A PROOF OF THE OBJECTIVITY OF MORALS

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It is well known that recent British philosophy, under the leadership of G. E. Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein, has defended common sense and common language against what seems to many contemporary philosophers to be the paradoxes, the obscurities and the mystifications of earlier metaphysical philosophers. The spirit in which this work is carried on is well indicated by the titles of two of the most famous of Moore's own papers: "A Defence of Common Sense" and "Proof of an External World." It can be more fully but still briefly described by saying something about Moore's defense of the commonsense belief that there are external material objects. His proof of an external world consists essentially in holding up his hands and saying, "Here are two hands; therefore there are at least two material objects." He argues that no proposition that could plausibly be alleged as a reason in favor of doubting the truth of the proposition that I have two hands can possibly be more certainly true than that proposition itself. If a philosopher produces an argument against my claim to *know* that I have two hands, I can therefore be sure in advance that *either* at least one of the premises of his argument is false, *or* there is a mistake in the reasoning by which he purports to derive from his premises the conclusion that I do not know that I have two hands.

Moore himself speaks largely in terms of knowledge and belief and truth and falsehood rather than of the language in which we make our commonsense claims and the language in which the skeptic or metaphysician attacks them, but his procedures, and still more the *effects* of his work, are similar to those of other and later philosophers who have treated the same topic in terms of adherence to or departure from common language. A so-called linguistic philosopher would say of the skeptic that he was using words in unusual senses, and that when he said that we do not know anything about the external world he was using the word "know" so differently from the way in which we ordinarily use it that his claim was not in conflict with the claim that we make when we say that we *do* know something about the external world.

It is easy to see the kinship between Moore's method and the linguistic method, so easy that many more recent writers have failed to see that Moore's method is distinct from the linguistic method. Moore takes the words of the

skeptic literally, and shows that what he says is literally false. The linguistic philosopher recognizes that what the skeptic says is literally false, and goes on to conclude that the skeptic, who must be as well aware as we are that what he says is literally false, is not speaking literally. Both Moore and the linguistic philosopher maintain with all possible emphasis (Moore is famous for his *emphasis*) that we literally *do* know of some propositions about the external world that they are true; they both hold fast to common sense and common language.

It is also well known that most contemporary British philosophers reject objectivist accounts of the nature of moral reasoning. The most famous and fashionable of contemporary British moral philosophers, while they differ substantially in the detail of their accounts of moral judgments and moral reasoning, agree in drawing a sharp contrast between moral reasoning on the one hand, and mathematical, logical, factual, and scientific reasoning on the other hand. They sharply contrast *fact* with *value*. They attach great importance to Hume's doctrine, or what they believe to have been Hume's doctrine, that *is* never entails *ought,* that from no amount of factual evidence does any evaluative proposition logically follow; that no set of premises about what is the case, unless they are combined with at least one premise about what is good or what ought to be the case, can yield any conclusion about what is good or what ought to be the case. While simple and extreme subjectivism is seldom explicitly defended nowadays, simple and extreme objectivism is almost never defended. Most of the fashionable doctrines, with the great stress that they lay on the emotive, prescriptive and imperative functions of moral propositions, lean so far towards the subjectivist end of the scale that they are sometimes, and naturally, lumped together under the title of "the new subjectivism." We are repeatedly told that there are no moral *truths,* that there is no moral *knowledge,* that in morals and politics all that we can ultimately do is to *commit* ourselves, to declare where we stand, to try by persuasion and rhetoric to bring others to share our point of view.

A speaker at the Cambridge Moral Sciences Club not many years ago began a paper on moral philosophy by saying that he would assume that we all agreed that all forms of objectivism must be rejected, and he was so used to swimming with a full tide that he was obviously and sincerely surprised, not to say slightly shocked, to find that there were some people present who would not allow him to take this agreement for granted.

What is apparently not very well known is that there is a conflict between the fashionable allegiance to common sense and common language and the fashionable rejection of objectivism in moral philosophy.

I have no doubt that the philosopher I have just referred to, and most of

those who agree with him about moral philosophy, would accept Moore's argument, or something closely akin to it, as a conclusive argument in favor of the claim that we have knowledge of the external world.

Most contemporary British philosophers accept Moore's proof of an external world. Most contemporary British philosophers reject the claim that we have moral knowledge. Therefore there are some contemporary British philosophers who both accept Moore's proof of an external world and reject the claim that we have moral knowledge. The position of these philosophers is self-contradictory. If we can show by Moore's argument that there is an external world, then we can show *by parity of reasoning,* by an exactly analogous argument, that we have moral knowledge, that there are some propositions of morals which are *certainly* true, and which we *know* to be true.

