



Moore on Scepticism & Certainty

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Abstract

In this paper, I would like to present G.E. Moore's view on scepticism and certainty with reference to his papers "Defence of common sense", "Proof of an external world", and "Certainty". Following Moore's "Proof of an External World" the distinction between empirical objects and private objects has been highlighted in section I. It has been pointed out that according to Moore, no example of private objects in place of "these are my two hands" could have successfully refuted scepticism; and that Moore does follow Kant's definition of external objects in order to prove the existence of the external world. In section II, two points have been emphasized: i) the example of these are my two hands is not a frivolous activity, and ii) Moore does recognize the point of Descartes' dream argument at least to the extent that he does recognize that knowing that P is different from Proving that P. In section III, Moore's attribution of certainty to empirical propositions has been highlighted by responding to the remarks made by Wittgenstein and Malcolm against Moore. In Section IV, following Moore's certainty, a logical explanation of Moore's thesis that contingent propositions can be certain has been carried out. In addition to that an explanation of how Moore has weakened the dream argument by finding it incoherent. Finally, it has been concluded that Moore is successful in his refutation of scepticism on the basis of common sense.

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1. Moore's Proof of the external world

"Proof of an External World" starts with a quotation from Kant. Moore quotes Kant saying, "It still remains a scandal to philosophy.... that the existence of things outside of us... must be accepted merely on *faith*, and that, if anyone thinks good to doubt their existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by any satisfactory proof" (Moore, 1965, p. 68). From Kant's remark, it becomes clear that there is a necessity for proving the existence of things outside of us. In the absence of such proof, we have to believe in their existence only on *faith*. The sceptic doubts the existence of things outside of us. How to counter the sceptic? The sceptic can be countered only by providing proof of the existence of things outside of us. In his paper, "Proof of an External World" Moore makes an attempt to provide such proof. The need for such proof is felt by Kant. It is a scandal for philosophy if we continue believing in the existence of the things outside of us merely based on faith. We should have *knowledge* of the existence of these things. Such knowledge is possible only when proof is provided. Of course, Moore does not claim that he is the first philosopher to provide proof for the existence of things outside of us. In the second edition of his *Critique*, Kant has himself given such proof, which, according to Moore, is quite rigorous. Kant's proof was directed toward the 'objective reality of outer intuition,' which according to Moore, means the same as 'the existing of things (or the things) outside of us' (Moore, 1965, p. 69). Taking clues from Kant's proof, Moore has provided his own proof. His own proof has emerged in the course of clarifying Kant's proof.

Kant calls 'external things' or 'things outside of us' as the 'things which are *to be met within space*'. But he does not distinguish these things which are to be met within space from things which are merely presented in space. Moore points out that an 'empirical object' to be *external*, if it is presented in *space*'. Kant treats the phrase "'presented in space' as if it were equivalent to 'to be met within space'" (Moore, 1965, p. 71). But it is easy to give counterexamples. An after-image or after-sensation is 'presented in space' but is not the kind of object, which can be met with in space. The after-image that I see is restricted to *me*. Numerically the same after-image cannot be seen by two different persons. But there is no doubt about the after-image which I see also is presented in space. According to Moore,

To say that so and so was at a given time "to be met within space" naturally suggests that there are conditions such that *anyone* who fulfilled them might, conceivably, have "perceived" the "things" in

question-might have seen it, if it was a visible object, have felt it, if it was a tangible one, have heard it, if it was a sound, have smelt it, if it was a smell. (Moore, 1965, p. 72)

An after-image does not satisfy these conditions. Not only is an after-image any sense-datum, as defined by the sense-datum philosophers, it also fails to satisfy these conditions. A colour-patch, a sound, or a smell that is restricted to one person alone is not the kind of object that can be met in space. Of course, they are presented in space. Even bodily pains are presented in space. We talk about tooth-ache and leg-ache. A tooth-ache occurs in the spatial position of a tooth. Similarly, a leg-ache occurs in the spatial position of a leg. But, tooth-ache or a leg-ache felt by one person cannot be felt by any other person. As Moore points out, "I do not reckon as "external things" after-images, double images, and bodily pains I also should not reckon as "external things," any of the "images" which we often "see with the mind's eye" when we are awake, nor any of those which we see when we are asleep and dreaming" (Moore, 1965, p. 75). In accordance with Moore's sense-datum theory, after images, double images, dreams, and pains are not external things. So, Moore's external things demand that they must be in space. Things that occur in dreams are not unlike those things, which are restricted to one person alone. A tooth-ache that occurs in waking life is subjective and private. So is private one's meeting the Prime Minister in a dream. One's name is not registered in the Prime Minister's office. No such meeting was held in real life.

