

WITTGENSTEIN ON CERTAINTY

It would be a trivial an exercise to define certainty in the sense in which it would be a trivial exercise to define terms like 'truth', 'beauty', 'good', 'yellow' etc; for they are simple, unanalysable terms. This does not mean that we are forever deprived of using such terms in our day to day affairs. One can devise certain criteria to assess the nature of such terms. Whether those criteria are acceptable to everyone is a different question altogether. What strikes my mind is that the so called dispute in philosophy about certainty, strictly speaking, is not a dispute about certainty as such; but it is a dispute concerning the criteria of certainty. Well, one might go to an extent of saying that how can anyone formulate certain criteria of certainty without explaining what it is all about. Then, again, we are caught up in a vicious circle. Thus, the problem of certainty has been one of the major philosophical problems that haunted the minds of epistemologists of all times. The generations of epistemologists have tried to find an acceptable solution to the problem of certainty. In spite of their valient attempts to resolve this problem, it remaains, till date, very elusive in the sense that it invokes a major philosophical debate. A peripheral knowledge of the issues concerning epistemology reveals us that scepticism, an alleged counterpart of certainty, has been a serious check on certainty.

My principal objective in this paper would be to highlight the subtle nature of Wittgenstein's line of argument against Moore and scepticism as expounded in his later work *On Certainty*. It is a known fact that Moore took exception to sceptic's remarks against the existence of material objects external to the mind. In order to repudiate sceptic's claim, namely, that there is no solid proof for the independent existence of material objects, Moore, in his lecture delivered to the British Academy in 1939, held with

appropriate gestures, "Here is one hand" and "Here is another" to show that material objects exist external to the mind. This argument of Moore became a main target of Wittgenstein's criticism. According to Wittgenstein, Moore's arguments do not provide any proof for the independent existence of material objects as the arguments put forward by Moore are not claims to knowledge at all. However, it was not Wittgenstein's intention to deny the general purport of Moore's arguments against scepticism in general. Let us examine the tenor of Wittgenstein's attack on Moore and scepticism.

Moore, in his characteristic style, as a champion of common sense philosophy, argued to show that there is substantial proof in accepting the view that material objects exist external to the mind in his papers, "A Defence of Common Sense", and "Proofs of an External World". In addition to that, he expressed the view that there are a good number of propositions which he knows for certain. Some such propositions are "The Earth Existed long before I was born", "There were other human beings besides me". All these propositions, held Moore, are truisms. Wittgenstein does not deny this fact. In fact, he recognises the peculiar logical status of these propositions. But, what is wrong with Moore's propositions, as Wittgenstein sees it, is that they are not the cases of knowledge at all. This statement of Wittgenstein certainly does not debar him from criticising scepticism. Like Moore, he too was critical of scepticism. His caustic reaction to scepticism is found in his *Tractatus*, long before he launched a scathing attack on scepticism in his much later work *On Certainty*. Scepticism, writes Wittgenstein :

...is not irrefutable, but obviously non-sensical, when it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked. For, doubt can exist only where a question exists, a question only where an answer exists, and an answer only when something can be said.¹

This pithy saying about scepticism has many interesting implications. I do not think that Wittgenstein deviates from this position of *Tractatus* while attacking scepticism in his later writings.

At the outset, Wittgenstein provides us with an incisive analysis of the nature of doubt. The analysis is as follows :

(a) *Doubt is not possible without proper grounds*

One of the preconditions for a doubt is that it needs some valid grounds. Wittgenstein reiterates this point.² Sceptics like Descartes would have been complacent with this condition since Descartes 'universal doubt' was built upon an *ad hoc* ground, namely, the 'malicious demon'.³ Before anyone questioned the *validity* of such an *ad hoc* ground, Descartes asserted that it is not a necessary condition that the ground itself be certain. For Wittgenstein, such a ground is as good as not having a ground; because mere imaginary ground for doubting something should not be taken as a ground at all. In this context Wittgenstein says that one has to distinguish a situation where doubt is not reasonable from the one where doubt is logically impossible.⁴ Nevertheless, warns Wittgenstein, there is no clear cut line that separates the former situation from the latter.

(b) Doubt is not a mere verbal utterance

Wittgenstein contests that doubting something just for the sake of doubting does not in any way make any difference.⁵ It is beyond one's own imagination what difference that it can make to anyone. Thus sceptic's doubt concerning the existence of material objects does not have any practical significance, as the grounds on which his doubt rests is very shaky.

