Moorean Foundational Propositions and Phenomenal Conservatism

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I. Introduction

In her paper "Unravelling Certainty," Danièle Moyal-Sharrock proposes an interpretation of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* according to which Wittgenstein attempts to "describe *what it is like* to be objectively certain" and to "determine what *kind* of certainty objective certainty is" (Moyal-Sharrock 79). She believes that Wittgenstein ultimately produces two positive accounts—one of "objective certainty" and one of "objective certainties" (Moyal-Sharrock 78)—each of which develops as a response to G.E. Moore's "Proof of an External World." Whereas Moore sets out to prove that the external world exists by demonstrating that he has two hands, Wittgenstein protests that statements with content of that sort—which I will call *Moorean foundational propositions*—actually serve as instruments of language and only appear to refer to empirical facts. Though I agree with this reading of *On Certainty*, I nonetheless disagree with Wittgenstein's conclusions, and I maintain that we can evaluate Moorean foundational propositions in accordance with the theory of phenomenal conservatism.

In order to substantiate this claim, I will proceed according to the following plan. First, I will situate my thesis within the relevant

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dialectical context by summarizing Moyal-Sharrock's reading of Wittgenstein's response to Moore. Second, I will provide a brief overview of the theory of phenomenal conservatism, to which I will then appeal in arguing that we can evaluate Moorean foundational propositions on the basis of (subjectively accessible) appearances—such that, *pace* Moyal-Sharrock's reading of Wittgenstein, Moorean foundational propositions are not mere instruments of language. Third, I will consider two potential objections to my account of phenomenal conservatism, neither of which seriously threatens the conclusions that I draw with respect to Moorean foundational propositions.

II. Moorean Foundational Propositions As Instruments of Language

According to Moyal-Sharrock, Wittgenstein conceives of Moorean foundational propositions—such as the proposition *I have two hands* (for a two-handed subject)—as instruments of language. In simplified, non-Wittgensteinian terms, we might usefully think of instruments of language as those features of public discourse that do not function to convey meaning (cf. Moyal-Sharrock 76ff). Mundane examples include the word "okay," which a person might use to express assent or acceptance, and the word "hello," which lacks semantic content and merely serves as a customary greeting. On Wittgenstein's view, then, Moorean foundational propositions do not convey meaning. Though they may *appear* to refer to empirical facts—such as the fact that the world came into existence long before my birth—they do not, in reality, so much as purport to tell us about the world. Consider what Wittgenstein says in §151 of *On Certainty*: "I should like to say: Moore does not *know* what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as also for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our method of doubt and inquiry" (22e). Because we take the truth of Moorean foundational propositions for granted in spite of our inability to verify their truth in any publicly accessible way, Wittgenstein suggests that it makes no sense to evaluate such propositions as if they make claims about the world. After all, we have widely accepted methods for verifying the truth (or falsehood) of vast numbers of other empirical propositions, such as

the proposition *that snow falls more frequently in Utah than in Cuba*, but we have no such methods in the case of Moorean foundational propositions. Consequently, we should not treat such propositions as if they make genuine empirical claims; instead, we should treat them, more or less, as higher-order linguistic constraints on first-order empirical discourse.

Now, as Wittgenstein acknowledges when he says that "Moore chooses precisely a case in which we all seem to know the same as he, and without being able to say how" (12e), almost everyone takes for granted the truth of various Moorean foundational propositions. On the other hand, (almost) nobody thinks that accepting a Moorean foundational proposition requires any "special investigations" such as those associated with calculating "the distance separating certain stars" (Wittgenstein 12e). Moreover, "it is difficult to imagine," according to Wittgenstein, "*why* anyone should believe the contrar[ies]" of the "propositions presenting what Moore '*knows*'" (14e). Could we ever come up with a legitimate reason to doubt the truth of such propositions? Apparently not: Wittgenstein thinks that a person cannot doubt the truth of her foundational beliefs as long as she has accepted a particular "picture of the world" (15e) as "the inherited background against which [she] distinguish[es] between true and false" (15e). So far, then, Wittgenstein's quarrel with Moore appears to reduce to a disagreement about the meaning of the word "know."[1] Whereas Moore interprets "know" epistemically (i.e., as involving epistemic justification), Wittgenstein interprets "know" linguistically, taking it to serve the function of signaling the speaker's (or writer's) ability to substantiate a claim by appealing to some publicly accessible and widely accepted source of information.

