Bewitched by the Word "Know"

William H. Brenner, Norfolk / VA

I

You ask me if our friend is in town, I say yes*; you ask, "Are you sure?," I reply, "I *know* it – I just installed him in our guest room!"—*What if you're mistaken?*—One can't be making a mistake about something like that!---*So you're claiming infallibility?*—Saying "I can't be making a mistake" was just a way of saying "I know ..."; I wasn't alleging a ridiculous "justification" for my claim!---*But only the infallible possession of truth really justifies a claim to knowledge.*—The "I know ..." is just an instrument with a limited, practical purpose -- a purpose which the following expansion of the "builder's language" helps to bring out:

> The number [of building stones] is sometimes estimated, sometimes established by counting. Then the question arises "Do you believe there are as many stones as that?," and the answer "I know there are – I've just counted them." But then the "I know" could be dropped. If, however, there are several ways of finding something out for sure, like counting, weighing, measuring the stack, then the statement "I know" can take the place of mentioning *how* I know. [Wittgenstein 1969, sec. 564]

---*I'm inclined to doubt that what you are saying is particularly relevant to the philosophical concept of knowledge.*— According to your philosophical concept, claiming to know (not merely believe) something entails a certain claim to infallibility – a claim that seems to me to conjure up the idea that whenever I make a knowledge-claim, I

> express a relation, not between me and the sense of a proposition (like 'I believe') but between me and a fact. So that the *fact* is taken into my consciousness. (Here is the reason why one wants to say that nothing that goes on in the outer world is really known, but only what happens in the domain of what are called sense data.) [*ibid*, sec. 90]

This, however, is a false and mischievous picture: false because it misrepresents the use of the word "know" in our language and the role of the concept in our lives; mischievous because "the problem of our knowledge of the external world" develops out of it. Behind that pseudo-problem is

> a picture of knowing as the perception of an outer event through visual rays which project it as it is into the eye and the consciousness. [Given this picture,] the question at once arises whether one can be *certain* of this projection. [*ibid*.]

Although the picture of knowing as "having the fact known *within one's mind*" is a wrong one, it does point to a use for sentences of the form "I *know* that such-and-such is so!," namely, that in which they mean: "It's so -- or else I've lost my mind!" This is the kind of – unusual but philosophically striking -- use we can imagine for the sentences Moore brought to our attention.

"I *know* that I have two hands," said Moore in "Proof of an External World," presenting this as a counterexample to the then-popular philosophical thesis that no empirical proposition is *known* to be true. Wittgenstein thought Moore's example important -- though not for the reason Moore presented:

If I wanted to doubt whether this was my hand, how could I avoid doubting whether the word "hand" has any meaning? So that is something I seem to *know* after all.

> But more correctly: The fact that I use the word "hand" and all the other words in my sentences without a second thought ... shows that the absence of doubt belongs to the essence of the language game, that the question "How do I know ... " drags out the language game, or else does away with it. [*ibid*, secs. 369-370]

"My name is Bill; I'm now using my two hands ... ": only if I am *mad* can I take anything else to be possible; for if I'm wrong here, I must mistrust all my judgments. Although such propositions "have the character of experiential propositions, ... [their] truth is unassailable for me. That is to say, if I assume that they are false, I must mistrust all my judgments" (Wittgenstein 1992, p. 79).—*"Propositions having the character of experiential propositions ... "?* ---I take it that Wittgenstein wants to contrast them with those paradigmatically non-empirical propositions of the philosophical tradition sometimes called "analytic truths." Now Wittgenstein clearly doesn't go along with the common identification among philosophers of the "unassailable and certain" with that narrow range of propositions, nor with the common identification of the factual-empirical with the "falsifiable and merely probable." In this, by the way, he is at one with Cardinal Newman, whom he mentions in the first section of *On Certainty*. "We are absolutely certain, beyond any possibility of doubt," remarked Newman in his *Grammar of Assent*,

> that Great Britain is an island.... There is no security on which we should be better content to stake our interests ... We are as little exposed to the misgiving, "Perhaps we are not on an island after all," as to the question, "Is it quite certain that the angle in a semi-circle is a right angle." ... [Y]et are the arguments producible for it in black and white commensurate with this overpowering certitude about it? [Newman 1955, p. 234]

While Wittgenstein would acknowledge that there are philosophers who say that it is just extremely probable that Great Britain is an island, he would also say that this makes little difference in their lives. Newman would have said that these philosophers give only "notional assent" to the view they assert, not "real assent." Wittgenstein, however, would question whether they have really asserted anything at all, reasoning that when familiar words are abstracted from the familiar circumstances of their everyday employment, one can no longer be certain what, if anything, they're supposed to mean.

II

Although words in a philosophical problem have the *look and sound* of words in an everyday question, they actually lack any clear sense -- or any clear sense the philosopher will want to avow. Recall the philosopher who explained the words "All empirical propositions are probable at best" by pointing out that every empirical proposition is logically contingent. Has he really done any more than stipulate a definition for "merely probable," presenting a tautology to justify his stipulation? He will want to say *Yes!* And we will need to press him to explain *what* more. An important and

distinctive *leitmotiv* in Wittgenstein's thinking, early and late, is that no clear answer to such a "*What* more? question" is going to satisfy the philosopher *qua* philosopher.

