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Was Moore talking nonsense?: Wittgenstein's criticism in 'On certainty'

Sartore, Edoardo

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Was Moore Talking Nonsense?

Wittgenstein's Criticism in On Certainty

Edoardo Sartore | ORCID: 0000-0003-3521-7800
University of Zürich, Zürich, Switzerland
edoardo.sartore@uzh.ch

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Abstract

This article examines Wittgenstein's criticism of Moore's use of "know", as he developed it in *On Certainty*. Arguing against much of the literature, the author claims that, by Wittgenstein's own lights, Moore was not talking nonsense. He does so by showing, first, that the standard reading is based on the idea that hinge propositions are non-epistemic, and second, that Wittgenstein's alleged adoption of the non-epistemic view is not adequately supported by the textual evidence. The author argues that claims to the contrary depend on an undue conflation, on the part of interpreters, of Wittgenstein's treatment of psychological avowals in *Philosophical Investigations* and his discussion of hinge propositions in *On Certainty*. Moreover, a closer look at Wittgenstein's objections to Moore shows that Wittgenstein himself repeatedly charged Moore with a similar confusion between the status of psychological statements and the status of his common-sense truisms.

Keywords

Wittgenstein – Moore – *On Certainty* – nonsense – hinge propositions – non-epistemic view

1 Introduction

According to the most widespread reading of *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein took issue with Moore's use of the expression "know" and came to the conclusion that, when Moore claimed to know the truisms of common sense and the premises of his proof, he made neither patently true assertions nor false claims, but was talking nonsense. As my main concerns here are interpretative, I won't be so much concerned with the substantive merits of the view attributed to Wittgenstein as with the plausibility of the attribution itself. I claim that the standard reading as it stands is not adequately supported by the textual evidence and that one major argument in its favour is essentially flawed.

Section 2 introduces Moore's knowledge claims as they emerge in "A Defence of Common Sense" and "Proof of an External World". Section 3 outlines the main features of the standard reading and specifically what I shall call the *non-epistemic thesis*.¹ Wittgenstein's alleged adoption of this thesis is largely regarded to be the key step from which the nonsensicality of Moore's claims follows as a corollary. Section 4 outlines the main argument in support of the non-epistemic thesis and points out some shortcomings of the standard account of Wittgenstein's remarks on the use of "know". Section 5 shows that the main argument for the non-epistemic thesis relies on a supposed analogy between Wittgenstein's discussion of hinge propositions in *On Certainty* and his earlier treatment of first-person psychological avowals. Section 6 shows that such analogy is only apparent and that Wittgenstein himself did not appeal to it. The final section argues that the standard account of Wittgenstein's criticism needs to be turned on its head: a closer look at the key passages in *On Certainty* shows Wittgenstein repeatedly accusing Moore of unduly equating the status of his common-sense truisms and the status of psychological statements.

2 Moore's Knowledge Claims

Wittgenstein's later notes collected in *On Certainty* are largely the result of him engaging with the themes of Moore (1925) and (1939).² His interest in these

1 Accordingly, I will sometimes refer to this standard interpretation of *On Certainty* as the "non-epistemic reading", examples of which can be found in von Wright 1982, Stroll 1994, Moyal-Sharrock 2004, Coliva 2010, Hamilton 2014, Schönbaumsfeld 2016, just to mention a few. Although these scholars diverge on more specific issues, their readings of *On Certainty* are by and large in agreement when it comes to the core exegetical points.

2 Both papers were republished in Moore 1959. As it often happens with Wittgenstein, it is unclear whether he ever carefully read Moore's essays. Most likely, his knowledge of them

two articles was, if not first aroused, at least rekindled by his discussions with Norman Malcolm during his visit to Ithaca (NY) in the summer and early autumn of 1949. Malcolm himself had just recently published a paper in which he criticised Moore's use of the expression "I know" in the two articles above, and it is only natural that during Wittgenstein's stay the discussions between the two should have largely revolved around the same theme (Malcolm 1958, 70). Both Moore's papers and Malcolm's take on them form the background against which Wittgenstein's notes should be read. However, for the purposes of my argument, it is unnecessary to delve into the details of the two articles by Moore. The following general point will suffice. In both papers Moore insists on there being some contingent empirical propositions that he knows for certain to be true. And in both papers this claim provides the starting point of an anti-idealistic or anti-sceptical argument.

In "A Defence of Common Sense" Moore claims to know for certain the propositions that make up what he calls the "Common Sense view of the world". The list he gives includes, among others, that he is a human being, that since his birth he has never been far from the surface of the earth, that the earth has existed for a long time before he was born, and so on. Moreover, he claims that an analogous knowledge ought to be extended to other human beings as well (Moore 1925, 34–35):

[E]ach of *us* [...] has frequently *known*, with regard to *himself* or *his* body and the time at which he knew it, everything which, in writing down my list of propositions [...], I was claiming to know about *myself* or *my* body at the time at which I wrote that proposition down.

In the later paper Moore sets out to prove, *contra* the idealist who denies it, the existence of the external world.³ His argument is extremely simple. He starts by holding up his hands and declaring, while making a gesture with the right one, "Here is a hand", and then adding, while making a gesture with the left one, "and here is another". By doing this, he claims, he has "proved *ipso facto*

was rather superficial, and in-person discussions with Moore himself played a significant part in fuelling Wittgenstein's interest. It often goes unmentioned that Wittgenstein met Moore a few times while he was in the process of writing the very remarks later collected in *On Certainty*. Those dated 18 March 1951 (OC §§389–399), for instance, were written after he had "talked philosophy" with Moore, as is evinced by his letter to Malcolm the next day (McGuinness 2008, letter n. 436).

