

Making Sense of Stebbing and Moore on Common Sense*

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Abstract

This paper reexamines Stebbing and Moore's views about common sense. I first draw on overlooked textual evidence to argue that Moore's common sense views are far less monolithic than has been traditionally assumed. I use this to show that Stebbing and Moore were largely aligned with respect to the extent to which the truths of common sense may be philosophically analyzed. I then develop an alternative reading of Stebbing's common sense program, which I argue is decidedly distinct from Moore's. For Stebbing, unlike Moore, science and common sense form a unity. I trace how this idea is developed across several of her works, culminating in her view that commonsense knowledge constitutes a form of probable knowledge.

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” says Stebbing, for “we cannot find premisses more certain than [these] *from which* [such beliefs] may be *deduced*” (1932–33, 74, 70). In this respect, “common sense needs no defence” (1938–39: 84).

In granting common sense such a central role in her philosophical theorizing, one can't help but consider the influence of G. E. Moore. Indeed, the philosophical milieu that Stebbing, twelve years Moore's junior, inherited and would ultimately transform in her own distinctive way, was shaped in significant part by Moore's philosophy. By the time Stebbing's remarks above were published, the impact of Moore's anti-idealist attacks (1899, 1903a) and defense of non-naturalistic ethics (1903b) had already been felt and thoroughly absorbed in Cambridge and beyond. His official defense of common sense would come slightly later, in 1925,¹ sealing his fate—for better or for worse—as the arch analytic philosopher of common sense.

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¹ Moore's first explicit articulation of his common sense view of the world appeared much earlier, in his 1910–11 Morley College lectures, though these were not published until 1953 as *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*.

Moore's common sense view seemed to have attracted Stebbing, who registers her solidarity nearly a decade after his famous defense:

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 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"²—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"³ while simultaneously acknowledging that she was very much a philosopher of her own rank and differed from Moore in a great many ways.⁴ 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,⁵ challenges this reading directly,

² 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.

³ See, for example, Milkov (2003), Beaney (2003, 2016), Chapman (2013), and Beaney and Chapman (2021).

⁴ 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).

⁵ Janssen-Lauret (2017, 2022a, 2022b, forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b). See also Coliva (2021) and West (2022: 144).

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).⁶

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

⁶ 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 that, if anything, more closely resembles Russell and Whitehead than Moore insofar as she, like them, “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 common sense and science are intimately intertwined for Stebbing. In this way, I see no tension in describing Stebbing as a figure who resembles both Moore *and* Russell and Whitehead.

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 "A Defence of Common Sense" (DCS, 1925)—"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 '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. Which ones do? While neither Moore nor Stebbing left us with any neat and tidy account of common sense,⁷ 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:⁸

- 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 admitted them to be only "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

⁷ 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" (1932–33: 74).

⁸ Neither the list here, nor Moore's own, is meant to be exhaustive.

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.

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 idealist but 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). They are also “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). 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 (a point we will revisit in the coming sections), 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 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: Ecumenical and Sectarian

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. Or to use Stebbing’s preferred characterization: *understanding* a sentence versus knowing

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.

its *analysis*.¹¹ While Moore's conception of "analysis" was often quite woolly,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" (1932–33: 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 job of metaphysical analysis is to reveal what *makes* our common sense beliefs *true*. But notice that what

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" (1932–33: 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 Stebbing (1932–33, 1934a, 1938–39).

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 makes a further distinction between what she calls the "immediate reference" and "ultimate reference" of a proposition. The difference comes down to this. The immediate reference of a proposition is what we ordinarily understand a proposition to assert, while its ultimate reference is something we discover through metaphysical analysis. Importantly, we needn't know the ultimate reference of a proposition to know its immediate reference, for the latter, unlike the former, is something that "we already know when we understand the proposition" (1932–33: 78–79). For example, the immediate reference of the proposition, "Every economist is fallible," is the following: *If something is an economist, then it is fallible*. When analyzing a proposition, however, we're interested not merely in discovering its immediate reference, but the "ultimate reference of what is expressed" (1932–33: 87). The ultimate reference of "Every economist is fallible" might, then, take the following form: *Maynard Keynes is fallible and Josiah Stamp is fallible, and so on*.

