Reasonable Doubt: 
Does It Need Its Own Justification?

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Abstract: In “On Certainty” Wittgenstein regards doubting as meaningful and reasonable only in a context providing language game where some background is taken for granted. Doubt, just as knowledge, should be backed up by an argument, only this time, one presenting reasons for uncertainty. Common sense propositions constitute part of the background for the arguments of doubting and because of their function and place within the system of language, they are regarded as indubitable. I discuss critically the idea of linguistically determined indubitability and advocate the possibility of a different kind of doubt, one that does not require its own justification and is still a reasonable epistemic attitude. Such doubt characterizes the states of affairs where the certainty of a proposition is not yet rationally established. I argue that, language does not limit us in doubting and in doubting reasonably.

Key word: Wittgenstein, doubt, certainty, propositions of common sense, indubitability

In On Certainty Wittgenstein is concerned with Moore’s arguments against the sceptic that come from two types of (allegedly) indubitable propositions. The first type concerns the existence of bodies, external objects and the ways in which they are present in space and time. (see Moore, 1925, p. 107) The
second type asserts the presence of a different kind of entities - a person’s immediate experiences (for example, of their body parts), beliefs (memories, expectations), dreams and feelings. Propositions of both types present the “Common sense view of the world” and are according to Moore to be known with certainty. Wittgenstein seems to agree with him on treating them as cases that confer certainty but he disagrees with him on the question of their knowledge status. Among the various lines of his criticism, there are two considerations of special importance for the topic of doubt. The first one is that certainty is subjective and knowledge claims make sense only when something objective is reported. The second is a counter-explanation of the indubitable character of common sense propositions that stems from Wittgenstein’s conception about the nature of language.

Both arguments treat the question of indubitability and rely heavily on the idea that doubt is logically possible only in a context providing language game where some background is taken for granted. Wittgenstein’s account of indubitability suggests that in order to be reasonable, doubt, just as knowledge, should be backed up by an argument only this time, one presenting reasons for uncertainty. Where such reasons cannot be submitted, doubting does not seem to make any sense.

This last thesis will be questioned in the following passages by a reconsideration of Wittgenstein’s explanation on the indubitable character of common sense propositions and by arguments

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48 The first group will be referred to in the text as “common sense propositions”, as beliefs in them are widely shared and they form an essential part of a reasonable person’s worldview and the second – “propositions of mental states” or “mental state reports”.
49 On the points of agreement and disagreements between Moore and Wittgenstein regarding the epistemic and linguistic characteristics of the propositions, see White, 1986, pp. 314-18
concerning the general epistemic conditions of doubting. I will advocate the possibility of reasonable doubt that does not require justification or any other propositional background as its rational condition. The text of On Certainty leaves some room for its establishment as far as the roots of indubitability and believing are sometimes presented as “groundless” (see 1969, §166) However, the kind of doubt whose possibility is advocated here is not treated as radically different from regular cases of epistemic hesitation. The arguments for its permissibility are intended as an objection to the idea that judgements of the common sense worldview are in fact indubitable by virtue of some existential or linguistic pre-setting.

The purpose of the analysis is instrumental - it addresses some further epistemological issues. There are sceptical implications behind the idea of linguistically determined indubitability. If knowledge establishes itself in some sort of semantic givenness, then this poses limitations on knowing and on justification. The consequences of the intertwining nature of the semantic and the epistemic and of rule and evidence, insert the risk of arbitrariness within the standards of rational thinking.

FROM SUBJECTIVE CERTAINTY TO OBJECTIVE
INDUBITABILITY

On the one hand, in order to know one needs complete rational certainty50, on the other hand – it seems, rationally, one cannot be completely certain of anything unless one knows. Inspections of instances of knowledge suggest that knowing (for its most part) is accompanied by rational certainty; however, certainty, even when it is rationally sustained, is not always a case of knowledge.

50 The terms “certainty” will be used here in the sense of a doxastic state, determined by the appropriate level of justification, rather than as an objective property of propositions. (cf. Klein, 1993, p. 62) Such a meaning refers to the characteristics of the epistemic agent and her mental states. Passages of On Certainty, (e.g. 1969, §30), suggest that such a doxastic account is closer to Wittgenstein’s usage of the term.
Propositions of the common sense worldview are subjectively certain but whether they constitute a case of knowledge depends on their further epistemic features.

