

MOORE, THE SKEPTIC, AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT *

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Abstract: I argue that Moore's arguments have anti-skeptical force even though they beg the question against skepticism because they target the skeptic rather than skepticism directly. Moore offers two arguments which are usually conflated by his interpreters, namely, his proof of an external world and a *reductio* argument. I explain why the anti-skeptical force of the latter has to be derived from that of the former. I consider an objection to Moore that is based on distinguishing between the everyday and the philosophical contexts. I argue that the objection fails even on the most plausible understanding of the distinction.

G. E. Moore's peculiar arguments against skepticism¹ have never ceased to intrigue philosophers since they were first presented half a century ago. Although the arguments have been analyzed, criticized, or defended for many times now, there is still no agreement on how they should be understood.² On the one hand, Moore's arguments are widely regarded as question-begging, and hence as incapable of *refuting* skepticism; on the other hand, they do have some kind of anti-skeptical force, at least in the sense that most people, when presented with the arguments, would *feel* that skepticism is in some way being seriously challenged, even if they also think that the arguments are question-begging. Without an explanation of why Moore's arguments can both be question-begging and have anti-skeptical force, we cannot fully understand them. In this paper I

will try to offer such an explanation.

My main contention is that Moore's arguments should be understood as targeting the skeptic rather than skepticism. In most philosophical discussions 'the skeptic' is no more than skepticism personified, but to understand Moore's arguments correctly we must think of the skeptic as an actual person who accepts skepticism, or at least as an actual person who seemingly sincerely claims that skepticism is true. I will first distinguish between two different arguments that Moore gives, which are usually conflated by his interpreters. The distinction is crucial, for only one of the arguments has anti-skeptical force *directly*. After explaining what the anti-skeptical force consists in, I will then consider an appealing objection to Moore's arguments that relies on a distinction between the context of everyday life and a special philosophical context. I will argue that such a distinction is not as easy to draw as some may think if it is to be more than a rough and philosophically insignificant distinction, and that no valid objection to Moore's arguments can be constructed upon the two most attractive ways of drawing the distinction.

I

In "Proof of an External World", Moore says that "there are thousands of different things such that, if, at any time, I can prove any of them, I shall have proved the existence of things outside of us".³ Then he gives the famous proof:

I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, 'Here is

one hand', and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, 'and here is another'.⁴

What Moore tries to prove is clear enough; what is not clear is how his proof is related to skepticism about human knowledge. Some may think that the relation is straightforward: Moore's proof is an attempt to refute skepticism. But *prima facie* Moore's proof cannot be a refutation of skepticism, if to refute skepticism is to prove that we *know* this or that about the world. If Moore had proved that two human hands exist, he would "have proved *ipso facto* the existence of external things";⁵ but he would not have thereby proved that he (or anyone else) *knows* that two human hands, or external things generally, exist. In fact, Moore himself later said that he did not think skepticism "could be *proved* to be false in any such simple way; e.g., by holding up one of your hands and saying 'I know that this hand is a material thing; therefore at least one person knows that there is at least one material thing'".⁶

M. F. Burnyeat thinks that "Moore's memory deceived him",⁷ that Moore did intend his proof of an external world to be a refutation of skepticism. Barry Stroud disregards Moore's disclaimer and treats his proof "as also implying that we know there are external things".⁸ But I think Moore is right to insist that his proof of an external world is not in itself a proof that *we know that* there are external things. This does not, however, mean that Moore's proof is not anti-skeptical or that it cannot have any anti-skeptical force.

To begin with, given Moore's understanding of the status of the premise of his proof, his proof is in a way incompatible with skepticism. Although the premise itself (i.e. 'Here is one hand and here is another') is compatible with skepticism, Moore thinks

he would not have offered a proof like that unless the premise was something that he knew to be true.⁹ If Moore is right about this, then if Moore did prove that there are external things, he must have known that there were two human hands which he held up in giving the proof.¹⁰ And if he knew that, skepticism about human knowledge must be false. His proof is not a proof that skepticism is false, but it cannot both be the case that he has proved that there are external things and that skepticism is true. Besides, if Moore did prove that there are external things, and if he knew that he had proved that, then he would as a result know that there are external things. And if he had such knowledge, skepticism must be false, though, again, his proof would not be a proof that he has such knowledge.

In any case, the mere incompatibility between Moore's proof and skepticism does not give Moore's proof any anti-skeptical force. The incompatibility implies only that *if* Moore's proof is sound, then skepticism is false, rather than that Moore's proof is sound and skepticism is therefore false. Indeed, it now appears that Moore's proof could not have any anti-skeptical force, for its premise *requires* the falsity of skepticism.

