

What Moore’s Hands Might Mean

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In 1781, Kant discovered a specter haunting philosophy. The specter famously took the form of a scandal and the scandal was this: philosophers hadn’t yet proven the existence of things “outside of us,” things external to our minds—external things.¹

A little more than a century and a half later, in “Proof of an External World” (1939), G.E. Moore created a scandal by attempting to do just that. “Here is one hand,” Moore said, raising his right hand, “and here is another,” raising his left hand. If there are hands, then there are external things, so there are external things. Alas, not everyone was convinced; the specter still haunts philosophy to this very day.

The astonishing simplicity of Moore’s proof aside, “Proof of an External World” (henceforth PEW) is a curious paper in many respects.

Its target is curious: is Moore’s proof directed at the idealist, the skeptic, both, or neither?²

Its structure is curious: the bulk of the paper is devoted to carefully distinguishing “things presented in space” from “things to be met with in space,” and the headliner itself—*the* proof—makes its debut only a few pages before the conclusion.

¹ See Kant (1998, B519).

² Anti-idealist readings of the proof include O’Connor (1982), Baldwin (1990), Klemke (2000), Coliva (2004), and Sosa (2007); anti-skeptical readings include Soames (2003), Weatherall (2017), Maddy (2017), and Leitz (ms). See also Morris and Preti (2015) and Doulas (ms-a) for an alternative account.

And the remarks at the very end of the paper are curious: Moore says he can know things he can't prove and yet also says he can't prove his premises without also proving that he isn't dreaming—something he believes he cannot do.

Adding to this list of curiosities are the examples that Moore uses as premises in his various proofs. It's not so much that the examples are strange—hands, shoes, socks, and soap-bubbles all seem to be paradigmatic examples of external things—but the fact that Moore invokes them in pairs or trios: two hands, two socks, two shoes, two sheets of paper, two soap-bubbles, two plants, two dogs, two shadows, three misprints. While hands, shoes, and socks typically come in pairs, it's certainly not true that shadows, soap-bubbles, sheets of paper, dogs, plants, or misprints do. What's curious, then, is that all the proofs advanced in PEW seem to feature redundant premises: you don't need two hands or two soap-bubbles to prove that external things exist—one seems to do the trick.

This is only a quirk of PEW if we think these repetitions are philosophically insignificant or uninteresting. Indeed, it's standard to pay these repetitions no mind at all. If we could show, somehow, that these repetitions *were* important—indeed central—to Moore's proof (or to what what *we think* Moore *thought* was important to his proof) then not only would these repetitions seem less strange, they could also no longer go ignored in our readings of PEW.

This is what I aim to do in this paper. I argue for the philosophical significance of these repetitions. I tell a story about how taking these repetitions seriously helps shed light on Moore's epistemology and methodology. The result is a new reading of the proof.

1. Redundant Premises

Moore's "official" proof notoriously features, not one, but two, human hands—Moore's own:

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 (PEW 165–66).

Why two hands and not one? The question doesn't seem obviously philosophical (why for that matter didn't Moore use two toes or three fingers for his proof?). As I hope to show in this paper, however, an answer to this question quickly leads us into philosophical waters.

So, why two hands and not one? Here's an initial stab at an answer. Consider the world. Given that *a* world or *the* world seems to be one that is comprised of more than one thing, the external world, if it exists, is presumably one that is populated by a plurality of external *things* or *objects* of different kinds. A natural way to begin answering the question "Is there an external world?" might, then, involve pointing to various *things* we take such a world to encompass: hands, shoes, socks, soap-bubbles, and so on. And if the external world is just the sum of its parts, i.e., all the external things that constitute it, then showing that some external *things* exist would suffice for showing that there is such a world.³

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's trying to answer. By pointing out the existence of all "kinds of '*things*' " outside of us (PEW 165, emphasis added), Moore is showing us the various things that make up, or constitute, the external *world*, demonstrating that there is such a world in turn.

This answer—call it the Simple Answer—is compelling but too quick.⁴ It's easy to be misled by two things here: the title of Moore's paper (and hence what we're inclined to take Moore to be proving, i.e., the existence of an external *world*) and the emphasis on *things* in Moore's various discussions

³ Of course, one might take issue with such a proof procedure, i.e., that such a method wouldn't, or couldn't, prove that such a world exists, or involves reasoning that turns out to be question-begging or circular under philosophical scrutiny. The goal of this section (and this paper more generally), however, isn't to determine whether these things are true or not. Rather, it's to get a better and deeper sense of what Moore was up to in PEW.

⁴ The Simple Answer isn't an established or well-entrenched position in the literature (as far as I know there isn't a literature around the question I am asking in this paper) but rather a natural, initial reaction one seems to have to the question: why two hands and not one?

of external things and whether such things exist. In other words, we're led to the Simple Answer because Moore's two hands seem both necessary for a proof of the external *world* (given that, apparently, one external thing an external world does not make) and because invoking more than one external thing is a natural way to answer the question, "Are there external *things*?"

I don't think the Simple Answer is completely off the mark—in fact, the story I'll defend in what follows isn't necessarily incompatible with it—it's just that the account above is *too* simple. Again, it's easy to be misled by the title of the paper and the question concerning external things.

Start with the title: "Proof of an External World." While there's an implication here that Moore's paper and proof are about establishing precisely this—that there is an external *world*—Moore hasn't actually carried out that task to completion in PEW. Despite the title, proving that such a world exists doesn't seem to be Moore's explicit goal or target; nowhere in PEW do we find a single proof whose conclusion entails that there *is* an external *world*.⁵ In fact, Moore only gets as far as proving the existence of external *things*. In Moore's "official" two-handed proof, for example, Moore only says that he has "proved *ipso facto* the existence of external things." So there's a sense in which the Simple Answer overstates the importance the role the external world plays in Moore's proof given that Moore doesn't seem all too interested in offering such a proof—only a proof of external things.

Why though? Perhaps it's because the word "world" is steeped in ambiguity and Moore simply wanted to avoid splitting hairs in what he thought might have been a potentially verbal dispute.⁶ (Does one external thing make an external world? Two? Three? How many? What do we mean by *the* world or *a* world?) Or perhaps it's just because the question of whether there is an external world is a distraction from Moore's main point (although, no doubt, "Proof of an External World" makes for a better title than "Proof of External Things"). Perhaps, that is, Moore knew that he didn't need to be so

⁵ As we'll see later on, this makes perfect sense on my reading: while Moore is certainly confident that we can prove the existence of such a world, he knows that the evidence he offers in PEW, while sufficient to prove the existence of external *things*, falls short of proving the more ambitious claim that there is an external *world*.

⁶ Recall van Fraassen (2002: 5–10) who initiates his critique of analytic metaphysics by attempting to answer the question "Does the world exist?" drawing out the alleged "impotency" of such questions (and their answers) in the process.

ambitious: if one could prove the existence of some external things it's easy enough to see how one could (eventually) secure the external world.

But even we shift our focus away from the external world to external things, there's still a bit of a wrinkle. For Moore also knows that the success of his proof doesn't depend on having to prove multiple instances; proving that there exists *at least one* external thing is enough to prove that some external things exist (i.e., at least one). While it may be natural to answer questions like "Are there external things?" by pointing to multiple instances of such things, logically-speaking, one instance is enough to settle such questions in the affirmative. Are there any mice in the basement? Are there North Korean weapons of mass destruction? Is there beer in the fridge? And if there is at least *one* mouse, *one* weapon of mass destruction, and *one* beer, that's enough to establish that there are such things of that kind. As Moore himself says in PEW:

And I think we can say that of every kind of thing of which this is true, it is also true that from the proposition that there is at least one 'thing' of that kind there *follows* the proposition that there is at least one thing external to our minds: e.g., from 'There is at least one star' there follows not only 'There is at least one thing to be met with in space' but also 'There is at least one external thing', and similarly in all other cases (PEW 164).

So there's a sense in which the Simple Answer also overstates the importance the role external *things* play in Moore's proof given that Moore is aware of the fact that proving that there is at least *one* is proof enough.

If this is right, and if Moore was aware of all this, the Simple Answer makes things only more puzzling. If one instance is enough, why another? The Simple Answer says that Moore was just making good on the question he was trying to answer, the question concerning the external world. But if the *world* isn't his target per se and if he only needs at least *one* external thing to prove that there are such things, Moore's answer—his proof—features a redundant premise, namely, "and here is another [hand]." For one hand or one shoe or one sock or one soap-bubble is enough to establish that there are external things. And, as the passage above indicates, Moore is aware of this. Why, then, did he feel compelled to include that extra hand?

