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THE UNINTELLIGIBILITY OF SCEPTICISM RESURRECTED

BY

MARC WALLACH

THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

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THE UNINTELLIGIBILITY OF SCEPTICISM RESURRECTED

ABSTRACT

Scepticism about the external world is the view that all our everyday and scientific beliefs are epistemically on a par. Scepticism does not deny that we have true beliefs, only that we have any rational justification for accepting them as true.

In this thesis I examine the claim that what passes for the doctrine of scepticism is in fact incoherent. My thesis consists of four sections. In the introduction I briefly discuss and reject the naturalist's response to scepticism. In the second section, I introduce the sceptical argument and defend it as a philosophical extension of our ordinary epistemic practices. In the third section, I examine G E Moore's famous anti-sceptical papers, which I eventually reject. The final part of my thesis looks at Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (OC), in which he wrestles with the idea of the intelligibility of scepticism. The claim that scepticism, or indeed any philosophical position, is unintelligible is not easy to establish and I do not think Wittgenstein demonstrates that it is so. Nevertheless, I do think he pushes scepticism to a point where it is difficult to see how it could occupy any conceptual space in our intellectual lives.

INTRODUCTION

Philosophical scepticism is the view that there can be no good grounds for believing that we know anything about the external physical world. The phrase 'Knowledge of the external world' covers "not only all the natural sciences and all of history, it covers all everyday, unsystematic factual claims belonging to no particular investigative discipline".¹ It therefore threatens all our beliefs about the world and, in consequence, the concept of reality that goes with it. Importantly, the truth of scepticism is compatible with all our beliefs being true, but deprives us of any rational reason for accepting them as so.

Philosophical scepticism is not, of course, the only type of scepticism, but it is the most universal and hence the most radical. Bas van Fraassen² for example, is sceptical about the unobservable entities postulated by scientific theories. He thinks that science gives us insufficient reason to believe in unobservable objects like 'spin', 'electron', or 'quark', remaining agnostic about their reality. He does not, however, express any doubt in beliefs about the observable world. Rather unobservable objects are introduced to explain the phenomena of the observable world. Indeed, it would be absurd to maintain that we lacked justification for believing in observable objects but had good reason for believing in unobservable ones.

¹ Williams 1996, p.103

² van Fraassen 1980

The sceptical claim is a conclusion and not a self-evident premise. This means it is the result of argument and, therefore, its appeal cannot lie in the sceptical claim itself, but rather in the steps leading up to it. This no doubt explains the often-cited analogy between the sceptical argument and Zeno's paradoxes of motion.³ The sceptic presents us with acceptable arguments that entail a completely unacceptable conclusion. The question is, what is the right diagnosis of the argument?

In this thesis I look at Moore and Wittgenstein's arguments for the unintelligibility of scepticism. Of course, they are not the only anti-sceptical arguments, but Wittgenstein's, in particular, is one that I find most compelling and attractive. But let me first say something about two alternative anti-sceptical replies.

One very influential anti-sceptical response is thought to be provided by a 'naturalised epistemology', a program initiated by Quine. Quine's own answer to scepticism is ambiguous, but his writings influenced a new way of approaching epistemology and, in turn, how we might refute the traditional sceptical problem. Quine (1977) expresses this new approach like this:

Epistemology is best looked upon, then, as an enterprise within natural science. Cartesian doubt is not the way to begin. Retaining our present beliefs about nature, we can still ask how we can have arrived at them. Science tells us that our only source of information about the external world is through the impact of light rays and molecules upon our sensory surfaces. Stimulated in these ways, we somehow evolve an elaborate and useful science. How do we do this, and why does the resulting science work so well? These are genuine questions, and no feigning a doubt is needed to appreciate them. They are scientific questions about a species of

³ Stroud 1984 p.139; Williams *op.cit* pp.xviii.

primates, and they are open to investigation in natural science, the very science whose acquisition is being investigated (Quine NNK, p68).

The problems of epistemology are scientific and subject to the same standards governing theory appraisal in the sciences, such as simplicity, explanatory depth, avoiding *ad hoc* explanations or the ability to make novel and successful predictions. This view of epistemology leads Quine to treat even the existence of physical bodies as a hypothesis 'conceptually imported' and 'comparable to the gods of Homer'⁴. The difference between belief in physical bodies and Homer's gods is that the former best explains the sensory evidence and provides a better 'device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience'. According to this new conception of epistemology, then, scepticism is to be treated as a *theory*, and tested according to our current methodological prescriptions and against our best scientific candidates.

A recent attempt at discrediting scepticism this way is Jonathan Vogel's paper 'Cartesian Skepticism and Inference to the Best Explanation'⁵. Vogel does not actually pit scepticism against any sophisticated scientific theory but against a 'scientifically unsophisticated common-sense view of the world' (p.353), by which he means that the visual and tactile impressions we receive are caused by certain objects having certain properties and standing in genuine causal relations with each other. Scepticism, he says, "questions our ability to read off the "real" or intrinsic character of things from those things' causal behavior" (p.355). Vogel's strategy is to show how our

⁴ Quine 1987

⁵ Vogel 1998

unsophisticated common-sense view of the world better explains the content of our experiences than does the sceptical hypothesis.

There is no need to go into the details of Vogel's argument since my objection to it is a general one. Both Quine and Vogel fail to see a difference in status between scientific theories and certain everyday propositions. That there is a distinction is something to which G E Moore was particularly sensitive:

Suppose, that now, instead of saying, "I am inside a building", I were to say " I think I'm inside a building", but perhaps I'm not: it's not certain that I am, or instead of saying " I have got some clothes on", I were to say " I think I've got some clothes on, but it's just possible that I haven't". (Moore 1957 pp227-228)

Moore is surely correct. It would be absurd to doubt the above remarks, while no such absurdity results from saying 'I think electrons exist, but I'm not certain, it is possible that they don't'. We saw, for example, how van Fraassen is agnostic about unobservables, which is just to say that he is not certain that they do exist. The difference in status between the two kinds of beliefs is due to the absence of evidence for Moore's statements. Scientific hypothesis is revisable, which need not be considered a fault but a virtue since it allows one theory to be replaced by a better theory resulting in scientific progress. It is not clear however just what kind of evidence could falsify Moore's remarks. In fact, it is not even clear what the supporting evidence could be either. We might think *perceiving* that Moore has clothes on fulfills this evidential role, but if a person does not know whether he or someone standing in front of him is wearing clothes or not, then we are more likely to conclude

there is a problem with his vision, rather than accept his doubt. Similarly with refuting evidence, anything that appeared to contradict Moore's claim to be certain that he has clothes on would most likely be rejected and explained away.

We must be careful here. Whatever the nature of this certainty, certainty is not the same as knowledge. One can be as certain as one likes and still be wrong, while if one knows, it follows conceptually that he cannot be wrong. If one does know, this may be accompanied by a feeling of certainty, but the certainty itself is just this, an accompaniment which does not justify or transform a belief into knowledge. Sometimes the two are used synonymously, but, when they are, it is usually used to convey an assurance that the speaker does know.

My objection against Quine and Vogel's approach, then, is that they conflate scientific and everyday beliefs by regarding them as being on the same 'epistemological footing'. This seems counter-intuitive and goes against the way we think and use particular propositions. Even if Vogel's argument is satisfactory, it builds into the common sense view of the world the possibility that it may one day be refuted. While this may be true for some common sense beliefs, it cannot be true of all. Rather than be swayed by the naturalist's dogma that *all* beliefs are hypotheses open to revision, we would do better to examine the cases where this prejudice breaks down.

Of course, the authenticity of the certainty Moore alludes to needs further elucidation if the distinction between the two types of belief is to be maintained. If such a certainty exists and if it makes no sense to doubt particular everyday beliefs, then scepticism will have been silenced.

A second type of anti-sceptical argument is associated with Thomas Nagel (1986) and Barry Stroud (1984). According to these philosophers, scepticism is “built into our ordinary thought”, by means of the concept of objectivity. Scepticism is the natural outcome of reasoning objectively about the world. Stroud explains objectivity like this:

I am trying to express a conception of the independence of the world, of the idea that the world is there quite independently of human knowledge and belief, that I think we all understand... There seems to be nothing in the conception itself to imply that knowledge or reasonable belief about the objective world is impossible...What we aspire to and eventually claim to know is something that holds quite independently of our knowing it or of our being in a position reasonably to assert it. That is the very idea of objectivity.

(Stroud, 1984. p78)

This idea of objectivity seems to be comprehensible, harmless and entirely natural.

How then does it lead to scepticism? Here is Nagel's explanation:

Objectivity and skepticism are closely related: both develop from the idea that there is a real world in which we are contained, and that appearances result from our interaction with the rest of it. We cannot accept those appearances uncritically, but must try to understand what our own constitution contributes to them. To do this we try to develop an idea of the world with ourselves in it... But this idea, since it is we who develop it, is likewise the product of interaction between us and the world...However often we may try to step outside of ourselves, something will have to stay behind the lens...and this will give grounds for doubt that we are really getting any closer to reality...The idea of objectivity thus seems to undermine itself....The search for objective knowledge, because of its commitment to a realistic picture,

is inescapably subject to skepticism and cannot refute it but must proceed under its shadow.

Skepticism, in turn, is a problem only because of the realist claims of objectivity.

(Nagel, 1986 pp.67-70)

The concept of objectivity or objective truth is here understood as non-epistemic, meaning that our propositions refer to a reality which is independent of any means we have for accessing it. The problem Stroud and Nagel find in this concept is that it creates a logical gap between the world and our knowledge of it, so that no matter how much or how good our evidence for the truth of a statement or theory, there always remains the logical possibility of doubt. It is not surprising then that the concept of objectivity gives rise to the problem of scepticism.

Both philosophers wish to save us from scepticism without actually refuting it. That is, they believe that we can live with the sceptic. However, what I find perplexing is Nagel's view that science increasingly advances to a more objective conception of the world, while maintaining that scepticism is an outgrowth of objectivity. Nagel remarks that without scientific advances we could make no sense of the idea of intellectual progress. I think Nagel is confused here. Scepticism does not deny the existence of the world, so it is compatible with all our beliefs being true. However it cannot be compatible with the claim that we *know* some of our beliefs to be true, or even approximately true. We may *think* that science is approximately true, but if it proceeds under the shadow of scepticism, then *for all we know* it may be false. This suggests that Nagel confuses scepticism with fallibilism, the view that we can progressively eliminate error from science by critical testing. I am not suggesting that scepticism and fallibilism are incompatible. One could accept Quine's fallibilist picture of science as a

device for co-ordinating appearances and leave it open if these theories represent the reality behind the appearances. But this is not what Nagel is saying. If science increases our objective knowledge, then the 'gap' between the world and our knowledge of it has been bridged.

I do think there is something unintelligible in the concept of objectivity endorsed by Nagel and Stroud. It is a central burden carried by this thesis to establish the unintelligibility of what Nagel calls 'the view from nowhere', or what Wittgenstein would call a philosophical employment of our words.

What I hope to show in this thesis is that there is a good case for the unintelligibility of scepticism. I am of course resurrecting the old Wittgensteinian position that is no longer held in the favour it used to be. But I think I am justified for two reasons. Firstly, the Wittgensteinian text in question is his final monograph *On Certainty* (OC), a collection of first-draft material, the final entries of which were written only days before his death. In comparison with the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations*, OC has received little attention. This has changed recently with the publication of two books: Marie McGinn's *Sense and Certainty* (1989) and Avrum Stroll's *Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty* (1994), which present a fresh and vigorous interpretation of this Wittgensteinian text.

There is perhaps another reason why the unintelligibility of scepticism has lost favour. This I think may have something to do with a feeling of antagonism towards Wittgenstein's own disparaging remarks about philosophical problems as arising from conceptual confusion. Taking this attitude towards all philosophical problems is, I

think, false. The measurement problems in quantum mechanics or the ethics of euthanasia are not properly represented as linguistic confusions. However, I do think Wittgenstein's attitude towards the problem of the external world is justified. Here it seems, is a philosophical problem which is neither generated by any particular problem nor would its 'solution' eradicate a problem in a particular inquiry. It is, one might say, one of the 'perennial problems of philosophy', along with the problem of free will and the mind/body problem. My feeling is that a Wittgensteinian treatment of these perennial problems has lost favour because of a tendency to take his remarks on philosophical problems in an unrestricted sense.

There is, however, a preliminary objection to the Wittgensteinian proposal I am examining, about which something needs to be said before proceeding. Anyone who tells us that we fail to understand what we think we understand takes on the difficult burden of demonstrating this failure to us. The sceptical argument does at least appear to be *intelligible* and comprehensible so this would seem to refute Wittgenstein's argument before it even begins:

The fact that we seem to understand the sceptic perfectly well, certainly well enough to understand how to argue against him or why so many popular anti-sceptical arguments fail. It is therefore difficult for us to convince ourselves that we do not understand the sceptic at all: so difficult in fact that the intuitive intelligibility of scepticism creates a severe problem for views about meaning that entail its incoherence (Williams, 1996 p.xiv).

Williams is appealing to the evidential role of intuitions. Intuitions are a powerful tool in philosophy, (e.g. Putnam's 'twin earth' and Davidson's swamp man). But intuitions

are revisable, either by conflicting intuitions or in light of observation and experiment. Some intuitions we are unable to revise even when they are wrong, such as our everyday intuitions about space and time in light of Einstein's theory of relativity. The significance of intuitions in philosophical argument is therefore difficult to assess.

Nevertheless, Williams is correct. Scepticism *is* intuitively intelligible, but then scepticism also is intuitively wrong. I am not trying to play off these two conflicting intuitions against each other; it is more often the case I think that we hear the expression "I thought I knew" rather than "I thought I understood". However, I do not think that scepticism is 'perfectly' intelligible, which is shown by the fact that we do not understand it simply in virtue of proficiency in English. One does not hear expressions like "We know nothing about the external world" or "I do not know I am not dreaming" without asking for further elucidation in the way one does not when he hears "I do not know anything about molecular biology" or "I've won the lottery! I can't believe I'm not dreaming". While we may seem to understand the first pair of expressions, we do not understand them as well as we do the latter pair.

Perhaps, however, Williams' remark does not just appeal to the intuitive intelligibility of scepticism; as evidence for this he points to the fact that so many anti-sceptical arguments have failed. The implication here is that in arguing against the sceptic and realising where anti-sceptical arguments go wrong, we understand what would be relevant grounds for refuting them. The possibility of a debate with the sceptic implies a shared vocabulary of the terms used, of concepts like "knowledge", "doubt", "belief", etc., and also of the evaluative standards employed for assessing his arguments. An ability to see *why* anti-sceptical arguments fail shows that both sides of

the debate are understood. Evidence of rational discussion, therefore, seems to demonstrate that scepticism possesses some measure of cognitive significance.