II

I will argue that nonetheless Moore's proof does have anti-skeptical force. But before doing so I want to distinguish Moore's proof from another kind of argument that Moore gives which is meant to be a refutation of skepticism. Burnyeat summarizes the main idea of this kind of argument well in his discussion of Moore: "if any philosophical principles about knowledge lead ... to conclusions of the order 'We cannot know that this

is a pencil', that by itself constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of those principles, however plausible they may seem in the abstract".¹¹ Let us call this 'the *reductio* argument'.

Although the *reductio* argument is clearly different from Moore's proof, Moore's interpreters usually conflate them and take the *reductio* argument to be implicit in Moore's proof; indeed, they think it is the *reductio* argument that does the anti-skeptical work. I will argue that Moore's proof has anti-skeptical force *directly*, and that the *reductio* argument must generate its anti-skeptical force in the same way as Moore's proof does if it is to have anti-skeptical force at all.

Let us look at the *reductio* argument a little more closely. First of all, since beliefs like 'I know that this is a pencil' and 'I know that there are two human hands here' are incompatible with skepticism and are what skepticism has given us reasons to question, the *reductio* argument obviously begs the question against skepticism. And Moore himself seems to admit that. In the early paper "Hume's Philosophy", he characterizes the essential feature of a 'valid' anti-skeptical argument this way: "Any valid argument which can be brought against [skepticism] must be of the nature of a *petitio principii*: it must beg the question at issue",¹² for a person can prove to himself that he does know some external facts only "by bringing forward some instance of an external fact, which he does know; and, in assuming that he does know this one, he is, of course, begging the question".¹³

But why does Moore think that a question-begging argument is "as strong and good a one as any that could be used" and that "it really is conclusive"?¹⁴ This is because he thinks 'I know that there are two human hands here' is more certain than 'Skepticism is true'.¹⁵ Of course, the skeptic does not simply assert that skepticism is true but offers

arguments for skepticism. Moore's point should then be understood this way: 'I know that there are two human hands here' is so certain that the *reductio* argument can defeat *any* arguments for skepticism.

Of course, Moore cannot mean only that *he feels* certain that he knows that there are two human hands. In "Certainty", he draws a sharp distinction between 'It is certain that *p*' and 'I feel certain that *p*': 'It is certain that *p*' does entail that *p* is true, but "from the mere fact that I feel certain that so-and-so is the case it never follows that so-and-so is in fact the case".¹⁶ Let us call this the distinction between 'impersonal certainty' and 'personal certainty'. Moore is clearly speaking of impersonal rather than personal certainty when he makes the point about the certainty of 'I know that there are two human hands here'. And according to Moore, 'It is certain that *p*' entails that *p* is true because "a thing can't be certain, unless it is *known*: this is one obvious point that distinguishes the use of the word 'certain' from that of the word 'true'; a thing that nobody knows may quite well be true, but cannot possibly be certain".¹⁷ In other words, impersonal certainty implies truth because it implies knowledge.¹⁸

However, if the *reductio* argument really relies on this notion of impersonal certainty, it cannot have the anti-skeptical force that Moore thinks it has. To claim that it is certain, in this sense, that I know that there are two human hands is to claim in effect that *I know that I know that there are two human hands*.¹⁹ But if it is question-begging in the first place to claim that I know that there are two human hands, then it will be doubly question-begging to claim that I know that I know that there are two human hands, for I cannot know that I know that *p* unless I know that *p*.

III

Let us return to Moore's proof. My suggestion is that Moore's proof is an argument against *the skeptic* as a person, rather than an attempted refutation of skepticism. Its anti-skeptical force consists in its exposing the trouble the skeptic must be in. This interpretation on the one hand respects Moore's disclaimer that his proof of an external world is not a proof that skepticism is false, and on the other hand explains why it nonetheless has anti-skeptical force.

Moore believes that he is in a position to prove the existence of external things because of his knowledge that the premise of his proof is true. And this can be generalized to all those who believe that the premise of Moore's proof is something that Moore knows to be true — if they believe that Moore knows that, they would take Moore to have proved that there are external things. But who would believe that Moore's premise is something that Moore knows to be true? Moore thinks all of his audience believe that he knows that his premise is true; not only that, he thinks all of his audience believe that *they themselves* know that his premise is true:

How absurd it would be to suggest that I did not know it [i.e. that there were two human hands that I held up], but only believed it, and that perhaps it was not the case! ... This is a perfectly good proof, provided I know what is asserted in the premiss. But I do know that I held up two hands above this desk not very long ago. As a matter of fact, in this case *you all know it too*.²⁰

