

Moorean Facts and Belief Revision, or Can the Skeptic Win? - Thomas Kelly (2005)

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1. Background

Consider skeptical arguments.¹ Why does it seem that the skeptic simply cannot win? Is it because we are dogmatic?

David Lewis writes:

We know a lot... We have all sorts of everyday knowledge, and we have it in abundance. To doubt that would be absurd... It is a **Moorean fact** that we know a lot. It is one of those things that we know better than we know premises of any philosophical argument to the contrary (1999: 418)

...and Kit Fine:²

In this age of post-Moorean modesty, many of us are inclined to doubt that philosophy is in possession of arguments that might genuinely serve to undermine what we ordinarily believe... the Mooreans among us will hold that the very plausibility of our ordinary beliefs is reason enough for supposing that there must be something wrong in the skeptic's arguments, even if we are unable to say what it is. In so far then, as, the pretensions of philosophy to provide a world view rest upon its claim to be in possession of the epistemological high ground, those pretensions had better be given up (2001: 2).

Moorean proposition: Belief in a Moorean proposition is invulnerable to being undermined by means of philosophical argument.³

Examples of Moorean propositions include:

- We know a lot.
- Things move.
- There are many different objects.
- I have hands.

The skeptic gives us an argument that undermines our belief in the external world; or an argument that undermines our belief in motion; and so on. We feel something must be wrong with the argument, so we refuse to budge.

If you're faced with an argument which appears to be flawless, there are two potential explanations of this:

1. The argument is flawless.
2. The argument is flawed, but your cognitive limitations prohibit you from seeing how.

¹ For instance:

1. You are not in a position to know you're not being deceived by an evil demon.
2. If you're to know anything about the external world, then you must be in a position to know that you're not being deceived by an evil demon.
3. So, you can't know anything about the external world.

² See also David Armstrong: "It is a very fundamental part of the Moorean corpus that there is motion. Things move. Perhaps we have still not, after two and a 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)."

³ Kelly goes back and forth between talking in terms of Moorean *facts* and Moorean *propositions*. It's more precise to speak in terms of believing propositions, so we'll stick with that.

Since both of these explanations are available, when faced with an argument which appears to be flawless, we are in a position of performing an *inference to the best explanation*.

So Kelly thinks we can see the Moorean as someone who opts for explanation (2) when faced with arguments against a special class of propositions.⁴

⁴ Kelly says: "Notice that, if this is dogmatism, there is a respect in which it is an unusually modest variety."

2. Policies and Norms

2.1 Policies

But why do Moorean propositions have the status that they do? What are we doing when we declare something a Moorean proposition?

It's clear that to declare something a Moorean proposition is not just to make a prediction. Instead, it's to adopt a kind of **policy**. To declare that P is a Moorean proposition is to endorse the following policy for evaluating arguments: any argument that has as its conclusion not-P should be judged a bad argument.⁵

⁵ Here's an analogy (from Kelly): If you're a conventionalist about math, you think there is no empirical observation which will falsify/disconfirm a proposition of arithmetic. This is not a *prediction*, it's an observation that we simply don't count empirical observations as the kind of evidence which bears on mathematical propositions.

In order for such a policy to be reasonable, it must be generated by some epistemic norm.⁶ What is the relevant norm?

⁶ "...the Moorean thinks that if we possess a sufficiently rich understanding of what are in fact the correct norms of belief revision, we will see that these norms effectively guarantee that it would never be reasonable to abandon one's belief in a Moorean fact in response to a skeptical argument."

2.2 Norms

We could just posit a fundamental epistemological norm which reifies the notion of a Moorean proposition.

MOORE: One should never abandon one's belief in a Moorean proposition on the basis of a philosophical argument.

This wouldn't be a very satisfying answer. (Though Kelly thinks such a move is not without precedent; there is a history of reifying special epistemological entities: e.g., Cartesian foundations, empiricist sense data reports, Kantian synthetic a priori principles, Carnapian linguistic rules, Wittgensteinian hinge propositions...)

KNOWN BETTER: One should never abandon a belief in response to an argument when that belief is known better than (at least one of) the premises of the argument.⁷

⁷ Recall the Lewis quote from the beginning.

On this norm, there is some "known better" dimension along which Moorean facts are so far along that there's no hope of defeating them.

But this "known better" dimension is, in Kelly's words, "extremely obscure".⁸

⁸ From here it's not clear to me if Kelly thinks he is revising the norm to be more clear, or proposing new norms.

MORE PLAUSIBLE: One should never abandon a belief in response to an argument when the proposition believed is more plausible than (at least one of) the premises of the argument.⁹

⁹ Recall the Fine quote. Kelly also attributes this to Lycan (REF?).

Kelly thinks this is just false, if understood literally. To see why: the proposition *there is a set of all sets* is very plausible. It even remains plausible once you learn that it's false. But one should not retain their belief in there being a set of all sets, once they have heard the arguments against it.

MORE CERTAIN: One should never abandon a belief in response to an argument when one is more certain of that belief than one is of (at least one of) the premises of the argument.