If you come across a 'tooth-ache' or a 'leg-ache' you have not 'met anything within space'. Hence also you have not come across any object that is literally external to your mind. But if you have come across a 'cat' and a 'dog' then you have certainly met two objects with in space. And these objects are external to your mind. Moore has prepared ground for his proof of an external world. The objects of such a world would be those which are 'met within space'. As Moore points out,

If I can prove that there exists now both a sheet of paper and a human hand, I shall have proved that there are now "things outside of us"; if I can prove that there exist now both a shoe and sock, I shall have proved that there are now "things outside of us"... Obviously, then there are thousands of different things such that, if, at any time, I can prove any one of them, I shall have proved the existence of things outside of us. (Moore, 1965, p. 81)

A sheet of paper, a human hand, a shoe, and a sock are qualitatively different kinds of objects from a tooth-ache, an after-image, a double image, and an image seen with closed eyes. The latter class of things cannot be used for producing proof of the existence of the external world. It is only

the former class of things, which provide material for Moore's proof of an external world. Finally, Moore provides his proof in the following words.

I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? BY holding up my two hands and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right, "Here is one hand," and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, "and here is another". And if, by doing this, I have proved *ipso facto* the existence of external things, you will also see that I can also do it now in numbers of other ways: there is no need to multiply examples. (Moore, 1965, p. 81).

No such proof is possible if Moore had taken the example of such two objects as a tooth-ache and an after-image. It is only by following Kant's definition of external objects that Moore has succeeded in proving the existence of an external world. Because after images and tooth ache although they are not in space they are present in space. Whereas the two hands of Moore are external things that are met in space as well present as in space.

2. Moore's Argument Against the Sceptic

One may feel that by raising his two hands Moore has involved himself in a frivolous activity. But as Moore points out, he has provided proof even if sceptics may not appreciate it. For him, a 'perfectly rigorous' proof has to satisfy three conditions.

(1) 'the premiss which I adduced as proof of the conclusion was different from the conclusion I adduced it to prove;' (2) 'the premiss which I adduced was something which I *knew* to be the case, and not merely something which I believed but which was by no means certain, or something which though in fact true, I did not know to be so; and' (3) 'the conclusion did really follow from the premiss.' (Moore, 1965, p. 82).

His proof satisfied all these three conditions. As his conclusion 'two human hands exist at this moment' is different from the premise, 'here is one hand and here is another', it satisfied the first condition. As he was quite certain about the premises and equally certain about his conclusion he satisfied the second condition. As the conclusion does really follow from the premises, it satisfied the third condition.

Moore is aware that the sceptic will not be satisfied with his proof. Granted that Moore's conclusion follows from his premises, but how has he arrived

at his premises? How has he come to know 'Here is one hand and here is another'? Moore accepts "I am perfectly well aware that, in spite of all that I have said, many philosophers will still feel that I have not given any satisfactory proof of point in question" (Moore, 1965, p.83). One who doubts the existence of the external world would also doubt the existence of Moore's hands. But such a doubter is an epistemologist, whose doubt can never be satisfied. Moore is in a position to satisfy an ordinary doubter. An ordinary doubt is not pointless. It is one that can be satisfied. Imagine a situation in which Moore's proof is questioned by an ordinary doubter. Moore would certainly succeed in satisfying him. As Moore remarks,

If one of you suspected that one of my hands was artificial he might be said to get a proof of my proposition "Here's one hand, and here's another", by coming up and examining the suspected hand close up, perhaps touching and pressing it, and so establishing that it really was a human hand. (Moore, 1965, p. 84)

But the sceptic, the epistemologist raises doubt, which can never be satisfied. How closely one may scrutinize a human hand, if one is a philosophical sceptic, one would never be satisfied that he is scrutinizing a human hand. Moore finds it very difficult to satisfy such a sceptic. In order to prove that he is raising his hands, he has to prove that he is not dreaming and that he is awake. Though Moore knows that he is awake, like the philosophers of the past, he fails to prove that he is not dreaming. As he remarks on this issue,

