Skepticism and the Case for Withholding

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Introduction

Do we know whether the external world exists? Most people think that we certainly and straightforwardly do, but I am not so sure. I believe that when one considers the experiential evidence and logical arguments on both sides of the discussion from a neutral and objective point of view, there is ultimately no compelling reason to accept the conclusion that we have knowledge of the external world. Further, I believe that there is ultimately no compelling reason to deny this knowledge either. Thus, I will argue that when we examine the question of our knowledge of the existence of the external world in a neutral and objective way, we should conclude that it is best to simply withhold on the matter altogether.

I will begin with a critical examination of one centrally important argument for the position that we do have knowledge of the existence of the external world—the Moorean anti-skeptical argument. Next, I will move on to discuss an historically influential argument for the conclusion that we do not have knowledge of the external world—the Cartesian skeptical argument. For each argument I will assess the scope of and force of the position’s reasoning and explain how each fails to rationally persuade a neutral thinker to adopt its respective conclusion. Finally, I will examine and defend the position that we are left with—a Pyrrhonian-type withholding—and conclude that this radically neutral attitude towards our knowledge of the external world is the right one for an open-minded and objective philosopher.

Part I- Realism

Realism is the position that we do have knowledge of the external world and so can know that it exists. The position benefits from its strong commonsense appeal and intuitive
attractiveness, and Realist arguments attempt to employ these strengths in order to prove their conclusion. G.E. Moore is one such Realist philosopher, and his 1939 “Proof of an External World” is widely considered to be one of the most influential and paradigmatic arguments for external world Realism. In it, Moore distinguishes between objects that are “presented in space”, or merely exist as objects of our perception, and objects that are “to be met with in space”, or exist independently of our perception, and argues that we do know that such a world “to be met with in space” exists.¹ The proof is emblematic of its kind and respected by many to this day, and so it is to this argument that we will turn in order to explore the method, force, and ultimate success of establishing the Realist position. However, I will argue that Moore’s argument rests upon a defect in logic called ‘transmission failure’ and so will fail to compel anyone who approaches the question of the external world neutrally and objectively to accept its conclusion.

Moore’s “Proof of an External World” is famous in part for the apparent commonsense simplicity of his beginning premise, “here is a hand”, and attempts to move from such plain observations to more sweeping and general conclusions about the nature of the external world. Let’s look at a formulation of the argument:

Moore:

Moore-1 Here (holding up left hand) is a hand.
Moore-2 Here (holding up right hand) is another hand.
Moore-3 Therefore, there are at least two hands.
Moore-4 Therefore, there are at least two things to be met with in space.

The question, then, is whether this is a good and successful argument for the conclusion that there are at least two things to be met with in space—an external world.

I think that it is not. In order for an argument to be a successful proof of its conclusion it must meet at least some standard of argumentation. In this paper I will employ the very criteria

¹ Moore, 1939.
that Moore suggests in his “Proof of an External World”: First, the argument must be valid, i.e. the conclusion must follow from the premises. Second, the argument may not “beg the question”, or in other words, the conclusion of the argument may not be included among its premises. Third, and finally according to Moore, the person for whom the argument is a proof must know its premises. Whether this set of standards is complete—and thus that any argument that meets them is therefore a good and exhaustive proof—is still an open question.

I think that Moore’s argument is vulnerable to criticism on several fronts. To begin with, the argument is not formally valid as it is set forth above in “Moore”, and so does not meet even our first standard of good argumentation. Without disambiguation of the nature of the “hands” in the premises—that is, whether they are presented or to be met with in space—the conclusion Moore-4 does not follow from them. Consider the possibility that the hands appealed to in Moore-1, Moore-2, and Moore-3 are presented but not to be met with in space. In this case the premises “here is a (left) hand” and “here is a (right) hand” are true, and yet the conclusion that there exist two objects to be met with in space may be false. For Moore-4 to follow, we must either amend Moore’s original two premises or add a third, new premise in order to include information about the status of the hands in space. Consider the following, now valid, formulation of the argument:

Moore*:

Moore*-1 Here (holding up left hand) is one hand that is to be met with in space.
Moore*-2 Here (holding up right hand) is another hand that is to be met with in space.
Moore*-3 Therefore, there are at least two hands that are to be met with in space.
Moore*-4 Therefore, there are at least two things to be met with in space.

Moore’s conclusion Moore*-4 follows from the newly edited premises, making the proof valid and meeting our first criterion for a good argument.
Unfortunately, the additions needed to establish validity create a problem of their own for Moore’s proof, though admittedly a subtler one. Consider the other two standards of good argumentation that Moore proposed in addition to validity: that the argument doesn’t beg the question and that its premises are known. The second condition seems straightforwardly to have been met—the conclusion that “there are at least two things to be met with in space” is not identical to either Moore*-1 or Moore*-2, even in the new formulation. The third, however, is not so obviously satisfied. Do we know our new premises? While most of us are quick to assent that we know the premises of the first formulation— for what could we possibly know better than “here is a hand”?—I think that we are rightly more cautious about assenting to Moore*-1 and -2— that “here is a hand to be met with in space”. Even if we do know our new premises, we certainly don’t know them as straightforwardly as we knew those of the original and ambiguous argument. Skeptics, for example, might assent to Moore-1 and Moore-2, and yet would not assent to Moore*-1 or Moore*-2. Thus, I think that whether or not some person could know the new premises is a point that one could legitimately push when criticizing Moore. However, I do not think that we need to show that Moore does not know his premises in order to discredit the proof and that instead, there is a better and more accurate way of describing how the argument fails to prove its anti-skeptical conclusion.

The proof fails because it depends upon a kind of circular reasoning. As we observed before, the argument does not formally beg the question, but the premises are still related to the conclusion in an unacceptable way. More precisely, one must have justification for believing the conclusion Moore*-4 in order to have justification for believing the new premises Moore*-1 and Moore*-2, and so one cannot rationally use those premises in order to come to know that
conclusion. This circumstance is an example of a general phenomenon that we will call transmission failure, and it is the most serious challenge to Moore’s proof.

Generally speaking, the term ‘transmission failure’ refers to a logical phenomenon that occurs when an argument’s premises and conclusion are related in the inappropriate way described above. Warrant, which roughly means justification and more exactly means what you need in addition to true belief to have knowledge of a proposition, successfully transmits to an argument’s conclusion when a rational subject would be able to come to know that proposition, perhaps for the first time, based solely upon their knowledge of the premises of a valid inference. Warrant fails to transmit, then, in those situations in which having warrant for the premises requires having warrant for the conclusion. In this situation it would be impossible for a rational person to come to know the conclusion of an argument based upon the argument alone, even if the three criteria that Moore set forth are met. Transmission failure may sound technical or arcane, but transmissible warrant is what allows for the advancement of knowledge where there was none before, and so it is fundamentally important when assessing the force and merits of an argument from a neutral and objective position.

