Making Sense of Stebbing and Moore on Common Sense*

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1 Introduction

Philosophy, for Susan Stebbing, begins with what is known, with common sense truisms like *I see this candle* or *there is a table in this room*. "We must begin with commonsense facts" (MAM, 1932–33: 74) says Stebbing, for "we cannot find premisses more certain than [these] *from which* [such beliefs] may be *deduced*" (MAM, 70). In this respect, "common sense needs no defence" (SPA, 1938–39: 84).

In granting common sense such a central role in her philosophical theorizing, one can't help but consider G.E. Moore's influence on Stebbing's thought. Moore, twelve years Stebbing's senior, had long established himself as a philosopher by the time Stebbing's remarks above were published. The impact of his early anti-idealist attacks (1899, 1903a) and defense of non-naturalistic ethics (1903b) had been felt and thoroughly absorbed in Cambridge and beyond. His official defense of common sense would come in 1925, sealing his fate (for better or for worse) as the arch analytic philosopher of common sense.

Moore's common sense view seemed to have attracted Stebbing, who registers her solidarity nearly a decade after his infamous "Defence" (DCS, 1925):

> I agree with Prof. Moore in holding that the "Common Sense view of the World," is, in certain fundamental features, *wholly* true. I agree with him further in believing that we all, plain men and philosophers alike, have held this. For example, I hold (and I venture to think that you also hold) that there have been "very many other human beings, who have had bodies and have lived upon the earth." Again, at this moment, I *know* that this is a table. I also know that there are trees and rocks. (1933–34: 26–27)

The influence that Moore had on Stebbing in this passage and others seems undeniable, if not altogether unsurprising. Moore and Stebbing were lifelong

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friends. After engaging in a lively back and forth at a meeting of the Aristotelian Society in London in 1917—their first introduction to each other—their exchange would continue through letters and eventually settle into an intimate friendship which was to include Moore's wife, Dorothy Moore.

While it would be inaccurate and wildly reductive to characterize Stebbing as a *mere* follower of Moore—or in A.J. Ayer's much less charitable words, "very much a disciple of Moore"[1]—Moore's influence on Stebbing at this time (roughly, the late 1920s and beyond) seems unquestionable. Most commentators wouldn't hesitate to characterize Stebbing's philosophical methodology as broadly "Moorean"[2] while simultaneously acknowledging that she was very much a philosopher of her own rank and differed from Moore in a great many ways.[3] Indeed, it would be surprising to hear that Stebbing *didn't* endorse Moore's "Common Sense view of the World." What would be the grounds for such a statement? What would be the evidence?

Surprising, yes, but stranger things have been true. If we have been misled by an historical distortion of sorts, it's important that we revise our interpretations accordingly. This is the spirit in which some commentators have recently come to challenge the received, "Moorean," reading of Stebbing. Frederique Janssen-Lauret, for example, in a series of spirited articles,[4] challenges this reading directly, arguing that Stebbing, surprisingly, "disavowed the Common Sense view" (2022a: 184) and "did not rush to endorse it" (2022a: 174). She argues that Moore's influence on Stebbing is largely an acknowledgement of courtesy, a politeness lost on commentators because they've taken "Stebbing's respectful tone towards Moore and her humility in describing her own achievements at face value, and because there has been relatively little investigation into Stebbing's philosophy of physics" (2022a: 172).[5]

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1   Ayer (1977: 157). The full sentiment reads: "Philosophically [Stebbing] was very much a disciple of Moore and she shared his impatience with sloppy or pretentious thinking. She was quite often brusque but she was never mean. She was one of those persons who make you proud if they think well of you" (157-58). Despite Ayer's hyperbolic remark about Stebbing's discipleship, as other passages in his autobiography suggest, Ayer seemed to have very much admired Stebbing.

2   See, for example, Milkov (2003); Beaney (2003, 2016); Chapman (2013); and Beaney and Chapman (2021).

3   As Beaney remarks, "Stebbing was far too independent a thinker to be described as a 'disciple' of Moore, although she was undoubtedly influenced by him" (2016: 240).

4   Janssen-Lauret (2017, 2022a, 2022b, forthcominga, forthcomingb). See also Coliva (2021) and West (2022: 144).

5   While acknowledging that Stebbing "greatly valued Moore as a mentor, and was generous with acknowledgments whenever she held a view she took to have originated with Moore" (2022a: 174), Janssen-Lauret nevertheless goes on to characterize Stebbing as a philosopher

So, if alternative readings are right, while common sense might have played some role in Stebbing's philosophy, it's not entirely clear how significant of a role it played and, moreover, whether Stebbing and Moore would have agreed on the nature and scope of its role in philosophical theorizing.

The aim of this paper is to sort all of this out (or to come as close to sorting it out as we can); to explore both Stebbing's and Moore's relationship to common sense and better understand where and how they differed, if they differed at all, and to gain a clearer sense of the direction of influence between them. The overarching goal is to bring some unexplored themes to light from a philosopher—Stebbing—who has been largely (and unjustly) overlooked and to reevaluate the views of a philosopher—Moore—whose common sense commitments have largely been treated as open-and-shut.

Ultimately, I'll show that both received readings and alternative readings are right in their own ways, just right for largely the wrong reasons. For as I'll argue, both readings uncritically assume a popular, albeit oversimplified, conception of Moorean common sense. This oversimplification, I submit, leads proponents of both readings astray. On the one hand, received readings are too quick to assimilate Moore's common sense view to Stebbing; on the other hand, alternative readings are too quick to conclude the opposite. After making some adjustments, I put forward an alternative reading that retains elements of both readings. In keeping with received readings, I show how, given a less familiar conception of Moorean common sense, Stebbing and Moore were largely on the same page. Simultaneously, in line with alternative readings, I show how Stebbing's important but largely overlooked paper, "Moore's Influence" (1942), reveals her own distinct way of conceiving common sense knowledge, one which departs from Moore's own and which Moore explicitly rejects: common sense knowledge as *probable* knowledge. To begin, I'll start by first sketching some more familiar aspects of Moore's account of common sense and connect them to Stebbing, before building up to a deeper and more complex picture.

