

Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*

Lecture 2

Recap and Plan:

Four sentiments of *On Certainty* expressed towards Moore's 'A Defence of Common Sense' and 'Proof of an External World':

1. Moore fails to engage with the sceptic/idealist.
2. Moore doesn't know what he claims to know.
3. Moore, nonetheless, has focused on the right kind of proposition.
4. Moore is right to have claimed that he has conclusive evidence for these propositions and, yet, that he may, in some sense, be wrong concerning them.

Today we'll focus on Sentiment 2 and ask, 'Why are Moore-type propositions (e.g., 'that here is a hand', 'that there is a tree', 'that my name is N.N.', 'that I have never been in the stratosphere') unknowable?'

A caveat: Wittgenstein doesn't unwaveringly claim that they are unknowable.

'Now, can one enumerate what one knows (like Moore)? Straight off like that, I believe not. - For otherwise the expression "I know" gets misused. And through this misuse a queer and extremely important mental state seems to be revealed.' (OC §6)

'Moore has every right to say he knows there's a tree there in front of him.' (OC §520)

'In its language-game ["I know..."] is not presumptuous. There, it has no higher position than, simply, the human language-game. For there it has its restricted application. But as soon as I say this sentence outside its context, it appears in a false light. For then it is as if I wanted to insist that there are things that I know. God himself can't say anything to me about them.' (OC §554)

Non-Knowing Non-Scepticism?

Why it's unclear what Wittgenstein means in saying Moore-type propositions are unknowable:

- The sceptic says the same.
- Wittgenstein often discusses his alternative (viz., certainty) as similar to *faith*; but that our relation to Moore-type propositions is one of faith is *also* what the sceptic says.

Faith/trust/certainty's foundational role:

'As children we learn facts; e.g., that every human being has a brain, and we take them on trust. I believe that there is an island, Australia, of such-and-such a shape, and so on and so on; I believe that I had great-grandparents, that the people who gave themselves out as my parents really were my parents, etc.' (OC §159)

'I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness.' (OC §94)

‘I really want to say that a language-game is only possible if one trusts something.’ (OC §509)

Knowledge and Doubt:

An argument for the claim that Moore-type propositions are unknowable:

- P1. A proposition can only be known if it would be intelligible to doubt it.
- P2. It would not be intelligible to doubt Moore-type propositions.
- C. Thus, Moore-type propositions are unknowable.

(Jumping ahead of ourselves...)

The above argument would seem to give us an answer to the question ‘How does Wittgenstein deny that we know Moore-type propositions and, yet, avoid being a sceptic?’

Here (one might think) is how:

- P1. Doubting Moore-type propositions is unintelligible.
- P2. Doubting is a necessary (if not sufficient) condition for being sceptical.
- C. Thus, being sceptical about Moore-type propositions is unintelligible, too.

Two reasons to think Wittgenstein does *not* argue against scepticism in this way:

1. Seems he would be failing to engage with the sceptic (much like he accuses Moore of doing).
2. He wants (as we’ll see) to distinguish between philosophical doubt and real/practical doubt, in which case *real* doubt being unintelligible need not rule out sceptical doubt.

(...Now back to the argument.)

A wrinkle to re-acknowledge: The conclusion that we don’t know Moore-type propositions isn’t a *categorical* statement. Wittgenstein thinks that some of us, sometimes, *do* know Moore-type propositions.

‘[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.’ (OC §407)

But ‘speaking with philosophical intention’ should be the same as ‘stating such a proposition when doubt would be unintelligible’, so we can focus on doubt.

Evidence that Wittgenstein makes the argument:

‘I know that a sick man is lying here? Nonsense! I am sitting at his bedside, I am looking attentively into his face. - So I don’t know, then, that there is a sick man lying here? Neither the question nor the assertion makes sense. Any more than the assertion “I am here”, which I might yet use at any moment, if suitable occasion presented itself... “I know that there’s a sick man lying here”, used in an unsuitable situation, seems [to you] not to be nonsense but rather seems matter-of-course, only because one can fairly easily imagine a situation to fit it, and one thinks that the words “I know that...” are always in place where there is no doubt, and hence even where the expression of doubt would be unintelligible.’ (OC §10)

A first tempting response: 'We know *this* if we know *anything*!'

A second tempting response: 'The passage says not that we don't *know* the thing in question, just that we can't *say* that we know (or don't know) the thing in question.'

Wittgenstein disagrees with both.

'My difficulty can also be shown like this: I am sitting talking to a friend. Suddenly I say: "I knew all along that you were so-and-so." Is that really just a superfluous, though true, remark?

I feel as if these words were like "Good morning" said to someone in the middle of a conversation.' (OC §464)

Why does he think that doubting Moore-type propositions is unintelligible?

1. Doubt requires *grounds*, and we have no grounds for doubting Moore-type propositions.

'"I know I have a brain"? Can I doubt it? Grounds for *doubt* are lacking!' (OC §4)

'Doesn't one need grounds for doubt?