I think that Moore is right about what his audience believe and that the anti-skeptical force of his proof consists in his being right about this. The 'you' in 'you all

know it too' is meant to refer to everyone in the audience, whether he is a non-skeptic *or a skeptic*. Moore's very point of saying 'you all know it' is, I believe, to remind the skeptics in his audience that they too know, and believe that they know, that there are two human hands that Moore has just held up. In reminding the skeptics that they have the knowledge-belief concerned,²¹ Moore exposes the contradictory beliefs they have: they have both the knowledge-belief concerning Moore's hands and the skeptical belief that none of us knows anything about the external world. Moore's target is real people who are skeptics or claim to be skeptics and people who find skepticism convincing; this is why Moore's proof has to be *performed* in front of an audience to have the most anti-skeptical force.

Is this how Moore himself understands his proof? Some remarks he makes elsewhere reveal that he is well aware of the skeptic's inconsistency. In "A Defence of Common Sense" Moore offers a list of what he considers to be truisms about the world, and then draws our attention to another truism, which is that we *know* all the truisms on the list (*mutatis mutandis*), that is, we know a lot of things about the world. Some philosophers do not think that we have such knowledge, and Moore says of them:

[N]o philosopher has ever been able to hold such [skeptical] views consistently.... they have, therefore, been holding views inconsistent with propositions which they themselves *knew* to be true; and it was, therefore, only to be expected that they should sometimes betray their knowledge of such propositions. The strange thing is that philosophers should have been able to hold sincerely, as part of their philosophical creed, propositions inconsistent with what they themselves *knew* to be true; and yet, as far as I can make out, this has really frequently happened.²²

Since Moore considers the skeptic's inconsistency as something that "has really frequently happened", it is reasonable to assume that he had that in mind when he gave his proof of an external world.

As for the *reductio* argument, if it is to have anti-skeptical force, it also has to draw our attention to the fact that we all, including the skeptic, believe that we know things which the skeptic says we don't know. In fact, Moore himself has used the *reductio* argument this way:

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.²³

As we have seen, this argument, being patently question-begging, cannot refute skepticism, but it, like Moore's proof, exposes the skeptic's contradictory beliefs.

IV

Of course, Moore's arguments²⁴ have anti-skeptical force in the way I have suggested only if the skeptic does have the knowledge-beliefs about the world that Moore so confidently ascribes to him. Moore himself does not explain why the skeptic has such knowledge-beliefs; it seems that he is just certain that it is a fact and makes use of it in his arguments. Since Moore's arguments are not coupled with such an explanation, they are

in this sense incomplete. I believe that the explanation of why the skeptic does have knowledge-beliefs is that he, like other normal human beings, *cannot help having* them. Our *actual* employment of the concept of knowledge is importantly *practical* in such a way that we have many thoughts, actions, feelings and emotions, as well as human interactions and relationships that are essentially motivated, structured, or explained by our knowledge-beliefs. Since this whole dimension of thoughts, actions, feelings and emotions, and interpersonal relationships is part of what constitutes a human life as we understand it and live it, knowledge-beliefs about the world are thus indispensable to leading a human life.

It would, however, take some long and complex arguments to establish that knowledge-beliefs are indispensable to us. Instead of trying to offer such arguments here, which I have done in a separate paper,²⁵ I can only give an example that I think can lend some support to the indispensability thesis. Let us imagine the following scenario: Moore asks a (self-proclaimed) skeptic in his audience, who has a doctorate degree in philosophy, “Do you have a doctorate degree in philosophy?”. The skeptic answers, “Yes, I do.” Moore then challenges him by saying “I think you *merely believe*, but *don’t know*, that you have the degree.” It is reasonable to think that this will naturally arouse some negative feeling or emotion, such as anger or resentment, on Dr. Skeptic’s part, and such negative feeling or emotion can only be explained by the fact that Dr. Skeptic himself thinks it is obvious that he does not merely believe but *knows* that he has the degree. And it is not hard to think of other examples like this one in which the subject’s knowledge-beliefs are necessary for explaining his thoughts, actions, feelings and emotions, or engagement in some interpersonal relationships.

I will not pursue this issue any further; in the remainder of this paper I will consider a kind of objection to Moore's arguments (as interpreted above) which I think is quite attractive. By seeing why this kind of objection fails, we can more easily appreciate the anti-skeptical force of Moore's arguments.