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 facts at all*. Yet, for the project of metaphysical analysis to be carried out it must 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 (1932–33). See also Stebbing (1942: 527).

makes such beliefs true could end up favoring realism or idealism. Metaphysical analysis doesn't discriminate.

This is where we might be tempted to think that 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 **ecumenicalism** about common sense.

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. 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 **sectarianism** about common sense. 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 sectarian reading of Moore come from? Three places, I suggest. Moore's early 1910-11 Morley College 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 an account of common sense that's more sectarian than ecumenical, 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.¹⁷ In LPA, her 1933 British Academy lecture, Stebbing also references a long passage from an early paper by Moore—"The Nature and Reality of Objects of Perception" (*NROP*, [1905–06] 1922)—taking it to be representative of her philosophical stance, namely, "that it is futile for philosophers to dispute the truth of commonsense statements merely on the ground that the analysis of these statements cannot be given, or on the ground that if an analysis were given, it would be shocking to common sense" (1933: 8–9). In her 1942 contribution to the Schilpp volume on Moore, she revisits the paper again, noting that it hasn't received the attention she believes it deserves (1942: 524).¹⁸

Now, what's notable about both these papers by Moore, i.e., DCS and *NROP*, is that his account of common sense is less sectarian than it is in *SMPP*, *PEW*, or *RMC*; indeed, many readers might find his views surprisingly ecumenical. Consider the passage from *NROP* which Stebbing reproduces in her British Academy lecture. With respect to the proposition, "Hens' eggs are generally laid by hens," we find Moore writing this (following Stebbing, I believe it is important to quote the passage in full):

I am quite willing to allow for the moment that if it is true at all, we must

¹⁷ See Stebbing (1926: 194; 1932–33: 73–74, 76; 1933–34: 26–27; 1933: 7, 27; 1938–39, 70–71, 73).

¹⁸ This remark could be taken as somewhat exaggerated, given that it was written for the Schilpp volume, which aimed to canonize Moore. The important point, however, is that Stebbing discusses *NROP* in both her 1933 and 1942 papers in a non-trivial way.

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).¹⁹

Though it would be only a few years later, in his 1910–11 Morley College lectures, that Moore would glom onto a more sectarian account of common sense, nearly two decades after these lectures, in both DCS and his posthumously published *Lectures on Philosophy* (LP, 1966), he appears to revert to his earlier, more ecumenical views.

In DCS, recall, Moore claims that he is “not at all sceptical as to the truth of . . . 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.

¹⁹ Interestingly, David Armstrong picks up on this as well, though he overstates things somewhat: “Moore was always ready to insist on what we might call the shallowness of truistic or Moorean knowledge” (2006: 160–61).

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.²⁰

Though Moore's ecumenicalism about common sense is perhaps less explicit in DCS, 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, in 1928–29, 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 material thing' but does *not* entail 'that's independent of perception' or 'that's not a colony of monads'" (*LP*, 17).²¹ 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

²⁰ Although Moore seriously entertains this phenomenalist analysis, he ultimately rejects it, as he does the other two analyses he considers (the direct realist's and indirect realist's). Importantly, while the phenomenalist analysis strikes him as paradoxical, he nevertheless admits that "the true analysis may, for instance, *possibly* be quite as paradoxical as is the third view given above [i.e., phenomenalism]," though he doubts this will be the case in the end (DCS, 133).

²¹ "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).

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 him.²² However, given that strikingly similar views were developed in texts of Moore's that Stebbing *did* read and discuss—namely, NROP and DCS—it's plausible that Stebbing's own ecumenicalism about common sense was likely inspired and influenced by the ecumenicalism on display in these texts. If this is right, the difference between Stebbing and Moore with respect to the truths and commitments of common sense isn't as stark as commentators like Janssen-Lauret claim it is, that (in my words) Stebbing endorsed a more ecumenical account of common sense 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.²³

4 Science and Common Sense

The commitments of common sense can be understood in either an ecumenical or sectarian way. At different stages of his philosophical development, Moore appears

²² Aside from their written correspondence, Stebbing reports that she had “often been present at discussions with [Moore] and [had] occasionally heard him lecture” (1942: 530).