(c) Doubt is possible only in the context of a language-game

Wittgenstein expresses the view that in order to doubt 'P', one must know what is meant by 'P'. For example, when a person expresses a doubt concerning the existence of material objects like 'tables', 'chairs', and 'trees', then he must be in a position to know what is meant by such objects like 'tables', 'chairs', and 'trees'. Such an understanding, holds Wittgenstein, presupposes a language-game in which these expressions are used. Thus, the language-game itself rules out the possibility of any such doubt. Because, to doubt these expressions is to question the very meaning of these expressions that are being used in a given language-game. On this ground, argues Wittgenstein, the sceptic's doubt destroys itself as it questions the meanings of the words used to express it. A language game is a practice that involves agreement or disagreement of foundational beliefs that give meanings to the words

that are being used. To put it in the language of Wittgenstein, "Our talk gets its meaning from the rest of our proceedings."⁶ This is tantamount to saying that "If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either."⁷ If Descartes says that the 'malicious demon' is deceiving him totally, then it is also capable of deceiving him even with regard to the meaning of the word 'deceive'. Thus, the argument of Descartes is self-stultifying.

(d) *There cannot be a universal doubt*

The very essence of language-games as illustrated by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* reveals that there cannot be a universal doubt, since doubts are restricted to their respective language-games. For example, explains Wittgenstein, a student interested in learning history frequently interrupts his teacher with all sorts of doubts even before he learnt the actual language-game of history. The doubts expressed by the student do not mean anything as he is yet to learn how to ask questions in that particular language-game. After all, the doubt presupposes belief. Here in this case there is no belief; hence there is no doubt. Thus, "A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt."⁸

(e) *Doubt presumes certainty*

It has been shown that a genuine doubt can only make sense in the context of a language-game or in a framework of reference which by itself is not a subject of doubt. Wittgenstein supposes that "Doubt is only possible where testing is possible."⁹ Our doubts rest on the fact that there are many propositions which are exempted from doubt. These propositions, according to Wittgenstein, constitute the world view. They form the system within which all testing takes place.¹⁰ As a matter of fact, they serve as 'hinges' or 'substratum' or 'scaffoldings' of our ordinary beliefs that are testable. Thus, doubting, warns Wittgenstein, presupposes certainty.¹¹

The above analysis clearly vindicates that none of the considerations advanced by Wittgenstein concerning the nature of doubt justifies scepticism.

Now, Wittgenstein takes up the issue that if certain propositions

serve as the 'hinges' or 'scaffoldings' of our beliefs, then those propositions (foundational propositions) are not doubted. If this were the case, are they also the propositions about which we cannot be mistaken? Wittgenstein's answer to this question is a negative one. He says that their certainty cannot in anyway guarantee that they cannot be mistaken. In this context Wittgenstein draws a wedge between a mistake and other forms of false belief. Suppose, for example, a person may think that he is living in a place for a long time other than the place where he is actually living. Such a claim, holds Wittgenstein, is not a mistake; but a kind of mental disorder.¹² The difference between a mistake and a mental disorder is that there can be valid reasons for a mistake committed in the recognition of a fact; whereas in the case of a mental disorder there can only be causes which are strictly pathological.¹³ This distinction between a mistake and madness may not be palatable to the sceptic. However, the sceptic may claim that if his belief turns out to be false, then there is sufficient ground for him to cast doubt on it (false belief) irrespective of its place in a rationally accepted system of beliefs.¹⁴ In this context, Wittgenstein aptly points out that Descartes himself admitted this fact in his *Meditations* while illustrating the argument from dreaming. Descartes writes:

...how can I deny that these hands and this body belong to me, unless perhaps I were to assimilate myself to those insane persons whose minds are so troubled and clouded by the black vapours of the bile that they constantly assert that they are kings, when they are very poor; that they are wearing gold and purple, when they are quite naked; or who imagine that they are pitchers or that they have a body of glass. But these are all madmen, and I would not be less extravagant if I were to follow their example.¹⁵

In spite of this profound statement, Descartes, just like lunatics, doubted the existence of material objects. Thus, he was inconsistent with his own position. Proceeding further, Wittgenstein unfolds another important distinction between a mistake and madness. In the case of the former it involves a judgement, though it may be false, while the latter does not.¹⁶ With these few remarks on the distinction between a mistake and madness, Wittgenstein keeps the sceptic at bay.

Now turning to Moore's attack on scepticism, Wittgenstein observes certain lacunae in Moore's arguments against scepticism.

Moore maintained that there are a good number of propositions which he knew them for certain. In line with Moore's claim, Wittgenstein holds the view that there are many propositions which are not doubted and also mistaken. For example, the proposition "I have never been on the Moon" cannot be doubted since its negation cannot be taken seriously.¹⁷ These propositions, according to Wittgenstein, have a peculiar logical status. Nevertheless, he warns us not to arrive at a drastic conclusion that since there are a good number of propositions whose validity cannot be doubted, it does not mean that they can be known for certain. The statements "I know where I am feeling pain", "I know that I am in pain" are as senseless as the statement "I know that I have pain". Wittgenstein asserts, to give a statement "I know that I am in pain" is to give a misleading interpretation of the "grammatical proposition" that there is no such thing as doubting that I am in pain. The kernel of Wittgenstein's argument is that it is senseless to lay claim to knowledge where doubt itself is senseless. Thus, Wittgenstein exposes the triteness of Moore-type propositions.