V

The kind of objection to Moore's arguments that I have in mind appeals to the idea that the skeptic's knowledge-beliefs and his skeptical belief are held by him in two different contexts (call this 'the contextualist idea'), which are usually marked by the distinction between the everyday and the philosophical. By appealing to the contextualist idea, it tries to show that the skeptic does not really have contradictory beliefs. It is not easy to see how exactly the contextualist idea is supposed to work to show that; I will take up what I believe to be the two most plausible lines of thought that are based on the contextualist idea.

According to the first line of thought, which can be called 'the temporal objection', the difference between the everyday and the philosophical contexts implies temporal exclusion, that is, one cannot be in both contexts at the same time. According to the second line of thought, which can be called 'the semantic objection', the difference between the everyday and the philosophical contexts implies a semantic difference concerning the word 'know' (and its cognates). The temporal and the semantic objections are not incompatible, but for the sake of clear exposition I will treat them separately unless it is necessary to relate one to the other.

It may surprise some that the contextualist idea can be used to defend the skeptic, for contextualist theories in epistemology have, as Keith DeRose observes, “almost invariably been developed with an eye toward providing some kind of answer to philosophical skepticism”.²⁶ The ‘answer’ to skepticism such theories offer consists in showing that our everyday knowledge of the world is immune from the threat of skepticism. What should be noted, however, is that such theories also hold that skepticism is true *in its own context*.²⁷ Whether this is a good answer to skepticism depends on how we should look at the ‘knowledge’ saved from and the ‘knowledge’ lost to skepticism. In any case, the temporal objector and the semantic objector simply make use of the contextualist idea to argue that the skeptic does not have contradictory beliefs even if he has both the skeptical belief and everyday knowledge-beliefs. And although they argue on the skeptic’s behalf, we do not have to assume that they themselves are skeptics or that the skeptic will be happy to accept everything they suggest to defend him against Moore’s arguments.

Before looking into the two objections, I would like to make a few observations about the relation between Moore’s arguments and the distinction between the everyday and the philosophical (‘the EP distinction’ for short hereafter). Some philosophers try to dismiss Moore’s arguments simply by virtue of the EP distinction. Moore’s arguments, as these philosophers read them, belong to the everyday, and hence cannot be a proper answer to the philosophical problem of skepticism. Let us call this ‘the dismissive use’ of the EP distinction. The reason why these philosophers do not simply dismiss Moore’s arguments as unsound is presumably that notwithstanding their patent question-beggingness, Moore’s arguments seem to be in some way acceptable. By making the

dismissive use of the EP distinction, these philosophers try to reject Moore's arguments in such a way that they can at the same time explain why these arguments are acceptable — they are acceptable as being useful and warranted *in the everyday context*, but unacceptable as an answer to philosophical skepticism.²⁸

But when the EP distinction figures in the contextualist objections to Moore's arguments, the use of the distinction takes an interesting turn. We can call it 'the defensive use'. In the defensive use of the EP distinction, Moore is presumably still placed on the side of the everyday. What is distinctive of the defensive use is that now, *given that the skeptic does have knowledge-beliefs about the world*, the skeptic is placed on both sides of the distinction rather than simply on the side of the philosophical — his knowledge-beliefs (and beliefs about the world) belong to the everyday, and his skepticism belongs to the philosophical.

VI

The central idea of the temporal objection is that even though the skeptic's knowledge-beliefs contradict his skeptical belief, he does not have contradictory beliefs because he has those beliefs in two different contexts, which implies that he has them at two different times. That is, the skeptic has the skeptical belief only when he is in a skeptical frame of mind, which he is in only when he engages in philosophical thinking; but when he returns to his everyday life from his philosophical retreat, he will leave the skeptical belief behind and reclaim his knowledge-beliefs, which are necessary for his everyday life.

The following well-known passage in Hume's *Treatise* is suggestive of this idea of a temporal division between the skeptic's philosophical retreat and his everyday life:

I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour's amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther. Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life.²⁹

The 'speculations' are of course philosophical, and they are opposed to dining, playing games, and having conversations with friends, which are non-philosophical activities in everyday life. And it is quite clear from the passage that the philosophical speculations and the everyday activities are divided *temporally*: the philosophical speculations are something that Hume would return to 'after three or four hour's amusement'.

It may seem that what the temporal objection needs is nothing but a neat temporal division between the everyday and the philosophical contexts. But the issue is actually far more complex than the objector would like to see. In order to work effectively against Moore's arguments, the temporal objection requires not only (1) a way of distinguishing between the everyday and the philosophical contexts which will result in a temporal division, or, a way of marking a temporal division which can be properly regarded as a distinction between the everyday and the philosophical contexts; but also (2) a temporal division between the everyday and the philosophical contexts such that the skeptic can be taken to be doing without *all* his knowledge-beliefs in the philosophical context. I will try to show how difficult it is to satisfy both (1) and (2).