How am I to prove now that "Here's one hand, and here's another?" I do not believe I can do it. In order to do it, I should need to prove for one thing, as Descartes pointed out, that I am not now dreaming. But how can I prove that I am not? I have, no doubt, conclusive reasons for asserting that I am not now dreaming; I have conclusive evidence that I am awake: but that is a very different thing from being able to prove it. I could not tell you what all my evidence is; and I should require to do this at least, in order to give you a proof. (Moore, 1965, p. 84)

The Cartesian dream argument has converted Moore into a helpless man. In order to show that he possesses two hands which he attempted to raise, he is required to prove that he is not dreaming. He knows very well that he is not dreaming. He has conclusive evidence that he is not dreaming, yet he cannot prove all this. But the fact that he cannot prove that he is awake does not mean that he does not know that he is awake. 'Knowing that one is awake' does not mean the same thing, as 'proving that one is awake'. The former may hold without the latter holding. So, he knows the premises of his proof without proving those premises. Not that these

premises lack evidence, they have evidence, conclusive evidence, yet that evidence will not satisfy the sceptic. Therefore, Moore does not produce that evidence. Not only that Moore has evidence that he has hands, even those who look at Moore's hands would consider them to be genuine hands. But neither Moore nor those who attended his lecture were in a position to prove that they were not dreaming. Therefore, Moore considers it a futile activity to prove that he is not dreaming. Moore concludes his lecture by saying "I can know things, which I cannot prove; and among things, which I certainly did know, even if (as I think) I could not prove them, were the premisses of my two proofs." (Moore, 1965, p. 84)

3. Wittgenstein's Criticism of Moore's Proof

Wittgenstein was critical of Moore's way of proving the existence of this empirical world. For Wittgenstein, there are propositions with certainty and we need no proof for the truth of those propositions. 'These are my two hands', can be treated as a proposition with certainty. According to Wittgenstein, there is no point in being skeptical about such propositions with certainty, and for the same reason, there is no point in refuting such scepticism. In a sense for him, it is ridiculous to deny the existence of this empirical world. When Wittgenstein heard about Moore's lecture, according to Wisdom, he reacted: "Those philosophers who have denied the existence of matter have not wished to deny that under my trousers I wear pants" (Moore, 1968a, p. 670). Moore is sharp enough. He responded to Wittgenstein in the following words.

If by this Wittgenstein meant that *no* philosophers who have ever denied the existence of matter have ever wished to deny that pants exist, I think the statements are simply false. *Some* philosophers, at all events *sometimes*, *have* meant to deny this: they have meant to assert that no such proposition as that pants exist is true; and it was only against *this* assertion that I supposed my proof to be a proof (Moore, 1968a, p. 670).

The expression 'material thing' is abstract. Its instances would be pants, shoes, cats, dogs, etc. To deny the existence of material things would be to deny the existence of pants, cats, dogs, etc. This implies that showing the existence of pants, shoes, etc., would be showing the existence of material things. Therefore, Moore is right in his attack on the sceptic, and Wittgenstein is wrong in defending them.

Of course, this does not mean that Moore has succeeded in meeting the philosophical sceptic. The philosophical sceptic would doubt Moore's premises of proof. He would use the Dream Argument to question Moore's premises of the proof. But this argument is pointless. Its pointlessness can be shown only by coming to the common-sense level. If there are genuine doubts, they can be satisfied.

Philosophers prior to Moore restricted knowledge and certainty to a priori statements, to statements that are called analytic or tautologies. They have prohibited the use of knowledge and certainty in empirical propositions. But Moore allows the use of knowledge and certainty to empirical propositions. The propositions 'This is a hand', 'This is a cat', etc. are empirical. Thus, Moore claims to know their truth with certainty. Moore's proof of an external world presupposes the application of knowledge and certainty to empirical propositions. Premises of Moore's proof are empirical. In order to understand why Moore considers empirical propositions to be certain, one has to come down to the level of common sense. In everyday life, we make knowledge claims without raising doubts like a sceptic. Therefore, Malcolm is wrong in commenting on Moore's knowledge and certainty when he says,

...people, listening to Moore, sometimes get the impression that Moore thinks that it is by some sort of *intuition* that he discovers whether the truth of a statement is certain. They get the impression that Moore thinks that certainty is a simple, indefinable quality like yellow, which unaccountable attaches to some statements and not to others (Murphy, 1968, p. 308).

