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Using and Abusing Moorean Arguments

ABSTRACT: *Metaethical Mooreanism is the view that without being able to explain how we know certain moral claims we can nevertheless be sure that we do know them. In this article I focus on the Moorean argument against moral error theory. I conclude that it fails. To show this failure, I first distinguish Moorean claims from Moorean arguments, and then so-called presumptive support from dialogical support. With these distinctions in place, I argue that the key Moorean claim requires dialogical support in order to be used within the Moorean argument against moral error theory, but metaethical Mooreans have provided only presumptive support for the Moorean claim. Not only is this presumptive support inadequate for fending off the moral error theory, it is doubtful that Mooreans can actually provide dialogical support for the key Moorean claim.*

KEYWORDS: Moorean claims, Moorean arguments, skepticism, moral error theory, moral epistemology

Introduction

It seems that we know some moral claims without being able to explain how it is that we know them. Likewise, it seems that we can be sure that we do know these claims even when confronted with powerful arguments to the contrary. Without being able to say exactly what is wrong with certain moral skeptical arguments, some philosophers say that we can reject them and maintain our belief in the initial moral claims. This, roughly, is the Moorean position in metaethics.

Mooreanism is not limited to moral matters. It is instead a perfectly general epistemic account. But, importantly, it is not best understood as a *positive* epistemic account—it does not explain how we know a particular claim. Rather, it is chiefly a *response* to skeptical or nihilistic arguments. It is a view that explains why, in spite of valid arguments to the contrary, we can be confident that we do in fact know a particular claim. And when it comes to moral matters, metaethical Mooreanism is not a view about how we know that some things are morally wrong, but rather a view about why skeptical arguments notwithstanding we can be sure that we do in fact know that some things are morally wrong.

In this article I assess how metaethical Mooreanism fares against the moral error theory. In section 1, I explain metaethical Mooreanism as a response to

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the moral error theory. In the next two sections I dig deeper into the Moorean position to show its structural features. I separate Moorean *claims* (section 2) from Moorean *arguments* (section 3). This is necessary to show, in section 4, why metaethical Mooreanism ultimately fares poorly against the moral error theory. In drawing this conclusion I rely on a distinction between two types of epistemic support: *presumptive* and *dialogical*. I explain that the key Moorean claim initially relies on presumptive support, but in order to fend off the moral error theory the Moorean argument requires dialogical support. I argue that this latter support has not been provided, and it is doubtful that it can be. So metaethical Mooreanism does not fare well against the moral error theory. From this I conclude, in section 5, that metaethical Mooreanism cannot adequately explain that we do in fact know that some things are morally wrong. Since this is what the view sets out to do, metaethical Mooreanism fails by its own lights.

1. The Moorean Argument against the Moral Error Theory

Moorean arguments in general have a readily identifiable structure (McPherson 2009): if a revisionary claim (like 'we don't know that there is an external world') is true, then a Moorean claim (like 'that I have hands') is false, but since that Moorean claim is true the revisionary claim must be false. This can be schematized in the following way, where RC stands for revisionary claim and MC stands for Moorean claim:

> Moorean Argument Schema
> If RC then not-MC.
> But MC.
> Therefore, not-RC.

Why call an argument like this *Moorean*? Because this type of argument was first used by G. E. Moore, who famously argued against external world skepticism in the following way: If external world skepticism is true then I do not know that I have hands, but since I do know that I have hands (that is, here is one hand, and here is another), external world skepticism is false (Moore 1939). (I am not presuming that Moore's argument succeeds, but for some discussion see Brueckner [1994]; Pryor [2000, 2004]; Wright [1985]).

It is noteworthy that despite being a forerunner of contemporary nonnaturalist moral realists, Moore did not use a similar argument against revisionary metaethical theses (like moral skepticism or nihilism). So we will have to depart from Moore himself in our analysis of Moorean arguments. However, other philosophers have used Moorean arguments to bolster certain metaethical views, and it is to these defenses that I turn.

The particular Moorean argument that I am interested in here is one often used against the moral error theory (Dworkin 1996; Enoch 2011; Huemer 2005; Nagel 1997). Here is what it looks like:

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Moorean Argument against Moral Error Theory

If the moral error theory is true, then it is false that some things are morally wrong.

But some things are morally wrong.

Therefore, moral error theory is false.

Note that the Moorean argument against the moral error theory (hereafter just 'the Moorean argument') retains the same structure as the schematic version above. Note, too, that it is structurally similar to Moore's argument against external world skepticism. However, one may note that the consequent of the first premise of Moore's argument concerns *knowledge*, whereas that of the Moorean argument concerns *falsity*. The reason for the difference is the target revisionary view. Moore's original target was external world skepticism, which is a view about knowledge. But the target of the Moorean argument is the moral error theory, which is a view about moral ontology (that is, whether there *are* moral facts, not simply whether we *know* that there are). The difference, then, seems warranted. And while the Moorean argument can seem a bit fishy, identifying exactly what the problem is, if indeed there is one, can be difficult. I will call someone who defends this sort of argument in one domain or another a *Moorean*, and I will call their suspicious interlocutor a *Revisionist*.[1]

Revisionists sometimes say that Moorean arguments violate the philosophical spirit of 'following the argument wherever it leads'. They also sometimes say that Moorean arguments are question-begging or flat-footed (for an overview of these responses, see Lycan [2001]). Keith Lehrer says that the 'commonsensical' nature of a proposition (like 'some things are morally wrong') does not confer it with any special or positive epistemic status (Lehrer 1971: 292). Barry Stroud says that, whatever else we want to say about it, a Moorean argument should not be considered a 'philosophical' answer to the Revisionist's challenge (Stroud 1979: 279). Peter Unger argues that even 'commonsense' beliefs cannot be held in the face of overwhelming evidence, such as that provided by the Revisionist's deductively valid arguments (Unger 1974). Laurence BonJour writes that the Moorean 'approach has the effect of ruling out even relatively weak versions of skepticism absolutely and conclusively from the very beginning of one's epistemological inquiry in a way that is both question-begging and dogmatic' (BonJour 1985: 12). Lastly, Richard Joyce has suggested that 'Moorean epistemology is an affront to the admirably anti-dogmatic tradition of post-Cartesian Western philosophy; better to embrace radical skepticism than endorse such a shamefully missing-the-point methodology' (Joyce 2014: 847).

