Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophy 110W-03
Russell Marcus
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I'll take your papers, now, thanks.
Moore/Wittgenstein

I. Recapitulation

II. Skepticism

- Consider: "There is an external world, made of physical things, with more or less the properties we ordinarily ascribe to those things."

- Descartes thus argues for the claim via the existence of God.

- Locke argues for the claim via the veracity of some of our sensory apparatus.

- Berkeley denies the claim.

- We are once again stuck, with Descartes in the third meditation, wondering if there is a material world.

Moore and Wittgenstein

- Both agree that there is a problem with the question of how to prove the existence of the external world.

- Moore thinks that the proof is far easier than one might think, than the idealist makes it out to be.

- Wittgenstein thinks that the question is ill-formed, that assertions of the existence of an external world are fundamental and not open to doubt.

Kant

- Moore starts his article by referring to Kant's argument, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, of the existence of an external world.

- Kant's justification, at B274-279, is called "The Refutation of Idealism".

- Kant provides two arguments.

Kant's first argument

- Kant's first argument is that space and time are essential to our ideas of externality.

- Thus, they are actually part of our experience of the world, rather than in the world itself.

- So, since the external world is a world in space and time, there is obviously an external world.

- This argument begs the question of the existence of a world outside (metaphorically) of space and time.

Kant's second argument

- The existence of an external world is presupposed by our understanding of ourselves as part of a world.

- We distinguish between changes in the world and changes in ourselves.

- When we move toward or away from an object, we do not think that the object changes, despite the changes in our visual field.

- When we stand still and watch the sun set, or as you watch me flail around the room, we attribute the changing visual field to changes in the world.

- The idealist claims that all such changes are internal.

- Kant argues that the idealist must presume the possibility of an internal/external distinction, a distinction between self and

III. Moore's proof

Moore's three conditions on a proof

- **C1. The premise has to be different from the conclusion.**
  - ▸ A valid argument can not merely restate the conclusion.

- **C2. We can not argue from belief to knowledge.**
  - ▸ 'Some of you will be pleased with your second paper grades' follows from 'Some of the papers will receive As'.
  - ▸ But, I can not claim to know the former claim, because I only believe the latter.
  - ▸ If I knew the latter, then I could know the former.

- **C3. The argument must be of a valid form.**
  - ▸ A valid argument is one in which the conclusion follows from the premises.

- **In a valid, deductive argument, if the premises are true, the conclusion must be true.**

Moore's argument:

- 1. Here is a hand.
- 2. Here is another hand.
- So, there are at least two human hands.
- So, there is an external world.

Analysis of Moore's argument

- Moore's argument is valid, so it does not violate C3.

- Moore makes it clear that he intends his premises to be known, so that he does not violate C2.

- The problem seems pretty clearly to be with C1.

On premises and conclusions

- One reason we want premises to be different from the conclusion is that we want to avoid silly arguments.

- Consider:
  - ‣ 1. It is raining.
  - ‣ Therefore, it is raining.

- It is silly, but there is nothing wrong with this argument, as far as the logician is concerned.

- We want premises to differ from conclusions so that we may avoid circular reasoning.

- We can not assume that there is a hand in order to prove there is a hand.

C1 is too weak

- We need something like: we can not assume what we set out to prove.

- Recall that Rowe used this point to argue against Anselm.

- Anselm assumed that the concept of 'God' was possibly instantiated.

- Once we had the possibility that God existed, it followed that God actually existed.

- Similarly here, once we accept that here is a hand, it does follow that there is at least one hand.

- The problem, as Descartes pointed out, is that we can start to wonder whether here is a hand.

- Moore responds that Descartes's demand is too strong, p 139.

IV. Defeating the skeptic

- One way to defeat a skeptic is to provide a proof.
  - ▸ If you were skeptical that the tooth fairy existed, I could produce the tooth fairy.

- Another way to respond to the skeptic is to show that the skeptic's alternative makes no difference to any important questions.
  - ▸ Even if the skeptic is right that we can not prove the existence of a material world, it makes no difference to how we behave.
  - ▸ Even if the world were Berkeleyan, we would still act as we do.
  - ▸ Hume writes that we abandon skepticism when we go out into the world, even if we struggle with it as we do philosophy.
  - ▸ So, we might grant that the skeptic has a legitimate point, but that it does not matter.

Moore and the skeptic

- Moore's strategy follows this second route.

- It does seem to be the case that we know that here is a hand.

- Any doubts that arise seem to be academic.

- Wittgenstein rightly points out that while Moore's commonsense approach feels good, if we accept that the claim (that there is an external world) make sense, then we have to look for some justification.

- According to Wittgenstein, the trick is to deny that the claim is sensible.

