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To cite this article: Annalisa Coliva (2021) Stebbing, Moore (and Wittgenstein) on common sense and metaphysical analysis, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 29:5, 914-934, DOI: [10.1080/09608788.2021.1936447](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2021.1936447)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2021.1936447>



Published online: 24 Jun 2021.



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ARTICLE



Stebbing, Moore (and Wittgenstein) on common sense and metaphysical analysis

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ABSTRACT

Susan Stebbing is often portrayed as indebted to G. E. Moore for her ideas concerning the relationship between common sense and philosophy and about analysis. By focusing mostly on her article “The method of analysis in metaphysics”, this article argues that, in fact, Stebbing anticipated some of Moore’s ideas in “Proof of an external world”, and even ideas in Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*. It further argues that Stebbing cast an original light on the method of analysis, while at the same time being much more aware of its limitations than Moore in “A defence of common sense”. In fact, her reservations anticipated some of Wittgenstein’s criticisms, in *Philosophical Investigations*, of his earlier logical atomism. It is concluded that Stebbing’s paper is a treasure trove of seminal ideas both in metaphysics and in epistemology, the full significance of which is better appreciated by reading it in connection with the work of these founding fathers of analytic philosophy.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 17 December 2020; Revised 20 March 2021; Accepted 25 May 2021

KEYWORDS Stebbing; Moore; Wittgenstein; common sense; analysis

1. Introduction

Susan Stebbing (1885–1943) met George Edward Moore (1873–1958) for the first time at an Aristotelian Society meeting in London in 1917. Moore was in attendance and engaged in discussion afterwards by insistently asking Stebbing to clarify parts of her paper. Since then, they were in touch for the rest of Stebbing’s life.¹

Stebbing is typically portrayed as indebted to Moore for many of her ideas concerning the relationship between common sense and philosophy and

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¹Chapman, *Susan Stebbing and the Language of Common Sense*, 33–34. Stebbing was the first woman Professor of Philosophy in Britain (since 1933), at a time when Cambridge was still refusing to allow women even to graduate. For the same reason, together with the fact that Wittgenstein applied for the position, Stebbing was not considered for the Chair left vacant after Moore’s retirement at Trinity College, Cambridge (Chapman, *Susan Stebbing and the Language of Common Sense*, 126–127). She was President of the Aristotelian Society for 1933–34 and President of the Mind Association for 1934–35, and a co-founder of the journal *Analysis* in 1933.

about analysis.² However, if we look at her work, particularly “The method of analysis in metaphysics” (1932, MAM), a different picture emerges. That is, one in which Stebbing did, in fact, anticipate some of Moore’s ideas in “Proof of an external world” (1939, PEW) and even some of Wittgenstein’s in *On Certainty* (1969, OC), with respect to the relationship between philosophy and common sense; and one in which she cast a particular and original light on the method of analysis, while at the same time being much more aware of its limitations than Moore himself in “A defence of common sense” (1925, DCS). In fact, her reservations regarding the method of analysis anticipated some of Wittgenstein’s remarks in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953, PI) against his earlier logical atomism in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921, TLP). MAM is thus a treasure trove of seminal ideas both in metaphysics and in epistemology, whose full significance is better appreciated by reading it in connection with the work of these founding fathers of analytic philosophy.

2. “The method of analysis in metaphysics”: two conceptions of metaphysics and their relation to common sense

MAM is a long and complex paper aimed at clarifying what, according to Stebbing, metaphysics should be concerned with, and how the analysis should be conducted. The starting point is a criticism of British idealism. Stebbing takes issue with McTaggart’s (*Some Dogmas of Religion*, 1) claim that metaphysics is “the systematic study of the ultimate nature of reality”. According to Stebbing, this way of conceiving of metaphysics is problematic because it depends on thinking that the nature of reality is neither as it appears, nor as is empirically discoverable by science, or through analysis. Rather, it is discovered through a priori, deductive reasoning, which starts from what is ultimate – Spirit, Reason – to derive appearance. Metaphysics then consists in the construction of a deductive system, predicated on the distinction between appearance and reality, which is either embraced or rejected *en bloc* (MAM, 68). According to Stebbing, the value of such systems, if they are coherent, is like the value of works of art (MAM, 68, see also 94). They have beauty and, therefore, spiritual significance. “They heighten the joy of living, but they do not give knowledge; they are the source of inspiration, but they do not yield understanding” (MAM, 68). To such a conception Stebbing objects: “In my opinion, however, metaphysics does not consist in creation, but in investigation” (MAM, 68).

²Ayer, *Part of My Life*, 157–158 describes her as “very much a disciple of Moore”. Beaney, “Susan Stebbing and the Early Reception”, 240 comments: “Stebbing was far too independent a thinker to be described as a ‘disciple’ of Moore, although she was undoubtedly influenced by him”.

Stebbing does not think that metaphysics leads to the discovery of new facts. In this, metaphysics differs from natural and social sciences (MAM, 65). Rather, “the aim of metaphysics is to reveal the *structure of that to which reference is made in true statements*” (MAM, 65, my emphasis). The investigation, therefore, aims at clarifying the nature of facts to which we ordinarily refer in our everyday statements, such as when we say ‘I am sitting at a table’, or ‘Here is a pen’.

According to Stebbing, traditional metaphysics errs because it partakes in:

a very common view of the nature of philosophy. This is the view that the business of the philosopher is to find reasons for our commonsense beliefs that certain things are the case; that if he cannot find these reasons, these beliefs must be abandoned.

(MAM, 68)

As Bradley put it (*Appearance and Reality*, 1), “metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct”. That is, if one engages in the epistemological project of justifying our commonsensical beliefs, one will be led to search for beliefs or principles which are allegedly more certain than what they are supposed to justify, and then to either proclaim that our commonsensical beliefs are unjustified, or that they are derivable from those more certain bases. Descartes’ *cogito* is an example of that conception of metaphysics, according to Stebbing.

