

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY  
Is There a Problem about the External World?

by

Robert Reid Buchanan

A THESIS  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS  
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

CALGARY, ALBERTA

NOVEMBER, 1992

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ISBN 0-315-83108-1

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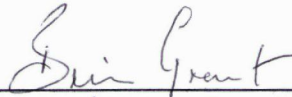
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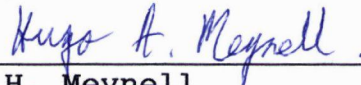
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an attempt to come to terms with a single traditional epistemological problem; namely, scepticism about the external world. I open by examining how the problem arises, and ultimately argue that the paradoxical view that we know nothing about the "world" around us seems to be the inevitable result of the traditional theoretical investigation of knowledge. This leads to a critical evaluation of Wittgenstein's response to scepticism, which I characterize as an attempt to "dissolve" the sceptical challenge through exposing incoherence somewhere in the traditional investigation. I argue that Wittgenstein fails to show the traditional investigation to be incoherent (and thus he fails to dissolve the challenge). I then examine recent arguments (those of Rorty and Davidson) purporting to show the traditional investigation to be incoherent. Ultimately I argue that these arguments also fail and that the sceptical position represents our actual epistemic relationship with the "world".

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Grant for all the help, advice, and encouragement over the past several months. I would also like to thank Maggie Kohl for making sure all the details were taken care of, Marin and Jill for providing a healthy working environment, and finally, Kim, for simply putting up with me.

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## I

## THE PROBLEM OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD

## 1. Opening: The Paradox

The great subverter of the excessive...principles of scepticism is action...These principles may flourish in the schools; where it is, indeed, difficult, if not impossible, to refute them. But as soon as they leave the shade, and...are put in opposition to the more powerful principles of our nature, they vanish like smoke, and leave the most determined sceptic in the same condition as other mortals.<sup>1</sup>

Hume captures here something of the Jekyll and Hyde like condition philosophers often seem to exhibit. A seemingly inevitable consequence of philosophical inquiry on many issues, the condition is characterized by what appears to be an irreconcilable clash between the results of such inquiry and the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of everyday life. On the one hand, the philosopher, while engaged in her distinctive probing, is naturally led to assert and indeed affirm, claims and "principles" which seem patently incompatible with those of ordinary life. On the other hand as a mere "mortal", the philosopher, outside of the rarefied atmosphere where her principles flourish, succumbs to the

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<sup>1</sup> David Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 159.

drudgery of the commonplace and here seems to subvert the principles by everything she says and does.

Epistemology is perhaps the area of philosophical inquiry in which the tendency to take on the Jekyll and Hyde personae comes most naturally. Hume argued that the attempt to understand human knowledge philosophically inevitably leads to scepticism and many have thought Hume to be right about this. This claim, if correct, reveals something about the inherent structure of the epistemological project. The suggestion here is that the questions and considerations which define the parameters of the project – questions concerning what it is to know something, how it might be possible to know something, and whether or not we can actually know anything arise naturally and *just as naturally*, prompt, in the most extreme instance, the undesirable conclusion that we can know nothing – that human knowledge is impossible. And this conclusion *is* undesirable, it seems to me, precisely because it forces on us the Jekyll and Hyde condition. Certainly from the everyday perspective, we believe and often claim that we know many things.

Obviously, an enormous amount of what we believe (and claim to know) from the everyday perspective concerns the way things are in the world around us. And, not surprisingly, such beliefs have not escaped the sceptical challenge – a challenge which traditionally has been called scepticism about the external world. The sceptical conclusion here is that it is

impossible to know anything about the world around us or even that there is a "world" around us. Yet, paradoxical creatures that they are, philosophers convinced of the correctness of this sceptical thesis seem to betray this conviction at an everyday level – making breakfast, washing the car, scratching one's nose, talking with friends, etc., are activities which not only presuppose familiarity with the world around us – but also seem to express the opposing conviction that we know that the world around us exists, and further, that we know a great deal about it.

The above remarks illustrate in broad strokes what I take to be the paradox, or apparent paradox, which fuels much of the epistemological project. As I have suggested, the paradox is that scepticism is apparently incompatible with the everyday stance we assume concerning our knowledge, yet if Hume is right, it also seems to be the only honest intellectual stance possible. We *feel* at once that, for instance, scepticism about the external world must be wrong, but following Hume we also feel it to be theoretically unassailable.<sup>2</sup> Kant captured the essence of what I want to

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<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that all forms of scepticism (those of a "local" variety and indeed, the "global" thesis) generate the "paradox" and that, in this respect, there is nothing particularly special about scepticism about the external world. However, I personally find this form of scepticism to be especially fascinating in terms of both the powerful nature of the arguments for it, and the scope of what they seem to undermine. I have felt "gripped" by the problem for some time – perhaps because I find the view that we can know nothing about what is right "under our noses", so to speak, to be a wholly unpalatable view, but one which certainly seems

call the paradox of knowledge about the external world when he claimed:

...it still remains a scandal to philosophy and to human reason in general that the existence of things outside of us...must be accepted merely on *faith*, and that if anyone thinks it good to doubt their existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by any satisfactory proof.<sup>3</sup>

It is this "scandalous" predicament – the apparent irrefutability of this sceptical conclusion, coupled with the conflicting conviction that the conclusion is unacceptable – which has I think given rise to one of the most central and difficult epistemological problems; namely, the "problem of the external world." The problem is characterized nicely by Barry Stroud as follows:

Put most simply, the problem is to show how we can have any knowledge of the world at all. The conclusion that we cannot, that no one knows anything about the world around us, is what I call "scepticism about the external world", so we could also say that the problem is to show how or why scepticism about the external world is not correct.<sup>4</sup>

I prefer Stroud's latter formulation of the problem here as it better captures both the sentiment that scepticism about the external world seems correct, and the sentiment that something must be wrong with it – that it *is* a problem. In other words,

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theoretically correct.

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by N. Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan Publishers Ltd., 1933), Bx1.

<sup>4</sup> Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 1. (Hereafter cited as *Significance*.)



I am suggesting that there would be no problem, so formulated, if we did not feel gripped by the paradox of knowledge about the external world.

The attempt to "show how or why scepticism of the external world is not correct" has been undertaken by many, in several different ways, and the central task I have set for myself in the pages that follow is to critically assess a specific type of attempt to deal with the problem of the external world. However, in order to properly understand both the problem and the line of response I have in mind, it is crucial, I feel, to firstly examine in detail what I take to be the constitutive issues and considerations of what I have been calling the paradox of knowledge of the external world.