In practice, transmission failure often occurs in situations when information that provides evidence in support of a premise provides warrant for that premise only in cases when there is already warrant for the conclusion. In these cases, because the subject must also have warrant for the conclusion in order for some evidence to provide warrant for the very premise that is meant to establish that conclusion, the subject would be unable to move rationally from the premises of the argument to the acceptance of its conclusion. Consider this example: You are awakened in the night by a strange noise and when you look out the window, you see what

\[2\] Wright, 2005.
appear to be extraterrestrials stealing your pet cat from its cat bed. In the morning, you find that there is a 10-foot crater in your back yard and that your cat is missing. You immediately call your skeptical and philosophically savvy next-door neighbor and tell her that you can prove to her that aliens exist. You make the following argument:

Abduction:

Abduction-1 If aliens have visited earth, then aliens exist.
Abduction-2 Aliens visited earth last night when they abducted my cat.
Abduction-3 Aliens exist.

Your neighbor will probably concede that the argument is valid and that it does not beg the question, but will still claim that it does not establish your conclusion. She will explain to you that the only way that she could have warrant for your second premise—the claim that aliens visited earth last night and abducted your cat—is if she also has warrant for the belief that aliens exist. She does not have warrant for that belief, hence why you called to try to prove it to her, and so she cannot be rationally moved by your argument to accept the conclusion that aliens exist. The argument, she’d explain, is an example of transmission failure.

You might try to resist your neighbor’s criticism by arguing that you have warrant for Abduction-2 independently by virtue of some observational information—namely, the late night catnapping, the crater in your yard, and your missing cat. However, the information you cite as evidence of an alien abduction is consistent with other explanations as well, like the possibility that it was not aliens who took your pet in the night, but cleverly disguised cat thieves. In order to gain warrant for the belief that aliens visited earth and abducted your cat, you need the further information that it was in fact aliens who you saw in the night, created a massive hole in your yard, and took your cat. And in order for someone to have warrant for this, they must at least have warrant for the belief that aliens exist. Your neighbor is right—she could not be warranted
in the belief that aliens visited earth and abducted your cat without already being warranted in the belief that aliens exist at all. The argument truly is an example of transmission failure.

Moore’s proof is another example of this kind of circular reasoning. Consider the new and disambiguated argument again:

Moore*:
Moore*-1  Here (holding up left hand) is one hand *that is to be met with in space*.  
Moore*-2  Here (holding up right hand) is another hand *that is to be met with in space*.  
Moore*-3  Therefore, there are at least two hands *that are to be met with in space*.  
Moore*-4  Therefore, there are at least two things to be met with in space.

Proponents of Moore believe that the only evidence required to establish warrant for their premises is the simple observation of their two hands in front of them. I think that more is definitely required, and the new premises, Moore*-1 and Moore*-2, illustrate this well. Moore’s premises involve not mere hands, but hands of a particular nature—hands that are to be met with in space. And in the same way that a pet-owner’s observations required further knowledge in order to establish warrant for the belief that aliens abducted his cat, the Mooreans’ observations of their hands require further information in order to justify the belief that “here is a hand that is to be met with in space”. Specifically, they must also know that their perceptions of hands (hands presented in space) are indicative of or caused by material hands (hands to be met with in space). Without this information, experiential observations cannot establish warrant for Moore*-1 and Moore*-2. But in order to have warrant for the belief that observations of hands are indicative of material hands, one must also have justification for the belief that material objects exist at all, which is the very conclusion that the proof seeks to establish. Warrant for the premises of Moore’s proof is dependent on warrant for his conclusion, that the external world exists, and so no rational subject could be moved by the premises of the proof to accept its conclusion. Understanding Moore’s proof as an example of transmission failure is a
formalization of the common intuition that even though the argument is not formally question begging, its reasoning is still importantly and unacceptably circular.

Of course, not everyone agrees that Moore’s proof is an example of transmission failure, but the philosophical maneuvers involved in defending this position have unacceptable consequences of their own for what we consider to be knowledge and what a proof is expected to do. James Pryor, for example, argues in his appropriately named paper “Is Moore’s Argument an Example of Transmission-Failure?” that the difference between Moore’s proof and other, actually circular proofs is that Moore’s premise “here is a hand” needs no further justification besides that which we gain through our perceptions.³ Pryor is a proponent of the “liberal treatment” of epistemological claims, meaning that he does not believe that positive justification is required for belief in things like the external world or our hands. Instead, the mere absence of contradictory evidence is sufficient. Pryor explains:

[The liberal treatment] says that for your experiences to justify you in believing things about your surroundings, it only has to be the case that you lack evidence for believing that \( N \) is false. You don’t also need to have some positive, antecedent justification for believing that \( N \) is true. Nor does \( N \) have to actually be true. So long as you lack reasons for believing that \( N \) is false, your experiences are able to give you justification for your perceptual beliefs.⁴

According to the liberal treatment, then, we do not need independent justification for the premise “here is a hand to be met with in space” because we have justification for that belief by virtue of our perceptions and a lack of contradictory evidence. It is important to note, however, that having justification for a proposition is not the same thing as having warrant for it. In fact, if Pryor truly means that our experiences ground mere justification for our perceptual beliefs, then his defense is not responsive to the charge of transmission failure in the Moore case. With this

⁴ Ibid.
narrow understanding of Pryor’s view the belief “here is a hand to be met with in space” is only justified and not warranted by our perceptions and a lack of contradictory evidence. In order to establish warrant for the premise, we would still need warrant for the conclusion, so the argument would still be an example of transmission failure. If Pryor’s liberal treatment is to do any work for the Moore proof, we need a stronger understanding of “justification”. More precisely, experiences must ground both justification and warrant for perceptual beliefs. While Pryor does not defend this claim explicitly in his explanation of the liberal treatment, only this broader sense of justification vindicates Moore’s argument from the charge of transmission failure. With this understanding of the liberal treatment we would have warrant for Moore*-1 and Moore*-2 by virtue of our sense experiences. Therefore no positive justification for the premises would be needed and we would not need to appeal to claims about perceptions of hands being good evidence for material hands or to the existence of material hands in general. Warrant for the conclusion of the proof would not be necessary in order to have warrant for the premises, and we could move freely from Moore*-1 and Moore*-2 to the conclusion that the external world exists. If we adopt the stronger understanding of Pryor’s view, then, it appears that Moore’s proof is no longer an example of transmission failure.

Unfortunately, the problems with this broad understanding of the liberal treatment and its application to Moore’s proof are numerous. To begin with, Pryor’s liberal view of epistemological claims is questionable in itself by any conventional or commonsense understanding of knowledge. According to the required understanding of the liberal treatment, I can know that there are an even number of grains of sand in the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, and I can also know that there are an odd number of grains of sand on that shore. It doesn’t matter that I am unable to provide positive justification for either of these beliefs, nor
that at least one of the two must be false, because in each case I lack perceptual evidence to the contrary. The liberal treatment overgenerates justification and warrant for beliefs that are plainly and intuitively not worthy of knowledge status.

