G.E. Moore – A Refutation of Skepticism

The Skeptic’s Challenge: Imagine someone who is merely a brain in a vat experiencing life inside of a computer simulation. The brain thinks to itself, “I have hands.” This belief is FALSE. This person does NOT have hands. They’re merely a brain with no body! And the same goes for most of this brain’s beliefs. In the simulation, it may think to itself, “I go to W&M”, “I saw Professor Vance this morning”, “I am eating pizza”, and so on, and ALL of these beliefs would be false. In short, brains in vats have a knowledge problem—they THINK they know lots of things, but they don’t (after all, you can’t know something that is false!). They’re systematically deceived.

Now, we’ve said that no one can rule out with CERTAINTY the possibility that s/he is a brain in a vat. It’s at least POSSIBLE, however unlikely. Well, the skeptic thinks that the mere POSSIBILITY that you are a BIV undermines your ability to know things even if it turns out that you are living in the REAL world and are NOT a BIV.

Why? Consider a court case. You can’t be justifies in convicting Sally for the murder if you haven’t ruled out Sue as a suspect. Right? The skeptic says something similar: You can’t be justified in believing that you’re in the REAL world (and have REAL hands, and eat REAL pizza, etc.) if you haven’t ruled out the possibility that you’re a BIV. And so:

The Argument For Skepticism

1. If you do not know that you are not merely a brain in a vat, then you do not even know that you have hands.
2. You do not know that you are not merely a brain in a vat.
3. Therefore, you do not know that you have hands (nor, in fact, ANYTHING about the things in the world around you; the objects of your experiences).

2. The Moorean Shift: The argument above has a certain form – it is called a “conditional argument”. And conditional arguments have TWO valid forms. Consider:

Argument #1:
1. If someone is old enough to drive, then they are at least 16 years old.
2. Frank is old enough to drive.
3. Therefore, Frank is at least 16 years old.

Argument #2:
1. If someone is old enough to drive, then they are at least 16 years old.
2. Frank is NOT at least 16 years old (rather, he is only 12).
3. Therefore, Frank is NOT old enough to drive.
Notice that both of these arguments are valid. The conclusion MUST follow from the premises. They have the following format:

**Argument #1 (modus ponens)**

1. If P, then Q
2. P
3. Therefore, Q

**Argument #2 (modus tollens)**

1. If P, then Q
2. Not Q
3. Therefore, not P

Both arguments have exactly the SAME first premise. Only premise 2 differs. But, both arguments cannot be right. Only one of them can be.

Philosopher G.E. Moore noticed this, and suggested that, while the argument for SKEPTICISM takes the form of Argument #1 (modus ponens), ANOTHER argument can be offered which takes the form of Argument #2 (modus tollens). Namely, this one:

1. If you do not know that you are not merely a brain in a vat, then you do not even know that you have hands.
2. You DO know that you have hands.
3. Therefore, you DO know that you are not merely a brain in a vat.

So, we have two competing arguments—but only ONE of them can be right. But, the only difference in the premises of the two arguments is premise 2 (for, their first premise is exactly the same). So, we must decide between these two claims:

2. You do not know that you are not merely a brain in a vat.
   OR
2. You DO know that you have hands.

Moore points out that we have zero evidence for or against the first claim. However, we DO have SOME evidence in FAVOR of the second claim. Namely this: **Here is one hand.** **And here is another!** Moore proposes that, whenever we are trying to decide between two conflicting premises, we should go with whichever one we have more evidence for. In that case, we have more reason to endorse the SECOND claim. In short, we are more justified in accepting the second argument rather than the first. This strategy is known as “The G.E. Moore Shift.”

Moore thinks skeptics are confused when they say that, in order to KNOW something, one needs to be able to PROVE it. Moore claims that he KNOWS that “here is a hand” is true, even though he can’t PROVE it (because he can’t prove that he is not dreaming, for instance). But, Moore notes, there are LOTS of things that we know without being able to prove them. For instance, I know that I spilled some coffee yesterday, that Hydrogen has one proton, and that I have two hands—though I cannot prove any of these things.
He writes,

“How am I to prove now that ‘Here’s one hand, and here’s another’? I do not believe I can do it. In order to do it, I should need to prove for one thing, as Descartes pointed out, that I am not now dreaming. But how can I prove that I am not? I have, no doubt, conclusive reasons for asserting that I am not now dreaming ... but that is a very different thing from being able to prove it. ... I can know things which I cannot prove.”

Notice that, unlike Descartes, the emphasis here is NOT on certainty. We MIGHT insist that knowledge requires ABSOLUTE 100% CERTAINTY. But, that seems too strict. If we demanded absolute CERTAINTY for knowledge, then we would know very little. A weaker usage seems more in line with how we use the word ‘knowledge’ in everyday language. People CONSTANTLY take the sort of argument Moore has just provided as the only sort that is ever needed in order to establish some conclusion.

For instance, imagine that you and your friend disagree about whether or not there is beer in the refrigerator. In order to settle the dispute, all that you need to do is open the refrigerator. “Here is one bottle of beer in the refrigerator,” you say, while holding up a bottle. “And here is another. Dispute settled.” What more could possibly be needed?

It would be absurd of your friend to reply, “Yeah, but maybe we’re hallucinating, or an evil demon is deceiving us into thinking that you’re holding beer when you’re not. You can’t rule out the possibility that that’s evil demon beer. So, dispute NOT settled!”

Perhaps the court case example earlier was misleading. It does seem unjust to convict Sally if Sue hasn’t been ruled out yet—but that is assuming that Sue is a SUSPECT; i.e., there is some REASON to think that maybe Sue is guilty! Absent any such suspicion, there is no requirement to rule out the possibility that Sue is the culprit before convicting Sally (otherwise every jury would have to rule out ALL SEVEN BILLION human beings before it could ever justly convict anyone!). Similarly, the belief that you have hands is not justified if you haven’t ruled out the possibility that you’re not a brain in a vat—but ONLY IF we have some reason to think that we ARE brains in vats. Absent such a reason, there is no requirement to rule out this possibility before acquiring knowledge.