Knowledge is certainly not an indefinable notion for Moore. So no statement is especially reserved to be known. A proposition that is doubtful in some situations may be known in other situations. Seeing a white patch of colour, on account of my poor eyesight, I question 'is this a cat'? This shows that I doubt the truth of the proposition 'This is a cat'. Such doubt makes no sense when I am playing with the cat. I know with certainty the truth of the proposition 'This is a cat'. So, there is no proposition to which the indefinable quality of knowledge is attached. A proposition that is

doubtful in one circumstance became certain in another circumstance. So, the notion of certainty is also not an indefinable simple notion like the notion of goodness. Undoubtedly Moore considers 'goodness' as a simple indefinable notion, but not either 'knowledge' or 'certainty'. Moore has discussed this issue more thoroughly in his paper "Certainty".

4. Moore on Knowledge and Certainty

The title of the paper "Certainty" itself suggests that Moore has taken up this issue and the allied issue of 'knowledge' for analysis. But certainty and knowledge were also the issues, which he took up in two of his earlier papers viz., "A Defence of Common Sense" and "Proof of an External World". Now he is a full-fledged epistemologist. Earlier in his "A Defence of Common Sense" and "Proof of an External World" he dogmatically adhered to common sense propositions. He felt no need of proving that he knows with certainty the truth of common-sense propositions. Now he feels the necessity of a critical analysis of the notions of 'knowledge' and 'certainty'. He wishes to show that he is not wrong in applying these notions to common-sense propositions. Since Moore's approach in this paper is different, he has taken up a different set of common-sense propositions to have fresh air. Like the earlier set of propositions, the present set also contains only empirical propositions. Consider the propositions which Moore has taken for analysis:

I am at present, as you can all see, in a room and not in the open air; I am standing up, and not either sitting or lying down; I have clothes on, and am not absolutely naked; I am speaking in a fairly loud voice, and am not either singing or whispering or keeping quite silent; I have in my hand some sheets of paper with writing on them, there are a good many other people in the same room in which I am; and there are windows in that wall and a door in this one (Moore, 1968b, p. 27).

Each of the above assertions made by Moore is an empirical proposition and contingent by nature insofar as their negations are not self-contradictory. For example, the negation of the proposition

'I am standing up' would be 'It is not the case that I am standing up'. Though false, the latter proposition is not self-contradictory. When the negation of a proposition does not involve a contradiction in terms then the proposition is technically described as 'contingent'. A contingent proposition is contrasted with a necessary proposition. A necessary proposition is one of which the denial is self-contradictory. Philosophers in the past have not hesitated in ascribing the notion of knowledge and certainty to necessary propositions. But they have not extended the application of these notions to contingent propositions. Moore wishes to show that knowledge and certainty are also ascribed to contingent propositions. For example, the proposition 'I am standing up' is contingent yet it is known with certainty when I am standing up.

Most of the philosophers, if not all, accept the view that a contingent proposition is such that its truth cannot be known with certainty. Since all empirical propositions are contingent, it has been concluded that the notions of 'knowledge' and 'certainty' cannot be ascribed to them. Moore finds this position difficult to digest. From the fact that a proposition is a contingent, only one thing follows its negation is not self-contradictory. It certainly does not follow that the proposition in question cannot be known with certainty. As Moore argues,

...the conjunctive proposition 'I know that I am at present standing up, and yet the proposition that I am is contingent' is certainly not itself self-contradictory, even if it is false. Is it not obvious that if I say 'I know that I am at present standing up, although the proposition I am is contingent', I am certainly not contradicting myself, even if I *am* saying something which is false? (Moore, 1968b, p. 32)

This means I am permitted to say 'I know that I am at present standing up', even in the condition in which I maintain that my 'present standing up is contingent'.

