

Oswald Hartley to H. G. Gaskin: Letter 19/4/59
(1959. Sun 7)

Knowledge, Certainty and Doubt

A. DO I KNOW I AM SITTING IN A CHAIR?

This book is concerned mainly with the philosophy of Wittgenstein's masterpiece, the *Investigations*, and associated writings. Among his other works, the most important are probably the notes *On Certainty*, which will be the main subject of this chapter. This work was written, as the editors tell us, in the last year and a half of the author's life (Preface, vi); the last remark in the volume is dated '27.4.[1951]', and he died two days later.

Wittgenstein had worked on the *Investigations* over many years, re-writing and re-arranging his material with infinite pains – though he was not satisfied, even then, that he had 'produced a good book' (Pl, end of Preface).¹ By contrast, the remarks in *On Certainty* (some of them dated day by day as he wrote) may fairly be described as first-draft material, and this must be borne in mind in reading and discussing the work. In spite of his many insights, and frequent brilliance of expression, his remarks in this volume are sometimes unclear or at odds with one another, as we shall see.

In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein had chosen as his starting-point a quotation from Augustine, and his reaction to the view expressed there was a dominant theme throughout the book. A similar role is played in *On Certainty* by the writings of an important recent thinker, and friend of Wittgenstein's, G. E. Moore. In the first section of the book Wittgenstein cites one of Moore's statements, and much of the book is taken up with his reactions to Moore's position. The quotation from Augustine, and the main focus of the *Investigations*, had been on language; whereas Moore's concern, and the main theme of *On Certainty*, is about knowledge and doubt. But, as we shall see, there are also important continuities between the two works.

The statement with which *On Certainty* begins had been made

by Moore in a remarkable lecture given to the British Academy in 1939, in which he took up a challenge that had been issued a century and a half earlier by Kant. It was, said Kant, 'a scandal to philosophy' that no-one could yet produce a 'satisfactory proof' of the existence of things external to the mind. Moore's 'proof' consisted in holding up his hands and saying, with suitable gestures, 'Here is one hand' and 'Here is another', and concluding from this that there are things external to the mind.

Moore was aware that this way of disposing of the problem might not satisfy everyone. Some philosophers, he thought, would demand a logical proof of his premises, 'Here is one hand' and 'Here is another'. Without this, they would argue, he could not *know* them to be true, and the way would still be open for sceptical doubt. Moore's reply was to admit that he could not give such a proof, but to claim that he could, nevertheless, *know* these statements to be true. There are some truths, he maintained, that a person can know without being able to give a proof.² In an earlier paper, 'A Defence of Common Sense', he had given an extensive list of propositions, of various kinds, all of them 'truisms' which, he said, he could '*know*', with certainty, to be true', contrary to what might be said by sceptical philosophers; for example, that he had a body, that there were other human beings besides himself, that the earth had existed long before he was born, and so on (*Philosophical Papers*, p. 32ff). These propositions, and Moore's use of them, are discussed in Wittgenstein's notes.

Wittgenstein's treatment has a negative and a positive aspect. His negative argument is that Moore's examples, so far from being paradigms of knowledge, are not proper examples of it at all. On the other hand, agreeing with Moore in assigning a special place to these propositions, he tries to give an account of their role in connection with our knowledge. Wittgenstein uses Moore's examples and similar ones of his own. I shall refer to both as 'Moore's propositions'.

Wittgenstein argues that when Moore speaks of 'knowledge', he is not using the word in accordance with its normal conditions. 'One says "I know" when one is ready to give compelling reasons'; if a person 'knows something, then the question "how does he know?" must be capable of being answered' (OC 243, 550). But it is not clear how these conditions could be met in the case of Moore's examples, such as 'Here is a hand'. If one tried to give reasons in such a case, one 'could give a thousand, but none that

is as certain as the very thing it is meant to be a reason for (OC 307). Such 'reasons' would not have the function of normal reasons. Hence, if the reasons for someone's assertion 'are no surer than his assertion, then he cannot say that he knows. . . ' (OC 243).

Wittgenstein also made the point (in the *Investigations*) that where we can speak of knowledge, it would also make sense to speak of believing or making certain. 'One says "I know" where one can also say "I believe" or "I suspect"; where one can convince oneself' (PI p. 221; cf. OC 58). But these possibilities, again, would not exist in the case of Moore's propositions.

It would seem that, in what he says about reasons, Wittgenstein is putting forward a general claim about the conditions of knowledge. According to a recent commentator, 'Wittgenstein concludes that, as a general matter, "whether I know something depends on whether the evidence backs me up or contradicts me" [OC 41]. When there is no possibility of evidence [doing this], the matter cannot be something that I know' (T. Morawetz, *Wittgenstein and Knowledge*, 92). Yet it would be surprising, in view of what he says elsewhere about generalisations and theories, if this were really Wittgenstein's settled view. It is also a claim that is hardly likely to be true if he is right in what he says about the fibre-to-fibre structure of our concepts. And indeed it is not difficult to think of counter-examples to this 'theory of knowledge' (as we may call it). I know that the Battle of Hastings took place in 1066, but would not be able to say how I know this. I know that two years ago I visited Castle Howard and enjoyed my visit, but there is no evidence that 'backs me up'.

Wittgenstein also says (OC 175) that whereas 'I know' requires a justification, this is not so in the case of belief. But this too is a mistake. Whether a justification is required depends on what the belief or knowledge is about, and on the context in which these terms are used. If I express a belief that so-and-so will win the election, then I *would*, in most circumstances, be expected to be able to say why I believe this. Finally, Wittgenstein seems to think, with many recent theorists of knowledge, that knowledge entails belief ('What I know, I believe' – OC 177). But such generalisations, apart from being open to refutation, are hardly in accordance with Wittgenstein's attitude to generalisation and theory, as expressed in the *Investigations* and elsewhere.³

But was Wittgenstein really committed to these views? Was he committed to denying that one could speak of knowledge or belief

in the case of Moore's propositions? In a number of passages we find him using these and related words in regard to such propositions. His 'belief' that he has two hands is, he says, shared by 'every reasonable person' (OC 252); he is 'quite certain' that 'motor cars don't grow out of the earth' (OC 79); he 'knows' that the earth has existed long before his birth (OC 288). There are also passages in which he confesses his difficulty in trying to decide whether these are cases of knowledge or not. He asks himself: 'Haven't I got it wrong and isn't Moore perfectly right? . . . Of course I do not think to myself "The earth already existed some time before my birth", but does that mean I don't *know* it?' (OC 397). Again, 'Do I know that I am now sitting in a chair? – Don't I know it? In the present circumstances no-one is going to say that I know this. . . . But even if one doesn't say it, does that make it *untrue*?' (OC 552).

