

# WITTGENSTEIN ON SCEPTICISM

Dr. B. Ananda Sagar

Assistant Professor

University Of Hyderabad

There is a close relation between Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* and G.E. Moore. Moore consistently rejects Scepticism and claims that knowledge and certainty are also applied to the propositions concerning the external world. The philosophical sceptic operates on the epistemological level that is why it is difficult to meet sceptic. He is not an ordinary pre-epistemic doubter. Moore has clearly introduced two levels for consideration, a lower and a higher level. Epistemic or philosophical level is higher to what may be described as pre-epistemic level. Common sense propositions occur at the pre epistemic-level. At this level there is hardly any difficulty in establishing their truth. When these propositions are brought to the epistemic level, their meaning and truth are analyzed. Moore is persuading the epistemologists to remain within their limits. Just as a common man would cross his limit if he starts doing analysis of the proposition that were entertained by him. Similarly, an epistemologist would cross his limit if he starts establishing or refuting that truth of common sense propositions. 'Certainty' for Moore has two different senses or one sense with two diverse applications. At the epistemic level 'certainty' is possible only when the analysis is persuasive or convincing. But the question of certainty at the pre-epistemic level is simpler to achieve. A common man would doubt only where there are factual errors. A factual error would be removed by a factual means and as a result certainty would arise. For example, on account of my weak eyesight I may commit factual errors, but those errors are easily removed because my other senses are quite active. They help me in removing my doubt and to achieve certainty. But the epistemologist not in a position to adopt the simple way of removing doubts, because his doubts are theoretical. Therefore, he has to adopt a persuasive theory. One should not confuse the disagreement in daily life with the disagreement in philosophy. There is no surprise that Moore fails to have any certainty about a given analysis of a proposition. But so far as these propositions are considered at the common sense level he is quite sure about their truth. He is certain about their truth, as the common man would be certain about their truth. Moore is certainly not operating at the epistemic level when he is discussing the question of the truth and meaning of propositions entertained at the pre-epistemic level. So there is not only a proposition that is entertained at the common sense level, there is also knowledge and certainty that operates at the very common sense level. Propositions are entertained and their truth or falsity established at the pre-epistemological level. They are merely analyzed at the epistemological level. Moore is not so much concerned in meeting the sceptic at the pre-epistemological level. He is not concerned with an ordinary doubter' whose doubts can be removed by practical means. He is

concerned with the philosophical sceptic who operates at the epistemological level. Philosophical sceptic denies knowledge and certainty. Against philosophical sceptic Moore wishes to show that one can have knowledge and certainty. Wittgenstein's model of certainty is unique. He agrees neither with Moore nor with the sceptic. It would be proper to describe Wittgenstein as the holder of the grammatical model; Certainty is inherent in the grammar of language.

According to Wittgenstein, Moore converted 'Knowing' into a mental state, different from the mental state of 'believing'. But neither knowing nor believing is a mental state. Wittgenstein remarks,

'One can say "he believes it, but it isn't so", but not "He knows it, but it isn't so". Does this stem from the difference between the mental states of belief and of knowledge? No. -- One may for example call "mental state" what is expressed by tone of voice in speaking, by gestures etc. It would thus be *possible* to speak of a mental state of conviction, and that may be the same whether it is knowledge or false belief. . To think that different states must correspond to the words "believe" and "know" would be as if one believed that different people had to correspond to the words, "I" and the name "Ludwig", because the concepts are different.'<sup>1</sup>

For Wittgenstein that the concept of 'knowledge' is different from the concept of 'belief'. But this does not mean that knowing refers to one mental state and believing another. Moore would hardly disagree with Wittgenstein on this issue. Moore too wishes to distinguish believing from knowing. Taking the help of Russell, Moore points out,

"that from the conjunction of the two facts that a man thinks that a given proposition  $p$  is true and that  $p$  is in fact true, it does *not* follow that the man in question *knows* that  $p$  is true: in order that I may be justified in saying that I know that I am standing up, something more is required than the mere conjunction of the two facts that I both think I am and actually am-as Russell has expressed it, true belief is not identical with knowledge."<sup>2</sup>

Since Moore equates 'believing' with 'thinking' it can be said that for Moore believing refers to a mental state. But does knowing also refer to a mental state, numerically different from the mental state of believing? Compare Wittgenstein's remark with that of Moore. For Wittgenstein said, while distinguishing 'I know' from 'I believe', "It would be correct to say: "I believe..." has subjective truth; but "I know ..." not."<sup>3</sup> Moore also considers 'I believe' as a subjective truth. Something more is required, according to Moore, for converting a subjective truth into an objective truth. If one has a true belief one does not necessarily have knowledge. Would the problem be solved by inventing another mental state, the state of knowledge? Such a solution is not useful for knowledge in such a situation would remain subjective. A mental state is a mental state, be it a state of belief or that of knowledge. A mental state by definition is subjective. There is no implication that Moore has converted knowledge into a mental state. Of course, he considers believing as a mental state.