Upon further investigation, however, Wittgenstein's interpretation of the function of Moorean foundational propositions as instruments of language appears to differ quite radically from the

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1 In fact, to some extent, Wittgenstein and Moore appear to be speaking at cross-purposes: Moore might very well be happy to agree with Wittgenstein in thinking that such propositions as *I have two hands* and *The earth existed long before my birth* are simply taken for granted (rather than proven or even known) by most adult human beings—so long as such propositions remain immune to sweeping skeptical doubts and can provide justification for at least some other substantive knowledge claims.

more traditional epistemic account championed by Moore himself. As Moyal-Sharrock observes, in attempting "to circumscribe the nature of our basic assurance ... about such things as 'Here is a hand' or 'I am standing here'" (76), Wittgenstein "dissociates [assurance] from knowledge" (76) by appealing to a non-epistemic conception of certainty as a psychological attitude. In accordance with his view of language as a sort of game with variable sets of rules for different discursive contexts, Wittgenstein thinks that certainty in this psychological sense is appropriate in some circumstances and inappropriate in others. Importantly, though, the sort of appropriateness that Wittgenstein has in mind has nothing to do with epistemic justification; rather, a person may appropriately feel certain with respect to some proposition just in case her feeling certain would not violate any of the rules of the language-game that she is playing. As Moyal-Sharrock notes, "Wittgenstein is seeking to define [certainty] as ... not based on grounds at all. For once grounds are adduced, we are in the realm of knowledge and justification" (77). Of course, Moore means precisely to give an epistemological account of the justification available to at least some people for accepting Moorean foundational propositions. He would, accordingly, reject Wittgenstein's broader account of groundless certainty, according to which an individual may appropriately feel certain of the truth of some particular propositions without having epistemic justification for believing those propositions. Thus, whereas Moore argues that most people are justified in believing that they each have two hands, Wittgenstein appeals to an alternative conception of certainty that does not require recourse to epistemic justification at all.

III. Moorean Foundational Propositions and Phenomenal Conservatism

Now that we have adequately grasped the most important features of Moyal-Sharrock's interpretation of *On Certainty*—the relevant portions of which strike me as largely correct—I will proceed to argue against Wittgenstein's view by proposing an alternative account of the evaluation of Moorean foundational propositions. In short, I will argue that Moorean foundational propositions fall under the scope of the epistemological theory of phenomenal conservatism.

Consequently, despite the plausibility of Moyal-Sharrock's interpretive claim to the effect that Wittgenstein construes Moorean foundational propositions as instruments of language, Wittgenstein's substantive philosophical claim seems far less compelling as long as we make the reasonable assumption that Moorean foundational propositions cannot serve both as instruments of language and as representations of (purported) empirical facts.

Before I proceed, I should point out that, for the purposes of the following discussion, I am going to set aside the issues of knowledge and objective certainty and speak instead in terms of justified belief(s). I have two reasons for doing so. First, I take the notion of justified belief to constitute some portion of the concept of knowledge (and perhaps of objective certainty as well) such that a consideration of justified belief will help us to better understand the more complicated concepts of which it is a part. Second, for present purposes, I wish to avoid, so far as possible, the age-old controversy about what counts as knowledge (or objective certainty). Instead, I will focus on the point of disagreement between Wittgenstein and myself that I find most interesting: namely, whether we can evaluate Moorean foundational propositions by appealing to some epistemic standard. Wittgenstein argues that we cannot; I maintain that we can.

In particular, I suggest that we select the theory of phenomenal conservatism—or something "in the neighborhood," as it were—for the purpose of evaluating Moorean foundational propositions. First proposed by Michael Huemer in his book *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, the theory of phenomenal conservatism relies upon and embellishes the idea that "it is reasonable [other things being equal] to assume that things are the way they appear" (Huemer, Ethical 99). As its name implies, phenomenal conservatism purports ultimately to ground all justified beliefs in (subjectively accessible) *appearances*. As a theory of *prima facie* justification, phenomenal conservatism offers the beginnings of a strikingly simple foundationalist framework for the evaluation of Moorean foundational propositions. Huemer's most recent version of the theory debuted in his paper "Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism" in the following form:

> *Phenomenal Conservatism* (PC): If it seems to S that P
> [where S is a subject and P is a proposition], then,

in the absence of defeaters [i.e., overriding reasons
to believe that P is false], S thereby has at least some
justification for believing that P. (30)