My proof that we have moral knowledge consists essentially in saying, "We know that this child, who is about to undergo what would otherwise be painful surgery, should be given an anesthetic before the operation. Therefore we know at least one moral proposition to be true." I argue that no proposition that could plausibly be alleged as a reason in favor of doubting the truth of the proposition that the child should be given an anesthetic can possibly be more certainly true than that proposition itself. If a philosopher produces an argument against my claim to *know* that the child should be given an anesthetic, I can therefore be sure in advance that *either* at least one of the premises of his argument is false, *or* there is a mistake in the reasoning by which he purports to derive from his premises the conclusion that I do not know that the child should be given an anesthetic.

When Moore proves that there is an external world he is defending a commonsense belief. When I prove that we have moral knowledge I am defending a commonsense belief. The contemporary philosophers who both accept Moore's proof of an external world and reject the claim that we have moral knowledge defend common sense in one field and attack common sense in another field. They hold fast to common sense when they speak of our knowledge of the external world, and depart from common sense when they speak of morality.

When they speak of our knowledge of the external world they not only do not give reasons for confining their respect for common sense to their treatment of that single topic but assume and imply that their respect for common sense is *in general* justified. When they go on to speak of morality they not only do not give reasons for abandoning the respect for common sense that they showed when they spoke of our knowledge of the external world, but assume and imply that they are still showing the same respect for common sense. But this is just what they are *not* doing.

The commonsense view is that we *know* that stealing is wrong, that promise keeping is right, that unselfishness is good, that cruelty is bad. Common language uses in moral contexts the whole range of expressions that it also uses in nonmoral contexts when it is concerned with knowledge and ignorance, truth and falsehood, reason and unreason, questions and answers. We speak as naturally of a child's not knowing the difference between right and wrong as we do of his not knowing the difference between right and left. We say that we do not know what to do as naturally as we say that we do not know what is the case. We say that a man's moral views are unreasonable as naturally as we say that his views on a matter of fact are unreasonable. In moral contexts, just as naturally as in nonmoral contexts, we speak of thinking, wondering, asking; of beliefs, opinions, convictions, arguments, conclusions; of dilemmas, problems, solutions; of perplexity, confusion, consistency and inconsistency, of errors and mistakes, of teaching, learning, training, showing, proving, finding out, understanding, realizing, recognizing and coming to see.

I am not now saying that we are right to speak of all these things as naturally in one type of context as in another, though that is what I do in fact believe. Still less am I saying that the fact that we speak in a particular way is itself a sufficient justification for speaking in that particular way. What I am saying now is that a philosopher who defends common sense when he is talking about our knowledge of the external world must *either* defend common sense when he talks about morality (that is to say, he must admit that we have moral knowledge) *or* give us reasons why in the one case common sense is to be defended, while in the other case it is *not* to be defended. If he does neither of these things we shall be entitled to accuse him of inconsistency.

I *do* accuse such philosophers of inconsistency.

Moore did not expect the skeptic of the senses to be satisfied with his proof of an external world, and I do not expect the moral skeptic to be satisfied with my proof of the objectivity of morals. Even somebody who is not a skeptic of the senses may be dissatisfied with Moore's proof, and even somebody who is not a moral skeptic may be dissatisfied with my proof. In fact, somebody who regards either proof as a strictly valid and conclusive argument for its conclusion may nevertheless be dissatisfied with the proof. He may reasonably wish to be given not only a conclusive demonstration of the truth of the conclusion, but also a detailed answer to the most popular or plausible arguments against the conclusion.

Those who reject the commonsense account of moral knowledge, like those who reject the commonsense account of our knowledge of the external world, do of course offer arguments in favor of their rejection. In both cases those who reject the commonsense account offer very much the same arguments

whether they recognize or fail to recognize that the account they are rejecting is in fact the commonsense account. If we now look at the arguments that can be offered against the commonsense account of moral knowledge we shall be able to see whether they are sufficiently similar to the arguments that can be offered against the commonsense account of our knowledge of the external world to enable us to sustain our charge of inconsistency against a philosopher who attacks common sense in one field and defends it in the other. (We may note in passing that many philosophers in the past have committed the converse form of the same prima facie inconsistency: they have rejected the commonsense account of our knowledge of the external world but have accepted the commonsense account of moral knowledge.)

It will be impossible in a small space to give a full treatment of any one argument, and it will also be impossible to refer to all the arguments that have been offered by moral philosophers who are consciously or unconsciously in conflict with common sense. I shall refer briefly to the most familiar and most plausible arguments, and I shall give to each of them the outline of what I believe to be an adequate answer in defense of the commonsense account.