2   What's "Common" About Common Sense

"The phrases 'Common Sense view of the world' or 'Common Sense beliefs' (as used by philosophers)"—as Moore acknowledges in DCS—"are, of course, extraordinarily vague; and, for all I know, there may be many propositions which may be properly called features in 'the Common Sense view of the world' or

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that, if anything, more closely resembles Russell than Moore insofar as she, like Russell, "was also on a quest to find a properly scientific philosophy" (2022a: 182). This may be true, but one of the upshots of this paper is that Stebbing and Moore were more aligned on this front then Janssen-Lauret supposes.

'Common Sense beliefs', which are not true . . ." (DCS, 119).

As Moore alludes to above, not all of our common sense beliefs are true, not all of them yield knowledge. Yet, there are a certain subset of them that do. Which are those? While neither Moore nor Stebbing left us with any neat and tidy account of common sense,[6] they did attempt to indicate which common sense beliefs they took to constitute common sense *knowledge*, i.e., those beliefs whose denial would represent "the height of absurdity" (DCS, 119). Here's a familiar selection from Moore, paraphrased from the opening pages of DCS:[7]

- 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.
- There have existed many other things that have shape and size in three dimensions.
- 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.

Though the truisms above can seem so obvious "as not to be worth stating" (DCS, 106), philosophers are notorious for having denied them, or for having distorted their meaning such that they are admitted only to be "half-true" or "partially true." Such philosophers, however, Moore urges, are "confusing the question [of] whether we understand its meaning (which we all certainly do) with the entirely different question [of] whether . . . we are able to *give a correct analysis* of its meaning" (DCS, 106). Knowing an expression's *meaning* and knowing its *philosophical analysis* are different. (We'll touch on the significance of this distinction in the next section.) For according to Moore, the meaning of each of the expressions above is unambiguous. *The earth has existed for many years past* is, for example, an expression which, taken in its ordinary and popular sense, "we all understand" (DCS, 111). If we know what "earth," "existed," "years," and "past" mean, we know what the entire expression means. And it seems that we do, as we effectively communicate using this and similar expressions.

Writing several years later, Stebbing produces a strikingly similar list. Unlike Moore's target in DCS, however, Stebbing's target isn't the traditional skeptic or

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[6] To attempt to provide such an account would perhaps be antithetical to the spirit of their respective approaches and, perhaps, to the common sense approach to philosophy more generally. As Stebbing says, in a different context, "It is useless first to *define* 'material thing,' or 'cause,' and then to ask whether the terms so defined are exemplified in the world" (MAM, 74).

[7] Neither the list here, nor Moore's own, is meant to be exhaustive.

idealist but, rather, those philosophers and scientists who think modern physics gives us reason to deny truths like the following:

- I am now seeing a red patch.
- I am now perceiving a piece of blotting paper.
- That is a piece of blotting paper.
- That piece of blotting paper is on the table.
- That piece of blotting paper was on the table before I saw it.
- Other people besides myself have seen that piece of blotting paper. ("Realism and Modern Physics," RMP, 1929)

Like Moore's propositions above, the propositions here, as Stebbing claims, are of the sort that are "believed by the plain man to be true" (RMP, 147). "Such facts are the basis upon which all scientific and philosophical speculation must rest" (RMP, 148). Scientific and philosophical speculation rests upon such facts because, for Stebbing, both disciplines (especially theoretical physics) develop "by the continual modification of common-sense views," i.e., truisms such as the ones above which Stebbing takes to comprise "perceptual science" (RMP, 148).[8] Denying such truisms, as some scientists and philosophers have done, is to deny theoretical physics itself, for "unless perceptual science is true theoretical physics cannot be true" (RMP, 149).

Though Stebbing's list above involves reference to more scientific contexts (e.g., blotting paper), it is a natural extension of Moore's list above. The propositions expressed in both lists are empirical contingent truths that we come to know on the basis of experience, testimony, and the like. As Moore clarifies, they are the sort of propositions "which every or very nearly every sane adult, who has the use of all his senses . . . believes or knows. . . ." (1962: 280).

Moreover, while we may not necessarily know *how* we know the truths of common sense, in the sense that "we [might] not know what the evidence was" (DCS, 118), we nevertheless know with *certainty* that they are true. Citing Moore's DCS with approval, Stebbing concurs: "I believe, however, that no one does deny that propositions such as these are true. The difficulty does not arise until we ask *how* we come to know such facts as these and *what* is their correct analysis" (RMP, 147).

Finally, it's important to emphasize that common sense beliefs such as the ones above aren't true *by virtue* of being believed by almost everyone—that is, they

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8   "I find it difficult to believe that physics would be possible if there were no public sensible facts. My difficulty is increased when I consider that scientific method has developed out of common-sense knowledge by a gradual transition, however, much the latest developments of physics may shock the plain man who has not followed the steps by which these results have achieved" (RMP, 160).

aren't true by virtue of sociology—but simply because *they are evidentially and obviously true*; all inquiry, meaning, and action must, in some sense, presuppose them.[9] In this respect, common sense for Moore and Stebbing really is *common*:

> But it must be remembered that, according to me, *all* philosophers, without exception, have agreed with me in holding [the truths of Common Sense]: and that the real difference, which is commonly expressed in this way, is only a difference between those philosophers, who have *also* held views inconsistent with these features in 'the Common Sense view of the world', and those who have not. (DCS, 118)

"*All* philosophers," for Moore, includes even those skeptics and idealists who have denied—or who profess to deny—the truths of common sense.[10] Stebbing, in her British Academy Lecture, "Logical Positivism and Analysis" (LPA, 1933), echoes something similar. Criticizing the methodological solipsism touted by certain positivistic views, she remarks:

> I have the best grounds for denying solipsism, namely, that I *know* it to be false. You, who are listening to me, and enable me to speak in the plural, *also* know it to be false. [footnote to Moore's DCS] I suggest that there is something wrong with a theory which, as a consequence of its fundamental principles, involves solipsism in any form. (LPA, 27)

Like Moore, Stebbing maintains that philosophers who deny, e.g., that other minds exist, cannot escape talk which seems to presuppose the existence of other minds. Such self-proclaimed solipists, after all, allow Stebbing to "speak in the plural," yet by doing so they fail to notice the contradiction they have slipped into and thereby fail to acknowledge that which they *already* know: that other minds exist. "The *premises* for an argument leading to solipsism are invariably derived from knowledge which is inconsistent with solipsism" (LPA, 28).

