

Moore and Wittgenstein on Doubt and Certainty

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"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.'" (On Certainty, §467)

Against philosophical idealism

Of Moore, Wittgenstein once said that his elevation to Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge constituted an excellent example of "how far a man can go who has absolutely no intelligence whatever."¹ Despite their initial differences, they maintained a relation, but on a personal level rather than philosophical - Wittgenstein had, by saying, little respect for Moore as an original philosopher. Yet he dedicated much of his later writings to the study of precisely Moore and in particular his philosophical papers "A Defence of Common Sense" (1925) and "Proof of an External World" (1939).² The last 18 months of Wittgenstein's life produced the notes posthumously compiled and published as *On Certainty* (1969), which in large is dedicated to Moore's essays.

At the outset, Wittgenstein's notes were formulated as a critique of Moore's concept of certainty, that is, that certainty applies to a set of empirical propositions that one *knows to be true*. In his attempt to refute idealism and the scepticism that had originated with Hume's doubt about knowledge from empirical propositions, Moore argued that there is a vast body of shared convictions about "the world", expressible in quite ordinary propositions (cf. *common sense*) and whose meanings are perfectly clear and for certain known to be true, even to the philosophers who apparently denied them. Moore's tenet,

1 See Ray Monk's biography on Wittgenstein, p. 262. (Monk, Ray: *Wittgenstein. The Duty of Genius*, London, Vintage, 1991).

2 According to Anscombe and Von Wright in the preface to *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein shall have extended his congratulations to Moore on what he considered Moore's best work so far, the *Proof*, perhaps in sheer spite; Wittgenstein had on numerous other occasions referred to Moore's proof as amateurish and oversimplified.

which was highly influential in the first half of the century, was that we know what a given proposition means, we know that it is true, hence he argued, contrary to Hume, that we can indeed know empirical (contingent) statements to be true with absolute certainty. It was from such a tenet his controversial *Proof of an External World* originated, and where Moore inferred from the perception of his hand that we can have knowledge of the external world.

Moore's original contribution to the notion of certainty attracted Wittgenstein, but his concept of certainty was to be substantially different, rejecting that what is certain (foundational) is susceptible to doubt, proof, truth, falsity or justification, attributes which only apply to putative cases of knowledge and not what is certain.

Before attempting to give an account of Wittgenstein's answer(s) to Moore, I am obliged to take a closer look at Moore's proof and I shall be doing so alternating between firstly the essence of Moore's proof, then a contemporary strategy to reinforce it, followed by modern criticism that point to serious flaws in the argument, before looking at the arguments Moore used himself in his essay.

Moore: Here are two hands

Despite being highly influential in his own time, Moore's proof is frequently ridiculed in modern debate as a naïve and trivial attempt at proving the existence of the external world and refuting the long succession of idealism/scepticism in the philosophical tradition. He deduced from the "clear perception" of firstly one hand, then another, that two hands existed in time and space and subsequently he had proved the existence of the outer world by proving that external, spatial objects exist in it. Moore argued that the proof was perfectly valid insofar as (i) the conclusion is different from each of its premises, (ii) the conclusion follows from its premises and (iii) each of its premises is known. In essence, the argument can be reproduced as follows:

- (1) Here is one hand
- (2) Here is another hand
- (Therefore: External, material objects exist in time and space)*
- (3) An external world exist

This proof was uncomfortable even for the advocates of Moore's philosophy, it was on the face of it blatantly begging the question against the sceptic, but despite the consternation, Moore's article was defended as there must

have been more to his argument than meets the eye. Some, as did Malcolm (1942), argued that the strength of Moore's argument was embedded in the use of *ordinary language*, and grounded on a semantic rather than an epistemic level. Arguably, it would not make sense to challenge the sceptic on an epistemic level given the sceptic's insatiable request for exhaustive, empirical evidence, and moreover, the sceptic's doubt as such could hardly be considered an empirical theory. Thus, the sceptic, accordingly re-interpreted, rather than pointing to the futility of attaining knowledge of the external world, questions the correlation between knowledge statements (*I know, I am certain that, I know for certain...*) and the objects it refers to or say something about (*Here is a hand...*). The question is thus if Moore has applied I know correctly when holding up his hands.

Consider here the notions *knowledge* or *certainty* and let's assume they were applied successfully (correctly) in some situations and rejected in others, then the former must represent genuine cases of knowledge, certainty etc., or the expressions could not have the meanings they do have. By an appeal to a paradigm case of correct use of these concepts, i.e. in the case of Moore he was in a state of visual and cognitive lucidity when inspecting his hands etc., Moore can be shown to apply these concepts correctly and thus refute the sceptic. This maneuver is justified by arguing that these instances of I know, with certainty etc., constitute paradigm cases and as such we know a priori that the denial of the existence of material objects, or our knowledge of them, cannot be coherently asserted.

