

Scepticism and Later Wittgenstein

Priyambada Sarkar, Kolkata, India

The thesis I like to defend in this paper is that in his book *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein challenges the hitherto unchallenged justificationist's model in epistemology and undermines the arguments of the philosophical sceptic in a consistent manner.

I

On certainty is, in fact, a report of Wittgenstein's reaction against Moore's refutations of scepticism. To the sceptic's question 'how can we prove that there is an external world?' Moore replies:

I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and 'here is one hand' and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left hand and say 'here is another'.

The question whether we do ever know such things as these, whether there are any material objects, seem to me to be questions which there is no need to take seriously: they are questions which it is quite easy to answer with certainty in the affirmative. (Moore, 1962,73)

Moore's view is that one can be entirely confident in the existence of two hands and other external objects. He does not even bother to examine the sceptical arguments that challenge the belief in the existence of the external world. Then Moore gives a long list of propositions like 'the earth existed for a long time before my birth', 'here is one hand and here is another,' 'I have never been far from the earth's surface,' etc. To Moore, these propositions are absolutely certain, because he believes that no sensible person under normal circumstances can doubt these propositions. Hence these indubitable propositions provide us with the rigorous proofs for the existence of the external world and a befitting reply to the original query of the sceptics.

Against Moore's proof of an external world Wittgenstein wants to point out that Moore cannot counter the sceptic's challenge 'you cannot know this' by simply saying that 'I do know this'. In fact, when the sceptic challenges our beliefs in the existence of the external world, his question is: whether and how far are our beliefs justified? There is a logical gap between our sense impressions and the physical object. The sceptic by challenging the notion of the external world is asking a logical question regarding the gap between sense impressions and the physical object. When Moore is saying 'here is one hand and here is another', he is not touching the logic of the sceptics. Hence it cannot be a reply to the challenge posed by the sceptics.

Wittgenstein says:

His mistake lies rather in countering the assertion that 'one cannot know that' by saying 'I do know it' (OC 521)

Wittgenstein wants to point out that it is not enough to say that the sceptical conclusion is absurd. What is needed is an explanation of the absurdity in question, and Moore has failed to provide us with that explanation.

Moreover, Moore's use of the term "I know" is inappropriate. Moore cannot know these propositions, nor can

others. Wittgenstein thinks that when Moore says that he knows such and such things, he is really enumerating a lot of empirical propositions, which have a peculiar logical role in the system of our experiential propositions. He says:

Moore does not know what he asserts he knows but it stands fast for him, as also for me, regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our method of doubt and enquiry (OC 151)

Because, to Wittgenstein

The propositions presenting what Moore knows are all of such a kind that it is difficult to imagine why anyone should believe the contrary. Nothing in my picture of the world speaks in favor of the opposite. (OC 93)

As no one can believe the contrary, it is misleading to say that we do or can know these propositions. Moore cannot know these propositions because he cannot doubt them. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein explains this point concisely. He says:

'I know' may mean 'I do not doubt' but it does not mean that the words 'I doubt' are senseless here or that doubting is logically excluded'. (PI p.221)

In the volume entitled *Nachlass MS 138* (1949) Wittgenstein states that I know how to ascertain that I have two coins in my pocket but I do not know how to ascertain that I have two hands, for I cannot think of doubting it under normal circumstances. He then says that philosophers misuse the verb 'to know' when they use it where doubting is excluded. He says that usually one uses the verb 'I know' where the possibility of doubting makes sense. But philosophers say, 'I know' precisely where the possibility of doubting does not make sense, or where doubting is logically excluded. (p. 16a)

Wittgenstein argues:

If someone doubted whether the earth had existed a hundred years ago, I should not understand that for this reason: I would not know what this person would still allow to be counted as evidence and what not. (OC 231)

To elucidate, we can say that when the verb 'to know' is used in the ordinary sense, one has to justify one's case by showing one's evidence and by explaining how one knows it. Now if someone doubts the existence of the earth hundred years ago then one would not know what this person would still allow to be counted as evidence and what not. A person cannot be doubtful about the matter and at the same time be employing our ordinary conception of evidence. Neither 'I know' nor 'I believe' are suitable expressions for stating this conceptual point. This is why Wittgenstein sometimes employs the metaphor 'it stands fast for me'. He suggests that Moore could have said this instead of 'I know' (OC 116). But he gives Moore the credit of pointing out the important fact that these propositions are very special in the sense that they belong to our frame of reference. Moreover, they play an important role in our everyday language and life.

II

Wittgenstein calls these propositions 'framework propositions' or 'hinge propositions', which, according to Wittgenstein, stand fast for us. He says that these propositions are neither true nor false, 'since it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between the true or false' (OC 514,515). He stresses that there are some things we have to accept in order to get on with our ordinary ways of thinking and speaking.

If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meanings of your words. (OC 114)

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

What is ironical is that Wittgenstein's arguments against scepticism are based mainly on these kinds of propositions, which Moore cited as proofs for the existence of the external world.

In the book *On Certainty* Wittgenstein points out that the sceptic cannot raise questions about the very possibility of knowledge, as his questioning or doubting presupposes the very existence of knowledge and certainty. Here Wittgenstein wants to say that the sceptic's use of the word 'I doubt' is also inappropriate.