Further, it is unclear whether the liberal treatment will even justify us in Moore’s premise “here is a hand to be met with in space”. The principle allows experiences to provide justification for perceptual beliefs only when there is no evidence that contradicts that belief. If sense experiences are they only kinds of thing that can generate relevant contradictory evidence, then it seems plausible that Moore’s premises are indeed justified. However, this seems straightforwardly not to be the way we treat other perceptual beliefs. In fact, we commonly treat logical and argumentative evidence as adequate reason to question perceptual observations. If we see a bear on a leash in Central Park, for example, a reminder that bears are illegal as pets in New York City and that Newfoundland dogs are the newest fad is enough contradictory evidence to require us to provide some positive justification for that belief if we wish to continue to claim we know it. In the case of our premises Moore*-1 and Moore*-2, skeptical considerations like the possibility that we are dreaming or that an evil demon is deceiving us provide contradictory argumentative evidence for “here is a hand to be met with in space”. Even simply contemplating the logically possible alternative—that “here is a hand that is presented, but not to be met with, in space”—which could be just as eligible for knowledge status as our premises are under Pryor’s view—might count as contradictory evidence. Thus it seems that so long as argumentative considerations qualify as contradictory evidence for perceptual beliefs, which they commonly do, the liberal treatment does not even justify Moore’s premises. Since Pryor’s defense of the proof depended on establishing warrant for the belief “here is a hand” from sense
experience alone, the loss of this justification is lethal. Without it, warrant for the premises again requires warrant for the conclusion, and the proof is still an example of transmission failure.

I think that these examples alone are enough to support the rejection of the liberal treatment of epistemological claims, but in case someone is unconvinced, there are other troubles with Pryor’s defense of Moore as well. For one, and in a striking parallel to the case of transmission failure, it seems as though under the liberal view the only individuals for whom Moore’s argument could be a proof of its conclusion are those who already accept that conclusion, even if they do so without justification. If some person does not already hold the belief that there is a world to be met with in space it is unlikely that they will hold the belief that “here is a hand to be met with in space”. The liberal treatment only provides justification for perceptual beliefs that are already held via sense experiences, and so it cannot establish warrant for Moore’s premises to anyone except individuals who believe Moore*-1 or Moore*-2. All that the liberal treatment allows is for people who do hold an epistemological belief to be warranted in that belief without circularity. Therefore, even if Pryor’s liberal treatment is accepted and can exonerate Moore’s proof from the charge of transmission failure, its consequences for the power and scope of argumentation are crippling. The argument will establish its conclusion only to those people who already accept its conclusion, and so cannot move those who approach the problem from a neutral viewpoint.

Finally, I think that it is worth noting that, if correct, the liberal view does not merely establish a way by which we may be warranted in believing the premises of Moore’s proof without having warrant for its conclusion, it also establishes warrant for that conclusion itself, making epistemological proofs of this kind generally unnecessary. If we need not have positive justification for epistemological claims based on perception, and argument cannot provide
adequate contradictory evidence to prevent knowledge, then we need not have any justification for the belief that the external world exists at all and Moore’s proof is superfluous. Perhaps Pryor would call this a strength of his view—it allows for the acceptance of the commonsense belief in the existence of the external world without positive justification at all—but for those individuals seeking a rational and thoughtful solution to the problem of the external world, Pryor’s view is defective. While the defense of Moore offered by Pryor may succeed in certain narrowly defined situations if one grants a generous understanding of “justification” and is willing to accept the liberal treatment of epistemological views, the consequences of doing so are so destructive and warping to the concepts of knowledge and proof as to be unacceptable.

Thus far we have discussed Moore’s proof as an offensive argument meant to establish the truth of anti-skepticism and have, I believe, shown that it fails to do so. The kinds of criticisms I have advanced against Moore are widely acknowledged to pose real problems for the proof, and yet people still like the argument and think that it does important work for the anti-skeptical position. Many believe that even if the proof fails to establish the truth of its conclusion—that the external world exists—it can instead be understood as a fundamentally “defensive” argument which aims merely to provide a rational means by which an anti-skeptic can resist skeptical arguments.5 It is important to note that even if Moore succeeds on defense, this will not directly help a person assessing arguments for and against knowledge of the external world from an objective and neutral position. Defensive arguments cannot move someone to accept their conclusion for the first time, but since very few people approach the problem of the external world in a neutral way, defensive arguments are a way for individuals who begin with a Realist viewpoint to raise doubts about competing views and bolster their own position. So for

5 Kelly, 2005.
the sake of completeness and fairness to the Realist position I will turn briefly to a discussion of the proof’s alleged defensive merits.

Understood defensively, Moore’s argument does not establish anti-skepticism, but should provide someone who already accepts its conclusion with the means to rationally defend his or her belief. While in the lecture delivered with his proof Moore did seem to suggest that his argument ought to move anyone to its conclusion, even (or especially!) skeptics, his argument is in some ways very obviously defensive in his deliberate appeal to the comparative certainty of his premise to those of the skeptic. Instead of merely allowing the argument to stand on its own, Moore asks us to compare his commonsense premises to those of the skeptical alternatives and to consider whether, regardless of our ability or inability to rationally justify them, we aren’t more certain of our belief that “here is a hand to be met with in space” than we are of skeptical premises and conclusions. Mooreans believe that when it comes down to it, each of us is far more certain of the proposition “here is a hand to be met with in space” than they are of the proposition “it is possible that my perceptions of hands are not caused by material hands,” or something of the like. Further, proponents of the argument think that it this is rational. The ultimate claim of this defensive anti-skeptical variation is that even if the individual premises of the Moorean argument are subject to criticism, upon reflection the critic will find that those dubious premises are more reasonable than the ones employed by skepticism.

A number of philosophers sympathetic to Moore’s aim, including William Lycan\(^6\) and Tom Kelly\(^7\), have delved deeper into what this “more reasonable” claim could entail, and how it could ever be more rational to simply refuse to accept an evidently valid skeptical argument in favor of one’s common sense beliefs about the world. Kelly in particular methodically attacks

\(^7\) Ibid.
the various understandings of “correct norms of belief revision” in order to vindicate the anti-skeptical position from accusations of dogmatism, or the irrational refusal to concede one’s belief, finally arriving at the conclusion that the Moorean’s most defensible position is indeed a defensive one, though not one that Moore ever took explicitly. Because of the radical subjectivity of a norm like “more reasonable than” when applied to epistemological claims, Kelly argues that instead of comparing the relative reasonableness of the beliefs and arguments of skeptics and anti-skeptics, we should compare the relative reasonableness of their underlying methods of philosophy. This, Kelly believes, provides the clearest evidence for the superiority of anti-skepticism. He claims that the philosophical methodology employed by the skeptic in the process of arriving at his or her conclusion is at least radically unconventional, if not irrational, and that therefore Moore’s proof succeeds defensively by demonstrating a particular way in which Realism is superior and preferable to skepticism.

To illustrate the methodological flaw in the skeptic’s position, Kelly first describes the two distinct methodologies, or ways in which to arrive at philosophical conclusions, that form the poles of the spectrum of possible methodological positions and then describes where the skeptic and anti-skeptic lie on the scale. According to Kelly, the spectrum is anchored by hyper-particularism, or the methodology that places weight entirely upon judgments about particular cases in order to move to more general principles, and hyper-methodism, the methodology that begins first with a general principle and only then makes judgments about cases in accordance with that principle. At either pole the methodology gives virtually no weight at all to its secondary factor—general principles in the case of hyper-particularism, and particular cases in the case of hyper-methodism—and so neither, he points out, is appropriate in common practice. In fact, Kelly argues, both extremes are unreasonable in their refusal to consider contributions
that one factor can make to the other in philosophical deliberation, and so both ought to be avoided in favor of a more balanced and reflective methodology.