In Wittgenstein's view, philosophical problems take us to "the limits of language" and are therefore completely soluble:

> If I say: here we are at the limits of language, then it always sounds as if resignation were necessary, whereas on the contrary complete satisfaction comes, since no question remains. The problems are dissolved in the actual sense of the word – like a lump of sugar in water. [Wittgenstein 1993, p. 183]

> The [true] aim of philosophy is to erect a wall at the point where language stops anyway. [*ibid*, p. 187]

Oriented toward that aim, philosophy must struggle with "the oldest images that are engraved into our language itself" *(ibid.*, pp. 183-184). For it is these images that generate and sustain the illusions of sense that lure thinkers over the edge of language. A notably seductive image, one Wittgenstein highlighted in *Philosophical Investigations* but struggles against in all his writings, is that of the meaning of a word as something we might "point to inwardly" and analyze without reference to what is going on "outwardly," in the stream of human life and practice. For instance, in *On Certainty* we find him working against the notion that the objective certainty of Moore's "Here is one hand" is something that might be understood in abstraction from what is going on outwardly, in one's life:

> My life shows that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, [or a hand] and so on—I tell a friend e.g. "Take that chair over there, "Shut the door," ["Hand over the clicker"], etc. etc. [Wittgenstein *1969*, sec. 7]

When Moore insists he *knows* these things, however, "I know" gets misused:

> I *know* I've two hands.--- Nonsense! You're holding them up and showing them to us.—*So* I don't *know it, then?!*--- Neither the question nor the assertion makes sense. Any more than the assertion "I am here," which I might yet use at any moment, if suitable occasion presented itself.... It is only in use that the proposition has its sense. And "I know that I have two hands," used in an *unsuitable* situation, seems not to be nonsense ... only because one can fairly easily imagine a situation to fit it ... [*ibid*., sec. 10, modified]

And through that misuse "a queer and extremely important mental state seems to be revealed" (sec. 6) – one differing from ordinary beliefs in that the fact believed is "taken into my consciousness" and therefore indubitable. Thus Moore, in his philosophical use of "I know," thought he was describing a state of affairs guaranteeing what is known. His mistake "really come down to this: that the concept 'know' is analogous to the concepts 'believe' ... in that the statement "I know ..." can't be a mistake" (*ibid*., sec. 21).

In his notorious argument against external-world skeptics ("Here is one hand, etc."), Moore's mistake was to assume that they asking a real question, an assumption stemming from the fact that the words, "Do physical objects really exist?" look and sound like a (much more general) instance of a familiar sort of question -- "Do extra-terrestrial life forms really exist?," for instance. This likeness led him to reply to the skeptic as if he were merely reminding him of something obviously true -- whereas, in fact:

No such proposition as "There are physical objects" can be formulated because "physical object" is a logical concept (like color, quantity ...) [*ibid*, sec. 90].

A logical concept is an instrument of language having a purely grammatical function, that of helping to explain the meaning of a word by indicating "the post in the language where it is stationed" (*PI*, sec. 257). If, as in a well-known *Blue Book* example, I try to explain a new word, "TOVE" to you by pointing to something and saying, "This is called 'TOVE,'" you may have to ask me what kind of name "TOVE" is supposed to be, what "post" I'm meant to hitch it to. Is it a physical-object word, a color word, etc.etc.?

In *Philosophical Remarks*, Wittgenstein explains that what he once called *simples* "were simply what I could refer to without running the risk of their possible non-existence" (p. 72). Demystifying this in *Philosophical Investigations*, he compares "simples" with the samples used in ostensive definition. "What looks like it *had* to exist," he explains, "is .... a paradigm in our language game; something with which comparison is made" (sec. 50). What *On Certainty* adds to this can be summed up in the following dialogue, based (with stylistic and interpretative modifications) on secs. 477, 480, 4, 204, 18, and 402:

> *Mustn't one know that the objects whose names one is learning by ostensive definition* <u>*exist*</u>*?*—Why should the language game rest on some kind of knowledge? Isn't it enough that experience doesn't later show the opposite?—*In teaching a child to use the common noun "door," one might point to a door and say things like, "Big door!" Doesn't he thereby come to know that a door exists?*—His behavior shows that he is certain there's a door over there: he knows what to do when we ask him to close it, for example. What I want to deny is that this sureness in the child's behavior, this "knowing what do," *rests on* knowledge. For I can see no sense in saying that someone's sureness in action rests on something he knows (or believes) to be true unless I believe that he's learned how to ask and answer questions of the form, "How do you know?" And I'm assuming that at a small child's stage of development, this will not be so -- so that, for him, knowledge that doors, etc. exist is never something *distinct from* the sureness he shows in action. It's not a kind of *seeing* on our part but our *acting* that lies at the bottom of the language game.

"There are physical objects, colors, shapes, sensations, ...": this sentence might function as a grammatical remark about the logical heterogeneity of words ordinary grammar lumps together as nouns. I think it important to see, however, that it does <u>not</u> function as do the "common-sense truisms" Wittgenstein used to describe our *Weltbild*. Although not in everyday use, such truisms (e.g., that the earth is very old) all seem to have an *imaginable* empirical use. "There are physical objects, etc.," in contrast, has only the potentially-misleading *surface grammar* of an empirical statement, never its actual or imaginable employment as an empirical proposition.

The function in language of *physical object* is that of a variable. Just as "2" and "3" are values of the variable *number*, so "hand" and "book" are values of this variable. But in philosophy we tend to overlook the actual "variable" function of a words like *physical object* and to treat it as if it functioned as a value of some super-variable ("being"). As early as the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein was combating the illusion that it makes sense to say, "There are (or there aren't) physical objects in the world" as one says (for instance), "There are (or are not) books in the locker."

"Do physical objects exist?" That's one of the problems Wittgenstein saw as distinctively philosophical. Such problems differ from others in that they "dissolve like lumps of sugar in water" once we carefully attend to actual use of the relevant words.— *But it never seems to turn out that one's attention has been* careful enough *to dissolve every lump!*—Yes. Something always settles out that looks like a philosophical problem and calls for further investigation.

Literature

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