G. E. Moore

It seems to me that, so far from its being true, as Kant declares to be his opinion, that there is only one possible proof of the existence of things outside of us, namely the one which he has given, I can now give a large number of different proofs, each of which is a perfectly rigorous proof; and that at many other times I have been in a position to give many others. I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, ‘Here is one hand’, and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, ‘and here is another’. And if, by doing this, I have proved ipso facto the existence of external things, you will all see that I can also do it now in numbers of other ways: there is no need to multiply examples.

But did I prove just now that two human hands were then in existence? I do want to insist that I did; that the proof which I gave was a perfectly rigorous one; and that it is perhaps impossible to give a better or more rigorous proof of anything whatever. Of course, it would not have been a proof unless three conditions were satisfied; namely (1) unless the premiss which I adduced as proof of the conclusion was different from the conclusion I adduced it to prove; (2) unless the premiss which I adduced was something which I knew to be the case, and not merely something which I believed but which was by no means certain, or something which, though in fact true, I did not know to be so; and (3) unless the conclusion did really follow from the premiss. But all these three conditions were in fact satisfied by my proof. (1) The premiss which I adduced in proof was quite certainly different from the conclusion, for the conclusion was merely ‘Two human hands exist at this moment’; but the premiss was something far more specific than this — something which I expressed by showing you my hands, making certain gestures, and saying the words ‘Here is one hand, and here is another’. It is quite obvious that the two were different, because it is quite obvious that the conclusion might have been true, even if the premiss had been false. In asserting the premiss I was asserting much more than I was asserting in asserting the conclusion. (2) I certainly did at the moment know that which I expressed by the combination of certain gestures with saying the words ‘Here is one hand and here is another’. I knew that there was one hand in the place indicated by combining a certain gesture with my first utterance of ‘here’ and that there was another in the different place indicated by combining a certain gesture with my second utterance of ‘here’. How absurd it would be to suggest that I did not know it, but only believed it, and that perhaps it was not the case! You might as well suggest that I do not know that I am now standing up and talking — that perhaps after all I’m not, and that it’s not quite certain that I am! And finally (3) it is quite certain that the conclusion did follow from the premiss. This is as certain as it is that if there is one hand here and another here now, then it follows that there are two hands in existence now.

My proof, then, of the existence of things outside of us did satisfy three of the conditions necessary for a rigorous proof. Are there any other
conditions necessary for a rigorous proof, such that perhaps it did not satisfy one of them? Perhaps there may be; I do not know; but I do want to emphasise that, so far as I can see, we all of us do constantly take proofs of this sort as absolutely conclusive proofs of certain conclusions – as finally settling certain questions, as to which we were previously in doubt. Suppose, for instance, it were a question whether there were as many as three misprints on a certain page in a certain book. A says there are, B is inclined to doubt it. How could A prove that he is right? Surely he could prove it by taking the book, turning to the page, and pointing to three separate places on it, saying 'There's one misprint here, another here, and another here': surely that is a method by which it might be proved! Of course, A would not have proved, by doing this, that there were at least three misprints on the page in question, unless it was certain that there was a misprint in each of the places to which he pointed. But to say that he might prove it in this way is, to say that it might be certain that there was. And if such a thing as that could ever be certain, then assuredly it was certain just now that there was one hand in one of the two places I indicated and another in the other.

I did, then, just now, give a proof that there were then external objects; and obviously, if I did, I could then have given many other proofs of the same sort that there were external objects then, and could now give many proofs of the same sort that there are external objects now.

But, if what I am asked to do is to prove that external objects have existed in the past, then I can give many different proofs of this also, but proofs which are in important respects of a different sort from those just given. And I want to emphasise that, when Kant says it is a scandal not to be able to give a proof of the existence of external objects, a proof of their existence in the past would certainly help to remove the scandal of which he is speaking. He says that, if it occurs to anyone to question their existence, we ought to be able to confront him with a satisfactory proof. But by a person who questions their existence, he certainly means not merely a person who questions whether any exist at the moment of speaking, but a person who questions whether any have ever existed; and a proof that some have existed in the past would certainly therefore be relevant to part of what such a person is questioning. How then can I prove that there have been external objects in the past? Here is one proof. I can say: 'I held up two hands above this desk not very long ago; therefore two hands existed not very long ago; therefore at least two external objects have existed at some time in the past, QED'. This is a perfectly good proof, provided I know what is asserted in the premiss. But I do know that I held up two hands above this desk not very long ago. As a matter of fact, in this case you all know it too. There's no doubt whatever that I did. Therefore I have given a perfectly conclusive proof that external objects have existed in the past; and you will all see at once that, if this is a conclusive proof, I could have given many others of the same sort, and could now give many others. But it is also quite obvious that this sort of proof differs in important respects from the sort of proof I gave just now that there were two hands existing then.