"Moral disagreement is more widespread, more radical and more persistent than disagreement about matters of fact."

I have two main comments to make on this suggestion: the first is that it is almost certainly untrue, and the second is that it is quite certainly irrelevant.

The objection loses much of its plausibility as soon as we insist on comparing the comparable. We are usually invited to contrast our admirably close agreement that there is a glass of water on the table with the depth, vigor and tenacity of our disagreements about capital punishment, abortion, birth control and nuclear disarmament. But this is a game that may be played by two or more players. A sufficient reply in kind is to contrast our general agreement that this child should have an anesthetic with the strength and warmth of the disagreements between cosmologists and radio astronomers about the interpretation of certain radio-astronomical observations. If the moral skeptic then reminds us of Christian Science we can offer him in exchange the Flat Earth Society.

But this is a side issue. Even if it is true that moral disagreement is more acute and more persistent than other forms of disagreement, it does not follow that moral knowledge is impossible. However long and violent a dispute may be, and however few or many heads may be counted on this side or on that, it remains possible that one party to the dispute is right and the others wrong. Galileo was right when he contradicted the cardinals; and so was Wilberforce when he rebuked the slaveowners.

There is a more direct and decisive way of showing the irrelevance of the argument from persistent disagreement. The question of whether a given type of inquiry is objective is the question whether it is *logically capable* of reaching knowledge, and is therefore an a priori, logical question. The question of how much agreement or disagreement there is between those who actually engage in that inquiry is a question of psychological or sociological fact. It follows that the question about the actual extent of agreement or disagreement has no bearing on the question of the objectivity of the inquiry. If this were not so, the objectivity of every inquiry might wax and wane through the centuries as men become more or less disputatious or more or less proficient in the arts of persuasion.

"Our moral opinions are conditioned by our environment and upbringing."

It is under this heading that we are reminded of the variegated customs and beliefs of Hottentots, Eskimos, Polynesians and American Indians, which do indeed differ widely from one another and from our own. But this objection is really a special case of the general argument from disagreement, and it can be answered on the same lines. The beliefs of the Hottentots and the Polynesians about straightforwardly factual matters differ widely from our own, but that does not tempt us to say that science is subjective.

It is true that most of those who are born and bred in the stately homes of England have a different outlook on life from that of the Welsh miner or the Highland crofter, but it is also true that all these classes of people differ widely in their factual beliefs, and not least in their factual beliefs about themselves and one another.

Let us consider some of the moral skeptic's favorite examples, which are often presented as though they settled the issue beyond further argument.

(1) Herodotus reports that within the Persian Empire there were some tribes that buried their dead and some that burned them. Each group thought that the other's practice was barbarous. But (a) they agreed that respect must be shown to the dead; (b) they lived under very different climatic conditions; (c) we can now see that they were guilty of moral myopia in setting such store by what happened, for good or bad reasons, to be their own particular practice. Moral progress in this field has consisted in coming to recognize that burying-*versus*-burning is not an issue on which it is necessary for the whole of mankind to have a single, fixed, universal standpoint, regardless of variations of conditions in time and place.

(2) Some societies practice polygamous marriage. Others favor monogamy. Here again there need be no absolute and unvarying rule. In societies where women heavily outnumber men, institutions may be appropriate which would be out of place in societies where the numbers of men and women are

roughly equal. The moralist who insists that monogamy is right, regardless of circumstances, is like the inhabitant of the Northern Hemisphere who insists that it is always and everywhere cold at Christmas, or the inhabitant of the Southern Hemisphere who cannot believe that it is ever or anywhere cold at Christmas.

(3) Some societies do not disapprove of what we condemn as "stealing." In such societies, anybody may take from anybody else's house anything he may need or want. This case serves further to illustrate that circumstances objectively alter cases, that relativity is not only compatible with, but actually required by, the objective and rational determination of questions of right and wrong. I can maintain with all possible force that Bill Sykes is a rogue, and that prudence requires me to lock all my doors and windows against him, without being committed to holding that if an Eskimo takes whalemeat from the unlocked igloo of another Eskimo, then one of them is a knave and the other a fool. It is not that we disapprove of stealing and that the Eskimos do not, but that their circumstances differ so much from ours as to call for new consideration and a different judgment, which may be that in their situation stealing is innocent, or that in their situation there is no private property and therefore no possibility of *stealing* at all.

