Modest Moorean Metaphysics

LOUIS DOULAS

Some metaphysicians offer a sweeping way to settle existence debates. Their recipe is simple. Suppose we're after an answer to (Q):

(Q): Do composite objects (like tables) exist?

An answer to (Q), so these metaphysicians say, is easy to come by. Given the evident fact that

(i) There are many tables before me

it just follows that

(ii) There are tables.

The argument is valid, and its premise is clearly true. So, tables exist.[1] As Jonathan Schaffer attests, "contemporary existence debates are *trivial*, in that *the entities in question obviously do exist*" (2009: 357).

But why believe the premise(s) of easy ontological arguments like (i–ii) are true? The kind of metaphysician I'm interested in here says premises like (i) express something *Moorean*, they're "one of the many facts which even philosophers should not deny" (Armstrong 1978: 440–41), and that's reason enough for believing they're true. That is, they endorse what I'll call *Moorean Ontological Arguments* or MOAs for short. MOAs are just easy ontological arguments whose premise(s) express a Moorean truth. I'll call any metaphysician whose ontology is built from MOAs a "Moorean metaphysician" or a "Moorean" for short.[2]

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[1]In this and what follows, I assume that quantification is "ontologically loaded" à la current orthodoxy.

[2]My characterization of the Moorean metaphysician is purposefully broad and intended to address many sorts of philosophers, including trivialists about existence/quantificational questions such as the neo-Aristotelian approaches of Fine (2001, 2009) and Schaffer (2009a, 2009b: §4), defenders of common sense ontology like Hirsch (2002), Korman (2015b, forthcoming*a*, forthcoming*b*), and Thomasson (2007, 2015), and common sense *temporal* ontology like Zimmerman (2008), as well as epistemologists who endorse a Moorean approach to metaphysics such as Lycan (2001) and Kelly (2008).

Since the approaches above are so diverse, it might be wondered how "Moorean" each one actually is. This is a good question and one of the goals of this paper is to find out. For now, however, it'll be useful to think of Mooreanism as a spectrum case: in some cases, the appeal to common sense is tacit; in other cases, it's more explicit. In §1 of this paper, I develop four Moorean approaches that can be used to better understand the extent to which the metaphysicians above may be rightly dubbed "Moorean" about ontology.

Think of easy ontological arguments like (i–ii) as a map charting the ontological territory and Moorean principles as the reason for believing that the map is accurate. It's the support easy ontological arguments get from Moorean principles that make MOAs a force to be reckoned with. Consider, for example, Schaffer on the existence of numbers:

> Here, without further ado, is a proof of the existence of numbers:
>
> 1. There are prime numbers.
> 2. Therefore there are numbers.
>
> 1 is a mathematical truism. It commands *Moorean certainty*, as being more credible than any philosopher's argument to the contrary. Any metaphysician who would deny it has *ipso facto* produced a *reductio* for her premises. And 2 follows immediately, by a standard adjective-drop inference. Thus numbers exist. End of story. (2009: 357)

And, in a similar spirit, Kit Fine:

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

In what follows, I'll present a puzzle that shows how the Moorean approach to ontology entails a contradiction. The puzzle has two interesting upshots:

The first is that existence debates aren't as trivial as the Moorean takes them to be. If MOAs are supposed to establish the triviality of existence debates, the MOA I consider in this paper shows the opposite: existence debates aren't trivial because they can't be easily resolved by the very MOAs that are supposed to easily resolve them. The second is that incompatibilist strategies, like those of the error theorist and fictionalist, look better motivated. Recently, these strategies have fallen out of favor. Superseding them are compatibilist strategies whose aim is to keep Moorean truths *true* without incurring ontological commitment to the entities entailed by these truths. But if I'm right, the way of the incompatibilist may no longer look so incredulous: in order to escape paradox, philosophical argument must be capable of overturning Moorean common sense. With the right sort of philosophical argument, then, the

incompatibilist may seem better justified in giving up belief in premises like (i) knowing that common sense metaontology is contradictory.

Here's the plan. In §1, I get clear on just what sort of principles are at play in MOAs like (i–ii). Drawing on these principles, I develop four Moorean approaches and in §2 argue that the Moorean should reject all but one. In §3, I present a puzzle that shows how the most plausible Moorean approach engenders a contradiction. In §4, I consider various attempts at reconciliation but, as we'll see, they all fail. I conclude in §5 by discussing the significance of the puzzle.

1   Mooreanism and Trivialism

Some caveats before we begin. I won't attempt to define "common sense" or "Moorean truth." For one, I'm not sure these notions can be helpfully defined.[3] Two, I don't think I need to define them for my arguments to go through. For the purposes of this paper I simply assume (with the Moorean) that there is some class of propositions—"Moorean truths"—that deserve greater credence than any philosophical argument contradicting them. Perhaps, at best, all we can say about these propositions is that they're in some way insensitive to culture, time, and place, propositions that are more "global" than they are "local."[4] Or as Armstrong once characterized it, "bedrock common sense" (2004: 27).

This obviously won't help those who already find Mooreanism dubious. What sorts of propositions get to count as "Moorean"? Presumably, all and only those of common sense. But what sorts of propositions are candidates for common sense anyway? If we can't say what exactly makes a proposition commonsensical how can we know which ones *are*? I'm sympathetic to this worry. But again, for the purposes here, I simply assume that Moorean truths are of the *we-know-it-when-we-see-it* kind. For example, in §3, I introduce some propositions that I take to be genuinely Moorean, propositions that I take to be bona fide instances of common sense. But if my examples end up undecidable, or are met with too much friction, then so much the worse for my argument. But also so much the worse for Mooreanism. For we may then come to realize that the notion is more inexact than we'd like, in which case we'd have good reason to discount it in our theorizing or even abandon it

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[3] Although see Lycan (2001: 48–49) and Kelly (2005, 2008) for compelling attempts.

