fast rules, here, regarding what the dialectical situation regarding a particular topic *is* at any moment, or in any global sense, and nor do I want to spend the time to develop a theory of how dialectic situations might work. But I think there is a modest point worth making, which is that scepticism is often considered a tenable position, at least from the point of view that it cannot be adequately refuted on its own terms. Of course, it is also an unacceptable position in many ways, which

is part of what makes it of such great philosophical interest.<sup>33</sup> The alternative view, on the other hand, that scepticism *can* be refuted in a direct or simple way is usually viewed as *untenable*. Moreover, the sceptic occupies an enviable role in the debate over whether knowledge of the external world is possible: as Lycan puts it, in arguing that Moore's anti-sceptical attempts in *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* fail, "the skeptic was there first" (Lycan 2007, p. 86) and so the anti-sceptic is obligated to argue *against* scepticism.

There are several points to be made here. The first is that, so long as scepticism is viewed as a tenable or sufficiently established position, the comparative argument is hobbled. This is because, first, the sceptic does not need to bring forth new or careful arguments in favor of her position. Even if a challenge such as Moore's does goad the sceptic into offering an argument, if the argument fails it does not follow that scepticism is no longer tenable. It just means that this particular sceptic could not defend herself very well. But, since the comparative argument *always* applies to individual arguments for scepticism, this difficulty is quite general, at least in unfavorable dialectic situations. That is, so long as the dialectical situation is such that scepticism is assumed to be tenable without additional justification, the comparative argument is only effective against various *routes* to scepticism.

This leads to my second point, which is that a sufficiently strong proof, even if it does not actually give the sceptic what she has asked for (i.e. a general account of how Moore's premises might be proved), can affect the dialectical situation. Perhaps no such proof can ever rule scepticism out as a tenable position, but it can make scepticism a position that must be argued for. And once scepticism requires arguments, the comparative argument is much more effective: if an argument *must* be given in favor of scepticism, the failure of any individual argument matters more.

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<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, McGinn (1989) for a thoughtful account of how scepticism is "unlivable."

So for the Proof to be an effective part of the strategy, at least in the role I have assigned it, it has to have some philosophical substance, even if Moore does not have to give the sceptic what she is looking for. Which brings me back to the first question I asked: how much philosophical substance does the Proof have? This is a difficult question to answer in any general way. (What, after all, is the measure of philosophical substance?) On the one hand, there is nothing “deep” about Moore’s Proof. In fact, as Stroud points out and I have argued is intentional, Moore appears to have given so distinctly shallow a reply to scepticism that one wonders if he has misunderstood the question. But on the other hand, there are a few features of the Proof that make it particularly consternating to a would-be sceptic, and thus that make authors like Stroud, who takes scepticism very seriously, remark on the “philosophical importance” of the Proof. I think that these features are the sorts of things that make the Proof require, rather than simply demand, an answer, and are likewise the features that give the Proof its lasting power, and which force the sceptic to reply in a sufficiently careful way to yield the sorts of argument Moore is looking for.

The first set of features are that the Proof is simple, deductively valid, its premises are perfectly obvious, and its conclusion, insofar as Moore is justified in asserting it, unequivocally conflicts with scepticism.<sup>34</sup> Even though, as Moore acknowledges, it is nothing like what the sceptic demands or would be satisfied by, it nonetheless seems like a perfectly rigorous and apparently sound proof of a proposition the sceptic must deny. The deductive validity of the Proof, along with the immediate apparency of its premises, makes responding to it tricky. I do not mean to say here that at first glance the Proof seems to work. It is obvious that *something* is wrong with the Proof. But because the Proof

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<sup>34</sup> See footnotes 2 and (especially) 14. Of course, the proposition “there exists an external world” does not itself conflict with scepticism. What conflicts with scepticism is Moore’s assertion that “there exists an external world” on the basis of the Proof.

has the features I have just listed, it turns out to be trickier to say just where the problem lies than one might first guess.