But Mooreans have suggested that their arguments are justified, at least in part, by their widespread use in philosophy (Kelly 2005). Consider the following: if Zeno's arguments against motion are true then it is false that things move, but things *do*

[1] These labels are not standard. Sometimes the debate is cast as between *Dogmatists* and *Skeptics*, as in Pryor (2000) and White (2006). Other times it is cast between *Mooreans* and *Skeptics*, as in Kelly (2005). Sometimes *revisionists* are instead called the '*Aw, come on!*' *crowd*, as in DeRose (1999). But I use term *Moorean* instead of *Dogmatist* to avoid the latter's pejorative connotations. And I use the term *Revisionist* instead of *Skeptic* because rejecting a Moorean argument need not amount to skepticism.

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move, so Zeno's arguments are false. Certainly we *do* think that things move, even if we might be unable to say *exactly* what is wrong with Zeno's arguments against motion. D. M. Armstrong says that 'perhaps we have still not, after two and half thousand years, got to the full bottom of Zeno's brilliant arguments against the existence of motion . . . But certainly Zeno should not persuade us that things do not move. Neither should anybody else' [1999: 79]. And even if we are unable to locate exactly what is wrong with Zeno's arguments, we are not, and should not be, persuaded by their conclusions. So giving a Moorean argument in response to Zeno's arguments against motion seems to be a legitimate philosophical response. This then leads some Mooreans to accuse Revisionists of metaphilosophical inconsistency. Thomas Kelly, for one, writes that the Revisionist will not succeed against the Moorean because the Revisionist 'is implicitly committed to a methodology for philosophical theorizing that does not withstand scrutiny once it is forced out into the open' (2005: 197). Because Moorean arguments are employed widely in philosophy, and rely on a standard methodology, Mooreans say that it is unfair to complain about their usage in principle. While it can be legitimate to complain about a *particular* Moorean argument (for example, one with a false premise), Revisionists at least have to accept that the Moorean argument *form* (that is, *modus tollens* in response to the Revisionist's *modus ponens*) is legitimate.

So the important question here is whether the Moorean argument is sound. Even if we are suspicious of the argument, rejecting it requires identifying a false or at least highly dubious premise. The obvious target is the second premise: 'but some things are morally wrong'.

Enter the moral error theorists. They deny that there are moral facts, and thus they deny that anything is in fact morally wrong (Garner 1994; Mackie 1977; Joyce 2001; Olson 2014; Streumer 2017). This will have many different entailments, producing many different styles of error theory (such as some about the ontological status of moral facts, others about moral knowledge). And while there are many such accounts, importantly different in their details, they are usually united by something like the following:

> Argument for Moral Error Theory
>
> Our moral discourse and practice commits us to the existence of moral facts.
>
> But there are no moral facts.
>
> Therefore, our moral discourse and practice is in error.

The conclusion of the moral error theory does not explicitly conflict with the Moorean argument. Rather, the conclusion of the moral error theory implies that the claim 'but some things are morally wrong' is false. Take a moral judgment like 'torturing people merely for fun is wrong'. Moral error theorists typically say that this judgment commits us to the existence of moral facts, but they in turn deny that the universe actually contains any such facts. So the moral claim here is false. That is of course the typical 'error' picked out by the moral error theory: our moral discourse and practice commits us to something that does not actually exist,

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in the same way that our discourses about God (according to atheists) or witches (according to nearly everyone) are also about something illusory.

In what follows, let the conclusion of the moral error theory, or more accurately an *implication* of its conclusion, be the revisionary claim. It is *this* claim that the Moorean argument targets. As noted above, the Moorean argument begins with a conditional: if the revisionary claim is true, then some particular Moorean claim is false. In this case, the Moorean claim is the claim 'but some things are morally wrong'. The Moorean argument uses the Moorean claim as its second premise. And by *modus tollens* it follows that the revisionary claim (and, therefore, the moral error theory) is false.

This reveals why this Moorean argument might seem fishy. It is because the Moorean argument centrally relies on a premise that conflicts with the moral error theory, and moral error theorists presumably take themselves to have adequately addressed and dispensed with that central claim. After all, the conclusion of the moral error theory implies that nothing is morally wrong. So when Mooreans not only reintroduce that claim ('but some things *are* morally wrong'), but also use it as their starring premise, it can naturally raise the suspicions of moral error theorists and perhaps noncommitted onlookers as well.