While I agree that we must share the same epistemic concepts and standards if disagreement is to be possible, it does not follow from this that scepticism is intelligible.

For example, if someone tells me he wants to put the moon in his pocket, how am I to understand this? Suppose I show him how to do it by placing a photograph of the moon in my pocket. He then tells me this is not what he meant, but wants to put the actual moon in his pocket. Now, I understand his words, but I do not understand the point of his words. This, I suggest, is how we understand the sceptic. The sceptic thinks he can, in all seriousness, doubt whether we know we have two hands or that we are not dreaming. We understand his words and convince ourselves that we understand him because we know what it is to doubt lesser things like whether Churchill did this or that during the war or that it will rain tomorrow. It is our non-philosophical understanding of the concepts of “knowledge”, “doubt”, etc., which provide both the model and the illusion that we understand the sceptic’s argument, just as realisable desires serve as a model for understanding fantastic and impossible desires like putting the moon in one’s pocket.

These replies only point the way to answering the objection that scepticism is intuitively intelligible and I bring them up here as an attempt to calm any nagging suspicion from the start that the entire thesis rests on an unavoidable problem.

SCEPTICISM

The scepticism I shall be concerned with is scepticism about justification, or what we have a *right* to believe. Scepticism about justification is not equivalent to simply asserting that any knowledge claim might not be true. Fallibilists contend that, as epistemic subjects, we begin with certain prejudices and false beliefs, which we subsequently revise through criticism. According to this position, the possibility that we may be mistaken about the evidence in favour of a particular belief is compatible with the evidence justifying that belief. The premise that our beliefs might not be true is not the same as saying that we are systematically wrong in all beliefs. Arguments in favour of fallibilism are usually made from past falsity, but any sceptic who argued from the past falsity of certain beliefs to pervasive falsity is making a fallacious inference. The sceptical argument must be of a different nature.

Scepticism about justification allows that some of our beliefs *may* be true but denies that our normal means for assessing knowledge claims are themselves justified. So, although some belief may be true and claimed to be known according to our normal justificatory standards, the sceptic denies that the knowledge claim counts as genuine knowledge.

He must be careful here. The sceptic must not be seen to depart from the actual usage of the concept 'knowledge', for it is linguistic usage that provides us with what we and other people *mean* by a term. If he does depart from ordinary usage his arguments are irrelevant, for he will not mean by the concept 'knowledge' what we mean by it but

will instead have conjured up his own concept out-of-the-blue. His denials of knowledge will not contradict our own standards and no paradox will have been generated. The sceptical conclusion, therefore, must genuinely conflict with our ordinary knowledge claims, and the evaluative standards by means of which we make and criticise those claims must be the same standards which give rise to the sceptical conclusion itself. Only with these two features is there a genuine paradox in our epistemic practices.

Scepticism trades on the assumption that it is always possible that a person is mistaken about what he takes himself to know. To give this thought substance, a sceptical hypothesis is introduced, such as the dream argument or the possibility that we are brains-in-a-vat. These provide alternative descriptions of how our experiences are caused, while, as experiencers, we are left unaware as to the true nature of the cause. Obviously it is never part of any ordinary knowledge claim that we rule out the possibility that we are dreaming or that our experiences are the result of an evil scientist stimulating our brains which are kept alive in a vat of nutrients. The sceptic accepts this, of course, but adds that this is just because they are set aside as irrelevant to the particular inquiry we are involved in. But, even in everyday situations, the elimination of specific incompatible possibilities is, he says, an ordinary requirement for crediting knowledge. For all practical purposes, scepticism can be ignored. However, if we disregard any specific features of a particular inquiry, as when seeking a purely philosophical understanding of our knowledge of the world, then the sceptical alternative *becomes* philosophically relevant and must be ruled out. This is because, despite the fact that sceptical alternatives are ignored or even considered absurd in

concrete situations, they still have an epistemic status pertinent to the truth of ordinary knowledge claims.

The sceptical argument I want to look at is the one advanced by Descartes in his *Meditations*. Descartes undertakes his hyperbolic doubt not for destructive purposes but with the aim of erecting the natural and mathematical sciences upon stable foundations. Rather than subject every individual belief to doubt, Descartes decides that all beliefs about the external world have a common basis “acquired either from the senses or through the senses”. If he has reason to distrust the senses then he has reason to doubt all propositions that are acquired through them. I pick up the argument after Descartes has just dismissed distrusting the senses on the evidence of a few perceptual illusions:

...there are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses – for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding his piece of paper in my hands, and so on....how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless I liken myself to a madman...But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally as mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself.

As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do awake...How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events - that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!... As if I did not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep! As I think about it more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep (Descartes First Meditation 18-19, 1992).

Descartes has turned his doubts towards judgments which he initially conceives are 'quite impossible' to doubt. He likens such doubts to the utterances of a madman, which, presumably, are not to be considered reasonable. Descartes then recalls that in the past he has had dreams vivid enough to convince him that what he was experiencing was real. He has dreamt that he was sitting in his dressing-gown and so on once before. Where madness failed, dreaming now succeeds in providing grounds for doubting what was thought to be quite impossible. He then, without explanation, remarks that he cannot conceive of any way to distinguish between a waking experience and a dream. Without some distinguishing mark, Descartes is unable to eliminate the undesirable possibility that he is now dreaming his entire experience.

It is important that the dreaming possibility, if it is to threaten knowledge, must be incompatible with what Descartes takes himself to know, otherwise there will be no imperative to exclude it. Yet it is not obvious that dreaming and knowing are incompatible, especially when one remembers that knowledge, like other concepts such as "belief", "soluble", "shyness", "brittle", is dispositional. For example, I believe that hippopotamuses do not salsa even though I have never consciously had this belief before. Or consider the righteous man. He is described as virtuous because of his actions, but presumably this person is virtuous even when not performing good deeds, as when he is asleep for example. Even if he dreams evil thoughts, this does not detract from, or in any way affect, his virtue. So if I dream some proposition, it does not thereby follow that I do not know it. I can dream that $2 + 2 = 4$ or that hippopotamuses do not salsa and still be said to know it.

But this misses the crucial point Descartes is making. To be justified in asserting that x is dispositional assumes that there was a time when the dispositional properties were genuinely observed. If I know that dogs of a certain kind have a tendency to bark at postmen, this must be because there have been actual occasions when they have done so. It may be that the counterfactual statement 'If my dog were to see a postman, then he would bark' is true, even if he were never to see a postman. However, *we would be in no position to know whether this statement was true or false* unless the character of dogs of this kind was witnessed. Generalising this, if no dog of this kind was ever known to have barked at postmen, then there would be no grounds at all for claiming that any dog of this kind would bark at postmen in certain circumstances. If we are going to predicate a dispositional attribute of an object, then there must be some evidence of that object possessing the attribute.

This means that if someone is to be credited with some empirical knowledge, there must have been some time when he was awake and acquired that knowledge through the senses. Therefore the claim that one can know p even if he dreams p , is true, only in virtue of the fact that there was a time when that person came to know p while awake and through his senses. But if Descartes is correct, and a waking experience cannot be distinguished from a dreamt one, then despite his belief that he is awake, this cannot be established and he is not to be credited with any piece of empirical knowledge.

Now, although we are willing to accept that someone may know a proposition even if he dreams it, we do not accept dreaming as a suitable means for acquiring a belief. Even if I dream it is raining outside and my dreaming this is caused by the sound of

falling rain, I do not thereby know it is raining. The *fact that p* just seems to play the wrong sort of causal role in generating the *belief that p*. As Stroud says regarding this point, it is not easy to say why dreaming is not an acceptable method of generating beliefs (Stroud, 1984. p.15). Nevertheless, I think we work with a clear distinction that waking and dreaming are different and that, even if the latter occasionally results in true beliefs, dreaming is not to be trusted as a reliable indicator of what happens in the external world.

I said that Descartes concludes, without explanation, that he cannot conceive any mark by which to distinguish waking experiences from dreaming. The reason for this is because anything that is considered as indicating a particular experience as genuine could be dreamt as well. We might think that pinching oneself and feeling pain is a good sign that one is not dreaming. But it is possible that one can dream pain as well and so one could be dreaming the test that is supposed to establish that one is not dreaming. The same applies to all possible tests and a regress is generated, whereby for any test T which is supposed to establish that one is not dreaming that one knows P, we get T*: S is not dreaming that [(S is not dreaming) that (S is not dreaming that P)]. The success of any test depends on whether it distinguishes waking from dreaming but any test can be dreamt and so no test can be known to be successful.

It would be useful to summarise in a semi-formal way the sceptical argument just presented.

- 1- It is possible to believe, that for all I know, I am now dreaming that P.
- 2- If I am dreaming that P, then I do not know that P.
(Dreaming fails to have the right sort of causal connection.)
- 3- For me to know that I am not dreaming, there must be some test enabling me to tell I am not dreaming.
- 4- I only know that test is successful if I know I am not dreaming the reliability of the test itself.
- 5- But for every test I perform, it is possible that I am dreaming its reliability.
- 6- Therefore, I do not now know I am not dreaming.
- 7- Therefore, I do not now know that P.

The conclusion of the sceptical argument above is conditional and says that empirical knowledge is not possible unless the possibility that I am dreaming is eliminated.

What makes the sceptical conclusion so radical is that it affects all our knowledge claims, since any test or method we might muster to disprove it is subject to the same nagging doubt. This means that the requirement of eliminating alternative possibilities is a completely general and universal one. Scepticism therefore places an important constraint on any anti-sceptical argument; it regards the advancing of any empirical evidence against scepticism as simply begging the question. Now one might object that the absence of empirical evidence to either refute or confirm scepticism means that *scepticism* begs the question. One might therefore say, 'If you exclude empirical verification or refutation then of course scepticism follows, for what other evidence is

there?' This is not really an objection since scepticism is not claiming that there is any other evidence, only that the best evidence we do have is defective.

What the sceptical argument reveals, then, is that there is a methodological requirement that we eliminate alternative possibilities incompatible with some knowledge claim and there is one possibility, the possibility that I am now dreaming, that can throw all knowledge claims into doubt at once.

I said earlier that the sceptic must not distort the ordinary concept of knowledge otherwise his conclusion will be irrelevant. Yet Descartes' argument seems to impose upon us a stricter than normal requirement for knowledge. It is never, in ordinary circumstances, necessary to eliminate the possibility that we are not dreaming if we are to know something. To know that the animal in the zoo is a zebra I must know that it is not a camel, for example, but no one would insist that I know I am not dreaming before I can know it is a zebra. The task for the sceptic then is to convince us that the methodological requirement that we eliminate the possibility that we are dreaming is not a distortion of our ordinary concept of knowledge, but is no more than the extension of a highly plausible epistemic standard imposed upon ordinary knowledge claims.

This is the task Stroud (1984) sets himself in the second chapter of his book on scepticism. He takes the charge of distortion seriously and accepts that ruling out the dream possibility is not normally considered a condition of knowledge and would rightly be treated as outrageous if the possibility was raised as an objection to a knowledge claim.

However, Stroud argues that it is our ordinary understanding of knowledge that is responsible for the sceptical possibility. His argument is premised on the distinction between its being entirely appropriate to say that S knows p and the truth that S knows p. With this distinction, truth conditions and justification conditions come apart to unleash the possibility that it is possible to be completely justified in claiming to know p but fail to genuinely know it. The importance of the distinction is that it makes intelligible the non-epistemic concept of objectivity, which Stroud and Nagel regard as built into our ordinary concept of knowledge and which is supposedly responsible for generating scepticism.

Stroud illustrates the distinction by means of two examples, both of which are supposed to be understood as ordinary knowledge claims. The moral to be drawn from these examples is that we ordinarily work with a conception of knowledge which distinguishes between it being reasonable to say “I know that p” and it being true that one knows that p.

Suppose I am at a party and the host asks me whether John is coming. I reply that he is, adding that I know this because I have just spoken to him on the telephone. John is well known as a reliable man and so I have good reason to trust him. What neither I nor anyone else knows at the party is that John was struck by a meteorite on his way over. Yet, coincidentally, my host raises the challenge that perhaps a meteorite will hit him. The objection sounds outrageous to me and the rest of the guests, but is the challenge irrelevant to my truly knowing that John will arrive? Stroud says:

A necessary condition of knowledge might remain unfulfilled even though it would be outrageous for anyone to assert that it is inappropriate for anyone to criticise my knowledge-claim on that basis. The appropriateness or outrageousness might have some source other than the falsity of what is said or implied about knowledge. (Stroud 1984, p.62)

According to Stroud, the host's objection is outrageous because it is apparently directed at the grounds for my assertion and not its truth. It is strange that the host should even consider the possibility that John will be hit by a meteorite, let alone verbally raise it as an objection, especially following my announcement that I have spoken to him on the phone a couple of minutes earlier. It would be like someone suddenly exclaiming in the middle of a conversation "Down with him!"¹, a remark uttered completely out of context.

The similarity is not on all fours however. While it was my assertion, and not my host's objection, that was the appropriate thing to say in the circumstances, the objection she raises is epistemically relevant to the truth of my claim. If the meteorite possibility *were* actualised, as it was in the example, then this would affect my knowledge since it would then be false that I knew John would come to the party. Knowledge does not tolerate actual falsity, so if *p* were false it would be sufficient to deprive a knowledge claim from counting as genuine knowledge.

...when someone claims to know something about the world without asking himself or even thinking of a certain possibility, and that possibility, if realized would mean that he does not know what he claims to know, he might fail to know in that situation precisely because he has not eliminated that possibility. *If there were no special reasons for him to consider that*

¹ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* 350

possibility, he might nevertheless be fully justified in saying that he knows. (Stroud, p.63, my emphasis)

The situation is supposed to be analogous for scepticism. Ordinarily, the suggestion that we don't know something because we might be dreaming is outrageous and not entertained as a serious possibility. Yet as outrageous as the suggestion is, if it were true, it would be fatal for knowledge. The fact that the possibility is not normally raised as an objection does not mean that it *cannot* be raised and that it is not a genuine objection. It may be true, and the fact that it is never entertained as a possibility does nothing to change this. It would be analogously outrageous for me or anyone else to make the point that I am not God, for obviously I am not, yet despite the oddness of such an utterance, it is true for all that.

