

Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*

Lecture 1

Background:

- Written over the last few years of Wittgenstein's life (1949-1951)
- Compiled posthumously by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright from notes/notebooks
- Topics: scepticism, certainty, knowledge, belief, doubt, human judgement... philosophy
- Largely written in response to G.E. Moore's 'A Defence of Common Sense' (1925) and 'Proof of an External World' (1939)
- Spurred by discussions with Norman Malcolm ('Defending Common Sense' (1949))

Moore's Papers:

I. "A Defence of Common Sense"

'I am going to begin by enunciating... 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.' (*Philosophical Papers*, 1959, 32)

The list: 'There exists at present a living 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; it was, for instance, much smaller when it was born, and for some time afterwards, than it is now. Ever since it was born, it has been either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth; and, at every moment since it was born, there have also existed many other things, having shape and size in three dimensions (in the same familiar sense in which it has), from which it has been at various distances (in the familiar sense in which it is now at a distance both from that mantelpiece and from that bookcase, and at a greater distance from the bookcase than it is from the mantelpiece); also there have (very often, at all events) existed some other things of this kind with which it was in contact (in the familiar sense in which it is now in contact with the pen I am holding in my right hand and with some of the clothes I am wearing). Among the things which have, in this sense, formed part of its environment (i.e. have been either in contact with it, or at some distance from it, however great) there have, at every moment since its birth, been large numbers of other living human bodies, each of which has, like it, (a) at some time been born, (b) continued to exist from some time after birth, (c) been, at every moment of its life after birth, either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth; and many of these bodies have already died and ceased to exist. But the earth had existed also for many years before my body was born; and for many of these years, also, large numbers of human bodies had, at every moment, been alive upon it; and many of these bodies had died and ceased to exist before it was born. Finally (to come to a different class of propositions), I am a human being, and I have, at different times since my body was born, had many different experiences, of each of many different kinds: e.g. I have often perceived both my own body and other things which formed part of its environment, including other human bodies; I have not only perceived things of this kind, but have also observed facts about them, such as, for instance, the fact which I am now observing, that that mantel-piece is at present nearer to my body than that bookcase; I have been aware of other facts, which I was not at the time observing, such as, for instance, the fact, of which I am now aware, that my body existed yesterday and was then also for some time nearer to that mantelpiece than to that bookcase; I have had expectations with regard to the

future, and many beliefs of other kinds, both true and false; I have thought of imaginary things and persons and incidents, in the reality of which I did not believe; I have had dreams; and I have had feelings of many different kinds. And, just as my body has been the body of a human being, namely myself, who has, during his lifetime, had many experiences of each of these (and other) different kinds; so, 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.’ (33-34)

A few important points to note from the discussion that follows:

1. Moore takes it for granted that we all understand what these propositions *mean*.
2. He thinks that their truth straightforwardly implies the reality of material things.
3. In response to the question whether he *really* knows all these propositions to be true and doesn’t merely *believe* them to be true, Moore says that he can’t think of anything better to say than that it seems to him that he *does* know them, with certainty.

II. “Proof of an External World”

‘It still remains a scandal to philosophy... that the existence of things outside of us... must be accepted merely on *faith*, and that, if anyone thinks good to doubt their existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by any satisfactory proof.’ (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B xxxix)

Pre-Proof Argument:

1. Some things are, by definition, “to be met with in space”: the bodies of humans and of animals, plants, stars, houses, chairs, and shadows—also, later, soap bubbles.
2. If any such thing exists, there are things to be met with in space.
3. If there are things to be met with in space, there are things external to our minds (i.e., there is an external world).
4. Thus, if it can be proved that there are any of the kinds of thing listed in (1), there is an external world.

An Objection to the Pre-Proof Argument:

‘Isn’t it possible that a dog, though it certainly must be “to be met with in space”, might *not* be an external object—an object external to our minds?’ (138)

Moore’s response:

There are two (Kantian) things that might be meant by ‘external to our minds’.

1. Things ‘transcendentally external to our minds’. These are *not* to be met with in space (since space is phenomenal); but Kant never made clear what transcendental externality is, so Moore doesn’t consider it further.
2. Things ‘empirically external to our minds’. These are not *the same as* things ‘to be met with in space’, but the former does entail being the latter.
 - a. Things internal to *my* mind vs. things external to *my* mind: It makes no sense to say of the former that they exist at a time *t* if I am having no experience of them at *t*.
 - b. Things internal to *our* minds vs. things external to *our* minds: It makes no sense to say of the former that they exist at a time *t* if we (human beings living on Earth) are having no experience of them at *t*.
 - c. This allows for ‘things external to our minds’ that are not ‘things to be met with in space’ (e.g., non-human animal experiences).