I have, then, given two conclusive proofs of the existence of external objects. The first was a proof that two human hands existed at the time when I gave the proof; the second was a proof that two human hands had existed at a time previous to that at which I gave the proof. These proofs were of a different sort in important respects. And I pointed out that I could have given, then, many other conclusive proofs of both sorts. It is also obvious that I could give many others of both sorts now. So that, if these are the sort of proof that is wanted, nothing is easier than to prove the existence of external objects.

But now I am perfectly well aware that, in spite of all that I have said, many philosophers will still feel that I have not given any satisfactory proof of the point in question. And I want briefly, in conclusion, to say something as to why this dissatisfaction with my proofs should be felt.

One reason why, is, I think, this. Some people understand 'proof of an external world' as including a proof of things which I haven't attempted to prove and haven't proved. It is not quite easy to say what is that they want proved – what it is that is such that unless they got a proof of it, they would not say that they had a proof of the existence of external things; but I can make an approach to explaining what they want by saying that if I had proved the propositions which I used as premisses in my two proofs, then they would perhaps admit that I had proved the existence of external things, but, in the absence of such a proof (which, of course, I have neither given nor attempted to give), they will say that I have not given what they mean by a proof of the existence of
external things. In other words, they want a proof of what I assert now when I hold up my hands and say 'Here's one hand and here's another'; and, in the other case, they want a proof of what I assert now when I say 'I did hold up two hands above this desk just now'. Of course, what they really want is not merely a proof of these two propositions, but something like a general statement as to how any propositions of this sort may be proved. This, of course, I haven't given; and I do not believe it can be given: if this is what is meant by proof of the existence of external things, I do not believe that any proof of the existence of external things is possible. Of course, in some cases what might be called a proof of propositions which seem like these can be got. If one of you suspected that one of my hands was artificial he might be said to get a proof of my proposition 'Here's one hand, and here's another', by coming up and examining the suspected hand close up, perhaps touching and pressing it, and so establishing that it really was a human hand. But I do not believe that any proof is possible in nearly all cases. 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; I have conclusive evidence that I am awake: but that is a very different thing from being able to prove it. I could not tell you what all my evidence is; and I should require to do this at least, in order to give you a proof.

But another reason why some people would feel dissatisfied with my proofs is, I think, not merely that they want a proof of something which I haven't proved, but that they think that, if I cannot give such extra proofs, then the proofs that I have given are not conclusive proofs at all. And this, I think, is a definite mistake. They would say: 'If you cannot prove your premiss that here is one hand and here is another, then you do not know it. But you yourself have admitted that, if you did not know it, then your proof was not conclusive. Therefore your proof was not, as you say it was, a conclusive proof.' This view that, if I cannot prove such things as these, I do not know them, is, I think, the view that Kant was expressing in the sentence which I quoted at the beginning of this lecture, when he implies that so long as we have no proof of the existence of external things, their existence must be accepted merely on faith. He means to say, I think, that if I cannot prove that there is a hand here, I must accept it merely as a matter of faith – I cannot know it. Such a view, though it has been very common among philosophers, can, I think, be shown to be wrong. They would say: 'If you cannot prove your premiss that here is one hand and here is another, then you do not know it. But you yourself have admitted that, if you did not know it, then your proof was not, as you say it was, a conclusive proof.' This view that, if I cannot prove such things as these, I do not know them, is, I think, the view that Kant was expressing in the sentence which I quoted at the beginning of this lecture, when he implies that so long as we have no proof of the existence of external things, their existence must be accepted merely on faith. He means to say, I think, that if I cannot prove that there is a hand here, I must accept it merely as a matter of faith – I cannot know it. Such a view, though it has been very common among philosophers, can, I think, be shown to be wrong.
Some people would feel I think, not merely something which I think that, if I cannot the proofs that I have posts at all. And this, I They would say: 'If there was that here is one you do not know it. And that, if you did not was not conclusive. As, you say it was, I cannot prove that, if I cannot do not know them, was expressing in that the beginning of that so long as we that is not conclusive. We pass next to the argument: “Descartes’s malicious demon is a logical possibility.” This is obviously quite different from both the two preceding. Russell does not say that any percepts are produced by Descartes’s malicious demon; nor does he mean that it is practically or theoretically possible for Descartes’s malicious demon to produce in me percepts like this, in the sense in which it is (perhaps) practically possible that a conjurer should, and theoretically possible that a physiologist should by stimulating the optic nerve. He only says it is a logical possibility. But what exactly does this mean? It is, think, an argument which introduces quite new considerations, of which have said nothing so far, and which lead us to the root of the difference between Russell and me. take it that Russell is here asserting that it is logically possible that this percept of mine, which I think tknow to be associated with a percept belonging to someone else, was in fact produced in me by a malicious demon when there was no such associated percept: and that, therefore, I cannot know for certain what I think I know. It is, of course, being assumed that, if it was produced by a malicious demon, then it follows that it is not associated with a percept belonging to someone else, in the way in which I think I know it is: that is how the phrase “was produced by a malicious demon” is being used. The questions we have to consider are, then, simply these three: What is meant by saying that it is logically possible that this percept was produced by a malicious demon? Is it true that this is logically possible? And: If it is true, does it follow that I don’t know for certain that it was not produced by a malicious demon?

