

A Gesture of Understanding: Wittgenstein, Moore, and “Therapy”

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Wittgenstein scholarship appears currently to be engaging in a deepening debate over the role of nonsense in Wittgenstein’s later philosophical work. For one party to this engagement, Wittgenstein’s later work pursues the project of exposing nonsense when it emerges during the course of philosophical discussions, and thereby provides a kind of therapeutic assistance to those philosophers who might otherwise have defended positions whose tenets include nonsensical remarks that “do not say anything” (Crary 5). This therapeutic reading argues in *The New Wittgenstein* and *Wittgenstein in America* particularly in the hands of James Conant that an austere interpretation of the role of nonsense in the *Tractatus* can be successfully extended to account for the project of Wittgenstein’s later writings as well. Opposing this therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein, P.M.S. Hacker has argued that Wittgenstein sees nonsense as arising from our attempts to deny grammatical rules by forming “nonsense which violates the grammar” (Baker 279). When philosophers begin to devolve into nonsensical remarks, Wittgenstein seemingly will not provide the form of therapy Hacker critiques, but rather will remind us of our rules of grammar in a way that *The New Wittgenstein* appears determined to resist. The text of Wittgenstein’s later collection *On Certainty* provides one case of a Wittgensteinian engagement with a philosophical discussion of knowledge, certainty, and error, a case for which each of these interpretations might wish, I suggest, to be able to account. *On Certainty* follows Wittgenstein’s involvement with G.E. Moore’s treatment of knowledge and skepticism, according to which I know I have two hands, and so can debunk a line of skeptical doubt, when I follow for my part along with Moore’s reasoning. Wittgenstein presents at least three forms of response to Moore, including accusations of nonsensicality, attempts to locate the sense of Moore’s view, and assessments of Moore’s understanding of his own remarks. As the interplay of these themes unfolds, I suggest in the end that *On Certainty* pursues a diagnostic engagement with Moore’s philosophical discussions whose distinctive character neither the therapeutic reading nor Hacker’s interpretation has yet properly to appreciate.

On Certainty presents a record of Wittgenstein’s extended entanglement with Moore’s treatment of knowledge and doubt in his essays in epistemology, an entanglement formed by the interplay of three primary themes – nonsense, sense, and understanding. Firstly, early in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein indicates that during the discussions Moore provides of epistemology, he advances apparent knowledge claims that may be viewed as nonsensical. Indeed, these moments within Wittgenstein’s treatment appear to manifest just the qualities that the therapeutic reading would lead us to expect. Wittgenstein finds Moore stepping into nonsense during the course of his work in epistemology:

I know that there is a sick man lying here? Nonsense! I am sitting at his bedside, looking attentively into his face. – So I don’t know, then that there is a sick man lying here? Neither the question nor the assertion has sense. (OC 10)

Such passages as this confirm the presence of a conception of nonsense in Wittgenstein’s treatment of Moore. As Wittgenstein addresses seeming knowledge claims typical

of Moore’s discussion, he finds both the alleged assertion and denials of knowledge to be characteristically lacking in sense. As Wittgenstein considers it, when we suggest “The expression “I do not know” makes no sense in this case’...of course it follows from this that ‘I know’ makes no sense either” (OC 58). Wittgenstein certainly appears to be employing a conception of nonsense familiar from his earlier writing, according to which nonsense so to speak lacks truth value, and the negation of nonsense yields nonsense. Texts such as these help to support the notion that Wittgenstein is employing nonsense as a term of criticism when he explores the work of other philosophers. This involvement with charges of nonsensicality therefore presents us with a question of whether Wittgenstein proceeds to handle Moore’s nonsense in a way that Conant and the therapeutic reading would lead us to expect.

On Certainty does not appear to rest with its conclusion that Moore’s epistemology advances nonsense. Wittgenstein instead appears to search for a way of capturing the sense that Moore’s references to knowing he has hands, or that he is a human being, might be able to have. The text is relatively direct on this point:

Anyone who is unable to imagine a case in which one might say “I know this is my hand” (and such cases are rare) might say that these words were nonsense. True, he might also say “Of course I know – how could I not know?” – but then he would possibly be taking the sentence “this is my hand” as an *explanation* of the words “my hand” (OC 412).

Wittgenstein suggests that we can find a sense for an expression such as ‘I know this is my hand’ when we consider that this talk of knowing marks those explanations of our uses of language (sometimes spoken of as descriptions of the grammar) that we ourselves are able to provide. Wittgenstein proposes that the alleged knowledge claims Moore includes in his response to skepticism may carry some sense, although not perhaps in the way we had expected. The presence of a sense arrives as a discovery during Wittgenstein’s investigations:

But now it is correct to say “I know” in the contexts that Moore mentioned, at least *in particular circumstances*. (Indeed, I do not know what “I know I am a human being” means. But even that might be given a sense.)

For each one of these sentences I can imagine circumstances that turn it into a move in one of our language games, and by that it loses everything that is philosophically astonishing.

What is odd is that in such a case I always feel like saying (although it is wrong): “I know that – so far as one can know such a thing.” That is incorrect, but something right is hidden behind it (OC 622-23).

When Wittgenstein dwells longer over Moore’s epistemological comments, he finds that, even in spite of the possible confusions into which Moore may have strayed, a sense can still be found for Moore’s employment of selected apparent knowledge claims during his discussions of epistemology. By saying that he knows he has two hands, Moore would, it begins to seem, be saying that his having two hands is not open to doubt in the context in

which he issues this remark, and that he knows how to use the language involved – although why it is that he is not *able* to entertain this seeming doubt still remains for us to resolve. Therefore, while Wittgenstein at the outset of his treatment accuses Moore of issuing nonsense, his more extended discussion begins to recognize the sense that Moore's remarks against skepticism may be able to sustain. What first seems nonsense is now a candidate for sense, albeit a candidate that does not reveal its sense in a straightforward fashion.

