Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophy 110W-03
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I'll take your papers, now, thanks.
Team Classes for next week
Moore/Wittgenstein

I. Recapitulation

- We discussed Moore's proof of the external world.
- Moore denies that there is a possible proof that would satisfy Descartes.
- But, his response seems question-begging.
- Wittgenstein also sees Moore's answer as unsatisfying.
- But, that is because Wittgenstein thinks that the question, of the existence of the external world, is nonsensical.
- We distinguished two different language games that one could play with 'here is a hand'.
- The first accepts evidence of handwaving as justification.
- The second does not.

II. The two possible moves

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.