In her view, in contrast, metaphysics should take for granted that our commonsensical beliefs are for the most part correct and then should proceed to analyse what facts make them true. We could dub her approach ‘the metaphysics first’ approach and the one she opposes ‘the epistemology first’ approach to metaphysics. As Stebbing puts it:

I am concerned to maintain that the contention that the proper method of metaphysics is the method of analysis involves, and is involved by, the denial of the view that the problem of metaphysics is to find reasons for our beliefs. I hold that such a belief, as, for example, that there is a table in this room, or that I am now sitting at this table, or that putting my hand in the flame was unpleasant, must afford a starting point

On this view, the business of metaphysics is to show (i) what exactly we are believing when we believe that there is a table in this room, that it was here three hours ago, and so on; (ii) *how* our various beliefs are inter-related; (iii) how our inconsistent beliefs may be adjusted, and which should be rejected. Thus metaphysics aims at making precise the reference of all true beliefs. For this purpose analysis is indispensable.

(MAM, 70)

Importantly, Stebbing points out that:

we cannot demonstrate that *this* given belief is true; we cannot find premises more certain than the belief itself *from which* it may be *deduced*. Either there is no guarantee of truth or there are some instancial premises which I can know to be true.

(MAM, 70)

Here Stebbing is not merely saying that commonsensical beliefs are accepted without proof, or that we are more certain of them than of any contrary philosophical thesis, or of the premises of arguments which should allegedly prove them. Rather, she is making a modal claim about the fact that no proof of them could be given, for it would necessarily rest on premises the truth of which is disputable, while the truth of these commonsensical beliefs is not. Alternatively, such a proof would depend on already taking for granted the very thing one is supposed to thereby prove, e.g. knowledge of having hands.

The former is a point which definitely resonates with Moore, who, in PEW (150), states: "I can know things, which I cannot prove; and among things which I certainly did know, even if (as I think) I could not prove them, were the premisses of my [proof]" – that is "Here is my hand" and "Here is another". Yet, Moore is not explicit as to why a proof of the premises of his proof cannot be given. Stebbing's claim also resonates with what Wittgenstein writes in OC (125):

If a blind man were to ask me 'Have you got two hands?' I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don't know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn't I test my eyes by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? What is to be tested by what? (Who decides what stands fast?).

Yet, Wittgenstein is just insisting on the fact that a proof of commonsensical beliefs would likely take them for granted. Still, he is not taking the issue with the idea of providing a proof of them which started from allegedly more secure philosophical theses (like Descartes' *cogito*).

Furthermore, it must be stressed that PEW was written seven years after MAM and OC was composed between 1949 and 1951, so well after MAM. True, in "Hume's Philosophy" (1909, 159–160, HP) Moore had already made the point that any proof aimed at proving that we know that there are external facts will proceed by considering a specific instance of knowledge, such as I know I have hands. It would thus beg the question since it would assume that we do have the knowledge of at least that fact about the external world. Yet, HP is not referenced in MAM and it is not clear that Stebbing had read it at the time. The reference we find to HP in her writings is much later, in "Moore's Influence" (1942, MI).

In DCS, which Stebbing refers to repeatedly in MAM, the problem of a proof of the truth of our commonsensical beliefs is not even in view, for the paper is concerned with the defence of common sense, and not with the proof of what it entails. In DCS Moore first specifies which truisms characterize common sense and then claims that philosophers who either deny propositions entailed by them, like idealists, or who claim that they do not know them, like sceptics, are saying something either false or self-contradictory (DCS, 38–43). The insistence on the truth of commonsensical beliefs,

even though no proof of them can be given, is not to be found in DCS, but only in PEW.

In DCS (40), Moore briefly outlines a reason against idealism which resembles but is not identical to Stebbing's argument for considering it impossible to deduce commonsensical beliefs from other ones. For Moore asserts that any philosophical position that *denies*, or entails the denial of, commonsensical beliefs (and/or of what they entail, such as the existence of an external world) would reach a conclusion that is less certain than those very truisms, and should, therefore, be rejected. Yet Moore is concerned neither with the derivation or justification of those philosophical theses, nor with the derivation or the justification of truisms themselves. Rather, he is merely pointing out that since commonsensical beliefs and what they entail are maximally certain, anything incompatible with them is less certain and should, therefore, be rejected. This is, in fact, commonly referred to as 'Moore's gambit'.

Furthermore, the 'metaphysics first approach' that characterizes Stebbing's position is echoed in Moore's PEW. For, despite the fact that generations of interpreters have tended to read it as an epistemological paper, meant to address scepticism, Moore ("A Reply to My Critics", 668) emphatically denied that and maintained that the paper was to be read as an anti-idealist one. If the topic of PEW is metaphysics, it does no longer involve analysis, though. Indeed, a *proof* of the existence of the external world is attempted in PEW – against Stebbing's claim that commonsensical beliefs could not be proved. True, the proof starts with commonsensical premises which are not proved. And true, Moore says that a proof of them cannot be given (PEW, 149, see also Moore, "Hume's Philosophy", 159–160). Yet, he then says that such a proof would depend on proving that one is not dreaming (PEW, 149). He claims that he has conclusive evidence that he is not dreaming, but that such evidence would not amount to a proof. Yet, the absence of such a proof is no reason for him to doubt that he knows those premises to be true. As I have claimed elsewhere,³ this is indeed Moore's central contention in PEW – that is, that a proof remains a good and cogent one even if its premises are not proved, as long as they are known, as they are in this case.

Wittgenstein was greatly influenced by Moore's writings, particularly DCS, while he was more critical of PEW precisely because it attempted to *prove* the existence of an external world. It is less clear if he was aware of Stebbing's or whether he interacted (philosophically) with her. Wittgenstein took the central insight in DCS to be the anti-Cartesian idea that there are propositions that look like ordinary empirical ones, and yet are not subject to doubt or

³See Coliva, *Moore and Wittgenstein*, chapter 1; "Scepticism and Knowledge"; "Moore and Mooreanism", "What Do Philosophers Do?".

verification. In ordinary circumstances, we do not verify that we have hands by looking at them, and it is no more certain that we do have them after looking. Nor do we have or would accept any reason to doubt that we have them (in said circumstances). Furthermore, we do not derive that proposition from an allegedly more secure one about our sensory experience. 'I have hands', like a myriad other propositions he lists in OC, is, for Wittgenstein, like for Moore and Stebbing, as secure as '2+2=4'.⁴ He also thought we could not prove them. For an alleged proof would start with premises that would be no more secure than them; or because the proof would be epistemically circular.⁵ Hence, Wittgenstein concluded that, despite contrary appearances, these were not ordinary empirical propositions, but more like rules. They were like 'hinges' that need to stay put if we want the door that is our ordinary epistemic trafficking in genuinely empirical investigation, to be possible at all.⁶ This was the new and original contribution made by Wittgenstein – that is, the claim about the different epistemic and semantic status of these propositions – not to be found in MAM. Still the motivations, behind such a radical move, are like the ones presented by Stebbing.