It seems that when philosophers speak of the philosophical context, they usually mean no more than the context in which philosophical problems (theories, views, arguments, ideas, concepts, etc.) are discussed or thought about. In this rough sense of the philosophical context, what the philosophical context is opposed to should just be called ‘the non-philosophical context’ — the context in which philosophical problems are not discussed or thought about. This indeed implies a temporal division, for a person cannot be in the philosophical and the non-philosophical contexts at the same time. It is not clear, however, that the non-philosophical context thus understood should also be called ‘the everyday context’.

We can certainly call it that by stipulation, but the problem is that in both the philosophical and the non-philosophical contexts we can be engaging in what we normally consider everyday activities. A philosopher who is, for example, presenting a paper in a philosophical colloquium is clearly in the philosophical context in this rough sense, but in presenting the paper he may also be speaking to others, responding to their questions, turning the pages of his manuscript, jotting notes on a piece of paper, taking a sip of water, trying to find a piece of chalk to write on the board, etc. — all these activities are clearly not restricted to the philosophical context. And if we have to have knowledge-beliefs in our everyday activities such as these, we cannot do without them in the philosophical context in this rough sense.

Those who speak of the philosophical context may have something more sophisticated in mind. They may think that there is some very special feature (or set of features) that philosophizing has which makes it sensible or even necessary to speak of the philosophical context. So a person is not necessarily in the philosophical context

when he is discussing or thinking about philosophical problems; he is in such a context only if the special feature in question is present. Different people may have different ideas of what special feature(s) philosophizing has, but what the temporal objector needs is a feature that is incompatible with what we normally consider everyday activities, so that the temporal division marked by the absence and presence of the special feature can be used to distinguish between the everyday and the philosophical contexts

The question, then, is whether philosophizing has any such special feature. The answer is obviously 'No' if the following has to be true of the special feature: in philosophizing what is present is that special feature *but nothing else*. If we use 'ϕing' to stand for whatever one is essentially doing when one is philosophizing, then the point is that one has to be doing some other things besides ϕing when one is philosophizing; and it is difficult to imagine what these other things could be if they were not what we normally consider everyday activities.

The temporal objector might claim that even if there are some other activities besides ϕing in the context marked by the presence of ϕing, they are never what we normally consider everyday activities. This claim is, however, most likely false. What is closest to what the temporal objector might have in mind seems to be this: the only other activity compatible with ϕing is sitting in an armchair alone (or something like that). But sitting in an armchair alone is still in a clear sense an everyday activity. And even if it was not normally considered an everyday activity, so that there was a temporal division between philosophizing in this sense (i.e. sitting in an armchair alone ϕing) and everyday activities, the fact that such a notion of philosophical context is extremely limited would put a great strain on its acceptability, to say the least.

On this extremely limited notion of philosophical context, Moore is in the everyday context rather than the philosophical context when he is presenting his anti-skeptical arguments to an audience of philosophers. The temporal objector may not resist this consequence, for it supports the dismissive use of the EP distinction, which he may welcome. But then on this very same notion of philosophical context the skeptic in Moore's audience is also in the everyday context rather than the philosophical context. Since according to the temporal objection the skeptic has the skeptical belief *only when* he is in the philosophical context, the temporal objector then has to say that the skeptic would simply agree with Moore's arguments *whenever* they are presented to him. This is, of course, a totally unrealistic description of the skeptic.

VII

Let us now turn to the semantic objection. The idea is that knowing something in the everyday sense is different from knowing it in the philosophical sense, so that a person can believe *truly* both that he knows (in the everyday sense) that *p* and that he does not know (in the philosophical sense) that *p*. The skeptic's knowledge-beliefs and his skeptical belief are thus not contradictory. Since it is not obvious that the word 'know' (and its cognates) has more than one sense, the semantic objection will be *ad hoc* if it relies on the mere claim that the word has the two different senses in question. It needs an explanation of how 'know' gets the two senses, and the explanation in terms of the notion of context is that the sense of 'know' is in part determined by the context in which the word is used.

What this explanation amounts to depends on what a context is supposed to be that can determine the sense of a word. I am not prepared to tackle here this difficult question in the philosophy of language; for my purposes I can grant that the senses or meanings of *some* words are partly determined by the contexts in which they are used, where a context is loosely construed as constituted by the situation the speaker or thinker is in, his particular interests and purposes in that situation, the kind of activity he is engaging in, the relevant rules or principles or standards that he is using, etc. But such a loose notion of context is not useful for the semantic objection.