The last passage draws attention to another reason that has been given for denying that these are cases of knowledge – namely, that there would be no *use* for the word 'know' in these cases; it would not perform the useful function that it performs in other, more usual cases. 'I would like', says Wittgenstein 'to reserve the expression "I know" for the cases in which it is used in normal linguistic exchange' (OC 260); and this would not include my knowledge that I am now sitting in a chair. But is there, after all, no context – no use, in any sense, for such expressions of knowledge?

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.' (OC 467).

But is 'doing philosophy' a genuine use? If, writes a commentator, 'a "philosophical use" is just one in which a philosopher may give examples, then the issue is whether there is such a use. What is at issue is whether it makes sense to proceed as Moore does' (Elizabeth Wolgast, *Paradoxes of Knowledge* (Cornell, 1977), 73). But this is a curious sort of issue. Knowing that Moore used the expression 'I know' in that context, how can we ask 'whether there is such a use'? Here the last word would seem to be: 'This language-game is played' (PI 645).

But should Moore's use *count* as a use? May it not, after all, be

devoid of sense? According to Norman Malcolm (in an early paper), Moore's use of 'I know' in the context of his argument was senseless in the same sort of way as the expression 'good-natured' in the context 'My desk is good-natured'.⁴ But this cannot be right. Moore's audience would have been very puzzled if he had told them that his desk was good-natured; but they were not puzzled by his claims to know that he had two hands. Probably they thought: yes, of course, here is something we all know. Nor would they have been puzzled by the fact that Moore made his assertions in that context.

But perhaps it will be said that Moore and his audience were both deluded, that in spite of what they thought, the whole discussion was meaningless. It would be rash, no doubt, to conclude that there is a meaningful use of language wherever people take themselves to be participating in a discussion. But how else is the matter to be settled? To someone armed with a view of the essence of language, such as that of the *Tractatus* or the verification principle, this question will have a firm answer, and he will have a method of deciding any given case. But if the later Wittgenstein was right in his rejection of this conception of language, then the question will not be amenable to such treatment. In that case we shall still be able to point out how the philosophical use *differs* from ordinary uses; but this will not entail that it is not a use at all.

The same point may be made about other non-ordinary uses of language, for example in science, aesthetic judgement and religion. The latter is especially interesting here, for in his *Lectures on Religious Belief* Wittgenstein made a point of bringing out the great differences that exist between the ordinary and religious uses of 'believe'. But he did not conclude that the latter was a misuse of the word, or that religious belief was not really belief. His conclusion was: '... there is this extraordinary use of the word "believe". One talks of believing and at the same time one doesn't "believe" as one ordinarily does'.⁵

Perhaps it will be said that a crucial difference between religion and philosophy is that the former is a 'practice'. But cannot the same be said of philosophy? Again, if Moore's philosophising is ruled out because of lack of an ordinary context, should not the same rule apply to Moore's critics? If they say, for example, that the meaning of a word is its use in practice, then it may be pointed out that this remark would only be made in a philosophical context.

Perhaps they would accept that the remark is 'nonsensical', but only in a special *Tractatus* sense of that word. But if this is correct, should not a similar allowance be made for Moore's assertions?

There is a passage in which Wittgenstein speaks of Moore's propositions as 'grammatical'. Taken in a grammatical sense, he says, Moore's 'I know' would mean: 'There is no such thing as doubt in this case', or 'The expression "I do not know" makes no sense in this case' (OC 58); but if that is so, he claims, then 'I know' makes no sense either. Yet his next remark again shows him vacillating on this issue. 'I know', he says, 'is here a *logical* insight' (OC 59). But, the reader may wonder, how can it be a logical insight if it makes no sense? I believe that Wittgenstein's talk of 'no sense' in the first remark was a hangover from his earlier, *Tractatus* self. The propositions of that work were (in the sense described in Chapter 2) 'nonsense', but this did not mean that they consisted of gibberish or lacked any point or context. They were intended to express a 'logical insight'.

A similar difficulty arises in the discussion of pain in the *Investigations*. We saw earlier (Chapter 5) how Wittgenstein dealt with the objector who said 'Only I can know whether I am really in pain', by drawing attention to the fact that, according to normal usage, other people frequently know that one is in pain. But he also took issue with the positive aspect of the objection, as follows:

It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I am in pain. What is it supposed to mean – except perhaps that I *am* in pain? (PI 246).

Now one thing it may mean, one way in which the statement would have a use, is as a 'grammatical' reminder; and, curiously enough, Wittgenstein himself indicates such a use in the very next section. Here he echoes the 'Only I can know ...' of PI 246 with the sentence 'Only you can know if you had that intention', on which he comments:

One might tell someone this when one was explaining the meaning of the word 'intention' to him. For then it means: *that* is how we use it. (And here 'know' means that the expression of uncertainty is senseless.) (PI 247)

Now it is not clear in what circumstances one would actually

'explain' this word to anyone (presumably we do not learn it in such a way). But we can easily think of cases in which we might remind someone of this aspect of its use; and similarly in the case of pain. To a dithery patient, the doctor may say: 'You must know whether you have a pain', or 'Only you can tell me'. And an indecisive person may be told: 'You must know what you want.' The function of such remarks is grammatical. It is not that the person concerned happens to have particularly good evidence for what he wants, intends or feels; but that he has, in these matters, a special authority or a special right of decision; and these are not based on evidence. When the word 'know' is used in this (grammatical) way, it does not mean what the objector in PI 246 had intended, but it does mean something. (It is 'nonsense', but only in a *Tractatus* sense of this word.)