Again, we use a notion here, "certainty", which is often ambiguous. This might mean *evidential* certainty or *psychological* certainty. Mooreans seem to mean by it a kind of psychological certainty.¹⁰

So if we go with the psychological variant of MORE CERTAIN, we get:

MORE CONFIDENT: In resolving conflicts among one's beliefs, one should always favor those beliefs of which one is more confident over those beliefs of which one is less confident.

Consider the following decision procedure. Imagine that at t_0 you have an ordered list of all the propositions you believe. They are ordered according to your strength of confidence in each proposition. At t_1 , the skeptic presents you with an argument you have never seen before.¹¹ You then compare the skeptic's premises to the negation of their conclusion, according to strength on your ordered list. Remove the proposition of which you are least confident in from your list.

Given this decision procedure, there's actually two ways of interpreting MORE CONFIDENT.

MORE CONFIDENT (1): In resolving conflicts among one's beliefs, one should abandon one's belief in whichever proposition one was least confident of *immediately prior to becoming aware of the conflict*.

MORE CONFIDENT (2): In resolving conflicts among one's beliefs, one should abandon one's belief in whichever proposition one is least confident of *once one becomes aware of the conflict*.

But each of these is bad.

MORE CONFIDENT (1) fails because to discard a proposition based on your ranking at t_0 is to ignore one's total evidence. Surely the appearance of a new argument for $\neg p$ provides new evidence that should affect your confidence in p !

MORE CONFIDENT (2) fails because it seems impossible to actually follow. This norm, in effect, asks you to decide which proposition to abandon based on which proposition you will abandon.¹²

MORE REASONABLE In resolving conflicts among one's beliefs, one should always favor those beliefs that it is more reasonable for one to think are true given the totality of evidence and arguments to which one has been exposed.

¹⁰ Kelly attributes this view to Pollock and Cruz (REF?). And Soames, at least, thinks this was actually Moore's view. Soames writes: "As Moore saw it, conflicts between speculative philosophical principles and the most basic convictions of common sense confront one with a choice. In any such case, one must give up either one's common sense convictions or the speculative philosophical principle. Of course, one ought to give up whichever one has the least confidence in." (REF?)

¹¹ If the skeptic is any good, the argument will be valid, and all the premises will be on your List. (So the skeptic has at least identified a conflict among your beliefs).

¹² Kelly says "What I am in the process of deciding is exactly how confident I will be that the various propositions are true, now that I have seen the argument... one simply cannot appeal to how confident one will be after the dust settles, for what is at issue in one's deliberations is precisely how the dust ought to settle."

This just seems trivial. And if it is the operative norm, it's disappointing for the Moorean, because it doesn't adequately explain why Moorean facts *in particular* are always favorable to skeptical premises.

3. *Metaphilosophy*

Kelly changes tack now. Some commentators have suggested that the Moorean point is a metaphilosophical one, not one of fundamental epistemic norms.¹³ Kelly is going to argue that the real reason the skeptic cannot win is that the skeptic is committed to a bad philosophical methodology.

¹³ See Soames (2003).

3.1 *Particularism vs. Methodism*¹⁴

Particularist: Starts with judgements about particular cases, and proposes principles which accommodate these judgements. When a judgement conflicts with the proposed principle, this counts against the principle.

¹⁴ The distinction is due to Chisholm (REF?). This has affinity with what Williamson calls "top down" and "bottom up" methodologies, see e.g. Williamson (2013).

Methodist: Starts with a general principle, uses this principle to arrive at judgements about particular cases. When a judgement conflicts with the general principle, this counts against the judgement.¹⁵

¹⁵ Chisholm thinks Hume's commitment to empiricism is an example of Methodism. (Hume justifies his skepticism about inductive judgements via a commitment to empiricism?).

These methodologies lie on a continuum. The extreme particularist gives up on a principle after a single conflicting case judgement. The extreme methodist revises all of their singular judgements insofar as they conflict with their principles. Somewhere in the middle of the two extremes is the method of *reflective equilibrium*: give equal weight to principles and judgements.

Extreme methodism can deliver skepticism. But how far up the continuum can the skeptic go, before methodology turns against them?

Kelly's argument:

Since we have a vast array of common sense judgements which conflict with the skeptical principle, the skeptic has very little room to move up the continuum before their methodology would suggest that the common sense judgements outweigh the principle. The skeptic is essentially "locked in" to being an extreme methodist.

1. But extreme methodism seems to just be a bad methodology.¹⁶
2. And it seems that extreme methodism is *dogmatic*: it's committed to some principle which is held on to no matter what.¹⁷

¹⁶ E.g., Gettier's counterexample to analyses of knowledge; and logical positivist's attempts to formulate an empirical criterion of meaning. The extreme methodist ought to retain their principle, not revise in light of these counterexamples.

So the skeptic cannot win because they're relying on a bad philosophical methodology.

¹⁷ This has mostly dialectical force. The skeptic often charges the non-skeptic with being *dogmatic*. Kelly is turning this criticism back towards the skeptic.