On this loose notion of context, a person cannot be in two different contexts at the same time. Now if the objection to Moore's arguments is that the skeptic believes that he does not know anything about the world *only when* he is using 'know' in the philosophical sense, and believes that he does know things about the world *only when* he is using the word in the everyday sense, then what the objection comes down to is that the skeptic does not have both beliefs at the same time. This 'semantic' objection relies on a temporal division and can be treated as the temporal objection in disguise — the appeal to the semantics of 'know' is superfluous. Our criticism of the temporal objection then applies to this 'semantic' objection as well.

What the semantic objector needs is in fact a very peculiar notion of context. If the semantic objection is to work, it must treat Moore and the skeptic as *not* being in the same context even when Moore and the skeptic are face-to-face discussing the same philosophical issues. That is, the semantic objector must treat only the skeptic, but not Moore, as being in the philosophical context. For if both of them are taken to be in the philosophical context, and if the context determines the meaning of 'know', then they

should be taken to be using the word in the same sense. And if Moore is right that the skeptic indeed shares with Moore the knowledge-beliefs that Moore expresses in presenting his anti-skeptical arguments, then the skeptic has those knowledge-beliefs in the philosophical context. On the other hand, the skeptic is supposed to have his skeptical belief also in the philosophical context. 'Know' should then be taken to have the same meaning in the skeptic's knowledge-beliefs as well as in his skeptical belief. In that case, the skeptic should still be taken to have contradictory beliefs even if the meaning of 'know' is context-dependent.

What the semantic objector needs is thus not just a notion of context that is meaning-determinant. It needs a peculiar notion of meaning-determinant context such that two people can be in two different contexts even when they appear to be talking with each other about the same thing, such as whether they know that there are two human hands. And more importantly, if the skeptic has knowledge-beliefs and the skeptical belief *at the same time*, then the notion of context needed must be such that a person can be in two different contexts at the same time when he appears to be thinking or talking about the same thing.

If there is such a notion of meaning-determinant context, then when two people are talking with each other about, say, whether they *know* that there are two human hands, they might not be talking about the same thing (i.e. they might be talking about knowledge in different senses). The question then is what determines what context each of the speakers is in which determines what it is that he is talking about. Since it cannot be something the speakers share, such as the very conversation they are engaging in and some background knowledge they both have, it seems that the semantic objector can only

appeal to the idea that the speakers may be using different rules, principles, or standards that are meaning-determinant. The problem with this is that the notion of meaning-determinant *context* will then be rendered superfluous, for it is the rules, principles, or standards used that are meaning-determinant. But if the semantic objector insists that it is the context the speaker is in that determines what meaning-determinant rules, principles, or standards are used, then he will be back to square one.

In any case, let us put this problem aside and allow the semantic objector to speak of meaning-determinant contexts even if he appeals to the idea of meaning-determinant rules, principles, or standards. The semantic objector may be able to suggest or adopt a plausible account of meaning-determining rules, principles, or standards such that two people can be in different contexts (i.e. using different rules, principles, or standards) even when they appear to be talking with each other about the same thing, or at least he may be able to come up with such an account for the word 'know'.³⁰ But even if there is such an account, it is not going to help him defuse Moore's arguments.

This is because the most serious problem for the semantic objector is actually this: the notion of meaning-determinant context that he needs must be such that when the skeptic is thinking or talking about, say, whether he knows (or whether others know) that there are two human hands, he can be in different contexts at the same time and hence are thinking or talking about knowledge in different senses. But it is not clear how the same person using a particular word under the same circumstances can be using different meaning-determinant rules (or principles or standards) for that very word *at the same time*. Perhaps he can if he does so self-consciously, making clear at least to himself that he is using this rule at this moment and that rule at that moment. In that case, the

semantic objection can help those skeptics who themselves are some kind of contextualist (about the word 'know'). But contextualist skeptics are rare, if they exist at all.³¹

The last hope for the semantic objector is the fact that in some cases a word whose different senses are *determined* by different contexts can nonetheless be *used* in each of these senses outside the context in which that sense is determined. For example, the word 'empty' as applied to a space can have two different senses as determined respectively by the context of a particular scientific research and the context of non-scientific, practical purposes, so that a certain container can be empty in the practical sense but not empty in the scientific sense; but we can use 'empty' in the practical sense even when we are in the scientific context (and *vice versa*) if what we say makes it clear that the word is used in that sense. The semantic objector may suggest that we can use 'know' in the everyday or the philosophical sense whether we are in the philosophical or the everyday context.