No one can doubt the whole system as doubting and knowing are intimately connected. Both knowledge claims and expressions of doubt get their sense from these framework propositions where they are rooted. (OC 121-123, 317, 341-342, 354, 450, 519 and 625). Hence, he argues that the sort of questions the sceptic wishes to raise about the existence of knowledge or about the existence of certainty is self-refuting.

Such response to the sceptic is important as it challenges the hitherto unchallenged evidential justification theory of the epistemologists. To Wittgenstein, what makes a proposition certain or indubitable is not the fact that Moore has strong evidence for it, but the fact that it plays a special logical role in our everyday language and life. Evidence has no role to play here. Our belief systems rest on a foundation, which cannot be challenged, or challenging of which does not make any sense.

But there are paragraphs in the book *On Certainty*, which seem to undermine what he has said so far, and present Wittgenstein as being inconsistent.

III

OC 96: It might be imagined that some propositions of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that the relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones become fluid.

OC 97: The mythology may change back into a state of flux; the riverbed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the riverbed and the shift of the bed itself. Though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other

OC 98: The same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of the testing.

OC 336: What men consider reasonable or unreasonable alters.

We have seen earlier that Wittgenstein by means of his framework propositions silenced the sceptic. But here we find him stating that these propositions, which constitute the very foundations of our belief system, are not stable or fixed. They also change with time. Hence the foundations of our belief system are relatively stable with respect to other changing facts of life.

And even the distinction between hinge propositions and ordinary propositions is not absolute. What appears to be a hinge proposition now may not appear so in near future and what appears to be an ordinary empirical proposition might turn out to be a hinge proposition later. These changes might occur slowly like the changing of riverbeds as compared to the changing flow of water in the river. But here the sceptic might raise his head and charge: So Wittgenstein, you are advocating relativism and relativism is nothing but a disguised form of scepticism.

How can we solve this puzzle?

The first alternative would be to suggest that Wittgenstein himself was a sceptic and his attempted refutation of scepticism is not to be taken seriously.

The second is that he is not a sceptic as such, but advocated context-relative-foundationalism.

The third is that he is neither a sceptic nor a non-sceptic. It is only our philosophical biases that tempt us to misunderstand him as a sceptic or a relativist or a foundationalist.

The first alternative cannot be accepted. The texts suggest that from the beginning of his career Wittgenstein was eager to prove that scepticism is non-sensical. The arguments varied in different phases of his life but he stuck to his original conclusion throughout his career. Hence our first alternative will not have the required textual support.

As far as the second alternative is concerned, commentators like Michael Williams have advocated such views. According to Williams, there will be a set of beliefs that will hold fast in a context, and they will be immune to epistemic evaluation in that context. But in different contexts different beliefs can play this hinge role and the former set of beliefs will then be subject to epistemic evaluation. Williams also claims that Wittgenstein did not want to establish hierarchy of hinge propositions. Hence one proposition cannot be treated as more fundamental than another. Therefore the sceptical context is just another context. He elucidates:

The sceptic takes himself to have discovered under the conditions of philosophical reflections that knowledge of the world is impossible. But in fact the most he has discovered is that knowledge of the world is impossible *under the conditions of philosophical reflections*. (Williams 1991, 130)

This interpretation cannot be accepted as it also lacks textual support. Although Wittgenstein did not admit hierarchy of hinge propositions still he maintains that hinge propositions are more fundamental, as they provide the foundations of our belief system. Moreover, in these cases he would not use the verb 'to know'. He would prefer to say that they stand fast for us.

Again, on William's interpretation knowledge of the world may be possible under one condition. It may be impossible in another condition or it may be neither possible nor impossible in some other condition. Knowledge would then be relative to conditions, to contexts. How can this interpretation overcome the charge of relativism?

Finally, we can say that Wittgenstein in later years was opposed to any sort of theorizing. He believed that philosophers' inclinations to provide theories have led to various puzzles. In fact, he believed that the problem of scepticism arises on account of our not paying any attention to the usage of the verb 'to know'. He also believed that the foundations of our knowing, believing, doubting, assuring, etc. are not at all propositional. It is, one could say, praxis. He attempted to refute the all-important evidential justification theory of the epistemologists. He maintained that giving grounds or justifying evidence has to come to an end. But the end does not lie in certain propositions striking us immediately as true; rather it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language games. He clarifies:

But that means I want to conceive it as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified, as it were, as something animal. (OC 359)

It is true that he believed that this commonsense framework is revisable. But its revisability does not make its hinge propositions less fundamental. For one cannot revise the whole framework. One cannot revise the concept of revisability itself.

Such a revision would amount to the annihilation of all yardsticks. (OC 492)

What follows from the above discussion is that Wittgenstein challenges the way we have seen the problem of scepticism so far, the way we have settled that knowing and believing are binary opposites. The most striking thing about this position is that Wittgenstein is not offering any theory of foundational propositions, which can justify our knowledge-claims. On the contrary, he is persuading us to look at the usage of the verb 'to know' in our everyday language and life, he is persuading us to take a certain view, 'a certain attitude' towards knowing and believing and treating certain propositions as framework or hinge propositions.

As adopting an attitude cannot be equated with proposing an account or a theory, his views on fundamental propositions cannot be labelled as foundationalism or relativism. In fact, if we attempt to label Wittgenstein's views as a theory, we will be doing injustice to him. The charge of relativism and hence of scepticism is thus superfluous and flies in the face of textual evidence that Wittgenstein puts in his last writings.

Literature

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Email: psarkar4@yahoo.co.in