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein adopts a critical notion of knowledge in the Cartesian sense according to which one only knows as far as one has justification for their belief. (1969, §175, §432) He develops further this understanding by adding to it an indispensable pragmatic dimension and places the force of his arguments against Moore upon it. Knowledge, for Wittgenstein, is not some special mental state different from belief (even such of complete certainty) (1969, §230), it is a term used in communicative contexts with regard to the objective conditions of the acceptance of beliefs. (e.g. 1969, §15-18, ) Furthermore, propositions can be knowledge only if they are supported by something more credible than they are, with which the risk of mistake is overcome. There is a clear line between knowledge and evidence in this respect, drawn by their linguistic and epistemic functions (cf. Wittgenstein 1969, §504) Knowledge is the result from the resolution of doubt. Evidence, on the other hand, is typically not doubted, for it is the tool for deciding for or against a proposition in the process of this resolution. (1969, §196-198)

Given this picture of knowledge and evidence, reports about private mental states proposed by Moore as a type of things that are known with certainty do not qualify as knowledge. Their certainty is not denied, but it is not considered indicative of knowledge, because this is just not the way in which the expressions are commonly used⁵¹. Anything that could count as evidence for these propositions shares the same foundational epistemic status. (cf Wittgenstein, 1969, §111) Common sense propositions also cannot be considered knowledge because of their certainty, but they might be considered known for another reason - they may

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⁵¹ The sense of “knowing” in Wittgenstein is restricted to “normal linguistic exchange” (1969, §260).
be a subject of justification. However, these do not seem to be propositions learned through evidence under some occasion. For Wittgenstein they are accepted partly because they somehow come along with our life form and its collective practices and partly because we have been in “unshakable conviction” due to the persuasions of our upbringing. And since they are imbedded in all our life practices, they more likely lay the ground for knowledge\textsuperscript{52} rather than being knowledge.

Despite these objections against the idea that propositions of the common sense worldview are instances of knowledge it cannot be said that Wittgenstein regards their acceptance as irrational or that his argument does not at all concern the epistemic aspects of knowledge ascriptions. His counter explanation of their certainty is based on their special place in the living practices of language-games. He ascribes to them methodological role in thinking and cognition. Their alleged linguistic function has epistemic consequences - the entire system of language and knowledge sustains them.\textsuperscript{53} For Wittgenstein their certainty is not based on epistemic conditions but on existential necessity: the fact that they are intrinsically related to human acting (1969, §204). This way, the subjective certainty of the propositions of the common sense worldview is explained by their objective indubitability rooted in the principles of language use and other human practices.

\textbf{THE THEORETICAL SUPPORT OF THE INDUBITABILITY THESIS}

One of the consequences of this view is that in common language it is impossible to make a rational argument for the

\textsuperscript{52} “209. The existence of the earth is rather part of the whole picture which forms the starting-point of belief for me.” (Wittgenstein, 1969, §209)

\textsuperscript{53} Compare: “248. I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house.” (1969, § 248)
uncertainty of both types of propositions. They are objectively indubitable since any background for establishing such an argument has to pre-suppose them. This way, the human cognitive practice of doubting would appear to be a species of some language-game with serious epistemological consequences. If the subjective certainty and the methodological function of these propositions as the ultimate justifiers for beliefs is based upon their linguistic and practical function then the practice of knowing is pre-determined by language as a life form. As far as knowing and doubting require some linguistic method; a proposition of methodological function can only be questioned if another method is available. The main reason for the adherence to the propositions of the common sense worldview, given their foundational methodological importance, seems to be the exhaustion of the sources for doubting. There are two points that may be questioned here: first, the thesis that there are empirical propositions of foundational methodological importance, and second - the thesis that no methods affords rational doubting without some linguistic givenness of the sort.

Just as the conceptual shift from subjective certainty to knowledge is problematic, the one from common acceptance and triviality to normatively sustained indubitability deserves more scrutiny. Language framing may explain but is not sufficient to prove the unreasonable nature of the doubt in common sense propositions. The arguments presented in *On Certainty* in this respect (e.g. 1969, §310-§315) are designed to be demonstrative but there are reasons to think they may be insufficient since methods of empirical validation also apply to this issue and the very notion of linguistic indubitability may become elusive if it is not grounded in data about actual epistemic agents. It is very hard to distinguish between a proposition that is just typically assumed as a part of numerous arguments, and one that has foundational

methodological importance with general considerations about the structure of human language, reasoning and acting. Many views in human history regarded as truisms and thus, as what people trivially consider common sense, have been overcome without significant changes in human communicative and other practices. It may be argued that if in the Middle Ages, someone doubted the existence of God, or that women were less smart than men, their doubt could very well had been unintelligible to peers of the time. It would also probably have had some very disadvantageous practical effects. Such propositions had enjoyed the status of pillars for the human experience, reasoning or worldview but contemporary instances of their rejection suggest that they had been subjected to doubt at some point. The same applies to concepts. We may have used them without deliberation due to the mastering of the rules of their usage but as Lehrer points out (1990, p. 177-178) many of them have become obsolete as our knowledge of the world increased.