3   Commitment Issues: Thin and Robust

So far, then, Moore and Stebbing seem to be largely on the same page with respect to *which* beliefs of common sense are true (i.e., the ordinary empirical truisms captured by the lists above). But it might be thought that this is where they part ways. To see this, consider a theme that emerges in Stebbing's writing during the late 1920s onwards: the Moorean distinction between meaning and analysis.

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[9]   See Coliva (2010: 16-17) for further discussion.

[10]   There is important interpretive work to be done on this passage. See Vanrie (2021) for one recent (and interesting) reading.

Or to use Stebbing's preferred characterization: *understanding* a sentence versus knowing its *analysis*.[11] While Moore's conception of "analysis" was often quite wooly,[12] Stebbing, across multiple works,[13] labored to clarify its meaning and articulate its significance. Ultimately, she distills analysis down into roughly two kinds: *logico-grammatical,* or "same level" analysis, and *metaphysical,* or what she calls "directional" analysis. The former aims to replace natural language expressions with apt ordinary language or logical paraphrases;[14] the latter "aims at making precise the reference of all true beliefs" (MAM, 70).[15]

In these works, Stebbing emphasizes over and over that we must not ask "*how* we come to know such [common sense facts]" but instead "*what* is their correct analysis" (RMP, 148). The job of metaphysics isn't to question the truths of common sense but to metaphysically analyze them.[16] For Stebbing, then, the

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[11] Stebbing acknowledges Moore's influence here writing that "[it] is from the writings of Prof. Moore that I have learnt the importance of the method of metaphysical analysis" but also immediately acknowledges in a footnote that "I do not wish to suggest that Moore uses this expression [=metaphysical analysis], nor that he would agree with what I say. But if what I say is correct, then I think it could have been derived from a study of his writings" (MAM, 76, footnote *). In fact, it's Stebbing's concession here, and her apprehensiveness in attributing these ideas to Moore, that ultimately speak to the originality and importance of her contributions to the debate surrounding philosophical analysis.

[12] Despite the centrality of analysis to Moore's philosophical method, Moore wasn't always clear about what kind of analysis he was engaged in. Nevertheless, I think there's a distinctive, metaphysical sense of analysis that is at the core of Moore's philosophy even if Moore wasn't always forthcoming about it (see this section; see also Preti 2017: 78).

[13] See especially MAM, SPA, and Stebbing (1934a).

[14] The nature of logico-grammatical analysis is thought to be best captured by Russell's theory of definite descriptions which many take to represent the paradigm of analysis in the 1930s.

[15] Stebbing's remarks on the relationship between what she calls "immediate reference" and "ultimate reference" can help us get a better grip on the distinction. Stebbing says that when we analyze a proposition we aim to discover what exactly it asserts. By this, Stebbing means *not* what the proposition's "immediate referent" is but, rather, the "ultimate reference of what is expressed" (MAM, 87). Call this a proposition's *ultimate referent.* A proposition's immediate and ultimate referent differ, then, in the following way. According to Stebbing, a proposition's immediate referent is something we are all familiar with and understand when we know a proposition. The immediate referent of, e.g., there is a table in this room is *there is a table in this room.* To know what a proposition's ultimate referent is, however, is "to know what must be the case if we are answering truly" (MAM, 79). To know, then, that Maynard Keynes is fallible and that Josiah Stamp is fallible (and so on) is to know what must be the case if the proposition "Every economist is fallible" is true. But we needn't know this to know the immediate referent of "Every economist is fallible"; for its immediate referent is just that: if something is an economist, then it is fallible.

[16] Analysis must come to end at some point, and when it does, there is a bottom—a set of basic facts—at which it terminates (cf. Russell 1922 and Wittgenstein 1921). But is this presupposition of metaphysical analysis justified? Stebbing answers this question in the negative. Metaphysical analysis terminates in *basic facts*, but it's possible that *there are no basic*

job of metaphysical analysis is to reveal what *makes* our common sense beliefs *true*. But notice that what makes such beliefs true could end up favoring realism or idealism. Metaphysical analysis doesn't discriminate.

This is where we might be tempted think Stebbing differs from Moore when it comes to the truths of common sense. For although Stebbing thinks that all philosophical and scientific speculation must rest on the common sense truisms above, she only seems to mean that their *truth* must be respected; how we metaphysically analyze such truths is open-ended. For example, while Stebbing doesn't think that modern science demands we interpret its theories and formalisms in any idealistic way, she writes that "it is . . . not impossible to interpret science idealistically" (1928: 128). The fact, then, that *there is a piece of blotting paper on the table* or the fact that *there are trees and rocks* doesn't necessarily entail the falsity of idealism; such facts *could* be given an idealist analysis.

The lesson, then, is this: realism, for Stebbing, doesn't imply the *negation* of idealism. A realist, as Stebbing glosses it, is simply "anyone who believes that such propositions as these [i.e., the common sense beliefs above] are true" (RMP, 147). Realism is a thesis committed only to the truth and knowledge of common sense and nothing more. Call this conception of common-sense realism **thin realism**.

If this is right, then there seems to be a stark difference between how Stebbing and Moore conceive common sense. After all, the received reading of Moore is that his common sense is surely incompatible with radical metaphysical views like idealism.[17] For Moore, unlike Stebbing, a commitment to common sense isn't just a commitment to the *truth* of the propositions enumerated above but to what those truths entail: that there are mind-independent things out there in the world. This is how philosophical views like idealism and skepticism are defeated by common sense—Moorean style. Call this conception of common-sense realism **robust realism**. Indeed, this apparent difference is one of the reasons commentators like Janssen-Lauret (2022a: 184) find it misleading to assimilate Moore's common sense view to Stebbing.

But where does this robustly realist reading of Moore come from? Three places, I suggest. Moore's early 1910-11 lectures, published as *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (SMPP, 1953); his notorious "Proof of an External World" (PEW, 1939); and "A Reply to My Critics" (RMC, 1942) in the Schilpp volume *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore*. In each of the essays here, Moore seems to endorse a

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facts at all. Yet, in order for the project of metaphysical analysis to be carried out it has to be assumed that there *are* such facts. But it doesn't appear that the metaphysician has legitimate grounds for thinking that such an assumption is true. At least so argues Stebbing in MAM.

