What Moore's Hands Mean

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Many readers have noted a curious feature of G. E. Moore's 1939 proof of an external world: the inclusion of a *second* hand.[1] Recall:

> 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'. ("Proof of an External World," 165–66)

Yet as Wittgenstein famously remarked: "If you do know that *here is one hand*, we'll grant you all the rest" (1969: §1). Wittgenstein's framing, perhaps unconscious, aligns with a broader consensus: one hand is proof enough! Indeed, as C. A. J. Coady has observed: "It remains something of a puzzle why Moore thinks he needs to show the existence of two hands when surely one would do" (2007: 116). So, if one hand is proof enough, why another?

Different answers have long circulated as speculation among Moore scholars, enthusiasts, and curious students. The most notable, perhaps, is that Moore's two hands serve as a deliberate rebuke of monistic idealism.[2] But a definitive answer has eluded commentators. I provide one here.

Consider a different paper of Moore's, published only three years before his enigmatic proof: "Is Existence a Predicate?" (1936, hereafter EP). A digression in the middle of that paper leads Moore to discussing Russell's analysis of propositional functions,[3] an analysis he is inclined to accept as true, with the following caveat:

> Mr. Russell has said "When we say 'some men are Greeks,' that means that the propositional function '*x* is a man and a Greek' is sometimes true"; and

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[1] In fact, Moore does not limit himself to just his two hands. His famous essay also features two socks, two shoes, two sheets of paper, two plants, two dogs, two shadows, and two soap-bubbles. It is not so much that the examples here are curious—all are paradigmatic instances of external things—but the fact that Moore consistently presents them in pairs.

[2] Coady intimates something like this when he writes (continuing the quote above): "Perhaps the thought lingers in the background that a world must have some plurality!" (2007: 116). In his encyclopedia entry on monism Jonathan Schaffer (2007) is even more explicit, suggesting that Moore's pluralistic protest against monism may have even contributed to its demise! (See also Schaffer 2010: 66.) While this historiography is certainly inaccurate, what is true is that Moore (and Russell) each had their turn at trying to refute idealist philosophy, and the monist thesis was by no means an unfamiliar target. Alas, though intriguing, evidence for an "anti-monist" reading is circumstantial at best.

[3] Moore is referring to Chapter XV of Russell's 1919, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*.

> has explained just previously that by "sometimes true" he means "true in at least one instance."[4] With this explanation of what he means by "sometimes true," I do not think that his statement as to the meaning of "Some men are Greeks" is strictly correct; since I think that the use of the plural implies that "*x* is a man and a Greek" is true in *more* than one instance, that is to say, in at least two instances. Let us suppose that he would accept this correction and say that what "Some men are Greeks" means is not, strictly, that "*x* is a man and a Greek" is true in at least one instance, but that it is true in at least two. (EP 182)

Then, one page later:

> Surely "Some men are Greeks" cannot possibly be true, unless there are at least two different objects, in the case of each of which a man might have seen it, pointed at it, and said with truth "This is a man and a Greek"? (EP 183)

And then:

> If this is so, and if we are allowed to distinguish, as I think we ought, between "men exist" and "a man exists," and to say that "men exist" means, *not* " '*x* is a human being' is true in at least one instance," but " '*x* is a human being' is true in at least two instances," then I think [Russell's] doctrine is true . . . . (EP 184)

Moore thinks Russell's analysis of sentences containing syntactically plural terms—'some men', 'men exist,' etc.—is wrong. For Moore, the use of the plural indicates that the meaning of sentences like '*x* is a man and a Greek' are naturally analysed as 'At least *two* values of "*x* is a man and a Greek" are true.' While Moore ultimately endorses Russell's doctrine of propositional functions, his endorsement is conditional on these amendments. For these are crucial to what Moore sees as one of the central aims of logical analysis, which are to render the ordinary meanings of various sentences of natural language into a more perspicuous, logical form. Plural descriptions are everywhere in natural language and what they ordinarily imply is more than one thing. Missing from Russell's regimentation is this plurality: the Greek*s*, hand*s*, and human being*s*. According to Moore, our logical paraphrases should respect this meaning.[5]

Indeed, this was not the only analysis of Russell's that Moore criticized for failing to respect the plural. Vulnerable to Moore's criticism is also Russell's conception of

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[4] "The assertion that it is 'sometimes true,' *i.e.* true in at least one instance" (Russell 1919: 159).