Kelly’s major criticism of skepticism comes when he explains that neither hyper-particularism nor any of the more moderate and reflective methodologies are conducive to the skeptic’s reasoning. He explains that our commonsense judgments about cases are so at odds with skeptical principles that the only methodology that could produce or defend the skeptic’s position must place no weight at all upon our judgments about particular cases. Skeptics are really hyper-methodists, privileging a general skeptical philosophical principle above all case-by-case judgments that contradict it, like the belief that “here is a hand”. This, Kelly argues, is dogmatic, which is exactly what skeptics have been accusing Moore and the anti-skeptics of being.

To illustrate the radical unreasonableness of the skeptic’s philosophical methodology, Kelly employs two historical cases in which even methodist methodologies were forced to reject a general principle when confronted with a substantial challenge by cases. One such example is Gettier’s refutation of the once prevalent and still intuitively plausible theory that knowledge is justified true belief. When confronted with particular cases in which the predictions of the principle conflicted with our judgments about those cases, Kelly reminds us that the philosophical community dismissed the principle, not the judgments. This, he argues, was the rational thing to do. Likewise the logical positivists were forced to abandon their quest for a coherent version of the verifiability criterion of meaning when each attempted principle rendered verdicts about the meaningfulness of sentences, like those of science, that are strongly at odds

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with our judgments about those sentences. In both cases, Kelly emphasizes that when the philosophical community was presented with irreconcilable conflicts between principles and our particular judgments, they have always decided in favor of the particular judgments. Thus to cling to the principle of skepticism, despite our judgments about things like hands and everyday objects, is at least unprecedented and according to Kelly, unreasonable. So while Moore’s proof does not succeed in convincing the skeptic to accept its anti-skeptical conclusion, Kelly believes that in an important way it does show us that ultimately, the Realist position is more reasonable than the alternative. Realists employ both judgments about cases and general principles, he would say, and therefore the position is to be preferred. If Kelly is right, he now has the tools to rationally resist skepticism and retain his anti-skeptical beliefs, and thus Moore succeeds on defense.

Kelly’s distinction between the offense and defense interpretations of Moore’s argument offers a good response to critics of Moore who argue that because the proof fails to convince a skeptical or neutral audience it does nothing to help the cause of the anti-skeptic. His argument for the “more reasonableness” of the anti-skeptic’s methodology, however, is less powerful. Kelly bases his criticism of skeptical methodology on the assumption that skeptical conclusions are as inconsistent with our judgments about cases as the Gettier and Logical Positivists’ conclusions were. I don’t believe that this is the case. While denying the original and ambiguous premise of Moore’s argument, “here is a hand”, may be radically unacceptable to our commonsense judgments about the case when we see a hand, this is not precisely what skeptics do. Instead, skeptics deny, “here is a hand to be met with in space”, which is nowhere near as offensive to our judgments as the conclusions generated by Gettier or Logical Positivism.

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9 Ayer, 1952.
Further, these skeptical conclusions do not actually require the use of a hyper-methodist methodology. All rational philosophical conclusions—methodist, particularist or in between—require the consideration of both perceptions about cases and principled standards, and Kelly agrees that this is appropriate so long as those standards are formed by reflection on cases. Denying the proposition “here is a hand to be met with in space” does not appeal to some obsolete philosophical principle, but instead to the idea or standard that perhaps perceptions are not always indicative of reality. This standard is a product of our judgments of cases in which our perceptions were proven flawed or when our perceptions were the result of dreams, not reality. Likewise, assenting to the proposition “here is a hand to be met with in space” appeals to the standard or “principle” that our perceptions are good indicators of reality, and this too was formed by judgments of particular cases. There is nothing wrong with either kind of reasoning, and so for Kelly to dismiss skeptics as methodologically unreasonable is premature and unwarranted. To be charitable, Kelly was working with the invalid formulation of Moore’s argument and its premise “here is a hand”, and the denial of this proposition is not a conclusion that flows easily from reflective consideration. That said, Kelly’s defense of Moore, even when understood as a fundamentally defensive argument, does very little for the attempted proof. It neither provides a compelling reason for a neutral audience to accept its conclusion nor provides much justification for the refusal to concede already-held Realism. It does, however, provide some evidence for the claim that it is plausible that we know the external world, and perhaps even that it is more plausible than that we don’t.

So let’s recap: Moore’s proof fails to establish its Realist conclusion because of the argument’s subtle circularity. We showed that neutral observers could never be moved by the proof to accept its conclusion and gain knowledge of the external world because it is an example
of transmission failure: to have warrant for the premises of the argument one must have warrant for its conclusion—which is the very question the neutral withholder seeks to answer. Even when understood as a defense of Realism instead of an offensive proof of it, Moore fails to do much to bolster the position. Ultimately, it does not appear that Moore’s argument can be used to move from withholding to the rational acceptance of the Realist position, and so an objective and neutral philosopher must resist its conclusion and remain withholding on the question of the existence of the external world.

**Part II—Skepticism**

Philosophical skepticism takes many forms, but in the context of our discussion Skepticism is the position that we do not have knowledge of the external world. Since the previous section of this paper illustrated how Realist arguments like Moore’s “Proof of the External World” fail to establish their conclusion, Skepticism is a plausible alternative position for an open-minded thinker to consider. Of course, the belief that we do not have knowledge of the external world has many counterintuitive consequences, like that we don’t know we have hands, for one example, or that we don’t know if the material objects “chairs” exist, for another. In order for a Skeptical argument to successfully compel someone to accept its position, then, it will need to be powerful enough to overcome these commonsense doubts. It seems reasonable to expect a proof of Skepticism to establish its conclusion by the same standards of Moorean proof that were required of the Realist argument.

While there are lots of philosophers who endorse Realism, very few people personally endorse Skepticism, and yet the position remains present and formidable in philosophical discussion because of the apparent strength of Skeptical arguments. The most plausible and common foundation for Skepticism is the fallibility of the human senses. Made famous by René
Descartes’ 1641 treatise *Meditations on First Philosophy*, this “Cartesian Skepticism” moves from the simple observation that we may be deceived in various ways to sweeping doubts about the extent and limitations of our knowledge of things like the external world.\(^\text{10}\) In Section II we will focus on one representative Cartesian-style argument for Skepticism in order to establish the relative merits of the position and to explore whether a neutral thinker should be moved to accept its conclusion.