2. Many or None

A clue can be found, not in PEW, but in Moore's *Lectures on Philosophy* (LP, 1966) which were delivered by Moore for Part I and Part II of the Moral Sciences Tripos at Cambridge between the years of 1925 and 1934. While the lectures themselves weren't intended for publication, we know that Moore was a diligent preparer of his lecture notes, "spend[ing] long hours over preparation."⁷ But I focus on these lectures not only because the material in them is philosophically rich, but because they are, as far as I know and as we'll come to see, the only writings that come closest to prefiguring the moves Moore ultimately makes in PEW. In this way, then, LP can be read as an early sketch of PEW.⁸

I want to start with Part III of these lectures which were delivered in 1933–34, five to six years before the publication of PEW. Therein we find Moore discussing questions of epistemology, questions about, for example, whether *we know* that material things exist or not:

These questions are often put [by philosophers] in the form: Do we know with certainty of the existence of other people? Do we know with certainty of the existence of matter? Do we know with certainty that anything has existed in the past? [RQ] But I want to emphasize that the real question is not, with regard to a single prop., e.g. "Other people have existed" or "Matter exists", whether we know *that* one to be true; but with regard to a whole *class* of props. in each case, from each of which these props. follow, whether we know any of *them* to be true. I think it would be admitted, & in any case I think it is true, that I certainly don't know for certain that other people have had experiences, unless I know the truth in particular cases of such props. as "This person is conscious now", "This person is seeing so-&-so", "This person is hearing so-&-so", "This person is thinking so-&-so", "This person is feeling so-&-so". [MN] And as I emphasized before, the question is always not: Do I know *at least one* such thing, or

⁷ Stebbing (1942: 531).

⁸ Not LP in its entirety, of course, but specifically the passages that appear in this paper.

none? But: Do I know *many* or none? [OM] it being taken for granted that, if I know *one*, I certainly know many (LP 181).

This passage requires some care in unpacking. Moore is saying at least three things (flagged by the brackets above and below).

First that, for him, the “real question” isn’t whether we know the truth of some general proposition like “Matter exists”;⁹ rather, the real question is whether we know the truth of some more specific, matter-entailing, propositions p_1 or p_2 or p_3 So, for example, the question isn’t whether we know that matter exists, but whether we know that at least one chair exists. Because if we know *that*, then we certainly know that matter exists (given that, if there is at least one chair, it follows that there is at least one thing made of matter). Call this Moore’s *Real Question* [RQ].

Second, as it turns out, there’s another important question for Moore in the vicinity (perhaps this is what Moore ultimately takes the “real question” to be). For as Moore clarifies at the very end of the paragraph, the question isn’t: Do I know at least one *F* or none? but: Do I know *many* *F*s or none? Call this the *Many-None* question [MN].

And third, that the *reason for this* is because of an assumption Moore says is “being taken for granted” here: that if I know at least one *F*, then I certainly know many *F*s. Call this the *One-Many* assumption [OM].

It’s tempting, however, to read this passage in a different way. But before we consider such a reading, a clarification is in order.

Without the proper context, it’s easy to read what Moore calls the “real question” as the Many-None question. This is because, without the proper context, it’s easy to read the sentence at the bottom of the passage above, “And as I emphasized before, the question is always not...” as referring to the question emphasized by Moore at the beginning of the passage, “But I

⁹ I have dropped talk of “knowing with certainty” here, opting for “knowing” in general. I do this not only for readability, but also because Moore holds the view that to know just *is* to know with certainty (cf. Moore (1959)). Also, because talk of knowing with certainty here doesn’t add anything important to the discussion or to the point being made. Note, however, that Moore also makes room for uncertain knowledge: that we can know *without* knowing with certainty. He additionally makes a distinction between two kinds of certain knowledge: the certain knowledge we can have about logical or mathematical matters (Moore’s less radical claim) and the certain knowledge that we can have about empirical matters of fact (Moore’s more radical claim).

want to emphasize that the real question is not...” It’s natural here to think that Moore is simply *re-emphasizing* the importance of a question he had emphasized earlier on in the passage. But, in fact, once we’re made aware that Moore introduces the Many-None question for the first time in a different passage altogether, in a shorter passage preceding this longer one, it’s most natural to read the sentence “And as I emphasized before” as referring to *that* passage (the one below) and *not* the passage above:

Only here the question asked is not strictly: Is it true that there have been many bodies or *not*? But is it true that there have been many, or *none* at all? And “Is it true that there have been many changes, or none at all?” It being, I think, for some reason always assumed when these questions are raised in philos. that, if there are any bodies, there are certainly many; if any changes, certainly many: so that the only alternatives it’s necessary seriously to consider are: Are there many, or none at all? (LP 176, emphasis added).

So, the question that Moore is re-emphasizing at the bottom of LP 181 is the Many-None question first introduced in LP 176 *not* to be confused with the “real question” Moore introduces at the top of LP 181.

Moore’s “real question” (or the Real Question, as we’ve been calling it) and the Many-None question are therefore different questions. For Moore, the Real Question transforms general questions (like “Do I know that matter exists?”) into more specific questions (like “Do I know that chairs exist?”). The Many-None question, on the other hand, is what you get when you ask the Real Question and multiply instances. Not: Do I know that chairs exist? but: Do I know that many chairs exist or none at all? While the Many-None question is certainly an important question for Moore—you might even say that it *is* the real, or most perspicuous, question for him—it is distinct from the Real Question introduced at the top of LP 181.

With that out of the way, let’s turn now to the alternate reading of LP 181 that I said one might be tempted by. Such a reading involves interpreting Moore’s Real Question in a much stronger (but less plausible) way than our initial much weaker (but more plausible) gloss above. Here’s how such a reading might be induced. Consider again the passage from LP 181 where Moore begins by emphasizing what he takes the “real question” to be:

... the real question is not, with regard to a single prop., e.g. “Other people have existed” or “Matter exists”, whether we know *that* one to be true; but with regard to a whole *class* of props. ... whether we know any of *them* to be true. ... I think it is true, that I certainly don’t know for certain that other people have had experiences, unless I know the truth in particular cases of such props. as “This person is conscious now”, “This person is seeing so-&-so”, “This person is hearing so-&-so”, “This person is thinking so-&-so”, “This person is feeling so-&-so” (LP 181).

Moore says that the Real Question isn’t targeting a *single* proposition but “a whole *class* of [propositions]” and that it’s not whether we know “*that* one [single proposition] to be true” but whether we know “any of *them* [multiple propositions] to be true.” He then goes on to say that he doesn’t know that, for instance, other people have had experiences, unless he knows “the truth in particular cases” and proceeds to list a number of more specific propositions.

Taken together, these remarks seem to imply that the Real Question demands that one know a *whole conjunction* of more specific propositions, p_1 and p_2 and p_3 ..., in order to know some more general proposition entailed by them (such as that other people have had experiences or that matter exists, etc.). Read this way, however, Moore’s Real Question is clearly implausible. If I know that there is *at least one* chair in this room, don’t I know that matter exists? Why must I know a *whole conjunction* of specific propositions in order to know some more general proposition entailed by them? Of course, this alone isn’t why we should oppose this reading (Moore certainly *could* have said something implausible or false). But it is reason to be suspicious; and, as it turns out, there is good reason to be suspicious.

Notice first that Moore says of this more specific class of propositions that the question is “whether we know any of *them* to be true” (emphasis added). Moore uses the word “any” as opposed to “all” implying the weaker, disjunctive reading captured by our original formulation of the Real Question above. In other words, he seems to be saying: among the propositions that make up this class, the question is whether we know *any* of those propositions, p_1 or p_2 or p_3 ..., to be true.