As I mentioned a moment ago, PC purports to ground justified
beliefs in subjectively accessible appearances, and yet nowhere in the
above definition does Huemer use either the word "appearance" or
any of its cognates. Even so, Huemer adverts to the "kind of propo-
sitional attitude" ("Compassionate" 30) found in sentences such as
"It seems to me that this coffee is hot," "I seem to see the silhouette
of a person in the fog," and "In this light, my jacket seems (or looks)
purple, but it's actually blue." As this last example illustrates, this sort
of propositional attitude–which Huemer calls an "appearance" or a
"seeming"–should not be confused with belief, for it might very well
seem to me that, in a certain light, my jacket is purple even though I
(justifiedly) believe that it is blue. Likewise in the case of perceptual
illusions: my belief that a straight stick retains its straightness when I
dip it in a glass of water does not change the fact that the stick seems
bent when I dip it in the water. Nor should we confuse an appear-
ance with a disposition or inclination to believe because "one might
be so convinced that an appearance was illusory that one was not
even *inclined* to believe its content" (Huemer, "Compassionate" 31).
Besides, "the way things appear may provide non-trivial explanations
for what we are disposed to believe" (Huemer, "Compassionate" 31).
Merely to assert otherwise begs the question.

In the end, Huemer declines to "analyze the notion of its
seeming or appearing to one that P" on the grounds that "philosoph-
ical analysis has never succeeded" ("Phenomenal" 328), but he does
attempt to "draw readers' attention to these familiar mental states"
by "citing examples, as well as discussing some of the features of these
mental states and how they differ from similar mental states" (329). I
have attempted to do something similar in the above paragraph, and
I am now in a position to propose the following rough characteriza-
tion of an appearance:

An *appearance* is a familiar mental state that

(i) has propositional content;

(ii) is not a belief nor a disposition to believe; and

(iii) normally leads the person who experiences it to form a corresponding belief with the same propositional content.[2]

Once we grasp the notion of an appearance, the upshot of PC is that, for anyone who experiences an undefeated appearance that some proposition is true, that person thereby has at least some justification for believing that the proposition is true.

Intuitively, PC strikes me as highly plausible, and I will argue below that any denial of PC that purports to be rational must in fact assume the truth of PC. Before I do that, however, I will present my main argument against Wittgenstein's claim that Moorean foundational propositions function merely as instruments of language:

(1) If PC is true, then we can evaluate Moorean foundational propositions by appealing to appearances. [P]

(2) If we can evaluate Moorean foundational propositions by appealing to appearances, then Moorean foundational propositions do not function merely as instruments of language. [P]

(3) PC is true. [P]

(4) Therefore, *pace* Wittgenstein, Moorean foundational propositions do not function merely as instruments of language. [1, 2, 3]

As far as I can tell, the argument is deductively valid. Consequently, if the premises are true, then the argument is sound—in which case, we ought to reject Wittgenstein's account of Moorean foundational propositions as mere instruments of language.

Support for (1): The first premise of my argument is true in virtue of the features of PC that I sketched above. Recall that PC purports to account for the underlying justification of all beliefs formed by reflection upon propositions. From this, (1) follows: if PC is true, then we can evaluate Moorean foundational propositions by appealing

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2 For a similar characterization of appearances, see Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism*, 99-100.

to appearances. In fact, for my purposes, I need not even assume that there are such things as Moorean foundational beliefs; all I have to assume is that there are at least some propositions—which usually attach to beliefs, no doubt—that seem true to some individuals and therefore fall under the scope of epistemic evaluation via PC. According to PC, in the absence of defeaters, the individuals in question will have at least some justification for believing the truth of the propositions that seem true to them. Surely there are such propositions; surely it seems to me that I have two hands and that the earth has existed for a very long time and that I ate cereal for breakfast this morning and so forth. In any case, to suggest that there are at least some propositions that seem to at least some people to be true is an extremely modest claim, the denial of which seems not only absurdly stringent but also impossible for me to accept given my own past experiences of contemplating just such propositions. Therefore, I suspect that (1) is true.

Support for (2): My second premise follows fairly straightforwardly from our working assumption—mentioned above—that being an instrument of language and being epistemically evaluable are mutually exclusive properties. Consider this argument:

(1') If we can evaluate Moorean foundational propositions by appealing to appearances, then we can evaluate Moorean foundational propositions by appealing to epistemic norms. [P]

(2') But if Moorean foundational propositions function merely as instruments of language, then we cannot evaluate Moorean foundational propositions by appealing to epistemic norms. [P]

(3') Therefore, if we can evaluate Moorean foundational propositions by appealing to appearances, then Moorean foundational propositions do not function merely as instruments of the language. [1', 2']

The argument's conclusion—which is identical to (2) in my main argument—follows from its premises, both of which are true given the assumptions that I am working with. In short, (1') is true

given that I have correctly described PC, and (2') is true given our exclusivity assumption. Therefore, (2) is true.

