What Moore's Hands Mean*

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

> I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, 'Here is one hand', and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, 'and here is another'. (1939, 165–66)

In fact, Moore does not limit himself to just his two hands. His famous essay also mentions two socks, two shoes, two sheets of paper, two plants, two dogs, two shadows, and two soap-bubbles. It is not so much that the examples here are curious—all are paradigmatic instances of external things—but the fact that Moore consistently presents them in pairs. Yet as Wittgenstein famously remarked: "If you do know that *here is one hand*, we'll grant you all the rest" (1969, §1). Wittgenstein's framing, perhaps unconscious, aligns with a broader consensus: one hand is proof enough! Indeed, as C. A. J. Coady has observed: "It remains something of a puzzle why Moore thinks he needs to show the existence of two hands when surely one would do" (2007, 116).

Different answers have long circulated as speculation among Moore scholars, enthusiasts, and curious students. The most notable, perhaps, is that Moore's two hands serve as a deliberate rebuke of monistic idealism.[1] But a definitive answer has eluded commentators. I provide one here.

Let us start with a different paper of Moore's. Three years before his enigmatic proof appeared, Moore published "Is Existence a Predicate?" (1936). A digression in the middle of that paper leads him to discussing Russell's analysis of propositional functions,[2] an analysis he is inclined to accept as true, with the following caveat:

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

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[1] Coady intimates something like this when he writes: "Perhaps the thought lingers in the background that a world must have some plurality!" (2007, 116). In his encyclopedia entry on monism, Jonathan Schaffer is even more explicit, suggesting that this pluralistic stance is a notable feature of Moore's proof, and may have even contributed to the demise of monism (2006 and 2010, 66). Though intriguing, without any evidential support (neither Coady nor Schaffer provide any, and there is no textual evidence in Moore's 1939 essay suggesting monism is even a proximal target) "anti-monist" readings are tenuous at best. Moore's proof might imply the falsity of monism, but obviously this is different from thinking that it was Moore's aims and intentions to refute the monist within the context of his 1939 proof. What is true, on the other hand, is that both Moore and Russell each had their turn at trying to refute idealist philosophy, and the monist thesis was by no means an unfamiliar target.

[2] Moore is referring to Chapter XV of Russell (1919).

explained just previously that by "sometimes true" he means "true in at least one instance."[3] With this explanation of what he means by "sometimes true," I do not think that his statement as to the meaning of "Some men are Greeks" is strictly correct; since I think that the use of the plural implies that "*x* is a man and a Greek" is true in *more* than one instance, that is to say, in at least two instances. Let us suppose that he would accept this correction and say that what "Some men are Greeks" means is not, strictly, that "*x* is a man and a Greek" is true in at least one instance, but that it is true in at least two. (1936, 182)

Then, one page later:

> Surely "Some men are Greeks" cannot possibly be true, unless there are at least two different objects, in the case of each of which a man might have seen it, pointed at it, and said with truth "This is a man and a Greek"? (1936, 183)

And then:

> If this is so, and if we are allowed to distinguish, as I think we ought, between "men exist" and "a man exists," and to say that "men exist" means, *not* " '*x* is a human being' is true in at least one instance," but " '*x* is a human being' is true in at least two instances," then I think [Russell's] doctrine is true … (1936, 184)

Moore thinks Russell's analysis of sentences containing syntactically plural terms—'some men', 'men exist,' etc.—is wrong. For Moore, the use of the plural indicates that the meaning of sentences like '*x* is a man and a Greek' are naturally analysed as 'At least *two* values of "*x* is a man and a Greek" are true.'

While Moore ultimately endorses Russell's doctrine of propositional functions, his endorsement is conditional on these amendments. Plural descriptions are everywhere in natural language and what they ordinarily imply is more than one thing. Missing from Russell's regimentation is this plurality: the Greek*s*, hand*s*, and human being*s*. According to Moore, our logical paraphrases should respect this meaning.[4]

This was not the only analysis of Russell's that Moore criticized for failing to respect the plural. Moore also took issue with Russell's conception of a class, which, on Russell's characterization, can be understood as containing only one member. Moore demurs: "With the ordinary meaning of 'class' it is impossible that any class should have only *one* member or none" (1962, 14).[5] According to Moore, when we talk of *classes* or *sets*

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

4   This point of Moore's can seem fussy, but it is worth noting that his fussiness has been shared by many others. Boolos, for instance, makes a case for plural quantification in a similar way that Moore does—by attending to ordinary usage: "Suppose that there is exactly one Cheerio in the bowl before me. Is it true to say that there are some Cheerios in the bowl? My view is no, not really. …" (1984, 443). Boolos's idea is to extend our stock of primitive logical notions so that we can accommodate precisely the sort of plural talk Moore finds absent from Russell's doctrine. Fussiness can have philosophical payoffs. While it would be going too far to say that Moore anticipated plural quantification, his remarkable sensitivity to ordinary usage anticipates the kinds of worries that later drove philosophers like Boolos to expand our logical toolkit.

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

of things (if such things exist) we imply that that there is at least more than one thing.[6]

Differences between Moore and Russell aside, Moore's sensitivity to plural terms, as demonstrated in the passages above, suggests the following deflationary reaction. The plurality that some commentators have fixed on in his 1939 essay is nothing more than an artifact of ordinary usage: in English, a syntactically plural term typically denotes more than one thing.[7]

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

Sure enough, when we turn our attention back to the rest of his discussion, we find that Moore is exceedingly sensitive to this. He is careful, for example, not to infer the plural 'There are external things' from the singular 'There is a soap bubble.' If there is *a* soap-bubble all that follows is that there is *an* external object—not *objects* (1939, 165). Furthermore, propositions about things (external things, some external things, things outside of us, things to be met with in space) are always deduced from propositions about various pairs of them. Never less, never more, always two (1939, 158, 165).

So, why two hands and not one? Answer: By invoking two hands—or two shoes, two socks, two soap-bubbles, and so on—Moore is simply making good on the question he is trying to answer, the question of whether there are any external things (plural). Moore's redundant premises in his 1939 proof reflect his sensitivity to ordinary linguistic usage. 'Things' is a plural noun and implies more than one, so if you are trying to prove whether there are any such things, you had better instance at least two.

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

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

7 Moore's well-known proclivities for accuracy and consistency are often noted as defining traits of his temperament (one might be tempted to call him a pedant in Russell's sense: someone who likes their statements to be true; see Russell 1953). Two anecdotes from Brand Blanshard, a close acquaintance of Moore, are worth noting. On *accuracy*: "[Moore] was so distrustful of the accuracy of newspapers that he read little of them except the official dispatches" (1987, 509). On *consistency*: "[Moore] was a stern critic, who demanded consistency of his novelists as well as his philosophers; if Miss Austen said on page 32 that Elinor Dashwood was at a party and on page 232 that she wasn't, Moore would catch it and tut-tut the author" (1987, 509).

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