And this seems as it should be. For what Moore seems to be drawing our attention to in this passage (especially with his emphasis on the class of

more specific propositions that “*them*” is meant to refer to) isn’t some highly controversial (and highly implausible) point about knowing a conjunction of more specific propositions, but the idea that abstract, general questions concerning our knowledge of the existence of matter, other people, and so on, can be made more tractable by turning our attention to the more specific, the more particular, the more concrete. If we want to know whether matter exists, we should ask whether we know of at least one chair. If we want to know whether other people have had experiences, we should ask whether we know if this person is conscious now. Indeed, this focus on “know[ing] the truth in particular cases” is a theme that runs throughout much of Moore’s work. This comes out most explicitly in Moore’s “The Conception of Reality” (CR) published nearly two decades before LP:

What, then, *ought* Mr. Bradley to mean by “Time is unreal”? What would most people mean by this proposition? I do not think there is much difficulty in discovering what sort of thing they would mean by it. ... But if you try to translate the proposition into the concrete, and to ask what it *implies*, there is, I think, very little doubt as to the sort of thing it implies. The moment you try to do this, and think what it really comes to, you at once begin thinking of a number of different *kinds* of propositions, all of which plainly must be untrue, if Time is unreal (CR 1917/18: 209–10).

Above we find Moore casting doubt on F.H. Bradley’s claim that time is unreal. Moore does this by drawing our attention to the fact that such a thesis would entail the falsity of a number of more specific, everyday, empirical propositions:

If Time is unreal, then plainly nothing ever happens before or after anything; nothing is ever simultaneous with anything else; it is never true that anything is past; never true that anything will happen in the future; never true that anything is happening now; and so on (Ibid).

The first part of LP 181 can be read in a similar light to the passages here from CR. In both LP and CR, Moore is trying to draw our attention to the Real

Question, which involves “translat[ing] the proposition into the concrete” (or in our case, translating the *question* into the concrete). This Moorean maneuver is meant to clarify what exactly is entailed by knowing (or not knowing) general propositions like “Matter exists” or “Other people exist” or “Time is real.” Do I know that matter exists? Well, if I know that there is a chair in this room, then I know that matter exists; Do I know that time is real? Well, if I know that things happen before or after other things, then I know time is real—pace Bradley. While it’s true that Moore never explicitly comes down on a disjunctive or conjunctive reading of the Real Question in any of these passages (the weaker and stronger formulations of the Real Question respectively), it stands to reason that the weaker, disjunctive reading of the Real Question is what Moore has in mind given the evidence here.

So, the alternate, stronger reading of the Real Question can be plausibly ruled out on at least two grounds: it fails to register, or is otherwise insensitive to, the significance of Moore’s word choice (“any” as opposed to “all”) and it seems to miss Moore’s larger point altogether (Moore’s emphasis on the particular and concrete).

With this (mis)reading out of the way, then, let’s return to the correct reading. How are the Real Question, the Many-None question, and the One-Many assumption related to each other and what is their significance to PEW?

Well, we can think of Moore’s Real Question as part and parcel of the way in which Moore thinks certain philosophical questions should be answered and how certain philosophical positions can be refuted: by appeal to concrete, particular, “paradigm” cases. The reason that Moore thinks the “real” question isn’t: Do we know whether matter exists? but: Do we know whether at least one chair exists? is because he thinks the proper way to answer the former is to start by answering the latter—by tending to our ordinary, everyday evidence. For if we know that at least one chair exists, then we certainly know that matter exists, given that chairs are paradigm cases of things made up of matter.

So, here is how we might put things so far: Philosophers ask certain questions, questions like “Does matter exist?” and “Do we know that matter exists?” The proper way to get a grip on what exactly is being asked by such questions, the proper way to answer them, advises Moore, is to convert them into more tractable, more specific questions like “Does at least one

chair exist?” and “Do we know that at least one chair exists?” (Per the Real Question.) And, once we do that, we’ll see that such questions can be answered in the affirmative.

Now, this isn’t yet a complete account of things. For, according to Moore, if we know that there exists at least one chair, certainly we know that there exist many (per the One-Many assumption). Thus, we might say that for Moore, the most perspicuous formulation of the question we end up with *isn’t* the Real Question: Do we know that *at least one* chair exists or none at all? but the Many-None question: Do we know that *many* chairs exist or none at all?

Of course, doing a lot of the work here is the One-Many assumption; and, admittedly, it’s a pretty odd assumption. In the next section, we’ll unpack it a bit further and explore how exactly it adds to the complexity of our discussion here. Right now, in fact, we have what is the very beginning (and only the very beginning!) of an answer to our question: Why two hands and not one?

If the above is right, and Moore thought that the most perspicuous rendering of philosophical questions like: Do we know that matter exists? is: Do we know that *many* chairs exist or none at all? And if Moore thought the reason for this was because of the idea that, if we *do* know that at least one chair exists, certainly we know that many chairs exist, then it would only be natural for someone like Moore to answer such questions by appealing to *more than one* instance of the kind under question: by invoking not one thing made of matter, but two, three, or four: here is one chair and here is another, therefore matter exists.

So, why two hands and not one? Because the question: Do we know that external things exist? gets converted by Moore to: Do we know that many hands exist or none at all? and thus the natural answer to such a question is the answer Moore gives in PEW: many hands exist; here is one and here is another (and there is another, and so on). Of course, while Moore knows that, logically-speaking, one instance of an external object is enough to “prove” the existence of external things, I want to suggest that he ignores this in PEW because he’s focused on answering what he thinks is the more perspicuous question—the Many-None question.

Notice that, so far, our answer is in keeping with the Simple Answer. Why two hands and not one? One version of the Simple Answer says that it’s

because it's a natural way of answering the question of whether there are any external *things*. The Simple Answer technically gets this right, but fails to fill in the details as we have done here: Moore invokes two external things and not one because he takes himself to be answering the Many-None question which explicitly calls for *more than one*.

While we've undone some of the mystery behind Moore's two hands, the answer we've offered here is far from complete; indeed, it's part of a much larger, more elaborate answer that will unravel in the pages to come. The question that confronts us now is this: what exactly for Moore is philosophically significant about the Many-None question? Given that the One-Many assumption is at the heart of the Many-None question, we can answer that question by going right to the source: by taking a closer look at the One-Many assumption. Doing so will help clarify why the Many-None question is significant for Moore as well as bring out further philosophical complexities between Moore's two hands and the proof itself.

3. Massive Experience

If I know one, I certainly know many. At least so says Moore's One-Many assumption. But is this assumption plausible? Moore mentions it each time he mentions the Many-None question; it's also the assumption which underlies the Many-None question, a question whose importance Moore takes time to emphasize twice in Part III of LP.¹⁰ Moore obviously, then, must have thought that the One-Many assumption had *some* plausibility.

Unfortunately, Moore's final gloss of the assumption, "If I know *one*, I certainly know many," doesn't give us too much to work with, making the assumption hard to evaluate for plausibility. It will help, then, to sharpen the One-Many assumption slightly so we can better see what role it was playing for Moore in LP and ultimately how exactly it fits into PEW. We first encounter a version of the assumption in LP 176, so we can do no better than to start there.

Are there any bodies? Are there any changes? These are ontological questions: questions about what exists. In LP 176, Moore reports that when

¹⁰ See the two passages from LP above: LP 181, 176.

such questions are raised in philosophy it is “for some reason always assumed that ... if there are any bodies, there are certainly many; if any changes, certainly many” (LP 176).

Here, for the first time, we encounter a version of the One-Many assumption: If there are any *Fs*, certainly there are many *Fs*. Since LP 176 deals with questions of metaphysics, ontological questions specifically, this version of the assumption is given an ontological gloss. And glossed this way, the idea is, I think, quite natural. The world comes furnished with many *things*, many *kinds* of things, and many *instances* of those kinds. There is not just one kind of plant, but multiple kinds with multiple instances: there is more than one spider plant inside and outside your home, stubborn milkweeds in the garden, mulefats down the street and 50 miles from here, Ox tongues in South Africa, and so on (of course, you may not know them under those descriptions specifically). Hence, if there are plants, there are certainly many of them *just given the way the world is*: the world is such that it contains more than one plant (and certainly more than one kind of plant).

A moment’s reflection, however, and even this version of the One-Many assumption can seem implausible. Consider the question of whether there are any mice in the basement or whether there are North Korean weapons of mass destruction. Is it true that the world is such that it contains more than one North Korean nuke or more than one mouse in the basement? Maybe not. There might, after all, be only one nuke in North Korea and only one basement mouse. So “If there are any *Fs*, certainly there are many *Fs*” seems false as a general principle.