[4] So while "The Eifel Tower is in France" or "Peter Parker is Spiderman" may be instances of *local* common sense they fail to be instances of global common sense. See Kelly (2008: 54) for further discussion.

altogether.[5]

A note on terminology before we begin. I take Moorean or neo-Moorean idioms in the vicinity—e.g., "Moorean truths," "Moorean facts," propositions that "command Moorean certainty" or are "obvious and undisputed," "commonsensical" or "of common sense," and propositions that correspond to our "ordinary, everyday beliefs" and "what we ordinary believe"—as all expressing (more or less) the same idea: that some propositions express truths we just shouldn't give up, even in the face of sophisticated philosophical arguments to the contrary. Here I refer to them most frequently as "Moorean truths" and "common sense propositions." Occasionally, however, when it improves the reading of a passage, I'll ditch talk of them for one of the Moorean glosses above.

With all that on record, let's turn now to uncovering the principles at work in MOAs like (i–ii).

MOAs do a lot of philosophical heavy lifting for the Moorean. An argument whose premise is commonsensically compelling shifts the burden onto any revisionary ontologist intent on denying it. A compelling premise means that one better have compelling reasons for denial. Suppose, for example, a mereological nihilist comes along and denies (i) "There are many tables before me" because they believe there are no tables at all (only simples suitably arranged)[6] and offers a philosophical argument for this conclusion.[7] No matter how ingenious the argument, the Moorean will not budge. In response to the nihilist, they'll run an MOA to the opposite conclusion, and they'll think their argument is sound because denying (i) for the absurd conclusion that there are no tables means giving up on a premise that deserves greater credence than any philosophical argument to the contrary. If arguments serve as evidence, the Moorean has common sense as evidence on their side. Those with revisionary inclinations must deny premises that almost everyone takes to be true.

This dialectic is not unfamiliar. According to the Moorean, when it comes to believing a proposition of common sense versus a philosophical thesis that contradicts this proposition, the smart money is always on common sense. Says William Lycan:

> No *purely philosophical* premise can ever (legitimately) have as strong a claim to our allegiance as can a humble common-sense proposition such as Moore's autobiographical ones. Science can correct common sense;

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[5]As Sider (2013) seems to have done. On his view, coherence with Moorean common sense counts for very little.

[6]Although see Contessa (2014) for how to be a non-eliminative nihilist.

[7]I discuss the revisionist's strategy in more detail in §4.

metaphysics and philosophical "intuition" can only throw spitballs. (2001: 41)

Eli Hirsch seems to concur:

> A simple point that Moore made in a number of papers is that our common sense convictions have more epistemic weight than any fancy philosophical arguments. Suppose you think you have an argument against the existence of tables. Maybe there is some mistake in the argument that you haven't seen. That's possible, isn't it? What is more likely, that there is a mistake in the argument or that there aren't any tables? Moore thought that any sane person who considers that question would soon realize that it is more reasonable to abandon the argument than to abandon tables. (2002: 104)

David Armstrong too:

> It is a very fundamental part of the Moorean corpus that there is motion. Things move. Perhaps we have still not, after two and a half thousand years, got to the full bottom of Zeno's brilliant arguments against the existence of motion …But certainly Zeno should not persuade us that things do not move. Neither should anybody else. (1999: 79)

The norm of belief revision in operation here seems to be something like this (where p is a proposition that expresses a Moorean truth): any *philosophical argument* that is at odds with p is either outright flawed or its premise(s) should not be believed. So common sense is an indefeasible source of justification against philosophical arguments to the contrary.[8] More precisely, then, the Moorean seems to be endorsing something like the following principle:

> (STRONG MOOREANISM): If p is a Moorean truth and q is the conclusion of a philosophical argument that contradicts p, and S is deciding which proposition to believe, then S should always believe p.

This formulation seems to gel best with the passages from Schaffer et al. above, but also with the attitude of many other Moorean sympathizers.[9] It also leaves open the possibility that *scientific* theses or arguments can be

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[8]Not indefeasible *simpliciter*: science is capable of overturning Moorean common sense. See footnote 10.

[9]See Lewis (1996: 549), Armstrong (2004: 26–30), and Kelly (2005, 2008).

legitimate defeaters of Moorean truths, which the Moorean seems comfortable conceding.[10]

But one may wonder whether this characterization of Mooreanism is too strong. After all, for all the Moorean knows, there's a philosophical argument out there with revisionary implications whose premises all express Moorean truths. Is the Moorean really so foolish to deny such a possibility? Other self-professed Mooreans might think that it's at least *epistemically possible* that a philosophical argument (with all Moorean premises say) could come along and stir the pot. While this sort of Moorean may ultimately admit the unlikelihood of such a possibility, it's a possibility in their eyes no less. So it seems that Mooreanism comes in weaker and stronger blends. Perhaps such a Moorean would endorse:

> (WEAK MOOREANISM): If p is a Moorean truth and q is the conclusion of a philosophical argument that contradicts p, and S is deciding which proposition to believe, then S should, *in nearly every case*, believe p (otherwise S should believe q or else suspend belief in p).

Think of the proviso, "in nearly every case," as picking out the specific instances the Moorean feels compelled to let a philosophical argument defeat a Moorean premise—whatever those cases may end up being and however the Moorean ends up deciding them. (I'll put pressure on this point in §2.)

