Moore, “A Defence of Common Sense”

1. Historical Background

1873: George Edward Moore is born. He always hated his given names and went by ‘G. E.’, although his wife called him ‘Bill’.
1892: Moore goes to Trinity College Cambridge to study Classics, where he meets Bertrand Russell and J. M. E. McTaggart. As a result of their influence, Moore begins to study philosophy.
1896: Moore graduates from Cambridge with a First Class degree in Philosophy.
1898: Moore wins a ‘Prize’ Fellowship at Trinity College which enables him to continue the study of philosophy there.
1903: Moore’s most important work, *Principia Ethica*, is published.
1904: Moore’s Fellowship at Cambridge ends.
1911: Moore returns to Cambridge.
1925: Moore becomes professor at Cambridge. “A Defence of Common Sense” is published.
1939: Moore retires from his position as Professor.
1958: Moore dies.

Funny quotation: “I do not think that the world or the sciences would ever have suggested to me any philosophical problems. What has suggested philosophical problems to me is the things which other philosophers have said about the world or the sciences.” (G. E. Moore”, in *A Companion to Analytic Philosophy*, Sosa & Martinich)

2. Some Truisms

The essay begins with Moore describing some claims that he says he “know[s], with certainty, to be true.” (175):

... a whole long list of propositions, which may seem, at first sight, such obvious truisms as not to be worth stating; they are, in fact, a set of propositions, every one of which (in my own opinion) I know, with certainty, to be true. (175)

He calls this long list of propositions (I).

(I): A set of metaphysical propositions that Moore knows with certainty:

(i) “There exists at present a living human body, which is my [Moore’s] body.”
(ii) “This body [i.e., Moore’s body] was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continuously ever since, though not without undergoing changes; ...”
(iii) “…at every moment since it was born, there have also existed many other things, having shape and size in three dimensions, ... from which it has been at various distances ...; also there have ... existed some other things of this kind with which it was in contact ...”
(iv) “…there have, at every moment since its birth, been large numbers of other living human bodies...”
(v) “…the earth ... existed also for many years before my body was born...”
(vi) “…I am a human being, and I have, at different times ... had many different experiences, of each of many different kinds,” for example, perception of my own body and other objects; observation of facts about those things; awareness of other facts; expectations about the future; beliefs (true and false); imagination; dreams; and feelings.
(vii) “…in the case of very many of the other human bodies which have lived upon the earth, each has been the body of a different human being, who has, during the lifetime of that body, had many different experiences of each of these (and other) different kinds.” (176)

3. A Further Epistemological Claim

(2) Each of us is in the same relation to a set of propositions about ourselves. That is, there are propositions corresponding to the propositions, propositions about ourselves, that we can know with certainty. Call this set of properties about you (1*).
For example:

1*-(i) Each one of us in this room knows that (i.e., knows that it is true that) right now there exists a body, which is his or her body. In other words, each one of us knows a proposition that corresponds to proposition 1-(i).

1*-(ii) Each of us knows that his or her body was born at a certain time in the past and has existed continuously since then, although now without undergone changes since that time. In other words, each one of us knows a proposition that corresponds to proposition 1-(ii).

And so on....