The problem of the external world arises, I have suggested, because a felt rift obtains with respect to knowledge of the external world when we reflect upon ourselves in terms of our respective capacities as thinkers and doers — we feel that we are pulled in opposite directions with respect to what we know about the world at the levels of theory and everyday life or practice. Now, it seems to me, that the source of inadequacy of many attempts to respond to the problem of the external world can be traced to a certain impatience with this feeling of unease that the paradox produces. The sort of responses I have in mind here are characterized by a dismissive attitude towards either the theoretical or practical side of the paradox. Some have denied

the force and even the interest of sceptical reasoning by taking the position that even if scepticism is theoretically correct, it doesn't make any difference in everyday life and hence we need not worry about it. Others, however, have simply denied the interest (or better, relevance) of our everyday perspective, and have embraced the theoretical side of the paradox by proclaiming the obvious truth of scepticism about the external world (and here, of course, the problem of the external world simply drops out of the picture).

Simply denying the interest of either side of the paradox seems to me inadequate because doing so trivializes one of the two perspectives we find we can, and indeed do, take up concerning our knowledge of the world around us. But this is not to deny that it might turn out that one of these perspectives is correct. Rather, all I want to claim is that a verdict here should be based upon a careful and detailed examination of the nature of each perspective. This is why I think that to properly understand and appreciate both the problem of the external world, and the line of response to the problem I want to examine, it is first necessary to consider the issues and concerns which constitute the two sides of the paradox.

In terms of the general structure of this study then, I propose to divide the work into three parts. The central objective of the remainder of this part will be to try to characterize the nature of, and relationship between, what I

have been calling the theoretical and everyday perspectives concerning our knowledge of the external world. I will try to show the interest of each perspective and outline the details of the tension between them which compel us to attempt to explain "how or why scepticism about the external world is incorrect".

Having set up what I take to be the terms of the paradox and the proper focus for consideration of the problem of the external world, I then, in part II, examine and critically assess a specific response to the problem. To anticipate a bit, the response I consider is that of Wittgenstein (in *On Certainty*). Briefly, I claim that Wittgenstein's response is one of the most powerful representatives of a general anti-sceptical strategy which I characterize as an "indirect" attempt to show how or why scepticism about the external world is incorrect.

I argue that the general strategy is indirect in the sense that it proceeds by trying to show that the move from the everyday perspective to the theoretical perspective (from which the sceptical conclusion seems to be inevitable) is illegitimate because the theoretical investigation is somehow confused or incoherent (and hence the strategy thereby tries to show that the beliefs that we accept from the everyday perspective are "secure" from the sceptical challenge). Thus, the hallmark of this sort of strategy, I claim, is that it is an attempt to "dissolve" scepticism about the external world

through trying to show it to be an illusory problem which arises from a conceptually confused framework.

Having discussed at some length Wittgenstein's version of the strategy, I close off part II with a critical evaluation of Wittgenstein's reasons for thinking that the sceptic has transgressed certain limits of intelligibility from the theoretical perspective.

In part III, I attempt to expand on specific issues that arise in parts I and II concerning the status and coherence of the theoretical perspective (and hence the significance and legitimacy of scepticism about the external world) by surveying some of the recent work (specifically that of Rorty and Davidson) on these issues. Ultimately, I argue that none of the philosophers I discuss (Wittgenstein, Rorty, Davidson) show that the traditional theoretical perspective is incoherent, and thus that the problem of the external world remains a real, legitimate problem. Finally, I consider the prospects for ever "dissolving" the problem and discuss what I take to be our actual position with respect to what we can know about the world around us.

## 2. The Everyday Perspective: The Pre-Theoretic Notion of Our Knowledge of the World

My aim in the remainder of part I, as mentioned, is to try to clarify and substantiate some of the cursory remarks made in the opening section concerning the genesis and nature of the problem of the external world. Perhaps the best way to



begin here is to attempt to characterize what I take to be our everyday perspective concerning our knowledge of the world around us. This seems to me the best place to start because an examination of this perspective reveals certain general features concerning the very notion of "our knowledge of the world" which form the basis for understanding the relationship between the everyday and theoretical perspectives. For, as we shall see, the theoretical perspective gets its force and interest by focusing on these very features in such a way as to make our knowledge of the world problematic; that is, in such a way that invites the sceptical conclusion that we can know nothing about the world around us. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

What then is involved in our everyday perspective concerning our knowledge of the world around us? Well, perhaps the simplest and most general way to characterize this perspective is to say that it amounts to an orientation towards the world in which normal human beings uncritically accept, as items of knowledge, a certain basic body of beliefs concerning "the way the world is". The sort of beliefs I have in mind here are that the world (and here I refer to the planet Earth) exists in space and time and contains many different kinds of objects which interact with each other in various ways. We believe that some of these objects are inanimate, some animate, some sentient, and some even intelligent. We believe that we are intelligent, sentient,

beings and that by virtue of these qualities we can formulate and express beliefs like the above. All of these beliefs are part of the basic backdrop of beliefs which are accepted as items of knowledge from the everyday perspective. But what does it mean to say we accept these beliefs as items of knowledge?

Well, it means that we think these beliefs are true. And this, of course, means that we think that these beliefs really do reflect the way the world *really is*. Now the reason why we think these beliefs do reflect the world correctly is, I think, obvious. For these beliefs represent the way we *experience* the world – by virtue of our sentience; we see, feel, taste, etc., objects around us, and by virtue of our intelligence, we formulate beliefs about these objects (ourselves included), the most basic being that such objects exist. But in everyday life we never (except in very special circumstances) express our belief that objects exist (or that the world exists). This is a belief that is *forced* upon us by the very nature of our experience, and consequently the truth of this belief is never called into question from the everyday perspective.

Now it is because our assent to these basic beliefs is forced upon us by the way we experience the world that we uncritically accept these beliefs as items of knowledge; that is, that we take these beliefs to be informative of the way the world really is. And it is the irresistible nature of such

beliefs, I think, that makes the everyday perspective concerning our knowledge of the world around us seem so secure (and indeed, beyond question). For we must, I think, grant that we have experience. Thus if knowledge involves true beliefs about "the way the world is", it would seem that the best candidates here would be those unspoken, basic, beliefs which naturally arise from our experience of the world. And perhaps the most fundamental belief here is that our experience of the world *really* is experience of a *world* (a world of independent objects existing in time and space). If this belief about "the way the world is" is not true – not an item of knowledge – then it is difficult to see what could possibly count as an item of knowledge about the world around us. If we could be wrong about this belief then it seems conceivable that we might be wrong about all of our beliefs about the world. And this, of course, is just the conclusion of the sceptic. But before I launch into a discussion of the details as to how the sceptic arrives at this conclusion, I want to briefly recapitulate what I have been saying about the everyday perspective and try to draw out some of the general features concerning the notion of "our knowledge of the world".

