

A. Pichler, K. Cahill, S. Säätelä
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On Certainty

Knowledge, doubt, certainty - and Moore's mistake

PI §246

- 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 wrong, and in another nonsense. **If we are using the word "to know" as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know when I am 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 am in pain. ...**

PI §246

- 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 wrong, and in another nonsense. If we are using the word "to know" as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know when I am 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 am in pain. ...**
- "Only I can know ..." as a statement which is false:
 - There are others who can and do know as well.
- "Only I can know ..." as a statement which is nonsense:
 - **I can only «know» the things which I also can doubt.**

Some sentences

	True?
"The earth is round"	
«My name is Alois» [uttered by Alois in this room]	
"The earth goes around the sun"	
"The sun goes down" [uttered at sunset]	
"The earth has existed for more than 10000 years"	
"There is a mind-independent external world"	
" $2 \times 2 = 4$ "	
" $2 \times 2 = 5$ "	
"I am in pain" [uttered by someone in pain]	
"It rains in Oslo"	

Some sentences

	Do you believe ...?
"The earth is round"	
«My name is Alois» [uttered by Alois in this room]	
"The earth goes around the sun"	
"The sun goes down" [uttered at sunset]	
"The earth has existed for more than 10000 years"	
"There is a mind-independent external world"	
" $2 \times 2 = 4$ "	
" $2 \times 2 = 5$ "	
"I am in pain" [uttered by someone in pain]	
"It rains in Oslo"	

Some sentences

	Can you give a justification for ...? Can you doubt ...?
"The earth is round"	
«My name is Alois» [uttered by Alois in this room]	
"The earth goes around the sun"	
"The sun goes down" [uttered at sunset]	
"The earth has existed for more than 10000 years"	
"There is a mind-independent external world"	
" $2 \times 2 = 4$ "	
" $2 \times 2 = 5$ "	
"I am in pain" [uttered by someone in pain]	
"It rains in Oslo"	

Some sentences

	Do you <i>know</i> ...?
"The earth is round"	
«My name is Alois» [uttered by Alois in this room]	
"The earth goes around the sun"	
"The sun goes down" [uttered at sunset]	
"The earth has existed for more than 10000 years"	
"There is a mind-independent external world"	
" $2 \times 2 = 4$ "	
" $2 \times 2 = 5$ "	
"I am in pain" [uttered by someone in pain]	
"It rains in Oslo"	

Knowledge (“*justified* true belief“)

- Can I know that
 - It rains in Oslo
 - $2 \times 2 = 4$
 - You are in pain
 - I am in pain
 - The external world exists
 - ...
- There is an important difference between empirical propositions which can be true or false, are open for investigation and can be “known” or doubted on the one hand and fast-standing truths, necessities, rules, *practical* certainty ... (“certainty”, “mythology”, “hinges”) on the other.

The starting point: Things which G.E. Moore claims to "know", but actually are «certainties»

"There exists at present a living human body, which is my body. This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continuously ever since, though not without undergoing changes; it was, for instance, much smaller when it was born, and for sometime afterwards, than it is now. **Ever since it was born, it has been either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth;** and, at every moment since it was born, there have also existed many other things having shape and size in three dimensions (in the same familiar way in which it has), ... **there have, at every moment since its birth, been large numbers of other living human bodies,** each of which has, like it, a) at some time born b) continued to exist at some time after birth c) been, at every moment of its life after birth, either in contact with or not far from the surface of earth; and many of these bodies have already died and ceased to exist before I was born. **But the earth has existed long also for many years long before my body was born:** and for many of these years, also, large numbers of human bodies had died and ceased to exist before it was born." (*A Defence of Commonsense*, 1925)

Moore's "proof"

- The skeptic says: "We cannot know for sure that an external world exists".
- Moore responds with a "proof" (*Proof of an External World*, 1939) :
 - (I know that) here is a hand.
 - (I know that) here is another hand.
 - Therefore (I know that) there are at least two external objects in the world.
 - Therefore (I know that) an external world exists.

Wittgenstein's response to Moore

- Where doubt is not possible, there is no knowledge.
- You cannot doubt that the external world exists, thus you cannot «know» it either.
- If the existence of the external world should be open for doubt, then such doubt cannot be countered by trying to **prove its existence** by something like Moore's «proof»:
 - None of the propositions
 - (I know that) here is a hand.
 - (I know that) here is another hand.
 - Therefore (I know that) there are at least two external objects in the world.
 - Therefore (I know that) an external world exists.

is more certain than the others; they are all on the same epistemological level and support each other.