Wittgenstein indeed accepts Moore's remarks as Malcolm reports as Wittgenstein saying,

“There is a tendency to think of knowledge as *mental state*...mental states, such as anxiety and pain, have degrees. *Certainty* also has degrees, e.g., ‘How certain are you?’ Since certainty has degrees we are helped to have the idea that knowledge is a mental state.

Moore would like to stare at the house that is only 20 feet away and say, with a peculiar intonation, ‘I know that there is a house’. He does this because he wants to produce in himself the *feeling* of knowing. He wants to exhibit *knowing for certain* to himself. In this way he has the idea that he is replying to skeptical philosopher who claims that everyday examples of knowing that there is a dog in the backyard, or that the neighbor's house is on fire, are not really or strictly knowledge, are not knowledge in the highest degree. It is as if someone said ‘you don't really feel pain when you are pinched’ and Moore then pinched himself in order to feel the pain, and thus prove to himself that other is wrong. Moore treats the sentence ‘I know so & so’ like the sentence ‘I have pain’. The criterion that he knows so & so will be that he *says* that he does.”<sup>4</sup>

Moore is not doing something novel in distinguishing the mental state of knowing from the mental state of believing. Long ago Plato did the same. Plato distinction between knowledge and belief was quite rigid. Believing, for Plato, could never be knowing because the realm of knowledge is wholly different from the realm of belief. Belief is restricted to the empirical reality. Knowledge was over and above it. But neither Moore nor Wittgenstein would accept this. Because for both of them, on occasions, empirical propositions could be known. As a matter of fact, Hume's view comes closer to Plato's view. Hume allowed knowledge and certainty to mathematical propositions. He only applied the notion of probability to empirical propositions.

Commenting on Moore's position that knowing and believing are mental states led Wittgenstein to say, for Moore “Knowing” is not very unlike “being in pain”. Moore refuses to produce any evidence in support of his claim. Just as one fails to demonstrate one's having pain as one demonstrates as having of a pen or a book. Moore fails to demonstrate his having of knowledge. So having knowledge is not very unlike having a pain. However, pain is something that is private and subjective but knowledge is something that is public and objective. Though I may be the only person knowing something at a given time but others are not debarred from knowing what I know. This distinguishes knowledge from belief.

According to Wittgenstein, as Anscombe reports, the best piece of work was Moore's *Defense of Commons Sense*. This means that Wittgenstein rejected Moore's “*Proof of the External World*”. Moore's Proof of the External World became very reputed. It was widely heard when it was delivered. Later it was read by both, the sceptics and those who opposed scepticism. Therefore, it

would be interesting to discuss proof of external world. Proof of the External World starts with a quotation from Kant. Moore quotes Kant saying, “It still remains a scandal to philosophy and to human reason in general that the existence of things outside of us must be accepted merely on *faith*, and that, if anyone thinks good to doubt their existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by any satisfactory proof.”<sup>5</sup> Moore tries to prove the existence of external things in order to do what Kant wished to do. He wishes to show that there are several things which are external to him. At the initial stage he distinguishes the things which would be called internal to oneself. One’s pains like headache, stomachache are internal to one’s self. So also the sound that one hears, the colour patch that one sees. In short, one can say that the sense data of all kind are internal and private to me. They are not things presented in space. So that others may observe them. Referring to the things outside of us Moore points out, “If I can prove that there exist now both a sheet of paper and a human hand, I shall have proved that there are now “things outside of us”; if I can prove that there exist now both a shoe and sock, I shall have proved that there are now “things outside of us”... Obviously, then there are thousands of different things such that, if, at any time, I can prove any one of them, I shall have proved the existence of things outside of us.”<sup>6</sup> This is a preparatory ground for providing a proof for the things existing in the public space, where they are observed by any body. Moore provides proof in the following words.