In addition to (STRONG MOOREANISM) and (WEAK MOOREANISM) there's another important principle that seems to be endorsed by the Moorean—call it *trivialism*: existence debates are highly trivial because they can be resolved by MOAs. By "resolved by MOAs" all I mean is that for any existence debate $d_1,...,d_n$ the Moorean can provide an MOA such that the MOA answers a "Does F exist?" question. Like our two Moorean principles above, however, trivialism is ambiguous, admitting of strong and weak readings:

> (STRONG TRIVIALISM): All existence debates are highly trivial because they can be resolved by MOAs.

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[10]So, in principle, premises like (i) can be overturned if (in a bizarre turn of events) the *Physical Review* were to come out claiming that the latest physics has debunked the existence of tables. Good work if you can get it, but what's left for philosophy? Why isn't philosophy gifted these debunking capabilities? The idea comes down to philosophy's inferior track record: science produces results and philosophy doesn't. Almost all Mooreans seem to converge on this point. I think this claim is misguided for various reasons but there's no need for me to digress into those details here. The takeaway is simply that *science*—not philosophy—can overturn claims of common sense.

For an interesting argument showing why philosophy *can* overturn Moorean common sense see Rinard (2013).

(WEAK TRIVIALISM): Most (or some)[11] existence debates are highly trivial because they can be resolved by MOAs.

A quick clarification is in order here: what kinds of existence debates are being targeted by these two principles? While I don't think we can completely pin down an answer to this question, we do have *some* idea as to what the target debates are supposed to be, enough, that is, to make both versions of trivialism serviceable. One kind of existence debate we can immediately rule out are those whose answers are clearly sensitive to empirical observation, e.g., "Are there any rats in the basement?" or "Are there North Korean weapons of mass destruction"? These are questions that metaphysics cannot answer nor is in the business of answering. I imagine, then, something closer to our target is this: the kinds of existence debates that are of special interest to practicing analytic metaphysicians. Perhaps these are the sorts of existence debates inspired by Quine (1948); debates concerning the existence of tables, numbers, properties, and the like. This, however, isn't exactly illuminating. Can we do slightly better? Let's distinguish between two sorts of existence debates: (A) existence debates that both practicing analytic metaphysicians *and* the general public engage in (e.g., debates over the existence of aliens, Gods, souls) and (B) debates that *only* practicing analytic metaphysicians engage in (e.g., debates over the existence of tables, numbers, properties). We can then say that the kinds of existence debates targeted by trivialism are debates like (B) (or debates *more like* (B) than (A)). While this formulation doesn't escape counterexamples, I think it gets us closer to the real target of trivialism and is just specific enough to be useful. Therefore, talk of "*all* existence debates" or "*most* existence debates" should be understood with the above restriction in mind.

Since both Mooreanism and trivialism come in strong and weak versions, we are left with four possible Moorean approaches to ontology:

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[11]Read the quantifier "most" as meaning "at least half." So if there are ten existence debates (WEAK TRIVIALISM) says at least five of those debates can be resolved by MOAs.

"Some" has its typical reading as "at least one." However, if only one existence debate is resolved by an MOA (WEAK TRIVIALISM) would be an extremely philosophically uninteresting principle. I take it, then, that when the Moorean says "some" their domain of quantification includes *more than one* existence debate.

MA1	MA2
(STRONG MOOREANISM)	(STRONG MOOREANISM)
(STRONG TRIVIALISM)	(WEAK TRIVIALISM)
MA3	**MA4**
(WEAK MOOREANISM)	(WEAK MOOREANISM)
(STRONG TRIVIALISM)	(WEAK TRIVIALISM)

Which Moorean approach is the target of this paper? In the next section, I'll argue that no self-respecting Moorean should endorse the weak versions of these principles. This leaves us with what I believe to be the appropriate target of this paper, the Moorean approach deserving of serious philosophical consideration: **MA1**, or (STRONG MOOREANISM) with (STRONG TRIVIALISM). Unfortunately, however, as I'll show in §3, **MA1** entails a contradiction, and is thus false.

Alternatively, this paper could be understood as presenting the Moorean with the following dilemma:

Either **MA1** is contradictory, thus false, or

MA2 or **MA3** or **MA4** is consistent, but implausible.

Obviously this is bad news for the Moorean. If they can't find a way to make one of the above principles work, their metaontological approach looks like a nonstarter.

2   Weak Mooreanism and Weak Trivialism

I want to show how (WEAK MOOREANISM) and (WEAK TRIVIALISM) are both individually implausible. Doing so will kill three birds with two stones, **MA2**, **MA3**, and **MA4**, and make room for one clear target: **MA1**.

Consider again what (WEAK MOOREANISM) says: if p is a Moorean truth and q is the conclusion of a philosophical argument that contradicts p, and S is deciding which proposition to believe, then S should, *in nearly every case*, believe p (otherwise S should believe q or else suspend belief in p).

The problem here is with the proviso "in nearly every case." If the Moorean is going to be concessive, they need to tell us *when and under what circumstances* a Moorean premise can be defeated by a philosophical argument to the contrary. And it's not clear the Moorean has a principled, anti-particularist solution to this. Now, one possible way forward was already mentioned in the preceding section: *on rare occasions* the Moorean may feel compelled to

believe the conclusions of a radical philosophical argument if the premises of that argument all express Moorean truths. However, this seems too much in tension with the spirit of Mooreanism. Indeed, the passages from Fine and Lycan above seem in line with a stronger formulation: "[T]here *must* be something wrong in the skeptic's arguments, even if we are unable to say what it is" (Fine 2001: 2) and "No purely philosophical premise can *ever* (legitimately) have as strong a claim to our allegiance as can a humble common-sense proposition" (Lycan 2001: 41, my emphasis). The modal force of "must" and "can" in these passages strongly suggest that *in no circumstance whatsoever* should the Moorean concede to the revisionary. Consider an argument for external world skepticism. The skeptic's argument is typically thought to be one whose premises all individually look extremely compelling (even by Moorean standards) but whose conclusion is just too radical too swallow. Yet, according to the suggestion under scrutiny here, the skeptic's argument is one the Moorean ought to be persuaded by. But obviously the Moorean is not and won't be. The Moorean doesn't negotiate with skeptics.