Suppose the proposition which Moore asserts is 'I am standing up', its negation would be 'I am not standing up'. If the former proposition is known for certain, then the latter should be false. Moore argues that "if I were to assert now 'it is possible that I am standing up' I should naturally be understood to be asserting that I

do not know for certain that I am. And hence, if I do know for certain that I am, my assertion that it is possible that I'm not would be false."(Moore, 1968b, p. 33). Moore is cautious enough. He is showing merely the falsity of the proposition 'I am not standing up'. He is not showing that this proposition is self-contradictory. If this proposition were self-contradictory, then the proposition 'I am standing up' would not be contingent; it would be necessary. Moore is trying to show that a contingent proposition can be known with certainty. He would succeed in achieving his end if he simply shows that its negation is false.

The next step is to show that all the assertions he made at the very start of the paper were not only true but also absolutely certain. Concerning this step he says,

Thus, if I do know now that I am standing up, it follows that I can say with truth 'it is absolutely certain that I am standing up'. Since, therefore, the fact that this proposition is contingent is compatible with its being true that I know that I am standing up, it follows that it must also be compatible with its being true that it is absolutely certain that I am standing up(Moore, 1968b, p. 37).

The connection between knowledge and certainty is such that if one knows that p then one cannot be uncertain that p.

The distinction between necessary and contingent truths has led some philosophers to think that 'certainty' has two different senses, the sense in which necessary truths are certain and the sense in which contingent truths are certain. Similarly, 'knowledge' also has two different senses, the sense in which necessary truths are known and the sense in which contingent truths are known. Moore shows awareness of this complication when he remarks

...it may be the case that, if I say, 'I know that' or 'It is certain that' 'it is not the case that there are any triangular figures which are not trilateral', or 'I know that' or 'it is certain that it is not the case that there are any human beings who are daughters and yet are not female', I am using 'know that' and 'it is certain that' in a different sense from that in which I use them if I say 'I know that' or 'it is certain that 'I have some clothes on'; and it may be the case that only necessary truths

can be known or be certain in the former sense (Moore, 1968b, p. 38).

For Moore's position, it hardly matters that necessary truths are certain in one sense and contingent in another. Two different senses of certainty have been invented simply because there is a type distinction between necessary and contingent truths. Moore has improved over his own position held earlier. Earlier only sense-data statements were free from doubt and uncertainty. Now all kinds of empirical propositions could possibly be certain. Now the proposition 'I have some clothes on' can be as certain as 'This is a red patch of colour'. The new position emerged during his "A Defence of Common Sense" and became matured at the stage of "Certainty". Concerning all the seven statements which Moore asserted in the beginning of the paper, he says,

Every one of them asserted something which might have been true, no matter what the condition of my mind had been either at that moment or in the past. For instance, that I was then inside a room is something which might have been true, even if at the time I had been asleep and in a dreamless sleep (Moore, 1968b, p. 44).

Earlier only sense-data statements were allowed to be true even when one was asleep. My statement 'This is red' would remain true even when I am dreaming. i.e., when I am sleeping. Now even material object statements remain true even when I am sleeping. The reason is simple. These statements are independent of the mind of the person who asserted them. From these assertions, nothing can be inferred about the mental state of the subject who makes those assertions, whether he is wide awake or in deep sleep.

The last argument has led Moore to conclude concerning those propositions that, "they were all of the propositions which implied the existence of an external world-that is to say, of a world external to my mind" (Moore, 1968b, p. 44). It is not only statements about the physical objects that are external to one's mind; even the statements about one's body are independent of one's mind. The sense of the external is so wide that one's own body is external to one's mind. The existence of the external world is the presupposition

of the seven assertions that Moore made. If these assertions are true, then the presupposition of the external world cannot be avoided.

