

Implications of Wittgenstein's Later Thought

Epistemological scepticism has marked western thought in various ways since Plato. This, of course, has had substantial implications, not only in relation to the study of epistemology as strictly conceived but also, for example, moral and religious thought.

You will recall that Plato demanded strict (and possibly unattainable) criteria for claiming true knowledge (here I am talking about his theory of forms). Descartes, whilst choosing to ignore such a theory, nevertheless demanded criteria that were just as stringent. In both cases, knowledge was only attainable if the form of justification that led to it was, in principle, error free. By that, I do not mean that someone who makes a justification must not make a mistake (although that is important); rather, the form of justification itself must not (in principle) be open to doubt as something that can lead to knowledge.

For Descartes, the senses were not, in principle, error free as forms of justification because – as we have seen in previous classes – they can be deceptive. Indeed, if we take his evil demon thought experiment seriously, then nothing apart from knowing one exists when one is thinking counts as knowledge. Even if we run with Descartes' suspect attempt to extract himself from such radical scepticism (solipsism) and embrace his idea that knowledge is either innate or derived from reason, such an attempt is still haunted by the thought that we might not always get things right. Thus, from a rationalist perspective, knowledge still seems hard to attain.

Similarly, for the empiricists (the school of thought antithetical to rationalism), knowledge is difficult to acquire insofar as the conditions under which we can say something is knowledge are subject to strict criteria – knowledge must be true; we cannot have false knowledge (because one cannot know something that is false). The difficulty for the empiricists is the reliability of the senses – if all knowledge comes from experience then it must come through the senses. But suppose the senses do not show us the world as it actually is? Again, because we cannot guarantee the reliability of the senses, we have a form of scepticism.

What these two positions have in common is that they demand error free justification if one is to be certain that a particular claim, for which a justification has been made, is knowledge.

Kant tried to remedy these difficulties with his Transcendental Idealism (see previous handout for details) by arguing that for an experience to be intelligible at all, it must occur in space and time (the two sensible intuitions of the mind). For it to be further understood, it must then be mediated by the twelve categories (e.g. causation) that are

filters on our experience supplied by the mind, and which allow us to make sense of them. This argument, Kant believed, solved the sceptical troubles of the rationalists and empiricists. The problem for Kant however, is that what we come to know about the world is still very much subject to the way the mind filters our experiences. This led him to draw a distinction between the Phenomenal World (that which is mediated by the sensible intuitions and the categories) and the Noumenal World (the world as it is in itself). We can never know the world as it is in itself because we have no access to the apparatus that would show it to us. Thus, what we can claim to be knowledge is really only knowledge relative to what we have access to (the phenomenal world) and which, as such, is subject to the ways in which the human mind filters experience. Accordingly, the argument might be made that because we cannot know the world as it is in itself, we cannot really have knowledge of it.

In summary: throughout the history of western philosophy since Plato, epistemology has been (in one way or another) haunted by what is known as the *Agrippan Trilemma*.

According to this argument, any proposition (statement) requires a justification. However, any justification itself requires further justification (to show why it acts as justification). This means that any proposition whatsoever can be endlessly (infinitely) questioned. This infinite chain of justification is known as an *Infinite Regress*.

Agrippa's Trilemma represents a form of scepticism which argues that, ultimately, one cannot justify any knowledge claims because any attempted justification would eventually collapse into one of the three following patterns: (i) a 'bedrock' belief that is somehow self-evident or self-justifying, which always sounds suspicious; (ii) an infinite regress; (iii) a vicious circle. All these are seen as problematic. Indeed, the trilemma apparently shows that true knowledge is impossible.

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The set reading for the last couple of classes represents a radical departure from what has come to be understood as conventional western epistemology. The simplest claim of the selected passages is that there are some things that need to 'stand fast' in order for sense to be possible. In other words, there are some things for which it makes no sense to demand justification – one such is the statement (proposition): "There are physical objects."

For a moment, think about how you might justify such a claim. You may, in the first instance, believe that just pointing to them and touching them provides sufficient justification. After all, what is the difference between that and making the claim, "There are flowers in that vase"?

The difference is as follows: it makes sense to doubt the claim of flowers in the vase – it might be an optical illusion, for example, or the vase might possess a floral pattern and be some distance away; enough to give grounds for doubt. One can certainly imagine that there are no flowers in the vase and one can exemplify sane forms of behaviour that are consistent with such doubts. Indeed, one can also make a mistake in relation to such a claim – “I thought the vase had flowers in it but I was mistaken”.

Look at paragraph 54 of *On Certainty*:

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.

Is a mistake conceivable when it comes to the proposition “There are physical objects”? – One could conceivably make a mistake in a particular instance (say, in the case of a mirage) but that such a mistake can be made requires that the existence of physical objects is not open to question; for otherwise, it is conceivable that one might ‘be wrong in every statement about physical objects’ (ibid.).

In other words, propositions such as “There are physical objects” are exempt from doubt. Wittgenstein put the point as follows:

341. That is to say, the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

342. That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in deed not doubted.

It is worth also reflecting further on paragraph 342 – ‘that certain things are in deed not doubted’ (ibid.). This is what we might call a form of enacted certainty. Just as we do not doubt the existence of physical objects when we sit down on a chair, so the scientist, when investigating the universe (either theoretically or empirically), does not do so either. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of behaviour that exemplifies a genuine doubt that physical objects exist because it is not possible for anyone to check whether or not there are physical objects. To claim knowledge of such things is a logical impossibility rather than a physical impossibility; one cannot take evidence of physical objects in the form of physical objects because ‘if no evidence is trustworthy, trust is excluded in the case of the present

evidence’ (OC: 302). Consequently, it is logically impossible to claim that we can know (or that it is possible to know) that there are physical objects. There can only be grounds for doubt where the possibility of reassurance exists and, of course, there is nothing that would count as such in relation to the proposition, “I know there are physical objects.”

A similar point can be made against the sceptic in relation to language. I can teach a child the correct meanings of certain words in response to their having misapplied them; in this way, I can be said to know what the words mean and the child can be said to have learned from me. This application of the word “know” *only* makes sense within a linguistic framework in which justification of this kind is possible without having to further justify the linguistic framework itself that has allowed for it.

Knowing whether or not one is applying any word correctly is an empirical matter – it is verified by observation. This is a method that, according to the sceptic, contains the possibility of error and so cannot be used to justify knowledge claims beyond doubt. In other words, the possibility of error (no matter how small) is contained within any attempt to justify an assertion of correct or incorrect use in relation any word.

But this means that the sceptic’s use of “know” (along with their claim that our everyday uses of it are imprecise) is incoherent because both claims rely on having learned the uses of the word via empirical means. The problem for the sceptic, therefore, is that because such methods of learning are subject to the kinds of doubt the sceptic claims undermine the possibility of knowledge they cannot be said to know what they are taking about! Put another way: even in cases where justification is, in principle, error free (if, indeed, there are any) the results cannot be described as knowledge because the method involved in the learning and application of the concepts required for a description to be made, themselves, contain the possibility of error.

Accordingly, the prospect of a way of living (form of life) in which the stringency of the sceptic’s use of “know” makes sense is undermined because such a form of life would not manifest enacted foundations that would give absolute grounds for its use (such foundations would, themselves, need justification).