On this suggestion, the semantic objection is that the skeptic's knowledge-beliefs and his skeptical belief are not contradictory because the following beliefs can be true in the same context and at the same time:

- (a) *I know in the everyday sense* that Moore has two human hands;
- (b) *I do not know in the philosophical sense* that Moore has two human hands.

What (a) expresses is what can be expressed, in the everyday context, simply by 'I know that Moore has two human hands', while what (b) expresses is what can be expressed, in the philosophical context, simply by 'I do not know that Moore has two human hands'.

Now if this is what the skeptic himself suggests, then again he has to be some kind of contextualist.

The semantic objector may insist that even if the skeptic is not a contextualist, this

objection still works as long as the word 'know' does have the two different senses. But the fact is that the word 'know' does not seem to work like the word 'empty' in this respect. We understand what 'empty in the practical sense' and 'empty in the scientific sense' mean presumably because we understand what the difference between the practical and the scientific contexts is and what the meanings of 'empty' are in these contexts. The content of what we say usually makes it easy for us and others to tell which meaning we are using, and we can make clear what the difference in meaning is without using the expressions 'empty in the practical sense' and 'empty in the scientific sense' ('empty in the practical sense' means, let's say, 'containing nothing that can be detected by our five senses', while 'empty in the scientific sense' means 'containing nothing that can be detected by the relevant equipments'). But 'know in the everyday sense' and 'know in the philosophical sense' do not have comparably clear meanings, at least because, as we have seen, it is difficult to see what the distinction between the everyday and the philosophical contexts is supposed to be if the contexts are to be meaning-determinant for the word 'know'. Accordingly, even if 'know' has different meanings in different contexts, it has to, contrary to the suggestion in question, stay in those contexts to have those meanings.

VIII

Moore's arguments cannot refute skepticism; they do not tell us why we should not accept skepticism; they do not even try to respond to any of the standard arguments for skepticism. As anti-skeptical arguments they are disappointing in all these respects,

but it does not mean that we have nothing to learn from them. The anti-skeptical force of Moore's arguments relies on, and draws our attention to, the indispensability of knowledge-beliefs to leading a human life as we understand it. And in exerting their anti-skeptical force Moore's arguments remind us of two important facts: first, to be a skeptic is to believe not only generally that we do not know anything about the external world, but also specifically that one does not know this or that about the external world (such as that one has two human hands); and second, anyone who has become a skeptic does not cease to be leading a human life that requires all kinds of knowledge-beliefs. As far as these two facts are concerned the trouble with skepticism is its believers.

The more general lesson is that philosophers are still normal human beings with all kinds of beliefs about the world that they share with other human beings. There is nothing remarkable about this fact, what is remarkable is that some philosophers need to be reminded of it. In the *Republic* Thrasymachus has the following response to Socrates' question whether Thrasymachus himself really believes the view he is defending: "What difference does it make to you, whether *I* believe it or not? It's my account you're supposed to be refuting." And Socrates' answer is, strangely: "It makes no difference".³² I think we can see in the light of Moore's arguments against the skeptic that sometimes what matters is not only whether a philosophical view can be defended, but also what the philosopher himself believes or has to believe.

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Notes

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¹ Throughout this paper ‘skepticism’ refers to skepticism about our knowledge of the external world.

² Moore’s anti-skeptical arguments are still discussed by philosophers. The latest contributions to the interpretation of Moore’s arguments include John Greco, “How to Reid Moore”, *Philosophical Quarterly* 52 (2002), pp.544-563; William G. Lycan, “Moore against the New Skeptic”, *Philosophical Studies* 103 (2001), pp.35-53; James Pryor, “What’s Wrong with Moore’s Argument?”, *Philosophical Issues* 14 (2004), pp.349-378; and Crispin Wright, “(Anti-)Sceptics Simple and Subtle: G. E. Moore and John McDowell”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65 (2002), pp.330-348.

³ G. E. Moore, “Proof of an External World”, in his *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), p.145.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.145-146.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.146.

⁶ G. E. Moore, “A Reply to My Critics”, in Paul Arthur Schilpp (ed), *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1942), p.668.

⁷ M. F. Burnyeat, “Examples in Epistemology: Socrates, Theaetetus and G. E. Moore”, *Philosophy* 52 (1977), p.395.

⁸ Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p.107, note 15.

⁹ “[I]t would not have been a proof unless ... 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” (“Proof of an External World”, p.146).