At this level of generality, then, the One-Many assumption seems implausible. But its plausibility can be better brought out by moving to a higher level of generality, by reminding ourselves of the *kinds* of questions that Moore was considering in LP 181 and 176 above. The questions that Moore had in mind aren’t questions like “Are there any mice in the basement?” or “Are there North Korean weapons of mass destruction?” (or their epistemic variants) but questions of a more general form, questions like, “Does matter exist?” “Are there changes?” “Are there material bodies?” “Do other people exist?” (and their epistemic variants) and so on.

Notice two things about such questions. Not only is it hard to answer such questions in the negative (that is, it’s hard to plausibly deny that matter exists, that there are changes, material bodies, or that other people exist, etc.) but,

more to our point here, it's hard to claim that one knows *only one* instance of each kind in question *unlike* the less general, more specific questions about basement mice and North Korean nukes. And it's this—the plausibility of *knowing* more than one instance (where what's known is suitably restricted to the relevant kinds)—that seems to be captured by the epistemic version of the One-Many assumption presented by Moore one lecture later in LP 181:

And as I emphasized before, the question is always not: Do I know *at least one* such thing, or none? But: Do I know *many* or none? it being taken for granted that, if I know *one*, I certainly know many (LP 181, emphasis added).

If I know one plant, I certainly know many; for the world is such that it would be highly unusual for me to know *just one*; my evidence for the existence of plants is so abundant that the world would have to have been quite different in order for me to know just *one* plant and not many. And what goes for plants, goes for material things too:

That there have been many bodies is “presupposed” by us all in ordinary life, in the sense that we have all, in ordinary life, often *observed* facts from which, taken together, it strictly *follows* that there have been many bodies. For instance, I at this moment *observe* that there are a good many human bodies in this room, a good many desks, a good many articles of clothing, a blackboard. And I have very often in the past made similar observations. I've observed in walking down a street that there were a good many houses in it; in looking at a wood that there were a good many trees in it; in looking at a sea-beach that there were a great many pebbles on it (LP 176).

Moore talks about how he *observes* a “good many” of desks, articles of clothing, houses, trees, pebbles, and so on. His evidence is diverse and the instances he observes are multiple. “Good many” is doing a lot of epistemic work here. Moore, in other words, is suggesting that his observations aren't just one-off anomalies. Rather, the evidence for the existence of matter is abundant, well-confirmed, and publicly available. There are a *good many* of well-confirmed instances that speak in favor of such knowledge; so much so

that it would be quite odd (although perhaps not impossible) to claim that one knows of only one instance of a material thing:

It seems not too much to say that *all* adult human beings have frequently observed facts of this sort [i.e., facts about there being a *good many* of material bodies]: so that in the case of each of us, it follows from many facts that he has observed, taken together, that there have been large numbers of bodies in the Universe, whatever else may be true of it (Ibid).

Moore seems to be saying something like this. Perhaps at one point in our lives (very early on in our developmental stage, say) it would have been plausible to have known just one and not many; but it would be strange indeed for a fully cognizant, rational, adult human being to profess knowledge of *only one* material thing: one plant, one chair, one person, one change, etc.; indeed, it might strike one as incredulous given just how “well-stocked” reality comes with such things. So, while knowing one doesn’t *entail* knowing many, certainly it would be hard to know just one and not also know many (again, where what’s known is restricted to the relevant kinds).

We can capture all of this by putting things this way: like all of us, Moore has *massive experience* that speaks to the existence of certain kinds of things, things like matter, other people, changes, and so on.¹¹ I don’t just know that one material thing exists, but many: the plants outside my window, the chairs at the coffee shop, the stones on the beach; I don’t just know that one person exists (me, say), but many: my friends, parents, cousins, and lovers; I don’t just know that one change exists, but many: that I was once small and now big, that it was once sunny and now dark, that the candle was once straight and is now bent, and so on.

The catalog of examples, the multiple instances—the inculcations of massive experience—is carried out by Moore in PEW six years later. Early on in PEW, well before he presents his infamous two-handed proof, Moore writes:

My body, the bodies of other men, the bodies of animals, plants
of all sorts, stones, mountains, the sun, the moon, stars, planets,

¹¹ I borrow the term “massive experience” from John Norton’s lecture notes on enumerative induction. See Norton (ms).

houses, and other buildings, manufactured articles of all sorts — chairs, tables, pieces of paper, etc. are all of them ‘things which are to be met with in space’ [i.e., external things] (PEW 150).¹²

Do I know *many* external things or none at all? This question is the product of both Moore’s Real Question and Many-None question. And, of course, given that Moore believes he knows many external things, he answers in a way that’s most natural: not *just* by invoking two hands (that comes later), but by proceeding to enumerate a list of external things he knows exist: his body, the bodies of other men, the bodies of animals, plants of all sorts, stones, mountains, the sun, the moon, stars, planets, houses, and so on. For, per the One-Many assumption, if you know one, you certainly know many.

By waving his two hands around and overwhelming the reader with a litany of examples, Moore is quite literally trying to *show us* how we have massive experience—a multitude of diverse, well-confirmed, publicly available observational evidence—that confirms the existence of external things. Moore is trying to get us to see (again, quite literally) that this is how we come to *know* that such things exist. Indeed, one natural way of *displaying* such knowledge is to do precisely as Moore does: by pointing out and enumerating many of the instances you take yourself to know.¹³

And all of this flows from the One-Many assumption. If you know one, certainly you know many; and if you know many, it’s because you probably have massive experience of the kinds in question. Hence, the proper question is: Do you know many or none at all?

So, when properly restricted, what makes the One-Many assumption plausible is the fact that we have massive experience of certain kinds of things: matter, changes, material bodies, other people, and so on. And recall that what it means to have massive experience of such things is just to have an abundance of well-confirmed evidence that speaks to their existence.

Importantly, the evidence here doesn’t seem to be particularly esoteric (in

¹² Of course, as Moore is at pains to point out in PEW, not *all* external things are things which are to be met with in space. Animal pains, for example, as Moore plausibly suggests, are things which are external to our minds, but not the sort of things that which could be met with in space.

¹³ See Neta (2007: 78–83) who makes a similar point about Moore’s proof functioning as a “display” of knowledge.

the sense that it doesn't presuppose or otherwise require specialized knowledge or training); nor does it seem particularly inaccessible (in the sense that it doesn't require sophisticated tools or technology to access or uncover). Again, as Moore emphasizes, "*all* adult human beings have frequently observed facts of this sort" (LP 176).

This seems to go some way toward explaining the plausibility of the (restricted) One-Many assumption, or why it is that we have better evidence for the existence of certain kinds of things (typically very general kinds, say, plants and animals) and not others (typically more specific kinds, say, Cobra lilies and Spoon-billed sandpipers). It explains, in other words, why we seem more certain that there exist many plants and many animals and less certain, comparatively-speaking, that there exist many Cobra lilies and many Spoon-billed sandpipers: the evidence we have for the former is, generally-speaking, better, more abundant, less esoteric, than the evidence we have for the latter. This may be due to certain ontological factors: there may just be comparatively less instances of the latter (think of red diamonds or endangered species) or to certain epistemic limitations: there may be many instances, a massive plurality even, but the evidence we have for them isn't immediately apparent or easily accessible (think of cells or atoms).

Moore certainly doesn't consider these issues to the extent that we have here, so it's not clear how far along with us he would have gone. He does, however, provide us with a hint of sorts. At the top of LP 176, he says, "That there have been many bodies is 'presupposed' by us all in ordinary life." Now, by "presupposed" Moore doesn't mean "assumed." In fact, he is careful to note that he *doesn't* mean the latter; he simply thinks "presupposed" better expresses what he has in mind than "assumed" (LP 175).

Why "presupposed" over "assumed"? In fact, Moore goes on to say that neither word is fully apt and that there isn't "*any* single word which will express what I mean" (LP 175). So Moore simply opts for the former because it only *slightly* better expresses what he means than the latter.