Why then do Mooreans reintroduce that premise? I suggest it is because Mooreans think of that premise as enjoying what we can call *presumptive support*. The way I am thinking of it, presumptive support is a form of epistemic support. The idea here is perhaps familiar from other contexts. For one example, think of the standard presumption of innocence enjoyed by accused parties: one's innocence does not have to be shown (it is presumed), instead it is one's guilt that needs to be established. As Edna Ullman-Margalit notes, nearly 'every text of the Law of Evidence contains a chapter on presumptions' [1983: 144] (see also Jones [1896: chs. 2 and 3]; Thayer [1898: ch. 8]; Morgan [1931, 1933]). What prosecutors have to show is that the presumption of innocence is defeated by the available evidence. But one's innocence is to be taken as the starting point, something that is at least initially agreed to by both sides. In law of evidence, the presumption of innocence might be off if evidence comes in that establishes the accused's guilt. In the Moorean case, it is the initial appearances themselves that establishes the presumption. Though there is a difference here in the way that the presumption is initially established, the important takeaway is that shared methodological starting points regarding assumptions are common enough, as is the acknowledgement that the starting points themselves do not once and for all establish the outcome.

Outside of legal contexts we often invoke presumptions, typically when we presume there are no objections to what we are saying unless something is specifically raised. Ullman-Margalit says that 'there is in presumption a sense of an unquestioned taking for granted, but at the same time of some tentativeness, overturnability' (1983: 143). We can mark this 'taking for granted' explicitly (for example, by saying something like 'if nobody has any objections . . .', where silence is then presumed agreement) but also implicitly (for example, by simply saying something that we presume is shared by our audience). Indeed, this latter, implicit form of presumption seems to be a natural understanding of how

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Mooreans are using Moorean claims: there is an important sense that such claims are thought to be taken for granted.

As I show below, there are commonsensical epistemic principles that explain why some claims (like the key Moorean one) should be thought of as having presumptive support. When Mooreans appeal again to the key premise ('but some things *are* morally wrong') it is because they think of that premise as having the required epistemic support. So it is not as if Mooreans are introducing some heretofore epistemically unsupported premise. But just as we will go into the courtroom thinking that the presumption of innocence can (in principle) be defeated by the available evidence, so too in the Moorean case should we think that the presumptive support in favor of such claims can (in principle) be overturned. As I am understanding them, Mooreans will accept that it is possible for a Moorean claim to be undermined or defeated, and the sticking point is over whether any extant skeptical arguments succeed in doing so.

An alternative explanation is that Mooreans think the issue here is fundamentally comparative. In particular, Mooreans might say that we simply have *more confidence in the Moorean claim* than in any of the premises of any skeptical argument that denies the Moorean claim. And if they have more confidence in the Moorean claim, it would be irrational to believe the skeptical argument. For discussion of this sort of comparative approach, see Kelly [2005]; Enoch [2011: 115–21]; Huemer [2005: 115–17]; Lewis [1999: vol. 2, 418]. But as I explain below, certain skeptical arguments specifically target the Moorean's confidence in the Moorean claim. Because of this, not only is the proposition itself targeted but also the Moorean's confidence in that proposition.

So while the claim 'but some things are morally wrong' might at one point enjoy presumptive support, it need not (and I will argue *does not*) forever retain that support. Indeed, I think that Mooreans must contend with a subtle shift in their key claim's epistemic status. When they reintroduce the premise as a *response* to the moral error theory they are no longer entitled to use it as a premise that enjoys presumptive support. Instead, because they are reintroducing it as a response to a skeptical argument, they are now using it as a premise that needs to have dialogical support. Think again of the standard presumption of innocence in law. While one's innocence can initially be presumed, it would be odd for the defense merely to reintroduce that presumption in the face of compelling evidence of their client's guilt. Like presumptive support, dialogical support is a form of epistemic support. But unlike presumptive support, dialogical support is *not* prima facie support. If a claim has dialogical support, then it has that support *in the face of* arguments to the contrary. By this I mean arguments that have been made, and not merely possible arguments to the contrary. So this means that dialogical support is not something that a proposition simply has or doesn't have, but instead is something that is dependent on the context. Which context? One where a given counterargument has been made. (One important issue here is which counterarguments are relevant, which I explain in detail in section 4. Briefly, the relevant counterarguments are going to be those that purport to undermine the presumptive support for the key Moorean claim.) That is what makes dialogical support importantly different than presumptive support.

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But it is unclear that Moorean claims can enjoy such support. At a minimum, Mooreans have not explained how they do. And this is ultimately what is wrong with the Moorean argument. While the Moorean claim can initially be justified presumptively, if the Moorean claim is used within the Moorean argument it must be justified dialogically. Absent this latter justification, the Moorean claim (within the Moorean argument) is unjustified. This is why the Moorean argument will fare poorly against the moral error theory and fail by its own lights.

Whether or not a claim undergoes a shift in epistemic status, from requiring presumptive support to requiring dialogical support, is subtle but important. I think this shift in the required support has taken place within the dialectic between metaethical Mooreans and Revisionists, and that is precisely what renders the Moorean argument here unjustified. At one point, the Moorean claim is justified because it has presumptive support. At a subsequent point, the Moorean claim requires dialogical support to be justified. So in order to make this shift clear, in what follows I spend some time unpacking the structural features of metaethical Mooreanism. In the next two sections I clarify the key features of the Moorean argument by separating Moorean *claims* from Moorean *arguments* and show the role that the former play in the latter. And, in turn, this shows more clearly the shift that makes the Moorean argument fare poorly against the moral error theory.

2. Moorean Claims

There is an important yet underappreciated difference between a Moorean *argument* and a Moorean *claim*. (See Lewis [1999: vol. 2, 418–45] and Kelly [2005] for a discussion of what they call Moorean 'facts'. See McPherson [2009] for a discussion of Moorean 'arguments'. See also Wittgenstein [1969] for a discussion of what he calls Moorean 'propositions' or 'truisms'.) The two are not often disambiguated, probably because their relationship is straightforward: a Moorean claim is simply one of the premises within a Moorean argument. To wit, the second premise of the Moorean argument ('but some things are morally wrong') is a Moorean claim.