When Moore refuted the sceptic's claim that the existence of material objects can be doubted by advancing a proof like proposition "I know that here is my hand", Moore, observes Wittgenstein, committed the same mistake as sceptic did when he staked a claim to the knowledge of existence of his own hand which is not considered a knowledge claim at all. Apart from that, the assertion "I know that here is my hand" is senseless for the following reasons.

- (a) In the assertion "I know that here is my hand", "I" is superfluous. To this extent this assertion of Moore is misleading.
- (b) The assertion "I know that here is my hand" can have some significance in a rare and uncommon circumstances. In such circumstances, the meaning of that assertion may be clear; but it does not provide any answer to the sceptic.
- (c) Unless it is possible to doubt the assertion "I know that here is my hand", or be mistaken in believing it, one cannot be said to know that "here is my hand".
- (d) Sometimes the assertion "I know that here is my hand" is used in our ordinary conversation either as a "misleading

"grammatical expression" or as an expression of one's linguistic capability.

The reasons adduced by Wittgenstein are logical and convincing. The quintessence of Wittgenstein's treatment of knowledge and certainty can be summed up by raising a question "Can one say; where there is no doubt there is no knowledge either."¹⁸ This question undermines the view that first-person knowledge alone can be called knowledge since some sort of privileged access is accepted in those cases of knowing one's private mental states in which some philosophers have located the source of knowledge, meaning and understanding. Wittgenstein's main objective here is to show that psychological concepts do not really denote something essentially private. They have public accessibility insofar as the language, that is used to express such psychological states, has public use. Wittgenstein does not deny the fact that there cannot be any doubt about anything. A doubt, as he sees it, can make any sense only in the context of a framework of reference which by itself is not a subject for doubt. Every framework of reference, according to Wittgenstein, is rooted in certain foundational beliefs. These beliefs are relatively foundational like the bed and banks of a river which determine the direction of the flow of the waters.¹⁹ Such beliefs constitute "foundational propositions" whose apodeictic nature in practice and action reveals us "that certain things are indeed not doubted."²⁰

When Moore said "I know that here is my hand", his claim to knowledge of his own hand goes against the view that there are certain foundational beliefs which permit us to articulate a great number of propositions. Not only that, the assertion "I know that here is my hand" can also mean that one can play several language-games with the expression "hand" in the sense in which one can make assertions such as "I have pain in the hand", "This hand is stronger than that". In such cases the doubt with regard to the existence of one's own hand, for that matter anyone's hand, does not arise, since its usage is part of our foundational beliefs. Thus, there was no need for Moore to stake a claim to the knowledge of our foundational beliefs, since they are in a way taken for granted. Moore may enumerate several empirical

propositions that need no special testing. Such propositions, argues Wittgenstein, "stand-fast" like solid rocks.

What really stikes a critic of Wittgenstein's line of argument is that Wittgenstein takes it for granted that there are certain indubitable truths about reality which form the grounds for our foundational beliefs. These foundational beliefs give rise to the articulation of various propositions that become part and parcel of our language-games. These language-games, in turn, represent various forms of life. Also, these foundational beliefs back up the agreement or disagreement of our linguistic practices. Thus, for Wittgenstein, the validity of our foundational beliefs consists in the role that they play in our day to day linguistic practices. One does not question the validity of these practices. But, they are no exceptions to the sceptic. Still he may challenge the very admissibility of these foundational beliefs as a base for our linguistic practices. Perhaps this may be the reason why Moore was rather forced to utter a statement that can elicit some persuasive force. Hence, Moore resorted to saying "I know that here is my hand", thinking it would serve as a proof for the existence of material objects. However, neither the arguments advanced by Moore nor the arguments advanced by Wittgenstein would really satisfy the sceptic. Wittgenstein knows this fact; whereas Moore was serious about the remarks made by the sceptic. All that Wittgenstein intended to show was the procedural inconsistencies involved in the arguments of Moore and the sceptic. He knows it for certain that he cannot convince a lunatic. Though Wittgenstein differs with Moore in his approach to the problem, both Moore and Wittgenstein have the same ontological commitment. In the case of Moore, the material objects such as tables, chairs, serve as the ontological base for Moore-type propositions; whereas in the case of Wittgenstein they serve as the foundational beliefs. The only point that Wittgenstein intends to make is that the attempts of Moore to silence the sceptic are in a way nothing but barking our way up to a wrong gum tree.

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