- d. For any kind of thing the existence of which entails that there are things to be met with in space, claims to perceive an instance of that kind imply that there would be no contradiction in asserting that the thing existed before it was perceived.

Where does this get us? It seems that Moore merely assumes (d). (But we move on.)

The Proof:

How [can such a proof be given]? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, ‘Here is one hand’, and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, ‘and here is another’”(146). Therefore, two human hands exist. Hands are things to be met with in space, thus, external to our minds; and, hence, there is an external world.

Three conditions of this being a proof, according to Moore.

1. The premises adduced must be different from the conclusion proved.
2. The premises must be *known*.
3. The conclusion must follow from the premises.

His defence of condition (2):

‘How absurd it would be to suggest that I did not know it, but only believed it, and that perhaps it was not the case! You might as well suggest that I do not know that I am now standing up and talking...’ (146)

He admits that what philosophers really want is a proof of his premises, but he says that he can’t give such a proof. “In order to do it, I should need to prove for one thing, as Descartes pointed out, that I am not now dreaming. But how can I prove that I am not? I have, no doubt, conclusive evidence that I am awake: but that is a very different thing from being able to prove it. I could not tell you what all my evidence is; and I should require to do this at least, in order to give you a proof.” (149).

Some Main Sentiments of *On Certainty* (as expressed towards Moore):

Sentiment No. 1: Moore doesn’t engage with his opponents.

‘Moore’s mistake lies in this—countering the assertion that one cannot know that, by saying “I do know it”.’ (OC §521)

‘If Moore is attacking those who say that one cannot really know such a thing, he can’t do it by assuring them that *he* knows this and that. For one need not believe him. If his opponents had asserted that one could not *believe* this and that, then he could have replied: “I believe it.”’ (OC §520)

Sentiment No. 2: Moore doesn’t *know* what he claims to know.

‘[W]hen Moore says “I know that that’s a ...” I want to reply “you don’t know anything!”—and yet I would not say that to anyone who was speaking without philosophical intention. That is, I feel (rightly?) that these two mean to say something different.’ (OC §407)

‘When one hears Moore say “I *know* that that’s a tree”, one suddenly understands those who think that that has by no means been settled.

The matter strikes one all at once as being unclear and blurred. It is as if Moore had put it in the wrong light.

It is as if I were to see a painting (say a painted stage set) and recognize what it represents from a long way off at once and without the slightest doubt. But now I step nearer: and then I see a lot of patches of different colours, which are all highly ambiguous and do not provide any certainty whatever.’

It is as if “I know” did not tolerate a metaphysical emphasis.’ (OC §§481-482)

Sentiment No. 3: Moore is right to have focused on the *kind* of proposition he does.

‘If Moore had informed us that he knew the distance separating certain stars, we might conclude from that that he had made some special investigations, and we shall want to know what these were. But Moore chooses precisely a case in which we all seem to know the same as he, and without being able to say how. I believe e.g. that I know as much about this matter (the existence of the earth) as Moore does, and if he knows that it is as he says, then I know it too. For it isn’t, either, as if he had arrived at his proposition by pursuing some line of thought which, while it is open to me, I have not in fact pursued.’ (OC §84)

‘When Moore says he knows such and such, he is really enumerating a lot of empirical propositions which we affirm without special testing; propositions, that is, which have a peculiar logical role in the system of our empirical propositions... Moore’s assurance that he knows... does not interest us. The propositions, however, which Moore retails as examples of such known truths are indeed interesting. Not because anyone knows their truth, or believes he knows them, but because they all have a *similar* role in the system of our empirical judgments.’ (OC §§136-137)

Sentiment No.4: Moore is right both to say that he has conclusive evidence for the propositions he claims to know and yet to admit that there is *a sense* in which he could turn out to be wrong.

‘It would not be surmise and I might tell it to someone else with complete certainty, as something there is no doubt about. But does this mean that it is unconditionally the truth? May not the thing that I recognize with complete certainty as the tree that I have seen here my whole life long—may this not be disclosed as something different? May it not confound me?

And nevertheless it was right, in the circumstances that give this sentence meaning, to say “I know (I do not merely surmise) that that’s a tree”. To say that in strict truth I only believe it, would be wrong. It would be completely *misleading* to say: “I believe my name is L.W.” And this too is right: I cannot be making a *mistake* about it. But that does not mean that I am infallible about it.” (OC §425)