3 Moore's later paper had at least as its primary target the metaphysical thesis of idealism rather than the epistemological thesis of the sceptic (see Moore's statements to this effect in his "Reply to my critics" in Schilpp 1942, 668).

the existence of external things” (1939, 146). Being well aware that his “proof” is unlikely to strike anyone as compelling, Moore goes on to argue for its “perfectly rigorous” character by showing that it satisfies the three conditions that we ordinarily require of our proofs: (i) the conclusion is different from the premises adduced in its support; (ii) the conclusion follows from the premises; (iii) the premises are both true and known to be true. On the assumption that “This is a hand” materially implies “This is an external thing”, the argument is analytically valid, and (ii) is satisfied.⁴ Regarding (i), Moore does not explain in detail what makes two statements “different”. However, he clearly believes that the fact that premises and conclusion are not logically equivalent (as it’s the case in his argument) suffices to establish that they are “different” in the relevant sense.⁵ His argument, then, hinges on whether or not he does in fact know its premises, whether or not he knows that which he claims by saying “Here is a hand and here is another”.

As I mentioned, I won’t be entering into the merits (or demerits) of Moore’s proof *vis-à-vis* idealistic positions and sceptical challenges. What interests me at this stage is Moore’s proof as it struck Wittgenstein, for it is clearly with the proof in mind that Wittgenstein wrote the lines that open *On Certainty* (OC §1):

If you do know that *here is one hand*, we’ll grant you all the rest. When one says that such and such a proposition can’t be proved, of course that does not mean that it can’t be derived from other propositions; any proposition can be derived from other ones. But they may be no more certain than it is itself.

3 The Standard Reading and the Non-Epistemic Thesis

According to the received view, Wittgenstein’s assessment of Moore’s essays includes both praise and criticism. On the one hand, he commends Moore for having drawn attention to an interesting class of propositions that, despite looking like ordinary empirical propositions, seem to play a special role in the system of our beliefs (OC §§136, 137). On the other hand, he finds

4 To show that such implication holds, Moore goes into a long and cumbersome discussion on the notion of externality that there is no need to repeat here.

5 “The premiss which I adduced in proof was quite certainly different from the conclusion, for [...] it is quite obvious that the conclusion might have been true, even if the premiss had been false. In asserting the premiss I was asserting much more than I was asserting in asserting the conclusion” (Moore 1939, 146).

something objectionable in Moore's insistence that he *knows* such-and-such to be the case.

The first feature that sets Moore's propositions apart from other empirical propositions is hinted at in the very first remark, quoted above. It seems intuitive that I know that I have two hands if I know anything at all. However, if I were asked to *prove* it, to give compelling reasons for my assurance, I wouldn't know where to begin. I wouldn't know how to support my claim: not because I couldn't infer it from plausible premises, but because none of the reasons I could give would be "as certain as the very thing they were supposed to be grounds for" (OC §307).

It is tempting to say that, if I were to doubt whether I do have two hands, I could always "make sure by looking". And of course, in exceptional circumstances – say, after a particularly nasty car accident – I could make sure that I (still) have two hands by looking at them. In different circumstances, as when I have reasons to suppose that I am hallucinating, I might look at my hands to make sure that I see everything where I know it is. In one case I check my belief that I have two hands against the testimony of my eyes, in the other I check the functioning of my eyes against my knowledge that I have hands.

These tests would allay specific doubts that arise in very special circumstances, and their results would provide reasons for my beliefs.⁶ But if someone raised doubts in normal circumstances, performing those investigations would achieve nothing. In such a case, I have no more reason to trust my eyes than to believe I have hands (OC §125, see PPF §312):

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?)

A second, related point is this: just as we cannot give reasons for Moore's propositions, we also do not arrive at them by means of investigations. There are "investigations into the shape and also the age of the earth, but not into whether the earth has existed during the last hundred years" (OC §138). If someone were to question whether the earth is really four and a half billion years old, we should have to provide some reasons for our belief. Doing so might require embarking on an inquiry to find out and present those adequate

⁶ Notice, however, that even in the exceptional circumstances just imagined, our giving reasons ends with beliefs for which no reasons are given.

grounds. Of course, most of us would probably defer to experts, rather than apply the dating techniques ourselves – we would perform what Kenny calls a “secondary inquiry” (1992, 27). Still, we have established procedures for answering the age-of-the-earth question. By contrast (OC §231):

If someone doubted whether the earth had existed a hundred years ago, I should not understand, for *this* reason: I would not know what such a person would still allow to be counted as evidence and what not.

It's not unfathomable that someone should be brought up to believe that earth came into existence with his birth (OC §92). Could we convince him otherwise? Of course, we may, but here no scientific investigation, no gathering of historical or geological evidence will necessarily convince him, for we might not share enough common ground for that evidence to have any grip. The reason for this, Wittgenstein says, is that our inquiries take place against a background of beliefs or propositions that we take for granted. These represent the limit⁷ *within* which we ask for and give reasons and make up what Wittgenstein sometimes calls our picture of the world (*Weltbild*), the matter-of-course foundation of our inquiries (OC §§94, 147, 167, 233, 262). If someone does not accept some of those propositions, giving him reasons is of little use. We shall rather impart him our picture of the world, i.e., engage in a process of persuasion which bears little resemblance to ordinary argumentative procedures (OC §§262, 612, 669).

This leads us to a third feature of Moore's propositions. There is a sense in which such propositions cannot be doubted. What this indubitability amounts to is not immediately obvious, but this much is clear: they have not been *established* beyond doubt, rather, they are *exempt* from it (OC §§88, 341, 653, 666). And their exemption from doubt is a constitutive feature of our inquiries (OC §341, §342 and §343):

the *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.

