Imagining Doubt

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Class: Knowledge and Certainty

The notion of doubt has been methodologically central to western Philosophy since Descartes. Wittgenstein, in 14.10.(37), attempts to formulate the notion of doubt in such a manner that the *meaning* of term becomes *clear*. Wittgenstein's formulation will call the meaning of the 'philosophical' use of the word "doubt" into question, thereby implicating the traditional method by which doubt itself is held to be of central importance.

In traditional method doubt has, as it were, served as the impetus to knowledge. Doubt is that which places the unquestioned beliefs of the majority into suspicion. The naive assumptions held by the common folk are such beliefs as, for example, 'that there is a computer in front of me', or that 'the same kind of food I ate for breakfast yesterday that nourished me will nourish me again tomorrow'. Though these assumptions may not be recognized as assumptions or beliefs, it is doubt which reveals them to be such. The notion of doubt entails the assertion 'not known for certain'. Doubt is therefore to be contrasted with knowledge. Knowledge is that of which we are certain. The criterion given for certainty, by the tradition, is that which is deductively provable. When this criterion is applied to those objects of "common sense" that doubt calls into question, apparently counter intuitive conclusions are reached. Knowledge of the propositions of common sense cannot be estab lished. This claim is supported by Russell and Moore. The room of doubt is, as it were, locked from the outside: once in, justifications for propositions of common sense, and, more generally, for certainty, seem impossible.

I think it is on the basis of the counter intuitive conclusions, and the philosophical predicament that doubt raises, that Wittgenstein is prompted to raise the question of the meaning of doubt altogether. And it is this question of the *meaning* of the concept that provides the framework of his discussion in 14.10.(37) .

Wittgenstein's inquiry into meaning---of doubt and propositions in general---differs significantly from traditional methods. Wittgenstein does not think

that an analysis of the term or proposition will reveal its essential meaning. In contrast, the meaning is only available and present in the larger context of usage. Th e contexts, or environments of use, are, for Wittgenstein, essentially practical. That is to say, meaning does not rest upon the analysis of a supposedly independent linguistic proposition, but is embedded and founded upon styles of practical action in the world. Meaning is situated. It is the context and shifting dynamics of meaningful uses of la nguage that Wittgenstein calls "language games". This is, admittedly, a general and incomplete sketch of what Wittgenstein means by the language game, but it should serve the present purposes.

If, given what has been said concerning language games, the meaning of doubt is to be understood at all, the environments of its use, and possible contexts in which it might be used, must be explored and described.

What Wittgenstein calls the simple, or primitive game is characterized by the absence of doubt in the philosophical sense. But does this mean that the game is in some fundamental respect "incomplete and incorrect"? Traditionally, most philosophers have thought so, and have rarely missed the opportunity to contrast philosophical knowledge against the beliefs and uncritical assumptions held by the average person. For example, Bertrand Russell, characterizes philosophical inquiry as that which examines "critically" those "beliefs...[which in]...daily life we assume as certain." This tends to give the impression, or entail the presupposition that philosophical doubt---even if knowledge is demonstrated not to be possible---is nevertheless a more honest stance towards the world. Thus, says Wittgenstein, "It is easy to think", given the philosophical positions of philosophers like Russell, "that only the game which includes doubt is *true to nature*." As such, d oubt might be said to be a "refinement" of the simple game.

But what happens when this traditional view of doubt is taken seriously, that is, taken to its end? If it is the case that doubt is more "true to nature", or a more honest stance towards the world, one could reasonably ask whether the game would be played more correctly, so to speak, if it began with doubt. It is c ertainly logical permissible to say that the game *can* begin with doubt. For we can imagine situations in which doubt is found at the beginning of the simple game, rather than not included at all. But what happens to the notion of doubt when it is situated in the practical environments of simple games? When descriptions are given it is seen that the philosophic notion of doubt, along with the games described, become unrecognizable. The simple games lose, as it were, their simplicity, while doubt appears to be crazy.

Wittgenstein first considers "Street traffic...with everyone doubting whether to go in this, or rather in that direction." When we really imagine what this environment would look like----cars slowing to a stop in the middle of the freeway and turning around only to turn around again and drive off into the meridian; vehicles hesitantly driving through stop sign and never driving

through green lights with any conviction----we would not, Wittgenstein claims, call such apparently chaotic directionless behaviour 'traffic'. The reason for this is that our very notion of traffic requires direction, consistency, and regular movements of vehicles. The simp le traffic game (which doesn't include doubt) has been transformed into another (unrecognizable) game entirely. And just as this other chaotic spectacle that includes cars, stop signs, traffic lights and the like is no longer what we mean by the term 'traffic', so too with doubt. Doubt itself becomes unrecognizable in the context of this description.

Further, imagine the behaviour of a doubting mother towards her child. Without doubt, the behaviour of the mother is as one would normally expect: when her child cries, she comforts it, feeds it, and responds, generally, sympathetically towards it. However, a situation can be imagined in which the mother regularly doubts whe ther her child is, in fact, crying, or, further, whether it even exists. Yet, according to Wittgenstein, we would not recognize, nor call, this behaviour 'doubting'. It would rather more likely appear to be a form of craziness.