So far I have tried to outline something of the background picture concerning our knowledge of the world which I think all normal (sane) human beings naturally assume in everyday life. But I have also tried to set up this picture in

a way that reveals certain general features constitutive of the notion of "our knowledge of the world". The features in question involve: 1) what sorts of things we think we know about the world, 2) how we supposedly know these things, and finally, 3) what knowing something about the world amounts to. With respect to the first feature, we think we know that the world exists and that it contains several different sorts of objects (human beings, for instance). Regarding the second feature, we think we know that a world of objects exists because we perceive them by means of sensory experience (we see them, touch them, etc.), and because we see and feel objects, we believe (think it true) that they are really there. Thus, concerning the third feature, knowing something about the world becomes a matter of holding true beliefs about the way the world is based on sensory experience.

In extracting the above features (i.e. what we can know about the world, how we can know about the world, and what knowledge about the world is) from what is assumed about "our knowledge of the world" from the everyday perspective, I have of course, set out the crucial issues which the philosopher focuses on from the theoretical perspective. In other words, I have tried to articulate the common ground – the natural background picture concerning the nature, attainment, and content of our knowledge of the world – which is shared in both the everyday and theoretical perspectives. The importance of doing this, I think, is twofold.

Firstly, spelling out the details of what is assumed about knowledge of the world in everyday life shows that the "natural" picture is just the familiar "realist" picture in epistemology. This is just the view that knowledge of the world is a matter of our having true beliefs, based on our sensory experience, about an objective world; that is, a real, existent world that is a certain "way" independent of what we think or believe about it. That this is our natural picture is important because it is just this picture which invites scepticism about the external world. Thus, the second reason why I think it is important to spell out the details of what is taken for granted about our knowledge of the world in everyday life is that it provides a basis for understanding how the theoretical investigation of this picture seems to undermine what we naturally assume here. For the sceptic renders our knowledge of the world problematic from the theoretical perspective by assuming the features of the natural (everyday) picture, and then showing that these very features seem to lead to the conclusion that we can know nothing about the world. And this, I think, is why we come to feel the paradox of knowledge of the external world, and thus feel compelled to show how or why scepticism about the external world is incorrect. I want to now begin sorting out some of the considerations which have led some philosophers to assert the paradoxical conclusion that we can know nothing about the world around us.

To get the ball rolling, it is necessary to spell out one final assumption we make concerning what is required for knowledge of the world which I think is implicit in the natural picture, but which I have so far not said very much about. In effect I have said that we naturally assume that knowing something about the world is a matter of holding a belief which truly represents some state of affairs – some fact about the way the world is – and that sensory experience is the means by which we come to form our beliefs about the world.

But I think we are all familiar with cases where we have come to hold a belief about the world (based on sensory experience) which was not true, but which we nevertheless have thought we knew, and have claimed to know. When such cases occur (and when the error is detected and pointed out), one will (barring stubbornness, self-deception, or some other quirk) withdraw the claim to "know" such and such and might say "well, I thought I knew" or "I guess I only believed it".

What this reveals is that a feature of our everyday conception of knowledge involves the notion that if one really does know something to be the case (as opposed to merely believing it), then one cannot be mistaken about the matter. I think it is obvious that in everyday life we do take this to be a requirement for knowledge. If someone offers a knowledge claim which seems suspect (for whatever reason), we will naturally respond with something like "are you sure about

that?" or "but have you not overlooked (such and such)?" or more simply (and more importantly), "how do you know that?". That we raise such questions reveals, I think, our reluctance to accept a claim to know this or that until it is established (to our satisfaction) that the person offering the claim is not mistaken about the matter (that he or she really does know, as opposed to merely believe, whatever is in question).

Now, of course, in everyday life; offering knowledge claims, raising doubts about knowledge claims, and offering support or reasons in order to justify knowledge claims, is often a smooth and straightforward affair (i.e. often in our daily interactions, we go through all of the above procedures, and this often results in mutual acceptance of this or that claim to know). For instance, I might in conversation claim to know that there are mountain goats in India, and my interlocutor might ask me how I know (he might think the claim dubious — that I might be wrong). If I offer a reason that he accepts (a reason which he thinks shows that I am not mistaken), then he will admit that I know. We can all cite countless examples of such everyday cases where knowledge claims are raised and accepted.

But of course, "what goes" (what passes as knowledge) in everyday life does not necessarily amount to knowledge. Often we are careless about offering and accepting claims to know this or that. Suppose that it was false that there are mountain goats in India and (believing that the beasts can be

found there) I managed to convince my interlocutor (after some debate) that there are mountain goats there. Obviously, even if I had excellent reasons for my belief, I would still be wrong about the matter — I would not *know* that there are mountain goats in India.

From this then, it is clear that even though we might sometimes think that we know something to be the case (and might manage to convince others that we know), if we are in fact mistaken or wrong about the matter, then we do not know whatever is in question. But I think it is also clear that if it is even *possible* that one is wrong or mistaken about a given claim to know, then that person does not know whatever he or she claims to know.

Even in cases where it seems that one cannot possibly be wrong about a given claim to know (and where one might have excellent reasons for thinking the claim to be true), that person cannot properly be said to know if there are ways in which he might be wrong that he has not taken into account. Often we will feel absolutely certain about a belief and someone will raise a consideration (that we did not take into account) which casts doubt on the belief (say because the consideration is incompatible with the truth of what we believe). Now, if such a possible consideration cannot be ruled out (and thus there is a real possibility that one might be wrong) then clearly, one cannot be said to know whatever is at issue (and this is so, it seems, even if whatever is at



issue is in fact true).<sup>5</sup> Thus, it seems that knowing something about the world – really knowing something – requires that it be impossible for one to be mistaken about a given matter.

But now this requirement for knowledge of the world becomes a devastating weapon in the hands of the sceptic. For the sceptic is in the business of raising considerations which seem to show that the requirement that it be impossible to be wrong is never satisfied for any of our putative knowledge claims about the world. In focusing on our everyday picture of what is involved in our knowledge of the world, the sceptic, in a few simple steps, seems to undermine even our most basic beliefs about the world by showing that it is indeed possible

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<sup>5</sup> And this, I think, reveals another important aspect of our everyday notion of knowledge; namely, that the mere holding of true beliefs cannot be all there is to knowledge. Suppose, for instance, one suspected or doubted my belief that there are mountain goats in India (say, on the grounds that he had just visited India and was informed by the natives that there are no mountain goats in the country) and challenged my knowledge claim (say, with the question "how do you know that?"). Suppose further that my answer was of the following nature; "well, there are mountain goats in Canada, so of course there must be some in India". Clearly, there are obvious ways in which I might be wrong about my knowledge claim here, and in light of my challenger's consideration, it is certainly possible (indeed, likely) that I am wrong. And, of course, my challenger would (rightly) respond with something like; "well that certainly isn't good enough and you don't know any such thing. I was just there and...". But now, even if my challenger was wrong (suppose the natives were unaware of a single family of goats somewhere in India) and my belief was true, it would be, at best, a lucky guess, and my challenger would be right in insisting that I do not *know* that there are mountain goats in India. In any case, it is clear that everyday cases like the above occur all the time and this shows, I think, that the idea that knowledge requires more than merely holding true beliefs is built into our everyday conception.

that we might be wrong about them, and hence that we can never know anything about the world around us. Let us now start to look at how this comes about.