Now in drawing attention to the normal use of 'know' that occurs when other people know that I am in pain, Wittgenstein was on safe ground. For it is a fact, and a fact known to anyone who cares to reflect on the matter, that we use the word 'know' in this way. But the other claim, that I cannot be said to know this, is not so easily defended. It seems, indeed, only too easy to produce a refutation of it. All that is required is for someone to say 'He knows he is in pain'; this would disprove the claim that 'it can't be said'. To be sure, we would need to have a genuine example of *saying*; the speaker would have to understand what he is saying and not merely utter the words. Let us assume that he uses the words concerned ('know', 'pain') correctly in other contexts. This would not entail, of course, that he is using them so in this context. Perhaps their combination here does not make sense. But how is this to be proved? The statement 'He knows he is in pain' is grammatical in the ordinary sense. Nor does it contain a demonstrable incoherence, as in the case of 'five o'clock on the sun' (PI 350). What we can say is that this is a rather peculiar use of 'know'. We can also point out (as Wittgenstein did) that if we treat this as a normal example, perhaps even a paradigm, of knowledge, then we are liable to go wrong in matters of importance in philosophy. But this will not prove that 'it can't be said'. Perhaps someone who has listened to these points will no longer *wish* to say it. But perhaps he will still wish to say it. (Or perhaps he will refrain from saying it in the presence of his philosophy teacher but go on saying it elsewhere – for example, when asked to give examples of things he knows.)

It is unfortunate that Wittgenstein expressed himself on this issue in such a definite way; and the same is true of his denials of knowledge of Moore's propositions in *On Certainty* (though, as we have seen, he was not consistent about this). For this may divert attention from the main investigation, and lead to futile disputes about whether these are 'really' cases of knowledge or not. In reply to A. J. Ayer's 'proof' (against Wittgenstein) that one does know it when one is in pain, Malcolm pointed out that in this case 'I know' cannot do any of its normal jobs', and concluded that this was 'a good and sufficient reason for excluding the combination of words "I know I am in pain" from language' (*Thought and Knowledge*, 127, 125). But what can it mean to exclude words from language? Would people be forbidden to utter this sentence? In this matter it is better to follow the methodology stated by Wittgenstein in another passage: 'Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything' (PI 126). What needs to be put before us, and what is important in promoting understanding, is a proper view of the function of 'know' in the first- and other-person sentences (for example, that in the former it 'cannot do any of its normal jobs'). This, and not something that follows from it, is the important advance. (Cf. Z 314).⁶

B. THE 'PECULIAR LOGICAL ROLE' OF MOORE'S PROPOSITIONS

Moore's answer to scepticism was to produce propositions which, he said, he could '*know*, with certainty, to be true' (*Philosophical Papers*, 32). In this matter he was in the tradition of thinkers through the ages, and especially since the time of Descartes, who held that scepticism must be defeated, and knowledge rehabilitated, by confrontation with cast-iron items of knowledge about which one could not possibly be deceived. But this was not Wittgenstein's approach, as we saw, he questioned whether these were cases of knowledge at all. He did, however, attribute to these propositions a 'peculiar logical role in our system' (OC 136), which he characterised in a number of ways. They must be taken for granted if there is to be any doubting or questioning at all. 'The questions that we raise, and our doubts, depend on the fact that certain propositions are exempt from doubt; are, as it were, the hinges on which those turn' (OC 341). They are part of one's 'world-

picture', 'the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false' (OC 94). 'I cannot doubt [such a] proposition without giving up all judgement' (OC 494), cf. 308). Nor could I argue with someone who questioned (or appeared to question) such propositions. If he said that he doubted whether he had a body, 'I wouldn't know what it would mean to try to convince him that he has one' (OC 257). An argument is possible only with someone who regards such propositions as 'exempt from doubt'. This does not mean, however, that we have here straightforward (and especially strong) examples of knowledge; for, as we saw, they do not conform very well to the normal conditions for knowledge.

The 'peculiar logical role' of these propositions is also brought out if we try to fit them into the established dichotomy of empirical and a priori knowledge. That they are not *a priori* in the sense of mathematical demonstrations seems clear enough. We cannot prove by such methods that the earth exists, that there are other people besides myself, or that the object before me is my hand; nor is it self-contradictory if we suppose these propositions to be false. Can we, then, regard them as empirical? On the face of it, the proposition 'The earth existed 100 years ago' has the same logical character as 'The earth existed a billion years ago'. The latter is a matter for empirical enquiry, but can the same be said of the former? It is not clear what would count as evidence for (as against) such a proposition. 'We don't', says Wittgenstein, arrive at such propositions 'as a result of investigation' (OC 138). (This is connected with the point that 'How does he know?' cannot be answered in these cases – see p. 153.) Hence 'not everything that has the form of an empirical proposition is an empirical proposition' (OC 308).

The propositions in question 'belong', says Wittgenstein, 'to the foundation of all operations of thought (of language)' (OC 401). His account should, however, be contrasted with traditional accounts of 'foundations of knowledge', given by philosophers of both the rationalist and empiricist traditions. According to Descartes, for example, the whole of our knowledge is based on a few self-evident truths, from which all the rest can be derived by deductive reasoning. Without this foundation the whole edifice would collapse before the onslaught of scepticism. Empiricists, on the other hand, have seen the foundation of knowledge as consisting of items of sense-experience. According to Locke, it is all built up

from 'ideas' which are, in some sense, imprinted on the mind when we use our sense-organs. In our time, empiricists such as Carnap and Ayer have tried to analyse all genuine knowledge into 'basic propositions', or 'protocol sentences', concerning the speaker's immediate 'sense-data'.

Wittgenstein too speaks of fundamental propositions and beliefs. Commenting on the proposition 'I have two hands', he writes: 'At the foundation of grounded belief lies belief that is not grounded' (OC 252–3). A superficial reading of *On Certainty* might suggest that we are being offered yet another account of the foundations of knowledge, comparable with those just mentioned. But Wittgenstein did not mean foundations in the traditional sense. The propositions concerned were, rather, parts of an interdependent system: '... one might almost say that this foundation-wall is carried by the whole house' (OC 248). We are not to think of them as a 'point of departure' (OC 105) – a kind of knowledge that we have, or could have, before any other. For example, that mountains have existed for a long time is presupposed by many of the things we say about mountains. But is it something that we learn, or could learn, first of all? A child, says Wittgenstein, 'doesn't learn at all that that mountain has existed for a long time; that is, the question whether it is so doesn't arise at all. It swallows this consequence down, so to speak, with what it *does* learn' (OC 143).