As I noted above, Moore is careful to emphasize this rigor in the discussion following the Proof. He points to three conditions that any rigorous proof must satisfy and then argues that the Proof satisfies them all. The conditions are that (1) the premises must differ from the conclusion, (2) the premises must be known to be true, and (3) the conclusion must follow from the premises (Moore 1939, p. 146). Two of these conditions are clearly met: Moore's conclusion differs from his premises, and moreover, it follows from the premises. The sceptic would not be inclined to deny either of these. The third condition, of course, is more contentious: it is here that Moore claims to *know* that his premises are true. Moore certainly implies that he knows his premises when he gives the Proof,<sup>35</sup> but it is only when Moore makes the additional step to argue that the Proof is rigorous that he explicitly contradicts the sceptic. I think this aspect of the Proof's structure is important, at least rhetorically, because even though the sceptic wants to say that "here is a hand" is doubtful, it is a bigger stretch to say that "here is a hand" is false when there is a hand right in front of your face. And so the sceptic's initial response to the Proof must be to question whether it meets Moore's standards for rigor, and not to deny the premises outright. This does not mean the sceptic does not have a strong position from which to criticize the Proof—if it is not rigorous, even by Moore's own standard, it cannot be very good—but once again, some care is necessary to say just where the problem lies.

Another feature that makes the Proof difficult to respond to is that the method of proof Moore uses is standard, even common, in ordinary contexts. As Moore notes, if someone were to claim that a certain page had no typos on it, you could prove that there were three typos by pointing out

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<sup>35</sup> Again, recall footnote 14: since it would be an example of Moore's paradox for him to say that "here is a hand, but I don't know it is," once he asserts "here is a hand," he commits himself to a knowledge claim about the external world, by his own lights.

successively, “here is one typo,” “here is another,” and “here is a third.” From this it would follow immediately that there were three typos on the page. So (and this is a major difference from, say, Kant’s response to scepticism) there is nothing exotic about the Proof. In fact, it is *exactly* the kind of proof one would give under all sorts of normal circumstances if someone has called into question that objects of a certain kind exist. This, I think, is what Stroud means when he says that from an internal perspective, Moore’s Proof is unobjectionable. Moore does just what one *ought* to do if asked, say, whether he can prove there is milk in his refrigerator or an article about Obama in today’s *New York Times*, or that electrons exist. As Stroud acknowledges, “Given [the internal] conception of the question ... it seems to me that there is no good reason for denying that what Moore says about our knowledge of external things is perfectly correct” (Stroud 1984, p. 117).

Taken together, these features mean that the Proof really does *require* a response. In order to continue to maintain that knowledge of the external world is doubtful, the sceptic needs to show that the Proof fails to prove otherwise, by bringing forward an argument in favor of her position. Note, too, that if this is correct, then Moore has indeed succeeded in manipulating the dialectic situation in such a way as to make his comparative argument more effective. Given the Proof, the sceptic is required to bring forward arguments; if Moore can systematically refute each of them via the comparative argument, then his case against scepticism is strong.

Before concluding, I want to return to Lycan’s reading and display the payoff of understanding Moore’s strategy in the way I have proposed. Lycan attempts to read the Proof as an *instance* of the comparative argument, as opposed to a complement to it. The idea is that the Proof can be understood as an implicit comparison between Moore’s premises and the sceptical conclusion. On this reading, though, there is a problem when Moore says that he *knows* that the premises are true. Recall that the comparative argument requires us to compare the plausibility of two sets of propositions. Until this plausibility has been determined and the argument is over, one cannot claim to know anything about

the external world without begging the question. Before the argument has ended and the relative plausibility has been determined, both sets of propositions, including, in the case of Lycan's proposal for the Proof, "here is a hand", are proposed tentatively. And so, to read the Proof as a version of the comparative argument is to assume that Moore does not know that his premises are true when he offers the Proof; he only knows as much *after* the Proof. If, on the other hand, Moore *can* claim to know that his premises are true, the only argument he can bring in favor of the claim is the comparative argument, in which case no additional proof of the external world is necessary. So Lycan's reading comes with "a cost" (Lycan 2007, p. 95): either Moore does not know his premises in advance of the Proof, or alternatively the Proof is superfluous, since the comparative argument is necessary in advance.