(1) “The external world exists” is not *less* certain than (2) “Here is a hand” – so you cannot prove (1) through (2)

- 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 should be tested by what?** (OC §125)
- **My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it.**

That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it. (OC §250)

On Certainty §1

(http://wittgensteinsource.org/Ms-172,1_f)

- If you do know that *here is one hand*,¹ 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.** (On this a curious remark by H. Newman.)

¹See G. E. Moore, "Proof of an External World", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. XXV, 1939; also "A Defence of Common Sense" in *Contemporary British Philosophy, 2nd Series*, Ed. J. H. Muirhead, 1925. Both papers are in Moore's *Philosophical Papers*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1959. *Editors*. See G. E. Moore, "Proof of an External World", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. XXV, 1939; also "A Defence of Common Sense" in *Contemporary British Philosophy, 2nd Series*, Ed. J. H. Muirhead, 1925. Both papers are in Moore's *Philosophical Papers*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1959. *Editors*.

Moore's mistake: His propositions do not express knowledge (open to doubt and proof), but *certainties*

- Moore wants to prove propositions which cannot be proven and don't need to be proven, but rather are themselves expressions of undoubted **certainties** (vs. *knowledge*).
- There are beliefs which do not need to be proven, cannot be proven, and are nevertheless legitimately held; the sentences which (try to) express them are in *On Certainty* called "hinge propositions" ("feststehende Sätze") - they are actually the basis for other things being provable or doubttable.
- The interesting thing is that many of the "hinge propositions" are not sentences of logic or mathematics, but at least **look like** empirical sentences or everyday ordinary propositions:
 - [Uttered by G.E. Moore] "I have two hands"
 - [Uttered by a believing Christian] "God exists"
 - [In 1951] "No one has been on the moon"
 - "The world is more than 5 minutes old"
 - " $2 \times 2 = 4$ "

The possibility of doubt presupposes hinges, certainties

- Doubting p presupposes non-doubting q ; doubt is possible only in the context of a specific practice which also includes non-doubt.
- Universal doubt is not possible since it would want to doubt everything – but doubt is not possible where nothing stands firm.

Hinge propositions ("feststehende Sätze"): Doubt presupposes certainty

- **We don't, for example, arrive at any of them as a result of investigation.** There are e.g. historical investigations and 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)
- ... the questions that we raise and our doubts depend upon 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.

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.** (OC §§341-343)

RFM Part VI, §23: Like empirical propositions hardened

- The justification of the proposition $25 \times 25 = 625$ is, naturally, that if anyone has been trained in such-and-such a way, then under normal circumstances he gets 625 as the result of multiplying 25 by 25. But the arithmetical proposition does not assert that. It is so to speak **an empirical proposition hardened into a rule**. It stipulates that the rule has been followed only when that is the result of the multiplication. It is thus withdrawn from being checked by experience, but now serves as a paradigm for judging experience.

Knowledge vs. (practical) certainty

- Certainties are produced by enculturation (incl. grammar) as well as by “very general facts of nature” (PI II xii; also see PI §142).
- The river bed metaphor (OC §97): certainties are like the limiting, stable river bed – knowledge is like the ever-flowing river water.
- Certainties are situated in and relative to *world pictures* (*Weltbild*) and forms of life.
 - Cultural Relativism?
- Even certainties can *change* (as the riverbed can change back into a state of flux).
 - What we consider necessary propositions / rules can again become empirical? All of them?? What about the necessity of mathematical and logical propositions? Can they change, too? Some of their stability is “guaranteed” by stable facts of nature?

NB: There are propositional, but also **non-propositional** hinges:
e.g. «extremely general facts of nature» (PI §142), hinges from our anthropological (biological) nature

...

Certainty, deviation, change and relativity

Certainty

- All our talking and acting is embedded in systems (“systems” in a weak sense) of underlying physical, biological, cognitive, emotional, societal ... certainties.
- These certainties are not fixed once for ever, but that there is always *something* which is certain, is a requisite for any language and practice to work.
- Cf. river-bed metaphor (OC §97):
 - The river-bed may change, the river move over its bed – and what is certain becomes itself fluid. But a river will always have some river-bed as point of reference.
- Change and diversity occur both diachronically and synchronically.