V. *On Certainty*

- *On Certainty* was not intended for publication, at least not in its current form.

- It is a bit of a mess: the argument is non-linear; there are diverse, inter-woven themes; he raises more questions than he answers, at least in any obvious ways.

- Wittgenstein's work is always thought-provoking, but it can also be unsatisfying.

- I will leave aside the more ancillary topics.

Two Wittgensteins

- Wittgenstein's work is generally divided into two periods: the early and the later.

- Early Wittgenstein and later Wittgenstein agree that philosophical problems arise from misuse and misinterpretation of language.

- Early Wittgenstein thought that we could clean up language according to its logical form and get rid of philosophical problems.

- Later Wittgenstein thought we could only clarify our meanings by examining the actual uses of words.

Topics in *On Certainty*

- It focuses on recurrent, later-Wittgensteinian themes, as well as hints of some other, more traditional philosophical concerns.

- One relevant theme is Wittgenstein's belief that sentences have their meanings only in use.

- Also relevant is Wittgenstein's game metaphor: we use language in ways similar to playing a game.

- There are rules which govern the language game, rules which are at root conventional.

- We can dissolve philosophical puzzles by understanding the rules of the game; see §31.

- Since the topics at hand in our class are knowledge, certainty, and doubt, we will focus on Wittgenstein's thinking about the rules that govern our uses of these terms.

VI. Wittgenstein's criticism of Moore's here-is-a-hand argument

- Wittgenstein and Moore agree that there is a problem with skepticism.

- But Wittgenstein is unhappy with Moore's solution.

- The easy way to see Wittgenstein's problem with Moore is at §21.

- Moore thinks "I know that..." is indefeasible.

- Otherwise, he could not know that here is a hand against the skeptic.

- If I believe that the world is flat, and find out that the world is round, it remains true that I believed that the world is flat.

- If I say that I know that the world is flat and find out that it is round, my knowledge claim has been defeated.

- But, Moore takes knowledge of the external world to be indefeasible, like belief.

- And the indefeasibility of our knowledge in general, and in particular about the existence of an external world is just wrong.

VII. Wittgenstein's answer to skepticism and idealism

- It is pretty easy to see that Wittgenstein is right about Moore's proof.

- It is harder to see how to criticize Moore without falling into the skepticism of the first *Meditation*, or the idealism of Berkeley.

- If one can not prove the existence of a material world simply, no complicated proof will be any better.

- We are not going to uncover evidence of the external world on an archaeological dig, or on a deep-space mission.

- Wittgenstein, though, thinks he has a new answer to both the skeptic and the idealist.

- Wittgenstein's positive solution depends on examining the meanings of our claims both about knowledge and about the external world.

'I know that...'

- First, let's examine the meaning of sentences that begin with 'I know that...', in the sense that Moore uses the phrase.

- Since prepending that phrase seems to make a move in the language game, it should have some effect on the meaning of the phrase.

- But, adding "I know that..." often just results in a very odd sentence.

- The oddity is acute when the original sentence is obvious.

Consider 'I know that 5+7=12'.

- If we are using 'I know that...' to emphasize that we have verified our calculations, we might understand the meaning.

- But, how could we even verify such a simple arithmetic sentence?

- We can make specific mistakes, with more difficult sentences.

- But to make a mistake with a simple sentence, to be asserting our surety of this calculation, would be to make mistakes with the whole system.

- If 5+7 were not 12, then we would have made some profound, and fundamental mistakes.

- We can not have miscalculated in all our calculations; §55.

- Thus, here, 'I know that...' seems to lack meaning.

- And there seems to be something wrong with sentences that include that phrase.

What does 'I know that...' mean?

- Wittgenstein appeals to a general principle that the meaning of a sentence is tied to how we use that sentence.

- Furthermore, we can determine how we use a sentence by the evidence we accept for it.

- So, Wittgenstein says that believing someone who claims that there is a material world entails allowing that there is a way to verify that there is a material world.

- But, if we are questioning the existence of the material world, there is no way to verify it, §23.

- Another way Wittgenstein makes the point is, "[D]oubt about existence only works in a language-game §24".

Two possible moves, using, 'There is a hand in front of me,' or, 'There is a material world'

- We can play a game in which doubt about such claims is a reasonable move.

- We can play the game in such a way that it is not.

- We can use a sentence such as 'There is a hand in front of me' to accept evidence of hand-waving.

- For example, if we want to distinguish between real and artificial hands.

- But, we can also use it such that the waving does not count as evidence.

- Berkeley takes claims about the existence of the material world in this way.

- Recall the story of Dr. Johnson.

The first move, if doubt is reasonable

- By making the first move, we express trust in our senses, by rule, though there are exceptions.