I mentioned earlier that a feature of the everyday perspective was that certain basic beliefs are forced on us by the way we experience the world and that this is why we uncritically accept these beliefs to be items of knowledge – as representative of the way the world is. Moreover, I have tried to show that it is because we do experience "things" – that we see, feel, smell, etc., objects – that we come to have the pre-theoretic (assumed) notion that our knowledge of the world must be based on sensory experience. The naturalness and indeed irresistible character of this picture is difficult to deny – each moment of everyday life seems to testify to its correctness. At least in my own case, every waking moment involves sensory experience of some sort with some "thing" or another, and undeniably those "things" not only seem to me to be really there, but also seem to me to be just the way I experience them; round, square, hard, soft, and so on.

Of course, it is clear that sometimes I can be (and indeed am) wrong about what I believe is "right in front of my eyes" (so to speak). The senses sometimes play tricks and sometimes, perhaps because of fatigue, carelessness, intoxication, or indifference, we can come to hold erroneous beliefs about what we see, feel, hear, etc.. However this just shows that we cannot *always* trust our senses and that we are

*sometimes* fallible in what we come to believe about the world. But is it possible, for instance, that I could be wrong in my belief that right now I am sitting comfortably in a chair staring at the computer screen and pecking away at the keyboard? I *feel* certain about this belief. I can see the screen clearly and am concentrating on how the chair feels – I am not fatigued, intoxicated, or indifferent – how could I be wrong about what my senses "tell me" must truly be the case?

### 3. The Theoretical Perspective: Descartes and the Genesis of the Problem of the External World

What I have just developed, of course, parallels the scenario that Descartes sets up in the *Meditations*. Descartes' intention here is to set up the best possible sort of scenario that anyone could ever be in for obtaining knowledge about the world around us. It is only fitting then that I should consider Descartes' reasons for thinking that even here it seems possible that one might be wrong about what one's sensory experience "tells" one must truly be the case. Not only is it fitting to look at Descartes' reasons here, but I think necessary in that Descartes' strategy in the *Meditations* involves showing that the features of the natural picture of our knowledge of the world lead irresistibly, and indeed I think inevitably, to the sceptical conclusion that we can know nothing about the world. In other words, the sceptical considerations raised by Descartes naturally produce

(at least initially) *theoretical* conviction that scepticism about the external world is correct, and thus we come to feel the paradox.

I should just mention here, before discussing Descartes' sceptical considerations, that his strategy was not intended to establish and defend the sceptical conclusion that we can know nothing about the world. On the contrary, Descartes' famous "method of doubt" was intended to establish "firm and lasting knowledge" about the world. However I will not consider (what Thomas Nagel refers to as) his "heroic" attempt to "save" knowledge from his own sceptical attack. Here, I am only interested in showing how Descartes' sceptical considerations render our natural picture of our knowledge of the world problematic.

That Descartes does assume the natural (realist) picture of our knowledge of the world is evident on the first pages of "Meditation One". I will not spell out the details of Descartes' own account of this picture, but merely list the essential points. Descartes claims, or implies: 1) that knowledge about the world is a matter of holding true beliefs about the way the world is, 2) that if it is possible that one is not certain (that one might be wrong) about any particular belief about the way the world is, then one does not know the matter in question to be true, and finally, 3) that all of our beliefs about the world are acquired through sense-experience.

From this Descartes goes on to set up what seems to be the best case scenario for knowing something about the world and wonders if it does in fact meet the above criteria. His version of the scenario runs: "I am sitting here before the fireplace wearing my dressing gown...I am feeling this sheet of paper in my hands and so on."<sup>4</sup> Descartes feels certain (he feels that he cannot be wrong) about his belief that he is sitting in front of the fire (and indeed, he claims that he would have to be mad to think otherwise). But nevertheless, on closer consideration, Descartes does find a reason for thinking that he might be wrong about this belief – a reason for doubting the truth of the belief – and thus he finds that perhaps his belief does not amount to knowledge after all. The reason is as follows:

How often has my evening slumber persuaded me of such customary things as these: that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, seated by the fireplace, when in fact I am lying undressed between the blankets! But right now I certainly am gazing upon this piece of paper with eyes wide awake. This head which I am moving is not heavy with sleep. I extend this hand consciously and deliberately and I feel it. These things would not be so distinct for one who is asleep. But all of this seems as if I do not recall having been deceived by similar thoughts on other occasions in my dreams. As I consider these cases more intently, I see so plainly that there are no definite signs to distinguish being awake from being asleep that I am quite astonished.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1980), 58.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

How exactly is this consideration supposed to show that perhaps Descartes does not know that he is seated in front of the fire (etc.)?

The first important point to notice here is that Descartes implies that if he was in fact lying in bed and dreaming that he was sitting in front of the fire, his belief that he was now (really) sitting in front of the fire would be false. And surely this is correct. If he was "lying undressed between the blankets", he certainly was not sitting in front of the fire. The second important point here is that no matter how certain Descartes feels about his belief that he is now awake and sitting by the fire, he finds that he cannot determine whether or not this really is the case because he is not sure that he is not dreaming. And if he is not sure that he is not dreaming, it is possible that he is dreaming, and thus it is possible that he may be mistaken about his belief that he is now sitting by the fire -- he does not know that he is. This last point is crucial and needs further examination.

As I see it, the central issue here involves Descartes' claim that there are no "definite signs to distinguish being awake and being asleep". I interpreted this claim above as stating that Descartes is not sure that he is not dreaming, and thus it is possible that he might be mistaken about his belief about sitting by the fire. I want to try to spell out just why Descartes is not certain that he is not dreaming.