However, Moore was in disagreement with such an interpretation of his proof and rejected emphatically that he was using some kind of ordinary language strategy when holding up his hands. He was doing exactly what it seemed as if he was doing: giving a proof of the external world by giving clear examples of material objects.

With the onset of the 1970s much of the initial sympathy for Moore's proof had vanished and Descartes' *Argument from Dream and the Malicious Demon* were resuscitated and used against Moore.³ His proof was commonly refuted on three grounds: (i) firstly that all of Moore's evidence is based upon sensory input, secondly, (ii) that the truth of one fact based on the truth of another fact forms an Epistemic Circle (it is question-begging). And finally, (iii) from very recent debates and in similar ways to (ii), Moore's argument is subject to transmission-failure, that is you have justification for believing the premises of some argument, and those premises entail some conclusion, but the argument

3 Along with a series of modern examples, such as *Brain in a Vat*.

is not capable of giving you justification for believing that conclusion.

In the case of (i), Moore's epistemic proof is questioned on grounds of the reliability of sensory input, resting as it does on epistemic verification. Recall Descartes' radical doubt where he indeed considered the possibility that he could be dreaming, alas he could not guarantee that what he (thought) he was perceiving was real or not, equally if he were to be deceived by a Malicious Demon. Moore saw no immediate counter-attack to this argument. He addressed it in *Proof*, where he admitted that his argument might be rendered unsatisfactory given that no such proof of whether one is being deceived or is dreaming could be given:

“How am I to prove now that "Here's one hand, here's another." I do not believe that I can do it. In order to do it, I should need to prove ... as Descartes pointed out, that I am not now dreaming. But how can I prove that I am not? I have, no doubt, conclusive reasons for asserting that I am not now dreaming. I have 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.” (Moore, *Proof*, p.169)

On the account of plausibility, Moore did not find the sceptic's argument more convincing than his own, and in the absence of a criteria that could indeed point to Moore as dreaming when he held up his hand, he comfortably asserted that he was indeed awake and moreover had conclusive evidence that this was so (visual and cognitive lucidity, the audience etc.). Moore furthermore argued that his premise, Here is a hand, was a proposition that was indeed known, given that claiming he should only believe it would be absurd:

“How absurd it would be to suggest that I did not know it, but only believed it, and perhaps it was not the case! You might as well suggest that I do not know that I am standing up and talking – that perhaps after all I'm not, and that it's not quite certain that I am!” (Moore, *Proof*, p. 166).

Once established that his premises were known, he argued that proving the premises is not a necessary requirement for a proof, alas, proof is not required for knowledge:

“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 premises of my. . . proof.” (Moore, *Proof*, p.170)

Which leads us to the question of circularity : (ii) How can the existence

of the outer world be proved if in proving it its existence is already presupposed in its premises? — Moore's proof is about the truth of *propositions* and as propositions, *Here is a hand* and *There is an external world* are not identical, which was the condition for Moore's proof.

Moore asserted that the existence of the outer world can be proved by proving the existence of material objects in it. Moore made here reference to Kant, and large parts of his Proof deal with Kant's terms to be met with in space and external to our minds. Moore seemed to have believed that in order to prove or explain the existence of an outer world, he also had to explain what it is to exist and what it is for something to exist internal as opposed to external to our minds. Here Moore argued that in order to prove an outer world he had to show that at least one object would exist external to his mind, as opposed to an object that would only exist when perceived or experienced, for instance a mental image or a sensation.

Finally, (iii) is Moore's proof an example of transmission-failure? – By a *transmission-failure* it is meant that the argument is not capable of “transmitting” the justification one has for believing its premise to its conclusion. We have a case of transmission-failure, then, when you have justification for believing the premises of some argument, and those premises entail some conclusion, but the argument is not capable of giving you justification for believing that conclusion. Transmission-failure may apply even if there is no failure of closure.⁴ The notion is discussed by, for instance, James Pryor and Crispin Wright. As Pryor (2002) has pointed out, this notion of transmission-failure is basically just new terminology for an old phenomenon: that of begging the question.

Hence, even if Moore is justified in believing that he is perceiving his hand, the justification may not transfer across to the conclusion that there is an external world and thus Moore is not justified in believing it. Pryor thinks the notion of transmission-failure does not apply to Moore's argument, while Wright (2003) does, claiming propositions such as *Here is a hand* cannot warrant a justified belief in *There is an external world* without antecedent justification. Pryor's stance, however, is that ones perceptual experiences does indeed justify the belief and the premise *Here is a hand* is not epistemically dependent on the conclusion *There is an external world*. Furthermore, he argues, as long as you lack any reason to believe that you are a *brain in a vat*, etc., your experiences will justify you in believing *Here is a hand*.