The Cartesian skeptical argument attempts to show that we do not have knowledge of the external world by combining the observation that our senses are fallible with the general epistemic principle that if we have genuine grounds for doubting something, we do not know that thing. Keep in mind that while Skeptical arguments are often presented in the first-person voice, the particular subject engaging the proof is an arbitrarily chosen agent and so its conclusion may be generalized. Consider the following formulation of a Cartesian-style argument when P stands for “empirical propositions about the external world”. Examples of empirical propositions of this kind are “here is a hand to be met with in space” or “I am sitting in a (material) chair”:

\[
\text{Cartesian:}
\begin{align*}
\text{Cartesian-1} & \text{ I have genuine grounds for doubting P.} \\
\text{Cartesian-2} & \text{ If I have genuine grounds for doubting P, I don’t know P.} \\
\text{Cartesian-3} & \text{ I don’t know P.}
\end{align*}
\]

With the proposed understanding of P, then, the conclusion of the argument is “I do not know empirical propositions about the external world”.\(^\text{11}\)

Let’s see if “Cartesian” succeeds in establishing its conclusion according to the standards of Moorean proof that were employed against the Realists in Part I: Straightforwardly, the argument is valid and its conclusion is not identical to either of its premises so it does not beg the

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\(^{10}\) Descartes, 1647.

\(^{11}\) Klein, 2005.
question. Further, warrant for the premises does not require prior warrant for the conclusion, so the argument does not suffer from transmission failure. It is unclear, however, if the argument meets the final criterion—that the premises are known. Both Cartesian-1 and Cartesian-2 are at least plausible, but merely plausible premises do not reach the standard required for proof. If the argument is to be a proof of Skepticism, we must establish that both Cartesian-1 and Cartesian-2 are known.

Before we can assess the premises, we need to say what we mean by the phrase “genuine grounds for doubt”. One hypothetical understanding which both aligns with intuition and is generally favorable to Skepticism is that an item “c” is genuine grounds “g” for doubting some belief “B” when: 1) if c is true then B is not known and 2) c is possible in the sense that it is consistent with what is known. Consider this example: You are at the Potawatomi Zoo observing a creature in an enclosure labeled “zebra” and understandably hold the belief that the observed animal is a zebra. The scenario in which the animal is actually a painted mule is genuine grounds for doubting the belief that the observed animal is a zebra because if c is the actual case, then B is not known: If the animal is a painted mule, then you don’t know that the animal is a zebra. On the other hand, the scenario in which the animal in the enclosure is a mammal is not genuine grounds for doubting your belief that it is a zebra because even when this scenario is the actual case—the animal in the enclosure is a mammal—you can still know that it is a zebra. Further, it seems that in order to be genuine grounds for doubt, a case must be possible in the sense that it is consistent with what is known. For example, if we know that the horse that played Mr. Ed in the 1960’s television sitcom Mr. Ed is dead, then the case in which the animal in the enclosure is the horse who played Mr. Ed is not genuine grounds for doubting

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12 Dretske, 1970.
that the animal is a zebra because that case is not possible in the relevant sense. Mr. Ed being in an enclosure at the Potawatomi Zoo is inconsistent with the assumed knowledge that Mr. Ed is no longer alive. The application of the proposed understanding of genuine grounds for doubt appears to confirm our intuitions in particular cases, so I will consider our knowledge of Cartesian-1 and Cartesian-2 with this hypothetical understanding.

The first premise, Cartesian-1, is the claim that I have genuine grounds for doubting empirical propositions about the external world. There are several ways in which a Cartesian might try to support this statement, and broadly they fall into two categories: bases for specific doubts about particular propositions and bases for more general doubts about large classes of propositions. The more modest way to defend the premise that we have genuine grounds for doubting empirical propositions is to provide case-specific reasons for doubting each proposition individually. Most often, this sort of defense appeals to the common and everyday fallibility of our senses. For example, a Skeptic might argue that the case that your eyes are deceiving you into seeing a mirage is genuine grounds for doubting the empirical proposition “I see a water hole in the desert”. If your eyes are deceiving you, then you do not know that you see a water hole. In this case, the unreliability of sense perceptions does provide genuine grounds for doubting an empirical proposition about the external world, but only in this one specific case. In order to defend the principle that we have genuine grounds for doubting all empirical propositions about the external world in this way, the Skeptic would need to either provide situation-specific genuine grounds for doubting each and every proposition of this kind or provide a convincing formula for generating them. It seems as if the everyday sorts of sense deceptions provide only specific grounds for doubting particular propositions, and if this were the only support available for Cartesian-1, we could not claim to know it. While it is plausible
that there is a case-specific reason to doubt each of our beliefs about the world, we don’t know that this is true. It is also plausible that for some possible case our sense perceptions really are trustworthy, like in the empirical propositions “My cat is spotted” or “I am approximately 1.6 meters tall”. Therefore the everyday sort of sense-deception provides only grounds for specific doubts, not for the general principle, and cannot establish knowledge of Cartesian-1.

Fortunately for Skeptics, there are ways to provide a more general basis for doubting our knowledge of empirical propositions about the external world. One famous example raised in Descartes’ Meditations is the possibility that you are dreaming. This is genuine grounds for doubt because in the case that you are asleep and dreaming, you do not know your empirical beliefs. For example, if you are dreaming of an alien in your backyard, you do not know the empirical proposition “there is an alien in my yard”, despite the apparent clarity of your perceptions. Even if there is actually an alien in your backyard while you are asleep and dreaming of that alien, you still do not know the empirical proposition “there is an alien in my yard”. So if it is the case that you are dreaming, then you do not know empirical propositions about the external world. The dream possibility appears to be a genuine grounds for doubt that applies to empirical propositions generally instead of in a proposition-specific way. An objection to the claim that the dream possibility generates genuine grounds for doubt is that the case is not consistent with something that we know—namely, when we are and are not dreaming. However, I don’t think that this objection sticks. Certainly there are at least some times when we are asleep and dreaming but do not know it, and there is no way to rule out the possibility that the present moment is not one of those times.

Even if we do always know when we are and are not asleep, there are other ways to raise general doubts about our empirical beliefs besides the dreaming possibility. Consider the
infamous “evil demon” possibility, which is the case in which an evil demon is controlling all of our thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions. The demon is all-powerful and his deception is complete, so we could have no awareness of his involvement. The external world may not exist at all in this case, but even if it does exist our experiences are entirely independent from it. The evil demon possibility appears to be genuine grounds for doubting empirical propositions about the external world generally because if it is the actual case, then we do not know any of them. In this scenario each perceptual belief is caused by the demon, not by some feature of the external world. Further, the evil demon hypothesis is consistent with what is known because of the special and maximally well-chosen characteristic that we cannot know that it is false. Since both the dream and evil demon possibilities appear generate genuine grounds for doubting empirical propositions that apply to generally, Cartesian-1 is not merely plausible, but it is known.

The only barrier to establishing a proof of Skepticism, then, is showing that the second premise is also known. Cartesian-2 is the plausible claim that if I have genuine grounds for doubting something, then I do not know that thing. The proposition is plausible because of the intuitive connection between certainty and knowledge; it seems as if we are uncertain about something, this is precisely when we’d say that we don’t know it. But as we already stated, that a claim is plausible does not mean that it is true, and more relevantly does not mean that it is known. While it is difficult to envision a scenario in which we have genuine grounds for doubting something and yet still know it, it is not impossible that such a counterexample exists. So long as our basis for accepting Cartesian-2 is the case-by-case evaluation that the principle does in fact hold, it does not seem that we can move from plausibility to knowledge of that premise. Further, it appears that the premise is self-refuting. If we can establish knowledge of Cartesian-2 then it is true that if there are genuine grounds for doubting a proposition then we do
not know it. But consider the possibility that an evil demon is deceiving me into believing that I know Cartesian-2, when in reality I do not. This scenario generates genuine grounds for doubting Cartesian-2, and according to that very premise, having these grounds for doubt means that I do not know it. It appears that it is impossible to know the Skeptic’s second premise, which means that the argument fails to meet the Moorean standards of proof.