Since Descartes' belief that he is sitting by the fire is based on his present sensory experience, it seems the only way he could establish that he really is sitting in front of the fire would be to somehow show he could not possibly be mistaken about his belief (based on this experience). But since in his dreams, Descartes has had (qualitatively) the same sort of experience (sitting in his dressing gown before the fire) – he cannot, on the basis of this experience, establish that he is not mistaken about the matter (that he is truly sitting in front of the fire). His present experience is all he has to go on and this experience is entirely compatible with his merely dreaming that he is sitting by the fire. Thus, for all he can tell (from what he has to go on), Descartes might in fact be dreaming (and hence it is possible that he is mistaken about the belief – he might be lying between the blankets). In other words, Descartes has shown that his sensory experience is not enough to establish that he is sitting in front of the fire – he does not *know* that he is.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> And these considerations, I think, help to illustrate the point I made earlier about knowledge not being merely a matter of holding true beliefs. For it certainly is possible that Descartes could in fact be sitting in front of the fire while he was dreaming that he was (in which case his belief would be true). But even though his belief would be true here, he does not know it to be true on the basis of his present experience. His being right here is merely coincidental and certainly does not amount to knowledge – he is not certain that he is sitting in front of the fire on the basis of his dream (and for all he can tell, he might be somewhere completely different). G.E. Moore illustrates this point by reporting an anecdote about a Duke of Devonshire, who once dreamt that he was speaking in the House of Lords, and awoke to find that he was in fact speaking in the House of Lords.

Now that there is a failure of knowledge here – in the best possible scenario anyone could ever be in for obtaining knowledge of the world – has devastating implications concerning the possibility of our ever being in a position to know anything about the world at all. For if our only source for obtaining knowledge about the world is sensory experience, and if this source is not good enough for knowledge even in the best possible case, then it is a short step to conclude that it is never good enough for knowledge, and consequently we can never know anything about the world around us. Thus, it seems that Descartes has shown that the very features of our natural picture of knowledge about the world lead to the sceptical conclusion. But has this really been shown?

I think that it has. Let us dwell a bit longer on the effect the dreaming consideration has on what we assume about knowledge in everyday life. I claimed earlier that perhaps the most basic belief we hold about the world is that our experience of the world is really experience of a world. I also claimed that this belief arises naturally (is "forced" on us) in that we see, feel, hear...perceive objects around us, and thus we cannot help but believe that they are really there (and indeed, this is why come to assume what we do concerning the nature, attainment, and content of our knowledge of the world). But in dreams we also "perceive objects" which of course are *not* really there, and since our experience is all we have to go on in deciding whether or not those objects are



we have to go on in deciding whether or not those objects are really there (whether our experience is really experience of the "world"), we find that we cannot establish that we are really experiencing the world — given that experience is all we have to go on here, for all we can tell, we might be dreaming. Hence the dreaming consideration seems to show that what we take to be our fundamental source for knowledge of the world is inadequate for establishing any true beliefs about the way the world is.

But it might be objected that this has not been shown at all. One might claim, for instance, that the dreaming consideration presupposes a distinction between a "real" world and a "dreamt" one, and thus for the consideration to be a threat to our knowledge, we would already have to know that there is a real, existent, world which contains human beings who sometimes dream about it, and sometimes really experience it. But this sort of objection, I think, misses the force of the dreaming consideration entirely. For the only way we could have obtained the knowledge that there is a real world with people who sometimes dream about it, and sometimes really experience it is, of course, from experience, and this is just what has been shown to be inadequate for such knowledge.

What the dreaming consideration shows, I think, is that our experience of the world is confined to *appearances* — how things *seem* to us at any given time — and thus it is possible that how "things" really are might be completely different

from how they appear. And it is this possibility which shows that we might be wrong about all of our beliefs about the world – even the most basic belief that there is an external world beyond our experience.<sup>7</sup> This point is illustrated nicely by Stanley Cavell through an example of an investigation of a putative knowledge claim about the world which, he claims, follows our ordinary, everyday, procedures of "investigation" for determining whether or not the claim in question actually amounts to knowledge. Cavell's example, like Descartes', is one which seems to be the best possible case for knowing something about the world, and is thus meant to show the naturalness and inevitability of the conclusion that we are confined to appearances, and that we might be wrong about all of our beliefs about the world. The example runs as follows:

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<sup>7</sup> The dreaming consideration, of course, is not the only possibility that leads to the conclusion that we are confined to appearances. Descartes' "evil demon" consideration, and the updated "brain in a vat" possibility, also lead to this conclusion. In *The View From Nowhere*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), (Hereafter cited as *View*), Thomas Nagel captures what I take to be the true force (of what he calls) the most "abstract" form of the sceptical possibility. He claims: "Sceptical possibilities are those according to which the world is completely different from how it appears to us, and there is no way to detect this. The most familiar in the literature are those in which error is the product of deliberate deception by an evil demon...or by a scientist stimulating the brain...Another is the possibility that we are dreaming. In the latter two examples the world is perhaps not totally different from what we think, for it contains brains and perhaps persons who sleep, dream, and hallucinate. But this is not essential: we can conceive of the possibility that the world is different from how we believe it to be in ways we cannot imagine... and there is no way of moving from where we are to beliefs about the world that are substantially correct."(71)

Request for Basis: How, for example, do I know  
there's a table here?  
 Basis: Because I see it. Or: by means  
of the senses.  
 Ground for Doubt: But what do I really see?  
Mightn't I be, suppose I were,  
dreaming, hallucinating?...  
 Conclusion: So I don't know.  
 Moral: I never can know. The senses are  
not good enough to ground our  
knowledge of the world (or: a  
claim to certainty about the  
world). Or again: we do not know  
the world in the way we  
"thought" we did ("by means  
of the senses"); we do not  
literally, or directly, see  
objects. The world and its  
contents could appear to our  
senses as they now do and there  
be nothing there beyond them,  
anyway not what we imagine  
or take for granted that there  
is.<sup>8</sup>

The (in Cavell's words) "natural and inevitable" moral that we  
can never know anything about the world is, I think, natural  
and inevitable precisely because it is drawn from what we all  
assume about knowledge of the world in everyday life. And this  
is why I think that the reasoning involved in rendering our  
natural picture problematic seems so sound – so irresistible.  
Indeed, one might say that from the theoretical  
(philosophical) perspective, the belief that scepticism about  
the external world is correct is a belief that is forced upon  
us by the nature of how we think (just as the belief that  
objects exist is forced upon us by the nature of our

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<sup>8</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 144.

experience). Thus, it is at this point that we start to feel the paradox of the external world. We feel theoretically convinced that scepticism is correct – yet we feel that it is unacceptable. We feel something must have gone wrong here and now have a problem; namely, to show how or why scepticism about the external world is incorrect.