Wittgenstein did not believe that one could be in a position of having only a set of fundamental beliefs (whatever they might be) and then proceed to build the rest of one's knowledge on that basis. 'When we first begin to *believe* anything, it is not a single proposition, but a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole); 'a totality of judgements is made plausible to us' (OC 141, 140). Descartes, by contrast, believed that a person might be certain of only one proposition – *cogito ergo sum* – and then, by using his powers of reason, construct a whole corpus of knowledge on the basis of this proposition. Empiricists, on the other hand, have looked to sense-experience, as opposed to reason, as the main source of knowledge; but here again, it was thought that the relevant items of knowledge ('impression', 'sense-data' and the like) come to us one by one, after which we combine and arrange them in various ways, so as to construct the knowledge we actually have. What we are 'given' are basic items of knowledge, which we have prior to the construction. Wittgenstein, by contrast, wrote: 'What has to be accepted, the given, is – one might say –

forms of life' (PI p. 226). The expression 'forms of life' is meant to convey the wholeness of the system, and also the fact that it includes action ('life') as well as passive observation or experience. (This point will be further discussed in Section C.)

Wittgenstein's 'fundamental' propositions, unlike the fundamental data of traditional epistemology, are of various types. Some are personal, others impersonal; some about objects in one's environment, others about one's body; some about mathematical truths, others about causal regularities, and others again about remembered facts. In a number of passages he discusses the differences between them and the different ways in which they fit into our world-picture.

Again, Wittgenstein's propositions do not have the permanence of the traditional ones. If 'cogito ergo sum' is the most fundamental item of knowledge, then this is a necessary and permanent part of the human condition; and similarly if the basis of knowledge consists of sense-data. Wittgenstein does speak of his propositions as a 'river-bed' which remains fixed relative to the flux of ordinary empirical propositions; but, he says, it may happen 'that this relation alters with time, so that fluid propositions become hard, and hard ones fluid (OC 96-9). To the suggestion that one could test 'I have two hands' by using one's eyes, he replies: 'Why shouldn't I test my *eyes* by observing whether I see two hands? *What* is to be tested by *what*? (Who decides *what* stands fast?)' (OC 125). (A nice example of a 'river-bed' proposition that has become fluid is 'no human being has ever been on the moon' (OC 108 and *passim*). Perhaps Wittgenstein was right – though this is debatable – in treating this as a river-bed proposition when he wrote; but if so, it has become 'fluid' since then.)

Finally, Wittgenstein makes the point that the logical status of a proposition may depend on the situation in which it is made. In certain circumstances (for example where an amputation is to take place) 'I have two hands' may function, not as a 'river-bed' proposition, but as an ordinary empirical statement for which evidence could be adduced. But this point, again, varies with different propositions. The question whether there are physical objects, for example, cannot be related to empirical circumstances in such a way (cf. OC 23).

Another characteristic of river-bed propositions is that they are not part of the 'traffic' of ordinary discourse; they are, 'so to speak, shunted on to an unused siding' (OC 210); and they 'lie apart from

the road travelled by enquiry' (OC 88). What is 'presupposed' by the language-game is not part of it. Wittgenstein sometimes says that the facts concerned 'show' themselves in the language-game (OC 7, 501, 618), but are not stated in it. This reminds us of the distinction between 'saying' and 'showing' that he had drawn in the *Tractatus*, according to which the pictorial relation that was presupposed by language could not itself be stated in language.

But are such views compatible with the later Wittgenstein's identification of meaning with use? If there is (apart from philosophy) no use for these propositions, if they lie forever in a dead siding, must it not follow that they are meaningless? (This is similar to the issue about the use of 'I know', discussed in the last section.) It may be thought that in identifying meaning with use, Wittgenstein was laying down a criterion of meaningfulness – that an expression has meaning only if there is a use for it.⁸ But such a criterion, which would be typical of philosophers of the verificationist school, is hardly to be expected from Wittgenstein. His aim was to investigate *what* the meaning of a word or sentence is (by paying attention to its actual use), rather than to eliminate some kinds of language as meaningless.

If such a criterion *were* adopted, would the requirement be for actual or for possible use? The former is hardly plausible. It is, after all, largely a matter of accident whether a given fact is ever stated or not. Suppose, for example, that there were four chairs in my room last Tuesday. Perhaps there will never be any point in stating this. Is the sentence therefore meaningless? (It would be easy to think of thousands of other examples, from more or less remote corners of history, geography and so on.) Similarly, there may never be any point in stating that the earth exists, but this would not entail that this sentence is meaningless or untrue. (It seems to me that I have known something the whole time, and yet there is no sense in saying so, in uttering this truth' – OC 466.) But what if the criterion were about possible rather than actual use? It is easy to think of situations in which there *would* be a point in using the sentence about the chairs. But then, with a little ingenuity, the same can be done for sentences like 'The earth exists'. To a group of space-travellers this sentence might convey important information. And there is a considerable literature in which philosophers have shown that, with sufficient imagination, a suitable context can be provided for the most unlikely sentences.⁹

C. KNOWLEDGE, DOUBT AND ACTION

In traditional systems of epistemology, as we have seen, all our knowledge is based on fundamental items which must be taken as self-evident; and if this cannot be done, then the whole edifice is undermined. But this would also deprive us of our reasons for acting, for we act on the basis of knowledge (or belief). But which comes first, knowledge or action? Can knowledge exist prior to action? Of course it can do so in particular cases. I find out that a certain film is on at the cinema, and *then* proceed to act on this knowledge. But can the same be said for knowledge in general? Descartes, in the sceptical phase of his argument, tells us that he will not yet allow his doubt to affect his actions: 'I am not considering the question of action but only of knowledge'.¹⁰ To be on the safe side, he will carry on as usual and not allow his doubt to subvert his activities. But the question of knowledge remains fundamental: his activities will lack justification unless and until he can, as he hopes, establish the truth of those 'ancient and commonly held opinions' (about the existence of the physical world and so on) that he has put into doubt. And if he cannot succeed in this, then he must, to be consistent, suspend his activities.