²³ Though Stebbing's ecumenical 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, human bodies, stars” (1933–34: 10). This, however, make it sounds as if common sense *is* antecedently committed to something that contradicts idealism. Something similarly sectarian 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. See also footnote 34.

to have aligned himself with both, while Stebbing, as I've suggested, influenced by Moore's NROP and DCS, seems to align with the former. But there are other aspects of Moore's and Stebbing's common sense view that demand examination—particularly the relationship between common sense and science. Considering this relationship will help us gradually build towards a clearer understanding of Stebbing's distinctive common sense program, one that diverges from Moore's in significant ways.

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)²⁴

The sciences *do* say not only $p \dots$ 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. Moore had a deep respect for mathematics and science and was certainly not ignorant of the important advances being made in these fields.²⁵ Though certainly not decisive,

²⁴ Curiously, we find David Lewis echoing something similar in *Parts of Classes*: "I'm 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 philosophical method. See Nolan (2005: 203) for discussion.

²⁵ See, for example, Moore's unpublished review of Russell's *The Principles of Mathematics* in Moore

the passages above do at least suggest that Moore was 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 (whether that's something that actually happens is a different matter, to be discussed shortly). 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.²⁶

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 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). This 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

(2018–19). Worth mentioning here is also his discussion of after-images in PEW 151, where he references both a physiology textbook and psychology manual, alongside some simple experiments he conducted 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. See Preti (2008, 2022) for discussion of how Moore's early philosophy was shaped by nineteenth-century anti-psychologism about psychology.

²⁶ See Moore's reply to Ambrose where he suggests that “There are no external objects” is an empirical statement capable of falsification (RMC, 670–74).

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 wary 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 was 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 and scientists were tempted to follow physics' lead, using these developments to draw extravagant metaphysical conclusions. Stebbing, well-versed enough in physics to engage critically, stood out for her methodical dismantling of the arguments and assumptions underlying these conclusions, providing a necessary counterpoint to the prevailing, and at times unbridled, enthusiasm surrounding the new physics.

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 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.²⁷ 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.

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 closely resembles what we would today call *presentism*—the view that only present events, objects, and times really exist. These broadly A-theoretic 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)²⁸

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.²⁹ Stebbing says all of this in full awareness of Einstein's theory of relativity (which is discussed

²⁷ See West (2022) for further discussion of Stebbing's philosophy of time.

²⁸ 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)").

²⁹ Stebbing seems to realize that if the past and future don't exist, statements about the past and

at the end of her article) but nevertheless goes on to conclude that time has an intrinsic direction and that the present—the *now*—is fundamental:

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)

Stebbing, however, doesn't reject Einstein's theory; instead, she insists on a division of labor, arguing 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)

While this passage raises many other interesting questions,³⁰ the relevant takeaway is that Stebbing doesn't see a direct conflict between our commonsensical conception of time and our best physics of time. A similar view is found in her 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 sharp rebuke of two prominent physicists—Arthur Eddington and Sir James Jean—whose philosophical worldviews she finds deeply muddled. Below, I'll just focus on her critique of

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).

³⁰ Why does Stebbing say that the problem of time for philosophers is *independent* of our best physical speculations? Perhaps her reasons are similar to her views about sense-data, which ultimately rest on her *purpose-dependent* account of inquiry: "[Sense-data] are elements discriminated within a context, and the discrimination is relative to the specific set of questions arising out of that context. . . . what is basic is *to be determined by the purpose of the investigation*" (1942: 527–28, emphasis added). Applied to time, the idea might be that what counts as "basic" or fundamental is similarly dependent on the context and purpose of the inquiry. Within the context of our best physical speculations, there is no room for talk of our subjective experience of the absolute *now* or of time *passing*, even if such experiences are central to our philosophical accounts of time.

Eddington.³¹

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 added)

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 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

³¹ 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.

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 “Some Puzzles about Analysis”:

“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, “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.³² (1938–39, 79)

³² 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.