Stroud, like Cavell, is also greatly impressed by the power of Descartes' sceptical considerations. Stroud agrees that given what Descartes assumes about knowledge, his reasoning is sound and scepticism about the external world does seem to be correct – it seems to be theoretically unassailable. But Stroud also agrees that it leaves us in a predicament which is unacceptable. When we are in the grip of the sceptical reasoning (from the theoretical perspective), we are coerced into admitting that the most we could possibly ever know is what we are now experiencing – how things seem to us. Stroud characterizes this predicament (as does Cavell) as feeling "sealed off" from the world – as having "lost the whole world". Yet this feeling is transient (or, as Cavell puts it, "unstable"), in that as soon as we assume the everyday perspective, we forget the "excessive principles of scepticism" and express (by what we say and do) the opposing belief that we are really experiencing *the* world.

In a lengthy passage, Stroud captures the power of Descartes' reasoning, and something of the predicament we are in if the sceptical conclusion about the external world is

correct. I offer the passage as summary of what I have been trying to develop above:

If we are in the predicament Descartes finds himself in at the end of the *First Meditation* we cannot tell by means of the senses whether we are dreaming or not; all the sensory experiences we are having are compatible with our merely dreaming of a world around us while that world is in fact very different from the way we take it to be. Our knowledge is in that way confined to our sensory experiences. There seems to be no way of going beyond them to know that the world around us is this way or that. Of course we might have very strongly held beliefs about the way things are. We might even be unable to get rid of the conviction that we are sitting by the fire holding a piece of paper, for example. But if we acknowledge that our sensory experiences are all we have to go on in gaining knowledge about the world, and we acknowledge, as we must, that given our experiences as they are we could nevertheless be simply dreaming of sitting by the fire, we must concede that we do not know that we are sitting by the fire. Of course, we are in no position to claim the opposite either. We cannot conclude that we are not sitting by the fire; we simply cannot tell which is the case. Our sensory experience gives us no basis for believing one thing about the world around us rather than its opposite, but our sensory experiences are all we have to go on. So whatever unshakeable conviction we might nevertheless retain, that conviction cannot be knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

If this really is the predicament we are in (and it certainly seems that it is), then none of our beliefs about the world amount to knowledge.

In fact, as Stroud suggests, the sceptical considerations here not only threaten our knowledge, but "reasonable belief" as well. For if "our sensory experience gives us no basis for believing one thing about the world

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<sup>9</sup> *Significance*, 31-2.

rather than another", then our continued assent to even our most basic beliefs (that objects exist, for instance) seems to condemn us to a life of irrationality. Just because we cannot help believing that objects exist does not thereby make the belief reasonable.<sup>10</sup> In any case, there is a paradox here -- what seems to be right from one perspective (I don't know that I am now typing) seems absurd from another (but I am sitting here typing). The problem then is to show how or why the sceptical conclusion is "absurd" or incorrect. And this will certainly take some showing.

#### 4. Closing: The Epistemic Gap

In part II, I examine a general strategy which attempts to expose just how and why the sceptic has gone wrong. Before turning to this however, I want to close by briefly recapitulating what I have tried to set out about the nature and genesis of the problem of the external world, and then offer a few comments concerning possible ways of dealing with the problem.

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<sup>10</sup> That the sort of sceptical considerations I have examined above infect not only knowledge, but also what is reasonable to believe about the world as well, testifies to the power and reach of scepticism about the external world. Thus it is puzzling to me why some philosophers (epistemologists) are content to dismiss scepticism on the grounds that it doesn't "make a difference". Given what is at stake here, the truth or falsity of scepticism about the external world certainly does make a difference, and should, I think, be taken seriously in questions about human knowledge.

I have tried to show that the problem of the external world arises because a certain assumed ("natural") picture of our knowledge of the world seems to lead inevitably to an unacceptable view when it is subjected to philosophical (theoretical) scrutiny. When we reflect on the nature, source, and content of our assumed notion of our knowledge of the world from the theoretical perspective, we are naturally led in light of the sceptical considerations to acknowledge what seems to be an unbridgeable "gap" between our experience of the world and the "world" itself. Once this gap is admitted, there seems to be no way of justifying our beliefs about the way the world is (if it "is" at all) to be even reasonable, let alone as certain knowledge. Nagel puts the point this way:

Sceptical theories take the contents of our ordinary or scientific beliefs about the world to go beyond their grounds in ways that make it impossible to defend them against doubt. There are ways we might be wrong that we can't rule out. Once we notice this unclosable gap we cannot, except with conscious irrationality, maintain our confidence in those beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

It seems then that the way to go about showing how or why scepticism about the external world is incorrect would be to somehow "deal" with this gap.

The attempts to deal with the gap are numerous and have taken many different forms. Some philosophers have simply denied (or better, simply ignored) the existence of any such

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<sup>11</sup> *View*, 68.

gap, and have gone on to claim certainty for our everyday beliefs about the world.

Others have attempted to (in Nagel's words) "leap across the gap without narrowing it". An example of such an attempt is Descartes' "heroic" effort to save our knowledge of the world by producing an a priori proof for the existence of a God (who guaranteed the veracity of our beliefs about the world). Such attempts typically involve such dubious manoeuvres and seem to me to be the weakest sort of attempt to deal with the gap. As Nagel puts it: "the chasm below is littered with epistemological corpses."<sup>12</sup>

Another way of dealing with the gap – the one I will concentrate on in part II – involves attempting to "remove" or "dissolve" the gap by trying to show the gap to be somehow illusory. The general strategy here is to expose some deep seated confusion or incoherence somewhere in the theoretical considerations which lead us to acknowledge the existence of such a gap. There are a number of different approaches that fall under this general strategy (and variants within each approach), but the motivation in each approach, it seems to me, is to defuse the sceptical threat by revealing incoherence somewhere in the sceptical position. In what follows, I want to concentrate on one specific approach, but I will also try to characterize something of the common features which the approach shares with similar strategies.

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<sup>12</sup> *View*, 69.



The above list of attempts to deal with the problem of the external world is not meant to be exhaustive, but merely illustrative of some of the ways philosophers have tried to show how scepticism about the external world is incorrect (and thus how knowledge of the world around us is perhaps possible after all).<sup>13</sup> The last approach seems powerful and illuminating for reasons I will try to make clear presently.

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<sup>13</sup> What this suggests is that the epistemological project is fuelled by the threat of scepticism. This seems to me to be an accurate description of the matter, in that there would be no reason to worry about questions like "how knowledge is possible" unless there were some reason for thinking that it might not be possible.

## II

## RESPONDING TO THE PROBLEM OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD

## 1. Opening: A Strategy

I want to begin by trying to fill out a bit more the nature of the general strategy of dealing with the problem of the external world which I characterized (rather vaguely in part I) as the attempt to remove or "dissolve" the epistemic gap between the basis for our beliefs about the world, and the nature of the world itself. Very generally, I see the essential thrust of the strategy (as was also mentioned) as involving the attempt to unearth deep conceptual error or confusion somewhere in the theoretical investigation which leads to the conclusion that we can know nothing about the world around us.