I said that Stroud's argument for the relevance of the sceptical possibility depends on the distinction between the conditions that make a knowledge claim true and the conditions that justify the making of the claim. He has tried to establish this distinction by the example of the party. However, there is disanalogy between scepticism and Stroud's example. I think we can agree with Stroud that a legitimate use of "know" is found in the above example. If someone claims to know p and that claim is subsequently refuted, then, even though that person had all the right reasons for thinking p is true, he did not know p. My objection however is that this sense of "know" does nothing for the sceptical cause. Scepticism is not committed to saying that all our knowledge is false, only that we have no reason to think that any of our beliefs are true. In Stroud's example *we are told* that John was hit by a meteorite, so naturally we know, when the question of knowledge is raised, that the claim is false.

The distinction between genuinely knowing p and claiming to know p emerges in Stroud's case, from the privileged position of knowing that John's claim is false. If we were not given this information it is not so clear that genuine knowledge would be denied. If John had turned up at the party and had not been struck by a meteorite, then we would be inclined to say that I did know he would come. Of course, scepticism will deny that I do know that John arrives at the party even if it appears that he does. But according to the moral of the example, we are only to deny knowing p if it transpires that p is false. Given that we have no such privileged position as regards the truth of scepticism, the above example cannot serve as a suitable model for scepticism.

It is perhaps because of this that Stroud considers a second case. The advantage of this second example is that it does not depend on knowing that the knowledge claim is actually false. Rather it is because of some defect in the person's evidence that his assertion is rendered dubitable.

Suppose that during the war people are trained to identify enemy planes by distinguishing certain features from the ground using a manual. If a plane is an F , then it has features x , y , and z , and it is an enemy aircraft, while if it is an E , it is identified by having features x , y , and w , and it is an allied plane. From the ground, this is the best method of identifying the two types of aircraft and has a high success rate. If the spotter follows this method and it is performed under appropriate conditions, i.e. in good visibility, then he is credited with knowing whether a particular plane is an F or an E . If, however, visibility was poor or the spotter was a little hasty, such that he could only make out features x and y , then, even if he correctly identified an F on the evidence of x and y , we would not consider his judgment justified. This would be

because the evidence available to him, and upon which he made the judgment, could also have led him to identify the aircraft as type E. In this case, all that he is entitled to assert is that the plane could be either an E or an F, but not that it is one or the other, and we would not credit him with knowledge.

Now, expanding the scenario slightly, suppose that there is another aircraft, type G, which also has features x, y and z but which the plane spotters were not taught to identify because it makes the process too difficult. From the ground, it is impossible to recognise an F from a G, but G, like E, is an allied plane, so it is not that important. The question is, *when a spotter identifies a plane as an F on the basis of features x, y and z, does he know it is an F even though it could be a G which has the very same features?* Stroud answers negatively:

Just as he did not know the plane was an F when he had found only features x and y – for all he knew then, it might have been an E – so he does not know now that it is an F because all the features he has now found are also present on another kind of airplane (p.68)

There is an important difference between the two cases, however. In the first example the spotter is *required* to eliminate the possibility that a plane with features x, y could be an E. The requirement is important since F is an enemy aircraft while E is an allied one. If the spotter only observes features x, y and guesses the plane to be an F, then, even if correct, we would refrain from saying he knew the plane was an F and would consider him a careless spotter. In the second case, there is no carelessness by the spotter since he is under no obligation to eliminate the possibility that what he identifies as an F could be a G. It would therefore be appropriate to credit him with

knowing that the plane is an F.

However, despite the spotter's right to claim knowledge for himself, and our recognising this right as a legitimate one, Stroud denies that the spotter does genuinely know. He says:

We recognise that he does not know it is an F even though there is absolutely nothing to be gained by pointing his ignorance out to him or to anyone else. *For all practical purposes we can accept his saying that he knows it's an F...*The well-trained airplane spotter is not required to rule out the possibility that the plane he sees with features x, y z is a G; nor do his teachers or his fellow spotters insist on that possibility's being eliminated. *But we recognise that it is nevertheless a condition of knowing that the plane is an F on the basis of x, y z that one knows that it is not a G.*

(pp.68-69, my emphasis)

The problem here is that the evidence upon which the spotter makes his claim that the plane is an F equally supports the possibility that the plane is a G and unless he can eliminate this possibility, he does not know it is an F. The spotter is not at fault when he identifies a plane as an F on the grounds that it has markings x, y, and z since he has no cogent reason to think that the plane is not an F, but a G instead. Nevertheless, says Stroud, we recognise a sense of "know" which outstrips the absence of reasons for thinking that the claim is false.

The case of the plane spotter still assumes a privileged position on our part, that of knowing that planes of type G exist. But, unlike the previous example, we do not know whether the identified plane is an F or a G and, what is the crucial difference, we

do not *need* to know this in order to know that the spotter fails to satisfy the conditions for knowledge. This example, then, seems to serve as more suitable model for scepticism than the previous one, for scepticism says that we cannot read off the existence of a physical world from the content of experience since the content equally points to the hypothesis that such experiences are no more than dreams.

There is of course one major difference between the case of the spotter and the sceptical scenario. With the spotter we can *discover* the weakness in his claim, but not so with the sceptic. *Never mind*, says the sceptic. This is simply the truth in scepticism. Obviously there must be a difference between the two cases, but, according to the sceptic, this is not a relevant objection. Rather, it is the fact of our epistemic situation.

Suppose however, that the plane the spotter identifies as an F is in fact an F. Surely he knows it is an F after all. Stroud has already allowed for the spotter's claim to be justified even though we are not told whether the plane is an F or a G. So suppose it is an F and his claim is justified, then the spotter would appear to know that the plane he has correctly identified is an F. Indeed, if the spotter's claim is justified and true, what more is needed to turn this into the wine of knowledge?

Stroud is not going to accept this, of course. Even if the spotter is right, we are not justified in saying that he knows *because he would have believed the plane was an F even if it was a G given the same evidence*. The correctness of his claim is, accordingly, *accidental*, for the evidence fails to discriminate between two incompatible alternatives.

Stroud seems to be appealing to a very strong sense of knowledge here, a sense that is not normally in play. It is part of our ordinary practice of making and accepting knowledge claims, that, even if the evidence fails to entail the truth of a claim by failing to eliminate all possibilities incompatible with it, we still accept that in appropriate circumstances such evidence constitutes knowledge. We just do not expect a knowledge claim to exclude all incompatible alternatives for it to count as knowledge. This is not to say that eliminating alternatives is not an important part of gaining knowledge, only that we do need to eliminate all possible ones. Consider the zebra case once again: in an ordinary case of knowing that some animals in the zoo are zebras, I do not need to know they are not cleverly painted mules in order to truly know that the animals are zebras, whereas I do need to know that they are not antelopes. The painted mules alternative is simply not relevant in *this* case. It may, of course, in extraordinary circumstances become relevant. For example, if it is known that a film crew are in the area and the number of zebras needed for their film is greater than the number in the zoo, and so they improvise by painting mules. Now there are complications regarding the relevant alternatives account, namely what makes an alternative relevant, such as whether the alternatives must be known to the knower, or whether they depend on facts about the situation. But the present point is that, in ordinary knowledge contexts and from all possible incompatible alternatives, only some are deemed relevant, while others are excluded.

Stroud however, has a powerful explanation of both why the sceptical alternatives *are relevant* and why they appear to be *irrelevant* to ordinary knowledge claims. He says:

There is a single conception of knowledge at work both in everyday life and in the philosophical investigation of human knowledge, but that conception operates in everyday life under the constraints of social practice and the exigencies of action, co-operation and communication. The practical social purposes served by our assertions and claims to know things in everyday life explain why we are normally satisfied with less than what, with detachment, we can be brought to acknowledge are the full conditions of knowledge.

(p.71)

Whether an alternative is relevant or not is fixed by the context in which the claim is entered and subject to the interests of those using it. These determine what is to count as a relevant possibility. What we accept as knowledge in these practical situations is not knowledge of the truth, but a weaker 'for-all-practical-purposes' kind of knowledge. This allows Stroud to argue that the detachment brought about through philosophical contemplation reveals the full nature of our ordinary concept of knowledge as it really is, free from all practical considerations and restrictions. Therefore sceptical possibilities are not raised, not because they are irrelevant to whether I have knowledge, but because there is no practical requirement to eliminate them. The absence of a 'special reason' for thinking that the sceptical possibility might obtain does not mean it is not a requirement upon knowledge. (p.63)

I said earlier that Stroud was attempting to illuminate a natural distinction between justification conditions and truth conditions. Via the example of the plane spotter he has traced the naturalness of this distinction as it figures in our ordinary assessment of knowledge claims. In response to the objection that ordinarily we do not expect a knowledge claim to exclude every incompatible alternative, Stroud has argued that this is due to our ordinary standards being practically constrained. The distinction between

truth and justification conditions is, therefore, upheld from a purely theoretical or objective perspective. The sceptic can be seen to have carved out from our ordinary epistemic practices conceptual space from which to damn those practices.

Where does this leave us? Scepticism would seem, as both Stroud and Nagel contend, to be rationally compelling and entirely natural. Michael Williams sums up our state of play like this:

We must conclude that, if there is a context in which the sceptic's alternatives are the relevant ones, and if that context is what the sceptic says it is – namely, one created solely by detachment from ordinary practical concerns and limitations – then neither the “relevant alternatives” nor any other broadly contextual conception of knowledge and justification will make headway against scepticism unless it is backed up by an alternative account of the relation between the context of reflection and more ordinary contexts. (Williams 1996, p.189)

It is the relation between ordinary and philosophical knowledge that the rest of this paper is concerned with. In the next section, I turn towards G E Moore, who attempts to argue that any philosophical view which contradicts certain everyday knowledge claims is itself contradictory. Moore is not arguing against the existence of a purely theoretical perspective, but he does think that philosophical aims and abilities are constrained by ordinary thinking.

G E MOORE'S 'DEFENCE OF COMMON SENSE'

G E Moore's 'A Defence of Common Sense' (DCS) was delivered in 1925. In this paper he appealed to common sense to show that the grand philosophical doctrines of scepticism and idealism were unintelligible. The argument of DCS appears to be simple. Moore gives examples of propositions he claims to know with certainty and which he thinks nearly everyone, including sceptical philosophers, have also known with certainty. He then shows how the doctrines of scepticism and idealism conflict with these propositions. Anyone who advances one or both of these philosophical doctrines is then guilty of holding two incompatible sets of beliefs.

As I shall show, Moore's argument fails. However the failure is most fascinating in that it raises a host of interesting questions, specifically about the relation between the claims of common sense and those of philosophy. This explains, perhaps, the comment by one philosopher that DCS is 'one of the few really decisive contributions to philosophical enlightenment which this century has given us'.¹

Rather than dive straight into the paper itself, I want to begin with an autobiographical quote of Moore's. This particular passage is insightful since it gives a clear indication of his attitude towards philosophy and philosophical problems in general and will help set the tone for this chapter and the next.

¹ Arthur Murphy, 'Moore's "Defence of Common Sense"' 1952, p.299

I do not think that the world or the sciences would ever have suggested to me any philosophical problems. What has suggested philosophical problems to me are things which other philosophers have said about the world or the sciences...the problems in question being mainly of two sorts, namely, first, the problem of trying to get really clear as to what on earth a given philosopher *meant* by something which he said, and, secondly, the problem of discovering what really satisfactory reasons there are for supposing that what he meant was true, or alternatively, was false.

(Schilpp 1952, p.14)

Although no distinction is clearly drawn, Moore refers to a distinction between ordinary everyday thinking and philosophical thinking. For Moore, the things of which common sense and science speak are unproblematic as regards their meaning and truth. However, the philosopher is someone who uses language in an unordinary way so that what he is saying is far from transparent. This attitude towards philosophy and common sense runs through Moore's entire philosophical career, but features most prominently in DCS.

We have seen the sceptical argument and how it requires a demonstration that the methods we use to justify knowledge claims be rationally defensible. The challenge of the sceptic, then, is not whether our knowledge claims are true but whether we have a right to think they are. Of course, if they are false, then we do not know them, but failure to know P is compatible with the truth of P. Descartes may genuinely be sitting in his dressing-gown, just as he believes himself to be, and yet not know this fact. Idealism on the other hand is in a sense more radical since it maintains that no physical object propositions can be true, from which it follows that we cannot know such propositions, since the concept of knowledge implies the condition of truth. Descartes

cannot know he is sitting by the fire if there are no physical objects; what he takes to be physical objects are 'imaginings' such as one encounters in dreams. Though both scepticism and idealism are the targets of DCS, I shall, where appropriate, focus on the anti-sceptical arguments.

The first part of Moore's objective consists of giving examples of propositions that he says are "such obvious truisms as not to be worth stating...everyone of which (in my opinion) I *know*, with certainty, to be true." The list is rather long and so I quote just a handful:

The earth has existed for many years.

There exists at present a living human body which is my body.

There exist other things, having shape and size in three dimensions.

There have been and are other living human bodies.

I have been aware of facts, which I was not at the time observing.

There have been other humans who have had many different experiences.

There have lived upon the earth many different species of plants and animals.

Call this list (1). The list divides into propositions, which imply the existence of material things, and those which imply the existence of a self or conscious minds. Moore is claiming, then, to know for certain the truth of propositions which imply the existence of both physical and mental facts.

As it stands, this is nothing more than the personal statement of a man reeling off examples which *he* claims to know. However Moore goes on to include one further proposition, also an 'obvious truism'. Call it (2):

...each of us...has frequently *known*, with regard to *himself* or *his* body and the time at which he knew it, everything which, in writing down my list of propositions in (1), I was claiming to know about myself or my body.

Moore is making two claims by introducing (2). First he is saying that the propositions which he claimed to know in (1) are also held with the same conviction by most other human beings. The propositions in (1) are universally held and comprise what Moore calls the 'Common Sense Conception of the World' (CSW). This means that the propositions Moore cites in (1) are of a special kind. If he had selected say, the capital of Peru or the date of the Korean war, then he could not have been sure that others would recognise themselves to know these things. Not only this, but they may have even challenged his claim to know them at all, especially if he had said he knew, for example, the precise temperature at the centre of the earth. The fact, therefore, that he cited propositions which *everyone* would recognise themselves to know removes the likelihood of doubt and the request to state how he knows them. The significance of the examples is something which struck Wittgenstein and we shall explore this further in a later section. However their significance seemed to go unnoticed by Moore. He obviously selects the right sort of propositions, ones which command universal acceptance, but fails to ask himself what it is about these propositions which have this ability. The second point regarding (2) is that, as well as Moore claiming there is

something called the CSW, he is also claiming that the CSW is true and that he knows it to be true.