⁴ Closure of warrant is the weaker stance; whenever there is warrant for the premises of known, valid argument, there is warrant for the conclusion too. Closure will hold, for instance, but transmission might fail in a case where there was warrant for the premises in the first place only because the conclusion was antecedently warranted. Cf. Wright.

Wright's position is that Moore's proof begs the question, and ultimately is no proof of all, the general issue here being “under what circumstances a valid argument is indeed at the service of *proof*” (Wright, 2003).

I think this last remark by Wright makes an appropriate introduction to Wittgenstein's riposte to Moore. Wittgenstein did seemingly not question the logical validity of the argument itself, but rather contends that the reason for the proof is wrong or misunderstood. Believing that a proof is needed in these circumstances is a misuse of the instances of applying proofs and a Moore appealing to common sense is equally futile, because natural (commonsensical) doubt does not arise as to the authenticity or reality of my two hands.

I know that is a tree

Now, let's return to the quote with which we opened this paper. It is not merely a witty remark from Wittgenstein on contemporary philosophical activity, it refers to a series of discussions between Moore and Malcolm on *being certain*, where Malcolm claimed that Moore misused the words *know*, *certainty* etc, and where Malcolm in 1946 had visited Moore in his Cambridge home; they sat together in Moore's garden when Moore suddenly pointed to a tree and said: “I know that that is a tree.”⁵ Malcolm had then argued that Moore here misused the instances of I know, as he had used it under circumstances under which it would *not normally be used*, as there had not been any doubt whether it was a tree or not. Malcolm's point here is that *doubt* was not really applicable, hence its use did not make sense. Moore was in strong disagreement and argued that whether there had been real doubt or not about the tree's existence did not affect the meaningfulness of the expression *I know*. He had used it *in the sense* that it is ordinarily used, even if not in ordinary circumstances.

Here Moore seems strictly occupied with the meaning/sense of the expression *I know that that is a tree* as a proposition that is either true or false, as opposed to Wittgenstein's (and Malcolm, in the context above) much more elaborate notion of *meaning as use*. But to Moore, his utterance makes perfect sense as he is certain about the following: He knows what it is to *know something*, he *knows what a tree is* and he knows *what it is like to see a tree before him*. He knows the truth of his propositions and also know how it should be ultimately verified: Moore seems to claim to make *sense* insofar as he could very well check whether it was a tree or not, and anyone else could perform the very same task, perhaps getting closer to the tree to get a better glimpse of it, and if not

⁵ See Malcolm, *Defending Common Sense*, published in *Philosophical Review* 58, 1949, pp.201-20, and Moore's *Letter to Malcolm*, reprinted in Moore, G.E.: *Selected Writings*, ed. T. Baldwin, London, Routledge, 1993.

successful, perhaps getting so close as to be able to touch it. It could very well be the case that I did not have a clear view and at first could not determine that it was a tree, but once it becomes clear to me, it can not intelligibly be doubted. What Moore did, and this despite his so-called commonsensical stance, was applying a different kind of doubting, a *philosophical doubt*, in which it would make sense to utter *I know that that is a tree*, but as Malcolm had pointed out to Wittgenstein,⁶ a philosophical question would not be raised as to whether it is certain that an object in front of you is a tree if the object were largely obscured or too distant to be easily seen.

Similarly with Moore's two hands in his *Proof*. Moore contends that he *knows with certainty* that the sentence *Here is one hand* is true, and similarly invites to a process of checking in case of doubt. He uses the checking of three misprints in a book as a parallel example:

“Suppose for instance, it were a question whether there were as many as three misprints on a certain page in a certain book. A says there are, B is inclined to doubt it. How could A prove that he is right? Surely he *could* prove it by taking the book, turning to the page, and pointing to the three separate places, saying 'There's one misprint here, another here, and another here': surely that is a method by which it *might* be proved! Of course, A would not have proved, by doing this, that there were at least three misprints on the page in question, unless it was certain that there was a misprint in each of the places to which he pointed. But to say that he *might* prove it in this way, is to say that it *might* be certain that there was” (Moore, *Proof*, p.167)