In these passages and those above, we don't find Stebbing insisting that common sense bow to the dictates of science, but neither do we see her rallying to defend common sense outright against the advancements of physics. What we instead find is a critical assessment of whether our best science is genuinely incompatible with common sense. In each case, Stebbing finds reason to suspect that the supposed conflict is illusory. Yet, her aim is not to discredit science—quite the opposite—but to distinguish the genuinely empirical content of our scientific theories from the metaphysical baggage imposed by certain philosophers and physicists, often manifesting in the misleading language used to describe their philosophical implications.

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 believed that the science of their time genuinely challenged those beliefs in the first place. For one gets the sense that both Stebbing and Moore considered science to either bolster the credibility of their commonsense outlook—Stebbing explicitly maintaining that science develops “by the continual modification of common-sense views” (RMP, 148)—or to be largely neutral with respect to it.

5 Common Sense Knowledge as Probable Knowledge

Up to this point, I've tried to show (i) that the gap between Stebbing and Moore on the scope and limits of common sense isn't as wide as some commentators have suggested, and (ii) how the differing contexts of their investigations—science for Stebbing, philosophy for Moore—prefigured their distinct uses of common sense. In this final section, I want to bring into even sharper focus how the scientific context that Stebbing was deeply immersed in shaped her account of common sense in a way that is decidedly distinct from Moore's. Somewhat ironically, this account is sketched in her paper, “Moore's Influence” (1942), a work often overlooked by commentators.

In “Moore's Influence,” Stebbing writes that one of Moore's greatest philosophical contributions is having shown that “we may have a *reason*, though not a logically *conclusive* reason for certain statements concerning direct observation” (1942: 524).

Austin (1962). Yet, the context in which Stebbing advances such arguments is fairly 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.

Stebbing understands beliefs based on such reasons (i.e., reasons that *aren't* logically conclusive) as constituting knowledge—that is, *probable knowledge*. What Stebbing believes Moore has convincingly demonstrated is that probable knowledge is a *genuine* case of knowledge, that it is “no less *knowledge* than *demonstrative* knowledge, although it is not, and cannot claim to be, logically certifiable knowledge” (1942: 526).

Already, we can appreciate the idiosyncrasies of Stebbing's interpretation of Moore. Nowhere, after all, does Moore characterize knowledge in probabilistic terms. Stebbing's reading, however, isn't entirely without textual basis. She draws the above lesson from a passage in Moore's NROP, where he characterizes a “good reason” for belief as one that renders a statement “*positively probable*” (NROP, 41). For Moore, that is, such a reason isn't merely one that conforms to “propositions from which the laws of Formal Logic state that the belief could be deduced” (NROP, 40). Moore's notion of “good reason” is more inclusive than that. He takes his usage to comport with its “wide and popular” sense. To illustrate, he considers the example of forming beliefs based on the testimony of a newspaper generally regarded as reliable. If, say, *The Times* has reported that the King is dead, then this would constitute a “good reason” to believe that he is, in fact, dead. The evidence we get from *The Times*, would, in other words, render our belief that the King is dead positively probable.

Stebbing sees this as one of the central lessons of Moore's common sense program. Just as the evidence from *The Times* furnishes us with probable knowledge that the King is dead, so too do our perceptual experiences (under and alongside other conditions) provide us with probable knowledge that the many propositions of common sense, such as the existence of material objects, are true. Though Stebbing doesn't put it explicitly this way, the upshot is that common sense knowledge—our knowledge of the various propositions of common sense—ultimately amounts to probable knowledge.