But separating the claims from the arguments serves us well. There are characteristics of each that are in need of examination, and the relationship between the two needs to be clarified. So we will first deal with Moorean claims, which have two key features: (1) they are basic beliefs; and (2) they play a critical role in constraining arguments.

2.1 Basic Beliefs

I will focus on the following two Moorean claims:

> Hands. I have hands.
> Motion. Things move.

Moorean claims like these are typically characterized by their purported *basicness*. Whatever else we believe, we should at least believe *Hands* and *Motion*. These

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function as basic beliefs within our mental economy. To say that a belief is basic is to say that it is universally (or perhaps nearly universally) shared, that it is not inferred from any of our other beliefs, that it is 'self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses' (Plantinga 2000: 84). We can understand basic beliefs as the expected default presumptions that we all share, as claims that are as evident to us as we expect them to be to others. (This understanding of basic beliefs departs slightly from Plantinga's, who often discusses a belief as being properly basic for a particular person. For example, a belief in God can be properly basic for Plantinga, even if it is not for me. In what follows, I do not index basicness to an individual, but instead talk of basicness *simpliciter*.) The reason we should emphasize the sharedness of these beliefs is that, like presumptions in law, it will depend on what our interlocuters are willing to grant us as a methodological starting point. Consider that a private presumption would certainly be unfair, but a shared one would not be. Here again the analogy with legal presumptions becomes relevant. It would be odd if the defense, but not the prosecution, operated under the presumption of innocence. Instead, that presumption is importantly shared between them. So, too, it seems, are presumptions regarding initial appearances shared in typical philosophical debates regarding Moorean claims. These basic beliefs are difficult to shake, but they are in principle capable of being changed. Even so, I do not aim to draw an equivalence between basic beliefs and Moorean claims. While all Moorean claims are plausibly understood as basic beliefs, not all basic beliefs are Moorean claims.

Why think that Moorean claims are basic beliefs in the above sense? Take the claim *Hands*. One reason to think that this is a basic belief is that it is evident to the senses and incorrigible (in the colloquial sense of 'exceedingly difficult to shake'), and one reason to think that it is justified is that we gain that belief via our perceptual experiences (which seem to provide defeasibly justified beliefs). Moore's 'proof of the external world' involved his pointing his hands at each other in order to demonstrate their existence: here is one hand, and here is another. Moore seems to think that this licenses the basic belief *Hands*. Now consider the claim *Motion*. This too is a belief that is not inferred from any of our other beliefs, rather it is an incorrigible belief that is evident from our experiences. Both *Hands* and *Motion* are beliefs that are evident to us, and that we reasonably expect to be evident to everyone else as well. Even when confronted with powerful skeptical arguments, like external world skepticism or Zeno's arguments against motion, it seems that we cannot shake *Hands* and *Motion*.

We do not have to wade into debates on whether (and how) our perceptual experiences can contribute to justified belief. We can instead simply adopt the following commonsense stance towards appearances: for claims like *Hands* and *Motion* 'there is a natural presumption in favor of taking the appearance at face value' (White 2006: 527). The idea that we have a 'presumption in favor of taking appearances at face value' is important going forward, and I characterize this presumption in the following way:

Appearance. It appears to S that P.

Justification. If *Appearance*, then S is (defeasibly) justified in believing P.

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Why accept either *Appearance* or *Justification*? For the following reasons. First, it is uncontroversial that there are things that appear to us: It appears to me that there is a roof over my head; it appears to me (as I expect it does to you) that the universe is more than five minutes old; and so on. That much is straightforward. What *Justification* says is that if it appears to you that the universe is more than five minutes old, then you are (defeasibly) justified in believing that it is. Not *always* justified, or *all things considered* justified, just *defeasibly* justified. So from the mere appearance that *p* you can gain a minimal sense of justification for believing that *p*. If you *did not* accept something like *Justification* then you would really struggle to have *any* justified beliefs. (The notion of a 'presumption in favor of taking appearances at face value' is also similar to what Michael Huemer [2001] calls *phenomenal conservatism*. This view says that if it seems to you that *p*, then you are prima facie justified in believing *p*. For an overview, see Moretti [2015].)

The move from *Appearance* to *Justification* provides what I above called *presumptive support*. As said, this is a form of epistemic support. What makes the support here 'presumptive' is that it is support that one can have *in the absence of further information*— that is, in the absence of defeaters for that appearance. Like the court proceedings mentioned above, one holds such presumptions with an expectation that they remain open to receiving information that might overturn them. You might think of presumptive support as *ceteris paribus* support, or you might think of the justification that presumptive support can provide as prima facie justification. The exact labels are, I think, inessential. What is important is that if or when more information becomes available this presumptive support *might* be defeated—and at a minimum one should be open to assessing *whether* it has been defeated. As Ullman-Margalit suggested, with such presumption's there is "a sense of an unquestioned taking for granted, but at the same time of some tentativeness, overturnability" (1983: 143). So one will need to assess whether the support they thought their belief enjoyed still holds.

2.2 Constraining Arguments

The second feature of Moorean claims is that they constrain philosophical arguments. This is standardly characterized in the following way: because of Moorean claims, there are necessarily limits to where philosophical arguments can lead. In particular, arguments will not be able to lead to the *denial* of a Moorean claim.

The constraining influence of Moorean claims is widely held as one of their defining features. Kelly says that a Moorean claim is a claim that cannot be undermined by a philosophical argument (Kelly 2005: 180). David Lewis says that a Moorean claim "is one of those things that we know better than we know the premises of any philosophical argument to the contrary" (Lewis 1999: vol. 2, 418). Moore himself says that he is justified in believing *Hands* because 'it seems to me more certain that I do know [it]' rather than any skeptical alternative (Moore 1959: 226).