“I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right, “Here is one hand,” and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, “and here is another”. And if, by doing this I have proved *ipso facto* the existence of external things, you will also see that I can also do it now in numbers of other ways: there is no need to multiply examples.”<sup>7</sup>

Most of the people who heard about Moore’s proof thought that Moore has not given any kind of proof. Answering them Moore points out that his proof was no proof

“(1) unless the premises which I adduced as proof of the conclusion was different from the conclusion I adduced it to prove; (2) unless the premiss which I adduced was something which I *knew* to be the case, and not merely something which I believed but which was by me means certain, or something which, though in fact true, I did not know to be so; and (3) unless the conclusion did really follow from the premiss.”<sup>8</sup>

One may not have any objection against the procedure of proof, but one may object the premises of the proof. How does Moore knows that he has two hands. One who doubts the existence of external world would also doubt the existence of Moore hands. Moore accepts “I am perfectly well aware that, in spite of all that I have said, many philosophers will still feel that I have not given any satisfactory proof of point in question.”<sup>9</sup> Kant certainly did not refer to ordinary doubter. He refers to philosophical doubter and the proof which required satisfying the philosophical doubter. Unless one

satisfies the philosophical doubt in Kant's terminology we have to believe the existence of external objects on faith. The philosophical doubter will use dream argument and Moore finds himself incapable of meeting the philosophical doubter.

“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.”<sup>10</sup>

The evidence which cannot be exhibited how we can call it evidence. For Moore ‘Knowing that one is awake’ does not mean the same thing, as ‘proving that one is awake’. He concludes his lecture by saying “I can know things, which I cannot prove; and among things, which I certainly did know, even if (as I think) I could not prove them, were the premisses of my two proofs.”<sup>11</sup>

Wittgenstein attacks not only Moore but also the sceptic. The sceptic raises doubts which cannot be satisfied. He gave a very interesting example. He says’ “Someone who doubted whether earth had existed for 100 years might have a scientific, or on the other hand a philosophical, doubt.”<sup>12</sup> Doubting the existence of the external world, for example, does not mean doubting the existence of a planet. The first doubt is philosophical and the second is scientific. The scientific doubt can be refuted but not the philosophical one. Philosophical doubts can never be answered. So Wittgenstein points out that it is possible to point out the discovery of the planet to the doubter but such proof is not possible in the case of the existence of the world.<sup>13</sup> Moore’s saying ‘I know this is a hand’ is not like ‘This is Saturn’. Moore has not discovered his hand like the scientist who discovered the Saturn. So Moore cannot prove that the external world exists by saying that ‘I know this is a hand’.

Moore’s use of I know may be accepted at the pre-epistemological level but certainly not at the epistemological level. Moore’s argument against sceptic is no kind of argument as Wittgenstein remarks, “Moore’s mistake lies in this – countering the assertion that one cannot know that, by saying “I do know it.”<sup>14</sup> Compare ‘having of two hands’ with ‘having of a pain’ Moore saying ‘I know I have two hands’ is similar to ‘I know I have a pain’. In both situations ‘I know’ is superfluous. Can you imagine the situation where I am failing to know that I have pain? But it is superfluous to say I do not know them also superfluous to say ‘I do know’. So one’s saying I know that I have pain simply means I have pain. Similarly with the situation of two hands. Can I fail to know that I have two hands? If I can not then it is superfluous to say I know that I have two hands. As Wittgenstein remarks,

“it’s not a matter of *Moore’s* knowing that there is a hand there, but rather we should not understand him if he were to say, “Of course I may be wrong about this.” We

should ask “what is it like to make such a mistake as that? – e.g. what’s it like to discover that it was mistake?”<sup>15</sup>

That is to say there is no reason or ground as to why, like Moore, one should say ‘I know I have a hand’. One does not have to assert such a simple truth as that one has a hand; one cannot be mistaken about it as such. But we should not understand him if he were to say that he might be wrong in this case. Whether or not one is right in claiming to know that he has a hand depends, according to Wittgenstein, on whether or not he shows he has not made a mistake. But as Wittgenstein says, in the case where Moore asserts that he knows that he has a hand, we can ask: what would it be like to make a mistake here?