But this only shows that it makes sense to verify if there are three misprints on a page or not, it can intelligibly be checked, and we can intelligibly detect a mistake if there were one. This does not amount to saying much more than if I doubt that *Here is a hand*, I'm doing so because I cannot see it clearly, I'm in a dark room etc. I could then satisfy my doubt turning on the lights. Obviously, Moore's statement *Here is a hand* goes beyond three misprints on a page, and cannot be parallel to it. That Moore in fact does parallel his proof with checking for misprints is a misunderstanding of what is at stake; doubt concerning the existence of physical objects cannot logically be satisfied by holding up a hand as evidence of it, it does not have an empirical solution. Consider these passages from *On Certainty*:

⁶ Malcolm had raised questions about Moore's philosophical use of words and claimed Moore was misusing such expressions as *I know that*, *I know with certainty* etc., and read his paper, *Defending Common Sense*, to Wittgenstein when the latter was staying with him in his home in 1949. Wittgenstein shall have been deeply impressed with Malcolm's discoveries, which triggered his own series of notes, later published as *On Certainty*.

“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 he is being dismissed, but there is a further doubt *behind* that one. — That this is an illusion has to be shewn in a different way.” (*On Certainty*, §19)

and:

“[...] And if he says he *knows* it, that can only signify to me that he has been able to make sure [...] My believing the trustworthy man stems from my admitting that it is possible for him to make sure. But someone who says that perhaps there are no physical objects makes no such admission.” (*On Certainty*, §23)

and:

“It is 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'. We should ask 'What is it like to make such a mistake as that?' — e.g. what's it like to discover that it was a mistake?” (*On Certainty*, §32)

In a typical context where people claim to know things, they are responding to actual or potential doubts and when asked *How do you know?* they can state their reasons.⁷ So, if someone says, *I don't know if there's a hand here* “he might be told 'Look closer.' This possibility of satisfying oneself is part of the language-game. Is one of its essential features.” (*On Certainty*, §3)

Moore's proof cannot serve as a proof against idealism; it has to be shown differently, as Wittgenstein points out.⁸ An idealist doubting that material objects exist is not satisfied with the correction of three misprints in a book, his doubt is on a *different level*. Wittgenstein claims that the idealist doubt is an illusion and as such the *dissolution* of these doubts involves exposing them as illusions:

“The idealist's question would be something like this: “What right have I not to doubt the existence of my hands?” (And to that the

7 Yet, knowledge as mere enumeration of physical objects is not knowledge; knowledge requires *understanding*, and understanding *shows itself* (for instance, through the application of a rule). Whether I have understood something is thus *shown* or will *show itself* through my use of that word or proposition, and whether I have understood something is not (generally) understood as the mere pointing to things. Cf. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §§ 80-81: “The *truth* of my statements is the test of my *understanding* of these statements.” (80) and “That is to say: if I make certain false statements, it becomes uncertain whether I understand them.” (81).

8 Wittgenstein's *Private Language Argument* has been heavily employed as a theory that effectively deals with scepticism, because it shows that an essentially private language is impossible (cf. also the fine example dubbed *Beetle-in-a-box*). The sceptic cannot make an intelligible account for how he acquired language, essentially public in its nature, publicly acquired and governed by rules. For the purpose of this essay, I find the richness of many of Wittgenstein's passages in *On Certainty* sufficiently compelling.

answer can't be: I know that they exist.) But someone who asks such a question is overlooking the fact that a doubt about existence only works in a language-game. Hence, that we should first have to ask: what would such a doubt be like? and don't understand this straight off." (*On Certainty*, §24)

Here, as pointed out by Fogelin (1987), we do not understand the character of doubt until we understand the grounds for the doubt and understand what issues have to be settled in order to resolve the doubt. In the case of the idealist stance, where essentially *everything* can be doubted, nothing can be cited to resolve it. Subsequently, claims to knowledge or doubt will be out of place, unintelligible, without function and thus useless. This in Wittgenstein's terms is to render it meaningless. It is the language-games that give these activities *substance*, but in the idealist domain these notions cannot be raised meaningfully.

Here the notion of *language-games*⁹ is indeed crucial. If raising doubts and answering them only is justified inside language-games (insofar as it is not meaningful to do this outside language-games), what then justifies language-games themselves?

To this Wittgenstein subtly answers: nothing.

But here *nothing* is not taken as something empty, non-existent, for our judgements are founded in what *stands fast for us*, and the epistemic concepts of the different language-games have their uses within these activities, but are inapplicable to what is foundational. Wittgenstein rejects the idea that what is fundamental or foundational in our world is susceptible to doubt, proof, confirmation, truth, falsity, or justification. These attributes apply to putative cases of knowledge but not to what is certain. Whatever is so susceptible belongs to the language-game and differs in kind from the ground that underlies it. *Knowledge* and *certainty* belong to different categories, and is not to be confused with two mental states with a distinct degree of certainty, like "surmising" and "being sure":

"'Knowledge' and 'certainty' belong to different *categories*. They are not two 'mental states' like, say 'surmising' and 'being sure'. (Here I assume that it is meaningful for me to say "I know what the word 'doubt' means" and that this sentence indicates that the word "doubt" has a logical role.) (*On Certainty*, §308).