These are all different locutions, but they are compatible. In saying that a Moorean claim cannot be undermined by philosophical argument, Kelly takes

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himself to be identifying a genuine constraint. Whatever else philosophical arguments can achieve, they cannot undermine Moorean claims. It is specifically that *philosophical* arguments are ineffective against Moorean claims, so it is the impotence of philosophy rather than the irreproachable Moorean claim that is most relevant here. When Lewis and Moore say that one knows a claim *better than* an alternative, or that one is *more certain* of it as compared to something else, they are each making an expressly comparative claim. (Huemer [2005] also argues for a comparative claim. He says that of two equally valid arguments, 'the better is the one whose premises are more initially plausible' [Huemer 2005: 116]. In order to reject a Moorean claim, one will therefore 'have to produce premises more plausible than any moral judgments—more plausible than "Murder is wrong", more plausible that "Pain is worse than pleasure", and so on' [Huemer 2005: 117].) This comparative claim is importantly different from what Kelly says, since Kelly does not identify a contrast class of propositions. Nevertheless, the comparative claims that Lewis and Moore each present seem to entail the constraining approach to inquiry that Kelly suggests. We can see this by thinking the following: if one knows some claim C better than not-C, then one can be justified in dismissing an argument for not-C. For example, if I know that 'things move', then I can be justified in dismissing Zeno's arguments to the contrary. This is why Jeremy Fantl, for example, says that 'some of us don't have to feel so guilty about flatly dismissing [an] opponent's arguments . . . [because] flat dismissal of arguments against [controversial] propositions is often legitimate' (Fantl 2013: 36). Indeed, this is why Mooreans often say that philosophical inquiry must be tethered to basic beliefs. It is why Lewis suggests that we should build our philosophical theories around certain fixed points (Lewis 1999: vol. 2, 418–45) and why Kelly reads him as suggesting that 'we should make adjustments elsewhere as needed in order to hold on to [particular] fundamental commitment [s]' (Kelly 2005: 179).

What should we make of the suggestion that this issue is fundamentally comparative, that we need to assess whether one claim is more compelling or intuitive than another? It is obvious that we can have varying degrees of confidence about our beliefs. We might want to accept that our confidence in a given proposition provides *defeasible* justification for believing that proposition. However, it seems less obvious that our confidence in a specifically Moorean claim will always enjoy (or always *continue* to enjoy) justification on those grounds.

3. Moorean Arguments

How do Moorean claims relate to Moorean arguments? In particular, what role does a Moorean claim play within the Moorean argument against moral error theory? To see the role, I will show how a Moorean claim contributes to the conclusion of a Moorean argument. The easy answer is that Moorean claims are simply a premise within Moorean arguments. But this easy answer obscures the special epistemic status that Moorean claims are thought to have. For that reason, I will explore the issue in more detail.

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3.1 Justification and Moorean Arguments

In the previous section, I showed why a Moorean claim is justified: because it is a basic belief, and because basic beliefs can have justification owing to presumptive support. But that justification stands apart from the Moorean argument itself. Instead, it lurks in the background. To bring it out, I introduce a second argument. Recall the initial schema:

> If RC then not-MC.
> But MC.
> Therefore, not-RC.

In the previous section, I showed why we should think that one can have a justified belief in a Moorean claim, such as 'some things are morally wrong'. This is because the Moorean claim can be a basic belief. What I now want to explain is how this information helps support the Moorean argument. Recall:

> If moral error theory is true then it is false that some things are morally wrong.
> But some things are morally wrong.
> Therefore, moral error theory is false.

Here is one way to see the Moorean claim and the Moorean argument relating. One can accept something like the following: if you are justified in believing a Moorean claim, and you can tell that believing the Moorean claim entails that you should believe that some revisionary claim is false, then you are justified in believing that the revisionary claim is false.

Notice how this relies on the *justification* one has for believing the Moorean claim rather than relying on the mere content of the claim itself. Notice too that the justification one has for believing the Moorean claim appears to transmit to the justification one has for denying the revisionary claim. This explanation thus looks like an instance of a common epistemic principle:

Justification Closure. if S is justified in believing P, and S knows that P entails Q, then *ceteris paribus* S is justified in believing Q.

This is justification closure construed as *closure under known entailment*. If, instead, justification closure were simply *closure under entailment*, it would be too permissive to be plausible here. One would, for example, not have to identify that S knows that P entails Q. It would suffice that P entails Q, irrespective of S's knowledge of this entailment. But here I opt for closure under *known* entailment in order to account for ignorance, on the part of S, that P entails Q, or worse, a rejection of the entailment. Consider: if one just accepted closure under entailment, then if S knows P, and if P entails Q, then S could explicitly reject that P entails Q but still be characterized as justifiably believing Q. Closure under known entailment avoids this problem, and is therefore preferable. (Other possibilities here are

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justification under *actual* and *justifiably believed* entailment - for more, see Luper 2016). I think that *Justification closure* can help make sense of how Moorean claims contribute to Moorean arguments. Note how *Justification closure* seems to be lurking behind most Moorean arguments. Moore thinks that he is justified in believing *Hands*. He also seems to (at least implicitly) think that if this justified belief entails that the belief in the skeptical conclusion is false then he is justified in believing that the skeptical conclusion is false. In doing so, Moore takes himself to be justified in denying the external world skeptic's revisionary claim.

Now suppose that *Hands* is indeed (at least defeasibly) justified. What *Justification closure* does is explain how that justification can transmit to another claim, namely the denial of the revisionary claim. And the way it does so is through an argument. Consider the following:

> Justification Schema for Believing Moorean Claims
>
> If S is justified in believing MC, and S knows that MC entails not-RC, then S is justified in believing not-RC.
>
> S is justified in believing MC.
>
> Therefore, S is justified in believing not-RC.