This priority of knowledge over action was turned on its head by Wittgenstein. The end-point of justification is not, he says, 'that certain propositions are seen immediately to be true . . . , but our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game' (OC 204). But what does this mean? Is Wittgenstein saying that we know because we act, rather than the other way round? This would be absurd. It makes sense to say I am going to the cinema because I know the film is on, but not vice versa. Yet this order of priorities is not there in the original learning-situation, in which we learn to take part in the language-game. We do not begin by learning that such and such is the case and then proceed to the relevant action. A child, says Wittgenstein, learns to *fetch* a book, to *sit* in a chair and so on; but he is not taught that these things exist. Again, one might teach him the word 'tree' by standing in front of a tree and saying 'lovely tree'. These activities presuppose the existence of trees and books. 'But can the child be said to *know*: that a tree exists?' (OC 480). Does he believe or know 'that milk exists? Does a cat know that a mouse exists?' (OC 478).

We learn the use and meaning of such words as 'book' and 'chair' in situations in which some action is being performed; and

then we also learn to justify our actions, or some of them, by reference to knowledge (for example, that there is a book in the other room). But the propositions about existence are not part of the language-game, except in the 'background' sense. 'Are we to say', asks Wittgenstein, 'that the knowledge that there are physical objects comes very early or very late?' (OC 479). In one sense it comes very early, for we have here one of those propositions that 'show' themselves in our language-games even though they are not normally stated and have no use outside philosophy. But in another sense the answer is 'very late'. The very concepts of existence and 'physical object' are sophisticated ones which could not come first in the acquisition of language. Nor is it necessary to acquire them in order to be competent in the use of language. In this sense they belong to the superstructure of the conceptual system and not to its foundation.

In Descartes's writings we are invited to develop a system of knowledge from the standpoint of a disembodied mind (the existence of our bodies being, so far, unproved); and in the works of empiricists knowledge is treated as something that is 'given' to a passive receptacle, the mind. But a human child is an organism that *acts*, and reacts, in certain ways, and the language-game that he learns is built on to this behaviour. This point was made in the *Investigations*, as we saw in Chapter 5, about the language-game of sensations, in which 'they teach the child a new pain-behaviour' by means of words which are 'connected with the primitive, the natural' behaviour of crying (PI 244). The same kind of development, from the 'natural' to the 'new' (language-game) behaviour, occurs in connection with the child's interest in milk and other objects in its environment. The new behaviour will involve concepts of knowledge and justification (and also deception), but the 'background' propositions need not come into it at all. A philosopher might claim, for example, that in most of our actions we rely on the 'uniformity of nature' – that things will continue to behave in regular ways. But, says Wittgenstein, such principles do not enter into our language-games any more than into the behaviour of animals. 'The squirrel does not infer by induction that it is going to need stores next winter as well. And no more do we need a law of induction to justify our actions or predictions' (OC 287). We might say, paraphrasing PI 246, that if we are using the word 'justify' as it is normally used, then our actions are very often justified; and there is no need to appeal, in addition, to a 'law of

induction' of the kind sought by philosophers. Similarly, we can explain a squirrel's behaviour by reference to its expectations, memory and so on (for example where it deposited its nuts), but we need not and would not ascribe to it any ideas about the philosophical principle. In the case of human beings, the philosophical question *can* be introduced, but this is not necessary in order for the activity or language-game to be conducted in the normal way and in accordance with normal standards of justification.

An objection sometimes made against Wittgenstein is that he makes too much of the original learning-situation, as if what is taught to the child is decisive in evaluating the claims of philosophers with regard to justification and other matters. Is it not absurd to regard a child's grasp of these matters as more authoritative than that of a sophisticated adult? Children are taught that babies are brought by a stork and that Father Christmas delivers presents in the night; but later it occurs to them to question and think critically about these beliefs. May not the same development take place in the case of ordinary beliefs versus philosophical doubt?

But this is a misleading comparison. For what the child is taught when he learns about chairs, trees and hands is not a belief (that these things, or physical objects in general, exist), but to participate in an activity, a language-game. Thus if we tell him 'This is your hand', we are not teaching him a belief, but the meaning of the word 'hand' – how to use this word in 'the innumerable language-games that are concerned with his hand' (OC 374). To the objector (in a passage in *Zettel*) who asks 'So does he have to begin by being taught a false certainty?', Wittgenstein replies: 'There isn't any question of certainty or uncertainty yet in their language-game. Remember: they are learning to *do* something' (Z 416). It is true that later they may proceed to raise questions about certainty or uncertainty, but the impact of these will not be like that of an adolescent's questioning of childish beliefs. In the latter case we have one belief competing against another. As the child learns more about the world, he gives up some of his early beliefs and lets others take their place. The question 'Where do babies come from?' is now given a different answer: they come from X and not Y. But this is not so in the other case. The doubts about physical objects or the 'law of induction' are not in competition with previously existing beliefs, for the child had neither beliefs nor doubts about these propositions. Nor is it a matter of competing

language-games, as if one language-game (the philosophical) could drive out another (for example, that of fetching books and other objects when requested to do so). Hence the philosopher 'will teach his children the word "chair" after all, for of course he wants to teach them to do this or that, e.g. to fetch a chair' (Z 414). (By contrast, 'if someone does not believe in fairies', he can simply 'omit to teach them the word "fairy"' (Z 413).) He will teach the word 'chair', not because he is able to refute the philosophical doubts, but because he and the child need to take part in the relevant language-games.

Such language-games should also be contrasted with religious beliefs. (Hence it may be misleading to regard religion as a language-game, as some philosophers have done.) A person may change his mind about a religious belief (either rejecting or adopting it) as a result of critical questioning of his existing beliefs: and then his behaviour would be affected accordingly. Here we have a case of competing beliefs, and behaviour dependent on these beliefs. But someone who takes part (as we all do) in the language-games of ordinary life, does not do so because he *believes* in the existence of physical objects.

