

Selections from *On Certainty* by Ludwig Wittgenstein

Paragraphs: 35-37, 51-55, 79-83, 118-123, 126-135

35. But can't it be imagined that there should be no physical objects? I don't know. And yet "There are physical objects" is nonsense. Is it supposed to be an empirical proposition? - And is this an empirical proposition: "There seem to be physical objects"?

36. "A is a physical object" is a piece of instruction which we give only to someone who doesn't yet understand either what "A" means, or what "physical object" means. Thus it is instruction about the use of words, and "physical object" is a logical concept. (Like colour, quantity,...) And that is why no such proposition as: "There are physical objects" can be formulated. Yet we encounter such unsuccessful shots at every turn.

37. But is it adequate to answer to the scepticism of the idealist, or the assurances of the realist, to say that "There are physical objects" is nonsense? For them after all it is not nonsense. It would, however, be an answer to say: this assertion, or its opposite is a misfiring attempt to express what can't be expressed like that. And that it does misfire can be shown; but that isn't the end of the matter. We need to realize that what presents itself to us as the first expression of a difficulty, or of its solution, may as yet not be correctly expressed at all. Just as one who has a just censure of a picture to make will often at first offer the censure where it does not belong, and an investigation is needed in order to find the right point of attack for the critic.

51. What sort of proposition is: "What could a mistake here be like?" It would have to be a logical proposition. But is it a logic that is not used, because what it tells us is not taught by means of propositions. - It is a logical proposition; for it does describe the conceptual (linguistic) situation.

52. This situation is thus not the same for a proposition like "At this distance from the sun there is a planet" and "Here is a hand" (namely my own hand). The second can't be called a hypothesis. But there isn't a sharp boundary line between them.

53. So one might grant that Moore was right, if he is interpreted like this: a proposition saying that here is a physical object may have the same logical status as one saying that here is a red patch.

54. For it is not true that a mistake merely gets more and more improbable as we pass from the planet to my own hand. No: at some point it has ceased to be conceivable. This is already suggested by the following: if it were not so, it would also be conceivable that we should be wrong in every statement about physical objects; that any we ever make are mistaken.

55. So is the hypothesis possible, that all the things around us don't exist? Would that not be like the hypothesis of our having miscalculated in all our calculations? 56. When one says: "Perhaps this planet doesn't exist and the light-phenomenon arises in some other way", then after all one needs an example of an object which does exist. This doesn't exist, - as for example does... Or are we to say that certainty is merely a constructed point to which some things approximate more, some less closely? No. Doubt gradually loses its sense. This language-game just is like that. And everything descriptive of a language-game is part of logic.

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

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

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

82. What counts as an adequate test of a statement belongs to logic. It belongs to the description of the language-game.

83. The truth of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference.

118. Now would it be correct to say: So far no one has opened my skull in order to see whether there is a brain inside; but everything speaks for, and nothing against, its being what they would find there?

119. But can it also be said: Everything speaks for, and nothing against the table's still being there when no one sees it? For what does speak of it?

120. But if anyone were to doubt it, how would his doubt come out in practice? And couldn't we peacefully leave him to doubt it, since it makes no difference at all?

121. Can one say: "Where there is no doubt there is no knowledge either"?

122. Doesn't one need grounds for doubt?

123. Wherever I look, I find no ground for doubting that...

126. I am not more certain of the meaning of my words than I am of certain judgments. Can I doubt that this colour is called "blue"? (My) doubts form a system.

127. For how do I know that someone is in doubt? How do I know that he uses the words "I doubt it" as I do?

128. From a child up I learnt to judge like this. This is judging. 129. This is how I learned to judge; this I got to know as judgment.

130. But isn't it experience that teaches us to judge like this, that is to say, that it is correct to judge like this? But how does experience teach us, then? We may derive it from experience, but experience does not direct us to derive anything from experience. If it is the ground for our judging like this, and not just the cause, still we do not have a ground for seeing this in turn as a ground.

131. No, experience is not the ground for our game of judging. Nor is its outstanding success.

132. Men have judged that a king can make rain; we say this contradicts all experience. Today they judge that aeroplanes and the radio etc. are means for the closer contact of peoples and the spread of culture.

133. Under ordinary circumstances I do not satisfy myself that I have two hands by seeing how it looks. Why not? Has experience shown it to be unnecessary? Or (again): Have we in some way learnt a universal law of induction, and do we trust it here too? - But why should we have learnt one universal law first, and not the special one straight away?

134. After putting a book in a drawer, I assume it is there, unless... "Experience always proves me right. There is no well attested case of a book's (simply) disappearing." It has often happened that a book has never turned up again, although we thought we knew for certain where it was. - But experience does really teach that a book, say, does not vanish away. (E. g. gradually evaporates.) But is it this experience with books etc. that leads us to assume that such a book has not vanished away? Well, suppose we were to find that under particular novel circumstances books did vanish away. - Shouldn't we alter our assumption? Can one give the lie to the effect of experience on our system of assumption?

135. But do we not simply follow the principle that what has always happened will happen again (or something like it)? What does it mean to follow this principle? Do we really introduce it into our reasoning? Or is it merely the natural law which our inferring apparently follows? This latter it may be. It is not an item in our considerations.