Towards the end of MAM another key anti-sceptical claim appears. After clarifying the purpose of the method of analysis in metaphysics, Stebbing acknowledges the possibility of being mistaken about beliefs such as 'I am seeing a piece of paper', or 'This is a pen', in ordinary circumstances, but she adds:

But it does not follow from this that we can never know that we are not mistaken. Descartes' argument ... seems [to me] one of his weakest ... His mistake was to attempt to doubt simultaneously *all* those propositions concerning the external world, which he had formerly *known* to be true. One feels Descartes knew too much about the characteristics of malignant demons to satisfy the requirements of his own method. Methodic doubt must proceed step by step. Such step-by-step doubting is not inconsistent with the assumption that I do *now know* that I am seeing a piece of paper.

(MAM, 93)

Stebbing thinks that we cannot doubt all our commonsensical beliefs at once. For it would be incoherent to take oneself to have known them and then call all of them into question at once.⁷ More importantly, she claims that doubt can only sensibly target specific beliefs and must presumably be supported by reasons. Thus, it is compatible with the assumption (or the fact) that we

⁴For the point of this mathematical analogy, see Coliva, "Are There Mathematical Hinges?"

⁵The former structure would be instantiated by a proof aimed at proving 'I have hands' starting with my current sensory experience. The latter structure would be exemplified by a proof, like Moore's, that, starting with commonsensical beliefs, aimed at deriving a justification for 'There is an external world', which needs, in fact, to be presupposed in order to have a justification for its premises.

⁶For a discussion, see Coliva, *Moore and Wittgenstein*, chapter 4.

⁷Stebbing was also familiar with the pragmatist rejection of Cartesian global scepticism and might have drawn inspiration from that for her criticism of it. Thanks to Alexander Klein for drawing my attention to this point.

do now know such things as ‘I am seeing a piece of paper’, when we are holding one in our hands.

The latter is an idea that we do not find in Moore’s writings, but which will be elaborated at length by Wittgenstein in OC. Moore does claim in PEW, as well as in HP, that it would be absurd to doubt that he knows the premises of his proof, or that he is not dreaming. Yet, he is not taking the issue with Descartes’ *global* scepticism by claiming that calling all our beliefs into question *at once* is impossible or otherwise problematic. Wittgenstein, in contrast, insists on the fact that a doubt that doubted everything would be self-defeating in that it would equally annihilate both the reasons for doubt (OC, 115, 450, 519, 625) and the possibility of meaning (OC, 506). Hence, it would be irrational – in the sense of not being supported by reasons – and meaningless (OC, 302, 383, 392, 606, 676).⁸

To sum up: Stebbing anticipates in MAM key points in both Moore’s more mature writings and in Wittgenstein’s and makes a more definitive claim about the epistemic status of commonsensical beliefs than Moore in DCS. Indeed, her views are very close to Wittgenstein’s, with respect to both the unprovability of commonsensical beliefs and the impossibility of global scepticism. Yet, Wittgenstein would develop his position almost two decades after MAM.

So why is Stebbing’s seminal contribution to epistemology typically disregarded? Three reasons immediately stand out. First, Stebbing is not elaborating the epistemological significance of those points further, for, by being interested in the particular kind of metaphysics that is concerned with finding the structure of facts referred to by commonsensical propositions, she was critical of foundationalist epistemological projects and uninterested in epistemology at large. Second, she was writing in a philosophical milieu that was mostly concerned with the issue of analysis: that issue was at the core of Russell’s, Moore’s, Wittgenstein’s, and the Vienna Circle’s investigations. Remarks that were significant for epistemology were simply not the focus of the on-going debate which she contributed to spur. Lastly, Stebbing’s influence faded with the waning away of interest in the debate on analysis. Thus, also the contributions she made to epistemology in her writings on analysis went unnoticed by subsequent generations of philosophers.⁹

3. Metaphysical analysis

In MAM, Stebbing distinguishes two main kinds of analysis: one is symbolic or same-level analysis; the other one is metaphysical or new-level (or even

⁸For a discussion of Wittgenstein’s anti-sceptical strategies, see Coliva, *Moore and Wittgenstein*, chapter 3.

⁹For general sociological reasons as to why women philosophers are often disregarded, see Hagengruber, “Cutting Through the Veil of Ignorance” and Hutton, “Women, Philosophy and the History of Philosophy”.

reductive¹⁰) analysis (MAM, 76). The former is what occurs in postulational systems – whence its other title of ‘postulational analysis’.¹¹ This kind of analysis aims at giving a clear and unambiguous formulation of key notions and concepts and at deductively deriving whatever follows from the initial set of definitions (MAM, 83). An axiomatic system would be a good example of what Stebbing calls ‘postulational analysis’.¹² According to Stebbing, logical positivists pursued this kind of analysis.

The latter, in contrast, aims at determining which facts make our commonsensical beliefs true. According to Stebbing, metaphysical analysis has been practised and championed by Russell, Wisdom, Moore and probably Wittgenstein in TLP (MAM, 74) – and could be considered the characteristic trait of ‘Cambridge analysis’, as opposed to ‘Vienna analysis’.¹³ Metaphysical analysis has a characteristic direction – whence its further label of ‘directional analysis’. It goes from the more complex to the less complex and bottoms out in facts that are basic because they cannot be further analysed into simpler ones.

According to Stebbing, Moore’s DCS, IV is a good example of metaphysical analysis (MAM, 77. see also §3 in the following).¹⁴ To exemplify it, Stebbing considers ‘I see a pen’. No matter whether there is a pen or whether I am right about the fact that what I am seeing is, in fact, a pen, “I must continue to contend that I see something black and (roughly) cylindrical. This contention must be granted. *This, that is black and cylindrical*, which I now see, has often been called a ‘sense-datum’” (MAM, 71). She then claims that she is only adopting the word, without endorsing any theory about the nature of sense data and their relations to physical objects.