There's another reason why (WEAK MOOREANISM) is implausible. When the Moorean shouldn't believe *q*, (WEAK MOOREANISM) says that they should suspend belief in *p* (again, where *p* is a Moorean truth). This is the Moorean's concession that common sense can only take us so far. But is it permissible for the Moorean to sometimes suspend belief in *p*?

Well, again, the Moorean would need to make clear *why* this must be done, especially given that *p* expresses a Moorean truth (for if *p* was a Moorean truth why *wouldn't* the Moorean believe it in the first place?). But suppose they've made this clear. Then there are some existence debates the Moorean must remain silent on. But what's unclear here is what could break the Moorean's agnosticism. Remember, it's not as if these debates are sensitive to empirical observation. So the Moorean's agnosticism can't be due to lack of empirical information. To avoid quietism, I think the Moorean must say that these existence debates *eventually* have to be settled some other way—by doing ontology. So suppose the Moorean begins ontological inquiry. They turn to the resources of philosophy to regiment their inquiry, drawing upon various philosophical tools and principles to determine whether the entities in question exist or not. Suppose these philosophical resources lead the Moorean to accept compelling philosophical arguments for the non-existence of some kind of entity. But then, if these entities don't exist, this will surely lead to a denial of the premise of some MOA. An obvious, undisputed premise that was once thought to be true is now false. But then the Moorean has conceded much more than what's permitted by their Mooreanism. They concede that MOAs can be trumped by philosophical arguments, and therefore grant that obvious,

undisputed premises (such as the ones that feature in the premise of MOAs like (i–ii)) can be undermined by philosophical argument and ultimately rejected. But this seems like one concession too many for the Moorean. If common sense is reason enough to *suspend* belief in some MOAs why think it's reason enough to *believe* other MOAs? If in the case of some MOAs our ordinary beliefs are subject to belief revision in the face of other philosophical considerations, why then aren't our beliefs in the premises of "successful" MOAs not similarly defeasible? They are.

There are similar worries for (WEAK TRIVIALISM). Recall: most (or some) existence debates are highly trivial because they can be resolved by MOAs. But if only *most* or *some* existence debates are highly trivial, then the punch of MOAs is greatly weakened, and (WEAK TRIVIALISM) begins to look implausible *qua* metaontological principle. Remember that MOAs are used by the Moorean to settle existence debates. MOAs settle such debates because they establish *ontological commitment*: for some existence debate d there is an MOA corresponding to it such that d is considered "resolved" if one incurs ontological commitment to Fs by virtue of believing the premise of that MOA. The worry is that if MOAs only work "part-time," then MOAs no longer look like a reliable way of settling existence debates. For example, suppose that for every existence debate an MOA can resolve there is also one that an MOA *can't* resolve (such that there is a one-to-one correspondence between some finite number of resolvable and unresolvable existence debates). Then the Moorean approach would only be capable of delivering ontological commitments half of the time. Yet, we should expect more from our metaontological principles. A metaontological principle like this one should tell us *how to settle existence debates*, full-stop. Though not without its problems, the metaontology outlined in Quine (1948), for example, provides metaphysicians with an apt model of this—*not* for doing ontology *per se*, but for what our metaontological principles should aspire towards. To resolve an existence debate the Quinean way—e.g., "Do Fs exist?"—the Quinean first recommends that we look to our best scientific theory, which we are to then translate into first-order logic. From there, to determine whether Fs exist or not, we look at what entities are required in the domain of quantification for sentences of our theory to come out true. If Fs are within the domain of quantification, Fs exist, and one is ontologically committed to them; if not, they don't.

What's important to appreciate here isn't so much that the Quinean method is the best or most appropriate way of *doing* ontology (it's not), but that what it offers is a procedure for carrying out that task in a methodological and principled way. The Quinean method is a way of delivering ontological commitment *full-stop*. The Moorean who endorses (WEAK TRIVIALISM) is no

less exempt from these standards than any other metaphysician.

Even if we were to overlook this worry, (WEAK TRIVIALISM) would still be in need of further motivation. *Why* do MOAs resolve only *some* existence debates and not others? Perhaps the Moorean might respond by saying that the unresolved ones are the real substantive existence debates—the debates deserving of the metaphysician's attention—and that's why they can't be resolved by MOAs. But this both obfuscates the Moorean's approach to ontology and pushes back the problem. The Moorean would then have to tell us how to distinguish substantive existence debates from non-substantive ones *and* tell us what exactly makes them substantive or not, beyond merely stipulating it so. So (WEAK TRIVIALISM) just seems too particularist, too unprincipled, to count as a proper metaontological approach.[12]

So the weak principles are just too weak. **MA2, MA3**, and **MA4** therefore aren't appropriate targets. This isn't to say that they're all lost causes. Maybe with enough tinkering the Moorean can get one of them to work. But this isn't the place to do that. Thus, I take the real target here to be **MA1**. Though obviously it is more extreme than the other approaches, it has virtues the others lack: its commitments are clear and its approach is sufficiently principled. Moreover, it seems better supported by those who embrace Mooreanism.

3   A Puzzle for Moorean Metaphysics

Consider again argument (i–ii). We're supposed to believe tables exist on the basis of the argument's premise. The premise is obviously true—it *commands Moorean certainty*—so we should believe it. So we should believe whatever this true premise entails: that there are tables.