Now there are three different things which might be meant by saying that this proposition is logically possible. The first is that it is not a self-contradictory proposition. This I readily grant. But from the mere fact that it is not self-contradictory, it certainly does not follow that I don’t know for certain that it is false. This Russell grants. He holds that I do know for certain to be false, propositions about my percepts which are not self-contradictory. He holds, for instance, that I do know for certain that there is a white visual percept now; and yet the proposition that there isn’t is certainly not self-contradictory.

He must, therefore, in his argument, be using “logically possible” in some other sense. And one sense in which it might naturally be used is this: Not logically incompatible with anything that I know. If, however, he were using it in this sense, he would be simply begging the question. For the very thing I am claiming to know is that this percept was not produced by a malicious demon: and of course the proposition that it was produced by a malicious demon is incompatible with the proposition that it was not.

There remains one sense, which is, I think, the sense in which he is actually using it. Namely he is saying: The proposition “This percept was produced by a malicious demon” is not logically incompatible with anything you know immediately. And if this is what he means, I own that I think Russell is right. This is a matter about which I suppose many philosophers would disagree with us. There are people who suppose that I do know
immediately, in certain cases, such things as: That person is conscious; at least, they use this language, though whether they mean exactly what I am here meaning by “know immediately” may be doubted. I can, however, not help agreeing with Russell that I never do know immediately that that person is conscious, nor anything else that is logically incompatible with “This percept was produced by a malicious demon.” Where, therefore, I differ from him is in supposing that I do know for certain things which I do not know immediately and which also do not follow logically from anything which I do know immediately.

This seems to me to be the fundamental question at issue in considering my classes (3) and (4) and what distinguishes them from cases (1) and (2). I think I do know immediately things about myself and such things as “There was a sound like ‘Russell’ a little while ago” — that is, I think that memory is immediate knowledge and that much of my knowledge about myself is immediate. But I cannot help agreeing with Russell that I never know immediately such a thing as “That person is conscious” or “This is a pencil,” and that also the truth of such propositions never follows logically from anything which I do know immediately, and yet I think that I do know such things for certain. Has he any argument for his view that if their falsehood is logically possible (i.e. if I do not know immediately anything logically incompatible with their falsehood) then I do not know them for certain? This is a thing which he certainly constantly assumes; but I cannot find that he anywhere gives any distinct arguments for it.

So far as I can gather, his reasons for holding it are the two assumptions which he expresses when he says: “If (I am to reject the view that my life is one long dream) I must do so on the basis of an analogical or inductive argument, which cannot give complete certainty.” That is to say he assumes: (1) My belief or knowledge that this is a pencil is, if I do not know it immediately, and if also the proposition does not follow logically from anything that I know immediately, in some sense “based on” an analogical or inductive argument; and (2) What is “based on” an analogical or inductive argument is never certain knowledge, but only more or less probable belief. And with regard to these assumptions, it seems to me that the first must be true in some sense or other, though it seems to me terribly difficult to say exactly what the sense is. What I am inclined to dispute, therefore, is the second: I am inclined to think that what is “based on” an analogical or inductive argument, in the sense in which my knowledge or belief that this is a pencil is so, may nevertheless be certain knowledge and not merely more or less probable belief.

What I want, however, finally to emphasize is this: Russell’s view that I do not know for certain that this is a pencil or that you are conscious rests, if I am right, on no less than four distinct assumptions: (1) That I don’t know these things immediately; (2) That they don’t follow logically from any thing or things that I do know immediately; (3) That, if (1) and (2) are true, my belief in or knowledge of them must be “based on an analogical or inductive argument”; and (4) That what is so based cannot be certain knowledge. And what I can’t help asking myself is this: Is it, in fact, as certain that all these four assumptions are true, as that I do know that this is a pencil and that you are conscious? I cannot help answering: It seems to me more certain that I do know that this is a pencil and that you are conscious, than that any single one of these four assumptions is true, let alone all four. That is to say, though, as I have said, I agree with Russell that (1), (2) and (3) are true; yet of no one even of these three do I feel as certain as that I do know for certain that this is a pencil. Nay more: I do not think it is rational to be as certain of any one of these four propositions, as of the proposition that I do know that this is a pencil. And how on earth is it to be decided which of the two things it is rational to be most certain of?

Notes