

Moore's Missing Principle

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One familiar version of skepticism assumes that knowledge is closed under entailment. Closure may be formulated in more or less qualified ways; the simplest formulation is the straight principle:

K1: If person S knows p and p entails q , then S knows q .

From this principle, together with the assumption that no one knows the falsity of skeptical hypotheses, it follows that no one knows the truth of propositions that entail the falsity of skeptical hypotheses. For example, I do not know I am standing, since this entails the falsity of the skeptical hypothesis that I am merely dreaming that I am standing, and by K1 if I know the former I know the latter as well.

Various responses to closure-based skepticism have emerged in recent literature. Among these is the suggestion that the closure principle be turned against the skeptic. The idea is to assume that we know various mundane, commonsense propositions that entail the falsity of skeptical hypotheses, and then conclude, on the strength of closure, that we know that the skeptical hypotheses do not hold. For example, since I know I am standing, I *do* know I am not merely dreaming that I'm standing. This strategy, which we might call *closure-based antiskepticism*, is associated with G. E. Moore, and has led to a revival of interest in Moore's work on skepticism.

However, Moore's own attack on skepticism did not rely on knowledge closure. The best guide to his critique is his essay 'Certainty,' delivered as a lecture in 1941, and written after his other famous essays on skepticism, which are 'A Defence of Common Sense' (1925), 'Proof of an External World' (1939) and 'Four Forms of Scepticism' (1940). Re-reading Moore's mature thought about skepticism, as revealed in

'Certainty,' suggests that he relied on a principle that is stronger than K1. This principle Moore himself never formulated. Moore's missing principle is worth identifying and examining, not only so that we can understand Moore himself, but also because it would be important if a principle stronger than closure were true.

In this essay I will attempt to formulate Moore's principle. I will also explain why it matters if his principle is true. Ultimately, however, I conclude that Moore's principle is false, leaving his extreme antiskeptical view without a clear basis.

Moore's Reply to the Skeptic

Moore comes closest to accepting closure-based antiskepticism in the following passage from 'Certainty:'

Suppose I say now: 'I know for certain that I am standing up' Many philosophers would say: 'You are wrong: you do not know that you are standing up' And one argument which has been used as an argument in favour of saying this, is an argument in the course of which the philosopher who used it would assert: 'You do not know for certain that you are not dreaming' And from this, that I do not know for certain that I am not dreaming, it is supposed to follow that I do not know for certain that I am standing up From the hypothesis that I am dreaming, it would, I think, certainly follow that I don't *know* that I am standing up; though I have never seen the matter argued, and though it is not at all clear to me how it is to be proved that it would follow.

I agree ... that if I don't know now that I'm not dreaming, it follows that I don't know that I am standing up, even if I both actually am and think that I am. But this ... is a consideration which cuts both ways. For, if it is true, it follows that it is also true that if I *do* know that I am standing up, then I do know that I am not dreaming. I can therefore just as well argue: since I do know that I'm standing up, it follows that I do know that I'm not dreaming; as my opponent can argue: since you don't know that you're not dreaming, it follows that you don't know that you're standing up (1941, 245-247).

Here we find Moore's *concession to the skeptic*: those who fail to know that they are not dreaming also fail to know they are standing. We also find Moore admitting that he cannot identify the principle upon which the concession rests ('... it is not at all clear to me how it is to be proved that

it would follow.')

Might it be K1? Well, as Moore realized, the proposition that he is standing, *standing*, does not entail the proposition that he is not dreaming, *not-dreaming*. Famously, Moore referred to a story about the Duke of Devonshire who dreamed he was speaking before the House of Commons only to awake and realize he *was* speaking before the House (1941, p. 245). So K1 is compatible with the possibility that Moore knows *standing* yet is unable to know *not-dreaming*. Hence, it would seem, K1 is not the principle Moore sought.

The simplest and most straightforward principle that is capable of underwriting Moore's concession to the skeptic is the following principle:

PK1: If S knows *p*, and S's knowing *p* entails *q*, then S knows *q*.