Ultimately, we have to decide between two alternatives. According to Moore, there is “the alternative that none of us ever knows for certain of the existence of anything external to his own mind, and the alternative that all of us-millions of us-constantly do” (Moore, 1968b, p.46). Moore’s own view is in support of the millions of us. All of us believe in the external world. But a few philosophers, the sceptics, reject our view i.e., the view of Moore. Those who reject Moore’s view succeed in doing so with the help of the dream argument. Moore accepts that “From the hypothesis that I am dreaming, it would, I think, certainly follow that I don’t know that I am standing up” (Moore, 1968b, p. 47). But Moore tries to encounter the sceptic in a very interesting way. The proposition that ‘I am standing up’ may be true even while I am dreaming. Forever in my dream, I may be standing up. Moore argues,

...from the hypothesis that I am dreaming, it certainly would not follow that I am not standing up; for it is certainly logically possible that a man should be fast asleep and dreaming, while he is standing up and not lying down. It is therefore logically possible that I should both be standing up and also at the same time dreaming that I am; just as the story, about a well-known Duke of Devonshire, that he once dreamt that he was speaking in the House of Lords and, when he woke up, found that he was speaking in the House of Lords, is certainly logically possible (Moore, 1968b, p.47).

The waking state and sleeping state are contrary to each other. This does not entail that an assertion (e.g. I am standing up) made in the waking state is contrary to the same assertion (I am standing up) made in the sleeping state. If I am standing up and dreaming that I continue standing up then that dream would fail to falsify the assertion that I am standing up. Rather my dreaming supports the assertion made while I am awake. Moore’s purpose is to weaken the dream argument and he has certainly done so. What happened in the dream of the Duke of Devonshire was confirmed when he woke up. Moore has reversed the order. What happened in waking life was confirmed by the dream. The sceptic has taken for granted that dreams falsify the truths of waking experience. Moore has

succeeded in showing that they do not always do so. Moore is only considering the logical possibility of one's dreams confirming the statements made while one is awake.

Moore further weakens the dream argument by providing a matching argument against the dream argument. Moore argues,

...since, I do know that I'm standing up, it follows that I do know that I'm not dreaming; as my opponent can argue: since you don't know that you're not dreaming, it follows that you don't know that you're standing up. 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 (Moore, 1968b, p. 49).

Moore's final blow to the sceptic is by showing incoherence in his argument. If the sceptic has ever dreamt then he knows what a dream is. Knowing what a dream has presupposes the distinction between dream experiences and waking experiences. Moore shows incoherence in the sceptic's thought by pointing out, that

All the philosophers I have ever met or heard of certainly did know that dreams have occurred: we all know that dreams have occurred. But can he consistently combine this proposition that he knows that dreams have occurred, with his conclusion that he does not know that he is not dreaming? Can anybody possibly know that dreams have occurred, if, at the time, he does not himself know that he is not dreaming? (Moore, 1968b, p. 51).

Imagine two children visiting a zoo. One of them knows very well what a tiger is. He has seen tigers in the past but the other child has only heard about tigers. It is for the first time that he comes to see a tiger in a zoo. He reacts 'That is perhaps a tiger'. But what would be the reaction of the other child who has already seen tigers to this tiger? He would say 'This is a tiger'. Is the sceptic like the child who came to see a tiger for the first time? Has the sceptic only heard about dreams? Is it that he was so fortunate that he never had dreams? It is because he never had dreams that he is led to say I may possibly be dreaming. But this would mean that the sceptic is not a normal human being. He lacks certain experiences that normal

human beings have. We need not worry about him. We should only worry about those sceptics who have all kinds of experiences like us.

In the conclusion, we may summarize our findings and relate them thematically to different texts of Moore in order to present G.E. Moore's view on scepticism and certainty. In his "Defence of Common Sense" Moore tried to draw the limits of scepticism. Its domain is restricted by the domain of common sense. The raw material of philosophy comes from the domain of common sense. Common sense supplies propositions to philosophy, which philosophers analyze. It is not the function of philosophy to establish the truth or falsity of these propositions. Its only function is to analyze them. In his "Proof of an External World" Moore tries to show that the denial of the external world involves incoherence. The external world means the world of material bodies. A denial of the existence of matter bodies amounts to the denial of such common objects as hands, tomatoes, and books. Once it is shown that the hands, books, and books exist, it is also shown that material bodies exist. In his paper "Certainty" Moore has tried to know that the notions of 'certainty' and 'knowledge' are no less applicable to empirical contingent propositions than to a priori necessary propositions. There is no special class of empirical propositions that could be known with certainty. Any empirical proposition can be known with certainty. He has very successfully shown the incoherence involved in the dream argument. Scepticism does not and cannot touch the domain of common-sense. No doubt Moore's refutation of scepticism is quite successful insofar as scepticism has no place in common-sense.

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