(4) Some tribes leave their elderly and useless members to die in the forest. Others, including our own, provide old-age pensions and geriatric hospitals. But we should have to reconsider our arrangements if we found that the care of the aged involved for us the consequences that it might involve for a nomadic and pastoral people: general starvation because the old could not keep pace with the necessary movement to new pastures; children and domestic animals a prey to wild beasts; a life burdensome to all and destined to end with the early extinction of the tribe.

"When I say that something is good or bad or right or wrong I commit myself, and reveal something of my attitudes and feelings."

This is quite true, but it is equally and analogously true that when I say that something is true or false, or even that something is red or round, I also commit myself and reveal something of my *beliefs*. Some emotivist and imperativist philosophers have sometimes failed to draw a clear enough distinction between what is said or meant by a particular form of expression and what is implied or suggested by it, and even those who have distinguished clearly and correctly between meaning and implication in the case of moral propositions have often failed to see that exactly the same distinction can be drawn in the case of nonmoral propositions. If I say "this is good" and then add "but I do not approve of it," I certainly behave oddly enough to owe you an explanation, but I behave equally oddly and owe you a comparable explanation if I say

"that is true, but I don't believe it." If it is held that I contradict myself in the first case, it must be allowed that I contradict myself in the second case. If it is claimed that I do not contradict myself in the second case, then it must be allowed that I do not contradict myself in the first case. If this point can be used as an argument against the objectivity of morals, then it can also be used as an argument against the objectivity of science, logic, and of every other branch of inquiry.

The parallel between *approve* and *believe* and between *good* and *true* is so close that it provides a useful test of the paradoxes of subjectivism and emotivism. The emotivist puts the cart before the horse in trying to explain goodness in terms of approval, just as he would if he tried to explain truth in terms of belief. Belief cannot be explained without introducing the notion of truth, and approval cannot be explained without introducing the notion of goodness. To believe is (roughly) to hold to be true, and to approve is (equally roughly) to hold to be good. Hence it is as unsatisfactory to try to reduce goodness to approval, or to approval plus some other component, as it would be to try to reduce truth to belief, or to belief plus some other component.

If we are to give a correct account of the logical character of morality we must preserve the distinction between appearance and reality, between seeming and really being, that we clearly and admittedly have to preserve if we are to give a correct accounting of truth and belief. Just as we do and must hope that what we believe (what seems to us to be true) is and will be in fact true, so we must hope that what we approve (what seems to us to be good) is and will be in fact good.

I can say of another, "He thinks it is raining, but it is not," and of myself, "I thought it was raining, but it was not." I can also say of another, "He thinks it is good, but it is not," and of myself, "I thought it was good, but it was not."

"After every circumstance, every relation is known, the understanding has no further room to operate, nor any object on which it could employ itself."

This sentence from the first Appendix to Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* is the moral skeptic's favorite quotation, and he uses it for several purposes, including some that are alien to Hume's intentions. Sometimes it is no more than a flourish added to the argument from disagreement. Sometimes it is used in support of the claim that there comes a point in every moral dispute when further reasoning is not so much ineffective as impossible in principle. In either case the answer is once again a firm *tu quoque*. In any sense in which it is true that there may or must come a point in moral inquiry beyond which no further reasoning is possible, it is in that same sense equally true that there may or must be a point in *any* inquiry

at which the reasoning has to stop. Nothing can be proved to man who will accept nothing that has not been proved. Moore recognizes that his proof of an external world uses premises which have not themselves been proved. Not even in pure mathematics, that paradigm of strict security of reasoning, can we *force* a man to accept our premises or our modes of inference; and therefore we cannot force him to accept our conclusions. Once again the moral skeptic counts as a reason for doubting the objectivity of morals a feature of moral inquiry which is exactly paralleled in other departments of inquiry where he does *not* count it as a reason for skepticism. If he is to be consistent, he must either withdraw his argument against the objectivity of morals or subscribe also to an analogous argument against the objectivity of mathematics, physics, history, and every other branch of inquiry.

But of course such an argument gives no support to a skeptical conclusion about any of these inquiries. However conclusive a mode of reasoning may be, and however accurately we may use it, it always remains possible that we shall fail to convince a man who disagrees with us. There may come a point in a moral dispute when it is wiser to agree to differ than to persist with fruitless efforts to convince an opponent. But this by itself is no more a reason for doubting the truth of our premises and the validity of our arguments than the teacher's failure to convince a pupil of the validity of a proof of Pythagoras's theorem is a reason for doubting the validity of the proof and the truth of the theorem. It is notorious that even an expert physicist may fail to convince a member of the Flat Earth Society that the earth is not flat, but we nevertheless *know* that the earth is not flat. Lewis Carroll's tortoise ingeniously resisted the best efforts of Achilles to convince him of the validity of a simple deductive argument, but of course the argument *is* valid.