[17] See, for example, Baldwin (2004, §6).

robust common-sense realism, one that is eminently incompatible with radically metaphysical views such as idealism. This is perhaps the clearest in SMPP where Moore takes issue with Berkeley's idealist analysis of common sense, arguing that "what we mean to assert, when we assert the existence of material objects, is certainly the existence of something which continues to exist even when we are *not* conscious of it" (SMPP, 21). According to *this* Moore, Berkeley's view *is* wholly at odds with the common-sense view of the world:

> I think, then, it may fairly be said that Berkeley denies the existence of any material objects, in the sense in which common sense asserts their existence. This is the way in which he contradicts common sense. (SMPP, 21)

While Moore isn't as explicit in PEW or RMC as he is here, both texts are read as continuous with SMPP. For example, while "common sense" is not mentioned even once in PEW, commentators have long interpreted Moore as taking *here are two hands* to be synonymous with *there are at least two external things*. Similarly in RMC, Moore seems to treat "material thing" as synonymous with "external thing" (RMC, 668–70). In both cases, the existence of external things is taken to be commonsensical for Moore.

I think that with respect to PEW and RMC such readings are too quick. However, this isn't the place for such a defense, so let's for the sake of argument grant that such readings are sound. What I want to argue here is that Moore's conception of common sense isn't as monolithic and resolute as commentators have assumed, and that this has important implications for how we understand the direction of influence between Stebbing and Moore with respect to their conceptions of common sense.

We can begin by noting that starting roughly from the late 1920s onwards (especially in the articles of Stebbing's referenced above) Stebbing repeatedly mentions Moore's DCS.[18] She also singles out an early of paper of his "The Nature and Reality of Objects of Perception" (NROP, [1905–06] 1922) for not having received the attention she thinks that it deserves (1942: 524; cf. 1933: 8–10).[19]

Now, what's notable about both these papers, i.e., DCS and NROP, is that Moore's account of common sense is conceived in a less robustly realist way than in SMPP, PEW, or RMC; indeed, many readers would find Moore's common sense

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[18]   Cf. Stebbing (1926: 194; MAM, 73-74, 76; 1933–34: 26–27; 1933: 7, 27; SPA, 70–71, 73).

[19]   This remark could be taken as exaggerating some given that it was written for the Schilpp volume canonizing Moore. The important point is simply that Stebbing discusses NROP in both her (1942) and (1933).

sketched in DCS and NROP somewhat unfamiliar.[20] Consider, for example, a passage from the earlier of these works, NROP, where with respect to the proposition, "Hens' eggs are generally laid by hens," we find Moore writing this (I believe it is important to quote it in full):

> I am quite willing to allow for the moment that if it is true at all, we must understand by "hens" and "eggs," objects very unlike that which we directly observe, when we see a hen in a yard, or an egg on the breakfast-table. I am willing to allow the possibility that, as some Idealists would say, the proposition: "Hens lay eggs" is false, unless we mean by it: A certain kind of collection of spirits or monads sometimes has a certain intelligible relation to another kind of collection of spirits or monads. I am willing to allow the possibility that, as Reid and some scientists would say, the proposition "Hens lay eggs" is false, if we mean by it anything more than that: Certain configurations of invisible material particles sometimes have a certain spatio-temporal relation to another kind of configuration of invisible material particles. Or again I am willing to allow, with certain other philosophers, that we must, if it is to be true, interpret this proposition as meaning that certain kinds of sensations have to certain other kinds a relation which may be expressed by saying that the one kind of sensations "lay" the other kind. Or again, as other philosophers say, the proposition "Hens lay eggs" may possibly mean: Certain sensations of mind *would*, under certain conditions, have to certain other sensations of mine a relation which may be expressed by saying that the one set would "lay" the other set. But whatever the proposition "Hens' eggs are generally laid by hens" may *mean,* most philosophers would, I think, allow that, in some sense or other, this proposition was true. (NROP, 64–65)

Though, of course, Moore would himself oppose almost all the revisionary analyses here, it's clear that he takes it to be an open question as to how propositions like "Hens' eggs are generally laid by hens" should be philosophically analyzed. Indeed, it's this passage that A.J. Ayer refers to when he writes: "I suppose that in later years Moore would have drawn the line at collections of spirits, but his attachment to common sense was always much looser than has generally been assumed" (1977: 117).

   Though it would be only a few years later, in SMPP, that Moore would glom onto a more robustly realist account of common sense, a similar account appears nearly two decades later in both DCS and Moore's posthumously published

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[20] Interestingly, David Armstrong picks up on this when he writes that "Moore was always ready to insist on what we might call the shallowness of truistic or Moorean knowledge" (2006: 160–61). Of course, if my reading is right, Moore wasn't *always* ready to insist on this.

Lectures on Philosophy (LP, 1966).

In DCS, recall, Moore claims that he is "not at all sceptical as to the truth of such propositions as 'The earth has existed for many years past', 'Many human bodies have each lived for many years upon it', i.e., propositions which assert the existence of material things" but that he is "*very sceptical* as to what, as to what, in certain respects, the correct analysis of such propositions is" (DCS, 127, emphasis added). The sense of analysis alluded to here is metaphysical. Moore goes on to say that "the whole question as to the *nature* of material things obviously depends upon their analysis" (DCS, 127–28) and how by analyzing propositions about material objects like "This is a human hand" we are to discover their nature; that the question of their nature depends on such analyses.

The point then, for Moore, is this. The reason we don't know with certainty how propositions like "This is a hand" should be analyzed is because it isn't obvious what the "principal" or "ultimate" subject of such propositions are *prior* to our analysis of them (DCS, 128). The correct metaphysical analysis of such propositions could, for example, yield something as metaphysically radical as phenomenalism, an analysis Moore himself entertains in DCS.[21]

Though it is perhaps less clear in DCS that Moore is endorsing a less robust common-sense realism, such a reading can be bolstered by considering some revealing passages in LP. The specific lectures of LP that I have in mind were delivered only four years after DCS, suggesting a plausible continuity of thought.

