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# On Certainty (English And German Edition)



## Synopsis

Written over the last 18 months of his life and inspired by his interest in G. E. Moore's defense of common sense, this much discussed volume collects Wittgenstein's reflections on knowledge and certainty, on what it is to know a proposition for sure.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The seventh volume of the Wittgenstein corpus, which contains notes written at the end of his life....

Provides a straightforward guide to the thought of this most complex of philosophers." --

"Bookseller""The volume is full of thought-provoking insights which will prove a stimulus both to further study and to scholarly disagreement." -- Alan R. White, "Philosophical Books""All students of philosophy will want to read it. What it contains is his notes on knowledge and doubt, written in the last year and a half of his life, mainly in answer to G. E. Moore's articles on these subjects." --

"British Book News"

Text: English, German (translation) Original Language: German --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

LW's attempt to address the debate between radical skepticism and GE Moore's claim to "know" various facts with certainty. Much of the book is a quite subtle discussion of how language about knowledge, certainty, and doubt is used in practice and by philosophers. But the discussion is non-linear; it repeatedly circles back to previously-discussed issues, but with slightly different takes

on the topic. This is at times illuminating, and other times frustrating. LW is said to be difficult to access and understand. I can believe it. But I also suspect this is one of his more readable books, so for someone who is interested in how LW practices philosophy, it should be a good "beginner" primary text. (N.B. The book is relatively short -- the printed edition is twice as long as it would otherwise be because of the inclusion of the original German text.)

Best work by LW and his very last work. This is the real deal, deeply insightful and poignantly concise--he's the poet of "Analytic Philosophy." I received my grad degree from a Philosophy of Language Department where studying Wittgenstein was the main event and been teaching for 25 years. However, *On Certainty* is not --I mean NOT a good "starter" book or introduction to Wittgenstein's work. The Blue and Brown Books or the first half of the *Philosophical Investigations* are good but *On Certainty* is not for novices. You have to work for this one and have some background. Secondary readings by Ray Monk or read about the infamous Vienna Circle. Reading about Wittgenstein is fascinating and helpful. Heck he wrote logic in the fox holes and was a war hero. Intriguing German family--he gave his tremendous wealth away to live in the Alps and teach school children. There is a rich and textured history here of one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th Century, who also influenced --was a game changer for many disciplines. Don't give him short shrift. As Wittgenstein said in the beginning of the *Investigations*, "I wouldn't want to spare you the trouble of thinking"

If it's okay to talk about "favorite" philosophy books, *On Certainty* is on my list. I've come back to it over and over since first reading it about 30 years ago. Two themes stood out this time, maybe the two themes that I've always thought were most important. 1) Distinguishing "grammatical" propositions from empirical ones. It's hard to talk about this briefly, but, roughly, "grammatical propositions", for Wittgenstein, are statements about how we speak. Elsewhere and here, he remarks on our commonly mistaking the one for the other. For example, he remarks on the physicist Eddington having "discovered" that tables (and other physical objects) aren't really solid, given that they are mostly made up of the space within and between atoms. He says that Eddington is actually proposing a change in the way that we speak, changing how we use the word "solid", rather than simply reporting an empirical observation. The line is blurry -- certainly empirical observations are relevant to the proposed change in the way we speak. Nevertheless, it is a powerful distinction. Wittgenstein is interested in correcting our tendency to be misled by such statements into some sort of false mysterious profundity, as here, in the kinds of skepticism and idealism under examination in

his time. But the distinction may also be useful in more common circumstances -- what about the statement "Life begins at conception (or quickening or birth or . . . )"? Is that statement empirical, or is it more a recommendation about how we should use the word "life"? If the latter, how does that change the debate about the rightness or wrongness of abortion rights? Both sides try to lend their argument more weight by treating such a statement as an empirical one, a "fact". Likewise G.W. Bush saying that "The US doesn't torture." Did that function for him as a factual statement, or a decision about how we are going to use the word "torture"? 2) The "natural history" of human beings

On Certainty responds to Wittgenstein's reading of Moore's "common sense" papers, particularly "Proof of an External World" and "A Defense of Common Sense". Moore in turn was responding to Kant's declaration of a "scandal to philosophy" that we can't (in quasi-ordinary words) prove the existence of a world outside our minds. Moore believed he could provide such a proof. But it's really the picture behind the felt need to provide such a proof that is bothersome and important. It calls up a picture of human beings creating "knowledge" in their minds by observing and reasoning about a world "outside their minds". Wittgenstein's arguments tend toward a less intellectualized and more natural relationship between human beings and the world, something more akin to what gets called "coping" by later writers (e.g., Heidegger). We don't need to "know" or "prove" the existence of an external world, since we live in the world. In fact, the very attempt to prove its existence makes its existence questionable, now that these propositions (e.g., "There is a world external to my mind") are articulated. The compulsion to ask, now that we've articulated them, whether we know them or knew them before we articulated them, seems already to be a mistake. Such propositions weren't there before articulating them, and what they try to express didn't function as "knowledge" per se. Our situation is much more akin, as Wittgenstein says (jokes?), to a squirrel's apparent knowledge that winter will come and so he'd better store nuts against it -- squirrels don't infer that winter will come from past winters coming. Nor we do we, as Moore tries to do, establish the existence of a "world external to our minds" by inferring its existence from some more primitive facts that we know to be true.

In ON CERTAINTY, Wittgenstein re-visits the age-old question as to whether we actually know that there is world external to our minds. Well, not quite. In this short and quirky, imaginative and profound book, Wittgenstein attempts to turn the tables on the ancient debate between the Skeptic ("you don't know...") and her anti-skeptical interlocutor ("yes, I DO know..."). An anti-skeptic, such as G.E. Moore who claimed to know all sorts of the things about the external world (e.g. This is a hand), does NOT know, according to Wittgenstein, in part because Moore's question-begging

response to the skeptic is wholly inadequate. But noting this does not mean that the skeptic wins the battle because, for Wittgenstein, it does not make sense to doubt the existence of the external world. We must affirm certain propositions in order to have inquiry at all, Wittgenstein argues, and among these are those claims which Moore alleges to know, aka 'Moorean facts.' Wittgenstein takes himself to show that we must believe the Moorean facts, but that, contrary to Moore, we do not know them. As bewitching as the Wittgensteinian effort is, it does strike me that he, in no way, demonstrates his central claim - namely, that we cannot sensibly doubt Moorean facts. Despite this rather damning criticism, I highly recommend delving into this brilliant attempt.

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