But just as common sense corroborates many positive existential claims, so too, I think, it corroborates many *negative* existential claims. Common sense—as ontologically inclusive as it can be—*excludes* many things from reality. Paradigmatic examples of this include (*inter alia*) mythical and fictional things, past and future things/times, and impossible objects. Of course, this hasn't stopped philosophers from debating the existence of these things. My point is simply that, from the purview of common sense, there are things that *obviously* don't exist. For example, we (eventually, I hope) tell young children that Sherlock Holmes, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy don't exist, hence their fictional status. Imagine how a philosopher who believes

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[12]In a slightly different context: Fairchild and Hawthorne (2018) argue against ontological conservatism on grounds that it's too unprincipled. I suspect something similar is going on here with (WEAK TRIVIALISM) and (WEAK MOOREANISM).

in the existence of such things would break the news to their children: they wouldn't say the Tooth Fairy exists *qua* abstract object. No, they would say (to their child's chagrin) that there is no such thing as the Tooth Fairy. The Tooth Fairy just doesn't exist. Similar reasoning applies in the case of past and future things/times and impossible objects.[13] I take it, then, that certain negative existential statements, e.g., "*F*s don't exist," express Moorean truths.

I turn now to the puzzle. To keep things clean and simple, I focus just on fictional things like Sherlock Holmes and the Tooth Fairy. However, it should be kept in mind that with necessary alterations my argument generalizes to past and future things/times, impossible objects, and whatever else *obviously* doesn't exist. It will also be helpful to have in front of us the commitments of the Moorean approach in question:

> **The Moorean Approach to Ontology (MA1)**
>
> (STRONG MOOREANISM): If p is a Moorean truth and q is the conclusion of a philosophical argument that contradicts p, and S is deciding which proposition to believe, then S should always believe p.
>
> (STRONG TRIVIALISM): All existence debates are highly trivial because they can be resolved by MOAs.

Now, just as much as common sense giveth, common sense taketh away. We granted this above. Common sense therefore licenses us to count the following claim as true, i.e., as one expressing a Moorean truth:

> (*r*) Fictional things (e.g., the Tooth Fairy) don't exist.

[13] Our commonsensical conception of time and temporal experience support the belief that past and future things/times don't exist. What is *to be* is now not: if you're reading this now, you're alive, you exist, your death has yet to come. So your death doesn't exist. What *was* is no longer: you were born, your birth has passed, it no longer exists. Of course, your birth was something that *once* existed and your death is something that *will* exist, but they don't *now* exist and that's enough to say they don't exist period. Saint Augustine concurs: "[I]t is abundantly clear that neither the future nor the past exist, and therefore it is not strictly correct to say that there are three times, past, present, and future" (Augustine, Book XI §20: 269). Presentists do too. One of the cited upshots of the presentist view is that it coheres with common sense. (Of course, this is also what gets the presentist into trouble. If past things/times don't exist, it's not clear what could make sentences like "Caesar crossed the Rubicon" true. Likewise for sentences about the future.) See Zimmerman (2008).

Impossible objects don't exist either. How could the round square exist? For it to exist there would have to be something that has the property of being both round and square which is, well, impossible. Nothing is or can be both round and square. So impossible objects don't exist.

But consider now another Moorean truth:

> (*p*) Some things are fictional (e.g., the Tooth Fairy).

From which it follows that:

> (*q*) There exist fictional things (e.g., the Tooth Fairy).

But (*q*) is obviously in conflict with what we ordinarily believe: that fictional things like the Tooth Fairy don't exist. What to do? Denying (*p*) saves (*r*) but at the cost of contradicting common sense. But saving (*p*) means giving up (*r*) which comes at the same cost. Do we kill one Moorean truth to save another? To dissolve the paradox, the Moorean must either reject (*r*) or else deny (*p*). From the standpoint of common sense, both options seem untenable. More formally:[14]

(1) (STRONG MOOREANISM) and (STRONG TRIVIALISM) are true.   (assume for *reductio*)

(2) If (STRONG MOOREANISM) is true then fictional things don't exist.

(3) If (STRONG MOOREANISM) is true then some things are fictional.

(4) Therefore, some things are fictional.   (from 1, 3)

(5) If (STRONG TRIVIALISM) is true and some things are fictional, then fictional things exist.

(6) Therefore, there exist fictional things.   (from 4, 5)

(7) Therefore, there don't exist fictional things.   (from 1, 2)

(8) Therefore, there exist fictional things and there don't exist fictional things.   (from 6, 7)

(9) Therefore, (STRONG MOOREANISM) and (STRONG TRIVIALISM) are false.   (from 1, 8)

Thus, the conjunction of (STRONG MOOREANISM) and (STRONG TRIVIALISM) entails a contradiction.

MOAs are supposed to establish that existence debates are trivial: they're trivial because they're easily resolved. But the MOA above establishes just the opposite: existence debates aren't trivial because they can't be easily resolved by the very MOAs that are supposed to easily resolve them.

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[14]Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting I formulate the puzzle this way.

If I'm right, ontology may just be a lot harder than the Moorean thought. A modest point, perhaps, but one heretofore lost on the Moorean metaphysician.

4   Attempts at Resolution

One natural response to the puzzle is to paraphrase.[15] Quine taught us that when we're in an ontological bind we can eschew ontological commitment by locating an appropriate paraphrase. To avoid commitment to holes, for example, we might paraphrase "There are many holes in my sock" into "My sock is multiply-perforated." The Moorean paraphraser could adopt a similar strategy. Perhaps there is a more natural translation of "Some things are fictional" that doesn't quantify over or entail the existence of fictional things. Perhaps, then, the Moorean should only consider propositions that have first been vetted by paraphrase: if p is a Moorean truth but has a paraphrase p^* that isn't ontologically committing, then it shouldn't be used as a premise in an MOA.