In these lectures, Moore distinguishes his usage of the term "material thing" from the variegated usages of other philosophers. Some philosophers, he writes, use "material thing" to mean something that is "independent of perception" (a phrase Moore finds particularly ambiguous). On such a usage, if there are no things that are independent of perception, then there are no material things—no human bodies, no blackboards, and so on (LP, 15–16). Other philosophers, he notes, use "material thing" such that even if there are no material things, human bodies, blackboards, and the like still exist even if conceived of as collections of conscious beings or monads (LP, 16).

Moore subscribes to neither of these usages. "[I]f you do include [being independent of perception] in your def., then you are using 'material thing' in a different sense" (LP, 16). A difference sense from Moore, that is. For Moore clarifies that he doesn't take material things to *ipso facto* entail that they are independent of perception: "I say: That is a blackboard, *does* entail 'that's a

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[21] Indeed, Part IV of DCS features a near tortuous discussion of Moore struggling to answer (roughly) the following question: how revisionary can our metaphysics get before common sense is no longer compatible with it? As Baldwin (2010) remarks, the analysis can be as "radical as one likes as long as it is consistent with the truth and knowability of the propositions analysed."

material thing' but does *not* entail 'that's independent of perception' or 'that's not a colony of monads'" (LP, 17).[22] Usages of "material thing" contrary to this, Moore finds "absurd and unjustifiable" (LP, 16).

While obviously Moore thinks material things *are* independent of perception, according to him, it's more "fantastic [and] absurd" to deny the wholesale existence of material things than to analyze them as colonies of mind-dependent monads:

> I don't use "material thing" in such a sense that in saying that a blackboard is a material thing I'm saying that it's not a colony of monads. Of course, I think it isn't: the view that it is seems to me fantastic & absurd. But not nearly so fantastic & absurd as the view that there are no material things in *my* sense. (LP, 16)

So, once again, we see that Moore leaves the metaphysical analysis of the materiality of objects open. While we *know* that human bodies and blackboards exist and that such things are material, it's not obvious how to metaphysically analyze materiality. Analysis could take us in several different directions; material things could turn out to be independent of perception, or they could turn out to be mind-dependent collections of monads. Analysis may reveal even more fantastical metaphysical tapestries as these.

While there's no evidence that Stebbing read drafts of Moore's lectures here, it's not unlikely that she encountered some of his ideas in correspondence with Moore. However, given that similar views were developed in texts of Moore's that Stebbing *did* read—namely, NROP and DCS—it's plausible that Stebbing's own thin conception of common sense was most likely inspired and influenced by the thin conception found in these texts. If this is right, the difference between Stebbing and Moore with respect to the truths and commitments of common sense *can't* be as commentators like Janssen-Lauret say it is, that (in my words) Stebbing endorsed a thinner common-sense realism than Moore.

That's one upshot, but another is that we should be cautious in ascribing *one* specific common sense view to Moore. I would urge something similar with respect to Stebbing as well. Indeed, though Stebbing's thin conception of common sense seems resolute, there are passages that suggest otherwise. For example, in "Constructions" (1933–34), Stebbing writes that the "external world is the total set of material things (i.e., perceptible objects) in their spatial and temporal relations . . . it is the world of macroscopic objects, such as tables, trees, water,

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[22] "In saying that there are such senses I am, of course, assuming, what is perhaps disputable, that from 'This is a human body' there does *not* follow "This is independent of perception": that is to say that the prop. 'This is a human body, but is not independent of perception', is *not* self-contradictory" (LP, 18).

human bodies, stars" (1933–34: 10). This, however, make it sounds as if common sense *is* antecedently committed to something that contradicts idealism.

Something similar is implied elsewhere by Stebbing: "I wish to maintain . . . that there is a fundamental difference between propositions which would ordinarily be said to be propositions about myself, *e.g.,* 'I am tired,' 'I see a chair,' and propositions *made by me*, but not about myself, *e.g.,* 'That is a chair.'" (1934b: 168). Stebbing says that propositions like "That is a chair" are propositions *not about herself,* the implication being that such propositions aren't about her mental states or sensations or sensible qualities but about *mind-independent* things like chairs.

4   Science and Common Sense

The commitments of common sense can, then, be conceived in a thin or robust way. Moore, at different parts of his philosophical development, seems to have endorsed both, while Stebbing, influenced by Moore's NROP and DCS, as I've suggested, seems to endorse the former, although even this isn't entirely clear. But there are other aspects of Moore's and Stebbing's common sense view that demand examination, such as, for example, the relationship of common sense to science.

Moore's discussions of common sense largely revolve around its relationship to philosophy. Can we—should we—ever give up our common sense beliefs in the face of McTaggart's argument that Time is unreal? What about when confronted with Bradley's infamous regress? Probably not. But then to what extent are our common sense beliefs capable of revision? Given their status as empirical, contingent truths, surely, they are capable of being overturned. Perhaps there is not much room for philosophy to overturn them, but might science be in more capable hands?

Moore never directly addressed such questions in his work, but the closest we get to a discussion of them can be found in several passages of LP. In Lecture III, "Questions of Speculative Philosophy," delivered in 1933-34, we discover a side of Moore that is rarely on display in his more well-known papers:

> 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)[23]

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[23] Curiously, we find David Lewis echoing something similar in *Parts of Classes*: "I'm moved to

> 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)

Moore's deference to science in the passages above suggests that his commitment to common sense isn't as stubborn as one might typically assume. Indeed, Moore had a deep respect for mathematics and science and was certainly far from ignorant of the advances being made in these fields.[24] In light of the passages above, it's plausible to read Moore as someone who was willing to give up some piece of common sense if, say, it was discovered that a portion of well-established science was in tension with it. And this seems to make sense from Moore's perspective: given that many of the propositions Moore countenances *as* common sense are empirical propositions, it follows that they could be subjected to empirical scrutiny and hence capable of falsification.[25]

Stebbing, by contrast, was steeped in philosophical debate surrounding the sciences. Developments in modern physics, namely, quantum theory—the "new physics"—led many philosophers and scientists to question realism and materialism; some, both physicists and philosophers alike, even entertained the idea that this new physics supported radical metaphysical views like idealism. While Moore established himself by using common sense to resist various forms of British Idealism, we can think of Stebbing as using it to resist idealist interpretations of twentieth-century physics.