Stebbing recognizes that the very idea of “probable knowledge” is a radical one. Much of Western philosophy has traditionally taken for granted the idea that, absent a deductive metaphysics of justification, absent demonstrative reasons for belief, we aren't rationally entitled to claim such knowledge. We might very well *believe* that material objects exist, we may have *probable opinion* that they exist, but, lacking demonstrative reasons, we cannot truly claim to *know* that material objects exist. According to Stebbing, this assumption is a “mistake,” one that “lies at the base of Hume's criticism of our belief in external objects” (1942: 525). It's also a mistake that lies at the heart of Descartes' method of doubt:

To begin, as Descartes began, or at any rate tried to begin, by doubting everything and then to conclude by asserting that most of what he had doubted had now been proved to be true is futile. This is no more possible in the case of common sense propositions than in the case of scientific propositions; nor

is it more necessary in the case of the former class of propositions than it is in the latter. *The logical character of the evidence for common sense propositions does not differ fundamentally from the logical character of the evidence for scientific propositions.* (1942: 526, emphasis added)

We don't begin where Descartes begins; we don't try to look for logically certifiable, demonstrative knowledge of the external world.³³ We content ourselves to what is probable. And what is probable constitutes a kind of knowledge of its own: "probable knowledge really *is* knowledge" (1942: 526). Or so urges Stebbing's Moore.

The sentence emphasized in the passage above is particularly striking. Here, Stebbing is at her most explicit in characterizing common sense knowledge as continuous with scientific knowledge, something that Moore, at best, only intimates. It also helps explain Stebbing's earlier hesitation to uncritically pit science against common sense. For Stebbing, the propositions of common sense and science are largely interconnected—the latter resting on the former, though neither is beyond revision. Since the logical character of the evidence of common sense is not fundamentally different from that of science, the former is equally as corrigible as the latter: "just as scientific propositions are not incorrigible, so too are common sense propositions not incorrigible" (1942: 528).³⁴

Unsurprisingly, Moore, in his reply to Stebbing, 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, unlike Stebbing, Moore couldn't seem to part ways with the old guard. Given his rejection of the views Stebbing attributes to him, I therefore suggest that Stebbing should be understood not so much as advancing a reading of the historical Moore, but as offering a rational reconstruction of his common sense program *as it struck her*.³⁵ Once we subtract Moore from Stebbing's reading, what remains is Stebbing's own distinctive account of common sense knowledge—a form of *probable knowledge* that differs in degree, not in kind, from scientific knowledge.

So understood, making sense of Stebbing and Moore on common sense perhaps comes down to this. We might be tempted to put it this way: unlike Moore's

³³ See also Stebbing (1932–33: 93).

³⁴ Compare this to Stebbing's remarks in RMP: "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).

³⁵ Stebbing is wary of this herself, writing that she may have "profoundly misunderstood Moore (which is, unfortunately, not at all unlikely)" (1942: 525).

common sense program, Stebbing's is more Quinean than Archimedean. While our common sense beliefs enjoy more centrality in our "web of beliefs" than scientific ones, they are nonetheless 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).

* * *

What to conclude? Janssen-Lauret (2022a: 174) is right to point out that Stebbing's "respectful tone" and "humility" towards Moore sometimes obfuscated the originality of her contributions.³⁶ If I'm right, Stebbing's paper, "Moore's Influence," may be yet another instance of this. But if I'm right again, this message is hard to square with the textual evidence of the previous sections. It also seems hard to square with Stebbing's personality and public persona.³⁷

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 what she *doesn't*—her own distinctive brand of scientific common-sense philosophy.

³⁶ See, for example, footnote 11.

³⁷ Stebbing's writings and correspondence leave the impression of a figure unafraid to express her views. Status didn't seem to deter her from speaking bluntly and unapologetically, whether confronting preeminent physicists or preeminent philosophers. She starts off one paper, for example, by 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, "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" (1938–39: 75). Examples beyond these can easily be multiplied. See also Chapman (2013: 34–35) who describes Stebbing's replies to Moore in their very first written correspondence as "tenacious." While this brusqueness or assertiveness wasn't unusual in British philosophy, it takes on a different significance given the subordinate position of women in male-dominated philosophy and British society at large. These examples aren't, then, meant to depict Stebbing as an intellectual bully, but rather to emphasize that she didn't seem to feign respect where she felt it was undeserved—even against the backdrop of a patriarchal intellectual environment. Of course, this isn't to say that Stebbing was *never* politely deferential due to these conditions. My point is that if Stebbing's tone towards Moore (or other figures) ever veered in the direction of the "respectful," we might think that it was because she genuinely admired them or felt a philosophical debt.

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