¹⁰The term ‘reductive’ is misleading because Stebbing does not want to reduce physical objects – e.g. tables and chairs – to constructions out of more elementary elements, such as sense data or even the basic constituents of matter identified by physics.

¹¹This was Stebbing’s, “Logical Positivism and analysis” preferred terminology.

¹²If it is merely formal. *Principia Mathematica* is not, according to Stebbing (MAM, 90–91). Compare Beaney, “Susan Stebbing on Cambridge and Vienna analysis”, 339–340 for an elucidation of postulational analysis (which, following Bentham and Wisdom, he dubs “paraphrastic”).

¹³Stebbing lists Wittgenstein in the main text, but then adds a cautionary footnote. For Wittgenstein’s atomism in TLP is driven by the goal of determining the conditions of possibility of meaning. Stebbing is critical of transcendental aims and of assigning language a pre-eminent role in metaphysics. For her, words mean what they mean, and metaphysics should determine what facts, if any, make our true beliefs true. Ultimately, Wittgenstein was considered by Stebbing to be at crossroads between Vienna and Cambridge analysis. On the differences between Vienna and Cambridge analysis, see Beaney, “Susan Stebbing on Cambridge and Vienna analysis”.

¹⁴A common illustration of directional analysis is the analysis of committees into the individuals that compose them (Stebbing, “Directional Analysis and Basic Facts”, 34–35), where we go from a complex group entity to a set of less complex entities like individuals. As Beaney, “Susan Stebbing on Cambridge and Vienna Analysis”, 348 rightly notices, however, no general criterion is given about how to demarcate different levels. Yet, this is no more than an illustration, since facts about individuals are not ultimate. Directional analysis is not just ‘new level’ analysis. Rather, as Stebbing points out in MAM, it is that kind of new level analysis that bottoms out in basic facts – that is, in facts that cannot be further analysed.

It is then clarified that sense data cannot be identical to physical objects because they are what “is directly presented to me in a given, determinate, perceptual situation” (MAM, 71) and, at most, only *parts* of objects, and not objects in their entirety, are so given to us. Furthermore, seeming to be aware of a sense datum and being aware of it is the one and the same thing. Thus, there is no room for an appearance/reality distinction with respect to sense data (MAM, 71). Yet, we do not infer the presence of the physical object from the sense datum, according to Stebbing. Such an inference would be open to mistake and this would quickly lead to considering the existence of physical objects, or our belief in it, problematic (as for instance Hume (*Treatise on Human Nature*, I, iv, 2) and Russell (*The Problems of Philosophy*) did). Rather, the physical object (Stebbing calls it “perceptual object”, MAM, 72) is “discerned within a given perceptual situation” (MAM, 72). One way of making sense of this idea is to think that the sense datum, while not coincident with the whole object, is that part of the surface of a physical object which is given to us in a specific perceptual situation, and therefore is not a mental entity. This would entail a certain view of sense data – one Moore is often associated with, even though he was ambivalent about it,¹⁵ as is clear from DCS, IV (see also §3 in the following). If so, however, Stebbing herself could not be noncommittal about the nature of sense data, after all.¹⁶

Furthermore, the sense datum is not even what “this pen” signifies (MAM, 71). ‘Pen’ for Stebbing means the physical object, not the sense datum. Yet, the judgement ‘This is a pen’ or ‘I am seeing a pen’ is *based on* and refers to the sense datum – it is based on and refers to that of which I am aware in the perceptual situation – whether I pay attention to it or not.

Echoing Russell, Stebbing maintains that philosophers have been drawn to this way of analysing the fact that this is a pen because “a demonstrative symbol can be used only when the using of it is co-present with its referend” (MAM, 72). The whole physical object is never completely given in the perceptual scene; therefore, it cannot be the referent of ‘this’ in the judgement ‘This is a pen’. The reference we make to sense data is thus direct, whereas the reference we make to physical objects is always and necessarily indirect (MAM, 73). Yet, until the nature of sense data is clarified, the relation between physical objects and sense data is going to be unclear and potentially problematic (MAM, 73–74).

¹⁵Martin, “Moore’s Dilemma”.

¹⁶Stebbing (“Logical Positivism and Analysis”, 78) writes: “Perceiving, I should contend, is neither direct nor inferential. To suppose that these alternatives are exhaustive is a prime mistake of Logical Positivism. Perceiving is certainly *indirect*; but it is a non-inferential, indirect *knowing*”. By perceiving a pen indirectly, since the direct object of perception is a sense datum, we nevertheless know, and know non-inferentially, that there is a pen in front of us. Arguably, for this idea to have some prospects of success, the sense datum should be considered identical to the part of the object perceived.

What is clear to Stebbing (like to Moore, in DCS, IV) is that we cannot hope to answer the general question ‘What is a physical object?’ before answering the question ‘What is a pen?’ (or some other relevant instance of the category of physical object), and that an answer to that question depends on knowing facts about this pen I am now seeing. To suppose otherwise would entail being content

with a definition, which leads us nowhere ... It is useless first to define “material thing” ... and then to ask whether [that term is] exemplified in the world. Yet this is what the deductive metaphysician does, unless he takes the easier course of defining the terms, and then ruling out whatever does not conform to the definition as ‘mere appearance’.

(MAM, 74)

While Moore in DCS, IV is adamant that he is interested in analysing *propositions* like ‘This is a pen’, Stebbing is interested in analysing the *fact* that this is a pen (MAM, 77, 82). For propositions are what sentences in different languages can all express and their elements “are constituents of the world; if the proposition is *true*, these constituents of the proposition are the elements of the *facts* to which the proposition refers” (MAM, 78, my emphasis). Moreover, metaphysical analysis is concerned primarily with true propositions, because it aims at knowledge. Hence, it is, at least primarily, an analysis of facts (on the assumptions that true propositions are facts). This argument presupposes a particular take on the nature of propositions, which is incompatible with a Fregean account of propositions as composed of the *senses* of the words that occur in the sentences that express them. It is also incompatible with the *Tractarian* view that propositions are pictures composed of (logically proper) *names* which *stand for* objects, sharing the same logical form with the states of affairs they depict. Yet, it is compatible with a Russellian conception of propositions, at least at a structural level. That is, Stebbing seems to agree with Russell that at a structural level propositions are composed of worldly items. This is compatible with then taking different views about the nature and identity of these worldly items. This account of propositions clearly raises problems of its own, concerning vacuous or fictional proper names, for instance. Yet, Russell’s theory of description was meant to overcome them.¹⁷ We can put the point by