Given Stebbing's interest, knowledge, and proximity to the sciences, it has been suggested that, compared to Moore, she *had* to have been much more cautious about which common sense judgements she accepted as true. For, after all, the science and mathematics of her day had overturned plenty of widely held

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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 philosophical method. See Nolan (2005: 203) for discussion.

[24] See, for example, his unpublished review of Russell's *The Principles of Mathematics* in Moore (2018–19). Worth mentioning here is also Moore's discussion of after-images in PEW 151. Therein, Moore references both a physiology textbook and psychology manual as well as some simple experiments that he carried out on his own. We should also not forget that from 1911 to 1925, Moore lectured on psychology three times a week for the Moral Sciences Tripos.

[25] See also Moore's reply to Ambrose where he suggests that "There are no external objects" is an empirical statement capable of falsification (RMC, 670–74).

beliefs that once seemed (and perhaps still seem!) intuitively or even obviously true (e.g., that two parallel lines never intersect). These theories were revisionary and brought about an apparent tension in our common sense beliefs. As Stebbing herself remarks, such theories reinforced "the fact that the world is infinitely more complex than common sense assumes" (RMP, 147).

Taking modern science and mathematics seriously, then, in the way Stebbing did, perhaps required her to be overall more skeptical of common sense than Moore. As Janssen-Lauret says: "[Stebbing's] expertise in the philosophy of science and mathematics, then, implies that she could not have regarded statements like 'nothing is the same size as its proper part' and 'parallel lines never meet' as acceptable common-sense truths" (2022a: 183). A passage from Stebbing's classic *A Modern Introduction to Logic* is suggestive:

> [T]he common-sense conception of number is to a considerable extent based on intuitions derived from counting, whilst the operation of counting remains unanalysed. Consequently our conception of number is unduly restricted and unclear. (1930: 456)

Such passages aside, however, the overall evidence doesn't support such a picture of Stebbing. Or so I shall argue here. In fact, I think the evidence suggests just the opposite. Because Stebbing was, in general, more steeped in scientific debate than Moore, she was more weary and more critical of science's ability (or lack thereof) to overturn common sense. Compared to the passages from Moore above, Stebbing seemed to have exercised more caution when it came to calling on science, physics in particular, for philosophical guidance. Indeed, a common theme throughout Stebbing's work in the philosophy of physics is her resistance to naively "reading off" one's metaphysics from one's physics. Moore's attitude towards science seemed comparatively more optimistic (one might even be tempted to say more naïve) when compared to Stebbing's, whose attitude seemed more critical and circumspect.

This point bears special emphasis. For this, I submit, is what is particularly *novel* about Stebbing's contributions to philosophy at this time. Early twentieth century physics represented a marked departure from the "classical" picture of physics of the centuries before it. Twentieth century physics didn't just bring about new formalisms and techniques for interpreting and conceiving theories, but a new *Weltbild* for understanding reality and our place in it. Special and General Theory of Relativity challenged our conceptions of simultaneity and our dualistic accounts of space and time (notoriously collapsing them into one spacetime); Quantum Mechanics brought about even more challenges to our pretheoretical intuitions. Many philosophers were tempted to follow science's lead, using these developments to draw extravagant metaphysical conclusions. Stebbing, knowledgeable enough of the physics to claim literacy, was among the

few to refrain from the hype, so to speak, and retrace the argumentative steps with a fine-toothed comb.

Indeed, Stebbing showed no hesitation in voicing her disagreement with established scientists. Reading her works from this period one gets the sense that while she maintained a deep respect for physics, she was also unflinchingly cautious of treating it as *the* ultimate authority on the nature of reality, especially when it directly contradicted common sense. Two cases here are particularly representative. The first concerns the passing of time and its relation to Special Relativity and the second concerns the nature of solidity in light of modern atomic theory. Let's consider both in turn.

4.1   On Time Passing

Bits and pieces of Stebbing's philosophy of time make their debut in incomplete and fragmented form in her 1936 contribution "Some Ambiguities in Discussions Concerning Time" to the volume *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*.[26] While much of that paper is devoted to discussion and criticism of McTaggart's infamous paradox, one gets a sense of where Stebbing's philosophical sympathies lie on matters related to the metaphysics of time. For example, Stebbing says that "we are forced to recognize three time-determinations: future, present, past" and that these temporal notions are all "mutually irreducible . . . *will be*, *is now*, and *was* are each unique; they cannot be analysed in terms of each other, nor in terms of anything else" (1936: 116). She then says that the statement, "'The past and future are equally real: both are as real as the present' . . . comes perilously near to being nonsense," but that

> it may pass muster if it be regarded as contradicting the statement, 'Only the present is real.' . . . There is *no other* significance in the statement that the past is real; there only seems to be some other significance when we fallaciously regard *the past* as a quasi-substantive. So with *the future*. (1936: 118)

On that same page, Stebbing says it's "misleading to use the word 'existence' at all" when we utter things like "*X* is in the past" or "*X* is in the future" which seem to imply the "shadowy existence" of such times. As Stebbing advises, better to say "*X was*" or "*X will be*."

These remarks all seem to support a broadly A-theoretic philosophy of time, more specifically, one that most closely resembles presentism, the view that only present events, objects, and times really exist. These broadly A-theoretic

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[26]   See West (2022) for further discussion of Stebbing's philosophy of time.

commitments resurface throughout the paper, especially when Stebbing proposes to analyze statements about the reality of the past and future as statements about whether such and such *was* or *will* be the case:

> To say that the past is real is to say *something has happened*, or, in other words, it is to say that *so and so is past* is true for some instance falling under the description 'so and so'. And similarly for the future and the present. (1936: 118)[27]

And in the paragraph prior she argues that those who are led to assume the existence of the past and future do so on the mistaken assumption that time is like a box or container, a mistake she believes is "analogous to the mistake of regarding space as a kind of tenuous box or receptacle." (1936: 118). She therefore seems to reject the *spatialization* of time endorsed by B-theorists, eternalists in particular.[28] Stebbing says all of this in full awareness of Einstein's theory of relativity (which is discussed at the end of her article) but nevertheless goes on to conclude that time has an intrinsic direction:[29]

> Time is passing. . . . Time, in a sense, is fundamentally alogical. It is this which makes it difficult to give an account of the temporal series that would make it fit in neatly with our rational scientific schemes. The difficulty arises from the fact that time has not only an intrinsic *order* but also an intrinsic *sense*, or, as I prefer to say, an intrinsic *direction* . . . In observing this direction we recognize that *now* is fundamental. (1936: 120–21)

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[27] Notice here that Stebbing seems to be denying that the existence of the past and future are presupposed in our tenseless talk since such talk is elliptical with tensed statements (perhaps ones involving tensed operators like "It will be the case that..." or predicate modifiers like "WAS(is crossing the Rubicon)").