Thus, as with the example of the traffic, when philosophical doubt is put in the context of the simple game (at the beginning), doubt, along with the game, is no longer meaningfully recognizable.

It therefore seems that, in fact, the game *can't* begin with doubt. For, although games *can* logically be imagined and described which include doubt at the beginning, these games appear very different from the ones we recognize and by which we live. Thus such descriptions of possible games do not reveal the meaning of doubt---that is, how it is used---in our own simple game. What they do begin show, however, is that the traditional claim that doubt is a more honest and worthy stance towards the world, is misguided.

The traditional importance of doubt is further upset when we consider, rather than why the game logically can or can't begin with doubt, why it is the game *doesn't* begin with doubt. This is a more practical question. The answer is simple: namely, that if the game did begin with doubt (or if doubt played a ma jor part in the game) it would be detrimental to the "game's biological function in our lives." If we think again of the mother who doubts the sincerity of her child's cries and is *continually* not convinced of them, it is obvious what the result of this kind of action would be: not unlikely, the child would die, or at le ast become very sick. In the case of the traffic, if everyone was starting and stopping sporadically, and changing directions in confusion, there would probably be a great number of crashes and deaths. Thus it is of the utmost importance that the game doesn't include doubt.

But does this mean that the very idea of doubt, as understood and valued by philosophy is a rather useless and slightly mad concept? We have seen that, in the context of the simple game, radical doubt is both logically and

practically without proper meaning. Logically, when doubt is imagined at the beginning of the game, bot h the game and doubt become unrecognizable. Practically, when the same procedure is followed, doubt becomes problematic for the continuation of our very existence. But are we then to do away with the idea of doubt altogether and be content with an unquestioned and uncritically assumed world?

It doesn't seem as though Wittgenstein takes it this far. As far as I can tell, Wittgenstein is saying two things concerning doubt; first, that there is a more complex game which meaningfully includes doubt; but, second, the game that includes doubt is different, and remains distinct from, the game which does not.

It may be, as Wittgenstein's interlocutor responds, "that doubt doesn't have a place in your simple game----but does that mean that it is *certain* he has a toothache?"

Wittgenstein's response to this question is complex, and seems again to be spread throughout the entire section. The first complexity comes with the answer we are required to give to the interlocutor, namely, that we are *not* certain. For we cannot simply say, on the basis of the descriptions outlined above, that doub t has no place in the way in which we live our lives and thus cannot be meaningfully raised. With the question 'are you certain?' (which necessarily implies doubt) a different game is being played than the simple game by which we practically live in the world. Wittgenstein says at the outset of the section that "the game which inclu des doubt is simply a more complicated one than a game which does not." The more complicated game is initiated with the question of doubt and certainty (they come together). In the context of this complex game, one could respond to the person who asks whether it is certain that so and so has a toothache by doing all kinds of experiments and i nvestigations into the matter. One could observe the behaviour of the person who claims to have a toothache and note that he consistently cannot eat properly and has a look of pain and frustration upon his otherwise pleasant face; and finally that he has been observed frequenting the dentist more than once since the alleged toothache began. In su ch a manner the certainty or doubt of the claim could be justified. Procedures and actions of this sort are what make up the more complex game of doubt in a meaningful sense.

What is crucial, here, for Wittgenstein is that the behaviour which is required for the game of doubt is not required for the simple game. In most cases, when someone tells us that he or she has a toothache, we generally *do not* doubt them. However, should that person have deceived us in the past concerning such claims , or if we are alerted to the fact that, in this particular context, that person would some how gain something (imagine that it involves some kind of insurance claim) from having a toothache, we may then begin to play the doubt-certainty game.

In the same manner, the philosopher (Moore) who exclaims "We know there is a chair over there!" is no longer playing the simple game; for there is no need to ask such questions in the simple game. To say that "We know" such and such a thing exists is a response to the possible claim that ‘we don’ ;t, in fact, know anything of the sort'. Procedures may then occur to determine if we really do know. However, this has no bearing upon the simple game itself, that is, upon how we live.

But it is unclear whether doubt holds the same meaning in the doubt-certainty game we actually play as it has for traditional philosophy. In other words, what meaning does doubt retain in its philosophical usage? Any at all?

As we have seen, it does not seem to make sense to radically doubt, in the philosophical sense, the truth of so and so’s toothache outright. If one continually claims that the person with the toothache might be "shamming", one has--if my interpretation of Wittgenstein is correct on this point---taken doubt out of its environment of meaningful use. For, as we have seen, in the simple game one neither can nor does doubt right from the beginning. And further, if, for example, everytime someone claimed to be sick, one thought that person might be shamming simply because the doubt can be raised, that person’s doubt would appear more likely as weird be haviour.

What then becomes of questions concerning the existence of the external world, or that of other minds? When these doubts are expressed through "actions, gestures and demeanor", rather than "in a language", they seem to lose their intelligibility. They are not the kind of questions (as the question of a t oothache is) that can be demonstrated as true or false. Thus the game of philosophical doubt, being neither the simple or more complicated game, seems to be an anomaly, the meaning of which remains in question.

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