¹⁷While both Moore and Stebbing were not interested in linguistic analysis (even though Moore’s terminology often obscured this point), it is quite difficult to attribute to Moore the view that, like Stebbing, he was interested in analysing facts. For he never claimed that analysis should be the analysis of true propositions, and he did not clarify what the constituents of propositions were in his view. For a contrary interpretation, see Milkov, “Susan Stebbing’s Criticism of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*”. The attribution to Moore (and Wittgenstein) was, in fact, made by Wisdom and it is Wisdom, *Logical Constructions*, I: 195 himself that can be first credited with the idea that analysis should reveal the structure of facts. While in MAM Stebbing follows Wisdom in attributing this view to Moore, she later rejects that attribution (MI: 528). Obviously, the attribution to Moore is moot. We will return to this issue in §3. Black, “Philosophical Analysis” criticizes Stebbing’s idea that the analysis should reveal the structure of facts.

saying that Stebbing's metaphysical analysis would aim at clarifying the structure of truth-makers, rather than of truth-bearers.¹⁸

Like in Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein, for Stebbing too, the grammatical form of the sentence can conceal "the form of the fact immediately referred to by the proposition" (MAM, 78, 81). In turn, the

immediate reference of the proposition *p* is what would ordinarily be understood to be what the proposition asserts. To understand *p* is to know its immediate reference. Thus the immediate reference of *There is a table in this room* is what you have all understood, namely that there is a table in this room. Every proposition, true or false, has an immediate reference.

(MAM, 78)

Here, however, Stebbing is talking about the *reference* of the proposition, which is clearly different from *identifying* the proposition with a specific (potential) arrangement of worldly items.¹⁹ This notion of a proposition as what is grasped when we understand a sentence, which, in turn, refers to worldly items, would differ from Russell's and would then be compatible with the *Tractarian* account of propositions and possibly also with the Fregean one. Indeed, Stebbing's conception of metaphysical analysis is very similar to Wittgenstein's idea, in TLP (3.201), of completely analysed propositions. MAM does not contain further clues as to which account of propositions Stebbing ultimately subscribed to. It remains, though, that either by inquiring into true propositions conceived of as constituted by worldly items or by inquiring into facts as that to which true propositions refer, Stebbing's analysis is an analysis of truth-makers rather than of truth-bearers.

The point of analysis, for Stebbing, like for Moore and Wittgenstein, is not to discover the immediate reference of a proposition since we know it already simply in virtue of understanding the proposition (MAM, 78–79). Rather, it is to discover "what *exactly* it asserts" – that is, what it *refers to* "however indirectly" (MAM 78-79). To know this "is to know what must be the case if we are asserting truly" (MAM, 79). Stebbing exemplifies this idea with the proposition that *every economist is fallible*. What I am asserting exactly by that entails that Maynard Keynes is fallible, *and so on*. So reference is made to Keynes, as well as to any other economist, even if none of them is the immediate reference of the proposition.²⁰ The analysis is then directional because it identifies those more basic facts – like the fact that Keynes is

He thinks that the analysis can only reveal the underlying logical structure of propositions. Concerning Black's criticism of Stebbing, see Beaney, "Susan Stebbing on Cambridge and Vienna Analysis", §3.

¹⁸I am indebted to Sandra Lapointe for this incisive formulation.

¹⁹Chapman, *Susan Stebbing and the Language of Common Sense*, 72 too notices this ambiguity between talk of analysing facts and analysing propositions in MAM.

²⁰Stebbing also distinguishes between referring to Keynes, in this case, and being acquainted with him, and holds that reference does not presuppose acquaintance.

fallible, that Karl Marx is fallible, etc. – which must obtain for the proposition that all economists are fallible to be true. These facts may be based on even more basic ones, where “a fact F is based upon F’ when F cannot be unless F’ is” (MAM, 80). The metaphysical analysis ultimately bottoms out in basic facts – that is, in facts that are not based on any other fact. Stebbing’s basic facts are clearly reminiscent of “atomic facts” in TLP (2) that are depicted by “atomic propositions” (as Russell, “Introduction” calls them), also because, like in TLP, for Stebbing if “we could express” them, “there would be complete isomorphy between these *facts* and their expression” (MAM, 82; compare TLP, 2.18, 2.2, 4.121).

Metaphysical analysis thus “presupposes certain assumptions with regard to the constitution of the world ... [which] are not logically necessary” (MAM, 80, 87). It presupposes the existence of such atomic or basic facts that serve as building blocks of all other facts. After proposing some semi-technical definitions, Stebbing identifies the following assumptions of metaphysical analysis:

(a) *The logical presupposition.*

(1) If *p* is to be analysed, then *p* must be understood. (...)

(b) *The metaphysical presuppositions.*

(2) If *p* is to be analysed, then it is not always the case that *p* is known to be false, and it is sometimes the case that *p* is known to be true.

(3) Directional analysis is possible. ...

(3.41) *The resultant* indicates a basic fact ...

(3.6) A basic fact is an absolutely specific fact. (85).

Stebbing takes Moore to have been “the only philosopher who has clearly stated the logical presupposition” (1) (MAM, 86), which she takes to be predicated on the distinction between “‘understanding *p*’ and ‘knowing the analysis of *p*’” (MAM, 86, see also Stebbing, “Logical Positivism and Analysis”, 56–57, and DCS, IV). We understand a proposition when we know its immediate reference, and “thus know how the expression expressing the proposition is being used” (MAM, 86). Thus, there must be an “expression ‘*S*’ which unambiguously expresses *p*” (MAM, 86). Clearly, we cannot analyse what we don’t or can’t understand. As she will state in later writings (MI, 519–520), Moore’s insistence on attaining a clear understanding of what is meant by certain philosophically germane expressions (e.g. ‘external world’), acquires its significance in this context. That is, it is the first necessary step towards giving a satisfactory analysis.²¹

²¹For a critical appraisal of this first step, see Beaney, “Susan Stebbing on Cambridge and Vienna Analysis”, 340–341).