OC § 97

- The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.

«The river bed can again become fluid ...»

- What about mathematical propositions?
- What about the «laws» of logic, like the principle of non-contradiction?
 - Societies that don't have the principle of non-contradiction?

Mistakes (domain of knowledge) vs. serious deviations and mental disturbances

- If my friend were to imagine one day that he had been living for a long time past in such and such a place etc. etc., I should not call this a ***mistake*** [Irrtum], but rather a **mental disturbance** [Geistesstörung], perhaps a transient one. (OC § 71)
- Not every false belief of this sort is a **mistake**. (OC § 72)
- Can we say: a *mistake* does not only have a cause, it also has a ground [...] roughly: **when someone makes a mistake, this can be fitted into what he knows aright**. (OC § 74)
- In certain circumstances a man cannot make a ***mistake***. («Can» here is used logically, and the proposition does not mean that a man cannot say anything false in those circumstances). **If Moore were to pronounce the opposite of those propositions which he declares certain, we should not just not share his opinion: we should regard him as demented**. (OC § 155)

So, what about other cultures' deviating beliefs? Are they just «wrong»? – A perfect description of one of our own culture's hinges:

“The fact that we attribute rain to meteorological causes alone while savages believe that Gods or ghosts or magic can influence the rainfall is no evidence that our brains function differently from their brains. It does not show that we "think more logically" than savages (...) It is no sign of superior intelligence on my part that I attribute rain to physical causes. I did not come to this conclusion myself by observation and inference and have, in fact, little knowledge of the meteorological processes that lead to rain; I merely accept what everybody else in my society accepts, namely that rain is due to natural causes. This particular idea formed part of my culture long before I was born into it and little more was required of me than sufficient linguistic ability to learn it. (...) It would be absurd to say that the savage is thinking mystically and that we are thinking scientifically about rainfall. In either case like mental processes are involved and, moreover, the content of thought is similarly derived.”
(Evans-Pritchard, in: *“Lévy-Bruhl's Theory of Primitive Mentality”* (1934))

Cultural relativism

On Certainty: Wittgenstein a cultural relativist?

- OC §105. **All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system.** And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments: no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life.
- Certainties, beliefs, truths ... are relative to the «Weltbild» / system they are embedded in, and the «hinges» of these systems are *not* a subject of argument and knowledge. This implies that there are no rational / knowledge / argumentative bridges between the different systems? And in turn, that (extreme) cultural relativism is right?
 - Cf. Child p. 207 ff

See OC §§609-612

- OC §609. Supposing we met people who did not regard that as a telling reason. Now, how do we imagine this? Instead of the physicist, they consult an oracle. (And for that we consider them primitive.) **Is it wrong for them to consult an oracle and be guided by it?—If we call this "wrong" aren't we using our language-game as a base from which to *combat* theirs?**
- OC §610. And are we right or wrong to combat it? Of course there are all sorts of slogans which will be used to support our proceedings.
- OC §611. **Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic.**
- OC §612. **I said I would 'combat' the other man,—but wouldn't I give him *reasons*? Certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.)**

”Soft” vs. ”extreme” cultural relativism

- ”Soft” cultural relativism: Certainties, beliefs, truths, concepts, standards of rationality ... are relative to the «Weltbild» which they are embedded in. But this does not imply that it is not possible to build bridges between the different systems / „Weltbilder“ / cultures, and thus, that it is possible to learn to understand each other.
- ”Extreme” cultural relativism: Certainties, beliefs, truths, standards of rationality ... are relative to the «Weltbild» which they are embedded in. This does, where we don't sufficiently share certainties, beliefs, truths, concepts ..., imply that it is not possible to build bridges between the different systems / „Weltbilder“ / cultures, and thus, that it is possible to learn to understand each other.

Is Wittgenstein an „extreme“ relativist?

- If language is at home in language games and practice(s), and knowledge and certainties and beliefs are at home in specific «Weltbilder» - doesn't this suggest that communication between different language games and «Weltbilder» (cultures) is not possible?
 - Does Wittgenstein's notion of language game imply independence and incomparability / incommensurability / incompatibility of language games?
 - Is Wittgenstein's account of language and communication failing to account for the possibility and actuality of intercultural communication?