I think it is difficult to see how the Proof could be an implicit instance of the comparative argument. For one, as I have argued, the comparative argument requires a set of specific premises for the sceptic's argument to be effective. But Moore does not even address the sceptic's argumentation in the Proof, never mind identifying a set of premises to compare with "here is a hand."<sup>36</sup> If the Proof is really an example of the comparative argument, what is being compared? Lycan does not tell us, because his reading does not appreciate the importance of having a specific, concrete version of the sceptic's argument to respond to. I might also add that, for the same reason, the account of the Proof that I have offered here is not open to Lycan. On his reading, the comparative argument does not need to respond to particular arguments, and so there is no reason for Moore to try to elicit them. But even supposing that Lycan's proposal has some initial plausibility, the reading of the Proof that results is unsatisfactory. Moore is adamant that he knows his premises in advance, so supposing that he is not simply mistaken about how his own argument works, we are left to conclude that the Proof is

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<sup>36</sup> Nelson (1990) suggests that Moore is offering an implicit comparison when he says that to prove he knows his premises, he would need to prove that he is not dreaming. But Moore does not reason here that he is more certain that "here is a hand" than that he might be dreaming; to the contrary, he seems to accept that he *would* need to prove he is not dreaming if he is to *prove* that "here is a hand" is true. I cannot find a comparison in this passage.

superfluous. And yet, the Proof continues to be one of the most famous and widely debated arguments of the 20th century. Lycan's reading offers no account of why *this* essay, of all of Moore's writings on skepticism, has had such lasting influence; mine, meanwhile, offers a compelling reason: it was explicitly and intentionally constructed to elicit precisely the response it has.

## 6. Coda: Moore and the Philosopher

External-world skepticism is a philosophical hydra, a catchall for parallel arguments united only by the conclusion that we cannot have knowledge of the external world. Moore seems to understand that any rebuttal of skepticism is certain to be more effective against some routes to the sceptical conclusion than against others. As I have read him here, Moore adopts a divide-and-conquer tactic against skepticism, separating particular strands of sceptical argument out from the morass of the whole and responding to them individually. The Proof, I have argued, can be understood as the lynchpin of the strategy: by striking at the heart of the sceptical conclusion, Moore challenges the sceptic to bring forth these arguments, which he will then rebut in turn with the comparative argument, as in "Certainty" and "Four Forms of Scepticism."

But so far, I have ignored a central question. Is the strategy effective? And is the Proof effective, supposing I am right about the strategy and the Proof's role in it? For the second question, I think the answer is clearly yes. One need only note how many of the so-called new sceptics<sup>37</sup> felt compelled to respond to Moore's Proof to see that it succeeded in eliciting just the kind of careful arguments that Moore needed for his response to skepticism to work. These philosophers thought that in order to take skepticism seriously, they first needed to reply to the Proof. The fact that so many

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<sup>37</sup> See for instance Lehrer (1971), Unger (1974), or Stroud (1984). Wright (1985, 2002) also feels he needs to address Moore's argument in developing his ideas about skepticism. Sadly, Moore did not live to run the comparative argument against these sceptical arguments, but Lycan (2001) attempts to do it on his behalf.

sceptical philosophers (or, in the case of Stroud, philosophers who think scepticism is alive and important) react to the Proof in this way, by itself shows that the Proof is successful.

But I also think there is a potential objection, here. If, as I have urged, the Proof should be understood as a performed challenge intended to elicit sceptical arguments that Moore can then refute via the comparative argument, and moreover, the Proof is supposed to be successful in this regard, then why does Moore's bibliography not contain a long list of papers in which Moore takes on specific, concrete sceptical arguments offered against the Proof? One reply is that Moore spent the period immediately after he delivered the Proof,<sup>38</sup> between 1940 and 1944, touring the US and lecturing on scepticism. "Four Forms of Scepticism" was delivered frequently, in various forms, over this period, and "Certainty" was delivered as the Howison lecture at UC Berkeley in 1941. So Moore *did* follow the Proof by responding to particular sceptical arguments while on his lecture circuit.