An important corollary of this is that metaphysical analysis is incompatible with explicationism à la Carnap. Writes Stebbing: “Hence, if we grant (1) we must admit that we cannot hope to solve metaphysical problems by assigning out-of-the-way meanings to ordinary expressions” (MAM, 86). That is, we must make clear what is meant by our ordinary way of speaking, if we want to find out what facts the propositions expressed by our sentences refer to. If, in contrast, we substitute those ordinary words with new ones, or select only a subset of their ordinary meaning, then our analysis would not clarify what we referred to exactly in the first place, but it would clarify, at most, what the propositions expressed by these explicated expressions refer to.²² In this sense, metaphysical analysis is tied to the analysis of ordinary language, and is not the analysis of a regimented, or more scientific language. Stebbing credits Moore in DCS with this insight. Yet, even if this undoubtedly resonates with Moore, there is no passage in DCS where Moore clearly states that.

With respect to assumption (2), Stebbing notes that it has been widely made by philosophers engaged in metaphysical analysis. The issue is not that, in principle, we cannot provide a metaphysical analysis of false propositions. Rather, if the *point* of metaphysical analysis is to acquire *knowledge* of the structure of facts, some of the propositions we analyse must be true and known to be true. That is, if the metaphysical analysis is to yield the knowledge of how nature is carved at its joints, and if it starts with propositions about, for instance, middle-sized objects in our surroundings, which are based on, and are made true by these more fundamental facts, it must itself start with some true proposition, or fact that we know (MAM, 92).

Stebbing rightly points out that what is problematic in the method of analysis are the metaphysical assumptions it depends on, particularly presupposition (3) and its corollaries. For these presuppositions are not logically necessary (MAM, 87, 80). Writes Stebbing:

These assumptions entail certain consequences with regard to the constitution of the world. It cannot be maintained that the world is certainly so constituted. If it could, then the method of metaphysics might be deductive. But unless the world *is* so constituted metaphysical analysis is not possible. Hence, those who employ this method ought to attempt to determine to what extent, if any, it is reasonable to grant these assumptions.

(MAM, 87)

Here Stebbing is introducing a powerful idea *against* the very possibility of metaphysical analysis. This point may go unnoticed because the first part of the paper is devoted to what looks like not simply a characterization and a methodological clarification of metaphysical analysis, but a defence

²²This anticipates the objection made by Strawson against Carnap’s explicationism, and nowadays customarily raised against conceptual engineering projects, that they entail a change in topic.

of it.²³ Yet, the aim of the paper is to clarify in detail the presuppositions on which metaphysical analysis rests and then evaluate whether they are plausible. Stebbing ultimately returns a negative verdict on this latter issue. Yet, she gives it its best shot, and, even if she is sceptical of its prospects, she never sounds dismissive. Probably, at the time of MAM, she still wished to remain open to the possibility that it could be shown that the world is as metaphysical analysis requires it to be, if that kind of analysis is to be possible at all.²⁴

Metaphysical analysis is ultimately not viable. If it cannot be wholly deductive and a priori, unless there are good reasons to think that the world contains basic, non-further analysable facts, it is simply impossible.²⁵ That is, if the world is not like that, then directional analysis cannot reach an end point and is destined to proceed in a circle (or be open-ended and infinite). Yet, it is of the essence of directional analysis – as opposed to symbolic analysis (MAM, 87) – that it be non-circular and that it would reach an end point.

One might suggest that the end point could be determined arbitrarily and thus say ‘for our current purposes, let arrangements of atoms be the simple facts on which all other facts are based’, where this is compatible with saying ‘for these other purposes of ours, let us consider what atoms are composed of’. The operator ‘for our purposes’, however, would give the game of metaphysical analysis away, according to Stebbing. For, if the adjective ‘metaphysical’ is to do any serious work at all, it cannot be up to us, even less to our purposes, how we carve up nature at its joints. As Stebbing puts it:

Thus assumption [3.6] commits us to the assertion that the ultimate constituents of the world are simple, ... , they are not configured elements. It does not merely assert that we are *permitted*, for certain purposes, to treat the elements of basic *facts as though* they were unconfigured; it asserts that they *must* be unconfigured. This is the assumption, made by Leibniz and Russell, for instance, that there are absolute simples.

(MAM, 89)

²³In “Some Puzzles About Analysis”, 72, SPA, see also MI, 527 Stebbing states:

I tried to show [in MAM] that this metaphysical use of the method of analysis rested upon certain assumptions which, so far as I knew, had not been explicitly stated. ... I tried further to show that, once the assumptions were explicitly stated, they did not seem very plausible. It appears that I entirely failed to make this contention clear, for several writers have subsequently taken me to have been defending the use of the method of analysis in metaphysics.

²⁴I, therefore, concur with Chapman, *Susan Stebbing and the Language of Common Sense*, 70–71, 93, see also Beaney and Chapman, “Susan Stebbing”, §3 who points out how Stebbing is not endorsing metaphysical analysis, but is adopting “it as a hypothetical possibility, in order to establish what would follow from it” and to clarify “the assumptions on which it rests and the principles by which it must proceed”.

²⁵Based on this, Milkov, “Susan Stebbing’s Criticism of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*”, 358 claims that Stebbing (and Moore) were thereby denying the analytic/synthetic distinction well before Quine’s rejection of it. This is not the place for an assessment of that contention. Notice, however, that Stebbing was ultimately critical of directional analysis. Thus, it is doubtful that she thought of it as the correct methodology to adopt in philosophy.

Symbolic analysis allows us to treat complexes as simples (for instance when we take a more complex formula and indicate it with a letter and operate on it), but metaphysical analysis worth its name is supposed to give us the knowledge about mind – and representation-independent facts. Thus, it is of its essence that the world be as it needs to be for it to be possible. Yet, we have no guarantee whatsoever that the world be that way.

Stebbing then concludes:

My difficulty is not that these assumptions are involved in metaphysical analysis; it is whether they can be justified. When we have made explicit what is entailed by directional analysis, we find we must make assumptions which so far from being certainly justified, are not even very plausible. Yet, unless they can be justified, the method of metaphysical analysis cannot yield results capable of solving our problems.