"*A dispute which is* purely *moral is inconclusive in principle. The specifically* moral *element in moral disputes is one which cannot be resolved by investigation and reflection.*"

This objection brings into the open an assumption that is made at least implicitly by most of those who use Hume's remark as a subjective weapon: the assumption that whatever is a logical or factual dispute, or a mixture of logical and factual disputes, is necessarily *not* a moral dispute; that nothing is a moral dispute unless it is *purely* moral in the sense that it is a dispute between parties who agree on *all* the relevant factual and logical questions. But the *purely moral* dispute envisaged by this assumption is a pure fiction. The search for the "specifically moral element" in moral disputes is a wild-goose chase, and is the result of the initial confusion of supposing that no feature of moral reasoning is *really* a feature of moral reasoning, or is *characteristic* of moral reasoning, unless it is peculiar to moral reasoning. It is as if one insisted that

a ginger cake could be fully characterized, and could only be characterized, by saying that there is ginger in it. It is true that ginger is the peculiar ingredient of a ginger cake as contrasted with other cakes, but no cake can be made entirely of ginger, and the ingredients that are combined with ginger to make ginger cakes are the same as those that are combined with chocolate, lemon, orange or vanilla to make other kinds of cakes; and ginger itself, when combined with other ingredients and treated in other ways, goes into the making of ginger puddings, ginger biscuits and ginger beer.

To the question "What is the place of reason in ethics?" why should we not answer: "The place of reason in ethics is exactly what it is in other inquiries, to enable us to find out the relevant facts and to make our judgments mutually consistent, to expose factual errors and detect logical inconsistencies"? This might seem to imply that there are some moral judgments which will serve as starting points for any moral inquiry, and will not themselves be proved, as others may be proved by being derived from them or disproved by being shown to be incompatible with them, and also to imply that we cannot engage in moral argument with a man with whom we agree on *no* moral question. Insofar as these implications are correct they apply to all inquiry, and not only to moral inquiry; and they do not, when correctly construed, constitute any objection to the rationality and objectivity of morality or of any other mode of inquiry. They seem to make difficulties for moral objectivity only when they are associated with a picture of rationality which, though it has always been powerful in the minds of philosophers, can be shown to be an unacceptable caricature.

I have criticized this picture elsewhere, and I shall be returning later in this article to some of its ill effects. Here it is necessary only to underline once again that the moral skeptic is partial and selective in his use of an argument of indefinitely wide scope: if it were true that a man must accept unprovable moral premises before I could prove to him that there is such a thing as moral knowledge it would equally be true that a man must accept an unprovable material object proposition before Moore could prove to him that there is an external world. Similarly, if a moral conclusion can be proved only to a man who accepts unprovable moral premises then a physical conclusion can be proved only to a man who accepts unprovable physical premises.

"There are recognized methods for settling factual and logical disputes, but there are no recognized methods for settling moral disputes."

This is either false, or true but irrelevant, according to how it is understood. Too often those who make this complaint are arguing in a circle, since they will count nothing as a recognized method of argument unless it is a recognized method of logical or scientific argument. If we adopt this interpretation, then

it is true that there are no recognized methods of moral argument, but the lack of such methods does not affect the claim that morality is objective. One department of inquiry has not been shown to be no true department of inquiry when all that has been shown is that it cannot be carried on by exactly the methods that are appropriate to some other department of inquiry. We know without the help of the skeptic that morality is not identical with logic or science.

But in its most straightforward sense the claim is simply false. There *are* recognized methods of moral argument. Whenever we say "How would you like it if somebody did this to you?" or "How would it be if we all acted like this?" we are arguing according to recognized and established methods, and are in fact appealing to the consistency requirement to which I have already referred. It is true that such appeals are often ineffective, but it is also true that well-founded logical or scientific arguments often fail to convince those to whom they are addressed. If the present objection is pursued beyond this point it turns into the argument from radical disagreement.