Thinking along these lines, it seems fair to read the published versions of these essays as samples of Moore's response to what was, or could have been, an even richer array of sceptical arguments encountered during his sojourn in America. It is also worth noting that Moore *does* respond to a wide variety of sceptical arguments in "Four Forms of Scepticism" as he works out what Russell's arguments are supposed to be. I think it is plausible that Russell's versions of these arguments for scepticism were among the more careful and concrete that Moore encountered from his contemporaries, and so Moore might have understood them as representative examples of strong arguments for scepticism of the kind encountered in the wake of the Proof. If this is correct, I think one can understand Moore's complaint in "Certainty" that he has never "seen clearly stated any argument which is supposed to show [that I may not know I am not dreaming]" (Moore 1959a, p. 247) as particularly poignant: even by 1941, over a year after he issued his challenge, he *still* has not seen

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<sup>38</sup> It was delivered to the British Academy on November 22, 1939.

anyone make a clear case for the dream argument. But sadly, there are no recordings of these lectures, nor are there records of the informal conversations that would have occurred during this period, and so I cannot point to direct evidence to back the idea that “Four Forms of Scepticism” and “Certainty” reflect Moore’s engagement with sceptical arguments elicited by the Proof.

But there is a second point to make here, which is that Moore gets his point across with what he gives us. In addition to encouraging formal arguments for scepticism, the Proof elicits sceptical arguments in a second sense as well: it draws the reader into thinking about why this apparently facile response to scepticism cannot succeed. The two later essays, meanwhile, demonstrate how Moore would reply to a sceptical argument of any sort, via the comparative argument. So reading the two pieces of the strategy—i.e. the Proof, plus the two later essays—in tandem may be sufficient for Moore’s purposes, in the sense that the Proof puts the reader in a frame of mind where she is considering arguments against Moore’s premises, and the later essays offer a scheme for how to think about such arguments so as to effectively refute them. In other words, these essays taken as a group can be understood to effect the strategy as I have described for a given reader even without explicit historical instances in which the Proof convinced a philosopher to publish her careful argument for scepticism, to which Moore then replied with the comparative argument.

The other question, about whether this strategy taken as a whole is effective, is more difficult. I think Moore’s strategy is successful against his contemporaries: “Four Forms of Scepticism” does seem to refute Russell, though Russell’s scepticism is not very well defended. And the British idealists—McTaggart and the like—took as their premises claims that seem so strange and outlandish today that the comparative argument is just the right move. I think it is less clear, though I will not develop the idea here, that the early version of Moore’s strategy succeeds against Hume in either “Hume’s Philosophy” or *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, and I think it is a question of some interest how Moore would have dealt with Humean scepticism in his maturity. It is curious, given his interest in

scepticism in the 1940s, that he does not return to Hume after 1910. Perhaps this is evidence that he took the 1910 argument to be an example of his mature strategy, and thus the best response he could offer. In any case, Moore probably could not have effectively used his strategy against Hume, given Moore's own commitment to sense-data. A modern response to Hume, using Moore's strategy, could succeed by simply rejecting the theory of ideas.

But there is another way of putting the sceptical problem that Moore's approach seems powerless against. All of the sceptical scenarios and arguments described above can be understood to be motivating a simple question: Can you justify all of your knowledge of the external world without making use of any of that knowledge? Or, can you justify your evidentiary norms from outside of those norms? This is what Stroud has in mind when he describes the external question. Put this way, scepticism requires no argument and makes no assumptions. But it also lacks sting. I think you can safely admit that you cannot justify your knowledge externally without bringing all of your knowledge into question.<sup>39</sup> As Moore insists at the end of the Proof, there are things we know but cannot prove.

So for the external philosophical question to yield the cataclysmic results the sceptic wants, the sceptic *does* need an argument: she needs to show that if we cannot independently justify our knowledge of the external world, we have no rightful claim to knowledge. There are likely many directions in which this argument might proceed, but the point is that any argument from the external question to the radical conclusion about knowledge will require a set of premises and a careful argument. And as soon as the sceptic is required to bring forth such an argument, Moore knows how to respond. In other words, I think Moore could safely issue a new challenge, in response to Stroud's external question, to bring forward an argument that from our inability to justify all of our knowledge of

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<sup>39</sup> Maddy (2007) makes a similar point in response to Stroud's external question. The second philosopher admits that she cannot answer the external question, but she does not think this has particularly dramatic consequences for her knowledge.

the external world from a perspective *outside* of that knowledge, it follows that knowledge of the external world is impossible, which does not rest on a premise that is, beyond comparison, less certain than that “I know that this is a pencil”. From here, Moore would be back in business.

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