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.

⁷ Marconi 2016 uses the felicitous phrase “*material* limit of argumentation” to contrast it with its *formal* limit.

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.

Not only do we not feel the need to doubt such things, but if I were to challenge those beliefs it would be unclear what, if anything, would remain untouched. Doubting the propositions that make up our world-picture seems "to drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos" (OC §613). Following these passages, it has become commonplace to talk of "hinge propositions" to denote these basic propositions (of which Moore's truisms are just a sample), and from now on I will follow this practice.

To sum up, Moore has directed Wittgenstein's attention to apparently empirical propositions that, as it were, are not up for grabs: they cannot be doubted or justified, nor are they the sort of things we find out. But then, does Moore know that he has two hands? Does he not? Does he or does he not know that the earth has existed for a very long time? For the standard reading, Wittgenstein's answer is "none of the above". *Tertium datur*: when it comes to hinge propositions, neither the expression of doubt nor the assertion of knowledge makes sense. The reasoning goes as follows. Hinge propositions play a "peculiar logical role" (OC §136) in our scientific inquiries as well as in everyday life. They shape the functioning of our language games (including our epistemic ones), hence they cannot themselves be subject to epistemic evaluation: we cannot doubt them, test them, or bring evidence in support of their truth, for they provide the framework in which all those practices take place. Now – here is the key (and problematic) step that standard readers take – this also means that we cannot be said to *know* them, for Wittgenstein insisted that knowledge requires the presence of reasons and the possibility of doubt. Call this the *non-epistemic thesis*: hinge propositions are not suitable candidates for knowledge, they are not the sort of things that one can know (nor fail to know). The concept of knowledge just does not apply (Coliva 2010, 87, Moyal-Sharrock 2017, 549, Schönbaumsfeld 2016, 98). The non-epistemic thesis explains what's wrong in Moore's performance. It's not that Moore isn't justified in claiming to know his common-sense truisms, but that his attempt at doing so involves a misuse of our epistemic concepts and therefore results in verbal utterances that are strictly speaking nonsensical.

Now, in ordinary parlance, the word "nonsense" can be used to mean more than one thing. First, it can be used dismissively, to disqualify statements that are deemed patently false or unreasonable. Second, it can apply to actions (including utterances) and qualify them as pointless, futile or out of place, when there is no point in performing them. And third, it can be used to mean

the same as “senseless” or “unintelligible”, to indicate sentences which are, as it were, not even false, but lack a sense altogether. It is the latter kind of nonsense that Wittgenstein famously predicated of some philosophical theses of the past, such as the epistemic privacy of sensations. Let’s call these three senses of “nonsense”, *absurdity*, *futility*, and *linguistic nonsense* respectively.⁸ It is crucial to keep these notions apart, for not only are they distinct, they are also mutually incompatible.⁹ Notice that only linguistic nonsense entails lack of truth-value, while absurdity implies falsehood, and the futility of an utterance is compatible with the truth of what is uttered.

It is important to clarify that, according to the non-epistemic reading, Wittgenstein diagnoses Moore’s claims as suffering from *linguistic nonsense*: when Moore claimed to know the truisms of common sense and the premises of his proof, his utterances were not just conversationally inappropriate but conceptually confused. In other words, Wittgenstein is detecting a “category mistake” in Moore’s use of epistemic language (Stroll 1994, 139). The latter was not saying something obviously true, he failed to say anything meaningful, for his claims violated the grammar of “know”.

One attractive feature of the standard reading is that it explains in one breath what’s wrong both with Moore’s knowledge claims *and* with sceptical doubts: Moore is right in holding his position in the face of sceptical doubt but errs when he couches his rights in terms of knowledge of certain empirical propositions. The sceptic, on the other hand, is right in thinking that we do not “know” those propositions, but he mistakenly concludes that we should remain agnostic towards them. Ultimately, they are both victims of the same conceptual confusion: they force the concept of knowledge upon propositions whose cornerstone-like role in our everyday inquiries make it unintelligible to say either that we know or that we don’t know them.

The question I want to raise is the following. Granted Wittgenstein’s recognition of the peculiar logical role that hinge propositions play in our epistemic practices, does the non-epistemic thesis follow? More specifically, does it follow from their *indubitability* that such things cannot be *known*? Whether it really is the case that, by Wittgenstein’s lights, Moore was talking nonsense depends on the answer to that question.

8 I borrow the distinction as well as the labels from Glock 2015, 119–120. See also Glock 2004.

9 I believe that neglect of these distinctions has been a significant source of confusion in the literature on *On Certainty*, where terms like “meaningful”, “rational”, “reasonable”, “sensible”, are often used interchangeably. The phenomenon extends to their contraries as well, with the result that it is not unusual for authors to characterise sceptical doubt as *at the same time* meaningless, irrational, and absurd.

I shall address this issue by examining one argument that is often made in support of the standard view. I will try to show that the argument is the combined result of two misunderstandings: one concerning Wittgenstein's conceptual elucidations of epistemic concepts, and one concerning the sense in which hinge propositions are indubitable.

4 The Grammar of "Know"

Throughout *On Certainty* Wittgenstein makes a plethora of observations concerning the use of the expression "I know", with the clear purpose of finding out why Moore's knowledge claims struck him as "fishy" (OC §423). He observes that "in normal linguistic exchange" (OC §260), the use of "I know" carries several implications, namely that:

- (a) doubt and mistake are possible – it *makes sense* to speak of doubting or being mistaken,
- (b) the claimant is prepared to give compelling reasons for his claims, i.e., he is prepared to answer the question "How do you know?",
- (c) the claimant is in possession of information that his audience does not have access to, hence the knowledge claim is relevant to the communicative exchange.