Moore's dissatisfaction with both words, however, is highly suggestive. What Moore seems to be groping at here is the idea that propositions like "There have been many bodies" or "There have been many changes" (i.e., propositions about *very general* kinds) are propositions so deep and fundamental, so massively confirmed and known, that we sometimes *forget* we know them; that is, we simply "presuppose" the existence of bodies, changes,

etc., in much of our inquiry into the world.¹⁴ Indeed, one can read the beginning of Moore's other monumental paper, "A Defence of Common Sense" (DCS, 1925) as an attempt to make some of these presuppositions explicit (almost as an attempt to remind us, idealists and skeptics included, of what we all already know). On the very first page, before enumerating his long list of "Common Sense" propositions, Moore warns the reader that his list contains propositions "which may seem, at first sight, such obvious truisms as not to be worth stating" (DCS 106). And what *are* these obvious truisms hardly worth stating? Here is a sampling:

- There exists at present a human body which is my body.
- This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continuously ever since, though not without undergoing changes.
- Many human bodies other than mine have before now lived on the earth.
- Many human beings other than myself have before now perceived, dreamed, and felt.
- The earth has existed for many years past.

Moore goes on to say that "each of *us* ... has frequently *known*, with regard to *himself* or *his* body and the time at which he knew it, everything which, in writing down my list of propositions [above], I was claiming to know about *myself* or *my* body and the time at which I wrote that proposition down" (DCS 109).

¹⁴ It's because of these features that some, like the Wittgenstein of *On Certainty* and the contemporary hinge epistemologies inspired by him, have gone on to think of these propositions in a special way—as *hinges*: neither true nor false, known nor unknown, justified nor unjustified, but nevertheless the sort of things that make possible the rationality of our epistemic practices. See, for example, Coliva (2015) and Pritchard (2015).

I'm inclined, however, towards a different story for why our knowledge of these "hinge" propositions can sometimes seem odd. Greco's explanation closely tracks my own intuitions about this: "[W]e don't *notice* the processes by which we arrive at such knowledge... [either because] we already have such knowledge early on, as we implicitly extend and fill in what we explicitly know ... [or] we come to have such knowledge as soon as the right question is raised, by means of easy inference from what we already know" (2016: 315).

If Moore knows the obvious truisms above and if others know the obvious truisms above (as Moore claims) then knowledge of such propositions would seem to constitute common knowledge of sorts—but of a very specific sort: the sort of common knowledge that is deep and fundamental, the sort that we forget we know, the sort that Moore says is often “‘presupposed’ by us all in ordinary life.” (Notice too that each of the propositions above, in one way or another, entail the very general propositions Moore says are presupposed by all of us from LP 176 above: that there is matter, changes, material bodies, other people, and so on.) So if I know one, I certainly know many, and I know many because I have massive experience which culminates in a special kind of common knowledge—*common sense* knowledge, we might say.

Where are we so far in the story? Early on we said that Moore opts for two hands and not one because the question he’s trying to answer is, in fact, the Many-None question: Do we know many hands exist (i.e., external things) or none at all? This question takes its shape from the One-Many assumption underlying it: If you know one, you certainly know many. But this assumption is only plausible once restricted to a class of very general kinds: matter, changes, material bodies, other people, and so on. Once understood this way, however, it’s easy to see why Moore answers the Many-None question in the positive: Moore knows many hands exist because he has *massive experience* of such things—external things, more broadly—and this massive experience plausibly constitutes a special kind of common knowledge: *common sense* knowledge, i.e., the sort that Moore says is “presupposed” by all of us. One way of displaying this common sense knowledge is to do as Moore does with his infamous proof.

Here’s a slightly different way of telling it, reverse-engineering the order of explanation. Moore starts off with massive experience of certain kinds of things—general kinds of things like matter, changes, material bodies, other people, etc.—and this massive experience culminates in a special form of common knowledge: common sense knowledge. This common sense knowledge gives rise to the One-Many assumption (if you know one, you certainly know many) which gives rise to the Many-None question (do you know many or none at all?) which is naturally answered in the affirmative by Moore and is displayed by pointing out the many instances he takes himself to know. Or in Moore’s words: here is one hand and here is another.

Now, up to this point, the external *world* hasn’t yet entered the picture.

Again, despite the title of Moore's paper, Moore doesn't seem to have the external world in focus; while he has offered plenty of proof for the existence of external things, he hasn't offered any proof for the existence of the external world (recall the assumption from earlier that an external world seemingly requires more than one external thing). What gives? Here finally we have an explanation: the evidence Moore has accumulated—the hands, the shoes, the socks, the soap-bubbles—isn't proof yet of an external world. Although Moore is confident that such a proof can eventually be given (this is implied by the title of his paper) he's careful not to stick his neck out too far, opting instead to show how we have massive experience of external things—a significant result in and of itself. There is a sense, then, in which Moore's proof is exceedingly modest: Moore isn't prepared yet to offer a proof of an external world; his evidence for the external world is only partial, only enough to secure the existence of external *things* (although, again, he's confident that we can offer such a proof once our total evidence is taken into account).

How does this square with the Simple Answer? It turns out that proving that there are multiple things *is* central to Moore's proof but not necessarily for the reasons the Simple Answer offered us. That is, it's not necessarily because Moore is trying to prove the existence of the external *world* (although the implication is present given the massive experience Moore has accrued for the existence of external *things*). Of course, logically-speaking, one instance is enough for proof in some sense and Moore knows this. Proving, for instance, that there is at least one black raven is enough to show that some ravens are black. But it would be nice if our evidence was more robust: more black raven sightings would be *better* evidence that some ravens are black. Moore, I claim, is up to something like this in PEW; he doesn't want to show us that our evidence for the existence of external things is merely accidental or anomalous. No: there is not *just one* measly external thing in existence but *many* and *multiple* external things. Moore's goal, then, is to demonstrate that our evidence for the existence of external things is abundant, well-confirmed, and publicly available: it's common sense knowledge that there are external things—we have *massive experience* of them!

Before moving on to the next section, it's crucial we circle back around to the questions Moore answers in the affirmative and what they suggest about the way he understands them.

Does matter exist? Are there changes? Are there material bodies? Do

other people exist? Are there external things? For Moore, given our massive experience of matter, changes, material bodies, other people, and external things, it's fairly straightforward to see that such things exist and that we know they exist. Yet, Moore's seemingly placid, flippant, flatfooted way of answering such questions is in tension with how many view these questions: as hard, vexing, *philosophical* questions. We're told that we're supposed to struggle with such questions, that their answers aren't obvious, that things are much more complicated than they seem. Why, then, does Moore answer these questions the way he does? After all, it's not as if he thinks such questions lack meaning or are nonsensical or anything like this.

Did Moore just think that such questions were trivial? It's tempting to think that he did and that this is why he answers such questions the way he does. But I don't think this accurately captures Moore's attitude towards such questions. Although Moore thought these questions were "quite easy to answer, with certainty, in the affirmative," (CR 228) this hardly implies that he thought such questions were trivial. To describe such questions as "trivial" makes them seem insignificant or unimportant, and I don't think Moore thought they were. Moreover, diagnosing them as "trivial" doesn't really get at the heart of the matter: if they're trivial, what exactly makes them so?

The correct answer is (what might very well be) the standard answer: Moore answers these questions the way he does because he thinks such questions are *empirical* questions of sorts, questions capable of being settled in all the ordinary, empirical ways. But the many who offer this answer either don't say much more than this or they don't explicitly say that Moore thought of such questions in this way (that is, they don't provide evidence that Moore held such a view). Perhaps, it's just obvious that Moore thought of them in this way, as empirical questions that demand empirical answers. But even putting things this way isn't entirely accurate. So, obvious or not, I think it's worth digging into the details here. We'll see that when we do we'll have a better appreciation of the significance of Moore's *two* hands and a better understanding of why many have found his proof so puzzling.

4. An Empirical “Proof”

In Notebook V of his commonplace book, Moore kicks off what is a brief, one-page entry titled “External Objects,” with the following question: “Is the statement ‘There are external objects?’ ‘empirical?’”¹⁵ Immediately, however, he begins to address a slightly different issue and the question gets left unanswered.

Although this entry is dated approximately three years after the publication of PEW, there’s no doubt that the question was on Moore’s mind much earlier than this.¹⁶ There’s also excellent reason to suspect that Moore thought the question concerning the external world, along with other similar questions about matter, changes, material bodies, other people, etc., were *empirical* questions (although this claim will require some qualification).

Let’s start with the most obvious evidence of this, first in PEW and then in the Schilpp volume, *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore* (PGM, 1942).

Recall in PEW when Moore compares his own proof of an external world to an ordinary, empirical “proof” one might give of three misprints:

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! ... 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 (PEW 167).

[B]ut I do want to emphasise that, so far as I can see, we all of us do constantly take proofs of this sort [i.e., the proof of three misprints] as absolutely conclusive proofs of certain conclusions — as finally settling certain questions, as to which we were previously in doubt (Ibid).

