

Philosophy 110W - 3: Introduction to Philosophy, Hamilton College, Fall 2007
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Lecture Notes, October 9

I. Discussion of the classes after break, recapitulation, and a perfectly legitimate animated short about Locke and Berkeley, which appears on the course home page. And something else, not quite as appropriate.

See the assignments section of the course website for more information about the classes after break.

II. Skepticism

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

We saw how Descartes was saddled with skepticism unless he appealed to the goodness of God to ensure that his ideas were veridical.

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

Locke presented an empiricist system in which we are able to gain knowledge of a material world.

He thus argues for the claim via the veracity of some of our sensory apparatus.

But, Berkeley showed that Locke’s system led to the denial of the material world.

Berkeley thus denies the claim.

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

That is, unless we accept, with Berkeley, that there is no material world, we are still wondering how to respond to the skeptic.

Moore and Wittgenstein 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.

II. 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, whom we did not read, and from whom Moore takes his cue, argued that we need justification for the claim.

Kant’s justification is in a section of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, B274-279, called “The Refutation of Idealism”.

Kant provides two rather complicated arguments.

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

The idealist also claims that all that exists is the continual flux of sensation.

Kant argues that the idealist must presume the possibility of an internal/external distinction, a distinction between self and world, in order to claim that there is no such distinction, but that the idealist can not presume such a distinction if all we have is the flux of sensation.

So, Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and Kant all think that the claim needs some justification.

Moore thinks that the claim needs justification, too, but that it is easily justified.

III. Moore's proof

Moore presumes 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.

For example, 'The Mets are (or will be) the 2007 National League Pennant winners' follows from 'The Mets are (or will be) the 2007 World Series winners'.

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.

Recall the distinction between valid and invalid arguments.

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.

So, Moore's argument goes:

1. Here is a hand.

2. Here is another hand.

So, there are at least two human hands.

So, there is an external world.

This argument is valid, 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. 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 difficult to take such an argument seriously. Still, there is nothing wrong with this argument, as far as the logician is concerned. More importantly, 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. That is, 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 there 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 there is a hand. For example, if I am dreaming, or if there is a deceiver. Moore recognizes this rejoinder, and responds that Descartes's demand is too strong, p 139.

We might interpret Moore as raising 'here is a hand' to the level of certainty of the cogito. The problem is that we have less justification for that claim. It does not have the certainty of the cogito. It does seem pretty solid, though. Moore says that the demand for a proof of 'here is a hand' in order to say that I know that there is a hand is too strong. We can know things that we can not prove. But, the point is not whether you can prove that there is a hand. The point is that it seems possible to doubt it. And if we require certainty beyond doubt in order to have knowledge, then we just do not know that there is a hand. On the other hand, if we do not require certainty beyond doubt, then we might know that there is a hand. We might then know that there is an external world. And still, we might be able to doubt it.

IV. Defeating the skeptic

One way to defeat a skeptic is to provide a proof. Imagine if you were skeptical that the tooth fairy existed. Then, I could produce the tooth fairy, and show you that she really does exist.

Another way to respond to the skeptic is to show that the skeptic's alternative makes no difference to any important questions.

That is, 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's strategy seems to follow this second route.

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

And 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.

Like all of Wittgenstein's work, and perhaps more so, 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.

It is often quite difficult to figure out the point of it all.

Try not to get frustrated; I will try to clarify the relevant themes.

I will leave aside the more ancillary topics.

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.

On Certainty is from the later period, and 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.

We talked a bit about the plausibility of this claim.

I made the connection to the meaning of art.

Here is a link to lots of Mondrian: http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/mondrian_piet.html

But, this is the best one, showing his transitions from representational to abstract depictions of landscapes: <http://www.artmuseums.harvard.edu/mondrian/career/index.html>

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.

But, 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.

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.

Second, granting that 'I know that...' creates some odd assertions, we still might want to know the meanings of such assertions.

That is, in order to assess Moore's claim to know that here is a hand, we need to know what this claim means.

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".

There are two different moves in the language-game that one could make, 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, or 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.