According to many scholars, Wittgenstein took these facts about the use of the expression "I know" to delimit the conditions for the application of the concept of knowledge, meaning that "only by conforming to these criteria would knowledge claims make sense, in the literal sense of having a meaning" (Coliva 2021, 213). Then, the reading goes, he accused Moore of talking nonsense, on the basis that his claims to know the common-sense truisms failed to conform to these requirements.

At the same time, it is clear to everyone that Wittgenstein wasn't pursuing a language-revisionary agenda to the effect that Moore should give up the use of the words "I know" in the context of his proof. Instead, these scholars argue, he conceded that Moore's assertions are flat-out nonsensical only if they are meant as genuine empirical knowledge claims, but they retain a meaning if understood as grammatical remarks expressing the logical exclusion of doubt. In this case "I know that *p*" could be paraphrased with "I can't doubt that *p*", "There is no such thing as doubting *p*", or "*p* cannot be intelligibly doubted". I will address this further claim in Sections 5 and 6 and show that it is based on an unwarranted parallelism between Wittgenstein's treatment of first-person psychological avowals and hinge propositions.

Let's now review the textual evidence for the first of these claims, the idea that (a)–(c) are conditions on the applicability of the concept of knowledge. I shall argue that while there is plenty of evidence for (a), Wittgenstein is far less resolute when it comes to (b), and that the identification of (c) as a condition of meaningfulness of knowledge claims is based on a misunderstanding.

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein insisted on the tight conceptual relation between doubting and knowing (OC §121 and §480):

Can one say: “Where there is no doubt there is no knowledge either”?

Admittedly it's true that ‘knowing something’ doesn't involve thinking about it – but mustn't anyone who knows something be capable of doubt? And doubting means thinking.¹⁰

Although in both these remarks the point is made tentatively, it is clear from other passages that the questions in §121 and §480 ought to be answered in the affirmative. In one of the first remarks, for instance, Wittgenstein reported with disapproval the opinion “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, see also §58), clearly expressing the thought that “I know that p” only makes sense if “I doubt that p” or “I don't know whether p” are intelligible as well.

The situation is far less clear-cut when it comes to (b) and (c). In several passages, Wittgenstein draws our attention to the relation between the legitimacy of a knowledge claim and the possibility, on the part of the claimant, to offer some reason or ground in its support, to say *how* he knows what he asserts (OC §18, §483 and §484):

“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.

Someone with bad sight asks me: “do you believe that the thing we can see there is a tree?” I reply: “I *know* it is; I can see it clearly and am familiar with it.” – A: “Is N. N. at home?” – I: “I believe he is.” – A: “Was he at home

10 Notice that this passage lends itself to yet another reading, where what is at issue is the capacity (*Fähigkeit*) for doubt. On this reading, Wittgenstein is considering whether we would ascribe knowledge to individuals who are not (yet) capable of doubting.

yesterday?” – I: “Yesterday he was – I know he was; I spoke to him.” – A: “Do you know or only believe that this part of the house is built on later than the rest?” – I: “I *know* it is; I asked so and so about it.”

In these cases, then, one says “I know” and mentions how one knows, or at least one can do so.

Some commentators have understood remarks like these as showing that Wittgenstein subscribed to the standard analysis of knowledge as justified true belief, and, furthermore, as committing him to understand justification in internalist terms (see Coliva 2010, 208–209, Moyal-Sharrock 2017, 548). On this reading, a claim of the form “I know that *p*” makes sense only if it is, in principle, possible to have reasons for *p* – i.e., if something *counts* as a reason for *p*. Moreover, the claim is true only if I can, as a matter of fact, make explicit my reasons for believing *p*, false if I can't.¹¹ I have a few qualms on this point.

First, nothing in the passages above indicates that Wittgenstein is making *general* claims about the requirements for the possession of knowledge. Indeed, in §18 the qualifier “often” blocks any general conclusion, as does the specification “in these cases” in the later remark, which confines the scope of the conclusion to the specific examples given in §483.

Second, Wittgenstein himself makes use of “I know” in a variety of context, many of which are characterised by the absence of specific grounds or evidence. For instance, he explicitly allowed for kinaesthetic knowledge as a kind of knowledge that is not based on evidence or reasons (Glock 1996, 192). In a similar fashion, he stressed the non-inferential character of our knowledge of other people's experiences, feelings and emotions (Z §225), going as far as to consider that in some cases there might be nothing more to knowing than guessing right and not having any doubts (LW II, 35–36), or that I may know that someone is not pretending to be in pain without thereby “knowing how I know it”, but merely by having developed “an eye” for it (LW II, 31, PPF §361). Passages like the following suggest that he may have come to consider hinge propositions as items of *knowledge*, albeit knowledge of a “special nature” (Hanfling 1982, 190):

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 forbears, 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

¹¹ Provided, of course, that *p* is true.

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)

Third, there are passages in his last writings where Wittgenstein offers alternative partial “analyses” of knowledge claims. Sometimes we read that “I know = I am familiar with it as a certainty” (OC §272, see also OC §582). Elsewhere we find Wittgenstein stating “I know ... = I am certain that it is so and it is so. [...] I know = I *can* say how it is, and it is as I say it is”, or considering the possibility of explicating “I know it” as “I learned it and it isn’t subject to doubt” (LW II, 45, 57–58). In none of these cases does he purport to give an all-purpose analysis of “know”, and it seems tendentious to give pride of place to those where he emphasises the connection between knowing and having reasons.