As Moore himself did (1941), let us assume that *not-dreaming* follows from the fact that Moore knows *standing*. Then, given PK1, Moore's knowing *standing* entails his knowing *not-dreaming*. Thus PK1 gives Moore what he wanted: failing to know *not-dreaming* entails failing to know *standing*. I suggest that PK1, or some qualified version thereof, is Moore's missing principle.

Eventually I will want to discuss whether PK1 is correct. First, however, I want to explain why it *matters* whether PK1 is correct. Obviously, if PK1 is false, Moore could fall back to K1, and defend closure-based antiskepticism. But K1 is compatible with a highly restricted form of skepticism which Moore would have rejected; PK1 is not. PK1 is more useful to Moore given his uncompromising rejection of skepticism. Yet the restricted form of skepticism is attractive, since it allows for a compromise with the skeptic that is compatible with closure, unlike the well known compromise offered by Fred Dretske and Robert Nozick.

What's at Stake

Recall that, according to Fred Dretske and Robert Nozick, we may know the truth of commonsense claims yet we do not know the falsity of skeptical hypotheses. We can call this view *semiskepticism*, since it

maintains that skepticism is partially correct: knowledge of the truth of skeptical hypotheses is beyond our grasp. Semiskepticism has intrigued epistemologists who think that there is a grain of truth in skepticism, but most have been reluctant to reject the closure principle, which is the price Dretske and Nozick pay for their compromise with the skeptic.

However, it is not necessary to deny closure if we want to defend some form of semiskepticism. Consider the familiar form of closure-based antiskepticism which, as pointed out earlier, is commonly associated with Moore:

1. K1.
2. I know mundane, commonsense things that are incompatible with the truth of certain skeptical hypotheses.
3. Therefore, we know the falsity of skeptical hypotheses that are not consistent with known commonsense truths.

On this argument, we can know the falsity of any skeptical hypothesis that is incompatible with any of the commonsense truths we know. However, the argument does not rule out the possibility that there are some skeptical hypotheses whose falsity we fail to know. The hypotheses in question would not be propositions that are merely *elusive*. All skeptical hypotheses have this property: they leave our experiences unchanged even if they are false. An hypothesis is salient if and only if it is not only elusive, but compatible with *all* of the mundane propositions whose truth we know. Let us say that such hypotheses are *deeply elusive*. (I'll treat deep elusiveness as an all or nothing property, but consistency with common sense knowledge is obviously a matter of degree.)

Most widely discussed skeptical hypotheses are not deeply elusive. Consider the familiar suggestion that I am a brain in a vat being given artificial experiences by scientists. This hypothesis is incompatible with things I surely know according to common sense. For example, it is incompatible with the fact that I am not in a vat. Similarly, the notion that I am merely dreaming that I am in New York, *dreaming & not-new*, is

incompatible with something I know according to common sense. It is incompatible with *new*, I am in New York. However, while *new* is incompatible with *dreaming* & *not-new*, it is compatible with *dreaming*, my present experiences are the product of a vivid dream. For it is possible to dream in New York.

Are there any deeply elusive hypotheses? Is *dreaming* itself one? The answer depends on precisely what we know according to common sense. Since it is not really clear how far such knowledge extends, our question has no clear answer. It seems reasonable to say that *dreaming* is incompatible with the proposition *see*, I see my computer keyboard, assuming that *see* entails that my present experiences of my keyboard are not the product of a vivid dream, and assuming that *dreaming* entails that *all* of my present experiences are the product of a vivid dream. Common sense says I know all sorts of things about my surroundings and my body's position; does it also speak to details about the visual process? If by common sense I know my present experiences have been produced through the ordinary visual process, as Moore sometimes said (1925, p. 33: he lists, among the things he knows, 'I have often perceived both my own body and other things which formed part of its environment'), but sometimes seemed unsure about (1941, pp. 247-251) then *dreaming* is not deeply elusive. Consider, too, that common sense might speak to what I *know* I know. Suppose common sense says I know the following:

—I know *new*

—Knowing *new* entails *not-dreaming*.

Then *dreaming* would not be deeply elusive.

If, but only if, we are not too ambitious about the extent of common sense, we might say that there are deeply elusive propositions. And then a proponent of closure might defend a weak form of semiskepticism, according to which we fail to know deeply elusive propositions. For closure does not position us to move from our knowledge of common sense claims to the knowledge of deeply elusive claims.