¹⁰ What Moore takes to be the premise of his proof is not ‘There are two human hands’, but ‘Here is one hand and here is another’ or ‘I held up two hands not very long ago’; the former is actually what is supposed to be proved. But since what Moore tries to prove is ultimately that there are external things, rather than merely that there are two human hands, in what follows I will, for simplicity, treat ‘There are two human hands’ as the premise of Moore’s proof, which strictly speaking should be taken to mean ‘There are two human hands that I have just held up’, or something like that.

¹¹ “Examples in Epistemology: Socrates, Theaetetus and G. E. Moore”, p.394. For Moore’s own arguments, see, for example, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Collier Book, 1962), pp.136-138; and “Four Forms of Skepticism”, in his *Philosophical Papers*, pp.225-226.

¹² G. E. Moore, “Hume’s Philosophy”, reprinted in his *Philosophical Studies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922), p.159.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.160. In *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, however, he concedes only that his argument “*seems like* begging the question” (p.136; italics added). After the remarks in “Hume’s Philosophy” just quoted, Moore goes on to say that “[i]t is therefore quite impossible for any one to *prove*, in one strict sense of the term, that he does know any external facts”. It is presumably in this ‘strict sense’ that Moore, as I have noted, denies

that skepticism could be *proved* to be false by his proof of an external world.

¹⁴ *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, p.136.

¹⁵ That this is what Moore thinks can be seen from the following passage, where he argues against Russell's four assumptions for a certain form of skepticism:

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. ("Four Forms of Scepticism", p.226)

¹⁶ G. E. Moore, "Certainty", in his *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1959), p.238.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.240. Cf. "[N]o argument is a good one, even in the sense that it enables us to know its conclusion to have any probability whatever, unless its premiss is at least as certain as its conclusion: meaning by 'certain,' not merely true or probably true, but *known to be so*" (*Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, p.138).

¹⁸ It should be noted that impersonal certainty does not admit of degree. On the present reading, then, Moore is infelicitous in saying that 'I know that there are two human hands here' is *more* certain than 'Skepticism is true'.

¹⁹ Moore later concedes, in his *Commonplace Book* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962), that he was mistaken in thinking that 'It is certain that *p*' entails 'I know that *p*', though he still thinks that "a thing is certain only if some *human being* now living on the earth knows it" (*Commonplace Book*, p.278; Moore's italics).

²⁰ “Proof of an External World”, p.146 and p.148; italics added.

²¹ A knowledge-belief that *p* is a belief that a person or a group of people know that *p*.

²² G. E. Moore, “A Defence of Common Sense”, in his *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), pp.40-41. Incidentally, in “Hume’s Philosophy” Moore remarks that “the sceptic can, with perfect internal consistency, deny that he does know any [external facts]” (p.160), which seems at odds with the passage just quoted. I think we should take Moore to mean here that skepticism is in itself a consistent thesis (it is in this sense that the consistency is ‘internal’); it is only the skeptic who is inconsistent.

²³ G. E. Moore, “Some Judgments of Perception”, reprinted in his *Philosophical Studies*, p.228; italics added.

²⁴ ‘Moore’s arguments’ refers to both Moore’s proof and the *reductio* argument.

²⁵ See my “The Skeptical Paradox and the Indispensability of Knowledge-Beliefs”, *Synthese* (forthcoming).

²⁶ Keith DeRose, “Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense”, in J. Greco and E. Sosa (eds), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp.193-194. For anti-skeptical arguments based on contextualist theories of knowledge or justification, see, for example, Stewart Cohen, “Contextualism and Skepticism”, *Philosophical Issues* 10 (2000), pp.94-107; Keith DeRose, “Solving the Skeptical Problem”, *Philosophical Review* 104 (1995), pp.1-52; and David Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1996), pp.549-567.

²⁷ Although contextualists like DeRose would certainly resist the label ‘skeptics’, they are philosophical ‘skeptics’ in the sense that they agree that skepticism is true in the

philosophical context (however they define it). Contextualists' motivation for such a position is, by the way, that they want to explain why we would find skeptical arguments compelling even though skepticism does not really threaten our (everyday) knowledge of the world.

²⁸ For a very interesting, but difficult, discussion of the status of Moore's arguments, see Thompson Clarke, "The Legacy of Skepticism", *Journal of Philosophy* 69 (1972), pp.754-769.

²⁹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edition, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.269.

³⁰ Two recently published articles are related to this issue: Keith DeRose, "Single Scoreboard Semantics", *Philosophical Studies* 119 (2004), pp.1-21; and Mark Richard, "Contextualism and Relativism", *Philosophical Studies* 119 (2004), pp.215-242.

³¹ See, however, note 27.

³² Plato, *Republic*, translated by G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992), 349a.