- Moore seems to be making this first move, since he accepts that here is a hand.

- But, the first move is question-begging regarding the existence of an external world, of course.

- It does not answer Descartes, or Locke, or Berkeley.

- So, perhaps Moore is better off with the second move.

The second move

- The problem with the second move is that there are no ways to verify the claim.

- The denial of the existence of a material world is not the result of some kind of investigation, not the result of experiment.

- In fact, no evidence favors or disfavors the hypothesis, §138.

- Testing comes to an end, §164; justification comes to an end, §192.

- Some claims must just be accepted without proof.

- It is difficult to see how any language game could be played with the second move.

- "The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty" (§115).

- Consider that If I am dreaming, I can not assert a doubt about whether I am awake (since one does no asserting when one is asleep!)

Meaninglessness

- So, 'I am here', in §10 might be used in a way that makes sense, but might be senseless.

- Wittgenstein thinks that lots of propositions are senseless, including all tautologies, e.g. 'If p then p'.

- Some mathematical sentences are empty, senseless.

- We hold '2+2=4' immune from evidence against it.

- We can expunge such senseless sentences.

- Or, recognize that they are logical.

VIII. Wittgenstein's 'logical' sentences, and the river

- Wittgenstein uses 'logical' in a specific way.

- In §82, he says that logic concerns itself with what counts as an adequate test on a statement.

- If some statements have no empirical tests, are unverifiable, that is a logical fact about those sentences.

- The logic is kind of a foundation, or limit, on our language game.

- Wittgenstein calls it a picture of the world which creates a background, §94-§95.

Using logical propositions

- The logical propositions, like 'I know that here is a hand' serve as a river bed on which ordinary empirical propositions flow.

- We can use them to teach the use of certain terms, §36.

- We can say that sentences like 'There are physical objects' are senseless as a way of teaching the term physical objects.

- Similarly, we can say '5+7=12' as a way of teaching the rules of arithmetic, but not to say anything about objects like 5, 7, and 12.

- The bare claim is too obvious to have any content.

- The only sensible use of such a sentence would be, for example, to teach children their numbers, or their addition facts.

The river bed

- Mathematics and what we ordinarily call logic are in the river bed.

- We can not defend our knowledge of particular river bed claims.

- How could you convince some one that you knew that 5+7=12?

- You would have to convince them that you knew something much wider than that one proposition.

Not just logic and mathematics

- Some particularly obvious propositions have similar functions in use.
  - ‣ that there is an external world
  - ‣ that no human being has ever stood on the surface of the sun

- There are similarly nonsensical, or limiting, or logical.

- So far, this picture is more or less consistent with the traditional distinction between necessary truths (the bed) and contingent truths (the river).

- Of course, we might call it a contingent fact that no one has been on the sun.

- But, it also is not going to change.

Logic and nonsense

Wittgenstein's picture

- There are basic truths, which are almost empty in that they have little use or value
  - ▸ people don't fly off into space
  - ▸ the sun is not a hole in the vault of heaven
  - ▸ 2+2=4
  - ▸ there is a material world.

- Denying these is like denying the rules of the game, changing the subject.

- The proposition that I have not been on Mars has the same status, §52.

IX. Wittgenstein's twist

Further wrinkles

How are the rules devised or discovered?

- Rules, like those in the riverbed, and those which distinguish the bed from the river, are conventional, and indeterminate, §§26-8.

- One way to try to resolve the indeterminacy is to appeal to inner states.

- We seem to know what the rules are, which propositions are bedrock, which truths are unassailable, as a matter of feeling.

- Recall Chisholm's counsel that criteria should be objective.

- Moreover, inner states are irrelevant, if we look to use for meaning, §§38-9.

- Experience can not give us the rules, either, §§128-132.

Do we get the rules by induction?

- The basic process of induction is that we see a few examples and then come to a general rule.

- Wittgenstein thinks that there is a fallacy in this ordinary understanding.

- We do not so much derive the general rule from the few instances, but use the rule as a way of organizing the instances.

- (This is a Kantian line of thought.)

- We don't gain propositions one at a time; we take on a system as a whole, §§141-4.

No clear distinction between river and river bed propositions

- Sometimes, what looks like an empirical proposition turns out not to be so.

- Moore, for example, takes 'here is a hand' as an empirical proposition.

- This continuity between logical and empirical propositions is the basis of Wittgenstein's attempt to avoid both Moore's error and skepticism.

- Wittgenstein's twist becomes explicit in §96, and §98-§99.

- We can change which sentences are like the river bed, and which ones are like the river.

X. A problem for Wittgenstein's twist

- Wittgenstein is trying to explain the fact that some propositions seem meaningful in some contexts, while being meaningless in others.