He sums this point up as follows:

...if we know that they are features in the 'Common Sense view of the world', it follows that they are true: it is self-contradictory to maintain that we know them to be features in the Common Sense view, and that yet they are not true. And many of them also have the further peculiar property that, if they are features in the 'Common Sense view of the world' (whether we know this or not), it follows that they are true, since to say that there is a 'Common Sense view of the world' is to say that they are true.

(pp.44-46)

So far then Moore has enumerated a number of propositions, all of which imply either the existence of material objects or the existence of conscious selves, which he maintains are held by nearly every human being with the same conviction as himself. These propositions comprise the fundamental features of the CSW, a system of beliefs which Moore knows to be true with certainty.

One should be struck by the *absence of argument*. Moore's claim to know the propositions in (1) and (2) has simply been asserted rather than defended. Moore would agree of course, replying that (1) and (2) are such obvious truisms as not to be in need of argument. He does, however, ask himself whether he really knows or only believes in the truth of these propositions, and answers:

I think I have nothing better to say than that it seems to me that I *do* know them, with certainty. It is, indeed, obvious that, in the case of most of them, I do not know them *directly*: that is to say, I only know them because, in the past, I have known to be true *other* propositions which were evidence for them. If, for instance, I do know that the earth had existed for many years before I was born, I certainly only know this because I have known other things in the past which were evidence for it. And I certainly do not know exactly what the evidence was. Yet all this seems to me no good reason for doubting that I do know it. We are all, I think, in this strange position that we do *know* many things, with regard to which we *know* further that we must have had evidence for them, and yet we do not know *how* we know them. (p.44)

Moore appears to be saying that a proposition can be known directly or indirectly. If a proposition is known indirectly then it is derived from some other proposition which he knows to be true. If a proposition is directly known, then it is not derived from another proposition but is self-evident. Propositions like 'The earth has existed long before my birth' are known indirectly, (perhaps by unconscious inference or testimony), which is to say they are derivable from other propositions, but Moore is not aware what these propositions are.

One might have thought that the propositions belonging to (1) were directly known since Moore considers them truisms. What then can be known directly? The answer comes later on in DCS and anyone familiar with his philosophy should not be surprised to find that sense-data are the ultimate referents or objects of every physical object proposition.

But there is no doubt at all that there are sense data, in the sense in which I am now using that term. I am at present seeing a great number of them, and feeling others. And in order to point to the reader what sort of things I mean by sense-data, I need only ask him to look at his own right hand. If he does this he will be able to pick out something...with regard to which he will see that it is, at first sight, a natural view to take that that thing is identical, not indeed, with his whole right hand, but with that part of its surface which he is actually seeing...to put my view in terms of the phrase 'theory of representative perception', I hold it to be quite certain that I do not *directly* perceive *my hand*; and that when I am said...to perceive it, that I perceive it means that I perceive...something which is *representative* of it, namely, a certain part of its surface. (pp.54-55)

From the text, I think it is clear that Moore is as certain of the existence of sense-data as he is of the propositions in (1). But this is an odd position to hold. Representative theories of knowledge are notorious for generating scepticism about the external world. If physical objects are never directly perceived, then how do we know of their existence on the basis of sense-data alone? I am not alone in finding this aspect of Moore puzzling.² He wants to say that both physical objects and sense-data exist and that sense-data are part of the surface of physical objects, but this last claim is not something he is entirely certain of, since he thinks no adequate analysis of sense-data has as yet been given. While this is not particularly important for our purposes, it is interesting that Moore fails to acknowledge, or chooses not to see the sceptical consequences of holding, a sense-datum theory. For whatever analysis is offered, none can be as certain for Moore as the propositions in (1) and (2). Moore therefore seems to be saying that he only knows there is evidence for these propositions *because* he knows them and not because he is able to explain how they are derived from the

² Stroud 1984; Baldwin 1996

evidence. This is nothing more than an affirmation that he does know these propositions. So, in answer to the question whether Moore argues for his knowledge claim, the answer is he does not.

This brings us to the crucial distinction Moore draws between the ordinary sense of an expression and the giving of a philosophical analysis of the expression. Without this distinction, Moore's claims to know the truth of his propositions will seem inexplicable in the face of philosophical objections. Although DCS contains Moore's fullest exposition of the difference between the ordinary sense of an expression and a philosophical analysis of it, not much mileage can be extracted from it. But as I said in the beginning, DCS stimulates discussion rather than closing it.

Moore's first remarks on the difference is the following:

Such an expression as 'The earth has existed for many years past' is the very type of unambiguous expression the meaning of which we all understand. Anyone who takes the contrary view must, I suppose, be confusing the question of whether we understand its meaning (which we all certainly do) with the entirely different question whether we *know what it means*, in the sense that we are able to *give a correct analysis* of its meaning. The question what is the correct analysis of the proposition meant on any occasion (for, of course, as I insisted in defining (2), a different proposition is meant at every different time at which the expression is used) by 'The earth has existed for many years past' is, it seems to me, a profoundly difficult question, and one to which, as I shall presently urge, no one knows the answer. (p.37)

Understanding or 'grasping' the meaning of an expression is an unambiguous affair and can be understood on every occasion of its use. The *analysis* of a proposition on the contrary, seeks for an understanding of what an expression means on every occasion it is used and this is not at all well understood. In *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (SMPP), Moore gives a good example of what he means:

A very good instance...is furnished by the word(s) 'life', 'alive'. Who is there who does not know what is meant by saying that some men are alive and others dead, sufficiently well to be able to say with certainty in ever so many cases that some men *are* alive and others *are* dead. But yet, if you try to...give an account of the differences between life and death, which will apply in all cases in which we say that one thing is alive and another dead, you will certainly find it extraordinarily difficult (pp.205-206).

The distinction seems a very convincing one. It is between using a concept and being able to analyse logically its relation to other concepts. Moreover, Moore says that an ordinary understanding of these sentences is logically prior to philosophical analysis, "it is obvious that we cannot even raise the question how what we do understand by it is to be analysed, unless we do understand it" (DCS p.37). All the propositions Moore cites are to be understood in their ordinary sense, which means anyone who understands English will understand what those propositions mean and that they are true. Doubting their truth or trying to elicit a more exact meaning of a proposition like 'The earth is very old' is to embark upon philosophical analysis.

The next stage of his argument is to render the vague pronouncements of scepticism into a more comprehensible ordinary sense. Now no philosopher has actually denied that the earth is very old, that living bodies do not die or that no one has dreams.

Nevertheless, according to Moore, they have implicitly denied such propositions in virtue of affirming particular philosophical doctrines. For what all the common sense propositions imply is either the existence of material things, space, time, and self, and these are objects or properties which some philosophers have, for different reasons, refused to accept as real.

What does it mean to say that material things are not real, or that selves do not exist? Moore says that such expressions are vague, but that a clear and correct understanding of them would be one that contradicts (2). This would mean that the claim that material objects are not real (for example), is logically incompatible with some propositions we all recognise ourselves to know with certainty, such as 'There exist human bodies'. So 'Material things are not real' entails, for one thing, that no human bodies exist. Moore gives another example of translating metaphysical propositions into ordinary claims in SMPP. After discussing the possibility that all we know of material objects is an orderly succession of our own sensations he remarks:

...it does, in fact, sound very plausible. But as soon as you realise what it means in particular instances like that of the train – how it means you cannot possibly know that your carriage is, even probably running on wheels, or coupled to other carriages – it seems to lose all its plausibility. (SMPP p.135)

We see that many metaphysical claims like 'Material things are not real', logically contradict some ordinary propositions (which imply the existence of material objects), the truth of which we all know with certainty. While Moore concedes that not all philosophers would intend their claims to be translatable into ordinary concrete terms,

it is, he thinks, the most natural way to take their expressions if we are to make them unambiguous. This, then, is how Moore generates the conflict between the common sense propositions in (2) and the claims of scepticism.

The next step is to show how scepticism is an inconsistent position. The argument proceeds as follows:

Most philosophers who have held this view, have held, I think, that though each of us knows propositions corresponding to some of those which merely assert that I myself have had in the past experiences of certain kinds at many different times, yet none of us knows *for certain* any propositions either which assert the existence of *material things* or which assert the existence of *other* selves, beside myself, and that they also have had experiences.

The philosophical view Moore is referring to is solipsism. While no philosopher has actually claimed solipsism is true, some have maintained that it is not logically refutable.. Bertrand Russell in *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (HKSL) defines solipsism as:

The belief that I alone exist. It is not one doctrine unless it is true. If it is true, it is the assertion that I, Bertrand Russell, alone exist. But if it is false, and I have readers, then for you who are reading this chapter it is the assertion that you alone exist. (Russell 1966, p.191)

Russell finds himself compelled to accept it on the basis of holding the following two principles, one about the nature of logical inference and the other a strict commitment to empiricism:

From a group of propositions of the form “A occurs”, it is impossible to infer by deductive logic any other proposition asserting the existence of something. (Russell 1966, p.194)

What we know without inference consists solely of what we have experienced (or more strictly, what we are experiencing). (Russell 1966, p.195)

To infer from experience is to assume a general law that what has been experienced will happen again. Yet deductive logic alone does not license such an inference and, according to Russell, there is no other means for rationally making inferences from one set of experiences to another and he is therefore uncomfortably unable to refute solipsism of the moment.

Moore says about solipsism that, if a philosopher claims that other men like himself cannot know anything about the existence of any other human beings, then he contradicts himself because:

When he says ‘No human being has ever *known* of the existence of other human beings’, he is saying: ‘There have been many other human beings beside myself, and none of them (including myself) has ever known of the existence of other human beings’. If he says: ‘These beliefs are beliefs of common sense, but they are not matters of *knowledge*’, he is saying: ‘There have been many other human beings, beside myself, who have shared these beliefs, but neither I nor any of the rest has ever known them to be true.’ (p44)

The solipsist is understood to be contradicting the common sense belief that we know of the existence of other human beings. According to Moore, denying this common

sense belief is self-contradictory. For when the solipsist denies this belief to count as knowledge, he makes implicit reference to other human beings who hold beliefs which are not known to be true. The solipsist is seen to be committed to the existence of a commonly held, but false view and therefore, the existence of subjects who hold such a view.

Moore therefore makes the inference from the solipsist's statement:

No human being has ever known that other human beings exist.

To the implicitly held statement:

Human beings exist

But this inference is fallacious. This is made apparent by the following parallel inference. From the statement:

No human being has ever known that unicorns exist.

It would be incorrect to infer:

Unicorns exist

It would be more correct to say that if there are unicorns, then no human being knows of their existence. Now Moore does in fact recognise that the solipsist can qualify his argument in this way by claiming, that it is *possible* that *if* there are other humans, then they do not know of the existence of other human beings. This has the effect of avoiding the contradiction. But he blocks this rejoinder on the grounds that this is not what philosophers have meant when advancing the solipsistic position.

However, Russell, in HKSL, understood solipsism precisely in the way Moore denies it has been intended by philosophers. There, Russell draws a distinction between

dogmatic and sceptical solipsism, where the former roughly corresponds to how Moore presents it, and says that this deserves no rational consideration. Sceptical solipsism, on the other hand, says that nothing is known beyond experiential data and is argued for on the basis of Russell's above two principles. The sceptical solipsist therefore leaves open the possibility that there are other men besides himself and so cannot be charged with implicitly referring to the existence of other human beings. The target of Moore's criticism in DCS is the dogmatic solipsist, a version of solipsism, which according to Russell, was rationally defective. The philosopher who defends sceptical solipsism is not, therefore, guilty of self-refutation since he does not assert in his premise something which he denies in his conclusion and Moore's stronger argument against dogmatic solipsism is logically fallacious. His attempt, therefore, of demonstrating the incoherence of scepticism fails.

It is interesting to observe that in *Hume's Philosophy* (HP), Moore advances a similar argument but draws a slightly different conclusion from that in DCS. He acknowledges that the contradiction only follows if the solipsist advances the dogmatic version of solipsism, but he only seriously considers sceptical solipsism. In HP, Moore lets the conditional response go through and concedes that it is 'quite impossible to prove, in one strict sense of the term, that he does know any external facts'. (p.160)

MOORE'S 'PROOF OF AN EXTERNAL WORLD'

Moore delivered 'Proof of an External World' in 1939. In this paper he promises to take up Kant's challenge of demonstrating the existence of things 'external to the mind'. After some conceptual clarification of what he is going to do, Moore formulates the following proof:

- 1- Making a gesture with one hand Moore utters 'This is a hand'.
- 2- Making a gesture with the other hand he utters 'This is a hand'.
- 3- Therefore, objects external to the mind exist.

After stating his proof, Moore goes on to claim it is a good one. Firstly it satisfies what he considers are the three logical conditions of adequacy that every proof must fulfill; the conclusion must not be contained in the premises, the premises must be known to be true, and the conclusion must follow on logically from the premise. For the moment, what is important is that he says it corresponds to the kinds of proof we tend to make and accept on a daily basis. Proofs of the kind Moore has just given, are normally sufficient to remove any doubt there may have previously been on a particular question. For example, as an answer to the question how many misprints are there on a page, one could point and say here is one misprint and here another. The proof is successful of course only if it is agreed that what is singled out as a misprint is in fact a misprint. That this method counts as a proof is evidence that misprints can be identified by pointing to them. If we can identify misprints by this method, then why not hands? Surely one can be more certain that he has identified a hand than a misprint. So what

makes Moore's proof a good one is that it reflects the kind of proofs we ordinarily make and accept.

Yet Moore's proof seems all too quick and the sceptic's reply is not hard to precipitate. He will say that Moore only establishes that two objects exist, not that two physical objects exist. What the sceptic/idealist sees when Moore holds up two hands is just a collection of visible properties and not something further called a physical object. For the idealist, 'matter' is a kind of convenient fiction term, which refers to a collection of visible properties. In fact, all we are presented with, according to him, is a collection of visible properties in which nothing points to the existence of a physical thing. So Moore is appealing to a visual object when it is quite clear that scepticism was initiated by reflection upon the objects of perception. The point the sceptic/idealist is making *is not that what Moore waves about is not a hand*, but whether it is a *material* hand, whether it is the kind of thing that has the spatial properties associated with material objects. It is odd then, that Moore offers an empirical proof for the existence of physical objects when he must have surely known that his proof is effective only once it has been established that hands are physical objects. Once this is done, examples can be pointed to just as they were with the misprints.