Finally, even if I am mistaken in the argument I’ve given for why we do not know Cartesian-2, the attempted proof suffers from another major flaw. Despite their plausibility, the content of the premises prevents us from having knowledge of both of them. We may know Cartesian-1 or Cartesian-2, but not both. This phenomenon occurs for the same reason that I argued Cartesian-2 could not be known. If it is, then it is true that when we have genuine grounds for doubting a proposition, we do not know that proposition. Application of the Cartesians’ evil demon possibility shows us that there are indeed genuine grounds for doubting at least Cartesian-1 and maybe both premises. In the case that an evil demon is deceiving me, I may be tricked into believing that I have genuine grounds for doubting empirical propositions. This is genuine grounds for doubting the premise Cartesian-1, so when Cartesian-2 is known Cartesian-1 cannot be. Thus, even if Cartesian-2 is not self-refuting, when it is known Cartesian-1 can’t be known. The argument’s premises cannot both be known. And if I cannot know both premises, then the argument fails to prove its conclusion by the same standards employed against the Realist.

Ultimately, then, it appears that the Cartesian Skeptical argument also fails to establish its conclusion by Moorean standards of proof. The premises are both plausible, to be sure, and they raise important doubts about the Realist position, but like the defensive understanding of Moore’s proof this observation does very little to further the Skeptical position. The argument is
not a successful proof of the conclusion that we do not have knowledge of the external world so our neutral philosopher will not be compelled to adopt Skepticism.

Part III—A Defense of the Withholding Position

Sections I and II show that typical arguments for both external world Realism and Skepticism fail to prove their conclusions by the standards required for a Moorean proof. Neither can move a neutral and uncommitted philosopher to the rational acceptance of its conclusion. It seems, then, that perhaps the proper attitude for the objective observer of the debate to take is to withhold on the question of our knowledge of the existence of the external world completely. In the final section I will explain what the withholding position entails and its historical foundations in classical Pyrrhonism and argue that it is indeed the best and most reasonable conclusion for the open-minded thinker to draw regarding her knowledge of the external world.

To withhold on the question of whether we have knowledge of the external world means to adopt no position on the question, positive or negative. Thus, a withholder neither accepts nor denies that she knows the external world. The position is often lost under the banner of Skepticism because of the withholder’s denial of Realism, which is the dominant epistemological philosophy, but it is subtly and importantly different from the kind of Cartesian skepticism that we discussed in Section II. The Cartesian skeptic denies that we have knowledge of the external world, which requires a positive commitment to the negation of the Realist claim, but a withholder makes no positive commitments. The nature of the position can be better understood by examining the philosophy of its earliest proponents—the Pyrrhonian Skeptics—, which can be traced back to the writings of Sextus Empiricus in the 2nd century. While a complete survey
of Pyrrhonist philosophy is obviously outside of the scope of this paper, I will explain their general epistemic policy and its consequences for their attitude towards knowledge of the external world in order to provide a fuller understanding of the withholding position.

Pyrrhonian Skeptics thought that in order to believe some proposition in the sense required for knowledge a person must adopt a kind of “pro-attitude” towards that proposition, which they called assent. 13 So while someone might believe some proposition passively, if they do not actively assent to it then by the Pyrrhonian standard they do not know it. Pyrrhonians viewed assent to a proposition as a signal that the matter had been fully and finally settled, and so they withheld assent to any proposition about which one could legitimately disagree. 14 When a proposition was uncertain or “non-evident”—like when there is evidence both for a proposition and its negation—a Pyrrhonian withheld assent and so did not know that uncertain proposition. In the case of the empirical propositions of the external world debate like “here is a hand”, Pyrrhonians viewed the matter as uncertain or non-evident, withheld assent, and so did not know them. Importantly, though, denying a proposition is equivalent to assenting to that proposition’s negation, and since the negations of empirical propositions like “here is a hand” are likewise non-evident, Pyrrhonians did not assent to these either. Withholding assent to both empirical propositions and their negations made Pyrrhonians withholders on both the first-order issue of the propositions themselves (i.e., they did not know “here is a hand”), but also on the higher-order issue of our general knowledge of empirical propositions. Because they withheld assent to all propositions about the external world, they did not know it, and in this way, the Pyrrhonians truly were skeptics. But importantly, they did not not know the external world either. Empirical

13 Klein, 2005.
14 Ibid.
propositions about the external world simply did not meet the strict standard of certainty that Pyrrhonians required for assent, so they withheld on the matter altogether.

It seems that the open-minded and neutral thinker of today finds herself in a similar position. Moore’s attempt to prove Realism failed to establish that we do know empirical propositions about the external world, and the Cartesian-style Skeptical argument failed to establish that we do not know empirical propositions about the external world. Since neither P nor ~P is established with any available argument, perhaps like the Pyrrhonians we should withhold. How we would arrive at this conclusion, though, is unclear. The Pyrrhonians never offered a proof of their position for the obvious reason that proving a conclusion requires the sorts of committed knowledge claims that Pyrrhonians avoided making. A proponent of withholding might try to argue that declining to commit to either Realism or Skepticism does not constitute an equivalent commitment itself, and thus that it does not require an equivalent defense. I think that there is something to this claim, but for the sake of fairness we ought to at least consider withholding a third competing position on the question of our knowledge of the external world and begin with its evaluation by the same standards expected of the Realists and Skeptics. Perhaps there is a proof of the withholding position that will compel a neutral philosopher to accept its conclusion by meeting the Moorean standards.

An argument for withholding must establish that we should withhold on the question of knowledge of the external world. Unlike the conclusions of the previous two arguments, which made direct claims about our knowledge of empirical propositions, the conclusion of an argument for withholding instead demands that we take a certain attitude towards that knowledge. Consider the following argument for withholding, where Q is understood to mean “I have knowledge of the external world”:
Withhold:

- Withhold-1 It is plausible that Q.
- Withhold-2 It is plausible that \( \neg Q \).
- Withhold-3 If it is plausible that Q, and it is also plausible that \( \neg Q \), then the proper epistemic position is to withhold on whether Q.
- Withhold-4 The proper epistemic position is to withhold on whether Q.