- One solution is to ascribe meaning to river propositions, and meaninglessness to riverbed propositions.

- Then, if a meaningful proposition is taken as meaningless, it is clear that it has become part of the bed.

- And if a meaningless proposition becomes meaningful, it is because it has broken out of the riverbed and started into the river.

There are no river bed propositions!

- If any sentence can be part of either the river or the bed, it would seem that it is never really part of the river bed.

- It looks more like a sentence that has stopped momentarily, like a fish resting in a pool on the side of the river.

- We can consider as part of the river bed only those propositions which never do become, never can become, dislodged.

- This way of looking at the river and riverbed better fits with the traditional distinction between contingent and necessary truths.

Fake river bed propositions

- We might play a language game in which 'Hendrix is God' is bedrock.

- But, we know that we are just playing a game.

- We know that 'Hendrix is God' is not a bedrock proposition, even if we treat it as such in certain contexts.

- And, we know that there is real bedrock, statements that we would never give up.

XI. Doubt and certainty

- Wittgenstein has come very close, in asserting the continuity of river and riverbed, to abandoning all hope for firm and permanent claims about the world.

- For, if any proposition can be taken as bedrock, and any can be part of the river, it seems completely conventional whether we hold logic or mathematics steady, or whether we hold religious, or moral, or just crazy views as bedrock.

- We might even hold idealist claims as bedrock, or skeptical ones.

- Wittgenstein seems to have fallen quite near a position a lot like the skepticism he is trying to avoid.

But, he does not go all the way.

- In fact, Wittgenstein's position is not quite that desperate.

- He retains enough of the traditional view to avoid complete, relativistic, conventionalism.

- For example, remember that he claims that doubt presumes certainty.

- The skeptic can not, says Wittgenstein, even get his (nonsensical) case started.

Does doubt presuppose certainty?

- It does seem possible to play a language game in which some propositions are held truly fixed, against the skeptic.

- But why would the game of doubt presuppose certainty?

- Why does any part of the river bed have to appear fixed?

- As a matter of fact, we do hold certain principles, logical and mathematical ones, fixed.

- Maybe one could assimilate some basic, obvious empirical principles, like that things do not go shooting off into space, to this set of fixed principles.

- But, does it follow from the doubts that we must have such fixed principles?

- I can see where doubt entails belief: doubt is denial of belief.

- Compare §156: to make mistakes, we have to judge in conformity with mankind; or §160: doubt comes after belief.

- But, why does Wittgenstein think that doubt is the denial of certainty?

XII. Practical doubt and philosophical doubt

- As a practical matter, Wittgenstein is certainly right that we do not have doubts about the existence of the world.

- We do not, as he says, check to see that we have two feet before we get up, §148.

- Still, it seems like we can say that we do not really doubt the existence of the external world and still we have no proof.

- To say that we lack practical doubt is not to say that we lack philosophical doubt.

- We exit through the door, and not through the window.

- Still, we might wonder about the picture.

- And strange things turn out to be so, sometimes.

- Wittgenstein accounts for strange science by the shifting between the river and the riverbed.

Evidence for the existence of a material world

- I am walking down the street and am shot to death. My soul hovers above my body and then I am somehow transported to the gates of heaven. St. Peter tells me that God is down the hall and to the left, and I go in for my welcome chat. I ask her if there is really a material world, and she tells me that indeed there is.

- Wittgenstein says that we should feel very distant from some one who experiences this, §108.

- The feeling of distance does not entail that the account is false.

Summary

- Wittgenstein says repeatedly that justification must come to an end somewhere (§164, §192).

- Moore thinks it comes to an end early.

- Descartes thought it came to an end at God.

- Wittgenstein wants to forget the question, ignore the whole project of justification for such claims.

- They are not empirical claims, subject to justification at all.

- They have a different status.

- If we accept Wittgenstein's views about meaning and evidence, we do seem pushed away from skepticism.

- But, we need not see claims about the existence of a material world as nonsense.

- We may just have an open question,

XIII. How to deal with skepticism

- We have come to the end of the epistemology section of the course.
- I think that there is no way to defeat skepticism about the material world, or idealism, totally.
- Chisholm is right that we know a lot more than the radical skeptic wants us to think we do.
- But, proving the existence of a material world is just out of our abilities.
- Certainly, physical scientists work, generally, under the assumption of a physical world.
- And, their predicates are naturally interpreted as referring to a material world.
- But, some one could always re-interpret those predicates to refer to a Berkeleyan world, and nothing will prevent such re-interpretations.
- We could be dreaming, we could be disembodied minds.
- These are not the best explanations, but they can not be totally eliminated.