



## **On Certainty - A Philosophical Analysis of Wittgenstein's View on Moore's Defence of Common Sense & Proof of External World**

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### **Abstract:**

*The aim of my paper 'On Certainty: A Philosophical Analysis of Wittgenstein's view on Moore's Defence of Common Sense & Proof of External World' is to spotlight the key points, as proposed by Moore and Wittgenstein in their plausible work on defense of common sense, the existence of external world, and the associated certainty with it. This very ideas tends to relate the events within human experience, and thus commensurate with human scale. Therefore this topic finds an entry here and has been taken forward to present a view on the critiques of commendable work by Moore and Wittgenstein, and the way they withstand their hypothesis.*

*Keywords: Certainty, Common Sense, External world, Skepticism, Language game etc*

### **Introduction**

Through his most famous works, "A Defence of Common Sense", and "A Proof of the External World" Moore argues against skepticism about the external world by, famously, raising his right hand and saying 'here is a hand', then raising his left hand and saying 'here is a hand', concluding that there are at least two material objects in the world and therefore, there is an external world.

*On Certainty*, Wittgenstein was interested in certain propositions which had been discussed by G.E. Moore. He quotes several propositions which Moore had selected and spoken about, because he thinks they play a curious role in our speaking and thinking. An investigation of this role leads to a better understanding of human language, thoughts and language games. Moore does not go into these questions. The proposition from Moore stands at the centre of Wittgenstein investigation but something different interests him. That aspect of the proposition which has impressed Wittgenstein, Moore did not notice or find very interesting. Wittgenstein quotes these propositions from –

- a) Moore's essay 'A Defence of Common Sense' (1925);
- b) Moore's lecture 'Proof of External World' (1939)



Let us examine Moore's characterization and Defence of Common Sense Philosophy.

### **MOORE'S COMMON SENSE VIEW OF THE WORLD:**

In Moore, the rejection of idealism comes out through what he calls "appeal to Common Sense". The principle feature of the Common Sense view of the world as Moore conceived it is the belief that there are in the universe enormous numbers of material objects. For instance, human bodies, animals, plants, etc. He defines material object as "something which:

- (i) does occupy space,
- (ii) is not a sense datum of any kind whatever,
- (iii) is neither a mind nor an act of consciousness.

Moore defended a common sense view of the world, holding that ordinary persons who claim that they know and know with certainty that table, chairs, etc existed are correct. They were correct because they were using the world "known in its common, ordinary way in making such a claim". To him every material object is also located in time and space in the sense that 'each of them either did exist in the past or exists now, or will exist in future'. So, in defense of common sense, Moore distinguishes ways to consider the significance of a proposition, a common sense approach and philosophical approach.

In 1925, Moore divided his paper "A Defence of Common Sense" into 5 parts –

In I. He gives a statement of his naive realistic position with respect to the existence of physical objects and things such as time, space and other persons.

In II. He sets out his position against certain idealistic positions and denies that physical facts are in any way either logically or causally dependent upon mental facts.

In III. He denies that there is good reason to suppose the existence of god or life after death.

In IV. He states his position on questions of possession and sense data.

Finally in V. He offers remark on the truth and analysis of propositions.

So, I will first state Moore's Common Sense position and then discuss his manner of defending it.

Moore begins by initiating a long list of propositions, "which may seem, at first sight, such obvious truisms as not to be worth stating – They are, in fact, a set of propositions, every one of



which (in my opinion), I *know*, with certainty, to be true<sup>1</sup>". Let us denote the set of propositions by S. The set S includes the following propositions<sup>2</sup> -

1. "There access that presents a living human body which is my body".
2. "This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continuously ever since though not without undergoing changes".
3. "It has been either in contact with or not far the surface of the earth".
4. "There have been large number of other living bodies like, my body, many of which has already died and cease to exist".
5. "The earth had existed also for many years before my body was born, and large number of human bodies had been alive" upon it, many of which had died and ceased to exist before my body was born".

Next he states his another proposition, call it S' "which makes an assertion about a whole set of classes of proposition". Each class being defined by the following properties<sup>3</sup>.

