

Wittgenstein's Doubts About Doubt

By Paul Austin Murphy (May 2018)

In this piece, Ludwig Wittgenstein is taken to be a [“anti-philosopher.”](#) More specifically, what tackles Wittgenstein's position on *philosophical doubt*—or at least on what's often called “global scepticism” (or “universal scepticism”). (Other philosophers who've been classed as *anti-philosophers* include Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida.)

Like many of Wittgenstein's other positions, this is the Austrian philosopher's critique of a central tradition (dating back over two millennia) within Western philosophy.

Along with Wittgenstein's position on doubt, his position on *language games* will also be discussed. Indeed, the two positions are tied together in various ways. The most important way doubt and language games can be tied together (at least within this context) is by seeing doubt itself as a (philosophical) language game. Oddly enough, Wittgenstein didn't seem to hold this position.

Throughout the following I'll also be bouncing off the words of Professor Sophie-Grace Chappell: a [Professor of Philosophy at The Open University](#).

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Ludwig Wittgenstein's case against scepticism (or at least against *global* scepticism) is simple. We can't doubt anything without exempting certain others things from doubt. Thus, the basic position is that even *philosophical* doubt requires non-doubt. That is, in order to get the game of doubt under way, certain things must be placed beyond doubt.

As Wittgenstein himself puts it (in [*On Certainty*](#)):

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 [doubts] turn.

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

My life consists in my being content to accept many things.

To put all that at its simplest: Say that you're doubting a friend's geological theory. You wouldn't thereby also doubt the very meanings of your friend's words. That would be semantic doubt; not geological doubt.

Similarly, you wouldn't doubt that your friend is a person

rather than a zombie or robot. That would be a doubt about “other minds”; not a doubt about geology.

Even if your other doubts aren’t philosophical, they still needn’t be doubts about geology.

For example, you may doubt your friend’s honesty or why he’s saying what he’s saying. (You may doubt that you put your underpants on.) Thus these other doubts may be [“properly ignored”](#) (as the philosopher David Lewis put it).

What’s at the heart of these “exemptions” is the “context” in which the doubt takes place. As Wittgenstein (again) puts it:

Without that context, the doubt itself makes no sense:
‘The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty’; ‘A doubt without an end is not even a doubt.’

If one doubts *everything*, then there’s no sense in doubting *anything*. Doubt occurs in the context of non-doubt.

Even according to Descartes, the one thing you can’t doubt is that you are doubting. And even in terms of personal psychology, you need a context for your doubt/s.

The Things We Cannot Doubt

The important point to make about Wittgenstein's position *isn't* that, as Professor Chappell puts it,

there is some special class of privileged propositions that we simply can't doubt.

Wittgenstein's position, in other words, isn't Cartesian or "foundationalist." The *propositions we mustn't doubt* could be of (just about) any kind. The general point is that there must be some propositions (of whatever kind) which we mustn't doubt in order to get the ball rolling (at it were). We can't start *ex nihilo* – as Descartes ostensibly did. We must bounce off certain propositions which we don't (rather than can't) doubt.

What we choose not to doubt (indeed what we also choose to doubt) will depend on context. That context will determine the nature of our doubts. (Or, alternatively, our lack of doubt vis-à-vis particular propositions or possibilities.)

Chappell (again) gives some very basic non-philosophical examples of this. He writes:

. . . in each context, there is a very great deal that is not in doubt: the existence of the chessboard, the reliability of the atlas, the possibility of generally getting shopping sums right. This background makes it possible to have doubts, and possible (in principle) to resolve them. Where there is no such background, says Wittgenstein, the doubt itself makes no sense.

We can create a table of what we can't doubt; and what we can doubt:

1a) The existence of the chessboard.

1b) The sincerity of our chess opponent's naivety.

2a) The (general) reliability of the atlas.

2b) Whether or not the atlas is up-to-date.

3a) The possibility of (generally) getting our shopping sums right.

3b) That one's hangover (today) is affecting one's arithmetical judgement.

To put all the above another way:

i) You couldn't doubt the sincerity of your chess opponent's naivety if before that you actually doubted the existence of the chessboard.

ii) You wouldn't doubt whether or not your atlas was up-to-date if you'd already doubted its general reliability.

iii) You wouldn't doubt your own arithmetical skills

during a hangover if you'd already doubted your skills in all contexts.

Not only that: you can only resolve your lesser doubts if you simply disregard the more global (or extreme) doubts which might have proceeded them. That is, you can go ahead and defeat your chess opponent only if you simply disregard the possibility of the chessboard simply not existing in the first place.

Wittgenstein also seems to say that total (or global) doubt simply "makes no sense." That's because there needs to be a *reason* to doubt. If you doubt everything, then you can have no reason to doubt—unless the very act of doubting *everything* is itself the reason to doubt!

Descartes' Fallacy?