Admittedly, there are passages in *On Certainty* that cannot be easily explained away (OC §243):

One says “I know” when one is ready to give compelling grounds. “I know” relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth. Whether someone knows something can come to light, assuming that he is convinced of it.

But if what he believes is of such a kind that the grounds that he can give are no surer than his assertion, then he cannot say that he knows what he believes.

Notice, however, that in this case the objection is directed against the propriety of *claiming* to know something, when someone doesn’t have grounds “surer than his assertion”. The further claim that he doesn’t *know* it (that there is no such thing as knowing it) does not necessarily follow. To claim that it does is to conflate the conditions for the appropriate assertion of a knowledge claim and the condition for the truth of the claim itself. And although Wittgenstein may have sometimes overlooked that distinction (OC §§10, 350), he was clearly aware of it when he wrote (OC §552, see also §§425, 431, 466, 549):¹²

Do I know that I am now sitting in a chair? – Don’t I know it?! In the present circumstances no one is going to say that I know this; but no more will he say, for example, that I am conscious. Nor will one normally say that of the passers-by in the street.

12 Even critics of Wittgenstein recognise that he is not entirely oblivious to the distinction between “questions about the propriety of saying ‘I know’” and “questions about the truth” (White 1986, 325). What White fails to point out, however, is that at least in *On Certainty*, the remarks in which Wittgenstein shows awareness of the distinction clearly outnumber the ones where he overlooks it.

But now, even if one doesn't say it, does that make it *untrue*?¹³

A similar point can be made with respect to condition (c). Wittgenstein does indeed point out the oddness of Moore's assertions and relates it to the fact that he makes them "in an *unsuitable* situation" (OC §10), where they are irrelevant or "out of context" (OC §§349–350, 468). He often goes on to claim that, for that reason, we don't understand him. And, admittedly, he tends to say that such assertions "make no sense". Nevertheless, there are good reasons to think that, by Wittgenstein's own lights, whatever goes awry in Moore's assertions is not strictly connected with a misuse of the expression "I know".

Whenever Wittgenstein characterises Moore's claims as making no sense, he makes comparisons with other utterances that he qualifies as "nonsense" in the same way. The examples that he chooses are telling. He compares Moore's assertions to saying "I am here" to someone right in front of me who sees me clearly (OC §10, 348), or to saying "Good morning" or "I wish you luck" in the middle of a conversation (OC §§464, 469). In all these cases we do not understand *why* someone would utter those words. As we can find no reason for him to do it, no point in his doing it, we may question *what* he really meant to say by uttering those words. In any case, it is the whole action that is to blame, not the specific choice of words (Schroeder 2022, 18). This suggests that the same problem affects Moore's assertions. His uttering "I know that this is a hand" when there is no point in doing so may leave us wondering what he means by using those words. But there is no reason to conclude that it is the concept of knowledge that is out of place here.

This becomes more evident if we notice that the expression "I know" plays no essential role for the oddness of the assertion. The bare utterance of "This is a hand" when there is no need for it, may cause the same failure to understand, and eventually cast the same doubts on the semantic competence of the speaker, as the utterance of "I know that this is a hand" (OC §460–461).¹⁴

In conclusion, Wittgenstein did not consider the relevance-condition, (c), a conceptual condition of knowledge claims. Although having reasons (b) is in many cases required for the truth of a knowledge claim, it is by no means obvious that the possibility of giving reasons makes for a *general* requirement for the meaningfulness of knowledge claims. If we do not assume that Wittgenstein equated knowledge to justified true belief, then the option remains open to see

13 Remember that, according to the non-epistemic reading, if I claim knowledge of a hinge proposition what I say is not false but meaningless (hence neither true nor false), and *a fortiori* "untrue".

14 Same with "That is a tree" (OC §§468, 533).

his remarks as pointing out that there are a lot of things that we *know* without being able to ground them with specific reasons.

However, the first conceptual point remains: knowledge claims make sense only when doubt is possible. It seems that this thesis together with the recurring claim that hinge propositions *cannot* be doubted is enough to establish the non-epistemic thesis, from which the nonsensicality of Moore's knowledge claims follows as a corollary. And indeed, this is the line of argument frequently adopted by interpreters, who support it by linking Wittgenstein's discussion of hinge propositions in *On Certainty* to his earlier treatment of first-person present tense psychological avowals.¹⁵ In both cases, the reading goes, there is no such thing as doubting: doubt is "logically" excluded. And since the possibility of knowledge is conceptually tied with the possibility of doubt, neither psychological avowals nor hinge propositions are knowledge-apt. To see where this reasoning goes wrong, it's necessary to take a step back.

5 Doubt and Knowledge

This grammatical connection between doubt and knowledge goes back to Wittgenstein's discussion of private experience in *Philosophical Investigations*. There we encounter the striking claim that one cannot be meaningfully said to *know* that one is in pain (PI §246).

Wittgenstein famously held that utterances like "I am in pain", "I hope he'll come", "I believe it's going to rain", in contrast with their third-person counterparts, are not descriptions but "expressions" or "avowals" (*Ausdruck, Äusserung*) (PI §585, Z §472). Even though we sometimes speak of "describing one's mental states", we thus denote a language-game which is utterly unlike the description of another person's mental state (PI §290, Z §53).

