Philosophy 110W: Introduction to Philosophy — Hamilton College
Spring 2012 — Russell Marcus

Class #6 - Commonsense Realism
Moore, "Proof of an External World"
Wittgenstein, from *On Certainty*

0. Mondrian; more Mondrian (showing his transition from representational to abstract landscapes)

I. Skepticism

We started the term by calling into question some of our most basic beliefs.
Descartes argued that sense experience cannot lead to knowledge.
Locke defended the principle that all knowledge derives from sense experience.
Berkeley showed that such a commonsense principle led to serious questions about the existence of the material world.

Consider the following claim:

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

Descartes was saddled with skepticism unless he appealed to the goodness of God to ensure that his ideas were veridical.
Descartes thus argues for EW 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 EW via the veracity of some of our sensory apparatus.
Berkeley showed that Locke's system led to the denial of the material world.
Berkeley thus denies EW.
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*, for the existence of an external world.
Kant 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 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.
Since the external world is a world in space and time, there is obviously an external world.
This argument ignores the question of whether a world independent of our experience exists.

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 EW needs some substantial justification.
Moore thinks that the claim is easily justified.

III. Moore's Proof

Moore presumes three conditions on a proof.

C1. The premise has to be different from the conclusion.
C2. We can not argue from belief to knowledge.
C3. The argument must be of a valid form.

For C1, a valid argument can not merely restate the conclusion.
One reason we want premises to be different from the conclusion is that we want to avoid silly arguments.
Consider:

It is raining.
Therefore, it is raining.

It is difficult to take such an argument seriously.

In defense of C2, note that knowledge is a special sort of belief.
Traditionally, knowledge is understood as justified true belief.
So if I know that p, I must also believe that p.
But, it is not the case that I can infer that I know that p from my belief that p.
Some claims are believed but not known.

Lastly, for C3, 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.

Given C1 - C3, Moore's argument for EW goes as follows.

M1. Here is a hand.
M2. Here is another hand.
M3. So, there are at least two human hands.
MC. So, there is an external world.

Note that MC is in relevant respects the same as EW.
The argument is valid, so does not violate C3.
Moore makes it clear that he intends his premises to be known, so that he does not violate C2.
But there seems to be a problem with C1.

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 thus too weak.
We need something like: we can not assume what we set out to prove.
As Descartes pointed out, we can start to wonder whether here is a hand.
For example, if I am dreaming, or if there is a deceiver, then my belief that there is a hand is not knowledge.
Moore recognizes this rejoinder, and responds that Descartes's demand is too strong.

> How am I to prove now that 'Here's one hand, and here's another'? I do not believe I can do it. In order to do it, I should need to prove for one thing, as Descartes pointed out, that I am not now dreaming. But how can I prove that I am not? I have, no doubt, conclusive reasons for asserting that I am not now dreaming; I have conclusive evidence that I am awake: but that is a very different thing from being able to prove it. I could not tell you what all my evidence is; and I should require to do this at least, in order to give you a proof (198-9).

We might interpret Moore as raising 'here is a hand' to the level of certainty of the cogito.
But we have less justification for MC and EW than we do for the cogito.
Moore replies that the demand for a proof of 'here is a hand' in order to say that I know that here is a hand is too strong.
We can know things that we can not prove.

In response to Moore, the point is not whether you can prove that here is a hand.
The point is that is seems possible to doubt it.
If we require certainty beyond doubt in order to have knowledge, then we just do not know that here is a hand.
On the other hand, if we do not require certainty beyond doubt, then we might know that here 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 EW makes 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.
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, while leaving 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.
Uninterpreted, a sentence has no meaning.
It's just scribbles, splotches of ink on paper, or vibrations in the air.
Remember the ant crawling out a pattern that looks like Martin Luther King, Jr.
Without our interpretation, there is no face.
Consider Mondrian's landscape paintings.

Further, any particular artifact is open to various interpretations.
Consider the string of sounds:

> ah kee ess oon ah may sah

Spanish speakers and Yiddish speakers will interpret the string differently, but it will be taken as grammatical in both cases.
In Spanish, it means, "Here is a table."
In Yiddish, it means, "A cow eats with a spoon."

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.

> The propositions which one comes back to again and again as if bewitched - these I should like to expunge from philosophical language (§31).

Let's focus on Wittgenstein's thinking about the rules that govern our uses of these terms.

VI. Against Moore's Argument

Wittgenstein and Moore agree that there is a problem with skepticism.
But Wittgenstein is unhappy with Moore's solution.

> Moore's view really comes down to this: the concept 'know' is analogous to the concepts 'believe', 'surmise', 'doubt', 'be convinced' in that the statement "I know..." can't be a mistake. And if that *is* so, then there can be an inference from such an utterance to the truth of an assertion. And here the form "I thought I knew" is being overlooked. - But if this latter is inadmissible, then a mistake in the *assertion* must be logically impossible too. And anyone who is acquainted with the language-game must realize this - an assurance from a reliable man that he *knows* cannot contribute anything (§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. On Using 'I Know That...'