1. They resemble one of the propositions of the set S, in a certain respect.
2. They could not be stated without having stated the propositions, or some (similar ones) of the set S first.
3. They are such obvious truisms as not to be worth stating.
4. They are propositions which are known with certainty to be true.

In order to avoid misunderstanding of his position with regard to the above stated obvious truism, that is the proposition of the set S and the proposition of the S', both of which are known with certainty to be true. Moore makes two more points.

- (i) That he is using the expression "is true" in an ordinary sense of it, in the sense in which to say that p is true is to say that p is wholly true, not in the sense of "is partially true"<sup>4</sup>. For him, as per ordinary men, a statement is either true or false; it cannot be both true and false nor can it be partly true and partly false.

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<sup>1</sup> Moore, G.E., "A Defence of Common Sense" in his philosophical papers, London; George Allen and Unwin Ltd., first published in 1959, P. 32

<sup>2</sup> *Idid*, P. 33-34

<sup>3</sup> *Idid*, P. 32

<sup>4</sup> *Idid*, P. 35



- (ii) That he is using the English language in its ordinary, ‘popular manner’ when he asserts his propositions to be true.

It happens that sometime we may say that we do not know what the expression, say for example, “the earth has existed for many years past” means. In such a case, according to Moore, what we are doing is confusing two entirely differently questions –

- a). the question whether we understand the meaning (usage) of the expression, which we all certainly do.
- b) the question whether we know what it means (analysis) in the sense that we are adult who gives a correct analysis of its meaning<sup>5</sup>.

Moore gives two sets of argument in order to substantiate his claim that the Common Sense propositions are both true and known with certainty to be true – first aim at showing that the denials of these propositions are false, and, second aim at showing how they are both true and known with certainty to be true. Moore’s argument aimed at showing that denials of Common Sense propositions are false. These denials are expressed, according to him, by such propositions as “Material things are not real”, “Space is not real”, “Time is not real”, “The other selves are not real” in so far as their truth is concerned. Let us discuss these arguments under three heads.

A). Those which are offered to show that any position which denies the *truth* of his common sense propositions is false.

B). Those which are used to show that any position which denies knowledge of these propositions is false.

C). Roles which are designed to support positively his thesis, namely, that the Common Sense propositions are both true and known with certainty to be true.

Here the discussion on these arguments is as follows – First I will indicate the position of Moore’s opponents, and then, I will state his arguments against the opponent’s position.

Moore’s propositions are not true; hence, they cannot be *known* to be *true*. The reason why they are not true is that they imply the reality of material thing, space, time, and other selves. But, the implication is false; hence the propositions are not true. And, what is not true cannot be known to be true.

Moore argues against this position thus - the expressions “Material things are not real”, “Space is not real”, “Time is not real”, “The other selves are not real” are really ambiguous<sup>6</sup>. If

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<sup>5</sup> Idid, P. 37

<sup>6</sup> Idid, P. 39



we understood then in “the most natural and proper usage of each of these expressions”, then obviously they express denials of Common Sense propositions. That these expressions are quite certainly false is shown as follows:

1. If Common Sense propositions are not true, then it follows that “no philosopher has ever existed and therefore none can ever have held the opponents position<sup>7</sup>”. But the consequent is false; for, there have been philosophers who certainly existed and held the opponents position.
2. Let us consider the second argument – The philosophers who have maintained a position contrary or contradictory to the common sense view about the existence and our knowledge of the existence of material things, human bodies, example, have shown inconsistency by alluding to the existence of other philosophers, and of the existence of the human race in general. They have shown the inconsistency by using the significant word “we” which means “human beings who have lived upon the earth, who have held certain philosophical views, and so on so fourth<sup>8</sup>. Is this inconsistency logical? We may ask. Moore’s answer is – yes, it is. To say that “there have been other philosophers who have held such and such philosophical views” and yet to say that “we do not know that they have existed” is certainly to make a logically inconsistent statement.
3. Moore’s opponents may say that it is certainly true that we all believe the proposition of Common Sense; such that we can say that they are all beliefs of Common Sense. But we do not know that these beliefs are true. They being contingent propositions, it is possible that they turn out to be false. They are matters of faith, not of knowledge<sup>9</sup>. To this Moore replies that the opponent’s assertion is self-contradictory. He says –

What is meant is; ‘its certain that we all do believe many such propositions, but none of us *know* any of them to be true’.