More specifically, however, it seems to me that the strategy is best understood as an *indirect* attack on the sceptical considerations. That is, the strategy proceeds indirectly by firstly specifying certain conditions or boundaries of "meaningfulness" or intelligibility, and then explaining how the sceptic violates these conditions or oversteps these boundaries.<sup>1</sup> The traditional theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> This sort of general anti-sceptical strategy has been employed in many different (but obviously related) ways since Kant. Thus the strategy might (loosely) be called "transcendental". However, given the wide divergence of approaches here (I would include, for instance, the attempt to

investigation of our knowledge of the world is thus examined in light of the purported conditions of intelligibility, and the sceptic's errors are exposed as "subtle" in that they result from the sceptic having violated the conditions in ways she has not noticed.

That the conceptual confusion involved in the sceptic's project is "deep" and "subtle" accounts (the story goes) for the apparent intelligibility of scepticism about the external world. But (the story continues), scepticism about the external world is not intelligible and somewhere in our thinking which leads us to posit the "gap" (from which the paradoxical conclusion follows), we have transgressed the threshold of coherence. And once we see just how and why we have gone wrong here, we will see that the gap is illusory (as a product of an incoherent picture) and will no longer feel that there is a paradox of knowledge about the external world. It is in this way that the strategy attempts to dissolve the troubling gap and defuse the sceptical threat – the "gap" is dealt with by showing that it was never really there in the first place.

Now admittedly, so far this general sketch of the "strategy" is still vague and not very helpful. But at this

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wield the "principle of verification" against the sceptic by "positivists" such as Carnap, Schlick, and Ayer as such an approach) and the continued controversy concerning the nature and status of "transcendental" arguments, nothing, I think, would be gained (except perhaps more confusion and controversy) in attaching this label to the general strategy.

point my purpose is to merely set out a framework in which to place the specific approach I want to consider. The approach I want to concentrate on is that of Wittgenstein, as it seems to me that the "diagnosis" of the sceptic's errors in *On Certainty* is the most powerful and penetrating representative of the strategy. However, in order to fully appreciate the nature of Wittgenstein's "response", it will be helpful to first examine another attempt to deal with the problem of the external world; namely, G.E. Moore's notorious "refutation" of the sceptical position. *On Certainty* is largely a response to Moore's work, and although Moore's approach does not fall under the general strategy I have been developing above, it will play a crucial role in sorting out just what Wittgenstein was up to here.

Before turning to the details of the responses at hand, I want to briefly discuss what I take to be the appeal of the general strategy, as well as something of just what the strategy might achieve if successful. The obvious appeal of the strategy, it seems to me, is that far from ignoring the interest of scepticism about the external world, philosophers whose approaches fall under the strategy generally acknowledge the potential threat of scepticism, and indeed, seem to acknowledge what Stroud has called the "provisional correctness" of the sceptical project. That is, such philosophers seem to admit that scepticism about the external world certainly appears to be intelligible, and that unless it

were possible to show that it is in fact unintelligible, then it does look to be the correct (and honest) intellectual stance to take regarding human knowledge about the world around us. So, such philosophers do take the sceptical threat seriously and if any are successful in exposing just how the sceptic oversteps the boundaries of coherence, then it seems that the threat will be fully defused.

However it is not immediately clear just what any of the specific approaches might accomplish in terms of what we can properly be said to know about the world around us. I claimed that if the strategy were successful it would "defuse" the sceptical threat. But it is not clear that "defusing" or "dissolving" is the same thing as refuting or proving false. Indeed as we shall see, it is a view of the specific approach I want to consider (Wittgenstein's), that the net result of exposing just how and why the sceptic goes wrong is not that of showing that we do, after all, know the very things the sceptic denies that we know. Rather, Wittgenstein tries to persuade us that knowledge, or "knowing", is subject to certain conditions which are overlooked (or "violated") by the sceptic when she engages in her theoretical project.

Thus the net effect of Wittgenstein's treatment of the problem of the external world involves, it seems to me, the suggestion that the traditional epistemological project which generates the problem is inherently confused and that we will inevitably be led down the garden path whenever we engage in

the traditional investigation of human knowledge. What we are left with then amounts to a kind of warning to refuse to be duped by the traditional investigation which seems to lead so naturally and irresistibly to the sceptical conclusion.

The essential point of Wittgenstein's "diagnosis" of scepticism about the external world is that it is neither true nor false, but incoherent. But since the sceptical conclusion here is "invited" by (what I called) our natural picture of knowledge of the world, it may be that this picture is itself shot through with conceptual muddle. In fact as we shall see, Wittgenstein does try to persuade us of this and thus if Wittgenstein's diagnosis is correct, it seems we will have to come to view human knowledge in a somewhat different (unnatural?) light if we are to resist the temptation to engage in the theoretical investigation.

In any case, these are just hints concerning what might be at stake here and the sorts of issues that will arise as we proceed. One central question that will come out here is just what epistemic status we should attach to our most fundamental beliefs about the world. Having said all of this then, I want to now turn to the phenomenon of G.E. Moore.

## 2. Moore: Refuting the Sceptic

In a number of fascinating papers, Moore attempts to respond (explicitly in one essay) to the problem of the external world. However, unlike the general strategy discussed

above, Moore does not attempt to "dissolve" the problem by exposing the incoherence of the sceptical position. Rather, Moore, the steadfast defender of "common sense", attempts to deal with the problem "head on" by claiming that he (and indeed that every sane human being) does in fact know the very things the sceptic denies we know.