On *Certainty* devotes perhaps the majority of its attention to the specific character of the confusions into which Moore's discussions risk beginning to fall. If Moore's treatment of knowledge were not to have its sense perspicuated, or if Moore were to seem to reject the perspicuations Wittgenstein proffers, Wittgenstein suggests that it may become uncertain whether he and Moore understand each other. The trouble with Moore's contentions, that he knows he has hands, that he knows he is a human being, is that they confer upon Moore the risk that he does not understand his remarks, and the risk that we do not understand him in the context in which he issues them. Wittgenstein indicates that Moore's understanding could possibly be in jeopardy if he were somehow to avoid acknowledging, with Wittgenstein, that knowledge and indubitability often are anathema. To call a statement indubitable in a particular context is to suggest that a speaker who denies it may very well not understand it.

That I am a man and not a woman can be verified, but if I were to say that I was a woman, and then tried to explain the error by saying I hadn't checked the statement, the explanation would not be accepted.

The *truth* of my statements is the test of my *understanding* of these statements.

That is to say: if I make certain false statements, it becomes uncertain whether I understand them (OC 79-81).

In the case of particular remarks, whether about one's hands or humanity, among other things, propounding falsehoods has the potential to speak against one's understanding of these remarks. Whether we convict a speaker of non-understanding may depend on our readiness to allow that he may have momentarily misspoken. If a speaker appears unwilling to retract a falsehood, or even if he seems unwilling to disallow the very possibility of a falsehood, then the shadow of nonunderstanding begins to fall over his case.

It's not a matter of Moore's knowing that there's a hand there, but rather that we should not understand him if he were to say "Of course I may have erred about this". We should ask "What is it like to make such an error as that?" – e.g. what's it like to discover that it was an error? (OC 32)

Wittgenstein suggests in passages such as these that certain statements speak quite strongly about a person's understanding, especially those indubitable statements whose denial we attempt either to entertain or to assert. Wittgenstein returns to this issue of nonunderstanding in the case of certainties throughout the text.

There are cases such that, if someone gives signs of doubt where we do not doubt, we cannot confidently understand his signs as signs of doubt.

I.e.: if we are to understand his signs of doubt as such, he may give them only in particular cases and may not give them in others.

In certain circumstances a man cannot make an *error*. ("Can" is used here logically, and the proposition does not mean that a man cannot say anything false in those circumstances.) If Moore were to pronounce the opposite of those propositions which he declares certain, we should not just not share his opinion: we should regard him as demented (OC 154-55).

Wittgenstein contends that certain statements do not lend themselves to our doubt, denial, or even our entertainment of their falsehood, without casting our understanding of these statements under suspicion, and leading others' understanding of us into confusion. Yet Wittgenstein believes that Moore has risked entertaining just these sorts of falsehoods by contending that he knows – that he knows he has hands or is human. Moore's manner of responding to skepticism, while on the one hand possibly making sense as we have seen Wittgenstein suggest earlier, on the other possibly points to a failure of understanding within Moore's account. Wittgenstein does not conclude that Moore is indeed a case of failed understanding. Instead, Wittgenstein acknowledges this prospect as at least a possibility, one that his interpretation appears to take steps to avoid.

How, then, are we to understand the character of Wittgenstein's involvement with Moore's work in epistemology? If we are to believe the therapeutic reading, Wittgenstein should identify the moments of nonsense within Moore's discussions, bringing us to see that Moore's terms "haven't (yet) been given any significant use" (Crary 7) when they appear in his seeming claims to knowledge. The notion that Wittgenstein does find a sense for Moore's remarks makes it difficult to maintain that these "do not say anything" (Crary 7) according to Wittgenstein's more developed account: what they say is, at least possibly, that Moore speaks a language within which certain statements characterize the grammar and can be regarded as true. For Conant, Wittgenstein's therapy involves "recognizing sentences...as nonsensical" (McCarthy 61). Yet Wittgenstein's therapy does not involve throwing away Moore's remarks so much as reclaiming them, offering them a specific way to make sense, albeit not a way we might have expected. On the other hand, if we are to follow Hacker in regarding the negation of grammatical propositions as nonsense, then Wittgenstein's entire discussion of error and understanding becomes difficult to accommodate. Most of Hacker's textual evidence for this treatment of nonsense is drawn from manuscripts *circa* 1930 that do not necessarily match the later developed view (Hacker 12-13). Denying a grammatical proposition is not an error, and *insisting* on its denial is nonunderstanding – but this does not lead the affirmation of these propositions to be nonsensical. Rather, the affirmation of such propositions is a sign of understanding them, and we do not understand nonsense. Affirming a grammatical proposition is not nonsensical, leaving its negation difficult to classify as nonsense in any conclusive sense. So neither Conant nor Hacker appears quite able to account for the character of *On Certainty*, if these issues of sense and understanding unfold in the way I have been suggesting.

In closing, I believe that the genuine character of Wittgenstein's response to Moore is that of diagnosis, but not one of the form the therapeutic reading would expect. Wittgenstein does cry "Nonsense!", but then this seems only to have signaled a search for sense. When a sense is found, it arrives accompanied by a diagnosis:

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 an error (OC 21).

To Wittgenstein, Moore came in contact with the themes of error and nonunderstanding, but misassigned these features without acknowledging how knowledge involves the presence and removal of doubt. "I know..." can be an error, and often is. Moore "overlooked" (OC 21) this point, and so overlooked the interplay of knowledge, error, and understanding that Wittgenstein helps to perspicuate. Moore has challenged Wittgenstein to understand his remarks, not to throw them away, in the end.

References

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