Wittgenstein connects knowledge with evidence. If one claims that he knows then he must produce evidence that he knows. If evidence is missing then knowing is also missing. But **evidence plays different** roles it makes quite good sense to say that others have evidence for my pain. Suppose some one says you have pain referring to my pain then I can ask him what is your evidence. He may refer to my physical disturbance, irritation, bodily behavior. But I know my pain without any evidence. For Wittgenstein genuine knowledge is evidence based. Moore is certainly making a pseudo knowledge claim. He writes,

“One says, “I know” when one is ready to give compelling grounds. “I know” relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth. Whether someone knows something can come to light, assuming that he is convinced of it. But if what he believes is of such a kind that the grounds that he can give are no surer than his assertion, then he cannot say that he knows what he believes.”<sup>16</sup>

Wittgenstein thought that Moore is right in referring certain propositions like “The earth has existed for many years past”; “Many human bodies have each lived for many years upon it”. These propositions are such that they cannot be doubted. But if they cannot be doubted then there is no question of knowing them. Moore should not give the preface I know to these propositions. The fact that Moore is right in asserting the truth of common sense belief. This shows that doubting in these situations does not make sense. According to Wittgenstein, if we doubt everything then it would not be a genuine doubt; it can at best be a pathological one. Doubt is possible where testing is possible and test presupposes something is not doubted and not tested.<sup>17</sup> Our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempted from doubt, are, as it were, like the hinges on which those turn.<sup>18</sup> Wittgenstein himself introduced propositions which are not very unlike the propositions introduced by Moore which Moore thought that they are free from doubt. For example, ‘I have never been on the moon’ can not be doubted. Similarly, one cannot doubt that one has two hands or that one has a brain inside the skull. These propositions are very much like Moore-like propositions. Wittgenstein writes, “Imagine a language-game “When I call you, come in through the door”. In any ordinary case, a doubt whether there really is a door there will be impossible.”<sup>19</sup> He wants to show that a doubt

such as this is not possible and so is not the presupposition of any language-game. The proposition that there is a door is to be understood as an example of something that is objectively certain – which is supposed to mean that doubt is logically excluded. Certainty ascribes to the language-game as such and not to the single proposition about the door. All the propositions about the door point to its existence. Thus, certainty precludes all existential doubts. Wittgenstein argues that objective certainties of human life are not threatened by the philosophical imagining of unheard of occurrences. This argument is against scepticism. Besides, he argues against those like Moore who provides epistemic proofs of our knowledge of the objective certainty. Certainty is a matter to be shown in practice and not to be proved.<sup>20</sup> Wittgenstein thinks that it can only be shown in our life, that is, in our language-game. Certainty is rooted in life and language and how we see it or believe it.

Wittgenstein has introduced the concept of language game in the *Investigations* in order to show how words are used in certain contexts. Out of that contexts the words make no sense. As Kenny quotes in his *Wittgenstein*, if one tries to doubt everything one cannot get as far as doubting anything. One cannot simply doubt everything. The sceptic cannot intelligibly doubt the things, which he claims to doubt, because thereby he undermines the language-game in which the words he uses have their meaning.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that Wittgenstein in the context of language what was already said in the *Tractates*. “Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical, when it tries to raise doubts where no question can be asked. For doubt can exist only where a question exists, a question only where an answer exists, and an answer only where something *can be said*”.<sup>22</sup> Wittgenstein says that the sceptics’ question may be dismissed because it lacks meaning. The meaningfulness of a question is derived from the meaningfulness of the statements, which can be made in answering it.

### **References:**

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- 3 . Oc, Sec.179.
- 4 . Malcolm. N, *Ludwig Wittgenstein A Memoir*, Oxford University Press, London, 1967, pp. 87-8.
- 5 . Quoted by Moore from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 34.
- 6 . G.E. Moore, “Proof of An External World”, in *Classics of Analytic Philosophy*, p. 81.
- 7 . Ibid. p. 81.
- 8 . Ibid. p. 82.
- 9 . Ibid. p. 83.
- 10 . Ibid. P.84.
- 11 . Ibid. p. 84.
- 12 . OC, Sec. 259.
- 13 . Cf. Ibid. Sec. 20.
- 14 . OC, Sec. 521.
- 15 . Ibid. Sec. 32.
- 16 . Ibid. Sec. 243.
- 17 . OC, sec.163, 377
- 18 . (OC, sec.341).
- 19 . Ibid.Sec.522
- 20 . Ibid. Sec 33
- 21 . Cf. Ibid. Sec. 20
- 22 . Ibid. Sec. 243