What is commonly known as Moore's proof of an external world only takes up the last three pages of a twenty-three page essay. Most of the essay deals with drawing a distinction between objects which are mind-dependent and those which are not. By the time he gets to the proof, it is supposed to be established that a hand is external to the mind and is therefore a physical object. All the proof does is to point to two objects which have already been conceptually distinguished as physical objects.

Moore's proof then is not purely empirical, but also conceptual. Now there is nothing out of the ordinary about a proof like this. The example of misprints was also empirical and conceptual. In order to identify a misprint, the correct spelling must *already* have been settled. Once the correct spelling of a word has been laid down, then the empirical question about the misprinting of a particular word, or how many misprints of a particular word there are on a page, can be answered. We might then think that Moore's proof succeeds. For by the time he points to his hand we know it has already been established as a physical object. So we should recast Moore's original argument like this:

- 1- Things to be met with in space are physical
- 2- Hands are things to be met with in space
- 3- Therefore hands are physical things
- 4- Physical things are external to the mind
- 5- "Here is one hand"
- 6- "Here is another hand"
- 7- Therefore there exist things external to the mind

While this is a more accurate representation of his argument, we are thrown into disarray on the last two pages by Moore's own comments regarding its achievement. Instead of clarifying the proof, they serve to confuse the reader. He rightly locates the sceptic's dissatisfaction with whether he knows the truth of his premises and not whether he has drawn a valid logical distinction between objects which are supposed to

be external to the mind and those which are not. Moore understands perfectly well the sceptical challenge. What the sceptic wants is:

not merely a proof of these two propositions, but something like a general statement as to how any propositions of this sort may be proved. This, of course, I haven't given; and I do not believe it can be given: if this is what is meant by proof of the existence of external things, I do not believe that any proof of external things is possible. How am I to prove now that 'Here's one hand, and here's another'? I do not believe I can do it. In order to do it, I should need to prove for one thing, as Descartes pointed out, that I am not now dreaming (p.149).

What is going on? Is this an admission of defeat? We were promised an end to the 'scandal' Kant despairs of, supposedly by means of a proof of the existence of the world. Moore then boasts not just one, but a number of proofs able to establish the existence of the world. All these proofs are vouched as valid, but, by his own admission, do not refute the sceptical challenge, for to do this he would have to prove that he is not dreaming.

Malcolm (1990) has remarked that Moore is not making any concession to the sceptic here at all, but is expressing the point that scepticism is unintelligible. He says:

...it is more plausible to credit Moore with the insight that a philosopher who wants a proof of the existence of an external world is asking for something he knows not what – a 'general statement' describing how any particular physical -object proposition might be proved... There is no place for a proof. The most one could do is to shake philosophers out of their notion that there is a problem. I think that, at the deepest level, Moore was trying to do just that in his 'Proof'. (pp.362-363)

Now not only does Malcolm read into Moore's paper what is not there, but the paper explicitly rejects this interpretation. Moore does not think that, because no proof is empirically possible, scepticism is therefore unintelligible. In fact, Moore's 'Proof' is more modest than an outright refutation of scepticism. For he closes the paper with the remark that:

those, if any, who are dissatisfied with these proofs merely on the ground that I did not know their premises, *have no good reason* for their dissatisfaction.

(p.150, *my emphasis*)

Moore is therefore arguing that the sceptic is unreasonable and not unintelligible. It is not obvious, that because we do not know what a proof of an external world would look like, that questioning its existence makes no sense. At least it was not obvious to Moore.

Apart from the impossibility of a 'proof', Moore has a second reason for rejecting scepticism as unreasonable. He says it is mistaken to think, if you cannot prove that you know your premises, that you do not know them and, therefore, that the proof was inconclusive. If this is the objection, then, from a practical point of view, Moore is correct.

We do not expect someone to be able to prove everything which they claim to know before accepting what they say. If I am proving to you what time the train leaves by showing you a timetable, you will not expect me to prove the reliability of the timetable, unless you have some further reason to doubt it.

Despite the general correctness of these remarks, the sceptic is not silenced by them. Firstly, the fact that the dreaming hypothesis cannot be refuted does not make it any less true that our actual experiences are as the sceptic supposes. Our inability to come up with a proof is symptomatic of our restricted epistemic situation.

The sceptic can also accept Moore's second point and, as in the Japanese art of Aikido, use its force against him. We accept a person's knowledge claim even though he offers no proof for what he knows in ordinary situations *unless* we have a reason to doubt what we are being told. If a doubt is raised, then there is some obligation to answer it. In compliance with this, the sceptic raises a doubt about Moore's ability to know that 'this' is a hand. Given the intelligibility of the dreaming possibility as an objection to Moore's knowledge claim, he is therefore faced with the obligation of presenting a proof. The fact that neither he nor anyone else can offer one shows, not that scepticism is unintelligible, but that Moore's knowledge claim is unjustified.

Both McGinn (1989) and Baldwin (1990) offer a fleeting defense of Moore based on what Baldwin dubs the argument from 'differential certainty'. The argument is found being expounded by Moore in his article 'Hume's Philosophy' in his *Philosophical Papers* which McGinn quotes:

There is no reason why we should not...make our philosophical opinions agree with what we necessarily believe at other times. There is no reason why I should not confidently assert that

I really do know some external facts, although I cannot prove the assertion except by simply assuming I do. I am, in fact, as certain of this as anything, and as reasonably certain of it.¹

The argument from differential certainty states that we are more certain we have knowledge than we are of any philosophical theory which either explains how we have it or denies that we have it. In effect, the argument eliminates the need for any philosophical legitimisation of ordinary knowledge claims at all.

It is undeniable that there is no question of Moore's certainty here or even that it is rational for him to believe what he is certain of. The question is whether appealing to this certainty constitutes a rationally persuasive move against the sceptic. The answer must be it does not. The appeal to certainty does not constitute a rational defence according to the ordinary standards of argumentation, and because, as I have previously argued, scepticism reaches its conclusion by means of ordinary standards, the argument from differential certainty fails to be philosophically persuasive as well. The reason this argument fails is because, when a knowledge claim is made and a doubt about it entered, it is not sufficient to simply go on affirming that one is certain of it. I am of course repeating the previous objection, but from the differential certainty argument, we can see that certainty functions differently from knowledge. Moore is entitled to his certainty, but he cannot use it to argue against the sceptic without begging the question.

In the article by Malcolm from which I have already quoted, he describes Moore's 'Proof' as "one of the most amazing, and even comical, scenes in the history of

¹ McGinn p.47

philosophy. Moore's audacity in trying to prove to an assembly of learned philosophers that external objects exist, by holding up one hand and then another, was astounding". (p.360) Malcolm also goes on to say how impressive it was. I think one cannot help but feel these conflicting tendencies in the paper. While Moore's proof was a failure, the failure is more insightful than other philosophers' successes. More than anything else, Moore gets us to experience the conflict between scepticism and our ordinary everyday judgments, a conflict which Wittgenstein spent his professional career trying to dissolve.

WITTGENSTEIN AND THE NONSENSE OF THE SCEPTIC

INTRODUCTION

The stimuli for OC were Moore's two papers, DCS and PEW. As we have seen, in those works Moore responds to the sceptic by claiming that he does know precisely that which the sceptic denies. Moore thought that any philosophical account which attempted to explain how knowledge of the world is possible should preserve knowledge and not undermine it. Hence any philosophical explanation that entails scepticism should be rejected for this very reason. As we have seen, Moore's defence is unacceptable because it begs the question rather than answering it. The fact that scepticism contradicts ordinary knowledge claims is no more than an observation; I avoid calling it a *mere* observation for the point is an insightful one, but it cannot, by itself, stand as a criticism of scepticism. While dogmatism is a serious misdemeanour in philosophy, I think in this case at least, it has not been wasteful. The arguments which need addressing have been highlighted by their very neglect. The contradiction between common sense and scepticism, which Moore grasped with clarity, cries out for further understanding. This means that if common sense is correct – if we do know many propositions to be true with certainty as Moore declared – then we need to know what it is about common sense that makes it correct, or at least safe from the sceptical conclusion. I agree that OC presents us with an increased understanding of these issues, which I hope to bring out in this section.

Wittgenstein does not simply appeal to facts of ordinary linguistic usage, though he does make much use of concrete examples of how we apply our epistemic concepts in all sorts of situations. But he does not appeal to these examples as a means of showing that our common sense judgements are correct. He differs here from Moore. Wittgenstein is not defending the beliefs of common sense, but is more concerned with a clarification of the concepts used to express those common sense beliefs. He does deny that we can doubt whether this object before me is a hand, but this is not because I do know it is a hand, à la Moore. Moore had defended a common sense epistemology from within common sense itself, but Wittgenstein offers a broader picture of our relation to our ordinary system of judgements about the world.

THE BEGINNING

In the debate between Moore and the sceptic, what impressed Wittgenstein most were the nature of the particular examples under discussion and the role they were supposed to play in the argument.

Recall that Descartes began his method of doubt by wondering whether he could question whether he was sitting by the fire in his dressing gown. He chose this example because he had initially considered it indubitable. Here was a case where neither expertise was involved, nor complicated inferences, nor reliance on the testimony of any one else. If Descartes could doubt this, then he could not be sure of anything. Moore chose the same kind of example but turned it on its head when he declared to know that he possessed two hands. Although he realised there was no contradiction in

denying he knew this, he could not bring himself, in the way Descartes did, to doubt such a proposition.

Both parties then had selected an example of something they considered themselves to be in the *best possible position to say they knew*, but reaching different conclusions. According to Moore, Descartes' doubts were artificial and absurd and to Descartes, Moore's affirmations would appear presumptuous and dogmatic. The examples cut both ways. Was this significant or just a red herring?

To Wittgenstein they signalled something odd as well as interesting, in the debate between Moore and the sceptic. He thought Moore was right: it *is* absurd to doubt such things as whether I have two hands or that I am not awake but dreaming instead. Yet he was unable to go along with Moore's repeated insistence that he knew them. The debate between Moore and the sceptic had brought to the surface a very significant and special class of propositions, propositions that appear impossible to doubt and strange to boast knowledge of.

Wittgenstein's general criticism of the Moore/sceptic debate is that, *in the philosophical context*, it is a mistake to treat the disputed propositions as items of knowledge for which there could be evidence. I stress *in the philosophical context* because Wittgenstein allowed for occasions, all be it highly extraordinary ones, where these propositions could be regarded as items of knowledge. His objection is directed against the *philosophical use* of these propositions, in so far as they are used to support or reject a metaphysical thesis.

Moore was correct on at least one point, however: no doubt about the propositions he affirmed is ever *ordinarily* entertained. Where he went wrong was to conclude that the absence of doubt about p, (where p is a Moore-type proposition), entails that one knows that p. If p is a Moore-type proposition and one cannot normally be said to know or doubt that p, then what is its status? Wittgenstein's answer is that such propositions are certain and, most importantly, their certainty is not something dogmatic or lacking justification.

THE CORRECT AND INCORRECT USE OF "I KNOW"

We have had occasion to notice the puzzling nature of Moore's anti-sceptical remarks. On the one hand, Moore is attempting to answer the sceptic, and as such he is in philosophical combat. On the other hand, he is defending what he thinks are our ordinary knowledge claims. While Moore did not think one had to be a philosopher to say he knew such things as whether he had two hands or that he was wearing clothes, it is only a philosopher who would say such a thing. Moore put himself in a difficult position. To deny he knew them would make him sound idiotic, but affirming them in the face of the sceptic would be question-begging.

Wittgenstein was perplexed by Moore's use of "I know" for the propositions he enunciated. Moore seemed to be conflating knowledge with certainty. He seemed to think that because he could not be mistaken in his certainty that p, that this guaranteed the truth of p (OC 21). If someone knows that p, then the truth of p is guaranteed,¹ but

¹ I do not understand why Genova (1995) says that Wittgenstein denies knowing p entails the truth of p (p.189). One can discern in OC a struggle to rectify this conceptual truth with the expression "I

the truth of p is not guaranteed by the use of "I know p". One can claim to know what he likes, but this does not make it true that he knows it, as Wittgenstein remarks, "It would surely be remarkable if we had to believe the reliable person who says "I can't be wrong"; or who says "I am not wrong". (OC 22) The use of the verb 'to know' is highly specialised (OC 11).

Wittgenstein gives us some idea what he considers to be the correct use of the expression "I know". He is not here contributing to the traditional analysis of the concept of knowledge, whereby a set of necessary and sufficient conditions are laid down and then tested against our intuitions. Such an approach would contravene Wittgenstein's 'family-resemblance' notion of a concept (*Philosophical Investigation* (PI) 65, 66). By the correct use of "I know", Wittgenstein is instead offering us reminders of how in fact we do use the concept.

Wittgenstein gives three examples for the correct use of "I know". In each case grounds are cited:

The correct use of the expression "I know". Someone with bad sight asks me: "do you believe that the thing we can see there is a tree?" I reply " I *know* it is; I can see it clearly and am familiar with it". -A: "Is N.N. at home?"-I: "I believe he is." -A: "Was he at home yesterday?" -I: "Yesterday he was-I know he was; I spoke to him." - A: "Do you know or only believe that this part of the house is built later than the rest?" - I: "I *know* it is, I got it from so and so."
(OC 483)

thought I knew", but in OC 549, the passage Genova cites as evidence, Wittgenstein explicitly rejects her claim.

Two important features about the correct use of "I know" are being made here by Wittgenstein. Firstly, each time "I know" is used, grounds for the claim are mentioned as well. In fact, the use of "I know" could be dropped altogether and replaced by "My grounds for p are..." (OC 564). Secondly, the giving of grounds is a response to an expressed doubt which requires the claimant to demonstrate how he knows and so remove the doubt. By saying how one knows, one makes it possible for another to judge whether one does know.

If someone... knows something, then the question "how does he know?" must be capable of being answered. And if one does answer this question, one must do so according to generally accepted axioms. *This* is how something of this sort may be known (OC 550-551).

There is nothing particularly contentious in what Wittgenstein is saying here. Clearly, just affirming "I know p" is not sufficient by itself to justify saying S knows p. Neither is the truth of p sufficient either, for one may be right about p, but for all the wrong reasons. What is important are the grounds for claiming p or being in a position to know that p. The idea of 'being in a position to know' or having grounds for a given claim carries in its wake the possibility of error (Genoa 1995, p.193). It means being situated in a causal environment, open to deception, restrictions and changes in that environment, "it is always by favour of Nature that one knows something" (OC 505).

Moore confessed an inability to provide any evidence for his affirmations. Yet he considered himself justified in saying he knew them because he thought the requirement to say how one knows is not universal. While he is correct to say that in ordinary cases "I know" does not always require saying how one knows, it is difficult

to see how this could be of any help to him against the sceptic. Let's look at a few uses of "I know" where grounds are not required and see if Moore could have used any of these.