The argument should be evaluated by the same Moorean standards of proof employed in Sections I and II: While Withhold is valid and its conclusion is not identical to any of its three premises, whether we know those premises by the same strict standards we expected of Moore* and Cartesian will need some consideration. Plausibility is a fairly vague requirement, but I’d suggest that we understand it to mean something like “possible, consistent with what is known, and supported by at least some evidence”. According to this understanding of plausible, Withhold-1 and -2 look promising. It is possible that I have knowledge of the external world, since the proof of Skepticism failed to establish its conclusion, and it would be consistent with what is known. And while Moore’s proof failed, the defensive understanding of the argument does provide some evidence for the Realist position by explaining why the Realist methodology is reasonable. So Withhold-1 appears to be known. Likewise, Withhold-2’s claim “It is plausible that I do not have knowledge of the external world” is possible since Moore* failed. Further, the Cartesian dream and evil demon possibilities both illustrate that \( \neg Q \) is possible and provide evidence to support it. Hence, it looks like Withhold-2 is also known.

The third and final premise, however, is problematic. Withhold-3’s claim “If it is plausible that Q and also plausible that \( \neg Q \), then the proper epistemic position is to withhold on whether Q” is plausible, and is even the central tenet of Pyrrhonist philosophy, but neither of these features is relevant in our evaluation of it. The principle conforms to our reasoned considerations of cases, though, and it appears that any problems raised by apparent
counterexamples to the principle can be mitigated by appeal to the “proper epistemic position” clause of the premise. Consider the following counterexample to the general principle:

Graduation:

It is plausible that I will graduate in May 2009. It is also plausible that I will not graduate in May 2009. However, while both scenarios are possible and consistent with what is known since I have not performed a recent degree audit, there is far more evidence supporting the scenario in which I do graduate. Therefore, the proper position for me to take regarding the question of whether I will graduate this May is that I will graduate.

Our commonsense judgment about the proper position to take differs from the judgment of the principle in this example. Because the evidence is weighted heavily in one scenario’s favor, we might say that it is proper to continue to believe the more likely possibility. However, this is a sloppy interpretation of the principle, which does not make claim about what attitude towards the situation is most favorable or even most practical, but instead about what is proper epistemically. If the scenario in which I do not graduate in May 2009 is possible, consistent with what I know about my academic standing, and has some sort of evidence to support it, I may choose to continue to believe I will graduate but doing so is not the philosophically correct position. When my consideration of the scenarios is purely rational and free from the influence of my desires, my intuition generates a different conclusion: that epistemically it is best to withhold on whether or not I will graduate in May 2009, at least until I am able to establish that the scenario in which I do not is either impossible, not consistent with what I know, or has no evidence to support it.

It seems that objections to Withhold-3 in the context of the external world knowledge debate will be similar. Realists might like to say that while both Q and ~Q are officially
plausible by our understanding of the term, Q is supported by far more evidence, and so the proper epistemic position would not be to withhold on whether Q. I think that this objection is not effective for the same reasons that it failed in the Graduation example. It may be more practical or desirable not to withhold on whether we have knowledge of the external world, but strictly speaking doing so is the epistemically proper position. However, my argument does not necessarily establish that Withhold-3 is known. If we hold the argument to the same standards we expected of Moore and the Cartesians, then in order to know Withhold-3 there must be some independently known basis of support that provides warrant for it, not simply a case-by-case assessment that the principle holds. Thus, I don’t think that the premise is known, which means that Withhold fails to meet the Moorean standards for proof.

Further, it seems that all three premises are vulnerable to genuine grounds for doubt. This objection is not lethal to the withholder because the Skeptical claim that if we have genuine grounds for doubting a proposition then we do not know that proposition does not appear explicitly in their argument. However, we noted in Section II that the principle is at least plausible and possibly known, and if it is true, then we do not know any of the three premises of the argument. It is possible that an evil demon could be deceiving us into thinking that both Q and ~Q are plausible, or that when this occurs we should withhold on whether Q. This criticism does not discredit the withholder’s proof on its own since the Skeptical principle may not be known, but if we are to hold the argument to the same stringent standards that we expected of the previous two positions, we must acknowledge that is possible that we do not know any of its premises. Because of the potential doubts and inability to establish that Withhold-3 is known, the argument for withholding ultimately fails to establish its conclusion by Moorean standards of proof.
This looks like a real problem. According to the standards I’ve employed, none of the positions on our knowledge of the external world has succeeded in providing the uncommitted thinker with an all-things-considered compelling reason to accept its view. Could it be that there is no best position, and instead that what we believe about our knowledge of the external world is arbitrary? It appears that the objective philosopher is trapped. Fortunately, I do not think that the prognosis is so bleak. Even though there is not a proof of any of the positions according to Moorean standards, maybe there is still a best position that we can know through reason. At the beginning of the attempted proof of withholding, I mentioned the possibility that the Pyrrhonian-inspired position was importantly different from both Realism and Skepticism, and that perhaps a different kind of argument could suffice to compel a neutral thinker to accept it. In fact, I believe that there is a successful, though informal, argument for the conclusion that the open-minded thinker should withhold. The informal argument for withholding is not a proof and so will not meet Moore’s standards for argumentation, but it will provide an all-things-considered compelling reason for a neutral and objective philosopher to withhold on the question of her knowledge of the external world.

The informal argument compels its audience to withhold by demonstrating that both Realism and Skepticism are unacceptable in a way that withholding is not. It is tempting to defend this claim with a simple and indirect argument by elimination, but quick consideration of this route will show that it is inadequate. For the sake of discussion, let’s examine what this naïve argument by elimination would involve: The argument would begin with the observation that with respect to our knowledge of the external world, there are only three possible positions one may take: assent to the proposition that we do know the external world, as Realists do; assent to the proposition that we do not, like Cartesian skeptics; or assent to neither proposition
and instead withhold on the question, like Pyrrhonians. It would then proceed to claim that we eliminated Realism and Skepticism as viable positions for the neutral thinker to adopt in Sections I and II of this paper by showing that both failed to establish their conclusions by the Moorean standards of proof. Further, despite these failures both arguments contain plausible and at times psychologically compelling reasons for doubting its opponent’s position, which would make us doubly unable to conscientiously accept Realism or Skepticism. Therefore, the naïve argument would claim, we ought to withhold from adopting either position, which indirectly compels us to be withholders.

Critics of this argument would rightly complain that it unfairly privileges the withholding position. No reason was given for beginning with the eliminations of Realism and Skepticism, which means that the argument arbitrarily presupposes a withholding starting point. A Realist might provide the same indirect argument by elimination and conclude that Realism is the best position by simply changing the order in which the proofs are examined. He could show that both Skepticism and withholding fail to establish their conclusions by the Moorean standards of proof and that therefore neither should be accepted, indirectly requiring the neutral thinker to adopt Realism. And so on for the Skeptic. This objection sticks. The naïve argument by elimination does not provide an all things considered compelling reason for an objective philosopher to withhold on the question of her knowledge of the external world. But I believe that there is another informal argument that does.

The successful argument for withholding begins with an examination of the neutral philosopher’s starting position. If an open-minded thinker wishes to establish the best position regarding her knowledge of the external world in a rational way, free from passion, and without consideration of the consequences of her conclusion, she must surely approach the debate with a
certain kind of objectivity. I think we all agree that it would be unacceptable for the neutral philosopher to engage the debate from a starting point that presumes any of the positions she is evaluating, including the withholding position, because it would violate her neutrality. That said, in another sense it seems that withholding is not only a sensible position to take while assessing competing arguments, but that it is actually mandatory for the sake of objectivity. These beliefs are not contradictory. While it would be inappropriate for the neutral philosopher to withhold on the first-order question of whether we have knowledge of the external world because that is one of the positions that she is evaluating, it is both appropriate and in fact required that she withhold on the higher-order question of which of the three available positions is best. In this sense, the neutral philosopher is a “big withholder” because she withholds on the higher-level matter of the proper attitude towards external world knowledge.