It may be claimed, however, that if someone does proceed to the stage of philosophical doubt, then this *ought* to affect his behaviour in ordinary life. We may assume that this would have been Descartes's position, had he not hoped for a speedy resolution of his doubts. If the sceptic means what he says when he uses the word 'doubt', then we would expect his behaviour to be affected in suitable ways, for this is a criterion of doubting, as normally understood. If someone doubts, in the normal sense, that there is a chair in the other room, or whether the train will really be at the station, then he would act (or refrain from acting) in suitable ways; and similarly in the case of more substantial beliefs and doubts, as in the case of religion. Yet this does not happen in the case of philosophical doubt. We can, says Wittgenstein, imagine people who qualify all their statements with an expression of uncertainty; but 'how would the life of these people differ from ours?' (OC 338). Again, a sceptic who has looked up the time of the train may insist: 'I have no belief that the train will really arrive' – but he will go to the station all the same. 'He does everything that the normal person does . . . ' (OC 339).

It may be thought that the sceptic behaves in these ways 'to be on the safe side', believing, perhaps, that the law of induction is

at least probably true, even if there is no proof of it. But this is not a tenable position, for there is no more proof that the law is *probably* true than that it is certainly true. And if our actions were based on such laws and propositions, then the sceptical challenge must deprive us totally of any justification for action, and this should be reflected in the sceptic's own behaviour. Yet, as David Hume pointed out long ago, sceptical arguments '*admit of no answer and produce no conviction*'. Their only effect is to cause that momentary amazement and irresolution and confusion, which is the result of scepticism' (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Selby-Bigge, 155).¹¹

But may not the sceptic's continued behaviour be due merely to weakness of will? Could there not be a really consistent sceptic, who suits his actions to his words? Such a person, we may take it, would *not* go to the station; would not take measures to provide himself with food; would not bother to evade traffic when crossing the road; would just as soon put his hand in the fire as not do so, and so on. But such behaviour is beyond the will-power of normal human beings. Here is another sense in which it is 'our acting which lies at the bottom of the language-game' (OC 204). We cannot help doing these things, any more than the squirrel can help acting in accordance with its nature. 'Nothing could induce me to put my hand into a flame – although after all it is *only in the past* that I have burnt myself' (PI 472). Our certainty in these matters 'lies beyond being justified or unjustified; [it is,] as it were, something animal' (OC 359). Moreover, if someone did act, or try to act, in ways appropriate to scepticism, would we recognise his behaviour as an expression of doubt?

If someone said that he doubted the existence of his hands, kept looking at them from all sides, tried to make sure it wasn't 'all done by mirrors', etc., we should not be sure whether we ought to call that doubting. We might describe his way of behaving as like the behaviour of doubt, but his game would not be ours. (OC 255)

Such a person, we might say, is unable to distinguish philosophical doubt from real doubt. And this would be a reason for regarding him as mad.

Wittgenstein's book is entitled *On Certainty*, and he takes his departure from Moore's propositions. Moore's approach to scepti-

cism was in the confrontationist tradition – confronting the sceptic with items of knowledge which would be unshakable. One might have expected something similar from Wittgenstein, but this, as we have seen, was not the case. One of his aims, indeed, was to discredit Moore's propositions from being genuine items of knowledge; and this may seem to strengthen the sceptic's position rather than to weaken it. What, in brief, was Wittgenstein's answer to scepticism?

Wittgenstein's approach, here as elsewhere, is to describe rather than to explain or justify (cf. OC 189, 192). 'In certain circumstances', he writes, 'we regard a calculation as sufficiently checked. What gives us the right to do so? ... Somewhere we must be finished with justification, and then there remains the proposition that *this* is how we calculate' (OC 212). The sceptic will challenge us to produce a further proposition which would justify our practice of calculating, and this, as Wittgenstein agrees, cannot be done. Can it be said, he writes in another passage, that 'everything speaks for, and nothing against, the table's still being there when no-one sees it? But what does speak for it?' (OC 119). The sceptical challenge to these propositions is not refuted by Wittgenstein. What he denies is that our language-games are founded on such propositions. In the case of religion or science, a whole practice or way of doing things may be underpinned by some fundamental belief or theory, such as the theory of natural selection or a belief in God, and if these are given up, it will no longer make sense to proceed as before. But there is no such underpinning in the case of ordinary life; and the 'fundamental' propositions postulated by foundationalists and sceptics (who are partners in the same misconception) has no such role. It is only through a misdescription of the logical situation that the sceptical doubts and denials seem to pose a challenge to our ordinary ways of going on. The remedy is not to take issue with these denials but to attain 'a clear view of the aim and functioning of [our] words' (PI 5).

D. KNOWING WHAT WE MEAN

There is also an internal incoherence in the sceptical position to which Wittgenstein drew attention. 'If you tried to doubt everything', he wrote, 'you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty'

(OC 115). The presupposed certainty is about the meanings of words. 'If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either' (OC 114, cf. 506).

If someone doubts, for example, that the object before him is a hand, then he must know the meanings of these words, for example, the word 'hand'. But to know the meaning of this word is to know that '*this*, for example', is a hand (OC 268; cf. 369). Again, 'I am not more certain of the meaning of my words than I am of certain judgements. Can I doubt that this colour is called 'blue?'' (OC 126). If I cannot be sure of this fact, then I cannot be sure of the meanings of my words, in which I express my doubt or belief.

Here we are brought back to the point about 'agreement in judgements' (PI 242), discussed in Chapter 5 (see pp. 88–9). It may be thought that the knowledge of meaning (whether of 'blue', 'hand', 'pain' or 'two') is independent of one's *use* of these words, in judging, doubting and so on; so that, given the knowledge of meaning, one could use them to affirm or doubt any proposition whatever. But this is not so, for someone who doubts that the object before him is a hand or that a certain flower is blue would be held not to know the meanings of these words. Hence I cannot tell someone (or myself) that I doubt whether this is a hand without, by this very utterance, throwing doubt on the meaning of my statement.

This point also applies to the word 'doubt' itself. If someone says he doubts one of these propositions, then 'how do I know that he uses the words "I doubt it" as I do?' (OC 127). Similarly, 'if this deceives me, what does "deceive" mean any more?' (OC 507); and how, if such propositions are to be doubted, 'can I rely on what is meant by "true" and "false"?' (OC 515).