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 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.
If prepending that phrase to a sentence makes a real move in the language game, it should have some effect on the meaning of the sentence.
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.
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.

> My believing the trustworthy man stems from my admitting that it is possible for him to make sure. But someone who says that perhaps there are no physical objects makes no such admission... Someone who asks such a question is overlooking the fat that a doubt about existence only works in a language-game. Hence, that we should first have to ask: what would such a doubt be like?, and don't understand this straight off (§23-§24).

VIII. Two Moves

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

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.
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 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

> There are e.g. historical investigations and investigations into the shape and also the age of the earth, but not into whether the earth has existed during the last hundred years (§138).

> Doesn't testing comes to an end (§164)?

> Justification comes to an end (§192).

Some claims must just be accepted without proof.
Wittgenstein thinks that since nothing will count as evidence in this game, the proposition, taken that way, lacks sense.
It is difficult to see, in fact, how any language game could be played with the second move.

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

If I am dreaming, I can not assert a doubt about whether I am awake, since one does no asserting when one is asleep.

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.
For example, 2+2=4 is the kind of sentence that we hold immune from evidence against it.
We can expunge such senseless sentences.
Or, recognize that they are logical.

IX. Wittgenstein's Logical Sentences and the River

Wittgenstein uses 'logical' in a specific way, to describe sentences including elementary mathematical facts and EW.

> What counts as an adequate test of a statement belongs to logic. It belongs to the description of the language-game (§82).

If some statements have no empirical tests, are unverifiable, that is a logical fact about those sentences.
The logic is a kind of limit on our language game.

> I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false. The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules (§94-§95).

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.
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.
Such bare claims are too obvious to have any content.
The only sensible use of such sentences would be, for example, to teach children their numbers, or their addition facts.

Mathematics and what we ordinarily call logic are in the river bed.
We can not even defend our knowledge of such 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.

Some propositions like EW, or that no human being has ever stood on the surface of the sun, 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.
The fact that no one has stood on the sun is not a truth of reason.
But, it also is not going to change.

Wittgenstein has distinguished between two ways to take claims about the existence of the material world.
In one way, we count 'here is a hand' as evidence.
This way presumes that there is an external, material world.
In the other way, 'here is a hand' can not be evidence.
But the game we are playing by not taking 'here is a hand' as evidence makes claims about the existence of a material world into nonsense.

X. Wittgenstein's Twist

The above interpretation of Wittgenstein is adequate to start, but there are some further wrinkles.
One problem is that rules, like those in the riverbed, and those which distinguish the bed from the river, are conventional, and indeterminate.
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.

But inner states are irrelevant, if we look to use for meaning.
Experience can not give us the rules, either.

The ordinary understanding of the rules is that they are learned by induction over experience.
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, that we do not so much derive the general rule from the few instances, but use the rule as a way of organizing the instances.
We don't learn propositions one at a time; we take on a system as a whole.

> When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.) It is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another *mutual* support (§141 - §142)

Still, the picture that Wittgenstein provides is one in which 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.

Sometimes, what looks like an empirical proposition turns out not to be so.
Such propositions can seem to be empirical, and are easily mistaken for empirical propositions.
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 twist, his 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.

XI. A Problem for Wittgenstein

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.

But, if any sentence can be part of either the river or the bed, it is never really part of the river bed.
It is 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.

For example, we might play a language game in which 'Ray Charles is God' is bedrock.
But, we know that we are just playing a game.
We know that 'Ray Charles is God' is not a bedrock proposition, even if we can treat it as such.
And, we know that there is real bedrock, statements that we would never give up.

XII. 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 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 like the skepticism he is trying to avoid.

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.

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.

> In order to make a mistake, a man must already judge in conformity with mankind (§156).

> Doubt comes *after* belief (§160)

But, the claim that doubt presupposes certainty is stronger than the obvious claim that doubt entails belief.

XIII. 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.

> Why do I not satisfy myself that I have two feet when I want to get up from a chair? There is no why. I simply don't. This is how I act (§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.
That is a nice picture.
But, the practical matter seems to be beside the point.

Anyway, there could be evidence, practical evidence, which would assure us of the existence of the material world.
Here is a story about some possible evidence:

> 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.
But the feeling of distance does not entail that the account is false.

Wittgenstein rightly claims that justification must come to an end somewhere.
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,

There may be no way to defeat skepticism about the material world, or idealism, totally, no way to prove EW.
Proving the existence of a material world is just out of our abilities.
But we know a lot more than the radical skeptic wants us to think we do.
Certainly, physical scientists work, generally, under the assumption of a physical world.
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.