And what meant by ‘it is certain that. . .’ is ‘I and many other men *known* that we all do believe any such proposition, but none of us *know* any of them to be true<sup>10</sup>’.

The structure of Moore’s argument is as follows – Let us say that ‘there are human bodies’ entails that ‘there are material thing’. Let p = ‘there are human bodies’. To say that, ‘we believe that p’ is to say that ‘p’ is a belief of Common Sense. But to say that ‘p is a belief of Common Sense, but p may be false’ is self-contradictory. The reason is this – (‘We’), in this context means ‘we, the human beings’ and the assertion that ‘we believe that p, but p is false’ can be re-expressed by saying that there are human beings who believe that ‘there are

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<sup>7</sup> **Idid, P. 40**

<sup>8</sup> **Moore, G.E., Lectures on Philosophy; also Moore, “A Defence of Common Sense”, P. 32-59**

<sup>9</sup> **Idid, P. 47**

<sup>10</sup> **Idid, P. 48**



human beings' but that 'there are human beings' is (or may be) false. The self-contradictory character of the thesis is, thus, exhibited fully.

4. According to Moore, his Common Sense propositions, taken together, describes what he calls the fundamental features of the world. His claim is that 'the Common Sense view of the world' is, in certain fundamental features, wholly true. He says – 'the features in question . . . are all of them features, which has this peculiar property – namely, that *if we know that they are features in the Common Sense view of the world, it follows that they are true* – it is self-contradictory to maintain that *we know them to be features in the Common Sense view, and yet they are not true*, means to say that we know this, is to say that they are true<sup>11</sup>'

Thus Moore generalizes his principles by saying that if we know there is a proposition which constitute the Common Sense view of the world, then that proposition must be true. And also, even if there is a proposition which constitutes a feature in the Common Sense view of the World, (whether we know this or not), it follows that it is true.

"Proof of an External World" is a long essay consisting of two parts. In the first and more substantial part Moore takes his lead from Kant's famous complaint that it is still a scandal to philosophy that nobody has proved that the external world exists. He then introduces a number of distinctions which should clarify the meaning of the expression "external world" and he concludes that in order to prove that the external world exists; one should prove that there are things that can be encountered in space and that exist independently of our minds. He proves this by holding his hand and saying:

(1) "Here's one hand"; (then he hides it)

Then, following the same procedure, he says:

(2) "Here is another"; (then he hides it)

Finally, without showing his hands again, he concludes:

(3) "There are two human hands at present".

Since the conclusion concerns the existence of objects which can be encountered in space, despite the fact that they are not currently perceived, and that, therefore, exist independently of our minds, Moore claims that since point 3 holds good, therefore, "The external world exists".

After producing his proof, Moore goes on to say that his proof is a rigorous one because:

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<sup>11</sup> Moore, G.E., "A Defence of Common Sense" in his philosophical papers, London; George Allen and Unwin Ltd., first published in 1959, P. 44-45



- (i) The premises are different from the conclusion,
- (ii) He knows his premises with certainty to be true, and
- (iii) The conclusion really follows from the premises.

In this paper, Moore tries to prove that there is a world external to our senses by holding up his hand and saying “here is a hand.” Wittgenstein admires the boldness of Moore’s approach, which implicitly questions the reasonableness of doubting such a claim (as it is certain that human do have hands), but he suggests that Moore fails because his claim that he knows he has a hand automatically invites the question of how he knows, a question that would embroil Moore in the sort of skeptical debate he wishes to avoid.

The idea of doubting the existence of a world external to our senses gains a foothold from the fact that any knowledge claim can be doubted, and every attempt at justification of a knowledge claim can also be doubted. Traditional epistemology has sought bedrock of certain knowledge, knowledge that is immune to all possible doubt, but from Descartes to Moore, this search has always come across problems.

Standing at the realm of the utopia of our discussion, an unprecedented light needs to be thrown on Wittgenstein’s work *On Certainty*, to clarify and contrast his ultimate thoughts on basic beliefs and his rebuttal of skepticism, to that of Moore’s. Therefore, lets take a turn towards Wittgenstein’s hypothesis and postulates.