Such weak semiscepticism is strong enough to support significant skeptical claims. Not only does it rule out knowledge of deeply elusive propositions such as *not-dreaming*, it also implies that higher-order empirical knowledge—knowledge that we have various sorts of sensorily based knowledge—is not possible. For, given closure, if we cannot know deeply elusive propositions such as *not-dreaming* then we cannot know our experiences are the product of the ordinary visual process (rather than a dream). And if we cannot know *that*—if we cannot know where our experiences come from—it seems impossible to know that we know any empirical truth.

Nevertheless, weak semiscepticism is a weaker position than that defended by Nozick and Dretske. Arguably, it is also more defensible. It is consistent with the overwhelmingly plausible idea that our commonsense knowledge claims position us to know truths they entail, so that, by knowing *new*, I am positioned to know *not-(dreaming & not-new)*. But it rejects the idea that we know the falsity of deeply elusive skeptical hypotheses. Weak semiscepticism still allows us to explain the appeal of skepticism without fully succumbing to it. We could offer something like the following picture:

—We cannot know the falsity of deeply elusive propositions, such as *dreaming*.

—If some deeply elusive proposition were true, we would know very little; e.g., *dreaming* is incompatible with our knowledge of most if not all truths.

It should now be clear why it matters whether Moore's principle PK1 is correct. Moore thought that if he knows he is standing up then he knows he is not dreaming. However, relying on the closure principle, Moore may not know he is not dreaming on the basis of mundane knowledge claims such as the proposition that he is standing. By contrast, PK1 rules out any compromise with the skeptic, including weak semiscepticism.

Let's examine the merits of Moore's principle PK1. Then we can consider how plausible weak semiscepticism really is.

Moore's Principle

PK1 will obviously need some qualifications; some of these are relatively trivial. They are much like the well known qualifications that K1 itself needs. For example, if we fail to believe q , or fail to see that p entails q , our knowledge of p will not translate into the knowledge of q . Hence K1 is best replaced with something like

K2: If, while knowing p , S believes q because S knows that p entails q , then S knows q .

Similarly with PK1; far more defensible is the following qualified principle (Luper 1984):

PK2: If, while knowing p , S believes q because S knows that q is entailed by S 's knowing p , then S knows q .

Is PK2 correct?

Consider a proposition q entailed by our knowing a proposition p , but not by p itself. Our question is whether, knowing p , and believing q because we know that q is entailed by our knowing p , we thereby know q . I can think of two reservations about PK2.

First, a concern about iterative knowledge might appear to arise. From the claim that knowledge is iterative, an unacceptable regress follows: suppose knowing p entails knowing we know p ; then it also entails knowing we know we know p , and so on. Yet we lack the relevant beliefs, so it appears impossible to have such knowledge. If PK2 implies that knowledge is iterative in this strong sense then it will generate an unacceptable regress. However, PK2 has no such implication. PK does not commit us to the proposition that knowing p entails knowing we know p . Instead, it implies that, if we know p and we believe we know p because we know this is entailed by our knowing p , then we know we know p . One might say that, given PK2, knowledge is weakly iterative: knowing p positions us to know we know p .

However, a second reservation suggests that knowledge is not even weakly iterative. Suppose we believe q because we know q follows from

our knowing p . This supposition does not entail that we know p . Not *knowing* that we know p , one might say, blocks us from knowing q even when we believe q because we know q follows from our knowing p .

To repair PK2 we might add, to the antecedent of PK2, the condition that S knows S knows p , as follows:

PK3: If, while knowing S knows p , S believes q because S knows that q is entailed by S 's knowing p , then S knows q .

This principle is weaker than PK2. In fact, PK3 is so weak that it is entailed by K2! It is simply K2 with *S knows p* substituted for p . Any proponent of closure will accept PK3; it is obviously correct.

We have found that Moore's principle can be qualified successfully. However, unlike PK2, PK3 does not suffice for Moore's purposes. PK3 implies that one of the following must be false if Moore does not know *not-dreaming*:

- (a) Knowing *standing* entails *not-dreaming*.
- (b) Moore believes *not-dreaming* because he knows that it is entailed by his knowing *standing*.
- (c) Moore knows he knows *standing*.