Suppose I have tipped over a box of matches and, holding the empty box in one hand, I pick up the matches in the other. Watching me, my friend says, "You do have two hands!", "I know I have two hands" I reply. Here the use of "I know" states that I do not need reminding. Another case where evidence is not required would be one that expresses competence; suppose someone is injured by a car in the street and a passer-by shouts "Help! Is anyone here a first-aider" and I reply "Yes, I know how to perform first aid". A further case would be one where it is used to express agreement: "It was a tragedy that so and so died so young", "I know", say I. Or "I know" may be used to assure someone, "Don't worry, I know the band will arrive on time". None of these uses involves explicit reference to evidence.

While these are acceptable uses of know, this does not mean they fail to satisfy Wittgenstein's two requirements for a knowledge claim because, in these cases, the person using "I know" is not challenged or questioned in any way to produce evidence. He is under no obligation to say how he knows, and, therefore, uses "I know" appropriately and innocuously. If the question is "Do you know?" or "Are you sure?", then "Yes, I am sure", "I know" are acceptable answers. If however, I am asked, "How do you know it is Tom's birthday?" then I must explain how I was in a position to know this. Similarly if challenged, I must be able to justify my claim that I know first aid or that the band will arrive on time. If the knowledge claim is something we all

agree on then, we must be able to ask ourselves, if challenged, (say by the sceptic), how it is that we could all come to know the same thing.

Perhaps then, it was one of these substitutes Moore had in mind when he addressed his audience. However it does not appear appropriate for Moore to use "I know" to prefix the class of propositions he affirmed. If "I know" is used as a reminder, what would it be like to forget that one has two hands. Moore carefully selected his examples precisely because no competence was involved and he thought nearly every human being familiar with the English language would assent to them also. This then excludes the use of "I know" to express competence that one knows one is wearing clothes.

That Moore was addressing the sceptic as well as his non-sceptical audience must rule out his use of "I know" to express agreement. All this would have achieved is to show the sceptic to hold a minority position while failing to demonstrate the correctness of the majority view. As for expressing assurance, the sceptic never doubted that we all assent to Moore's propositions or even the integrity of Moore's assurance. But this is just seen as irrelevant to the question of his knowing. What interests the sceptic are Moore's reasons and whether those reasons admit of doubt or not. Wittgenstein's perplexity over Moore's use of "I know" comes down to the fact that he is unable to conceive of a context in which one would say "I know" for imparting information or a context for doubting them.

From Wittgenstein's remarks on the concept of knowledge we see that the correct use of "I know" essentially involves the possibility of error and the need for grounds. But the propositions Moore affirmed do not satisfy either criterion. We seem to have a

special class of propositions for which the concept of knowledge, as Wittgenstein understands it, is not applicable. Moore's affirmations have the form of empirical propositions, but for which no grounds exist and about which no question or doubt is ever raised.

The propositions...which Moore retails as examples of such known truth are indeed interesting. Not because anyone knows their truth, or believes he knows them, but because they all have a similar role in the system of our empirical judgements. (OC 137)

When Moore says he *knows* such and such, he is really enumerating a lot of empirical propositions which we affirm without special testing; propositions, that is, which have a peculiar logical role in the system of our empirical propositions. (OC 136)

What then is the role of these special propositions and how do they differ from other empirical propositions?

THE STRUCTURE OF OUR SYSTEM OF EMPIRICAL PROPOSITIONS

Here is a recent statement from the Government's chief scientific advisor, Sir Robert May²

You can't say anything is safe. You can say two and two is always four; because that sort of definition is built into the structure and nature of the system but you can't say, with 100 per cent confidence, that the sun will rise tomorrow.

2. *The Guardian* February 23 1999

May is alluding to the commonly made distinction between mathematics and empirical knowledge. The distinction is drawn by means of the apparent absolute certainty enjoyed by mathematics as contrasted with the mere probability of empirical knowledge. May characterises the certainty of a mathematical proposition like $2 + 2 = 4$ by saying it belongs to the structure of the system, the implication here being that our empirical system of beliefs have no certainties which play the same structural role.

It is this homogenising of all empirical beliefs to a single logical type which, for Wittgenstein, marks the first step towards scepticism. For the idea that ‘nothing is safe’ gives the false impression that one can doubt the entire system at once. Of course, philosophers have always posited a structure to our empirical beliefs, distinguishing basic from non-basic beliefs. The existence of a class of basic beliefs has usually been posited as a means for dealing with the infinite regress of justification³. While it is more controversial to deny a structure than to assert one, what is novel about Wittgenstein is his account of the nature of the foundations which serve as a terminating point for justification.

Two themes dominate and distinguish Wittgenstein from the more traditional foundationalist position associated with Descartes. Firstly, “justification”, says Wittgenstein, must come to an end (OC 192), “but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us as immediately true; i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game” (OC 204). As a way of dealing with the infinite regress of justification, Wittgenstein does not posit a class of basic

³ If S knows that p, then he must be able to justify his belief that p by appealing to another proposition q. But then q must be justified by another proposition r and so on.

beliefs which are somehow self-evident or self-warranted. In fact, as we shall see later, there is good reason for not regarding them as propositions at all. Secondly, the structure of knowledge is holistic:

When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole) (OC 141)

No single proposition, therefore, could act as a foundation for our entire system of knowledge, because every proposition is connected with some other proposition. It makes no sense for Wittgenstein, as it did for Descartes, to think that the *cogito* could stand independent of the rest of knowledge. Of course, this does not mean that all beliefs are on a par, we must distinguish between knowledge and certainty, where the latter refers to our way of acting. As we shall see later, the mystery of Wittgenstein's account is the relationship between the certainties of action and empirical beliefs.

Wittgenstein calls those propositions that are certain and fundamental 'hinge propositions' and these are contrasted with more standard empirical judgements.

That is to say, 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 turn.

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

If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put (OC 341-343).

Wittgenstein makes a number of claims regarding hinge propositions. They cannot be justified or doubted (OC 110, 125, 243), but are necessary for doubting and resolving

problems. One cannot therefore doubt a hinge proposition without a particular epistemic practice collapsing. It makes no sense to speak of a mistake regarding a hinge proposition (OC 25, 32, 138, 155). To do so is a symptom of mental derangement and not of being in error (OC 155, 231, 257). Hinge propositions are not empirical, we did not arrive at them through investigation or on the basis of evidence (OC 94, 95, 240, 298). Some hinge propositions can, in certain circumstances, function as empirical propositions, while others stand fast absolutely. They do not function as hypotheses, but belong to our 'world-picture' (OC 167).

I shall illustrate a hinge proposition by means of two examples:

EXAMPLE 1

Suppose I am planning to buy some furniture for my living room and I decide to measure the height of my doorway so as to have an idea of whether I shall be able to manoeuvre the furniture through it. I measure the doorway and it stands at 2m. Suppose that now a philosopher raises doubts about the accuracy of my initial measurement of the door. While I am certain no mistake has been made, to appease him I bring out my tape measure and check again. I even invite him to check for himself and, unsurprisingly, the door measures 2 metres. Normally, that is non-philosophically, we should be perfectly satisfied with this, but the sceptic is not satisfied by what we actually do but with whether what we do is justified. If he pushes his doubts about the height of the door after we have checked the answer, then what he is questioning is whether we are justified in accepting the reading of the tape measure. Such a doubt is not impossible; perhaps he knows that my tape measure was made by a company whose machines imprecisely cut their measuring materials. It is

possible, then, that I could have made a mistake, but it also remains possible for the mistake about the height of the door to be eliminated. Even if the sceptic distrusts all measuring implements, there is one ruler, the standard metre rod in Paris, which, if I had access to it, could positively determine the height of the door. Even a bad workman could not blame this tool. This is because the standard metre does not function in the way other rulers do. It's not that it is more accurate, rather it stands as an exemplification of 'a metre'.

It has this special paradigmatic status, but not because of any intrinsic property such as being more accurate than any other object of one metre. Indeed, it would be a kind of nonsense to ascribe or deny the property of being a metre to the standard metre rod, for 'the standard metre rod is one metre' does not describe a fact, but prescribes a standard. This does not mean its status cannot change.

The standard metre rod *could* function as an object to be measured as well as a standard ruler, for example, by a laser beam⁴, but even then, the laser beam takes on the role of a correct standard and the distinction between propositions which are tested and those which stand fast re-emerge.

When the standard metre functions as a rule, it is not used to justify the length of any particular object, in the way the height of the door was used to test the height of the statue. Rather it is the standard against which our ordinary rulers conform, so that doubting it entails doubting the results of all measuring and, in consequence, one does away with the idea of correct and incorrect measurements as we understand them.

Without any agreed criterion of what a metre is or any other unit of measurement, it becomes impossible to determine the length of one object by means of another. We could never determine the length of a room, the height of a person, or the distance between two cities. Therefore, we could never calculate how long it would take to travel from one destination to another.

EXAMPLE 2

Consider the following two statements:

- (1) The earth has existed for over a hundred years
- (2) Napoleon fought at the battle of Waterloo in 1816

Without (1), not only could (2) not possibly be true, but the idea of historical inquiry would collapse into chaos and confusion. (2) is a contingent statement which *happens* to be true and for which there exists documentary evidence, but while it could not possibly be true without (1), it is not the case that (1) supports the truth of (2) in any epistemic sense. What makes (2) true is some other contingent proposition or set of propositions, which themselves depend upon (1) if they are to play their particular epistemic role.

The proposition that the earth has existed for over a hundred years has a special relationship to proposition (2) and propositions like (2). For every piece of historical information depends upon (1), but is not supported by it. One cannot infer from the earth having existed over a hundred years the truth of (2). (1) makes (2) possible

⁴ Hans -Johann Glock 1996 p214. 'Necessity and Normativity'.

without making it true. We can put this by saying that (1) determines what *can* be true and false but not what *is* true or false.

While it is the case that (1) can logically be derived from (2) if (2) is true, (2) cannot epistemically establish the truth of (1). If (2) is true for example, then this entails the existence of the earth upon which Napoleon fought and the date of the battle implies that the earth has existed for over one hundred years. So from the words contained in the contingent proposition 'Napoleon fought at Waterloo in 1816' we can derive (1) which is a necessary condition for the truth of (2). However, despite this logical relation, (2) cannot epistemically support (1). For if (1) *is* a necessary condition for the truth of (2), then (2) cannot be established as true without first establishing the truth of (1), which, as we shall see, is not something that can be done. Even if (1) could be shown to be true, its truth would not support the truth of (2) since we can neither logically nor epistemically derive (2) from (1).

While the two types of examples I have given share the outer appearance of empirical judgements like 'this door is one metre', 'this rock is over a hundred years old', they have the function of *a priori* propositions.

Both the standard metre rod and 'the earth has existed for over a hundred years' are necessary requirements for the possibility of carrying out their respective inquiries. Yet they are different 'kinds' of hinges. The standard metre, as its name suggests, is an example or paradigm with the aim of establishing a universal standard for measurement. No doubt it was introduced to eradicate some sort of problem. But 'the

earth is over a hundred years old' is not a standard of, or for, anything and was clearly not introduced to solve any problem or disagreement.

One important difference between these two hinge propositions, however, is that the standard metre is fixed *relative* to the practice of measurement and, as we have seen, may be subject to alteration. It is even possible that an entirely new system of measurement may evolve, as long, that is, as there is some regularity in the rigidity of objects. The same cannot be said of 'the earth has existed for over a hundred years'. There may be disputes about exactly how old the earth is, whether it is five or six billion years old for example, but not whether it is more than one hundred years old. This hinge proposition therefore 'stands absolutely fast'.

The class of propositions which cannot be doubted is itself not homogeneous. The 'world-view' is multi-layered and pulsating, a criss-crossing of individual belief-systems and public disciplines, all held in place by a few unalterable certainties. As we mature and become acculturated we shall acquire our own set of hinge propositions, some of mine will be different from some of yours, and others we all share. Wittgenstein makes use of the following metaphor to characterise the dynamic of this system:

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid (OC 96)...the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish

between the movements of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself, though there is no sharp division of the one from the other. (OC 97)

And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away or deposited. (OC 99)

Some hinge propositions are unalterable while others are relative to contexts, practices or individuals and become part of the (empirical) waters. A hinge proposition which has become part of the river-bed is 'Water boils at 100 degrees centigrade' (OC 338) while 'no one has been to the moon' (OC 106), is now part of the waters. More personal hinge propositions include: 'I have never been to China' (OC 333) and 'I have two hands', while 'This is red' or 'The letters A and B are pronounced like this' (OC 340) can be seen to constitute correct standards for judging linguistic competence. The various layers are also related to each other, for example, if no one has been to the moon, then neither have I. But personal certainties are not always dependent on public ones, so even though some men have been to the moon, I can still be sure that I have not⁵. Personal certainties are still hinges because even though no public practice is undermined, if I was unsure what my name was or whether I had been to China, then not only would faith in my own judgement begin to sway, but other people would feel intellectually distant from me.

Despite the different levels in generality of hinge propositions, doubting them is not something we normally do and which would be extremely odd to attempt. But our not doubting them is not, says Wittgenstein, "something akin to hastiness or superficiality"

⁵ Moore was therefore wrong to include personal certainties as belonging to what he called 'the common sense conception of the world'.

(OC 358), rather we are to conceive them “as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal” (OC 359). I take this to mean that hinge propositions are *non-epistemic*. We do not refrain from doubting hinge propositions because we know them. Rather, they do not lack justification but stand outside epistemic application. Wittgenstein likens this certainty to the certainty a cat has about the existence of a mouse, or the infant’s certainty that milk exists (OC 478), the point of comparison being that such a certainty does not require any cogitation or linguistic competence.

The non-epistemic status of hinge propositions becomes more apparent if we recall my earlier ‘example 2’. We saw that it was not possible for the truth of a contingent historical proposition to epistemically support the existence of the earth since it must be already certain that the earth exists for the historical claim to be possible. It is for the same reason that ‘inference to the best explanation’ arguments cannot be used to establish the existence of physical objects since their existence is a pre-condition for doing science. This type of argument tries to show that the ‘hypothesis’ of the physical world scores higher on explanatory virtues than does a sceptical alternative. But there is no virtue in accepting the existence of the physical world; it doesn’t pay to do so and we did not accept it for any reason at all.

No one was ever taught such things like ‘objects do not vanish when unperceived’ or that ‘I am a man and not a woman’. No one told me, and neither did I discover for myself, that I have never lived in China, “...experience is not the ground for our game of judging. Nor its outstanding success” (OC 131). Our certainty in these things does not continue because it pays to do so, accepting them is just what we do. There is

therefore an important difference between scientific investigations and their foundations.