Furthermore, removing a proposition with the rank of a rule of reasoning from a system of beliefs would be expected to have some drastic consequences on that system. The extent of such revisions is hard to determine as it is unforeseeable just how much a particular person’s worldview would change if some common sense proposition were suddenly dropped. We do not in fact know how much a system of language and knowledge would change, as the revisions that would follow for the sake of logical consistency can hardly be traced. Perhaps the results of such revisions would change our view on the subject and rearrange entirely what we now, for our current advancement of knowledge and experience consider being basic in a semantic and logical sense.55

55 The same is true even if we put human conduct in the picture. If a person decides to act in accord with doubt and dismiss certain beliefs of this sort not just philosophically but in practice, we do not know what the degree of revision to a traditional behavior would be. The case with the proponents of the thesis about the flatness of the Earth provides an interesting field for an investigation on this topic.
The ability to doubt a proposition comes down to being able to assess the chance of mistake and such an assessment is always open for factual assertions on the ground of what Lehrer calls “the fundamental skeptical premise” (Lehrer, 1990, p. 177). Even if a subject is unable to foresee a context where such propositions become void, the ability to consider the risk of mistake in light of the many past mistakes in human thinking undermines the confidence in their veracity. The empirical propositions of the common sense worldview have their linguistic status shifted to the domain of norms as Wittgenstein ascribes to them methodological functions. Seeing language as a form of life, he extends its rules to propositions that have empirical form and their certainty allegedly becomes of logical nature. However, their function alone, does not remove the possibility for doubting them, as their empirical nature is not altered by it. To the contrary, their status of methods for knowledge makes the question of their veracity even more pressing.

It is altogether a peculiar idea of the common sense philosophy that empirical propositions that appear to be exempt from rational doubt, should also be regarded as known without any further deliberation. Wittgenstein rightly compares certainty to the “tone of voice” (1969, §30) that accompanies a statement but that analogy also applies to the sense of indubitability. There is no easy notion of justification that would sustain the idea that a mistake of epistemic nature is not possible for assertions about facts. This questions the whole idea of indubitability for empirical propositions since realizing the insufficiency of the mere sense of indubitability is a rational way to bring about doubt and uncertainty. The rational requirement for the acceptance of any belief is necessary as far as the objective features of a proposition that make it certain or indubitable may after all bear no relation

56 See Wittgenstein, 1958, § 23
57 Moore advocates the possibility of knowing without proof. (Moore, 1939/1993, 170)
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These examples matter not as straight defeaters of the thesis about the linguistically determined indubitability. Radical changes in language and respectively in the content of believed certainties could be explained in the context of Wittgenstein’s views of language. They are, nevertheless, important as demonstrations about the principle possibility of doubt and revision. Granted that the propositions of the common sense worldview are part of the fundamentals of thinking and knowledge, the principle possibility for their revision presented by empirical evidence about the evolution of language is enough to question their status of indubitability. But because doubting them in this manner is advanced by the presence of grounds, (i.e. language change and the imperfections of the human cognitive practices) the arguments for such a doubt may easily end up relying on a list of assumptions in a way that despite being able to single out some common sense proposition and question its veracity we might never be able to give up all of them at once and remain reasonable in our effort of doubting.

THE THESIS THAT RATIONAL DOUBT REQUIRES LINGUISTIC FOUNDATIONS

Wittgenstein seems to think that just as knowledge is a matter of publicly accessible evidence so should doubt be.
Indeed such an account seems reasonable. Belief has the same function as knowledge. If I am to question a belief, it makes sense to address the features it is supposed to possess as knowledge, that is - I should consider the relevant evidence and should show that either it consists of false propositions or it is not conclusive. Perhaps the logical procedure behind the inference does not transfer warrant, or perhaps the conclusion was a product of induction too weak for me to allow for knowledge. This is an epistemic evaluation that measures the chance of mistake according to the publicly bestowed standards of justification. It is usually supplemented by the heuristic building up of mistake scenarios within the particular context. However, in order for this evaluation to be performed in the first place, doubt has to be already present. Disengaged doubt is the initial drive behind our epistemic explorations. Its epistemic conditions do not depend on the presence of some justifying ground, because justification itself as an act of epistemic evaluation is reasonable only in the light of doubting. Wittgenstein presupposes that a person cannot understand the meaning of a proposition without some sort of epistemic commitment. The act of understanding, however, does not seem to logically require acceptance. A person may entertain a proposition without a commitment even to the strict line of its references and meaning. If it is conceivable for me to behave with disregard for a certain belief, if its negation is conceivable, then that is enough to introduce the chance of falsity.