It might be thought that the sceptic could simply accept these points, and proceed to apply his doubt to the meaning of words as to everything else. He might, for example, ask himself whether he can really be sure of his meaning when he uses the words 'doubt', 'hand' or any others. But in doing this, he would again have to help himself, illegitimately, to a knowledge of meaning – in this case, the meaning of the question just mentioned. Normally such doubts about meaning – the meanings of ordinary words – do not arise, because our knowledge of them is daily confirmed and, so to speak, fine-tuned, by our dealings with other people. (This would not be so in the case of Robinson Crusoe, who might

indeed become doubtful about his memory of meanings.) But this source of knowledge cannot be invoked by a consistent sceptic, for he would doubt whether there *are* any other people.

But could not the doubts occur without any use of language? Of course the sceptic must use language if he is to make his points in discussion; but may one not doubt privately, without using language? What would this mean? A person may think silently of the proposition 'Here is a hand', consider whether it might be denied and so on. But this thinking would still be in terms of words, so that the scepticism about meanings must still arise. Another form of doubt is 'dispositional'. I may doubt whether it will be fine weather tomorrow, without ever thinking about the matter. But then it must still be true that *if* someone asked me, I would express my doubt in words; and to do that, I must know what the words mean. It is true that we can also ascribe doubt to creatures incapable of verbal expression. A squirrel, for example, may be said to be in doubt as to where he buried last year's nuts, or a dog as to which person he ought to follow. But in these cases the doubt is expressed in behaviour; and it is the behaviour that makes us ascribe doubt to the animal. But this is not so in the case of the sceptic.

The sceptic must either 'cheat' by helping himself to the assumption that he knows what he means, or he must remain silent. His predicament, like that of the person in the private language argument, is at 'the point where one would just like to emit an inarticulate sound' (quoted on p. 116).

E. 'SHOULD I SAY "I BELIEVE IN PHYSICS"?' (OC 602)

One of the things we 'swallow down' in the course of our learning, and which may be described as part of our 'world-picture', is the belief in modern science. In our quest for knowledge about the world, and reliable predictions about the course of nature, we look to scientific evidence and scientific methods. But is this something we take for granted, as needing no justification? Or can we claim to know, on the basis of reasons, that the scientific view is correct? (Cf. OC 602) This issue is brought to a head when the scientific view comes into collision with an alternative one. Suppose, says Wittgenstein, we came into contact with people who did not acknowledge the force of scientific evidence. 'Instead of a physicist,

they consult an oracle' (OC 609). Is this a difference that could be resolved by reasoning? Or would we merely be 'using our language-game as a base from which to *combat* theirs?' (OC 609). Reason, says Wittgenstein, can only take us a certain way.

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

Now it may be objected to this that reason and persuasion are not exclusive, for we often persuade someone to change his beliefs by *giving* him reasons – good reasons – for doing so. But it is also true that sometimes, at least, the reasons (or so-called reasons) that are given in such situations are not good, and various irrational procedures may be used to produce the desired change. Again, we may be mistaken in thinking that the 'primitive' people would be better off by changing their beliefs and their ways – a point that was illustrated in Chapter 6 with Wittgenstein's example of the people who said 'Our affairs went better before' when they had been persuaded away from their 'mistakes in counting' (RFM 105–6; see p. 132). Nevertheless there is such a thing as persuading the other people of the falseness of their view, and the superiority of scientific procedures, by rational means and without resorting to 'combat' or persuasion of an irrational kind. We may, for example, prove to them by demonstration that scientific methods and medicines are effective against disease. It may be said that, all in all, the scientific intrusion may do more harm than good, leading to a disruption of tribal values and so on; but this does not affect the point that it is possible to prove the effectiveness of the scientific approach.

There is an important difference between the status of the scientific view and the status of Moore's propositions. In describing the latter as belonging to our 'world-picture', as the 'hinges' on which all propositions turn, we are speaking about *human* thought and language, and not those of one society as against another. In the case of science, on the other hand, we know very well that this 'world-picture' is only a recent and local development. However, in justifying the scientific approach, we would be able to draw on universal values; we could appeal to that 'common behaviour of mankind [which] is the system of reference by means

of which we interpret an unknown language' (PI 206, previously quoted p. 135). We saw in Chapter 6 that there were limits of Wittgenstein's pluralism. Though we could not prove to the people who calculated and measured in strange ways that their practices were wrong, there is a point beyond which we could not make sense of their activities at all; they would not be *different* ways of calculating, for we could not describe them in these terms at all. Some aspect of this 'common behaviour' were suggested on p. 136 (in connection with Quine's position): human beings desire food when they are hungry, express fear (and behave accordingly) when threatened with pain, and so on. It is only under these conditions that we can interpret their language and, indeed, regard them as human beings in the full sense. But this frame of reference, and common understanding, must also enable us to reason with them, and to prove by rational argument the advantages of the scientific view.

What, after all, is the scientific view? This is not the place for an examination of the various definitions of science that have been put forward and contested by philosophers in recent years, but we may take it that one essential aspect of it is a due respect for experience. But the practice of learning from experience is an essential part of rationality itself. It is not something peculiar to the scientific view or any other; for it is part of that frame of reference, and common behaviour of mankind, which are necessary if we are to make anything at all of the language and practices of people different from ourselves.¹² And by appealing to the universal frame of reference we could demonstrate the advantages of the scientific view, both in terms of results, and in terms of the rational procedures that lead to these results.

Instead of a physicist, they consult an oracle. (And for that we consider them primitive.) (OC 609). Are we wrong if we do so? Are they not equally entitled to describe the scientific view as primitive? But what would this mean? The difference between their view and ours is not merely that they believe one thing and we another; there is also a sense in which our view *encompasses* theirs. I call him primitive because I have resources that are unfamiliar to him and because, let us suppose, he has no resources that are unfamiliar to me We can represent their beliefs and procedures to ourselves, but they cannot apprehend our own.¹³ Such a contrast is indeed made by Wittgenstein himself in another part of his book.

We say: these people do not know a lot that we know. And, let them be never so sure of their belief – they are wrong and we know it.

