

The Philosopher's Garden: Scepticism within (and from without) Wittgenstein

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I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden;
he says again and again "I know that that's a tree",
pointing to a tree that is near us.
Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him:
"This fellow isn't insane. We are only doing philosophy."
On Certainty § 467

If philosophy is disease, the sceptic must surely have a terminal case. There seems to be no relief for one so ill. However, in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein offers us a new way to examine the problem, a new treatment, as it were. As Wittgenstein's methodology is so uniquely multi-faceted, so too is his attack on the sceptic, and as it has been said before, Wittgenstein has a marvelous capacity, not for solving problems, but dissolving them. We should not therefore be surprised that the die-hard sceptic remains unconvinced by Wittgenstein's attack; it is not the sort of maneuver the sceptic is used to. Indeed, at times it does not seem like an attack at all. The sceptic must beware however; behind Wittgenstein's oblique style there lies an assault of such subtlety and caliber that only a master of could deliver it. But really, for all his mastery, for all his philosophical poignancy, how effective is Wittgenstein's criticism? It is certainly of a very different order than those we have seen in the past, but can Wittgenstein ultimately avoid the charge of "question begging" that have plagued so many before him? The question is somewhat complicated in the case of Wittgenstein, not only by his philosophical position, but also by his methodology.

To be sure there is justification,
but justification comes to an end.
On Certainty § 192

While there are many points upon which Wittgenstein definitely appears to attack the sceptic, he simultaneously denies those very foundations the "anti-sceptical" position typically relies on. As Wittgenstein famously remarks in § 166 of *On Certainty*, "The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing." No matter what the nature of our reasoning may be, those reasons must eventually give out. It appears as though Wittgenstein's writings suggest a kind of cultural relativism that ultimately abandons universal objective knowledge to those realms inaccessible to humanity. But while this may seem to play right into the sceptic's hands, he does so in a manner that somewhat deflates the traditional sceptic, though ultimately, I shall argue, cannot abolish scepticism entirely. Wittgenstein's philosophy may very well create a new, somewhat more sophisticated sceptic, as it were.

I said I would combat the other man, - but wouldn't I give him reasons? Certainly; but how far do they go? And the end of reasons comes *persuasion*.
(Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.)
On Certainty § 612

Wittgenstein has a strange way of affecting his readers; he influences us without our full knowledge of how it is that we have been swayed. But given the intimacy of Wittgenstein's philosophy with his methodology, his form with his content, I am led to question how much of Wittgenstein's own influence is, in fact, persuasion. Indeed, at times it seems as though Wittgenstein does not so much *convince*

us, but *convert* us. Though all in all, this "persuasive" aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophy should not surprise us. If he truly wishes to abandon a universal ground or logic from which we may depart, as he does indeed seem to, what other option does the man have? He cannot *argue* his position, he can truly only present it. As he writes in § 109 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, "We must do away with *explanation*, and description alone must take its place." It just so happens that he does this in a very persuasive manner. Think here of all those metaphors (like the beetle in the box for example), and the snappy slogans ("Back to the rough ground!"), Surely this is no accident; these devices play an integral role, not only in Wittgenstein's method, but in his philosophy as well.

Not every false belief of this sort is a mistake.
On Certainty § 72

It is impossible to discuss Wittgenstein's philosophy apart from his methodology; each is like a mirror of the other. As I have discussed my concerns regarding the persuasive aspect of Wittgenstein's method, so must I in turn discuss the philosophic thread that reflects this tendency of his. The philosophic theme I would like to pursue here is the theme of mistake and madness. This distinction is fundamental to his critique of the sceptic: it is through this distinction that Wittgenstein demonstrates what he calls the "intellectual distance" that can exist between people, and, I believe, the cultural relativism that makes it impossible for us to genuinely argue against those with radically different positions from our own. The point being, if it can be shown that the sceptic is not as "intellectually distant" as they may at first appear, we have a field upon which to "combat" them. If the sceptic can be shown to participate in our "form of life", as it were, there must be some sense of rationality in which we share, and thus a basis upon which to judge right from wrong, a mistake from madness. So, while Wittgenstein does, as I say, deflate the traditional sceptic, he does not explicitly deny the possibility of a sceptical "form of life", however intellectually distant these people might be.