### **AN INSIGHT INTO CERTAINTY:**

The main theme of *On Certainty* can be brought out by the way in which Wittgenstein criticizes Moore’s proposition. Moore wanted to protest against the philosophical view which says – one can only really *know* mathematical propositions and impressions of ones on sensations and feelings. He wanted to say that he also has knowledge of things in his immediate surroundings – of this tree, for instance – as well as of facts such as, for e.g., that the ‘earth has existed since long before his birth’.

Wittgenstein comments that even in the case of those propositions which Moore assert, it is incorrect to begin with ‘I *know*’. If I am sitting there near a tree in my garden, it does not occur to me to *doubt* that its a tree. But just of this, it does not occur to me, to say to someone that ‘I *know*’ it. So, Wittgenstein found it remarkable that Moore says it – that he puts forward just those propositions as ones which he ‘*knows* with certainty’. Wittgenstein further explains this point with the following example – we can imagine circumstances in which it is perfectly natural to say ‘I *know* it is a tree’. A blind man asks me, hitting the tree with his stick, ‘do you think it is a tree?’ I reply – ‘I don’t think it is a tree, I know it is’. These are circumstances in which the expression can be used but they are of no interest to philosophy. Moore is not in such circumstances. He is in the garden of the house in which he had lived for many years and says ‘I know that is a tree’. Moore says what he does because he is perplexed about the use of the word ‘*know*’. In lecture given in 1938, Wittgenstein said that philosophers want to use the word ‘*know*’ in ways entirely



different from its view outside philosophy. Wittgenstein says that we use ‘know’ correctly if we say, ‘I know John is in his room’ ‘how?’ ‘I saw him – ‘I saw him’ go in a min ago’. But some philosophers say it is incorrect. Why? Because although the man may be speaking conscientiously, it could turn out that he is wrong. This is a familiar state of affairs. We provide for it with the phrase, ‘I thought I *knew*, but I did not’. You cant say, ‘he knew, but he was mistaken’. This feature of our grammar is one of the chief sources of philosophical puzzlement about *know*.

It is important in many cases to distinguish between knowledge and conjectures. ‘John in his room’ is not a conjecture. Sometimes people will change what they say if we pull them up; ‘Well I did not know, but I felt pretty certain’. We should not say we know unless we have examined the matter and said we know as a result. There is blame attached to the use of it when that use turns out to be unjustified. This is one feature of ‘*know*’ which led Moore and others to treat ‘I *know*’ as one does ‘I believe’. If we use the expression ‘A man really knows that John is in his room’ in the same way as ‘A man really believes that John is in his room’, two consequences follow:

1. It wont make sense to say that he is mistaken in saying that he knows it.
2. It wont make sense to say that he said it, but it wasn’t so

Wittgenstein discusses these issues On Certainty. Philosophers went along with his discussion of the expression ‘Mistakes’ and ‘Doubt’. Philosophers who put forward skeptical views usually reveal confusion about ‘Doubt’. If we are going to talk about doubt, that only makes sense in a certain language game, system, environment etc. When philosophers doubt the existence of object in the physical world, Wittgenstein says that he does not know what ‘doubting’ is here, let alone grounds for doubt.

Wittgenstein points out what he finds important in the propositions Moore enumerates in On Certainty (OC, 136).

When Moore says he *knows* such and such, he is really enumerating a lot of empirical propositions which we affirm without special testing; propositions, that is, which have a peculiar role in this system of our empirical proposition.

Should this proposition be called empirical? This is a difficult question. What Wittgenstein is insisting on is that they are not logical proposition. There a great many propositions which seem to be empirical, and yet do not play that role at all. If we think of propositions like ‘there is a fair amount of oil on swan seas sands’, ‘the mumbles railway runs along the sea-shore’, experience might teach us to modify them. Now compare these with ‘this is a desk’, ‘the earth has existed for many years before I was born’ Wittgenstein says, although he calls them empirical propositions but he does not call them a class of propositions with features in common.

If we did open the door which leads to a corridor, and see a green-field and a river instead, *we would not know what to say*. Here, Wittgenstein’s point is that the kind of propositions Moore





is listing play a similar role, namely, that if they are called into question we would not know what to say; we would not be able to carry on language at all.