If we compare our system of knowledge with theirs, then theirs is evidently the poorer one by far. (OC 286)

The relationship is analogous to that between a modern scientist and his predecessors. The former can understand (and reject) the views of the latter, but the latter may have no inkling of the modern ideas. In this matter there is both continuity and discontinuity. The pre-scientific people are cut off from the richer system, but behind that system are those universal values of reason by means of which we can converse with them and introduce them to the richer system, and similarly in the history of the development of our own society.

8

Conclusion

Wittgenstein's notes *On Certainty*, as we have seen, are open to a number of objections, and seem sometimes to be at odds with one another. How he would have revised and re-drafted this material, had he lived to do so, must remain a matter for speculation and extrapolation from his more finished writings. But it is clear that, even in the state in which we have it, the work represents a major advance in epistemology, as well as exhibiting the kind of brilliance and originality that we find throughout its author's writings.

Originality is not, of course, a quality that is peculiar to Wittgenstein's work. It may be said of almost every philosopher of importance that he enriched the subject by contributing ideas that had not been thought of before. This is true, for example, of Moore's contribution to epistemology. His approach to scepticism was certainly something new and has proved to be of lasting importance in subsequent discussions of the subject. (In this book I have not tried to do justice to Moore's position, discussing it only from the point of view of *On Certainty*.) Even so, Moore's originality was not of the startling and, as we may say, disorienting kind that we find in Wittgenstein's work. Moore was addressing himself to a well-established question on the philosophical agenda, and his treatment may be described (as I claimed) as belonging to the 'confrontationist' type. But when we turn to Wittgenstein's writings here and elsewhere, we find that the established questions are not addressed in an easily recognisable way at all; one may feel, indeed, that they have been left unanswered, and that Wittgenstein's writings, fascinating as they may be, do not really get to grips with the important questions. In *On Certainty*, for example, he seems to approve neither of scepticism nor of the alternative view offered by Moore, and to confine himself, instead, to describing the relevant uses of language ('language-games'). But to regard this approach as a satisfactory way of unravelling philosophical problems calls for a radical re-orientation of the ideas with which we are likely to approach such problems, and with which they have been approached by philosophers in the past.

- to Evidence and Argument in the Field of Religion' by R. W. Hepburn: 'A language-game, wrote Wittgenstein, "is not based on grounds. . . . It is there - like our life". Religious belief, Norman Malcolm claimed, paraphrasing Wittgenstein, "does not rise or fall on the basis of evidence or grounds: it is 'groundless' ". (in R. Straughan and J. Wilson (eds), *Philosophers on Education* (Macmillan, 1987) 129. For Malcolm's claim, see S. C. Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion* (Cornell University Press, 1977) 148.) But Hepburn and Malcolm are both mistaken. Malcolm's 'paraphrase' is not justified by Wittgenstein's text (cf. OC 459, 509, 559); and Hepburn's 'A language-game . . . ' replaces Wittgenstein's 'The language-game . . . ' (OC 559). Wittgenstein is talking about human language and life as a whole, and not making a case for particular language-games.
17. See John Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge University Press, 1969), 66-7; cf. William Alston, *Philosophy of Language* (Prentice-Hall, 1964), 42-3.
18. J. Canfield, *Wittgenstein: Language and the World* (Amherst, 1981), 16.
19. The last two paragraphs, and some other passages in this section, are adapted from my paper, 'Does Language Need Rules?', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 30 (July 1980).
20. 'I know what the (several) views of *Wittgensteinians* are, even if I do not know for sure which, if any, was Wittgenstein's', writes Hilary Putnam. He goes on, however, to speak of *Wittgenstein's* views, attributing to the latter the idea that 'mathematical facts . . . are explained by our "natures" or "forms of life"'. See 'Analyticity and Apriority: Beyond Wittgenstein and Quine' in H. Putnam, *Realism and Reason* (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

7. KNOWLEDGE, CERTAINTY AND DOUBT

1. For details of its composition, with many comparisons with earlier drafts, see the commentaries by G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, published by Blackwell since 1980.
2. G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers*, 127 and 145-50.
3. I have criticised these and other claims made by recent theorists of knowledge in my paper 'How is Scepticism Possible?', *Philosophy*, 63 (1987). See also 'A Situational Account of Knowledge', *The Monist*, 68 (1985).
4. Norman Malcolm, 'Defending Common Sense', *Philosophical Review*, 58 (1949), 218.
5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, edited by Cyril Barrett (Basil Blackwell, 1966) 59. Also compare the following: 'Anything that I normally call evidence wouldn't in the slightest influence me.' 'No matter what might happen I shouldn't call it evidence against. . . . ' In the first passage (*Lectures and Conversations*, 56) Wittgenstein is commenting on religious belief, in the second (Malcolm's *Memoir*, Oxford University Press, 1958, 89) on an assertion of the type that Moore had put forward.
6. In this section I have used or adapted material from my paper 'On

- the Meaning and Use of "I know"', *Philosophical Investigations*, 5 (1982).
7. Moore himself claimed that they were empirical, in a retrospective essay, replying to critics who regarded them otherwise. See P. A. Schilpp, *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (Open Court, 1952) 672.
8. Cf. John W. Cook, 'Notes on Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*', *Philosophical Investigations*, 3 (Fall 1980), 26.
9. See also A. C. Ewing's argument that sentences like 'Quadratic equations go to race-meetings' should be described as false rather than meaningless, in 'Meaninglessness', *Mind* (1937).
10. *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1, edited by Haldane and Ross (Cambridge University Press, 1911), 148.
11. Hume also wrote that 'it is not reasoning which engages us to suppose the past resembling the future' (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 39), and used the example of putting one's hand in a fire in this connection. Although Wittgenstein had not read Hume, the resemblance between their views is extensive and remarkable, in spite of deep differences in other respects. See my 'Hume and Wittgenstein' in G. Vesey (ed.), *Impressions of Empiricism* (Macmillan, 1976).
12. Cf. p. 132 and p. 184 n. 6.
13. Thomas Morawetz, *Wittgenstein and Knowledge* (London: 1988), 128, 131. In this section, I have profited from Morawetz's discussion, p. 123ff.

8. CONCLUSION

1. This remark is usually taken to mean that our understanding is bewitched by language. But it (and the German original) could also be read in the sense that the *remedy* is 'by means of language'. The two readings could, of course, both be true.