¹⁵ Moore (1962: 20, Notebook V, c. 1942–43).

¹⁶ That this question was on Moore’s mind wasn’t unusual for the time—the question was very much in the water. See later on in this section where I briefly discuss Ambrose’s and Wittgenstein’s views on the matter.

Moore hints at the congruency between his proof of an external world and the sort of empirical proof one might put to work in ordinary life. “[S]urely that is a method by which it *might* be proved!” Moore exclaims, emphasizing that we ordinarily regard such proofs as being highly effective and reliable, “as finally settling certain questions, as to which we were previously in doubt.” We rely on these and similar proofs to learn about misprints on a page, diseases someone has contracted, and the number of planets contained within our galaxy. The implication is that Moore’s proof of the external world is intended to be methodologically of a piece with such proofs and should assuage our doubts in similar ways (at least Moore hopes).

But Moore is even more explicit about this in PGM, which was published only three years after PEW and after Moore had some time to reflect on the lively discussion his hands generated:

Why should it not be the case that from his false non-empirical statement that “There are external objects” is self-contradictory, the philosopher invalidly infers the empirical statement “There are no external objects?” This seems to me to be what has actually happened; and that, therefore, philosophers who say “There are no external objects” are making a false empirical statement, though they are *also* making a false non-empirical one, namely that “There are external objects” is self-contradictory (PGM 672, emphasis added).

Here, Moore just comes out and says it: that there are external things is an empirical claim.

The evidence here seems decisive enough, but if we go back a few years we find that Moore’s views are more subtle than this and that there is—dare we say—a *naturalistic* current that runs through Moore’s treatment of such philosophical issues.¹⁷ Embedding Moore’s proof within this broadly

¹⁷ Just what kind of naturalism? Though this question can’t be taken up here (cf. Ch. 4 & 5), there is a very real sense in which Moore is a methodological (as opposed to ontological) naturalist of sorts, something I hope to bring out in the passages to follow (albeit indirectly). That is, Moore seems to understand philosophy and science as continuous with one another such that philosophical claims (many of them anyway) are treated essentially like empirical claims responsive to empirical evidence (this is at least how Moore seems to understand

naturalistic framework can help us better appreciate where Moore was coming from.

Return again to Part III of LP (delivered in 1933–34). This time we find Moore face-to-face with various questions concerning methodology. Are questions like “Is Matter real?” “Is Change real?” questions for the philosopher? Or are they questions that our everyday observations and science can answer? Moore suggests that it’s the latter:

The props. “That many bodies have existed in the Universe” & “that many changes have taken place in it” are therefore entailed by things we have all *observed* (LP 177).

In discussing such questions about the nature of Reality as a whole as “Is Matter real” & “Is change real”, philosophers have been discussing questions to which one particular answer, the affirmative answer, follows both (a) from things we all observe in ordinary life & (b) from established conclusions of many sciences. And I’m emphasising this because it seems to me to have a very important bearing on the relation of philosophy to the sciences; & therefore on the general conception of philosophy (Ibid).

Moore acknowledges that one particular answer to such questions (his preferred answer, “the affirmative answer”) has important implications for the relationship between philosophy and the sciences and philosophy as a whole. This acknowledgment is important. Moore is registering the fact that the method he’s partial to for answering such questions—the method of everyday, empirical observation and the sciences more broadly—has radical implications for the way philosophical problems are handled and addressed.

Yet, how could Moore think that the aforementioned methods are appropriate? After all, such questions are discussed mostly and almost exclusively *by* philosophers. The sciences don’t raise or discuss such questions, so why think that *their* methods yield any fruit in this context?

philosophical views entailing the non-existence of matter, change, material things, other people, and external things, i.e., as *false* empirical claims). With his emphasis on common sense, however, perhaps it’s more precise to describe Moore as a naturalist of the following bent: a non-reductive, common sense empiricist, one who stresses the role that common sense and sensory experience play in philosophical and scientific inquiry.

Moore grants this, “It’s true that no special science raise these abstract questions themselves” but then immediately says that it’s “obviously rather a subterfuge” to argue that such questions can’t be settled by the sciences simply on the grounds that such questions aren’t explicitly raised by them (LP 178). It’s a subterfuge, according to Moore, because it’s clear that the sciences (coupled with our ordinary, everyday observations) *can* and *do* settle such questions, even if indirectly. How? Because the existence of matter, changes, material bodies, other people, external things, etc., just follow from both “things we all observe in ordinary life” and the “established conclusions of many sciences”:

One science, e.g., has established that thousands of years ago there existed large numbers of enormous reptiles, ichthyosauri & such like. This is a genuine conclusion of a science & an established one; & from it there follows that there have been many bodies in the Universe. Another science has established that more than thousands of years ago just as now there were millions of stars. This is a genuine conclusion of astronomy; & from it again there follows that there have been many bodies in the Universe (LP 177).

It’s true that *because* such general “abstract” questions often get raised in philosophy that they *seem* exclusive to the philosophical enterprise and not the empirical sciences. This isn’t especially unusual; for it goes both ways. There are questions that seem to belong exclusively to the sciences that philosophy surely has no business trying to answer: “It’s admitted that it’s not the business of philos. to discuss whether millions of stars existed a million years ago: that must be left to astronomy” (LP 178).

There is a division of labor implicit here: philosophical questions are addressed and answered by the philosophical method and empirical questions are addressed and answered by the empirical method.

But Moore wants to blow this all up; he wants to put pressure on the distinction by calling into question the methods and scope of both philosophy and science. The point is metaphilosophical: why not think that some of the questions philosophers raise *can* be settled by ordinary, empirical experience and the sciences? That such questions aren’t explicitly raised in these domains doesn’t necessarily preclude such questions from being addressed or answered

by them. It *could* turn out, for example, that determining whether matter or material bodies exist is little different from determining whether there are any non-black ravens or whether a straight line can be drawn between any two points: just look and see.

Here's another way of appreciating what Moore is gesturing at. Philosophical questions often seem to invoke highly general kinds like "matter," "changes," "material bodies," "people," "external things," and so on. This generality is, in one sense, what gives such questions a distinctly philosophical feel. Consider, for example, the following questions (ordered by increasing generality):

- Are there Cobra lilies?
- Are there plants?
- Are there material things?
- Are there external things?

The first two questions seem distinctly empirical; the last two, philosophical. But if there are Cobra lilies, then there are plants, and if there are plants, then there are material things, and if there are material things, then there are external things.¹⁸ One might think that if the latter two claims are entailed by the former, and the former are empirical claims, then so too are the latter. That is, if one were to *deny* that there were external things or material things, one would also be denying that there were plants and Cobra lilies—but then one would be denying a straightforward empirical fact!¹⁹

So these questions only *seem* philosophical because of their high generality. But don't let that fool you; their generality isn't incompatible with them being

¹⁸ Keep in mind, however, that not all external things are material things (i.e., concrete things to be met with in space) given that, for example, animal pains are external but, arguably, not material. See footnote 12.

¹⁹ This is essentially the force of Moore's point from earlier in §2, captured by what we called Moore's Real Question in the passage from LP 181: "I certainly don't know for certain that other people have had experiences, unless I know the truth in particular cases." But it's perhaps best brought out by Moore's criticisms of Bradley in CR 209–10. Recall Moore's incredulity when pointing out what he thinks is entailed by Bradley's view, namely, the falsity of a large number of well-confirmed empirical facts: that nothing ever happens before or after anything, that nothing is ever simultaneous with anything else, that nothing is ever past or future, and so on.

empirical. As Barry Stroud reminds us, “The term ‘external thing’ as Moore understands it is just a more general empirical term than ‘dime’, ‘coin’, and ‘piece of money’ ...” (1984: 93)

Moore therefore seems to want to reject the idea that the philosophical method is best suited to answer such questions. And it’s not best suited to answer such questions because such questions aren’t philosophical questions. While such questions have historically been discussed by philosophy, this is only because they’ve been discussed in certain sorts of ways:

It can’t, I think, be denied that these questions [Is Matter real? Is Change real? Etc.] have been discussed by philos., & if you discuss them *in certain sorts of ways*, but only in certain sorts of ways, you are doing philos. (LP 176).