In a certain sense, the foundations are idle. This is not to say they do not have a role. Scaffolding is idle but not useless. The role of the foundations is obviously supportive, but how and in what sense? Are they fundamental truths shared by all humanity? This cannot be right, since some of these foundations are relative and fluctuate between contexts and individuals. On the other hand, there are some that 'stand absolutely fast' such that no person can reasonably doubt. It remains unclear whether the foundations of language and thought are themselves propositions. Wittgenstein of course uses the term 'hinge proposition' (not more than three times in OC). He also says that the expression 'physical objects exist' is nonsense, which implies that it is not a proper proposition at all. Strawson (1985) is non-committal and prefers to speak of 'crypto-propositions'. But how can the substratum of thought be nonsense? Wittgenstein also advises us to look at the practice of language in order to see the logic of language (OC 501), but says that our relation to the foundations of our system of judgements is not a kind of seeing, but an acting (OC 24). And what does he mean when he says "The existence of the earth is rather part of the whole picture which forms the starting-point of belief for me"? (OC 209) We cannot infer anything from the propositions which form the world-picture. Take Strawson's four favourite hinges: the existence of the earth; the uniformity of nature; the existence of human beings; and the reality of the past. I cannot derive any empirical proposition from these four hinges and in this sense they are useless. But can we derive them from ordinary empirical judgements?

Meredith Williams (1999) has suggested the idea that hinge propositions are derivable from ordinary propositions:

The certainty of propositions that hold fast does not derive from their belonging to a transcendental structure which conditions all concrete empirical judgements; rather *their certainty derives from the concrete empirical judgements that we make.* (p.74)

Supposing that 'which holds fast' is derivable from ordinary empirical judgements, then from every such judgement we could derive the existence of the physical world. Given that Wittgenstein does not think we ordinarily say things like 'this is a chair', 'this is a hand', etc., but learn to fetch books and sit on chairs (OC 476), then what stands fast must be buried in these orders. Deriving hinge propositions would mean that from the order:

(1) 'Bring me that chair.'

we can derive the proposition:

(2) That chairs exist.

From which we can derive:

(3) Physical objects exist.

However the idea that we can 'derive' the certainty of hinge propositions from empirical judgements gives the impression that hinge propositions have a 'ghostly' existence, somewhat like the elementary propositions of the *Tractatus*. If there are such things as hinge or framework propositions that form the substratum of all inquiring and asserting (OC 162), and they are such as to never be brought into doubt,

then they would seem to have an abstract existence. This is a point noted by Wolgast (1987) who finds a tension in OC between Wittgenstein's later view of meaning which ties the meaning of a word or sentence to its use, and the existence of significant but idle propositions. She says:

How can a proposition be important when it never comes into the language and is not learned as part of that language? It is precisely its *not* coming into that language as a working proposition that shows its character as fundamental. That is part of the criterion for its being a "framework proposition". But this reasoning is circular: Framework propositions are important partly because they are not used; and they are not used because that is part of their framework role. (p.162)

Wolgast has touched on something here but I am not sure that she has correctly interpreted Wittgenstein. Pointing out that our system of judgements excludes doubting hinge propositions does not necessarily make them significant. If they never come into language then an alternative reading is that they are vacuous. Strawson (1985) seems to suggest this:

To attempt to confront the professional skeptical doubt with arguments in support of these beliefs, with rational justifications, is simply to show a total misunderstanding of the role they actually play in our belief-systems. The correct way with the professional skeptical doubt is not to attempt to rebut it with argument, but to point out that it is idle, unreal, a pretence; and then the rebutting arguments will appear as equally idle (Strawson 1985, p.19).

The difficulty I have perhaps been skirting around is the question of whether hinge propositions are propositions at all. If they are, then they must be meaningful. But then

it would make sense to say things like ‘I am certain that physical objects exist’, which Wittgenstein seems to suggest is nonsense.

Malcolm (1982) puts his finger on the difficulty of speaking about the role of hinge propositions:

It is too fundamental to be either ‘unjustified’ or ‘justified’. It underlies any mastery of words in which a procedure of justification could be framed. This fundamental thing is so fundamental that it is difficult, or perhaps impossible, to describe it in words. One would *like* to characterise it in mental terms – to call it knowledge, or belief, or conviction, or certainty, or acceptance, or confidence, or assumption. But none of these expressions fit. All of them have their appropriate application *within* language-games. Whereas Wittgenstein is trying to call attention to something that underlies all language-games. (pp.17-18)

While Wolgast observes an unresolved tension in OC between Wittgenstein’s later view of meaning as use and the existence of abstract propositions, Stroll (1994), on the other hand, observes progress and a possible solution in the text. He thinks that towards the end of OC, Wittgenstein began to develop a non-propositional account of hinge propositions (p.156), as well as a propositional one. The propositional account has three characteristics. (1) hinge propositions form a system, (2) some hinge propositions stand relatively fast, and (3) some hinge propositions stand absolutely fast. The non-propositional account he says, abandons (1) and (2) and is marked by the three features of instinct, acting, and training.

On this interpretation, what Wittgenstein takes to be foundational is a picture of the world we all inherit as members of a human community. We have been trained from birth in ways of

acting that are non-reflective to accept a picture of the world that is ruthlessly realistic...This picture is manifested in action...The foundations are neither known nor unknown, neither reasonable nor unreasonable. They are there, just like our lives. (pp.158-159)

If Malcolm and Stroll's reading of OC is correct, and Stroll does cite textual evidence for his claim, then the picture which emerges is that knowledge rests on ineffable foundations which are absolutely necessary for our epistemic practices. Not only does it make no sense to doubt them or affirm them, it makes no sense to utter them at all.

The difficulty for the view that what stands fast is ineffable is that we cannot say that they stand fast, and Wittgenstein, like the sceptic, utters a meaningless expression by commenting on their special status.

Wittgenstein faces a dilemma here. If what stands fast is non-propositional, then it cannot make sense to say that we are certain of them or to express their special character at all because of their ineffability. If they are propositional, then it seems Wittgenstein is committed to the *Tractarian* view that there exist propositions which never come into our language, thereby conflicting with his later theory that the meaning of an expression is connected to its use.

We might think that the following passage offers a potential exit from the above dilemma:

Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described? You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it. (OC 501)

This suggests that Wittgenstein never abandoned the saying/showing distinction of the *Tractatus*. There the distinction was used to make the point that the logic of language cannot itself be described but is manifest in its actual employment. However, as Glock (1996) notes, there is a second passage where Wittgenstein explicitly denies the saying/showing distinction:

Indeed, doesn't it seem obvious that the possibility of a language-game is conditioned by certain facts?

In that case it would seem as if the language-game must 'show' the facts that make it possible. (But that's not how it is.) (OC 617-618)

Glock (1996) offers an alternative reading, which suggests a way out of the dilemma. He says that Wittgenstein nowhere states that hinge propositions cannot be stated, only that they are not. As textual evidence he cites OC 88 where Wittgenstein says 'if they are ever formulated'. Glock goes on to say:

What is correct is this. Wittgenstein tentatively suggested that to say, with Moore, that we *know* hinge propositions creates confusion because it invites sceptical doubts, and is hence at odds with our treating them as certain, which shows itself in the way we act. But this is not to say that it creates confusion or fuels scepticism to draw attention to these propositions, as long as one does not mistakes them for ordinary empirical claims. (Glock 1996, P.139)

So, according to Glock, we can state hinge propositions as long as we do not say that we know them and one remembers their special logical role. I think this is probably correct. This interpretation also tallies with a remark Wittgenstein makes at OC 232, where he says it would be more correct to say that we could doubt every single fact

and *do not* doubt them all, rather than that we *cannot* doubt them all. The force of the ‘cannot’ derives from human practice and not from the intrinsic nature of hinge propositions. This suggests that the ineffability of certain hinge propositions is also not intrinsic and that it is not impossible to formulate them under particular circumstances.

The sceptic cannot doubt hinge propositions without collapsing large portions of how we understand and navigate our way around the world. Accepting them is just something we all do and it is not clear what making a mistake with regard to a hinge proposition is like. This shows that underneath judging, must lie certainty (OC 115).

What would it mean to be in error about this being a hand? I could be deluded, dreaming, or drugged, but these make sense against the idea that one can wake up from a dream or ‘come down’ from a drug-induced experience. Thus doubt about these propositions makes sense in extraordinary cases, but there is nothing in such cases to support scepticism.

DOUBTING CERTAINTIES

How devastating is this response for the sceptic? Michael Williams raises the following objection. He says:

It will not do to object that Wittgenstein shows more than that we do not treat certain hinge propositions as open to question but that, since their standing fast for us constitutes what we understand by judgement, we cannot so treat them. At least, it will not do unless we have a way of meeting the reply that “cannot” only means “cannot if we are to get on with ordinary pursuits.” As historians, we cannot entertain radical doubts about the reality of the

past. But this does not mean we cannot entertain them as epistemologists (Williams 1996, p.158).

Michael Kober makes a similar criticism:

As this (the sceptic's) use of the word "dreaming" does not accord completely with its ordinary use, it detaches the sceptic from his ordinary practices and their presuppositions...On the other hand...describing practices of a form of life, for hermeneutic reasons, from "within"- cannot dissolve a detached scepticism (p.438).

Recall Stroud's earlier claim that, in the context of philosophy, our thoughts are not constrained by practical limitations or necessities. Our only concern is with the goal of truth. Williams and Kober make a similar objection. The sceptic can adopt a detached position 'outside' all of our practices and, in the isolated context of philosophy, is free to doubt all hinge propositions. Indeed, the objection that the survival of practices requires hinge propositions can be seen as a restatement of the sceptical paradox rather than a solution. Wittgenstein himself is aware of this when he writes:

The statement "I know that here is a hand" may then be continued: "for it's *my* hand that I'm looking at". Then the reasonable man will not doubt that I know. – Nor will the idealist; rather he will say that he was not dealing with the practical doubt which is being dismissed, but there is a further doubt *behind* that one. – That this is an *illusion* has to be shown in a different way. (OC 19)

Wittgenstein has an argument that bridges the gap between the practical indubitability of hinge propositions and their theoretical indubitability, although it is not to be found

in OC. But Williams ignores this aspect of Wittgenstein's response because he finds the intuitive intelligibility of scepticism so powerful that any theory of linguistic competence is likely to be less convincing than the sceptical intuition itself (p.xix).

Now, I do not know how one distinguishes between more and less powerful intuitions. One cannot appeal, for example, to differences in 'liveliness' or 'vivacity' and, while many philosophers would agree with Williams' intuition, many 'ordinary language' philosophers have considered scepticism to be highly unintuitive. Stroud shares Williams' intuition but, unlike Williams, he is taken with the incoherence strategy as the most suitable form of challenge to scepticism (p.274), even though he is unable to offer any positive account along these lines. Clearly the extra burden carried by an incoherence strategy is worth the labour if it truly is the most promising anti-sceptical response.

Williams himself is stalking the sceptic, only he has no time for demonstrating scepticism's' unintelligibility. He is happy to exile scepticism to the philosopher's study and remove its general significance. While this is one anti-sceptical response, it is not the one Wittgenstein is proffering. If Williams' objection stands, then so does the intelligibility of scepticism.

The discussion up until now has sought to provide an account of the role of hinge propositions in our practices. Following Strawson and Stroll, I have focused on the absolute hinge propositions, which, as we have seen, are not relative to particular practices, but to thought in general. Moreover, if Stroll is correct, what supports all

our linguistic or discursive practices is itself non-propositional and practical. The foundations of all thought and action are then ineffable.

But the sceptic has not been entirely silenced, since he will argue that the ineffability of these certain foundations persists only as long as we conceive of ourselves from *within* those foundations. The ineffability is practically necessary for our thinking about the world, but the possibility of a detached theoretical perspective from which to articulate and assess the truth of our 'assumptions' seems to persist. I am therefore returning to Stroud's concept of 'objectivity' developed in section II, which until now I have left untouched and looming in the background.

The completion of Wittgenstein's anti-sceptical response involves showing that the theoretical or objective perspective is illusory and that there is no privileged position from which to articulate the hinges of our world-picture. The idea that one can simultaneously plunge a practice into confusion and preserve the terms which serve to characterise that practice is something which cannot be done.

Consider again the case of determining length. Suppose the practice of determining length is thrown into confusion by refusing to accept any agreed standard of correctness for ascribing length. What exactly does it mean to question such a practice?

What "determining the length" means is not learned by learning what *length* and *determining* are, but the meaning of the word "length" is learnt among other things, by learning what it is to determine length. (PI II XI)

For Wittgenstein, the meaning of 'length' and 'determine' is learnt by the methods we use for determining length, and so plunging the practice into confusion deprives the words from the contexts in which they derived their sense. When the sceptic questions our ability to determine length he obviously does not consider this doubt as infecting the meaning of the words 'length' and 'determine'.

If our ability to determine length is questioned, then a distinction is forged between word and application. This distinction assumes it makes sense to apply our words for determining length *externally*, from a position outside the contexts in which the word has application.

The sceptic about the external world works with the same distinction between meaning and application. He thinks it is possible to speak of an external world (the sceptic is not an idealist) about which we can know nothing.

If, therefore, I doubt or am uncertain about this being my hand (in whatever sense), why not in that case about the meaning of these words as well? (OC 456)

If I wanted to doubt whether this was my hand, how could I avoid doubting whether the word "hand" has any meaning? So that is something I seem to *know* after all. (OC 383)

"I know that this is a hand". - And what is a hand? - "Well, *this*, for example." (OC 268)

The *truth* of my statements is the test of my understanding of these statements. That is to say: If I make certain false statements, it becomes uncertain whether I understand them (OC 80-81)

The *truth* of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference. (OC 83)

Wittgenstein is here expressing the thought that entertaining certain doubts – doubts about whether ‘This is a hand’ for example – entails a doubt about the *meaning* of the words used to express the doubt. This is not Wittgenstein deepening the sceptical problem to the semantic level so that we have to seek for a justification of the way we interpret our words. On the contrary, Wittgenstein is quite certain that we do know how to use our words even though there are no grounds for this use (OC 307). Clearly, it is a prerequisite for the intelligibility of scepticism that the sceptic correctly understands the meaning of his words.

Scepticism can be seen as holding the following two claims⁶:

- (1) The sceptic understands the meaning of the words used to express his doubt.
- (2) It is possible to systematically make false judgements using those words.