Consider the following platitudes. I normally form beliefs about other people's mental states by way of observing their behaviour (linguistic and not) and the circumstances in which that behaviour takes place. Often this process goes smoothly (everything points to the same conclusion), sometimes less so. There are plenty of ways I might go wrong, my description is often imprecise and tentative, and I might revise it in light of further information. Moreover, I am open to the possibility of deceit, and knowing that, I may have doubts about the sincerity of another's sayings and doings. All these features are lacking

15 This line of defence is pursued extensively by Coliva 2010, Ch. 3, 2021 followed by Schönbaumsfeld 2016, but is suggested by many other readers, including von Wright 1982, Malcolm 1977 and Moyal-Sharrock 2004.

when one “describes” one’s own mental states. I certainly do not infer what I hope from my behaviour, no more than I listen to myself talk to find out what I believe (PPF §100). I can’t imagine going wrong or doubting whether I really am in pain.

This asymmetry between the first- and third-person case has led philosophers to distinguish between two kinds of knowledge: while I am “directly” aware of my own experiences, they say, I can only “indirectly” infer other people’s mental states, for “I cannot directly observe their feeling” (Russell, 1921, 118). Similarly, others can only know my inner mental states by inference from my overt behaviour. While I have immediate and infallible knowledge of my mental life, others must rest content with the defeasible evidence they can gain from observation. One upshot of this reasoning is the doctrine of the *epistemic privacy of sensations*, i.e., the idea that *only* I can know my mental states, others can only surmise them. Wittgenstein notoriously took issue with these conclusions (PI §246):

In what sense are my sensations *private*? – Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it. – In one way this is false, and in another nonsense. If we are using the word “know” as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know if I’m in pain. – Yes, but all the same, not with the certainty with which I know it myself! – It can’t be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I’m in pain. What is it supposed to mean – except perhaps that I *am* in pain?

Other people cannot be said to learn of my sensations *only* from my behaviour – for I cannot be said to learn of them. I *have* them.

This much is true: it makes sense to say about other people that they doubt whether I am in pain: but not to say it about myself.

In other words, to say that other people can *only* learn of my sensation from my behaviour is misleading, for it suggests that there are other, better ways of finding out whether I am in pain than by looking at my behaviour. But that is mistaken: to know that another person is in pain *is* to learn it from his behaviour. I myself do not *learn* of my sensations.

The fact that I cannot be mistaken about my own experiences (sensations, thoughts, hopes, intentions) has been pinned on the alleged fact that I am in a privileged epistemic position with respect to them – that I can observe them directly, and hence know them with certainty. But this, Wittgenstein thought, is misconceived. For the exclusion of error and doubt with respect to my own mental states is grammatical (aka conceptual). Unlike their third-person

counterparts, “I don’t know whether I have a headache” or “I wonder whether I am in pain, I’m not sure”, make no sense as genuine expressions of doubt. Of course, I may not be sure that what I am experiencing is *called* “headache”, or I might be *uncertain* whether to characterise it as “painful” or as merely “unpleasant”. But these cases betoken either a limited mastery of the English language on my part or the lack of sharp boundaries between our concepts. Once these sources of uncertainty are factored in, there is no space left for *ignorance*, hence none for doubt. “Only I know that I am in pain” just makes no sense, for its negation is *inconceivable* (PI §251):

What does it mean when we say: “I can’t imagine the opposite of this” or “What would it be like, if it were otherwise?” – For example, when someone has said that my images are private; or that only I myself can know whether I am feeling pain; and so forth.

Of course, here “I can’t imagine the opposite” doesn’t mean: my powers of imagination are unequal to the task. We use these words to fend off something whose form produces the illusion of being an empirical proposition, but which is really a grammatical one.

As the last paragraph suggests, however, “Only I can know whether I am in pain” retains a meaning if we understand it as a grammatical proposition which signals the senselessness of doubt and error with respect to one’s own mental states (Hacker 1990, 67–68). The upshot of the discussion is that what looked like deep philosophical truths that call for explanations are superficial truths of grammar.¹⁶

Following Coliva (2010 Ch. 3, 2021) as well as Schönbaumsfeld (2016, 2021), we might now draw a distinction between two senses of “know”. On the one hand there is the *ordinary* sense of “know” which indicates the obtaining of an epistemic relation between a knower and a proposition. The use of “know” in this sense is confined to cases where it is logically possible to doubt. It is what Wittgenstein had in mind when he wrote (PPF §310):

“I know ...” may mean “I do not doubt ...” – but does not mean that the words “I doubt ...” are *senseless*, that doubt is logically excluded.

But there is also a further, *grammatical* sense of “know” whose use signals the non-obtainment of the conceptual connections that regulate the epistemic

¹⁶ As Hacker nicely put it “The epistemic privacy of sensations is a grammatical proposition dressed up in the guise of an epistemic truth” (1990, 3–4).

use of “know”. In other words, the use of “I know that *p*” in this second, grammatical sense signals that, with respect to *p* (or, more generally, with respect to a certain class of propositions to which *p* belongs), doubt and error are logically excluded. To sum up, the expression “know” can be used, as it is ordinarily the case, to express the *absence of doubt*, but it can also be used to make a conceptual point – namely, to express the *unintelligibility of doubt*.¹⁷

Although the label is not his own, Wittgenstein clearly countenanced the grammatical use of “know” with respect to first-person present-tense psychological avowals, such as “I am in pain”. According to the non-epistemic reading, in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein extended its application to hinge propositions as well.

6 Being in Pain and Having Hands

A pivotal point of the non-epistemic reading is the idea that hinge propositions are akin to psychological avowals in that, prefixing any hinge-expressing sentence with “I know” yields not a genuine knowledge claim but, at best, a grammatical remark and, at worst, sheer nonsense. These authors’ commitment to this view is explicit (for two examples, see Moyal-Sharrock 2004, 26 and Coliva 2010, 96–97).¹⁸

Just as in cases of first-person psychological statements which he had been examining, “here ‘know’ means that the expression of uncertainty is senseless” (PI §247); that is: “‘I know’ is here a logical insight” (OC §59) – “here”, that is: in Moore’s use of it, “I know” conveys a grammatical, not an epistemic, certainty.