[5] This point of Moore's can seem fussy, but it is worth noting that his fussiness has been shared by many others. Boolos, for instance, makes a case for plural quantification in a similar way that Moore does—by attending to ordinary usage: "Suppose that there is exactly one Cheerio in the bowl before me. Is it true to say that there are some Cheerios in the bowl? My view is no, not really. . . ." (1984: 443). Boolos's idea is to extend our stock of primitive logical notions so that we can accommodate precisely the sort of plural talk Moore finds absent from Russell's doctrine.

a class, which, on Russell's characterization, can be understood as containing only one member. Moore demurs: "With the ordinary meaning of 'class' it is impossible that any class should have only *one* member or none" (1962: 14).[6] According to Moore, when we talk of *classes* or *sets* of things (if such things exist) we imply that that there is at least more than one thing.[7]

Differences between Moore and Russell aside, Moore's sensitivity to plural terms, as demonstrated in the passages above, suggests the following idea. The plurality that some commentators have fixed on in "Proof" is nothing more than an artifact of the fact that, in English, a syntactically plural term typically denotes more than one thing.

Recall the central question that Moore takes up in "Proof," which originates from the introductory quote from Kant on its very first page: can an adequate proof be given of *things* outside of us? Or, as Moore puts it: can an adequate proof be given of the existence of external *things*? This question involves a plural term, so it is natural for Moore to interpret it as requiring proof of *more than one* external thing. In response, Moore produces not one external object, but two. Moore instances two hands, then, because the challenge he is addressing—whether any proof can be given of external *things*—demands him to produce *more than one* external thing.

To be clear, the suggestion here is not that Moore instances two hands because he believes the meaning of sentences like 'Hands exist' are logically analysed as 'At least two values of "*x* is a hand" are true'. (Though Moore would likely agree with this analysis.) That would be putting the cart before the horse. Rather, our logical paraphrases should respect ordinary usage, not the other way around.

Sure enough, when we turn our attention back to "Proof" we find that Moore is exceedingly sensitive to this. He is careful, for example, not to infer the plural 'There are external things' from the singular 'There is a soap bubble.' If there is *a* soap-bubble all that follows is that there is *an* external object—not *objects*.[8] Furthermore, propositions about *things* (external things, some external things, things outside of us, things to be met with in space) are always deduced from propositions about various pairs of them. Never less, never more, always two (see "Proof," 158, 165).[9]

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[6] Moore finds himself in welcome company; he is among several philosophers who have found the idea of singleton collections (a set with only one member) incoherent. See, for example, Black (1971: 621–22) and McTaggart (1921–27: 131).

[7] See also Moore (1966: 122): "*If* there are classes, at least 2 different props. of this sort must be true. . . . In the same way, There are men, or There are lions, is logically equivalent to: At least 2 different props. of the sort 'This is a man' or 'This is a lion' are true."

[8] "I think, therefore, that from any proposition of the form 'There's a soap-bubble!' there does really *follow* the proposition 'There's an external object!' " ("Proof," 165).

[9] Moore's well-known proclivities for accuracy and consistency are often noted as defining traits of his temperament (one might be tempted to call him a pedant in Russell's sense, that is, someone who likes their statements to be true; see Russell 1953). Two anecdotes from Brand Blanshard, a

So, why two hands and not one? Answer: By invoking two hands—or two shoes, two socks, two soap-bubbles, and so on—Moore is simply making good on the question he is trying to answer, the question of whether there are any external things (plural). Moore's redundant premises in "Proof" reflect his sensitivity to ordinary linguistic usage. 'Things' is a plural noun and implies more than one, so if you are trying to prove whether there are any such *things*, you had better instance at least two.[10]

It turns out that one hand is not proof enough. At least not for Moore. Unless what is being asked is whether there is *an* external thing. But that is not what is being asked. What is being asked is whether there are any external thing*s*. And *that* requires a different answer: here is one hand, and here is another.

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close acquaintance of Moore, are worth noting. On *accuracy*: "[Moore] was so distrustful of the accuracy of newspapers that he read little of them except the official dispatches" (1987: 509). On *consistency*: "[Moore] was a stern critic, who demanded consistency of his novelists as well as his philosophers; if Miss Austen said on page 32 that Elinor Dashwood was at a party and on page 232 that she wasn't, Moore would catch it and tut-tut the author" (1987: 509).

[10] If the upshot is that Moore invokes two hands because that is just how plural nouns function in English, could this point not have been more simply made by appealing to the relevant passages from "Proof" in the first place? Why go through the detour of EP? One important reason is that doing so avoids begging the question against other interpretations, e.g., anti-monist readings (see note 2). Such readings themselves can, and are, motivated by appeal to the same passages in "Proof." The evidence from EP therefore gives us a reason *independent* from the reason we get if we were to base our evidence exclusively on the passages from "Proof."

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