On the assumptions PK3, (a) and (b), Moore cannot conclude that he does not know he is standing if he does not know he is not dreaming. What he can conclude is that he does not *know* he knows he is standing if he does not know he is not dreaming (a conclusion he could also reach by combining closure with (a) and (b)). This conclusion is weaker than the concession he wants to make to the skeptic (assuming that knowledge is not strongly iterative).

It turns out, then, that Moore's antiskeptical strategy fails. His concession to, and hence his response to the skeptic would make sense if Moore adopted PK1 or PK2. But PK1 is clearly false, and PK2 is questionable. PK1 and PK2 can be further weakened, giving us PK3, which is clearly correct, but of limited interest, in that it is entailed by K2

itself, and, like K2, consistent with weak semiskepticism. Moore's concession would also make sense if Moore assumed that knowledge is strongly iterative, since he could then rely on closure to back his position. But knowledge is not strongly iterative. There is one other explanation of Moore's concession: he might have assumed that anyone who knows *standing* knows he knows *standing*. This assumption *may* be defensible even if people may know *some* things without knowing they know them. But the resulting argument is not especially strong.

Perhaps Moore himself was aware that he based his antiskepticism on a false principle. Less than a month before he died, Moore wrote, of 'Certainty,' that 'there are bad mistakes in it which I cannot yet see how to put right (1959, Preface).'

Weak Semiskepticism

Without PK1 or PK2, Moore has no basis for opposing weak semiskepticism. However, there would be good reason to reject this compromise with the skeptic if we could identify a plausible account of knowledge that is consistent with our knowing the truth of deeply elusive propositions. Such an analysis exists: it is the safe indication account (Luper 1984, 1987, 2003). In this final section, I will take the safe indication account for granted and briefly explain how it may be used against weak semiskepticism.

The safe indication account holds, roughly, that S knows *p* if and only if S believes *p* because of some event or state of affairs R that safely indicates *p*'s truth. It says that R *safely* indicates *p*'s truth if and only if:

p would hold if R held.

On this analysis, lower-order empirical knowledge is straightforward; for example, we may know that a table is before us on the basis of table-related sensory evidence, since, in ordinary (non-Gettieresque) circumstances, there would be such a table if one appears to be in front of us. Higher-order empirical knowledge is possible as well; for example, it is possible to know we are *seeing* a table in front of us. Under ordinary

circumstances, when we are alert, our visual apparatus is functioning properly, and we have a clear view of a table, our table experiences safely indicate that we are seeing a table: in all of the worlds that are close to the actual world (as described) and in which we experience a table, we are seeing a table. Our experiences are produced through the ordinary visual process. Noting all this, we are positioned to know we are seeing a table. (For further discussion see 2006.)

On the safe indication account, weak semiskepticism looks unattractive indeed. We are in a position to know we are not dreaming, since *not-dreaming* follows from the fact, which we know, that we see a table. Assuming, as seems plausible, that we may rule out *not-dreaming* and other deeply elusive proposition on the basis of our higher-order empirical knowledge, nothing stands in the way of the conclusion that deeply elusive propositions fall within the scope of knowledge.

Of course, to get from knowledge of things like *we see a table* to knowledge of things like *we are not dreaming*, we rely on closure. And not all accounts of knowledge support closure. But the safe indication account does. Whatever safely indicates the truth of p also safely indicates the truth of p 's consequences. Thus when we know p , thereby believing it on the basis of something that safely indicates its truth, we are positioned to believe p 's consequences on the basis of something that safely indicates their truth.

Conclusion

Moore was correct to insist that we know *not-dreaming*, even if he failed to provide a full defense for his view. As we just saw, that defense can proceed by way of the safe indication account of knowledge. It is not clear, however, whether Moore himself would have accepted the safe indication account. Moore thought that under normal circumstances when we look at tables we know we are seeing them, and he took it that this helps position us to know we are not dreaming. Hence he was committed to accepting *some* analysis of knowledge by which we can know such things. However, Moore also equated knowledge with

certainty. I believe that, unless we adopt a peculiarly weak understanding of ‘certainty,’ it is implausible to say that we are certain we are not dreaming. But I will not attempt to argue the point here.*

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