But paraphrase seems antithetical to the whole Moorean approach. The Moorean deals in Moorean truths. These are truths that are meant to be unambiguous by design. Indeed, it's for this reason that they seem so compelling: they're true, obviously, *as stated*, no paraphrase necessary.[16] Suppose, however, we were to grant the Moorean their paraphrases. There's an unresolved tension between the Moorean truth and the paraphrased one: though the paraphrase is ontologically innocent, the Moorean truth is not. Yet, it could be that the Moorean truth is still more compelling than the paraphrased one. For consider "There are many tables before me" which seems more like a Moorean truth than "There are many particles arranged tablewise before me." While the latter avoids commitment to tables, it loses its Moorean luster. So must the Moorean count this paraphrase as a Moorean truth too? Or is the abandoned Moorean truth no longer Moorean?

There is a more serious issue with the paraphrase approach. If paraphrase is permissible, we might wonder what work MOAs are doing for the Moorean. Paraphrase enters the scene as a strategy for *retaining* one's preferred ontology. That is, before one paraphrases, one already has an ontology in mind that one intends the paraphrase to respect (hence the motivation to paraphrase *away* the existence of holes). Yet, the whole upshot of the Moorean approach is to use MOAs to settle existence debates. Mooreans employ MOAs to determine what exists. Paraphrase undermines this whole approach by forgoing MOAs

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[15]Thanks to an anonymous referee for this objection.

[16]See Schaffer (2009: 357) for a similar line of reasoning.

altogether: with paraphrase, the Moorean picks and chooses their ontology ahead of time as opposed to letting ontology come to them by putting MOAs to work.[17]

Moving away from paraphrase, the Moorean might try sidestepping the puzzle by deferring to a principle like the following:

> (EASY BELIEF): If a premise p of some MOA expresses a Moorean truth, but its conclusion q doesn't, then S should nevertheless believe q on the basis of p because p expresses a Moorean truth.

Consider argument (p–q) again. Its premise "Some things are fictional" expresses a common sense proposition while its conclusion "There exist fictional things" clashes with another common sense proposition "Fictional things don't exist." (EASY BELIEF) tells us that we should believe the conclusion of (p–q) simply because its premise respects common sense.

But (EASY BELIEF) is implausible on two fronts. First, (r)—like (p)—expresses a common sense proposition. So respecting common sense can't be used as a condition for rejecting (r) here since (r) itself respects common sense. Second, even if (q) is a conclusion that is deduced by S why should S believe (q) when S believes more strongly in (r)? That is, if we are more certain of our belief in the proposition "Fictional things don't exist" why believe otherwise? If common sense counts in favor of truth and one is more *certain* of propositions which respect common sense than those that don't, it seems irrational to believe otherwise, especially when certainty about (r) is stronger than mere belief in (q).

I anticipate the following rejoinder: "But (q) is the logical entailment of something we believe to be true, namely, (p), and if we know (p) to be true, and we're in a position to know what follows from (p), then are we not justified in believing that (q) is true?"

The problem with this line of reasoning is that we're both justified in believing that (q) is true and also that (r) is true. On the one hand, we

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[17]Maybe this isn't all that bad. Paul Audi (2015: 225), for instance, proposes we understand common sense "as a source of concepts and categories rather than as a body of propositions most of which are true (perhaps even obviously so)." His idea is that we should stop looking to particular claims of common sense for Moorean enlightenment, e.g., "There are many tables before me," but instead to the ontological categories these common sense claims presuppose, e.g., "complex material object." But this overlooks the epistemic saliency of the claims from which these ontological categories are derived. The Moorean's belief in the existence of complex material objects might be entailed by a belief (or presupposed by a belief) in the proposition "There are many tables before me," but only because *the Moorean believes this proposition is true*. And *why* does the Moorean believe it true? Because to deny it would contradict common sense. It's unclear to me, then, how common sense could be merely appended to *categories* of things but not also to specific *claims* (of common sense).

have evidence that some things *are* fictional, e.g., the Tooth Fairy. And since something isn't nothing then it seems we have evidence that something exists, namely, the Tooth Fairy. So, given that the former claim is supported by evidence, we're justified in believing it, hence we're justified in believing the entailment of that claim: fictional things like the Tooth Fairy exist. On the other hand, we have evidence that fictional things don't exist. Fictional things are, after all, thought to be non-existent for good reason: they're made-up! And made-up things don't exist. Because our evidence for both claims is underdetermined we seem justified in believing either one. Therefore, believing (q) on the grounds that it's entailed by (p) (assuming our belief in (p) is justified) isn't enough to decide the matter.

Perhaps the Moorean might retreat to a different sort of Moorean principle:[18]

> (PLAUSIBILITY): If at least one premise p of some MOA is less plausible than the denial of its conclusion q, then S shouldn't believe the premise of that MOA (otherwise S should believe it).[19]

(PLAUSIBILITY) seems to do the trick for familiar MOAs like (i–ii). Is "There are many tables before me" less plausible than "Tables don't exist"? No. So, Mooreans should believe the premise of that MOA for the existence of tables.

Unfortunately, however, this move proves to be fruitless in the end as (PLAUSIBILITY) yields the same puzzling results. Consider again (p–q):

> (p) Some things are fictional (e.g., the Tooth Fairy).

> (q) Therefore, there exist fictional things (e.g., the Tooth Fairy).

With the updated decision procedure in place we can ask: Is (p) less plausible than the negation of (q)? That is, is (p) less plausible than (r)?

> (r) Fictional things (e.g., the Tooth Fairy) don't exist.

It's indeterminate given that (p) seems equally as plausible as (r). So (PLAUSIBILITY) gets the Moorean no closer to solving the puzzle.