Now the moral skeptic is even more inclined to exaggerate the amount of disagreement that there is about methods of moral argument than he is inclined to exaggerate the amount of disagreement in moral belief as such. One reason for this is that he concentrates his attention on the admittedly striking and important fact that there is an enormous amount of immoral *conduct*. But most of those who *behave* immorally appeal to the very same methods of moral argument as those who condemn their immoral conduct. Hitler broke many promises, but he did not explicitly hold that promise breaking as such and in general was justified. When others broke their promises to him he complained with the same force and in the same terms as those with whom he himself had failed to keep faith. And whenever he broke a promise he tried to *justify* his breach by claiming that other obligations overrode the duty to keep the promise. He did not simply deny that it was his duty to keep promises. He thus entered into the very process of argument by which it is possible to condemn so many of his own actions. He was *inconsistent* in requiring of other nations and their leaders standards of conduct to which he himself did not conform, and in failing to produce *convincing reasons* for his own departures from the agreed standards.

Here we may remember Bishop Butler's remark that the true system of morality can be found by noticing "what all men put on the show of," however true it may be that not all men live up to their pretensions.

The same point can be illustrated in British national politics. When the opposition complain against an alleged misdemeanor on the part of the government, they are often reminded that they themselves, when they were in office,

behaved in precisely the same way in closely analogous circumstances. They are then able to reply by pointing out that the *then* opposition complained violently in the House of Commons. In such cases both sides are proceeding by recognized methods of argument, and each side is convicted of inconsistency by appeal to those methods.

"Objectivism leads to authoritarianism: who are we to be so downright about what is good and bad, right and wrong?"

A good illustration of this complaint is found in Professor P. H. Nowell-Smith's remark that "It is no accident that religious persecutions are the monopoly of objective theorists." This type of argument is radically misconceived; it consists in combination of several separate but equally serious confusions. In the first place we must notice that Nowell-Smith is here using a *moral* argument against objectivism. His objection depends on the moral proposition that religious persecution is morally wrong. I fully accept this moral proposition, but I claim that it gives no support to Nowell-Smith's attack on objectivism. For this moral proposition, and indeed every other moral proposition, is logically independent of the objectivist account of the nature of moral inquiry, in the sense that it would not be self-contradictory to deny objectivism and approve of religious persecution, or to condemn religious persecution and accept objectivism. In general, every philosophical proposition about the logical character of a class of propositions is logically independent of the truth or falsehood of any proposition of that classs. This can be most decisively shown by pointing out that a philosophical proposition about the logical character of any particular proposition is also about the logical character of the *negation* of that proposition, since every proposition has the same logical character as its negation. (The negation of a moral proposition is a moral proposition, the negation of an empirical proposition is an empirical proposition, and so on.) It follows that if, as a matter of historical fact, "religious persecutions are the monopoly of objective theorists" this is not because the objective theory gives any logical ground for religious persecution, but because some objective theorists have made the very mistake of which I am now accusing Nowell-Smith—the mistake of supposing that it *does* give some logical ground for religious persecution.

This is in fact my second main objection to the argument from authoritarianism, that it not only depends on a moral proposition which is logically independent of objectivism, but also depends on a causal proposition which, like all other causal propositions, is logically independent of objectivism. It may be true that those who accept the objective theory are liable to argue mistakenly from it to the conclusion that religious persecution is justified. If this is so, while it is indeed not "an accident," but a causal phenomenon which

can be scientifically or historically investigated and understood, it gives no ground of objection to the objective theory.

The fear of authoritarianism which prompts Nowell-Smith's complaint is also present in the minds of many of those who make the other objections that I have discussed. I shall return to this later, and show its importance for an understanding of the motives that lead to the rejection of the commonsense account of moral knowledge. But the objection involves a logical point of great importance, and I must say something about it here if I am to make quite clear why I reject Nowell-Smith's complaint.

When a philosopher defends the certainty and objectivity of a particular branch of knowledge, he naturally provides examples of propositions of the kind with which he is concerned, and says of them that he knows them to be true. This is what Moore was doing when he said that he had two hands, or that the earth had existed for many years past. Now it is also very natural that a rival philosopher who is able to show that a proposition which is used as such an example is *not* true, or is at least very doubtful, should feel that he has damaged the philosophical position of the philosopher who used the example. And yet this feeling is wholly unjustified. For the example can be doubted or refuted only by making use of that very mode of reasoning which the philosopher who used the example was defending. An example will make the point clearer. If I am defending our knowledge of the external world against a skeptic, I may pick up an object from the table and say, in Moore's fashion, "I *know* that I have a pen in my hand." The skeptic may be able to point out to me that the object in my hand is not a pen, but a propelling pencil. But if he takes this opportunity, then, far from weakening my philosophical position, he grants me my case, because although it is true that I have made a mistake in saying that I *knew* that I had a pen in my hand, the skeptic's proof that I made that mistake is in itself sufficient to show that I was not mistaken in my claim that there can be knowledge of the external world. All that he succeeds in doing is to give me a better example than the one I had chosen for myself.