Chappell then offers us a logical argument against Descartes' global doubt. She argues that it rests on a fallacious argument. She writes:

Descartes—you could say—begins his philosophy by arguing that since any of our beliefs might be false, therefore all of our beliefs might be false. But this is a fallacious argument. (Compare: 'Any of these strangers might be the Scarlet Pimpernel; therefore, every one of these strangers might be the Scarlet Pimpernel.') What is true of any belief is not necessarily true of every belief. So—the claim would be—Descartes' system rests on a

fallacy (the 'any/all fallacy,' as it is sometimes called.)

Prima facie, Chappell's argument does seem to follow. After all, she's not saying that all our beliefs are false if one is false. She's saying that all of them *may* be false if one is (found to be) false.

Then again, one belief (or "any" belief) being false doesn't entail every belief being false. Though it may leave open that possibility.

The analogy with the Scarlet Pimpernel doesn't work because, by definition, only one person can be the Scarlet Pimpernel. This may be a simple grammatical mistake in that Chappell uses the phrase "every *one* of these strangers might be the Scarlet Pimpernel"; whereas she should have said that "*any one* of these strangers might be the Scarlet Pimpernel".

Perhaps there's nothing strange about saying that every (or all) our beliefs *may* be false – or even that they *are* all false. However, not all our beliefs are identical when it comes to their content (i.e., what they're about); though there can only be one other person who's identical with the Scarlet Pimpernel.

So, saying that

any of these strangers might be the Scarlet Pimpernel;

therefore, every one of these strangers might be the Scarlet Pimpernel

isn't the same as the Cartesian example at all. Two beliefs may both be false; though they needn't be identical beliefs. However, if there were two people who were the Scarlet Pimpernel, then they'd need to be identical—indeed *numerically* identical.

The Language Game of Scepticism

Wittgenstein brings in his notion of a [language game](#) to make sense of global doubt. Again, his argument against doubt is simple. That argument is that philosophical (or sceptical) doubts simply don't arise in any of our language games. Therefore, Wittgenstein believed that we should simply ignore them. Chappell writes:

The trouble with crazy sceptical hypotheses, according to Wittgenstein, is that they don't crop up in any of the various language games that make up the texture of ordinary life in the world. That is why it doesn't make sense to discuss them.

This is a repeat of the claim that “crazy sceptical hypotheses” don't have any context. And if they have no context (outside philosophy!), then “it doesn't make sense to discuss them.” However, the sceptic (or philosopher) may simply reply:

So what! I don't care if scepticism has "no context" or if there's no sceptical "language game." What I'm saying may still be legitimate and even true! In any case, why can't scepticism (or philosophy generally) itself be a *language game*?

After all, philosophy is indeed a language game (if we must use Wittgenstein's term) which has been played for over two thousand years. And scepticism itself has been an important and influential language game *within* philosophy—and, indeed, within Western culture generally. What better examples of a language game could you have?

Moreover, is it really true that scepticism only exists in the language game of philosophy? To take two simple extreme example: What about the many conspiracy theories that are so much a part of our culture? And what about the intense scepticism which is directed against science and indeed against philosophy (e.g., Wittgenstein's own position!) itself?

In addition, shouldn't a Wittgensteinian say that the very fact that "crazy sceptical hypotheses" have been discussed at all means that they must have been discussed in one (or in various) language games? Every discourse—crazy or sane—needs its own language game. Indeed, isn't that one of Wittgenstein's main points about language games?

Despite saying all that, Chappell states that

the sceptic isn't playing any legitimate language game in his discourse, and so is talking nonsense.

Again, who says that the sceptic isn't playing a language game? And who says that if the sceptic is indeed playing a language game, then his language game isn't "legitimate?" Is it because it's not the language game of the ordinary man speaking "ordinary language?" The sceptic may again say:

So what! Why should I care about ordinary language or the ordinary man?

So, I'm not sure why—or how—Wittgenstein excluded scepticism from all language games or managed to deny that it's a legitimate language game.

Perhaps Wittgenstein might have replied:

But that's where you're wrong! The sceptic's discourse doesn't make sense. It's meaningless. It's meaningless precisely because it's not ordinary language. (It doesn't use accepted terms in the way that people use them in everyday life.) Therefore, the sceptic's discourse doesn't make sense. It's nonsense.

It's certainly true that sceptical "linguistic activity" does indeed have "its own rules". Indeed, it can hardly not do so.

And because it does have its own rules, then it must also be a bona fide (Wittgensteinian) language game. However, it just happened to be a language game which Wittgenstein himself didn't like. (Just as William P. Alston – in his paper [‘Yes, Virginia, There Is a Real World’](#) – favours religious language games; though he doesn't like the language games of what he calls “relativism” or “scientism.”) If we truly believe in Wittgensteinian language games, then we simply can't pick and choose which ones we accept and which ones we reject. If it's a “human linguistic activity with its own rules,” then it's also a language game. Indeed, according to the Wittgenstein himself (if only implicitly), it's irrelevant if you or I agree or disagree with the *other* language games we don't belong to. After all, all language games—almost by definition—are (at least partly) autonomous and thus beyond the criticisms of other language games.

Isn't all this the truly relativistic result of Wittgenstein's theory of languages games?

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