Could going "fundamental" escape the problem? Some metaphysicians make a distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental quantification.[20] Call these metaphysicians *fundamentalists*. According to the fundamentalist, different senses of "there are/there exists" are invoked when making

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[18]Thanks to Dan Korman for this objection and discussion here.

[19]If you find the plausibility relation too underspecified, feel free to substitute it with "certainty" or some other relevant epistemic notion.

[20]See Cameron (2008, 2010), Dorr (2007), Sattig (2015), and Sider (2009, 2011, 2013) for different but related strategies. See also van Inwagen (1990) for the locus of compatibilist-inspired strategies like these.

existential claims. For example, the quantifier we use when we're metaphysically serious can be dubbed the "fundamental quantifier"—it's the quantifier that "carves at the joints." When one denies the existence of tables, then, one is denying that *fundamentally-speaking* tables exist. But when one isn't doing metaphysics, and is out in the wild, furniture shopping (say), one's assertion that "There are many tables before me" doesn't entrap you in contradiction, for it doesn't commit you to tables. Here only a non-fundamental, ordinary sense of the quantifier is in use. And while what was said was literally and strictly true, it isn't ontologically deep or serious.

Why is fundamentalism relevant to the Moorean? Because having our ordinary common sense propositions come out true is one of the main motivations to go fundamental. Fundamentalists with revisionary inclinations (i.e., those who want to deny the existence of tables, numbers, and so on) want to hold on to the literal truth of common sense propositions that we (and they) all utter outside the seminar room. They would also like to be able to express their deep ontological commitments which seem to contradict these ordinary claims. To do both, they invoke the fundamental/non-fundamental distinction. Thus, the fundamentalist who doesn't like fictional things bloating their ontology might say "There exist fictional things" is true *non*-fundamentally-speaking (and therefore doesn't entail ontological commitment to fictional things) but false *fundamentally*-speaking, for fundamentally-speaking, fictional things *don't* exist.

Though this resolves the puzzle, the Moorean should find the fundamentalist move deeply unsatisfying. For what good is the Moorean approach to ontology if it has nothing to do with *ontology*? If Moorean truths like "There are many tables before me" don't entail the existence of tables (in the fundamental sense) they seem useless to the Moorean who wants to include such entities into their ontology—and include them on the basis of their entailment from claims that *command Moorean certainty*. The reason for believing in such entities is *because* they follow from such claims. The problem with fundamentalism, then, is that it asks too much of the Moorean. For while it sidesteps the puzzle, it does so by radically reforming the scope and application of Moorean common sense. It then becomes quickly unclear what exactly the upshot of fundamentalism is supposed to be if the Moorean image it alleges to preserve is one the Moorean can't recognize.[21]

Suppose now that we were to make a distinction between *what exists$_C$* and *what exists$_A$* where "exists$_C$" means something like "exists concretely" and where "exists$_A$" means something like "exists abstractly." The Moorean

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[21] See Korman (2015a, forthcoming*b*) for critical discussion of the fundamentalist approach.

could then take (r) to mean:

> (r)* Fictional things (e.g., the Tooth Fairy) don't exist$_C$.

And if the quantifiers in (p–q) are taken to express "exists$_A$" then the contradiction disappears and the puzzle is resolved. Call this the *ontological pluralist* approach.[22] Ontological pluralism says there are *multiple ways for something to be*. Some things exist concretely and other things exist abstractly, but make no mistake: both exist.

I think there are good, independent reasons for the Moorean *not* to adopt pluralism.[23] Nevertheless, we can still ask: should the Moorean go pluralist for the simple reason that it resolves our puzzle? It's not clear they should. I assume what makes (r) a Moorean truth is that it says fictional things don't exist *in any sense at all*—not that they exist in *some* sense. Moreover, I don't think it's exactly commonsensical to hold that fictional things, if they do exist, exist as abstract objects, outside of space (and perhaps time). If in order to resolve the puzzle the Moorean has to invoke strange, commonsensically dubious entities then the move to pluralism doesn't seem worth it.

A different direction: suppose we were to depart from Quinean orthodoxy and adopt a different view of quantification altogether—quantifier neutralism.[24] Quantifier neutralism is just the view that quantification in natural and formal language is ontologically neutral, and thus not ontologically committing. According to the neutralist, quantificational expressions like "some," "there are," and "∃" *don't* mean *there exists* and therefore don't entail ontological commitment. Instead, existence is a predicate, "E," and ontological commitment is induced (or thwarted) by attaching that predicate to expressions in the following way: $\exists x\ (Fx \land Ex)$. In English: "There is something (e.g., the number 3) such that it is prime and it exists." Or if we think numbers *don't* exist: $\exists x\ (Fx \land \sim\!Ex)$. In English: "There is something (e.g., the number 3) such that it is prime and it doesn't exist." Thus, for the neutralist, the domain of quantification includes both existent and non-existent things.

Neutralism has an elegant solution to the puzzle: (p) doesn't entail (q). All (p) entails is *there are* fictional things—not *there exist* fictional things. For fictional things are *non-existent*. So (q) is better understood as (q*): "There are (non-existent) fictional things." On this approach, (p), (q*), and (r) all

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[22] See Turner (2010) and McDaniel (2017) for a defense of ontological pluralism.

[23] See Merricks (2017) for critical discussion, much of which I'm sympathetic to.

[24] For a defense of neutralist views ranging from the Meinongian to the anti-Meinongian, see Azzouni (1994, 2004, 2017), Crane (2012, 2013), Doulas (MS), Finn (2017), Priest (2005, 2008), and Routley (1980, 1982).

express Moorean truths. So the Moorean can endorse (*p*), (*q**), and (*r*) without contradicting themselves.