Similarly, if I am defending the objectivity of morals, and I give an example of a moral proposition which I claim that I know to be true, and the moral skeptic is able to convince me that it is *not* true, or that it is doubtful, he can do this only by making use of the very mode of reasoning whose possibility he seemed to be denying. As we have seen, this is how Nowell-Smith proceeds in his attack on objectivism: he makes use of a moral proposition. It is a recurrent feature of skeptical arguments that they rely on the very types of knowledge that they are meant to be attacking. When he reminds us of all the occasions when we were mistaken the skeptic fails to notice that he can

identify the occasions when we were mistaken only because we now know *better;* that in fact the notion of *being mistaken* is necessarily connected with that of *not* being mistaken, and stands or falls with it.

So far I have been defending a particular type of account of moral inquiry against a number of objections. I maintain that the account I have defended is the commonsense account, and that it can be defended against philosophical attacks in very much the same manner as that in which Moore's commonsense account of our knowledge of the external world can be defended against philosophical attacks. At this point a new question arises. If I am right in claiming that my account is in accordance with common sense and common language, why has it been so vigorously attacked, and why in particular has it been attacked by philosophers who pride themselves on their fidelity to common sense and common language? I think we can find the key to the solution of this problem if we look further at Moore's treatment of our knowledge of the external world and at the skeptical objections against which he defended it. This will lead us to a brief consideration of the general form of philosophical skepticism of which moral skepticism and skepticism about the external world are particular instances.

After attending to Moore's defense of common sense and his proof of an external world we may ask, "Why in that case do so many philosophers maintain that common sense is mistaken, and that we do not in fact know anything about the external world?" The situation appears more puzzling still when we notice that Moore does not claim to be telling the skeptics anything that they do not already know. He propounds what has been called "Moore's paradox," that skeptical philosophers themselves know as well as Moore does that their conclusions are untrue.

When this puzzlement becomes more articulate it may take a rather different form. We may say, "Surely Moore must be *missing the point* of the arguments of the skeptical philosophers. If they know as well as he does that we *do* have knowledge of the external world, then they cannot seriously mean to deny that we have knowledge of the external world. When they seem to deny what they and all of us very well know, they must really be doing something else, and we must not rest content with showing that what they *say* is false. Perhaps what they *say* is not what they *mean.*" And this is what some philosophers have said about skepticism and Moore's answer to it. Professor John Wisdom has described Moore's procedure as "legalistic." While Moore is quite right in his arguments and in his conclusions, many of his readers remain dissatisfied, because they feel that his convincing disproof of the skeptical conclusion needs to be supplemented by a fuller account of the sources and motives and effects of skepticism.

This is just what Wisdom, following a lead given by Wittgenstein, has undertaken to supply. The first hint was given in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* ("What the solipsist *means* is of course correct"), and it was extended and elaborated in the researches that have now been published as *The Blue and Brown Books* and *Philosophical Investigations*. The story is taken further still in Wisdom's *Other Minds* and *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*. In this paper it is neither necessary nor possible to give a full account of what has emerged from all these works. It will be sufficient if I can indicate in general terms how these inquiries bear on Moore's treatment of our knowledge of the external world, and how they can help us with our original question about common sense and morality.

We must ask, "What is the point that Moore is missing? If the skeptic, under the guise of doubting our claim to have knowledge of the external world, is really doing something else, what else is he really doing?" He is portraying the character of our knowledge of the external world by implicitly contrasting our knowledge of the external world with our knowledge of mathematics and our knowledge of our own minds. When he explicitly claims that we have no knowledge of the external world he is implicitly claiming that our knowledge of the external world is different in kind from these other forms of knowledge. He *says* that no proposition about the external world is certainly true: he *means* that no proposition about the external world has the same *kind* of certainty as some propositions about minds or some propositions of mathematics.

In general: a metaphysical paradox is a portrait of the character of a kind of inquiry, executed by the technique of implicit comparison of one kind of inquiry with another. The skeptical philosopher notices that what ultimately confirms a proposition of a given type is a set of propositions of another type, i.e., a set of propositions from which the original proposition does not follow deductively. He expresses this insight by saying that we have *no* ultimate reasons for asserting the propositions, since the only available evidence does not and cannot logically guarantee the conclusion. He thus comes into conflict with the commonsense conviction that we do have knowledge of the kind in question, and also with other philosophers who defend this commonsense conviction. They also make use of the paradox technique. Some of them agree with the skeptic that only deductive certainty will do, and are therefore led to claim that our ultimate evidence *is* deductively related to the conclusion, that the conclusion is *equivalent* to the evidence from which it is ultimately derived. The slogan of this party is that "The meaning of a statement is the method of its verification." Others agree with the skeptic that the conclusion does not deductively follow from the premises, but deny that a deductive validation is

required. Their slogan is that "Every sort of statement has its own sort of logic."

