Adrian Brockless
Evening Class Handout
Wittgenstein

Further Implications of W's *On Certainty*

Last week we examined the implications of Wittgenstein's philosophy for sceptical arguments in epistemology – such as the idea that there is at least the possibility that the external world does not exist in the way that we think that it does (or at all in the case of solipsistic arguments). We also looked at the Agrippan Trilemma which suggests that, ultimately, one cannot justify any knowledge claims (see last week's handout for details).

Wittgenstein, you will remember, claimed that propositions such as "There are physical objects" cannot, on pain of incoherence, be justified – there is nothing that can, in principle, count as such justification (touching other objects presupposes, as opposed to demonstrates, one's own physicality, for example). Accordingly, such propositions, unless being used in a specific and unusual way (see paragraph 36 of selected reading), are hinges upon which sense turns (see paragraph 341). They are required if we are to be able to make sense of anything at all. One might think of such propositions as *Universal Hinges* because, whatever one's culture or creed, that there are physical objects goes without question.

Another, and directly related point, is that knowledge requires the possibility of doubt in order for it to be justified. One cannot make a knowledge claim if there is no possibility of its justification and, since it is not possible to justify the claim, "There are physical objects" one cannot know it either. Put another way: it is not conceivable that one could be mistaken in relation to the claim "There are physical objects".

We then examined another dimension of scepticism which centres on the notion of the kind of justification that there needs to be in order for there to be knowledge.

According to the sceptic, the method of justification that leads to any claim of knowledge needs to be error free, in principle. In other words, it needs to be free from the possibility that it (as a form of justification) can be doubted. Many people, for example, believe that certain forms of mathematical justification represent a method that is, in principle, error free; of course, one might (as an individual) make a mistake in terms of working through such a

justification but that, obviously, is not a fault of the justification itself.

The Agrippan Trilemma demands justification for a justification and that, of course, leads to what is known as an *Infinite Regress* because the justification of the justification would, itself, require justification as a justification and so on. The trilemma is directly related to a conception of knowledge that is immune from any kind of doubt – the immunity that Descartes was looking for when he embarked on his project to secure a solid (and justifiable) foundation for knowledge. But this conception of knowledge, as Wittgenstein pointed out, is non-sense because, for any kind of knowledge, there is a point at which further justification makes no sense (e.g. "There are physical objects").

Such a method of error-free justification that is at the heart of sceptical epistemology has profound corollaries for the possibility of knowledge claims to be made in relation to them. The way we learn language and how to describe the world using it (and other means too) requires learning. It is however, worth noting that the ways in which we learn language are empirical – that is, they are made by observation on the part of both pupil and teacher. Observation is, according to the sceptical epistemologist, a fallible mode of justification; as such, it cannot be used to justify knowledge claims. Nonetheless, such means are the only ones open to the language learner and language teacher. Consequently, a sceptical epistemologist such as Descartes, cannot (by definition) know what he is talking about when proclaiming his scepticism because the means through which he has come to learn the language he is speaking (or writing) has been learned through the very methods he believes to be fallible and, as such, not good enough for knowledge!

I now want to turn to something else we touched on at the end of last week – the topics of enacted certainties, aspect-perception and moral philosophy.
Enacted certainties are, if you like, the grounding of propositions such as "There are physical objects". The various legitimate uses of the word know that we have at our disposal are tied to a foundational framework that allows for justification; such a framework is, ultimately, given through how it is *enacted* in our practices. For example, the proposition "There are physical objects" is born out in the most

mundane things we do with unerring certainty, such as reaching to pick up a towel after having a shower or sitting down on the sofa to watch television.

In the same way (as Wittgenstein points out), we use words with unerring certainty and, in cases where there may be some uncertainty (such as when we might be unsure of how to use an esoteric word in our native tongue or when we learn a foreign language, for instance), we can ask someone who is knowledgeable in relation to them.

Among other enacted certainties is the seeing of faces and smiles, for example. I am not able to justify that the person who stands in front of me has a face. My seeing of a face – my recognition of it as such – is interdependent with my qualitative experience of it as such. In this way, such enacted certainties are directly related to seeing aspects. Of course, sometimes there is disagreement over what is seen and where disagreement is common one often makes the assessment that the object or representation in question is ambiguous. For example, a smile may be ambiguous – some might see it as friendly, others as malicious and others might be unsure or change their minds. Similarly, the ambiguous picture of the old/young lady is seen as ambiguous precisely because there is common disagreement over what is seen, along with the ability to see the other aspect. Of course, the aspect-dawning that occurs in such cases (the coming to see the other aspect of the face or picture) requires that there are also aspects that are not seen in ambiguous ways – that there are faces upon which there can be smiles and that there are pictures that can represent. There is no ambiguity in the fact that the old/young lady is a picture; neither is there any ambiguity that a smile (whether malicious or friendly) exists on a face. Again, we encounter enacted certainties which provide the grounds for a framework of confirmation and denial.

There are also however, forms of proposition that we can think of as *local hinges* (and here I depart from W's terminology).

I am thinking here of ethical thought. There is much debate in philosophy about the status of ethical thought – some believe it to be rooted merely in a form of psychological response to a set of events (David Hume and A.J. Ayer, for instance); others that there is an accessible moral reality (Plato and Immanuel Kant, for example). Generally speaking, such differences are divided into subjectivist and objectivist camps.

By examining W's thought in *On Certainty*, it is possible to draw out the existence of moral hinges. To show how this is so, I will begin by highlighting a common view of 1st year undergraduates – namely, that moral thought is just subjective; many of us have our own individual moral beliefs. Thus, the reality of good and evil is essentially illusory.

Now consider the following example: imagine in a class such as this one that one of its members is the parent of a victim of the moors murderer Ian Brady (other members of the class and the tutor are aware of this). The tutor now invites the class to consider whether the claims of evil done are illusory. If the tutor were not serious in his invitation to question the reality of evil, then the class would naturally be horrified because it would show him to be almost pathologically frivolous; similarly, if he were seriously asking them to consider that what had been done by Brady was not evil (because there is no such thing) then that, too, would be horrific. The point of this example is to show that there are certain natural ways of thinking that condition (and are expressive of) the ways in which conceive of and assess the thoughts of others; such ways, as we have discussed in relation to other examples (that ruling out of consideration on pain of insanity the thought that a waiter in Pizza Express might be trying to poison us, for instance), provide the grammatical foundations for our moral concepts the rules for how to apply them.

Now, of course, there are many different moral frameworks – in the UK we do not leave our dead out for the birds (or other wildlife) but the Parsees believe that to do so is a matter of honour. Similarly, in Greek times, slavery was not even considered to be a moral issue. Most middle class families (or their ancient Greek equivalent) had slaves; it was as common and morally controversial as owning a radio or television set. Things are fundamentally different now – it is morally unthinkable for us to own slaves; this is a local hinge because it does not hold for all cultures or for all time. Aspect-dawning also plays a fundamental role in changes and developments in moral thought. There is much more to be thought about here but that is your job!