In *On Certainty* doubting a proposition is taken to mean “regarding it as uncertain”. Rationally regarding something as uncertain may be due to the case that the result of its epistemic evaluation assigned “a less than certain” status to the proposition or the reason could be that its veracity hasn’t been established yet (has not been explored or has been but only partially). Doubt in the second case is an epistemically legitimate attitude that precedes any reasoning about the degree of justification. No argument
is necessary to think that a proposition that has not undergone epistemic evaluation should be regarded as uncertain. Rational certainty is not something to begin with, it is its product. That applies not just to everyday judgements but also to propositions that have been granted the status of rules or extensions of definitions or entailed by reference principles or anything else that makes them analogous to logically validated statements. When one does not know, it is rational to inspect the case. The state of not knowing is a good enough reason for doubting.

Under this note, one may still argue that the initial drive behind epistemic evaluations is merely psychological. The uncertainty that fuels and pre-conditions the epistemic assessments is related to the aims of cognitive behavior that rationality serves to fulfill than to the domain of rational deliberations. It may be that such doubt always fails to become a rational stance when the propositions of the common sense worldview are brought to mind. Private mental states and common sense propositions appear certain with immediacy. In most occasions, agents act as if they know them without ever judging on the subject of their veracity. Nevertheless, it is not a given that such a habit stands for their status of indubitability. There are reasons to think that the habit is pragmatically grounded. It would not be reasonable to question the existence of my hands any time I try to grab an object but it is not at all certain that there is an inherent epistemic flaw in such an attitude or that it cannot be performed at all. It is a case not much different from a situation where the evidence on a subject is insufficient but agents, driven by practical demands, act in accord with the most probable assumption. Acting in accord with the most probable assumption, in the context of unchanging line of evidence, develops a pragmatic habit that may increase the subjective certainty but it cannot remove the possibility for doubting. Willing to perform an epistemic evaluation of a proposition is always reasonable from an epistemic point of view
since it is the condition that brings rationality into the picture in the first place. It can at times be very impractical to do so, especially in the case where the evidence overwhelmingly favours one hypothesis over another, but there is no existing standard of verification that forbids it. The result of particular cases of epistemic evaluation is not pre-determined, as we never know what new evidence may be drawn or how our views might shift. Being unable to devise a rational argument is no less worrisome than finding out a degree of uncertainty. It is not epistemically wise to just stumble upon indubitability and be satisfied with it – it is also something that needs to be rationally explored. Rationalizing doubt is a means to resolve it since showing how something is uncertain is pointing to the problematic areas of its justification as a target for improvement (revealing new evidence or making inferences that are more precise). However, failure in rationalizing our skeptic attitudes does not remove them. It presses us to question further whether our language framework is good enough and whether our rational standards are complete.

CONCLUSION

For private mental states as well as common sense propositions it is the case that they are certain whether because people immediately recognize this, or because no rational argument may be presented for their uncertainty. Perhaps, their epistemic evaluation always leads to the conclusion that any argument against them is ultimately self-contradictory. Every time we try to doubt these propositions, they turn out to be unimpeachable but as Wittgenstein has shown not quite with the means of our rational standards of evaluation. However, the framework of language does not limit us in doubting them and reasonably so. If no argument may be presented, there is always the meta-sceptic consideration that perhaps the feeling of certainty is deceitful, that the epistemic evaluation was performed badly, that there is

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in fact such an argument, but we fell short of it. This leaves the propositions of the common sense worldview neither certain nor indubitable. As impractical as it may be, we cannot give up on considering them based on failure to bring grounds for our doubt, because doubting is the starting point of the human cognitive inquiry. Knowledge begins with uncertainty and is a practice that is just as basic to human life as are the linguistic practices that we usually employ to refine it. Even though the input of information in our life often comes in linguistic form and depends on it, our cognitive achievements possess some independent sources through which they can affect the ontological commitments in the structure and the concepts of language. This result has positive implications with regard to the prospects of knowledge. Despite the brought back uncertainties, it leaves our strive for learning free of the limitations of linguistic givenness.

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