Other metaphysicians avoid the risks and surrender the rewards of paradox, and follow the safer, slower road of *direct* comparison and contrast, of detailed, literal description of the similarities and differences between kinds of knowledge. And sometimes the landscape painters and the nature poets bandy words with those who prefer theodolites and photogrammetry.

There is one peculiar feature of the skeptic's procedure which underlines this account of the nature of metaphysical conflicts. When he is purporting to cast doubt on any one kind of knowledge, the skeptic must make use of other kinds of knowledge as his standards of comparison; and these other kinds of knowledge, while they are being used in this way, are of course exempted from criticism. But each of them in turn may be doubted by the same procedure, and may even be implicitly and unfavorably contrasted with kinds of knowledge against which it was itself employed as a skeptical weapon. This is well illustrated in metaphysical arguments about time.

(1) The ultimate evidence for statements about the future is evidence about the present and the past. But from statements about the present and the past no statement about the future follows deductively. Therefore we have no knowledge of the future.

(2) The ultimate evidence for statements about the past is evidence about the present and the future. But from statements about the present and the future no statement about the past follows deductively. Therefore we have no knowledge of the past.

(3) The ultimate evidence for statements about the present is evidence about the past and the future. But from statements about the past and the future no statement about the present deductively follows. Therefore we have no knowledge of the present.

These three skeptical arguments together form an outline sketch of the nature of our knowledge of the past, the present and the future. Each of them taken separately proceeds by assuming that two of the three types of knowledge are sound, and using them to cast doubt on the third. Each in turn is questioned, and each in turn is taken to be sound and used as a skeptical weapon against the other two. If we take all this at its face value the account is therefore self-contradictory. Even if a philosopher confines himself to attacking one of the types of knowledge by assuming the other two types to be sound, he cannot escape the charge of inconsistency, since it is clearly possible, even if he does not do it himself, to use his own method of argument against the types of knowledge that he chooses to exempt from it.

There is a general form of skeptical argument which can be applied in turn

to every type of knowledge, even, as Lewis Carroll's tortoise shows, to deductive knowledge. A philosopher who uses this form of argument against any one type of knowledge must claim exemption for at least one other type of knowledge. But if he *seriously* means to doubt the type of knowledge against which he uses the argument, this is just what he cannot consistently do, since the type of knowledge that he chooses to exempt has no more and no less right to its exemption than the type of knowledge that he chooses to condemn. But of course, as Moore is aware and as Wisdom shows and insists, no skeptic does seriously mean to cast doubt on any type of knowledge, however much he may protest that this is what he is trying to do.

If we now return to the moral skeptic we can see that what he was doing was to draw implicit comparisons and contrasts between moral knowledge and other kinds of knowledge. When I defended the commonsense view that we *do* have moral knowledge, I was being "legalistic" as Moore was being legalistic when he defended the commonsense view that we have knowledge of the external world. In any sense in which he was missing the point of the skeptic of the senses, I was in the same sense missing the point of the moral skeptic. And just as the skeptic of the senses is not finally disposed of by showing that what he says is literally false, so the moral skeptic is not finally disposed of by showing that what he says is literally false. Each of them makes by his paradox a point which is quite compatible with the platitude which his paradox literally denies. But just as Moore rightly felt it worthwhile to demonstrate to the skeptic of the senses that his paradox *was* a literal denial of a platitude, because he suspected that the skeptic was not fully aware of the nature of his own procedure, so I have felt it worthwhile to demonstrate to the moral skeptic that his paradox is a literal denial of a platitude, because I suspect that many moral skeptics, even if they are fully aware that skepticism of the senses is a denial of a platitude, are not fully aware that moral skepticism is a denial of a platitude.

In moral philosophy, as in the philosophy of perception, to demonstrate the falsehood of skepticism and the unsoundness of skeptical arguments is an important beginning, but it is only a beginning. It needs to be followed by a positive exposition and description of the character of the knowledge that the skeptic declares not to deserve the name of knowledge, and an explanation of how its character prompts the skeptic to propound his paradoxes, and hence of how his paradoxes contribute to our understanding of its character. To do this for moral skepticism would be to write the book on moral knowledge for which this article cannot be more than a provisional first chapter.