(MAM, 91–92)

In later writings, such as SPA and MI, Stebbing returns on the issue of whether there are basic facts that could be the end point of metaphysical analysis and denies that. In MI, she clearly states that sense data, which, according to metaphysical analysis, should be the constituents of basic facts, are

elements discriminated within a context, and the discrimination is relative to the specific set of questions arising out of that context. Within that context the sense-data can be taken as basic, but, even so, they are not the termination of a directional analysis of common sense propositions ... what is basic is to be determined by the purpose of the investigation.

(MI, 527–528)

What Stebbing is, in fact, claiming, already in MAM and throughout her career, is that the idea of ‘basic facts’, or of simple and unanalysable elements of reality, is a philosophical myth. In a very Wittgensteinian spirit – this time in the vein of PI (§§38–79, especially §§47–48) – she notices that considering something simple or complex is an arbitrary choice, constrained only by the purposes of the investigation at hand.²⁶ The significance of this claim is not to expose the fact that the distinction is impossible, but that it is not metaphysically serviceable – that is, that there is no prospect in the kind of metaphysical analysis which is meant to carve nature at its joints. Clearly, if that is the project metaphysics identifies as central, then so much the worse for metaphysics. Thus, contrary to logical positivists, Stebbing is not saying that metaphysics is nonsense, or that the so-called metaphysical truths are at most grammatical – that is, conceptual – necessities. Rather, she is criticizing its fundamental methodological assumption – namely, that there are metaphysically basic facts.

²⁶For a discussion of Wittgenstein’s rejection of his earlier atomism, see Coliva, “Wittgenstein’s critique of logical atomism in the *Philosophical Investigations*”.

In sum, in MAM Stebbing clearly spells out the project of metaphysical analysis and raises crucial objections against it. Neither the methodological clarity nor the critique of the entire project is to be found in Moore's DCS, which Stebbing considers the best example of metaphysical analysis. Her critique is, in fact, similar, yet prior to Wittgenstein's. Finally, since metaphysical analysis, for Stebbing, would be the best way of pursuing metaphysics, far superior to the kind of metaphysics that, since Descartes and Hume, up to British Idealism, has tried to provide a justification for our commonsensical beliefs, its demise is, in fact, the demise of metaphysics, as Stebbing sees it. Stebbing did not explicitly draw that conclusion in MAM, probably because she wished to remain open to the idea that it might be shown that the world is constituted by basic facts. In time, however, it became clear to her that that residual hope was indeed vein – “a hangover from the days when ‘the problem of the external world’ was envisaged as primarily a problem of justifying common sense beliefs” (MI, 527), and also from the days when eminent analytic philosophers engaged themselves in the project of metaphysical analysis. Not coincidentally, after MAM, Stebbing devoted herself more and more to the analysis of language, most evidently in *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939) (compare Chapman, *Susan Stebbing and the Language of Common Sense*, 143–145).

4. Moore's conception of analysis in “A defence of common sense”

Stebbing credits Moore with the discovery of metaphysical analysis. It is, therefore, apposite to consider what Moore is, in fact, doing in DCS, IV, where he addresses the issue of how to analyse truisms, which he considers different from the issue of their truth and knowledge. He states:

I am not at all sceptical as to the *truth* of such propositions as “The earth has existed for many years past,” ... i.e. propositions which assert the existence of material things: on the contrary, I hold that we all know, with certainty, many such propositions to be true. But I am very sceptical as to what, in certain respects, the correct *analysis* of such propositions is. (DCS, 53)

In this respect, he thinks that he differs from many other philosophers, who think that the analysis of these propositions is clear, while their truth and knowledge are contestable (DCS, 53). Contrary to how Stebbing reads him in MAM, Moore is not saying that there is no epistemological issue to be addressed in connection with truisms, and that the point is merely to offer an analysis of them. Rather, he is simply indicating which one of the two projects is more difficult, in his opinion. As he writes:

I, on the other hand, while holding that there is no doubt whatever that many such propositions are wholly true, hold also that no philosopher, hitherto, has

succeeded in suggesting an analysis of them, as regards certain important points, which comes anywhere near to being certainly true.

(DCS, 53)

In SPA (73), Stebbing recognizes that in MAM she had somewhat misunderstood Moore and writes: "I did not then [in MAM] clearly see that Moore's discussion was also entangled with epistemological problems".²⁷ In fact, just before introducing sense data as fundamental elements of the analysis, Moore does tackle the epistemological problem of how one knows to be perceiving a hand. He writes:

It seems to me quite evident that the question how propositions of the type I have just given are to be analysed, depends on the question how propositions of another and simpler type are to be analysed. I know, at present, that I am perceiving a human hand ... ; and it seems to me that I cannot know how the proposition "Material things exist" is to be analysed, until I know how, in certain respects, [this] simpler [proposition] [is] to be analysed. ... It seems to me quite evident that my knowledge that I am now perceiving a human hand is a deduction from a pair of propositions simpler still – propositions which I can only express in the form "I am perceiving *this*" and "*This* is a human hand." It is the analysis of propositions of the latter kind which seems to me to present such great difficulties, while nevertheless the whole question as to the *nature* of material things obviously depends upon their analysis.

(MI, 526)

Hence, for Moore, knowledge of "I am perceiving a hand" is *deduced* from these more basic propositions, of which he then gives a tentative analysis:

whenever I know, or judge, such a proposition to be true, (1) there is always some *sense-datum* about which the proposition in question is a proposition – some sense-datum which is ... the principal or ultimate subject ... of the proposition in question, and (2) that, nevertheless, *what* I am knowing or judging to be true about this sense-datum is not (in general) that it is *itself* a hand ...