Support for (3): I have no doubt that critics of my argument will focus on my third premise. The claim that PC is true is quite controversial in epistemology. I propose to defend that claim by deploying the following subargument:

> (1*) If all denials of PC that purport to be rational are self-defeating, then we are justified in believing that PC is true. [P]

> (2*) All denials of PC that purport to be rational are self-defeating. [P]

> (3*) Therefore, we are justified in believing that PC is true. [1*, 2*]

As such, the argument is plainly valid, but I suspect that readers will raise objections to both premises. Because these premises are so crucial to the success of my main argument, I will devote the following section of the paper to a consideration of two potential objections—one for each premise—to which I will respond in turn.

IV. Two Objections and Two Replies

Objection to (1*): Someone might object to the claim that we are automatically justified in believing that PC is true if we successfully rule out all of the conceivable alternative theories of justification. If there are, say, ten conceivable theories of justification, then the falsity of nine of the theories does not entail the truth of the remaining theory—after all, every theory might be false—nor does the falsity of nine theories give us any reason by itself to accept the truth of the tenth theory.

Reply: The objection appears to assume that by a denial of PC, I mean an alternative to PC. Actually, by a denial of PC, I simply mean the negation of either PC or some logically equivalent proposition. I could always restate (1*) as: If all affirmations of ~PC that purport to be rational are self-defeating, then we are justified in believing that PC is true. Consequently, the objection does not endanger (1*).

Objection to (2*): Someone might choose to challenge (2*) instead by attempting to refute or else undermine the claim that all denials of PC that purport to be rational are self-defeating. Unfortunately, because I am persuaded that (2*) is true, I have no suggestions to offer in this vein that do not immediately strike me as self-defeating. Nevertheless, I suspect that, at the very least, the critic of (2*) might just flatly deny the claim that undefeated appearances confer at least some degree of justification on beliefs with corresponding contents. Otherwise, the critic might instead suggest that we simply have no good reason to accept PC. Either way, (2*) is false.

Reply: I cannot hope to convince each and every critic here, but in response to the objection, I will simply point out three reasons for accepting the truth of (2*).

First, in order plausibly to deny PC, one would need to provide reasons for thinking that PC is false. But providing reasons for thinking that PC is false will eventually involve an appeal to appearances—an appeal, in other words, to what seems true—in order to persuade the proponent of PC to accept some bottom-line claim that implies the negation of PC. After all, what else could one appeal to? As a matter of empirical fact, we make judgments "based upon how things seem" to us, and while we "need not believe everything that seems true," we nonetheless ought to believe "only what seems" true (Huemer, *Ethical* 101). Surely we should not prefer to accept the "propositions that seem *false* instead" (Huemer, *Skepticism* 105). Therefore, any plausible denial of PC will in fact presuppose the truth of PC.

Second, if PC is false—if, in other words, the way things seem to us confers no justification on any of our beliefs—then we must accept global skepticism with respect to justification. In other words, we must accept the conclusion that we are never to any extent justified in believing anything. However, if instead we accept the claim that some proposition is to some extent justified—literally "the least we could assume, in any discussion" (Huemer, "Compassionate" 50)—it follows that we need not accept global skepticism with respect to justification. Moreover, if we need not accept global skepticism with respect to justification, then PC is true.

Third, all "intellectual inquiry presupposes" PC, and all rational arguments function to "change the way things seem to one's

audience" (Huemer, *Ethical* 101). Intellectual inquiry presupposes PC in the sense that the rational knowledge-seeker begins by holding fixed what seems true to her. Over time, assuming that she accepts only those propositions for which she has sufficient justification, she builds her doxastic structure upon the foundational beliefs that she has accepted on the basis of appearances. Likewise, rational arguments function to change the way things seem to the auditor(s) by presenting premises that seem true and seem to support the argument's conclusion. Even radical skeptical arguments to the effect that we lack justification for believing anything presuppose the skeptic's own beliefs about what seems true. Consequently, to deny PC is to adopt a self-defeating position.

V. Conclusion

In this paper, I have challenged the account of Moorean foundational propositions attributed to Wittgenstein by Danièle Moyal-Sharrock. According to her account, Moorean foundational propositions function merely as instruments of language. I have argued instead that the theory of phenomenal conservatism is true and that it provides a simple epistemic standard by which we can evaluate Moorean foundational propositions.

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