What is new in *On Certainty*, therefore, isn’t so much the host of considerations about the use of “I know”, which was already largely present in the *Philosophical Investigations*; rather, it is their extension to the case in which that expression is applied in connection with propositions not about one’s own mental states but about physical objects.

The argument for the nonsensicality of Moore’s knowledge claims then hinges on this: that according to Wittgenstein, hinge propositions are indubitable *in*

17 For this contrast, see Malcolm 1977, 186–187.

18 Similar claims are to be found in von Wright 1982, 175, White 1986, 321, Malcolm 1977, 190, Hamilton 2014, 182, Schönbaumsfeld 2016, 98.

the same sense that first-person psychological avowals are. I shall argue that, despite uncertainty of expression and occasional wavering (OC §58), this is not the case. In contrast to psychological avowals, doubt about a hinge proposition is always possible (intelligible), although in determinate circumstance it is unreasonable.

Commentators tend to run together the following two claims, both ascribed to Wittgenstein: (i) it is not possible to doubt everything at once, and (ii) there are some propositions where doubt is “logically excluded”. By making the former claim, Wittgenstein would be attacking “the Cartesian idea that one could scrutinize and reject all of one’s epistemic beliefs taken together” (Schönbaumsfeld 2021, 236), but only the latter claim licenses the conclusion that sceptic and Moore are talking nonsense.

Now, Wittgenstein does indeed argue for the weaker thesis. In numerous places he points out that “somewhere I must begin with not-doubting” (OC §150). In our everyday transactions as well as in scientific investigations (OC §§167, 337, 341), we rely on an ever-changing cluster of judgements that “stand fast”. Scientific experiments and mathematical calculations can only take place against a background of things that are not doubted, such as the existence of the experimental apparatus before my eyes and the reliability of my memory (OC §337). But the same holds for ordinary activities, such as the carrying out of an order (OC §519). The upshot of these considerations is that doubt is essentially *local*. Our method of acquiring knowledge hinges on the fact that at any given point certain things are not doubted. If we want to continue in our cognitive projects (and more generally, in our everyday *life*, OC §344), “some empirical judgement or other” (OC §519) must be exempted from doubt. As we have seen in Section 3, this structural point does not exclude that what now stands fast may later come into question. However, these passages do rule out the possibility of the kind of wholesale or global doubt fostered by radical scepticism. That kind of doubt, one would like to say, is illusory, for it cannot be seriously entertained without giving up the activity of judging altogether.

Does it follow that there are *specific* propositions that cannot be intelligibly doubted? It is true that at least some hinges cannot be doubted “without causing havoc in our noetic structure” (Kenny 1992, 22, see OC §613), so that, in some cases, doubting an individual proposition would require, *per impossibile*, doubting “all sorts of things that stand fast for me” (OC §234). However, this conditional indubitability is still a long shot from the intrinsic, conceptually determined indubitability that characterises psychological avowals.

It is a feature of our language-game with “pain” that people have authority over their own avowals. That means that I cannot understand what “He

believes he is in pain, but he isn't" means without covertly replacing our concept of pain with a *different* one (one in which a truthful confession of pain is *not* a criterion for someone being in pain). It should be obvious that the same inconceivability does not extend to hinge propositions. When I say, "This is a hand", it is always *conceivable* that I be wrong (though it might not be conceivable that I am *always* wrong). And I believe that the difference had not escaped Wittgenstein, who frequently characterises doubts about hinge propositions not as illusory or unintelligible, but as unreasonable (*unvernünftig*) (OC §325, emphasis added.):

When we say that we know that such and such ..., we mean that any reasonable person in our position would also know it, that *it would be a piece of unreason to doubt it*.

Hence, when Wittgenstein says that hinges "cannot" be doubted, he is putting a constraint on reasonable doubt. Reasonable doubts must have grounds. As early as in OC §4, Wittgenstein had pointed out that with respect to some propositions, such as "I have a brain", grounds for doubt are lacking. In many places he insists that just as knowledge claims can usually be challenged by asking for reasons or grounds, doubts owe their legitimacy to there being some reason for doubting (OC §323 and §459, see also §§122–123, 322):

So rational suspicion must have grounds? We might also say: "the reasonable man believes this".

If the shopkeeper wanted to investigate each of his apples without any reason, for the sake of being certain about everything, why doesn't he have to investigate the investigation?

What he is attacking, I believe, is what Michael Williams called the "claimant-challenger asymmetry" (2007, 99), i.e., the idea, implicit in many sceptical arguments, that whenever knowledge is claimed, the burden of justification lies with the claimant, while the sceptical challenges themselves are not subject to justificatory constraints.

There are still other passages where Wittgenstein points out that the absence of doubt in determinate circumstance is what characterises the behaviour of a "reasonable person" (OC §§219–220, 254).¹⁹ Against the sceptic, he makes the

¹⁹ That doesn't mean that it is obvious where to draw the line between reasonable and unreasonable doubt (see OC §§326, 452–453.)

point that a claim of knowledge is not falsified by there being a possible unanswered doubt (OC §392 and §375):

What I need to show is that a doubt is not necessary even when it is possible. That the possibility of the language-game doesn't depend on everything being doubted that can be doubted.

Here one must realize that complete absence of doubt at some point, even where we would say that 'legitimate' doubt can exist, need not falsify a language-game.

Here the suggestion is that the sceptic, by imposing artificially high standards on our knowledge claims, by treating every logical possibility as an epistemic possibility, withdraws from our rationality project, refusing to take part in our shared "method of doubts and inquiry" (OC §151). But that is not to say that sceptical doubts are literally nonsensical.