[28] Stebbing seems to realize that if the past and future don't exist, statements about the past and future *prima facie* don't refer to anything (1936: 119). Intuitively, one would have thought that the truth-conditions of "Caesar crossed the Rubicon" involve Caesar, the Rubicon and the relations obtaining between them. But if neither Caesar nor past times exist, then this can't be. What, then, do statements about the past and future refer to if not past and future times and objects? Stebbing responds by suggesting that we think of the past and future as "constructions" and it's these constructions that sentences about the past and future are ultimately about and make reference to (at least from our presently existing vantage point). The suggestion is interesting and seems to anticipate contemporary views in the philosophy of time such as temporal ersatzism and temporal fictionalism. For a survey of the former see Emery (2017). For the latter view see Baron, Miller, and Tallant (2019).

[29] Stebbing seems to think that the problem of time is a different problem for philosophy than it is for physics: "In physics 'time' is a fourth dimension; in experience it is not: in physics time is no less relative than space; in experience there is an absolute *now* and an absolute *here* . . . It must suffice to say that the discussion of time as a problem for philosophers is largely independent of physical speculations" (1936: 123).

This passage nicely sums up Stebbing's attitude toward science and common sense and offers a convenient transition to Stebbing's book *Philosophy and the Physicists* (PP, 1937), published only a year after her chapter on the philosophy of time. In that book, we encounter Stebbing's rebuke of two prominent physicists—Arthur Eddington and Sir James Jean—whose philosophical worldviews Stebbing finds deeply muddled. Here I'll just focus on her critique of Eddington.[30]

4.2 On Solidity

Early twentieth century physics brought about modern atomic theory, endearing physicists with many new lessons, including, among others, lessons about the nature of matter: that it is largely porous, that its structure is nearly all empty space at the microphysical level. In light of this, some physicists and philosophers drew the conclusion that things that ordinarily appear to us a solid, such as tables or planks of wood, aren't really solid at all. The spirit of the times is captured by Ernst Zimmer in his popular science book *The Revolution of Physics*:

> A table, a piece of paper, no longer posses that solid reality which they appear to possess; they are both of them porous, and consist of very small electrically charged particles which are arranged in a peculiar way. (1936: 51)

With a bit more flair, Eddington concurs:

> I am standing on the threshold about to enter a room. It is a complicated business. In the first place I must shove against an atmosphere pressing with a force of fourteen pounds on every square inch of my body. I must make sure of landing on a plank traveling at twenty miles a second around the sun . . . *The plank has no solidity of substance.* To step on it is like stepping on a swarm of flies. Shall I not slip through? No, if I make the venture one of the flies hits me and gives a boost up again; I fall again and am knocked upwards by another fly; and so on. . . . (*The Nature of the Physical World*, NPW, 342, emphasis mine)

Now, Stebbing finds Eddington's language here to be "gravely misleading to the common reader" and reveals a "serious confusion" in his own understanding of the physical world (PP, 48). Indeed, there is something funny about Eddington's reasoning here. The problem seems to be that Eddington is using the language

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[30] Stebbing takes aim at two passages from Eddington's 1928 Gifford Lectures, *The Nature of the Physical World*. One of them consists in his infamous "two tables" argument (recall: the table of science and the table of common sense); the other is perhaps less known and puts pressure on our ordinary understanding of what it means for an object, such as a wooden plank, to be solid. My focus here will be on the latter, less familiar argument of Eddington's.

of "common sense," a language that, in J.L. Austin's words, "has been concentrated primarily upon the practical business of life" (1956-57: 133), to describe phenomena that, we might say, is *uncommon* to the practical business of life— microphysical phenomena. This is why Stebbing thinks Eddington is confused: "[n]o concepts drawn from the level of common-sense thinking are appropriate to sub-atomic, i.e. microphysical, phenomena. . . . the language of common sense is not appropriate to the description of such phenomena" (PP, 51). While acknowledging that there is "considerable variation in the precise significance of the word 'solid' in various contexts" (PP, 52), Stebbing's point is that Eddington's use of the word in *this* specific context is infelicitous:

> The danger arises when the scientist uses the picture for the purpose of making explicit denials, and expresses these denials in common-sense language used in such a way as to be devoid of sense. This, unfortunately, is exactly what Eddington has done in the passage we are considering . . . (PP, 51)

In fact, the charge is even more egregious. For Eddington doesn't appear to be using the words "solid," "non-solid," and "empty" in any technical sense. He's writing for a popular audience, with no specialized knowledge of contemporary physics, and, at least in the passage above, introducing no new concepts which require elaboration. Operating, then, with what seems to be the ordinary sense of those words, Eddington seems to reason from what he takes to be a paradigm case of something's being non-solid, i.e., the empty space of the plank at the *microphysical* scale, to the conclusion that the plank of wood itself at the *macrophysical* scale is non-solid. Yet is the plank of wood not a paradigm case of something's being *solid*? Stebbing puts the point more forcefully:

> It is of the utmost important effort to press the question: If the plank appears to be *solid*, but is really *non-solid*, what does "solid" mean? If "solid" has no assignable meaning, then "non-solid" is also without sense. If the plank is non-solid, then where can we find an example to show us what "solid" means? The pairs of words, "solid"—"empty", "solid"—"hollow", "solid"—"porous", belong to the vocabulary of common-sense language; in the case of each pair, if one of the two is without sense, so is the other. (PP, 53)

And later, continuing the critique in SPA:

> "Is that floor really solid?" is a sensible question to ask if we are uncertain whether the floor is as solid as it looks or whether perhaps it has got dry rot in it. But it is not a sensible question to ask if we are asking it because we are thinking that physicists have informed us that wood consists of elections [sic] so widely spaced that the wood can be said to be "mostly emptiness." In the first context the question has sense and resembles in form the question,

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"Is that really an apple?" asked by someone who thinks he has been offered a medlar or perhaps an "apple" made of soap. In the second context the question is not sensible because no answer could be given to it of an appropriate logical form. The similarity of grammatical form has misled us.[31] (SPA, 79)

Stepping back, then, the crucial question here isn't whether Stebbing (or Moore) *would* relinquish their common sense beliefs in the face of well-established scientific evidence to the contrary (perhaps they both would, given the right kind of observational evidence), but *whether* they thought the science of their time actually challenged any of these beliefs in the first place. For one gets the sense that both Moore and Stebbing thought that science either bolstered the credibility of their commonsense outlook or else was neutral with respect to it.

5   Common Sense Knowledge as Probable Knowledge

What to conclude? Is Stebbing's acknowledgment of Moore's influence merely an acknowledgement of courtesy, as some commentators have recently suggested?

I do think that Janssen-Lauret (2022a: 174) is correct to point out that Stebbing's "respectful tone" and "humility" towards Moore did sometimes obfuscate the originality of her contributions.[32] But Janssen-Lauret's overall message is hard to square with the textual evidence of the previous sections. And not just this: it's hard to square with Stebbing's personality and public persona.

Stebbing was by no means shy about how she felt about certain views. Whether it be preeminent physicists or preeminent philosophers, status certainly didn't deter her from taking aim, and taking aim she did, blatantly, brusquely, and unapologetically. She starts off one paper, critiquing the physicist Sir James Jeans in this way: "I am told that my present task is to draw the fire of Sir James Jeans" (1942–1943: 92). And in the opening pages of PP, she criticizes both Jeans and Eddington for their muddled and misleading exposition, speciously expressed,

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[31] The argumentative strategies employed by Stebbing in these passages are striking both in their familiarity and unfamiliarity. On the one hand, they are characteristic of the kind of arguments popularized by the canonical figures of Ordinary Language Philosophy (i.e., "paradigm case" and "polar concept" arguments). Indeed, Stebbing's emphasis on "the language of common sense," i.e., ordinary language, is reminiscent of the later Wittgenstein (1953, 1958) and J.L. Austin (1962). Yet, the context in which Stebbing advances such arguments is unfamiliar. Stebbing pushes common sense and the ordinary language methodology into new territory, into the context of modern science, appealing to ordinary language not only as a way to dissolve philosophical muddles but also purported *scientific* muddles as well. In so doing, Stebbing raising all sorts of interesting and important questions about the relationship between ordinary language and scientific language that the canonical figures of ordinary language philosophy were largely silent on.

[32] See, for example, footnote 11.

"with an amount of personification and metaphor that reduces them to the level of revivalist preachers" (PP, 6). In another paper, she takes aim at her colleague, the philosopher Duncan-Jones, for expressing himself in a similarly elusive way: "I admit that I find this [i.e., Duncan-Jones's] Olympian aloofness unhelpful" (SPA, 75). Examples beyond this can easily be multiplied.[33]

If Stebbing's tone towards Moore or any other figure ever veered in the direction of the "respectful," one might think it's only because Stebbing genuinely admired them or genuinely felt she owed them something philosophically. Remarks like the ones above suggest that she wasn't one to feign philosophical respect for those she felt such respect was hardly due, even when the patriarchal conditions in which she was working were already working against her.

So, while I think Stebbing's acknowledgment of Moore's influence was more than just an acknowledgement of "courtesy," and thus in this respect Moore's influence on Stebbing shouldn't be understated, I don't think it should be overstated either. While Stebbing certainly inherited Moore's common sense view of the world, what she shares with Moore shouldn't downplay the fact that Stebbing was very much a philosopher of her own rank.

Before concluding, however, I want to draw attention to one overlooked way in which Stebbing inevitably made Moore's common sense view her own. Somewhat ironically, it is sketched in her rich and important paper "Moore's Influence" (1942).

Stebbing writes that one of Moore's greatest philosophical contributions is having convincingly demonstrated that "probable knowledge" is a *genuine* case of knowledge. Knowledge, in other words, as Stebbing reads Moore, needn't entail certainty. We can know that we aren't dreaming (because the obtaining of *not-p* is highly probable) yet not be certain that we aren't (for the obtaining of *p* is still possible). How, you may ask, has Moore demonstrated this? As Stebbing reads him, this is, in fact, *the* fundamental takeaway of his common sense view of the world:

> The logical character of the evidence of common sense propositions does not differ fundamentally from the logical character of the evidence for scientific propositions. (1942: 526)

> Just as is the case with scientific propositions so also in the case of common sense propositions, what is basic is to be determined by the purpose of the investigation; just as scientific propositions are not incorrigible, so too are common sense propositions not incorrigible. (1942: 528)

We don't begin where Descartes begins; we don't try to look for certain, logically

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33   See Chapman (2013: 35). See also footnote 1.

certifiable, demonstrative knowledge. We content ourselves to what is probable. So urges Stebbing's Moore.

Moore in his reply, perhaps unsurprisingly, denies all of this. "I do not at all like [Stebbing's] proposal," he writes "to call the kind of knowledge I have now that I am sitting in a chair 'probable knowledge.'" He continues: "I hold that it is *certain* that I am now sitting in a chair, and to say that I have 'probable knowledge' that I am, seems to me to suggest that it is *not* certain" (RMC, 677).

Alas, Moore couldn't seem to part ways with the old guard. But Stebbing clearly did, unveiling her own picture of common sense, and philosophy, in the process. Perhaps, at last, making sense of Stebbing and Moore on common sense comes to this. Unlike Moore's conception of common sense, Stebbing's is more Quinean than Archimedean: although our common sense beliefs enjoy more centrality in our "web of beliefs" than scientific ones, they are an extension of such beliefs and, hence, just as corrigible. Importantly, however, they are just as evidential, part and parcel of a method "not wholly unlike the methods employed in the natural sciences" (1942: 546).

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