Arguably, Wittgenstein here escapes the traditional polemic surrounding

⁹ I do admittedly presuppose some understanding of the concept of language-games here; the concept is worthy of a lengthy discussion by itself.

the task of providing an absolute ground for what is taken to be certain. Traditional philosophy has either had to postulate that something *just is so*, or recur to an infinite regress of justifications. For Descartes in his "*cogito reduction*" the foundation was what he saw "clearly and distinctly,"¹⁰ namely that he was a thinking being [ultimately guaranteed by God], an indubitable fact that served as an axiom for the rest of his propositions which truth depended on and was justified by his cogito. I would suggest that Descartes here is no less ingenious than Moore in holding out his hand. When confronted with the sceptic's interrogation "How do you know for sure that it is true?" he would be obliged to reply "Because it cannot be doubted" (or in fact, as he did, recur to the existence of God, providing him with the clear idea of his existence).

In Wittgenstein's treatment of the problem, the question put forward by the sceptic is not even allowed, because it is formulated on the assumption that what it questions is to be regarded as knowledge. It is not knowledge; Descartes' cogito is not knowledge, neither the assertion of Moore's two hands. Here Wittgenstein would say that there is a mistake in *category* – one cannot sensibly ask of that which is certain whether it is known (or not known) or true (or false), certitude is not susceptible to such ascriptions. Knowing, doubting, believing, justifying, adducing evidence for or against a claim, truth, falsity, and being mistaken, they all have their use or uses within *language-games*, and are inapplicable to what is foundational. In the language- game they come to an end:

"Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end – but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e., it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting* which lies at the bottom of the language-game." (*On Certainty*, §204)

"If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not true, nor yet false." (*On Certainty*, §205)

The foundation, the bedrock or what 'stands fast for us' (*festlegen*) is beyond revision, which reversed means to Wittgenstein it is certain:

"The questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, as it were like hinges on which those turn." (*On Certainty*, §341).

Hence *doubting comes to an end*. The idealist that here obsessively insists

¹⁰ Consider here how it can be questioned in what way we have direct access to our mental states and how we could investigate into the certainty or clarity of their contents. Here, I would like to paraphrase research fellow Jens Saugstad at the University of Oslo (UiO), who in a lecture series at UiO some years ago led the attention towards what it would be like to check the correctness of a mental state. How is it done? By holding your thoughts up against a light to see better?

that doubt can be upheld is not playing the doubting-game, in fact it cannot be considered doubting at all:¹¹

“If you tried to doubt every thing you would not get as far as doubting anything.” (*On Certainty*, §115)

“A doubt without an end is not even a doubt.” (*On Certainty*, §625)

And finally, to illustrate the senselessness of this activity, Wittgenstein recurs to the image of a person that keeps looking in a drawer in search of a missing object:

“[...] It would be as if someone were looking for some object in a room; he opens a drawer and doesn't see it there, then he closes it again, waits, and opens it once more to see if perhaps it isn't there now, and keeps on like that. He hasn't learned to look for things. [...] He has not learned *the* game that we are trying to teach him.” (*On Certainty*, §315).

The suggestion here is that *philosophical doubt*, as in the case with Moore's two hands, is open-ended, and will go on infinitely, whereas as real doubt eventually comes to an end. After some tries to find the missing object, one is either successful or abandon the task.

Even though at the face of it clearly unsatisfactory in terms of what is (normally) held as a proof (cf. Wright), I think ultimately where Moore is flawed is attempting a proof where a proof is not intelligible. Doubt does not arise as to the authenticity or reality of my two hands. And doubting whether there are physical objects or not seems to be deprived of a conceivable answer. How can you show that there are no physical objects? What criteria do one point to? And similarly : How does such a negation manifest itself in our life form, in our activities? What would it be like to doubt *Here is a hand?* – It would undermine the whole framework in which we raise and answer doubts.

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¹¹ Recall Wittgenstein's somewhat similar thoughts in the *Tractatus*: “If a question can be put at all, then it *can* also be answered” (*Tractatus*, 6.5) and, “Scepticism is not irrefutable, but palpably senseless, if it would doubt where a question cannot be asked. For doubt can only exist where there is a question; a question only where there is an answer and this only where something *can* be said.” (*Tractatus*, 6.51).

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