Yet, neutralism seems to suffer a similar fate as fundamentalism. For I doubt the Moorean will like that (by the neutralist's lights) Moorean truths such as "There are many tables before me" don't entail the existence of tables. But suppose a compromise is reached: maybe according to the Moorean tables exist because *just look at what's in front of you*! That is, instead of inferring the conclusion "Tables exist" from a Moorean premise "There are many tables before me" the Moorean here can simply insist that "Tables exist" is true because it expresses a Moorean truth. But as Ted Sider correctly points out:

> This maneuver is just a fig leaf. These propositions that Mooreans simply take as premises exhibit a striking pattern: they include all the dictates of common sense. If Mooreans realize this but are unwilling to regard common sense as a source of justication, it would be unreasonable (and unselfaware) for them to continue insisting on the premises, unless they have reason to believe that there is another source (or sources) of justication for the premises. (2013: §2)

So, though initially compelling, neutralism doesn't help the Moorean in the right way.

I want to consider one last objection, one that has nothing to do with the principles above. The objection I'm imagining targets the negative existential I claimed expressed a common sense proposition. The objector here says that this isn't an example of such. Maybe this objector doesn't think negative existentials can be the sorts of propositions that express common sense propositions. But that seems ad-hoc. Why are only positive existentials candidates for common sense? Or maybe this objector disagrees with my choice of example. If that's the case, then we're at a stalemate, and I ask the objector to come up with a better one.

The Moorean seems backed into a corner. With no way to override the puzzle, MOAs look like an inconsistent and ineffectual way of settling existence debates.

5 Concluding Discussion

Inconsistent beliefs aren't anything new. When we discover an inconsistency in our belief system, we update it accordingly, shoring up the unwanted inconsistency by deciding to endorse some propositions and rejecting others. In the case above, however, it's unclear how exactly we might do this: **MA1** seems to allow no wiggle room. What, then, to make of our puzzle?

Perhaps some would like to *keep* trivialism and give up Mooreanism: easy ontological arguments like (i–ii) get by just fine without Moorean principles.

But then we might wonder why the premise(s) of such arguments are *true*. Why believe them? What's doing the justificatory work? If it isn't Mooreanism, or if it's something weaker than Mooreanism, proponents of easy ontological arguments must be open to refutation by philosophical arguments to the contrary. (This is unlike proponents of MOAs who are unwilling to concede this since it would mean giving up on some Moorean truths.) Yet, I assume that those interested in trivialism are interested in easy ontological arguments because they seem like a compelling way of *settling* existence debates. But if the premise(s) of such arguments are capable of being philosophically overturned, why think such debates are "trivial" or "easily resolved" in the first place?

Maybe others would be tempted to give up trivialism and *keep* Mooreanism. Maybe some existence debates are trivial and others aren't. Or maybe they're all non-trivial. Or maybe existence debates are all trivial in some *other* way than what trivialism suggests. Whatever the case, the proponent of such a view has modest aspirations: Mooreanism settles *some* philosophical debates to be sure, but which ones? I take it that those attracted to this approach recommend patience: answers are to be discovered piecemeal, on a case-to-case basis.

Another way forward is to embrace some general form of *anti*-Mooreanism and *anti*-trivialism. Anti-Mooreanism, because common sense doesn't count for much; anti-trivialism, because existence debates are highly *non*-trivial.

How would an approach like this one play out? Well, everyone can agree that common sense is an acceptable starting point. (What else is one supposed to lean on at the beginning of inquiry?) But instead of letting common sense stubbornly dictate what, in the final analysis, there is and what there isn't, it should be renegotiated when new evidence comes along. For instance, J.R.G. Williams suggests that the real Moorean challenge ought to focus not on the relative justification of one's beliefs but *when and under what conditions it is rational to change these beliefs*.[25] Moorean principles simply ban philosophical arguments from inducing rational belief change: according to the Moorean, philosophy just doesn't have the capabilities. But the puzzle above cries out for a seachange: philosophical argument *needs* to be capable of undermining Moorean common sense or else land itself in paradox. With the right sort of philosophical argument, then, it should be permissible to give up our belief in certain Moorean propositions.

This lends some credence to incompatibilist approaches like those of the

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[25]See Williams (2013: 167). Although note that Williams goes on to develop a compatibilist strategy similar in spirit to the fundamentalist.

error theorist and fictionalist. If philosophical arguments are capable of undermining Moorean common sense, then it's permissible to give up our belief in certain Moorean propositions. Thus, we may be *justified* in rejecting the premise(s) of MOAs like (i-ii): there aren't many tables before me because (perhaps) *tables don't exist*. Of course, much turns on fleshing out the "what" and "when" of rational belief change. For if the conditions are too stringent, we could slide back into Mooreanism; but if the conditions are too permissive, we could end up with something deeply unprincipled, or worse, incoherent.[26,27] Whatever the case, the Moorean metaphysician has their work cut out for them.

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[26]It's easy to see how some form of anti-trivialism follows: if we're justified in rejecting the premise(s) of MOAs like (i-ii), settling existence debates *by* MOAs looks futile.

[27]It's an interesting question as to how "anti-Moorean" the proposal sketched here really is and whether it could be accommodated by something like (WEAK MOOREANISM). My response to the former is that it's anti-Moorean in the sense that common sense doesn't count for much—it only guides initial inquiry and can be overturned by compelling philosophical arguments to the contrary. I take it that no Moorean would be happy with this outcome. As for whether this "anti-Mooreanism" coheres with (WEAK MOOREANISM): it doesn't insofar as proponents of (WEAK MOOREANISM) only believe it's every blue moon (if ever *actually* the case) that common sense can be philosophically overturned. The anti-Mooreanism here says that this happens more frequently than proponents of (WEAK MOOREANISM) are comfortable conceding.

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