If this is right, then it shows how the Moorean claim helps to support the Moorean argument:

> Justification for Believing the Moorean Claim
>
> If S is justified in believing that some things are morally wrong, and S knows that this entails that moral error theory is false, then S is justified in believing that moral error theory is false.
>
> S is justified in believing that some things are morally wrong.
>
> Therefore, S is justified in believing that moral error theory is false.

When the Moorean argument is supported by this argument the result is a better argument. It is better because it makes explicit how justification is thought to transmit to the conclusion of the argument. Without *Justification closure* in tow, the Moorean argument can look too much like a flat-footed denial of the moral error theory. But Mooreans should try to avoid this appearance. Towards this end, drawing out *Justification closure* and making it explicit is helpful.

So far I have separated Moorean claims (like 'but some things are morally wrong') from Moorean arguments. The reason for this was so that I could identify the important features of each component and the relationship between the two. One important feature of Moorean claims is that they are plausibly construed as basic beliefs. These beliefs enjoy justification because there is a presumption in favor of taking appearances at face value. This makes it plausible to interpret a Moorean claim as having presumptive support. I also showed that one important feature of Moorean arguments is that they use Moorean claims as their star premise. Moorean arguments have another argument lurking in the background, namely

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one that uses *Justification closure* to transmit the justification from the Moorean claim to the denial of a revisionary claim.

And with all of these pieces in place, it sheds light on the following issue: why and how the required epistemic support for the Moorean claim shifts, from requiring only presumptive support to requiring dialogical support.

4. Rejecting the Moorean Argument

At one stage, the Moorean claim 'but some things are morally wrong' can be rightly interpreted as enjoying epistemic support. It is because it certainly appears as if some things are morally wrong that the Moorean claim is (at least initially) justified. This Moorean claim enjoys justification because we have a presumption in favor of taking appearances at face value, without which we would struggle to have any justified beliefs.

But presumptive support by its very nature is open to being defeated, like the presumption of innocence enjoyed by accused parties in court. As I showed above, Moorean claims play a key role within Moorean arguments. I explained that Moorean claims are basic beliefs that enjoy presumptive support because we are licensed to take appearances at face value. But what happens when one is presented with arguments specifically *against* those same appearances, and in particular one's confidence in those appearances? If it seems that some things are morally wrong, and if you are presumptively justified in believing this on that basis, then you need to take seriously attempts that purport to overturn the initial appearances. Just as the presumption of innocence is strong, a defense attorney ought to take seriously the prosecution's case.

I suggest that when our presumptively justified beliefs are challenged in this way, we are forced into a position where we must move on from relying on presumptive support and towards relying on dialogical support. When there is a philosophical argument against one of our presumptively justified beliefs, in engaging with that argument we should accept certain terms of debate. One such term is that we will provide some added defense of our belief. And this, as I understand it, is precisely what the Moorean argument is: it is a philosophical argument against another (revisionary) philosophical argument (namely the moral error theory), an argument for why we can continue to believe the Moorean claim.

4.1 Accounting for Error

To be clear, I am not suggesting that a claim that enjoys presumptive support is once-and-for-all defeated simply because there is a counterargument against it. The mere presence of the moral error theory does not rule out that the Moorean claim can be justified. Rather, I am suggesting that the moral error theory targets the Moorean claim's *presumptive* justification. Since the moral error theory is an argument specifically *against* initial appearances, the Moorean claim can lose its presumptive support. However, it can gain other support, namely *dialogical* support—but only if Mooreans explain why and how.

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If this is right then it shows how a problem arises for metaethical Mooreanism. Moorean claims play a starring role within Moorean arguments, and Moorean arguments purport to transmit the justification of the Moorean claim to the denial of the revisionary claim. But the required epistemic status of the Moorean claim undergoes a subtle but critical shift during this process. The justification gained from initial appearances will no longer do, since the moral error theory targets those initial appearances. And the way in which it targets those appearances proves to be important.

Because they are suggesting that there is a widespread mistake in our moral discourse and practice, moral error theorists seem to owe an account of how and why we have fallen into error. J. L. Mackie said that if the error theory 'is to be at all plausible, [its defenders] must give some account of how other people have fallen into what [they regard] as an error' (Mackie 1977: 17–18). Similarly, Richard Joyce writes that the error theorist 'owes us an account of why we [all] have been led to commit such a fundamental, systematic mistake' (Joyce 2001: 135). So what moral error theorists (indeed, error theorists of all stripes) need to do is *account for the error* that most people are making. Absent this, what is on offer is surely a competing or skeptical account, but not exactly an error theory deserving of the name. Any error theory needs to explain the error.

For his part, Mackie attempts to account for our widespread moral error by probing 'the projection or objectification of moral attitudes' (1977: 42). Echoing Hume ([1888] 1978), Mackie suggests that we are psychologically disposed to project certain qualities onto external sources—not just with respect to moral notions but as a more general psychological phenomenon. For example, we seem to move easily from feeling disgusted by a creepy-crawly insect to ascribing some quality of disgustingness onto that insect itself. When that happens, we have *projected* the quality out into the world, or *objectified* our disgust. If we are indeed disposed to this sort of projection or objectification, then we could expect it to affect our moral thinking as well. We might again move easily from certain emotional responses (such as *disapproving* of an action) to thinking that certain moral properties must really exist (such as that the action *is* wrong).