Wittgenstein denies the consistency between (1) and (2). His argument is that if (2) is true, then (1) is false. The possibility of systematically making false judgements entails a failure to understand the words used to express those judgements. “This is a similar case to that of showing that it has no meaning to say that a game has always been played wrong” (OC 496). Suppose the game of chess was always played wrong so that every move made contravened its rules. We would no longer say that this person was playing chess, he may be playing some other game using the same wooden pieces, but he does not use those pieces according to the same set of rules.

Wittgenstein's argument against the compatibility of (1) and (2) is premised on the claim that meaning cannot be divorced from a practice. The relation between the meaning of a word and its use is conceived on the model of a rule and its application (OC 62) so that using a word or expression is understood as participating in a rule-governed activity, like that of playing chess.

Every language-game is based on words 'and objects' being recognised again. We learn with the same inexorability that this is a chair as that $2 + 2 = 4$ (455).

But what determines this inexorability and how is it possible? When we learn how to use a word, we do so only from a finite number of exemplifications, but the rules which determine their application extend way beyond these samples and into the future, and yet we still all go on using the word in the same way. This is something quite remarkable. How do we explain the fact that we are able to learn the meaning of a word from being taught to use it on a limited number of occasions, to recognising it again and again? Apart from this question of understanding a rule, there is the further problem of the normativity of rules. How is it that a rule can uniquely determine a course of action or judgement? What makes one application of a rule the *correct* one?

Wittgenstein uses the example of teaching a pupil an arithmetical series as a means for focusing the discussion.

⁶ See for instance, Strawson (1983) p.10 and Hookway (1990) p.127

Now we get the pupil to continue a series (say + 2) beyond 1000 – and he writes 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012. We say to him: “Look what you’ve done!” – He doesn’t understand. – He answers: “Yes, isn’t it right? I thought that was how I was *meant* to do it.” - Or suppose he pointed to the series and said: “But I went on in the same way.” – It would now be no use to say: “But can’t you see...?” - and repeat the old examples and explanations. (PI 185)

Wittgenstein wants us to think about how we would interpret this example, which on the face of it seems clear enough. The pupil is being taught to continue a mathematical series by being given the rule ‘+2’ and some examples, which he has hitherto followed correctly. But then the pupil goes wrong, a mistake is made and he fails to see how he has deviated from the original rule. Wittgenstein says this case is similar to someone reacting to a gesture of pointing by looking from the fingertips to the wrist rather than in the direction from wrist to fingertip (PI 185).

But what does this show? A dog instinctively looks in the direction of finger tip to wrist, so the suggestion seems to be that the pupil behaves in a similarly unnatural way. Yet no problem immediately suggests itself. The example seems not to threaten our own understanding of the rule or to question the correctness of our application. The teacher is correct and the pupil, we think, is perhaps a bit slow.

To a philosophical mind the absence of a problem can sometimes itself be cause for concern. Although in this case we would say the pupil is clearly wrong, the subject of misapplying rules in general has been broached. What, we might go on to ask, allows us to say that our ‘natural’ interpretation of the rule is the correct one. This is further

complicated by the phenomenology of understanding that suggests we understand a word or expression immediately, that it comes to us 'in a flash' as it were.

“It’s as if we could grasp the whole use of a word in a flash.” – And that is just what we say we do...It becomes queer when we are led to think that the future development must in some way already be present in the act of grasping the use and yet isn’t present. – For we say that there isn’t any doubt that we understand the word, and on the other hand its meaning lies in its use (PI 197).

Wittgenstein recognises an important piece of phenomenology here. Understanding the meaning of a word seems to be an experience of some kind. We experience the meaning of a word in an instant, as if we were observing an object. But obviously the use of the word is extended in time and cannot be identical with that experience. Perhaps then, when we grasp the meaning of a word, we experience an instance of the more general rule. The situation of the pupil would then be like this. The rule '+2' traverses an infinite number of steps, but when the teacher was instructing the pupil, he did not have such an infinite number of steps in mind. While we seem to grasp the meaning of a word in a flash, we cannot grasp an infinite series in a flash. There seems to be no mental act which has the capability of grasping every instance of the rule. So we shall be inclined to say that the rule itself predetermines the correct steps the teacher takes (PI 188)⁷.

Does this mean then, asks Wittgenstein, that a new insight or intuition is needed at every step (PI 186)? He rejects this suggestion on the grounds that the question of how to apply the insight itself emerges. How do we decide what is the correct step to

⁷ Fogelin, 1976. P.141.

take with each insight? It seems that without a more general rule of interpretation we shall be unable to determine whether the insight is correct. So we seem neither able to grasp a general rule nor able to guarantee that an insight corresponds to a general rule without introducing a further general rule to legitimise it.

Wittgenstein considers further ways of bridging the gap between rule and application, all of which postulate some object, process, or interpretation, as means for grounding the initial application. He rejects them all for the same reason he rejected the initial suggestion of an insight.

For example, he rejects the suggestion that what connects rule and application is some mental state which we represent to ourselves as a means for interpreting the rule. The problem with this type of response is that it also leads to a regress. For it appears that we have simply substituted one representation for another, albeit a mental for a physical one. If the representation is an image or picture, then the picture can be interpreted in more than one way⁸, while if one uses words, then we have substituted one sign for another sign without progress.

Wittgenstein rejects the idea that there is anything which determines the inexorability of applying rules like + 2 other than the practice of actually doing so. Nothing more is needed to close the gap between rule and application and it is illusory to look for one.

The essence of Wittgenstein's answer to these problems is given at PI 198⁹

⁸ Blackburn 1984. Chpt.2

⁹ Williams 1999, p.167

Let me ask this: what has the expression of a rule – say a sign-post – got to do with my actions? What sort of connexion is there here? – Well, perhaps this one: I have been trained to react to this sign in a particular way, and now I do so react to it. But that is only to give a causal connexion; to tell how it has come about that we now go by the sign-post; not what this going-by-the-sign really consists in. On the contrary; I have further indicated that a person goes by a sign-post only insofar as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom (PI 198)

To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs (uses, institutions). (PI 199).

Fogelin (1976, p143), correctly identifies two elements in Wittgenstein's account of rule-following from these remarks: one is reference to a causal element between sign and action and the other is a social element in the form of a custom or practice. Wittgenstein is not saying that the rule together with training *and* the practice uniquely determines the future application of a rule. The *training is already embedded in a practice* and this is why he dismisses the objection that he has only given a causal connection, as if we could ask the question of whether this training was itself correct. The fact that we react to the sign-post as a sign and not as a mere piece of wood shows that to follow a rule is for the rule to already be embedded in a practice. The rule *is* our standard of correctness, but what makes it the standard for correctness is not anything inherent in the rule itself, but our using it as such. As Williams puts it:

It is the very conformity of action and judgement that allows for the possibility of deviation and so incorrect behaviour. It is only in conformity and failure to conform that a significant contrast between correct and incorrect action emerges. And these bedrock practices are rooted in "the common behaviour of mankind" (PI 206) (Williams 1999, p.175)

With the introduction of a 'practice', the need to search for explanations or justifications determining the correct use of a rule comes to an end. Obeying a rule is a capacity, an ability to behave in a way which conforms with the behaviour of those who are part of the practice. One is trained to react to the sign-post and being able to react appropriately is the criterion of having mastered the rule.

For our purposes, the important aspect of the idea of a practice is that the standards for the correct and incorrect application of a rule or use of a term belong to a practice. It makes no sense to claim that we understand the meaning of a sign like '+ 2' *and* question whether we correctly use it in the way we do, since our using it in the way we do is the criterion for correct and incorrect application. Doubting the correctness of our actual application therefore implies doubting the meaning of the rule.

I claimed earlier that the sceptic holds two potentially incompatible propositions. He assumes that it is possible for us to make systematically false judgements while simultaneously understanding the meaning of the words used to express that doubt. Wittgenstein, I suggest, has an explanation of why this assumption is false.

The explanation has turned on the analogy that understanding a word or expression is similar to following a rule. The correct use of a word is an instance of correctly applying a rule. From the forgoing discussion, we have seen that what determines whether a course of action constitutes the correct application of a particular rule is not some interpretation of the rule since one interpretation only leads to another, and so on:

What this shews is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call “obeying the rule” and “going against it” in actual cases (PI 201).

Obeying a rule is not an intellectual feat, but the manifestation of ability acquired through training against the background of a practice.

To argue that we systematically make false judgements is to imply that, as a community, we have been teaching and responding to the wrong set of rules. However, it should be clear by now why this question cannot be raised. For it supposes that there is some way of fixing the meaning of a word outside actual cases of applying it. But this is to court the regress of interpretations.

The sceptic about the external world implicitly works with a different conception of rule and application. By virtue of adopting a detached perspective our system of empirical judgements, the sceptic assumes it makes sense to speak of using words in a way incongruent with the rest of mankind, as though our words have a meaning distinct from the way we actually use them.

Scepticism is unintelligible because it tries to adopt an external interpretation of our practice of describing the external world, when no such interpretation could fix the meaning of a word. I have assumed rather than argued that Wittgenstein’s notion of a practice is social and excludes private practices. To argue for this would take me too far adrift into the so-called private language argument.

One might still feel that scepticism is intelligible. What is unintelligible is the roar of a lion or hearing a language one does not understand. Furthermore, if Wittgenstein says a practice is required in order to fix the meaning of concepts, then he need look no further than philosophy itself. Scepticism has been with us for centuries and it is often students first taste of philosophy. There are correct and incorrect ways of presenting and arguing for the sceptical argument itself.

These points are all valid, but I think we can allow for intelligibility of scepticism in an innocuous sense. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein asks whether it is nonsensical to say that a pot talks or to ascribe pain to a doll (PI 282). He answers that it is not, but qualifies this by adding that this way of speaking is 'secondary' and parasitic on ascribing language and pain to human beings. I think the same point can be made against scepticism, or if one prefers, the 'practice' of scepticism. The sceptic believes himself to have discovered some kind of defect or limitation in the concepts we use for describing the world, when in fact, he has merely given himself a new interpretation of the concepts which everyone else uses. This new interpretation is neither an immaterialistic one, as in Berkeley's sense (since the sceptic is a realist) nor a common sense one. There is room for the intelligibility of scepticism. Unfortunately for the sceptic, what scepticism means is not what he would like it to mean while what he would like it to mean remains a mystery.

CONCLUSION

I have been attempting to make a case for the unintelligibility of scepticism. The notion of unintelligibility has centred around whether or not it is possible to doubt certain propositions. According to a naturalised epistemology, all propositions have the status of a hypothesis, but differ in the degree to how well they explain particular phenomenon. On this understanding, scepticism is fantastically *ad hoc*, complex and highly implausible, but nevertheless intelligible. The other side of this, of course, is that our ordinary judgements are considered extremely good at explaining the phenomena of human experience and therefore, are highly plausible.

While one may invoke ordinary judgements as explanatory, this is not their natural role. For as Moore observed, it strains the sense of judgements like 'This is a hand' or 'I am wearing clothes', to express any degree of doubt about them. Moore himself was consistent in his conviction that these ordinary judgements, as well as certain 'metaphysical' propositions like, 'human beings exist', are absolutely certain for him and for everyone else. However, he tended to waver over whether or not scepticism is unintelligible or just implausible. Essentially, what he lacked was an argument which would show how the universal certainty attaching to ordinary propositions prevents the sceptic from raising his doubts in the first place. Admittedly, he did come close to such an argument in DCS. He tried to argue that a denial of knowledge of the external world commits one to knowledge of its existence. While his strategy was on the right track, his argument was a disaster. One gets the feeling that Moore contributed to, rather than put an end to the sceptic's doubts.

This, I think, is what Wittgenstein observed with clarity, when he criticised Moore's use of "I know" in relation to the propositions he enumerated in DCS. Claiming to know *p*, invites the obligation to say how one knows it. This Moore could not do. But this does not mean that Moore's claims are unjustified and scepticism therefore triumphs. What is essentially important in entering a knowledge claim is not the claim itself, but the grounds for it. Moore was wrong to say he *knew* hinge propositions not because *he* could not justify them but because there are no grounds for them. With hinge propositions bedrock is reached. The absence of grounds is not a lack. We are not epistemically 'cut off' or denied evidence for them. Rather there is no evidence and this is because of their special role in the system of our empirical judgements.

Wittgenstein is a foundationalist. With his hinge proposition we reach 'the bedrock of our convictions' (OC 116). However, he is not a traditional foundationalist (Stroll 1996. Chpt 9) since the propositions which support the body of our beliefs have a different status from the body itself. The crucial difference is that hinge propositions are non-epistemic. By this is meant that they are exempt from doubt (OC 341). To say that I can doubt that I have never been to the moon, is madness (OC 663). But, in contrast with the view of other foundationalists such as Descartes (Malcolm, 1986), the indubitability of these propositions does not entail truth. Rather hinge propositions decide what is true or false and what it is possible to doubt.

This 'not doubting' is not an act of will (Malcolm 1986). There is no individual or collective act of denial, as though we had decided as a community to insulate hinge propositions from doubt. The situation is, as we have seen, that we do not doubt them

and this is shown in our lives (OC 344). Our behaviour shows the absence of doubt. The foundations of knowledge are not therefore agreed upon, but there is agreement in action if not in opinion.

From the discussion of rule-following the notion of a practice was introduced. A practice determines what stands fast and what does not. Hinge propositions are like sign-posts which we are trained causally to react to, but the training takes place against the background of a practice. Agreement in action is primarily the result of interaction with such a practice as well as through a causal relationship with certain facts of nature¹ Wittgenstein is reluctant to say that hinge propositions are indubitable in principle. As practices change over time, so some propositions lose their indubitable status becoming part of the empirical waters instead.

The sceptic is in no position to doubt hinge propositions either. Doubting that which makes doubting and the adducing of evidence possible is itself not a possibility. Despite the temporal indubitability of that which stands fast, it would be a mistake to think that the sceptic, by imagining certain unheard -of events is thereby able to induce doubt about them. If, for example, houses turned into steam or cattle stood on their heads (OC 514), this would not contradict what stands fast. While the rules which determine the use of names for objects in a practice reaches into the future, for some possibilities there are no rules. If unheard-of events did occur, this would not falsify what we know, but would lead to a conceptual change, somewhat similar to the

¹ Fogelin (1976, p.144) emphasises the general dependence of practices on the natural constitution of human beings. He says, for example, that if our spatial abilities had evolved differently, then we would have correspondingly evolved a different geometry.

conceptual changes which occur in scientific theories. This is why scepticism, as well as denying us anything to reflect on, denies us anything to reflect with.

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