If my friend were to one day imagine that he had been living for a long time past in such and such a place, etc. etc., I should not call this a *mistake*, but rather a mental disturbance, perhaps a transient one.
On Certainty § 71

The theme of madness and mistake is one that runs throughout *On Certainty*. How is it, Wittgenstein asks, do we distinguish between these "mental disturbances" and a simple, ordinary mistake? And where does the sceptic fall upon this scale? Most reasonable people (including a few philosophers,) believe the sceptic is certainly misguided, but is the sceptic mistaken, or mad? To answer this question we must investigate how it is that such a strange and destructive error should arise in the first place. The source of the problem, according to Wittgenstein, like the source of all philosophical problems, is, not surprisingly, the misuse of language. In deviating from our ordinary natural language games, as the sceptic does, our words are placed in an unnatural context, they take on a meaning unfamiliar to us, and thus the problems that arise from such an abuse are truly not the problems we perceive

them to be. In the context of *On Certainty*, this point is clearly raised in response to G. E. Moore's blatant epistemic assertions.

This situation is thus not the same for a proposition like "At a distance from the sun there is a planet" and "Here is a hand" (namely my own hand). The second can't be called a hypothesis.

But there isn't a sharp boundary between them.

On Certainty § 52

Moore does not *know* these things he claims to (like "Here is one hand, and here is another."), argues Wittgenstein, for knowledge is not an appropriate characterization of those paradigmatic understandings that are actually the *foundations* of knowledge. As he states in § 205, "If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true*, nor yet false." The paradigms are not proper objects of knowledge themselves, for knowledge requires a number of conditions that the paradigms do not meet; knowledge must, among other things, be open to verifiability and doubt. Wittgenstein is famously of the opinion that where doubt is impossible, so too is knowledge. The language game of knowledge requires the possibility of satisfying oneself, and this is not possible in the case of Moore's paradigms. Take the statements from § 52 for example, the claim "there is a planet this distance from the sun" is an empirical proposition, obviously open to empirical investigation. "Here is a hand", however, is not. Any proof one could provide for such a claim is no more certain than the claim itself. One cannot say *how* one knows "here is a hand", for these sorts of propositions, within a system of others like it, are the conditions for empirical investigation in the first place. As Wittgenstein writes in § 515, "If my name is *not* L.W., how can I rely on what is meant by 'true' and 'false' anymore?!" We should not therefore claim that we *know* these paradigmatic propositions, claims Wittgenstein, but that they "stand fast".

So is the *hypothesis* possible, that all the things around us don't exist? Would that not be like the hypothesis of our having miscalculated in all our calculations?

On Certainty § 55

Wittgenstein makes a very subtle move here in § 55. Notice that he asks, "Is the *hypothesis* possible...?" He does not directly address the question whether the belief itself is possible, only the hypothesis. This is not irrelevant; it is exactly the position the traditional sceptic is in. The sceptic asks us to consider, isn't it *possible* that we may be a brain in a vat, or that there is an evil demon who deceives us in everything we do, etc.? The sceptic presents us here with what appears to be hypothesis, but as a genuine hypothesis these possibilities ultimately fail. They are not genuine, according to Wittgenstein, because they are not verifiable, and an hypothesis that is not verifiable is no hypothesis at all. In other words: these questions the sceptic typically raise do not satisfy the criterial requirements of an hypothesis. This is why, I believe, Wittgenstein alludes to the idea of calculation here in § 55. It is much easier to accept the notion that we cannot have been wrong in *all* our calculations, because we have so obviously created the conditions under which calculation occurs. This just is calculation. "This is how one calculates. Calculation is *this*" (§ 47); we are the ones who have defined it as such, so how could we be wrong? On the other hand, we tend to conceive of empirical propositions as somehow independent of us, and thus we feel that a mistake is more appropriate here. Most people find it much easier to doubt an empirical proposition such as "This is chair" rather than a logical proposition like "1+1=2". This does not mean that it is any more certain however.

But nor am I *making a mistake* about twelve times twelve being a hundred and forty-four. I may say later that I was confused just now, but not that I was making a mistake.

On Certainty § 304

Of course, it is one thing to say that one has no doubts, but quite another to abandon the possibility of changing one's mind later. Similarly, while it may not possible for *us* to mistake calculating 1+1, we can certainly imagine those who may calculate differently from us. Wittgenstein presents us with a case of this in § 137 of the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics III*. He writes there,

Imagine someone bewitched so that he calculated:

3 3 3 3 2

 i.e. $4 \times 3 + 2 = 10$

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Surely we would not say of this man that he was simply making a mistake, but that some madness had overcome him, "bewitched" as it were. But what if he was just one of many who calculated like this, should we call them all insane? It would seem that in this case we could call them neither, even though their view disagrees with ours. Our beliefs form a great system of mutual support, propositions such as these have a place only within that system; at a certain distance outside of that system we no longer have an adequate test for truth. How then are we to judge? This is the situation we are presented with when we consider Wittgenstein's "strange tribes".