More recent error theorists have provided different accounts of the error. Both Joyce and Jonas Olson rely on evolutionary debunking arguments (Olson 2014; Joyce 2001). Bart Streumer differs and suggests that what accounts for our error is something fundamentally comparative. If we have on the one hand the claim 'some things are morally wrong', and on the other hand we have the moral error theory, then the reason we have mistakenly accepted the former is that we cannot actually believe the latter, even though the theory is true (Streumer 2017: 174–77). This is because Streumer argues that the moral error theory is actually part of a global error theory about all normative judgments. For my present purposes, the details (about the evolutionary debunking argument, about the possibility of a global error theory, and so on) are inessential. What is important is that each of these authors is attempting to provide an account of our moral error. They see that by accounting for the error, not only will they have targeted initial appearances (that is, the appearance that some things are morally wrong) but they also account for why we all typically believe those mistaken appearances. This one-two punch

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makes the skeptical arguments difficult to fight back against: not only is there a competing theory, that competing theory also explains why their opponents would have mistakenly believed otherwise. This I think becomes extremely relevant as the Moorean tries to reintroduce justification for the once-presumptively-justified Moorean claim—that is, as the Moorean tries to move from the Moorean claim being presumptively justified to it being dialogically justified.

4.2 Dialogical Support

Because a Moorean claim that is presumptively justified and a Moorean claim that is justified dialogically look identical, the shift in required epistemic status can be easily missed. So here is perhaps one way to bring out the distinction between the two types of epistemic support. Let *Presumption* be a claim that is justified presumptively, and *Response* be a claim that is given as a response, that is, justified dialogically:

> Presumption. 'Some things are morally wrong'.
> Response. 'But some things *are* morally wrong'.

Admittedly, the difference here is very subtle. But what is important is that *Response* cannot be justified simply because we have a presumption in favor of taking appearances at face value. It instead must be licensed by something *besides* that presumption. Why think this? Because the moral error theory targets the presumption in favor of taking appearances at face value. In particular, there is now a (purported, but not conclusive) defeater for the presumptive support of the Moorean claim. The moral error theorist will say that, though it certainly appears that some things are morally wrong, one should give up this thought if the moral error theory is not only valid but also sound. And if this is right, then the Moorean claim cannot simply be wheeled in again within the Moorean argument if it relies only on presumptive support.

I think we should accept that *Presumption* is at one point justified. But what the Moorean owes us now is an explanation for why *Response* is *also* justified, that is, why using it as a *response* to a skeptical argument is justified. If *Response* is justified because we infer it from *Presumption* then this merely presumes that the presumptive support for the Moorean claim still holds. And this move is illegitimate in the face of the skeptical argument, because there is a purported defeater for the presumptive support that has gone unaddressed. It would be like the defense attorney merely appealing to the presumption of their client's innocence in the face of evidence of their guilt ('certainly the evidence presented seems to incriminate my client, but recall the presumption that my client is innocent'.) In particular, if the moral error theorist not only provides a skeptical argument but also accounts for the Moorean's mistaken presumption, then *Response* being inferred straight from *Presumption* seems egregiously dogmatic. So it is worth exploring other justificatory strategies for the Moorean claim.

When faced with a revisionary or skeptical thesis, like the moral error theory, some Mooreans might respond in the following way: If we believe the Moorean

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claim ('that some things are morally wrong'), and if we have no reason to accept a competing revisionary thesis, then we are justified in believing the Moorean claim. There is only a slight difference here as compared to the presumptive support provided by our taking appearances at face value, but I think the difference is worth spelling out.

On the one hand, to say that you should take appearances at face value is just to say that you have a default presumption in favor of thinking something is true if it strikes you as true. As stressed, this presumptive support about appearances can provide defeasible justification regarding your beliefs about those appearances. On the other hand, when you say that you are justified in believing a Moorean claim *if you have no reason to accept a revisionary claim*, then you are specifically making a *dialogical* point. In this latter case, you are highlighting that there is a *response* that you think you are licensed to give when confronted with a revisionary or skeptical argument.

It is important to recognize that there is a dialogical process involved in this latter case. If there is justification in the former case it is achieved presumptively. But this justification can in principle be defeated, specifically by an argument that adequately explains away those appearances. When this happens, if justification is going to be regained it will have to be because a claim has newfound dialogical support. This latter form of support is one that can be gained only when faced with arguments or when pressed to give responses.

In light of this, I suggest adopting the following characterization for dialogical support: if it appears to S that p, and S has no reason to suspect that any revisionary or skeptical alternative to p is true, then S is justified in believing p (White 2006: 527. White calls this *dogmatism*. But, as said, in order to avoid pejorative connotations, I eschew the term in favor of *Mooreanism*. And see Huemer [2007] for a more recent defense of phenomenal conservatism, in particular one that explicitly mentions the presence of defeaters.). It is important here that by 'any' alternative we at least restrict this to any argument that has been made. Working from this characterization, I will separate out the following claims:

> Appearance. It appears to S that p.
>
> No reason. S has no reason to suspect that any revisionary alternative to p is true.
>
> Justification*. If *Appearance* and *No reason*, then S is justified in believing p.

The inclusion of *No reason* makes the argument different from the presumptive reasoning that I examined above. What does it mean to say that S has *no reason* to suspect that any revisionary claim is true? Plausibly, that there is no revisionary claim that is rationally compelling. Valid arguments can be rationally compelling; sound arguments even more so. Whether that is the case or not depends on the quality of the arguments involved. So the important point here is whether or not there are epistemic defeaters for a given belief.