(DCS, 54)

Thus 'I am perceiving a hand' is *deduced* from 'I am perceiving this [sense datum]' and 'This [sense datum] is a hand'. As we saw in §2, Stebbing denied that. And even in MI (525–526), she tried to avoid charging Moore with this view of how we know 'I am perceiving a hand' by appealing to the idea that the latter proposition is simply made 'positively probable' by the propositions 'I am perceiving this [sense datum]' and 'This [sense datum] is a hand'. She also claimed that Moore's great achievement was to "led us to see that probable knowledge is no less *knowledge* than *demonstrative* knowledge, although it is not ... logically certifiable knowledge. In other

²⁷Milkov, "Susan Stebbing's Criticism of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*", 355, in contrast, claims that Stebbing and Moore conceived of the problem of the external world as an epistemological problem. This is explicitly denied by Moore, "A Reply to My Critics" and runs contrary to the 'metaphysics first' approach that Stebbing explores at length in MAM.

words, probable knowledge really *is* knowledge" (MI, 526). She tried to avoid charging Moore with that view because it does not follow that there is a hand where I seem to see it, simply because I am having a sense datum as of hand, as those who have thought it doubtful that we can ever know propositions about material objects point out. Moreover, and contrary to his various pronouncements, if, for Moore, knowledge of "Here is a hand" is deduced from "I am perceiving this" and "This is a hand" (where 'this' refers to a sense datum), it actually follows that a proof of one's knowing that there is a hand here can be given.²⁸ In addition, Moore insists on the fact that what is being analysed are propositions and he makes no assumption about their nature such that analysing them would be identical with (or would ipso facto entail) analysing facts. Nor does he claim that if analysis is to yield knowledge of facts, it must be an analysis of true propositions. Of course, he holds that truisms are true. Yet, he is not committed to the view that analysis should target only true propositions, and hence facts.

Since it would simply be wrong to hold that 'This [sense datum] is a hand', Moore clarifies that he does not hold that the sense datum *itself* is a human hand. After all, a hand has many parts, which are not parts of this sense datum. Thus, he proposes the following analysis:

"There is a thing, and only one thing, of which it is true both that it is a human hand and that *this surface* is a part of its surface." In other words, to put my view in terms of the phrase "theory of representative perception," I hold it to be quite certain that I do not *directly* perceive *my hand*; and that when I am said ... to "perceive" it, that I "perceive" it means that I perceive (in a different and more fundamental sense) something which is (in a suitable sense) *representative* of it, namely, a certain part of its surface.

(DCS, 55)

Moore then considers the question: "What, when I know 'This is part of the surface of a human hand,' am I knowing about the sense-datum in question?" (DCS, 55) Is it *itself* part of the surface of a human hand or not? He responds: "This is the question to which ... no philosopher has hitherto suggested an answer which comes anywhere near to being *certainly* true" (DCS, 55). He then concludes by looking at three possible answers, each of which he finds to be open to "very grave objections" (DCS, 56).

The first one holds that the sense datum is identical to the visible part of the object. The main problem with this view is that it cannot explain our perception when we see double: since we see two sense data, which cannot be

²⁸In his reply to Stebbing, Moore, "A Reply to My Critics", 677 wrote: "I do not at all like her proposal ... to call the kind of knowledge I have now that I am sitting at a chair 'probable knowledge.' I hold that it is *certain* that I am now sitting at a chair, and to say that I have 'probable knowledge' that I am, seems to me to suggest that it is *not* certain". Moore might have been right in objecting to the label 'probable knowledge', which suggests that knowledge of truisms is not certain; yet Stebbing was right in claiming that such knowledge cannot be deduced from knowledge of propositions regarding sense data.

both identical to the single visible surface of the object perceived. Thus, “it looks ... as if every sense-datum is, after all, only ‘representative’ of the surface, of which it is a sense-datum”. But then, asks Moore, “what relation has it to the surface in question?”

Here is the second possibility: “There is one and only one thing of which it is true both that it is part of the surface of a human hand, and that this sense-datum is an appearance or manifestation of it” (DCS, 57). Yet, Moore immediately notices that we have no idea of this thing that should have such a “supposed ultimate relation” to our sense data.

Finally, there is the view Moore attributes to Mill, according to which material things are ‘permanent possibilities of sensation.’ When I know “This [sense datum] is part of the surface of a human hand” I should, therefore, know “a whole set of hypothetical facts each of which is a fact of the form ‘If *these* conditions had been fulfilled, I should have been perceiving a sense-datum intrinsically related to *this* sense-datum in *this* way,’” (DCS, 58). However, knowledge of there being a hand here, according to Moore, is very unlikely based on knowing hypothetical facts like the one just mentioned. Rather, they would be conditions of the form ‘If this and that *material thing* had been in those positions and conditions ...’.

Thus, according to Moore, since it is not clear what sense data are, an analysis of propositions like ‘I am perceiving a hand’ is yet to be provided. Still, he does not express any misgiving about the possibility of achieving it.

5. Conclusions

In DCS, IV Moore is not concerned with metaphysical analysis as Stebbing understands it. Rather, he is interested in the epistemological issue of how we know that there is hand here, or that we are perceiving it. He thinks this knowledge is deduced from knowledge of a set of more elementary propositions about sense data. He wonders what the nature of sense data is and cannot find a satisfactory answer to that question. Still, he does not despair that such an answer could eventually be found. Despite these open issues, he proclaims his faith in the fact that truisms are true and known for certain. Yet, he makes no specific claims about the ultimate structure of reality and about sense data being the elements of elementary facts.

Nonetheless, even if Stebbing’s reading of DCS, IV is misguided, as she later recognized in SPA, this only testifies to the originality of her views. That is, metaphysical analysis, as she understands it in MAM, is very much her own invention and her own contribution to the debate about the method of analysis.²⁹ Furthermore, while she was eventually critical of it,

²⁹The main precedent of which was Wisdom, *Logical Constructions*, rather than Moore. see also fn. 17. Yet, Wisdom credits Stebbing, and MAM appeared while the publication of Wisdom, *Logical Constructions* was in progress.

her account resonates with the subsequent ‘metaphysical turn’ in analytic philosophy. For her ‘metaphysics first’ approach, which champions going back to facts themselves, irrespective of how we talk or represent them, and dismisses epistemological issues pertaining to the justification of our commonsensical beliefs as irrelevant and misguided, would certainly be music to the ears of many present-day metaphysicians.

If, as I have claimed elsewhere,³⁰ a philosophical classic is not such just because of the answers it gives, but because of the questions and prospects it raises – that is, because of the avenues for further research it opens up – it is clear that Stebbing’s MAM should be considered a classic of Early Analytic Philosophy, for its contributions to both epistemology and metaphysics, on par with much more celebrated works by a whole host of male colleagues of hers.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank two anonymous referees and Sandra Lapointe, Alexander Klein, and the audience at a seminar I held at McMaster University in November 2020 for their valuable comments on the earlier versions of this paper. I owe special thanks to Louis Doulas for the very stimulating conversations on Stebbing, Moore and common sense, as well as for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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³⁰Coliva, *Moore and Wittgenstein*, 4–5.

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