But just because such questions have been discussed in certain sorts of ways, i.e., in a philosophical way, by using a particular a priori method, doesn’t mean that the *questions* are themselves philosophical.²⁰

It seems to me that we can only allow these questions to belong to philos., if we insist that you will only be doing philos. if you discuss them *by a particular method*. And then the question arises whether the method used by the sciences isn’t the best & the only proper method for settling such questions (LP 178).

The philosophical method seems to lead to a denial of the kinds of things that we not only have good evidence for but that we *know* exist: matter, changes, material bodies, other people, external things, and so on. Moore puts the point rhetorically:²¹

²⁰ See Doulas (ms-b) for further discussion of this passage, specifically how Moore’s treatment of such questions relates to that of Carnap’s and Wittgenstein’s.

²¹ He also makes a similar point with regards to mathematics: “Surely it’s the business of the mathematicians to decide whether particular mathematical propositions are true? And if so what’s the use of the philosopher discussing whether *any* mathematical propositions are true? Suppose he decides they are, can he give better reasons than the mathematicians give? Suppose he decides they aren’t. He’s contradicting the mathematicians. And aren’t they the better judges?” (LP 185).

Curiously, we find David Lewis echoing something similar in *Parts of Classes*: “I’m

The sciences *do* say not only p ,... but there's *good evidence for p* : and it has happened that p belongs to a class of propositions with regard to which philosophers have concluded: We *never* have good evidence for a proposition of that sort. Isn't the fact that the sciences say: Such-and-such *is* good evidence for so-and-so, a reason for saying: It *is* good evidence? (LP 189).

The passage above can easily be read as an unmotivated appeal to the sciences. But Moore isn't saying that because science says that p , p is true. Rather, he's saying that the methods by which one reaches certain conclusions about the world by way of everyday experience and the sciences seem more rationally compelling than the methods by which philosophers reach their conclusions. Perhaps this is why Moore in the first place suspects that such questions aren't philosophical but empirical.

Moore is often chided for missing the philosopher's point but from Moore's perspective it's the philosopher who misses Moore's point. For the philosopher fails to recognize that their methods are ill-suited to the questions they are trying to answer. Imagine, for example, a philosopher who argues for the existence of material objects on purely a priori, philosophical grounds. If the existence of material objects already follows from ordinary experience and the sciences, "what's the use of his going over the ground again, & proving again what the scientists have already proved?" (LP 178). Yet, while the philosopher will surely admit that it's none of his business settling empirical questions, such as whether millions of stars existed a million years ago,

how can it be his business to discuss whether it's true that many material things have existed in the Universe or none have? If he comes to the conclusion they have, he will be merely saying something which the astronomers have already proved; if he says none have, he will be contradicting the astronomers (Ibid).

moved to laughter at the thought of how presumptuous it would be to reject mathematics for philosophical reasons. How would you like the job of telling the mathematicians that they must change their ways, and abjure countless errors, now that *philosophy* has discovered that there are no classes?" (1991: 59). The connection here may not be entirely coincidental given Moore's (admittedly unobvious) influence on Lewis's method. See Nolan (2005: 203) and Kelly (2005: 203, fn. 1) for discussion.

While Moore doesn't specifically mention the question concerning the external world in these passages, clearly such a question is among the very general, "abstract" philosophical questions he thinks can be settled both by everyday and scientific evidence.

Of course, nowhere does Moore make the case for this; nowhere does he specifically *argue* that the methods of science and everyday empirical observation *are* better or preferable to the philosophical method. But the sort of proof he offers in PEW, coupled with the passages from PGM and LP above, all plausibly point in that direction. Indeed, after asking what the best and proper method for answering such questions is, Moore then asks: "How is a philosopher to set about proving that there have been many material things in the Universe, or that there have been changes?" (LP 179). And once again Moore leaves the question unanswered. It's tempting, however—almost irresistibly so—to read PEW as Moore's answer to this question six years later.

Now, if we go along with Moore and understand such questions as empirical questions and such claims as empirical claims, we must admit that, like all empirical claims, they could be wrong; such claims could be falsified or disconfirmed. But how exactly could one falsify or disconfirm that there are external things? How could one empirically show that there *aren't* such things? The impossibility of such a task would, no doubt, demonstrate that the claim, "there are external things," is non-empirical; perhaps metaphysical, perhaps nonsense.

These questions are taken up by Alice Ambrose in her contribution to PGM, "Moore's Proof of an External World." Ambrose takes issue, amongst other things, with Moore's method: that one can empirically *prove* the existence of external objects. Such claims, she thinks, can't be empirical but metaphysical. She asks us to consider the following example which is meant to cast doubt on Moore's idea: "Consider now teaching someone the phrase 'external object'. The difficulty would be that one could not *point out* anything to him which was not an external object" (PGM 406).

Consider the claim that there are no non-black ravens. The raven paradox notwithstanding, disproving this claim involves finding one non-black raven. This is an empirical way of investigating the world if any. But according to Ambrose we can't do the same when it comes to external objects. While one can prove, for example, that a coin exists by producing a dime, Ambrose

argues it's unclear how exactly one could prove that an external object exists (or doesn't exist) in the same way. For the same evidence—Moore's hands, say—can be appealed to by someone who didn't believe in the existence of external objects, which would make Moore's very appeal to such evidence (i.e., his proof of two hands and hence his proof of external things) question-begging in some sense.

Being a student of Wittgenstein, Ambrose's contentions with Moore's method can be understood in a Wittgensteinian light. And for Wittgenstein (and perhaps by extension, Ambrose) Moore has made a particularly disastrous blunder: he has conflated a grammatical question with a factual or empirical question. Of course, Wittgenstein agrees with Moore that questions like "Is there a chair in this room?" are empirical questions, questions that one can answer through observation and testimony and the like. But this isn't so for questions like "Are there physical objects?" or "Is there an external world?" For such questions, according to Wittgenstein, are senseless, pseudo-propositions: nonsense.²² As Wittgenstein says in the *Tractatus*: "So one cannot, e.g. say 'There are objects' as one says 'There are books' " (T 4.1272).

Yet, for Moore, this is precisely something one *can* say. Moore doesn't register Wittgenstein's distinction here between grammatical questions and empirical questions. Nor does he think of his "proof" as requiring any sort of transcendental maneuver. In this way, Moore has also answered Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* when Wittgenstein asks:

...[D]oes Moore want to say that knowing that here is his hand is different in kind from knowing the existence of the planet Saturn? Otherwise it would be possible to point out the discovery of the planet Saturn to the doubters and say that its existence has been proved, and hence the existence of the external world as well (OC 20).

Indeed, Moore wants to say precisely this:

I've insisted the sciences give indirect proofs of this [i.e., external things], by proving that particular material things have existed: I

²² Although this doesn't necessarily mean that Wittgenstein thinks there are no objects. See Coliva (ms) for discussion.

instanced the proof of the existence of Plesiosauri, Ichthyosauri, etc.; & of the existence of millions of stars 10,000 years ago (LP 194).

In this respect, then, Moore's proof is perfectly banal: we come to find out that there are external objects by all the usual everyday, empirical ways. In fact, Moore thinks there is a procedure in place here for empirically discriminating between external things (coins) and non-external things (after-images). In response to Ambrose, Moore writes:

One *can* point out to a person an object which is *not* an external object by the method which I suggested just now for finding an object of the sort which I should call a "sense-datum." You can say to him: "Look at a bright light for a little while; then close your eyes; the round blue patch you will then see is not an external object." After-images, seen with closed eyes, are *not* external objects; and you *can* arrange that a person should see an after-image. And it seems to me that the contrast with objects of this sort enters into the meaning of "external object" (PGM 671).²³

Moore's idea is highly suggestive and can be pushed further with the caveat that the further we push, the further we risk putting words into Moore's mouth.