If there is presumptive support for a claim then you can easily move from *Appearance* to *Justification*. In the absence of further information, you are

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justified in believing that things are just as they appear to be. But when you include *No reason*, if you are to get *Justification** it must be because you are specifically entertaining or evaluating other possibilities. What needs to be stressed here is the difference between *Justification* and *Justification**, and how it is *No reason* (or the presence of defeaters) that makes the latter different. The former relies on presumptive support, which is something you have in the absence of further information, and the latter on dialogical support, which is something you gain only after the back and forth of arguments. And the reason the difference between *Justification* and *Justification** is important is that it shows how the Moorean argument fares poorly against the moral error theory.

The Moorean claim 'but some things are morally wrong' (or what I am now entertaining as *Presumption*) was justified presumptively. Because it appears to us that some things are morally wrong we are thereby justified in believing that some things are morally wrong. But the similar Moorean claim 'but something things *are* morally wrong' (or what I am now calling *Response*) cannot be justified presumptively. Rather, it must be justified dialogically. This is again because *Response* is being presented, of course, as a *response* to a skeptical argument (namely the moral error theory). So the Moorean must offer a new explanation for why *Response* is justified here, because they cannot say that *Response* is justified because *Presumption* is justified. To do so would be to ignore the fact that *Response* is being given as a dialogical response to a skeptical argument. So *Response* is going to have to be justified in some other way, and not because there is a presumption in favor of taking appearances at face value.

Though this seems like a challenge that Mooreans might be able to meet, there are obstacles awaiting them. Recall that one of the key features of Moorean claims is that they are basic beliefs, and that such beliefs gain justification because we can sometimes believe that things are just as they appear to us to be. But if the Moorean cannot rely on that particular Moorean claim and its attendant justification when confronted with the moral error theory then what *can* they use in their defense? If they double-down and say that *Response* is justified because *Presumption* is justified then they have flatly ignored the moral error theory. They will have mistakenly thought that the presumptive justification still holds. And while this does not rule out that the key Moorean claim *can* be justified, it does rule out that it is justified *presumptively*. So Mooreans will have to provide some other reason to think that *Response* is justified. But this justification has not been provided, and that is why the Moorean argument fares poorly against the moral error theory.

5. Conclusion

One might wonder how far the case I have made against the Moorean argument generalizes. I started out by noting that Mooreans appeal to the widespread use of Moorean arguments. One such Moorean argument that everyone seems comfortable making is in response to Zeno's arguments against motion. As Armstrong says 'certainly Zeno should not persuade us that things do not move. Neither should anybody else' (Armstrong 1999: 79). But in light of my argument

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above, one worry might be that my critique of the Moorean argument against the moral error theory works equally well against this Moorean argument against Zeno. That is, it seems that the Moorean argument against Zeno has presumptive support but lacks dialogical support, and since it is the latter that the Moorean argument really needs it therefore fares poorly against Zeno's arguments.

But I do not think that Zeno has the upper hand here, and in explaining why not, I will draw a more general conclusion about when Moorean arguments are legitimately used and when they seem abused. If one initially believes that 'things move' (that is, *Motion*), then this is presumably licensed by the presumption in favor of taking appearances at face value. But if one uses that judgment within an argument against a revisionary view (like Zeno's arguments against motion), then one cannot be said to be relying on a 'mere' presumption any longer. As I have said, the justification gained from initial appearances will no longer do. So does the Moorean argument against Zeno lack the required (that is, dialogical) support? I think not. While Zeno's arguments against motion do target *Motion*, they do not do so in a way that defeats or undermines those initial appearances. Defenders of this argument have not provided an undermining or debunking account for *Motion*. While they are clearly suggesting that we are making an error in accepting that claim, they have not *accounted for the error*. What explains why we falsely believe that things move? Zeno, as I understand him, is silent here.

The general conclusion that I want to draw is that Moorean arguments fare especially poorly against skeptical arguments that also account for the error. Sometimes it may be enough to remove the presumptive support. Other times it may be that removing presumptive support needs to be coupled by an adequate account of why there is an error in the first place. This later coupling occurs in the debate between moral error theorists and their Moorean opponents. But it is noticeably lacking when it comes to Zeno's arguments against *Motion*. So while one can accept the Moorean argument against Zeno, one should not accept the Moorean argument against the moral error theory.

To be clear about what I take this to demonstrate: It does not show that the key Moorean claim ('but some things are morally wrong') cannot be justified. Rather, it shows that while a Moorean claim can be initially justified (that is, presumptively) because we are licensed to take appearances at face value, when it is given in response to the moral error theory that claim can no longer be justified in that same way. This is because presumptive support only works *in the absence of further information*. But further information has been given, in the form of the moral error theory, which is specifically an argument *against* the key Moorean claim, and so an argument against initial appearances. Some moral error theorists also go further and account for the error, which makes the Moorean's job that much more difficult. So now, if the Moorean claim is going to regain its justificatory standing then it must not be presumptively but rather dialogically. The Moorean must provide some other argument in favor of the justification of the key Moorean claim, because the presumption in favor of taking appearances at face value no longer holds. But Mooreans have not provided these arguments.

In light of that, we should think that metaethical Mooreanism cannot adequately explain *that* we do in fact have successful moral judgments. The view needs to be able

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to explain why Moorean claims are justified. Ordinarily it can do so by noting that Moorean claims are basic beliefs, and that basic beliefs are justified via a presumption in favor of taking appearances at face value. But this avenue of explanation is not available for the Moorean argument. Because the Moorean argument is a *response* to a skeptical argument, it cannot rely on the presumptively justified Moorean claim. To do so would be to ignore flatly that it is being given in *response* to a skeptical argument. So the Moorean owes us an explanation for why we can continue to think that the key Moorean claim is justified. But Mooreans have not offered this explanation, and it is doubtful that they can.

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