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not certain propositions striking us as immediately true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language game.

On Certainty § 204

Genuine comparison is only possible *within* sufficiently similar language games, but there seems to be some confusion regarding the boundaries of those language games. We should not, of course, be surprised at this given Wittgenstein's views on vagueness, however, even given this, what would then count as a test whether someone operates sufficiently within our system? There must be some manner for determining just how intellectually distant we are from another, particularly if we wish to address the sceptic, for if there were none, there could be no genuine disagreement, discussion, or debate. Certainly discussion and disagreements do occur, but how do we know when someone occupies enough of our "intellectual vicinity" that we are *genuinely* entitled to accuse them of falsehood? For this test I believe that Wittgenstein has none other than the idea of action in mind. Is not this what all the talk about Goethe and the squirrels is about? The foundations of a language game do not rest upon propositions, parts of language themselves requiring grounding, but upon an "ungrounded way of acting". In this sense, we have a common denominator against which different systems of believe may be compared. The primacy of action is fundamental to them all.

My life shows that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on. - I tell a friend e.g.: "Take that chair over there", "Shut the door", etc, etc.

On Certainty § 7

Wittgenstein is fond of characterizing our foundations as "bedrock". Our most fundamental source of action is fossilized within that bedrock, it is the ground from which our "form of life" springs. These bedrock 'beliefs' that inform our actions are so basic they cannot be genuinely expressed through language, and as such, neither can they be genuinely questioned. They can only be lived, and thus lived, they are lived with certainty. As Wittgenstein writes in § 334, "My life consists in my being content to accept many things." The sceptics thus betray themselves. Every time the sceptic sits down, eats lunch, or addresses another person, they betray their certainty that the chair exists, food nourishes, and that their friend is not truly a mindless automaton whose bodily actions are governed by an evil genius bent on deceiving them. How genuine is a doubt that *cannot* be upheld? Wittgenstein claims that such a doubt is no doubt at all. Words can lie, they can be manipulated, they can be ingenuine; actions, of the fundamental sort Wittgenstein discusses here, cannot. "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language." (*PI* § 109) Isn't that why Wittgenstein wants to replace argument with description? To disclose the abuse of words that philosophers are so fond of, Wittgenstein attempts to reveal their *use*. This is no coincidence.

But mightn't I be crazy and not doubting what I absolutely ought to doubt?
On Certainty § 223

Of course, this critique only works for the *traditional* sceptic, the philosophical sceptic, that is, the one with which we share a "form of life." Ultimately, Wittgenstein cannot deny the possibility of an unusually sceptical foreigner, or even a dramatic shift in our own "form of life". Perhaps this is the reason he himself battled with insanity for much of his life. Wittgenstein's philosophy offers us no assurance of truth or sanity. We must recognize and accept, perhaps even appreciate, this constant threat that madness presents. When we fully realize this, if this is even possible, we will have made our peace with scepticism, not as a problem to be solved, but as an imminent fact of human existence; a reality that forces us to abandon our search for the foundation and begin an explorations of ourselves and our limitations. We must not flee from our finitude; we must embrace it.

If someone asked us "but is it true?" we would say "yes" to him; and if he demands grounds we might say
"I can't give you any grounds, but if you learn more you too will think the same."

On Certainty § 206

So, in this great twenty-five hundred year struggle with scepticism, where does Wittgenstein sit? Wittgenstein occupies a strange place. On the one hand, he deflates the traditional sceptic, claiming there sceptical concerns are impossible to uphold, and thus without meaning, but on the other hand, he presents an unmistakably sceptical position himself, but one that is inevitably placed within some (albeit, foreign) system of beliefs. I'm not sure to what extent Wittgenstein ultimately begs the question directly, though certainly he presupposes many things central to his position. Though amazingly, *even this* is placed within a system of beliefs, and thus, to some extent, justified. Wittgenstein's philosophy is an attempt to convert the reader; it is an attempt to establish not an absolute foundation, but a common ground. Wittgenstein is truly a man of his time. A master of his times, he is a master of style, and a master of question begging, for he begs those questions that only readers with a common ground will allow him to beg, because we beg them as well.

Scepticism dissolved?