Annalisa Coliva


Annalisa Coliva has three main aims in the present book. The first is to provide a textual exegesis of Moore’s essays “A Defence of Common Sense” and “Proof of an External World,” and, more extensively, of Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*, offering an interpretation she argues is preferable to competitors. The second, which is closely connected to the first, is to explain the role both of these philosophers have had historically in influencing and shaping some central philosophical questions and theories of the past century. The third is to offer suggestions as to how some Wittgensteinian insights can be applied to contemporary concerns in epistemology and philosophy of language.

The book succeeds in its interpretive/historical task. Offering a new interpretation of the above works makes the book “a properly historical work, conceived as a form of rational reconstruction, whose validity, however, can only be tested against textual evidence” (3). To bring a properly historical outlook to twentieth-century analytic philosophy is a welcome, and quite novel, approach. Coliva says she tries to keep distinct her “activity as a historian and [her] work as philosopher” (4), but it is her suggestions of how insights from these philosophers can be applied to contemporary debates that I find most intriguing and most contentious.

Coliva argues convincingly that Moore’s epistemology and response to scepticism is best understood as “proto externalist.” She canvasses a number of critiques of Moore’s response to scepticism (Malcolm, Clarke, Stroud, and Wright) and argues that their criticisms largely result from a failure to recognize that Moore distinguishes between “knowledge and the conditions of obtainment, on the one hand, and what he sees as the challenge raised by scepticism, on the other: namely the challenge of *proving* to know what one legitimately takes oneself to know” (28). In Moore’s famous proof of the external world he argues from the premise that he knows he has hands to the
conclusion that he knows there is an external world. Those who find his proof unconvincing think that he cannot use his “knowledge” of having hands as a premise unless he can prove that the conditions of obtainment hold; they claim that knowledge can only be appropriately applied to a given proposition if one can rationally redeem one’s claim to knowledge: “Most of his contemporaries, and in particular Wittgenstein, were firmly rooted in an internalist conception of knowledge and, accordingly, thought that Moore was altogether missing the point” (54).

While Wittgenstein found Moore’s response to scepticism thoroughly unconvincing, he did think he had pointed to something important in recognizing a set of propositions that seems immune from doubt and for which grounds for knowing them seem absent. Some examples of these “hinge propositions” are “The Earth has existed for a very long time,” “There are physical objects,” and “Here is a hand” said while one looks at one’s hand. Despite the limitations of Moore’s response to scepticism, Coliva says that “it is obvious that he had the great merit of individuating a series of propositions ... that go well beyond the ones traditionally investigated in epistemology, for which it is a genuine challenge to understand whether we bear an epistemic relation to them” (54). Trying to understand and articulate our relationship (epistemic or otherwise) to these propositions is of central interest to Wittgenstein in On Certainty.

In presenting her own interpretation of On Certainty, which she says is a variant of the “framework” reading, Coliva distinguishes it from three other prominent interpretations, the “naturalist,” the “therapeutic,” and the “epistemic” readings (8). The framework theory emphasizes that these “hinges are rules which, as such, can’t be subject to epistemic appraisal” (8). What I take as essential and distinctive to her reading is that she argues that, to understand Wittgenstein’s view, one must take seriously the normative character of these propositions. They articulate the norms which govern our epistemic practices; “they are not just meaning constitutive rules, but also, and in fact in most cases, rules of evidential significance” (10). On her view, they are genuine propositions with a role to play, just not the same role as empirical propositions. Coliva argues that this view better answers certain puzzles and questions that arise in interpreting On Certainty. Two of these questions are: How should we best understand his response to scepticism? Why characterize our relationship to these propositions as one of certainty?

Coliva argues that Wittgenstein’s collection of remarks on the use of “I know” as well as the remarks on our use of “doubt” reveal what is misleading about Moore’s claim to know those hinge propositions, as well as what is wrong with the sceptic’s claims to doubt them. For both knowledge and doubting require