Wittgenstein often speaks of ‘logic’ in *On Certainty*, and of ‘a logical question’, ‘a logical insight’, etc<sup>12</sup>. He does not think logic as a formal system of principle – like for e.g. *Principia Mathematica*. If we say that the book is a logical investigation – this means that it is a discussion of what logically or what logical principles are. But this does not mean – Wittgenstein is looking for a method by which logical principle may be constructed or derived; or that he wants to give ‘a mechanical method’ for deciding whether a given formula is a logical principle or not.

Regarding the discussion of what logic is *On Certainty* he says, ‘if you demand a role from which it follows that there cant have been a mis-calculation here, the answer is that we did not learn this through a role, but by learning to calculate’ (OC, 44). And then ‘what sort of proposition is – what could a mistake here be like? It would have to be a logical proposition. *But it is a logic that is not used, because what it tells us is not taught by means of proposition. It is a logical proposition; for it best describes the conceptual (linguistic) situation*’ (OC, 51).

Wittgenstein asks ‘Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described? You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it’ (OC, 501). He is not saying that there is nothing logical to be seen, but it will not be a description of a set of logical principles. It will be seen in ‘describing a language game’, in ‘describing what belongs to a language game’.

Wittgenstein is describing what belongs to a language game. For e.g., speculation about the existence of planet, and trying to establish the existence of my own hands, are importantly different. He wants to show that, for the most part, doubt is ruled out in the later case, and that this is not a matter of degree in relation to speculations about the planet. ‘For it is not true that a mistake merely gets more and more in probable as we pass from the planet to my own hand. No, at some point it has seized to be conceivable’ (OC, 53).

These are logical proposition, but not formal principle and they tell us what the conceptual situation is like. Here is an example of describing what belongs to a language game – ‘If I believe that I am sitting in my room when I am not, then I shall not be said to have *made a mistake*. But what is the essential difference between this case and a mistake?’ (OC, 195). It is the difference between what belongs to a language game and what does not. A mistake does not belong to that language game.

But, then, Wittgenstein asks - ‘when is something objectively certain? When a mistake is not possible but what kind of possibility is that? Must not mistake be logically excluded?’ (OC, 194). Wittgenstein’s way of responding is to say that ‘mistake’ is not a move in the game at all.

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<sup>12</sup> Rhees Rush, *ON CERTAINTY, There – Like OUR Life*, edited by D.Z. Philips, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, P. 48 - 49



He says that ‘it is logically ruled-out’. But if he had put this by saying that ‘It is a logical impossibility’ it would have been confusing because of the associations the phrase ‘logical impossibility’ has. It would change his emphasis from noting what *is* and *is not* said, to talk of what *can* and *cannot* be said – the hardness of the logical ‘must’.

For these reasons, when he says a Moore’s truism and proposition – ‘what I hold fast to is not ones proposition but a nest of propositions’ (OC, 225), he does not speak of then as a nest of logical propositions, though they ‘determine the form of the language game’, or ‘describe the language game’.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Putting an end to the afore-mentioned discussion, it could be concluded that firstly, both Moore and Wittgenstein need to be equally respected and applauded for treating their subject uniquely by retrofitting the critic-dimension to their well carved thoughts.

Wittgenstein transforms Moore’s move on skepticism by having the standard sort of verificationism, paradigm case arguments, and contrastive arguments, in order to give a setback to Moore’s hypothesis. Prominent among those arguments is a very effective and powerful tool of “Language Game”. This concept was coined by Wittgenstein, which lays emphasis on the simple language, combined with a context that shows what to do with the language. For example, a language for building contains two words, 'slab' and 'brick'. When A says 'slab' to B, B finds a slab and gives it to A; likewise, when A says 'brick' to B, B finds a brick and gives it to A. Language games are also known as play languages<sup>13</sup>.

With this idea, Wittgenstein hits out at Moore, saying that the things that do exist (in real) need not be stressed to show that it does exist. It becomes obvious for humans to understand and substantiate its existence. As a matter of fact, whatever is represented is merely a play of language and therefore it becomes vital that in what manner we present it. Hence, “Language-Game” becomes an integral part of any certain statement which could be treated as an existence proof for external world, if described in the words of Moore.

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