Wherever I look, I find no ground for doubting that...' (OC §§122-123)

'I know, not just that the earth existed long before my birth, but also that it is a large body, that this has been established, that I and the rest of mankind have forebears, that there are books about all this, that such books don't lie, etc. etc. etc. And I know all this? I believe it. This body of knowledge has been handed on to me and I have no grounds for doubting it, but, on the contrary, all sorts of confirmation.' (OC §288)

'What if the pupil refused to believe that this mountain had been there beyond human memory? We should say that he had no grounds for this suspicion.' (OC §322)

'One doubts on specific grounds.' (OC §458)

'What kind of grounds have I for trusting text-books of experimental physics?

I have no grounds for not trusting them.' (OC §600)

2. Our doubts and certainties form a system. Doubt requires certainty about *something*.

'If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty.' (OC §115)

'If I wanted to doubt the existence of the earth long before my birth, I should have to doubt all sorts of things that stand fast for me.' (OC §234)

'[T]he questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.' (OC §341)

'A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt.' (OC §450)

3. Anyone who gave the appearance of doubt in the relevant scenarios would themselves be unintelligible to us.

‘It’s not a matter of Moore’s knowing that there’s a hand there, but rather we should not understand him if he were to say “Of course I may be wrong about this.”’ (OC §32)

‘There are cases such that, if someone gives signs of doubt where we do not doubt, we cannot confidently understand his signs as signs of doubt.’ (OC §154)

‘Suppose a man could not remember whether he had always had five fingers or two hands? Should we understand him? Could we be sure of understanding him?’ (OC §157)

4. Anyone who seemed to us to doubt these things would seem actually insane.

‘If my friend were to imagine one day that he had been living for a long time past in such and such a place, etc. etc., I should not call this a mistake, but rather a mental disturbance...’ (OC §71)

‘I, L.W., believe, am sure, that my friend hasn’t sawdust in his body or in his head, even though I have no direct evidence of my senses to the contrary. I am sure, by reason of what has been said to me, of what I have read, and of my experience. To have doubts about it would seem to me madness...’ (OC §281)

‘N.N. cannot be mistaken about his having flown from America to England a few days ago. Only if he is mad can he take anything else to be possible.’ (OC §674)

(Other passages re-read as expressing madness:)

‘Suppose a man could not remember whether he had always had five fingers or two hands?’ (OC §157)

[In the middle of talking to a friend...] ‘I knew all along that you were so-and-so.’ (OC 464)

[While sitting at a man’s bedside and looking attentively into his face...] ‘I know that a sick man is lying here.’ (OC §10)

Real Doubt and Philosophical Doubt:

A seeming counterexample to the madness hypothesis: The philosopher. But Wittgenstein admits a difference here.

‘I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again “I know that that’s a tree”, pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: “This fellow isn’t insane. We are only doing philosophy.”’ (OC §467)

Real doubt comes out in practice. Philosophical doubt doesn’t.

‘But if anyone were to doubt it, how would his doubt come out in practice? And couldn’t we peacefully leave him to doubt it, since it makes no difference at all?’ (OC §120)

[T]here are people who say that it is merely extremely probable that water over a fire will boil and not freeze, and that therefore strictly speaking what we consider impossible is only improbable. What difference does this make in their lives? Isn't it just that they talk rather more about certain things than the rest of us?' (OC §338)

Wittgenstein thinks that even a sceptic/idealist would admit a distinction between their doubt and normal doubt, just that they're wrong about *what* that distinction is.

“I know” often means: I have the proper grounds for my statement. So if the other person is acquainted with the language-game, he would admit that I know. The other, if he is acquainted with the language-game, must be able to imagine how one may know something of the kind.

The statement “I know that here is a hand” may then be continued: “for it's my hand that I'm looking at.” Then a reasonable man will not doubt that I know. - Nor will the idealist; rather he will say that he was not dealing with the practical doubt which is being dismissed, but there is a further doubt behind that one. - That this is an *illusion* has to be shown in a different way.' (OC §§18-19)

‘One gives oneself a false picture of doubt.’ (OC §249)

Why, though, does real doubt infect practice but philosophical doubt doesn't? (Another way of asking for a *deeper* answer to the question ‘What's the difference between the two?’)

The answer *should* be that the sceptic does not have *grounds* for doubt. But the sceptic *gives* grounds—and concludes that, based on those grounds, we *ought* to doubt. Wittgenstein, though, claims that he *can't* doubt these things, implying that we don't have grounds for doubt.

‘Can I believe for one moment that I have ever been in the stratosphere? [i.e., Can I doubt that I have never been in the stratosphere?] No.’ (OC §218)

‘I cannot at present imagine a reasonable doubt as to the existence of the earth during the last 100 years.’ (OC §261)

‘I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming.’ [i.e., I cannot doubt that I am not dreaming.] (OC §676)

Why, though, are the sceptic's grounds not grounds for *doubt*?

(A transition to the next lecture...)

For Wittgenstein: In cases where doubt is unintelligible, making a mistake is unintelligible.

If you were to find out that one of the sceptic's scenarios obtains, were you (before) *making a mistake* in believing that it doesn't obtain? (i.e., Should you *have known better*? Were you *to blame*?) Wittgenstein thinks not, for the sceptic's own reason—that things would seem to you *exactly* as they do now. So you may be wrong, but you needn't change anything, needn't doubt in response to the sceptic's reasons.