I think Moore's response to Ambrose above hints at an intriguing way of reconceiving the debate between Moore, the realist, and one of his opponents:

²³ We hear something similar from Austin, no shy admirer of Moore ("Moore is my man") many years later. Taking aim at the argument that delusive and veridical experiences are qualitatively indistinguishable, Austin writes: "[W]e have the phrase 'a dream-like quality'; some waking experiences are said to have this dream-like quality, ... But of course, if the fact here alleged *were* a fact, the phrase would be perfectly meaningless, because applicable to everything. If dreams were not 'qualitatively' different from waking experiences, then *every* waking experience would be like a dream; the dream-like quality would be, not difficult to capture, but impossible to avoid" (1962: 48–49)

We can understand Moore here in a similar way: there is already a distinction in place that we have a good handle on that allows us to discriminate between things independent of our minds and perceptions (external objects) and things that are dependent on them (such as after-images).

the idealist. Given that Moore sees the issue of whether there are any external things as an empirical one, he sees his proof as demonstrating the falsity of idealism. Once the dialectic is reconceived of in this way, however, the idealist incurs the following burden: the idealist must offer up empirical evidence that could falsify or disconfirm the thesis that there are any external things. And what could this falsifying or disconfirming evidence be? To some ears, like Ambrose's, the fact that there seems to be no straightforward falsifying or disconfirming evidence makes vivid what's at stake: that the issue isn't an empirical one but a metaphysical one.

But this is too quick. While falsification is sometimes straightforward—spotting a non-black raven surely disproves the claim “there are no non-black ravens”—it's certainly not always (perhaps not even often!) the case that falsification is so uncomplicated. Take Euclid's postulate that we can always draw a straight line between any two points. This postulate seems well-corroborated: we allegedly have *massive experience* that speaks in its favor. And yet it's false, but in an entirely subtle way. John Norton explains:

Einstein's general theory of relativity finally informs us that Euclid's geometry holds only approximately in our space. The deviations are only discernible by the most refined of observations. A ray of starlight grazes the edge of the sun and is momentarily visible in photographic plates taken at the time of a solar eclipse. The photos reveal that the ray is slightly deflected as the light falls into the sun. Only half the deflection is due to that fall. The remainder is due to the slight deviation of the geometry of space from Euclidean near the sun (Norton, ms, footnote 3).

Falsification therefore ranges from the more simple and straightforward to the more subtle and complex.

I want to suggest that Moore had something very similar in mind in his response to Ambrose. Not the *very same* example, of course, but the idea that falsification may take incredibly complex and subtle forms, and given that we have an abundance of well-confirmed empirical evidence for the existence of external things, the burden therefore falls on the idealist to provide evidence (however subtle) that could potentially falsify this. It may not be obvious *how* to falsify the thesis that there are such external things, but that doesn't

mean it can't be done; that doesn't mean that the *question* concerning the external world is non-empirical—on the contrary, according to Moore.

So, why two socks, two shoes, two sheets of paper, two soap-bubbles, two plants, two dogs, two shadows, three misprints? Why a *good many* of human and animal bodies, chairs, desks, articles of clothing, houses, trees, pebbles, stones, mountains, stars, and planets? *Why two hands and not one?* The answer should now be simple. Moore is doing as anyone might do when trying to answer an empirical question: he's offering up empirical evidence—loads of it—in favor of the hypothesis that external things exist.

Moore's hands, then, have gone a long way. And they have yet one more way to go. Drawing on the claims developed in this paper, I want to now conclude with some reflections on why so many have been dumbfounded by Moore's proof. The diagnosis I offer departs from the more standard ones currently on offer which mostly focus on the proof's alleged circularity.²⁴

5. What's Puzzling About the Proof?

In an earlier part of LP, Part I, "Are Material Things Real?" (delivered in 1928–29), Moore considers how we might prove certain philosophical views false. The views Moore has in mind are idealist ones that are committed to saying that we are mistaken whenever we judge that rocks and tables are material, mind-independent things. Moore asks whether we can disprove such views and confidently answers: "I think we can" (LP 44).

How? Some criteria for refutation are given which interestingly prefigure the move Moore will eventually make eleven years later in PEW:

In order to refute a given prop. *q*, all that you need to do is to find some prop. *p*, which (1) you *know* to be true, which (2) is inconsistent with the prop. in question, & (3) is such that in arguing "Since *p* therefore not *q*" you are not arguing in a circle: e.g. in order to refute "There are no black swans" you have only to find a black swan, i.e. to find a prop. of the form "This is a swan & is black", which you *know* to be true (LP 44).

²⁴ See, for example, Wright (2004) and Coliva (2010). See also Doulas (ms-c) for further discussion.

Consider, for example, how Moore thinks we might refute the thesis that nothing has shape or size:

... I refute “Nothing has shape or size” by pointing to the prop. “This desk has shape & size”. Isn’t this a conclusive refutation? I think it is (LP 44).

But isn’t this circular? This is a worry almost everyone has about Moore’s official proof in PEW. And nowhere in PEW does Moore address this worry. It’s striking, then, that Moore *does* address such a worry in LP. In particular, he says that his refutation above—his “proof” that something *does* have shape and size, i.e., this desk—*isn’t* guilty of a *petitio principii*:

It is perfectly true that “This desk has shape” is something which can only be true if “Nothing has shape” is false, & you may perhaps say, if you like, that “something has shape” is *contained* in it. But I should be guilty of *petitio principii* only if my knowledge that this desk had shape was based on a prior knowledge that “Some things have shape”: only if we could say, “I shouldn’t have known this, if I hadn’t first known the other”. And obviously this isn’t true, any more than the knowledge, on the part of the first person who saw a black swan, “This is a swan & is black” was based on a prior knowledge “There are black swans” (LP 44–45).

Predictably, Moore likens the issue here to an empirical one, one concerning knowing an empirical fact such as “There are black swans.” That is, when we come to know some generalization, whether existential or universal (e.g., that some things have shape and size or that all things have shape and size) we come to have that knowledge on the basis of our knowledge of particular instances which support those generalizations. In other words, we come to know that some things have shape and size because we come to know that *this* desk here has shape and size and that *that* desk there has shape and size, and so on, such that the conjunction of all of our observations yields the conclusion that some (or all) things have shape and size. We have, in other words, *massive experience* that tells us that some things have shape and size. Our knowledge of the instances is *prior* to our knowledge of the

generalization. And this seems as it should be when it comes to our empirical knowledge: the only way to come to figure out whether some things have shape and size is to go out and observe some things that fit this description.

Bringing this back to Moore's opponent, the idealist: Moore is therefore claiming that there isn't anything question-begging about pointing to multiple instances of external things to refute the idea that there *aren't* said external things. For we first come to know that there are things like hands, shoes, socks, and soap-bubbles, and so on (and that there is a wide and diverse body of evidence that supports this knowledge) and on that basis therefore come to know that *there are external things*.

Moore's proof above, that something has shape and size, is identical in form to the proof he offers in PEW. If Moore thought the proof above wasn't circular or question-begging, then it's hard to imagine he thought the proof in PEW was circular or question-begging (why would he offer up such a proof in the first place if he did?).

Why, then, is Moore's proof so puzzling? Many have pointed to its flawed epistemic structure: Moore's proof seems question-begging or fails to transmit warrant, and so on.²⁵ But Moore obviously didn't think so. On my view, then, this isn't the proper diagnosis.

What's puzzling about Moore's proof is that Moore believes he can settle the question of the external world in an ordinary, empirical way when so many of us feel that the question can't be settled in such a way (since many of us feel the question isn't an empirical question but a metaphysical or philosophical one). Moore did himself a disservice by suppressing his methodological views from PEW which are on full display in LP (which was in many ways an early sketch of PEW). In PEW, Moore sets up his discussion in a traditionally philosophical way (think of the quote from Kant and the long and exacting conceptual analysis of Kantian jargon) and proceeds to answer what he makes us think is a traditionally philosophical question in a straightforward, empirical way. But this, understandably, leads to confusion and puzzlement. More precisely, then, Moore's failure is his misleading his reader into thinking that *he himself* thinks the question is a philosophical one when, really, he thinks it's an empirical one. Moore's failure is his failure to make explicit his metaphilosophy.

²⁵ See, for example, the references in footnote 24.

In this paper, I've attempted to make this metaphilosophy a little more explicit. Moore's second hand isn't a redundancy. If the story I've told in this paper is on the right track, what it reveals is a broadly naturalistic metaphilosophy: that we come to know a lot of things about the world through common sense experience, by looking and observing and doing experiments (both simple and sophisticated); that the methods we use change the kind of questions we're trying to answer and that the method we should prefer is that of ordinary, empirical observation to the method of philosophy (at least when it comes to answering certain questions); and that just as logical and mathematical matters can be known with certainty so too can empirical matters of fact. Though we are still entitled to question the upshot of all this, we can at least start to better appreciate the method behind Moore's seemingly mad naivety.*

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