Importantly, adopting the big withholder starting position does not appear to be optional. Anything but withholding on the higher-level question of which position is best violates neutrality and generates unacceptable bias. To better illustrate this point, consider the following analogy: The University of Notre Dame decides to sponsor a philosophical inquiry to establish objectively whether God exists. The three possible conclusions that the inquiry could draw are 1) that God exists, 2) that God does not exist, or 3) that we should withhold on the question of whether God exists. The University must select some person to head the committee and make the final decision about which conclusion to adopt. If Notre Dame’s goal in performing this inquiry is truly to establish which is the best and most rational position, free from passions and without consideration of the consequences of its conclusion, then the University must select this leader carefully. It seems straightforwardly inconsistent with the stated goal if they select some person who is already a committed theist, atheist, or agnostic. In order to be a neutral inquiry,
Notre Dame must select a leader who withholds on the question of which position is best, a “big withholder”, and it does not seem over cynical to accuse the University of cheating in an important way if they do not. It appears that starting as a big withholder is intellectually obligatory.

So far we have simply established that in order for an open-minded thinker to be truly neutral in her evaluation of the external world knowledge debate, she must start as a big withholder. Importantly, though, it looks as if withholding on the higher-order question commits you to withholding on the first-order question as well. The proper position for evaluating the debate is to remain neutral amongst Realism, Skepticism, and withholding, and anyone who does this successfully will also be withholding on the first-order question of our knowledge of the external world. Since this is the case, becoming a big withholder makes you a little withholder too. To better understand why this is so, consider the analogy with the existence of God. Imagine that Notre Dame tried to do what I just argued they had to do, namely appoint a philosopher who was not committed to theism, atheism, or agnosticism to head their inquiry. As a big withholder, the new head investigator would be neutral about which position on the existence of God is best, which straightforwardly makes him an agnostic on the main question as well. This strange feature of the three-way debate on God’s existence means that anyone who evaluates the question with neutrality will be committed to one of its candidate positions— withholding.

This phenomenon certainly does not appear in all three-way debates. In fact, it seems rare. Consider the scenario in which three candidates apply for a prestigious position in a company. Only one candidate may be hired, and all three are equally qualified. Each candidate has a friend on the human resources staff, but the president of the company demands that the
candidates be judged by some person who is neutral on the issue of who is best of the three applicants. In this case, the big withholder is not committed to one of the options. He may choose any of the three, even if that choice will ultimately be arbitrary. It’s important to note, though, that the three-way debate over our knowledge of the external world is exactly like the three-way debate over the existence of God and not like the three-way debate over candidates for a business position. In both the cases of both external world knowledge and God the available positions are identical: affirm X, affirm ~X, or withhold on X. Thus, just as someone who approaches the debate over the existence of God from the big withholding position must adopt agnosticism, the neutral and open-minded philosopher will likewise be committed to withholding on the question of her knowledge of the external world.

So the informal argument that will compel a neutral philosopher to accept the withholding positions is the following: When evaluating the debate over our knowledge of the external world objectively and with the purpose of establishing rationally which position is best, the philosopher should approach that debate as a big withholder. However, big withholders are logically committed to withholding on the first-order question of the debate. Therefore, the philosopher should be a withholder on the question of whether we have knowledge of the external world. The argument might not pass as a proof, especially by Moorean standards, but it will still provide the neutral thinker with an all-things-considered compelling reason to withhold on whether or not she has knowledge of the external world.

Realists and Skeptics might object that it is unfair that the withholding position is allowed to provide an argument for its conclusion that does not meet standards of Moorean proof when they have not been allowed to do so. They might argue that their position could also provide informal but all-things-considered compelling reasons to adopt its conclusion. However, I don’t
think that this is so. We established that a neutral philosopher must begin as a big withholder, and that this commits her to being a first-level withholder. While it is possible that an open-minded thinker who has adopted the withholding position could be moved to accept Realism or Skepticism by a compelling enough reason, it is unclear what this reason could be. The first two sections of this paper examined the best candidate arguments for the non-withholding positions, and neither argument successfully established its conclusion by Moorean standards. Even if we grant that these standards are unnecessarily strict, which we should since the argument for withholding is successful without meeting them, even an informal argument for Realism or Skepticism will appeal to premises that a withholder does not accept. For example, a withholder could not know “here is a hand to be met with in space”, because this presumes the Realist position and a withholder does not accept Realism. So while it is possible that some informal argument for Realism or Skepticism could successfully move the new withholder to adopt its position, the prospect seems unlikely, and this should not be counted as a criticism of the argument for withholding.

Finally, I think it is important to return to the existence of God analogy one more time. I noted that an important consequence of assessing the debate objectively was that it committed the philosopher to accepting agnosticism on the first-order question of whether God exists. I don’t think that this is a negative. This is a wonderful opportunity to clarify the audience that both informal arguments are meant to compel: open-minded thinkers who wish to evaluate the debate and choose a position rationally, free from passions, and without consideration of the consequences of their conclusion. In the case of the existence of God, I do not believe that the informal argument will or should move a believer to accept agnosticism. Of course, refusing to do so would mean that the person is not evaluating the topic objectively, but this is something
that everyone is quite comfortable with in the context of our knowledge of God. People of faith embrace the fact that reason alone cannot compel someone to accept knowledge of God, and they do so anyway because of things outside the rational realm. However, people who believe that they know the external world exists do not seem similarly willing to make this concession. Many philosophers who claim rational objectivity declare that they know “here is a hand to be met with in space” without proof, but see no inconsistency in doing so. The analogy to our knowledge of God should show that it is perfectly acceptable to claim that we know the external world, but that doing so is not purely rational. The informal argument for withholding shows only that if a person is truly committed to neutrality in their assessment of our knowledge of the external world then she will conclude that she should withhold on the question.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore the question of our knowledge of the external world in an objective way and without consideration of the desires and passions that color our everyday beliefs about empirical propositions. The initial goal was to establish which of the two mainline positions on external world knowledge is best—Realism or Skepticism—but after critical examination of the best arguments each had to offer, I was forced to the conclusion that if I am to be purely rational in my attitude, I should simply withhold. The first section was my attempt to show that despite the popular and practical force of the Realist position, its reasoning is importantly defective. The second illustrated that despite its ultimate failure, a Skeptical argument can perform impressively even according to Moore’s standards for proof. Neither position could provide an ultimately satisfying conclusion for an objective and neutral thinker. Finally, the third section provided an all-things-considered compelling reason to accept the
conclusion that it is best and most rational to simply withhold on the question altogether. While I do not expect that my informal argument will convince every person that they too should withhold on the matter of whether they know empirical propositions, I hope that it will move at least those philosophers who genuinely seek a principled and rational position on our knowledge of the external world.
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