7 Reconsidering Wittgenstein's Criticism

If doubts about hinge propositions are not unintelligible but "just" unreasonable, the argument for the non-epistemic thesis doesn't go through. Consequently, the charge that Moore's assertions are nonsensical should also be dropped. Of course, the question remains: What *did* Wittgenstein find faulty in Moore's take? I suggest that Wittgenstein did not have a problem with Moore claiming to *know* the hinge propositions, but rather with his performance, with his *claiming* to know them.²⁰

Sometimes his objection is just that when Moore enumerates the things he knows, he "proves nothing whatever" (OC §488, see also §520). Moreover, by making knowledge claims when there is no need for them, he puts them "in a false light". When a philosopher makes those claims, he makes it seem like he is infallible, like what he says is "unconditionally the truth" (OC §403). It is as if he were to say: "God himself can't say anything to me about them" (OC §554). But that's not the case, and Wittgenstein never gives up the truism that we are never infallible about empirical propositions, hinges included (OC §425).

²⁰ Thus, I am sympathetic to the readings by Hanfling 1982, Kober 1993, Ch. 4.2, Wright 2004, Glock 2016, Williams 2021, and Schroeder 2022 in so far as they all agree that Wittgenstein ultimately accepted the truth of Moore's knowledge claim.

The more specific point that Wittgenstein raises time and time again is the following. Moore, he writes, mistakenly believes that “the concept ‘know’ is analogous to the concepts ‘believe’, ‘surmise’, ‘doubt’, ‘be convinced’ in that the statement ‘I know ...’ can’t be a mistake” (OC §21). However, knowing, in contrast with believing or feeling certain, is not a mental state (OC §§6, 42, 230, 308, 356): whereas a truthful utterance of “I believe that *p*” guarantees that I believe that *p*, a sincere utterance of “I know that *p*” does not guarantee that I know that *p*. The point is grammatical: whereas we accord subjects authority over their claims to believe or their expressions of conviction, we don’t accord them authority over their claims to know, nor, more generally, over empirical judgements.²¹

Another way of pressing this criticism makes use of Wittgenstein’s distinction between a subjective and an objective sense of “certain” (OC §194). Subjective certainty is nothing other than “complete conviction”, the “total absence of doubt” which is compatible with both knowledge and false belief (OC §42). By contrast, objective certainty entails truth, but “there can be dispute whether something *is* certain; I mean, when something is objectively certain” (OC §273). The distinction may be summarised like this: whereas subjective certainty is transparent but not factive, objective certainty is factive but not transparent. As we’ll see, Wittgenstein repeatedly accused Moore of treating his attitude to the truisms of common sense as both factive *and* transparent. He acted as if his (authoritative) appeal to his own feeling of conviction were enough to refute the sceptic.

Already in the summer of 1949, as Malcolm’s (1958, 71) account of their conversations testifies, Wittgenstein’s argument ran along these lines:

Moore would like to stare at a house that is only 20 feet away and say, with a peculiar intonation, “*I know that there’s a house!*” He does this because he wants to produce in himself the *feeling* of knowing. He wants to exhibit *knowing for certain* to himself. [...] It is as if someone had said “You don’t really feel pain when you are pinched” and Moore then pinched himself in order to feel the pain, and thus prove to himself that the other

21 Pace Coliva, who writes: “we accord subjects authority over their own occurrent sensations and over judgements such as ‘Here is my hand’, when made in the relevant contexts” (2010, 96). Of course, one could say that sometimes we accord people authority over some empirical judgements (e.g., to experts in their respective fields). However, in this case we have to do with presumptive authority, which differs in kind from the sort of full-blown authority that people have over their own “inner life”. Only in the latter case, not in the former, can we say that truthfulness entails truth.

is wrong. Moore treats the sentence “I know so & so” like the sentence “I have a pain.” The criterion that he knows that so & so will be that he *says* that he does.

The same point occurs more succinctly in *On Certainty* (§178):

The wrong use made by Moore of the proposition “I know ...” lies in his regarding it as an utterance as little subject to doubt as “I am in pain”. And since from “I know it is so” there follows “It is so”, then the latter can’t be doubted either.

And just six weeks before his death, Wittgenstein wrote the following entry (OC §389):

If there were a dispute whether one could have a pain in such and such a part of the body, then someone who just then had a pain in that spot might say: “I assure you, I have a pain there now.” But it would sound odd if Moore had said: “I assure you, I know that’s a tree.” A personal experience simply has no interest for us here.

By the looks of it, the standard reading gets things backwards: Wittgenstein’s remarks are directed *against* Moore’s (alleged) conflation of common-sense truisms and first-person avowals of sensations. Far from drawing a parallel between the two cases, Wittgenstein is juxtaposing them for contrast.

Whether Wittgenstein’s criticism does justice to Moore is doubtful (Baldwin 2011, 556). What matters here is that Wittgenstein’s adoption of this stance against Moore is irreconcilable with the idea that Wittgenstein himself extended to hinge propositions his treatment of first-person psychological avowals. As I showed in Section 5, without this step the argument for the non-epistemic nature of hinge propositions loses credibility. It escapes me how the standard reading could be made consistent with the remarks quoted above. Moreover, it would have to accommodate the following statement, which, however, contains *an explicit denial of the non-epistemic thesis*, and thus represents one final blow to the idea that (according to Wittgenstein, OC §390, emphasis added) Moore was talking nonsense:

All that is important is that *it makes sense to say that one knows such a thing*; and consequently the assurance that one does know it can’t accomplish anything here.

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