We have seen that the considerations the sceptic raises seem to make it impossible for us to justify (i.e. impossible to show that we could not be mistaken about) any of our beliefs about the way the world is. Given that our experience is our only basis of justification for all of our beliefs about the world, and the fact that our experience is entirely compatible with the world being completely different (than how it appears to us), there seems to be no way to bridge this epistemic gap in order to establish, for instance, that the objects which I (right now) believe are "external" to me (my computer, table, chair, etc.) are the way they appear – or even that they are there at all. Moore rejects this last claim (that there is no way to establish that such objects are "really there") and in "Proof of an External World" offers what he claims is a "perfectly rigorous" proof for the existence of external objects. I will briefly outline Moore's "proof" here and examine how it fares in light of the sceptical considerations. From this I will then quickly look at what some have thought to be the significance of Moore's

approach and consider just how we should perhaps understand Moore's work.<sup>2</sup>

Before offering his proof, Moore opens the paper by carefully explaining what he means by "internal" and "external things". External things are those which are "met with in space" and whose existence is not dependent on human perception (or sense experience); whereas internal things are not to be "met with in space" and their existence is dependent on "perception" or experience. Examples of external things are soap bubbles, human hands, socks, shoes, and the like, and examples of internal things are pains, after-images, and so on. From this Moore goes on to claim that if it is possible to prove that there exist (at least two) of the sorts of external things he mentions, he will have proved the existence of things outside us. As he puts it:

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<sup>2</sup> I will concentrate exclusively on Moore's "Proof of an External World" here as this paper is the most directly relevant to the concerns of this study. But it should be noted that Moore, in several essays, employs the same sort of notorious, "head-on" approach in dealing with the sceptic (or, for that matter, in dealing with any sort of paradoxical philosophical position which seems to be in conflict with "common sense"). Two notable examples are "A Defense of Common Sense" and "The Refutation of Idealism". In both of these works, Moore's straightforward strategy (roughly) involves trying to show the absurdity of the sceptical and idealist positions by pointing out that such views conflict with common sense. But, as we shall see, (as we work through the details of Moore's "proof" of the external world), Moore was not content to merely point out the paradoxical nature of such views - Moore also claimed that, because such views conflict with common sense, such views are thereby shown to be *false*. (And here we get a sense of the notoriety of Moore's approach).



If I can prove that there exist now both a sheet of paper and a human hand, I shall have proved that there are now "things outside us"; if I can prove that there exist now both a shoe and a sock, I shall have proved that there are now "things outside us"; etc.; and similarly I shall have proved it, if I can now prove that there exist now two sheets of paper, or two human hands, or two shoes, or two socks, etc.<sup>3</sup>

Now there seems to be nothing controversial about this so far. If Moore can prove, for instance, that two human hands exist, it does seem to follow (trivially) that he has proved that there are now things outside us (external things).

But when Moore finally does turn to the proof itself (after several pages of explanation concerning what is about to be proved), we are offered the following:

I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, "Here is one hand", and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, "Here is another".<sup>4</sup>

Moore claims that this proof, as it stands, is "perfectly rigorous", and "that it is perhaps impossible to give a better or more rigorous proof of anything whatever".<sup>5</sup> But Moore concedes that his proof would not have been adequate if it did not satisfy the following three conditions:

- (1) Unless the premise that I adduced as proof of the conclusion was different from the conclusion I adduced it to prove;
- (2) Unless the premise which I

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<sup>3</sup> G.E. Moore, "Proof of an External World" in his *Philosophical Papers*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), 145. (Hereafter cited as *Proof*.)

<sup>4</sup> *Proof*, 145-6.

<sup>5</sup> *Proof*, 146.

adduced was something which I *knew* to be the case, and not merely something which I believed but which was by no means certain, or something which, though in fact true, I did not know to be so; and (3) unless the conclusion did really follow from the premise.<sup>6</sup>

Moore insists that all three conditions are fully satisfied.

But clearly anyone familiar with the sceptical considerations we have examined above would at least raise an eyebrow at Moore's assertion that condition (2) has in fact been satisfied. Moore here gives the impression that perhaps he is either not familiar with the sceptical threat or that he is deliberately ignoring it (perhaps he does not think it worth addressing). But what Moore claims is satisfied here is precisely what the sceptic calls into question and it seems we should expect at least some acknowledgement of the sceptical considerations, and some defense of the claim that the second condition has been satisfied. All Moore offers in defense of his assertion is that it would be "absurd" to suggest the possibility that he did not know (but only believed) that his hands existed (at the time he held them up), and that "You might as well suggest that I do not know that I am now standing up and talking – that perhaps after all I'm not, and that it's not quite certain that I am!"<sup>7</sup>

But the sceptic offers what seem to be extremely powerful reasons for thinking it is not "absurd" to suggest the

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<sup>6</sup> *Proof*, 146.

<sup>7</sup> *Proof*, 146-7.

possibility that Moore does not know (as opposed to merely believe) what he here claims to know (that his hands exist or indeed, that he is standing up and talking!). What is going on here? It seems at this point that Moore is simply begging the question against the sceptic by claiming to have proved the existence of external things (by pointing to his hands and saying that he knows, with certainty, that they exist).

Surely the only evidence Moore (or anybody) could possibly have for this putative knowledge claim is that he can see his hands, touch them, etc.. But his "seeing and touching" here is perfectly compatible, for instance, with his merely dreaming that he is now seeing and touching his hands, and unless Moore can rule out the possibility that he is not merely dreaming, then it seems he could be wrong in his claim to know that his hands exist — it seems that he merely believes that his hands exist after all. How could Moore fail to see this?

Strangely, Moore not only seems to have been aware of Descartes' dreaming possibility, but he also admits near the end of the paper that in order to prove the existence of his hands he would also have to prove that he is not dreaming. He says:

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. But how can I prove that I am not?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Proof*, 149.

But then Moore goes on to say that it is a mistake to think that such "extra proofs" are in any way needed for establishing his conclusion that external objects exist. He claims that his proof is conclusive as it is and that the view which says that one cannot know that external objects exist unless one can show (prove) how one knows that they do, can be "shown to be wrong - although shown only by the use of premises which are not known to be true..."<sup>9</sup> This certainly seems question begging and all Moore offers in support of this is the bald statement "I can know things, which I cannot prove; and among things which I certainly did know, even if (as I think) I cannot prove them, were the premises of my two proofs."<sup>10</sup> Moore then ends the piece by saying that it is not a "good reason" to object to his proof solely on the grounds that he did not know his premises.

Stroud refers to Moore as an "extremely puzzling philosophical phenomenon". I agree. How could Moore possibly think that the sceptic would be at all impressed by his proof? And Moore certainly did have the sceptic in mind here. When Moore asserts that he knows that two external objects exist (e.g. his hands), he is asserting something which seems patently incompatible with the sceptical claim that we can know nothing about the world around us. Moreover, Moore really

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<sup>9</sup> *Proof*, 150.

<sup>10</sup> *Proof*, 150.

did see his proof as a refutation of the sceptic (as showing the falsehood of the sceptical conclusion).

Often, Moore explicitly claimed that any view which asserted (or implied) the possibility that he (all of us) did not know the things he claimed to know must be false on the sole grounds that such a view conflicts with what he says we all know. For instance, Moore rejects two of Hume's sceptical "principles" concerning our knowledge of external objects in the following way:

It seems to me that, in fact, there really is no stronger and better argument than the following. I do know that this pencil exists; but I could not know this if Hume's principles were true; therefore, Hume's principles, one or both of them, are false. I think this argument really is as strong and good a one as any that could be used: and I think it really is conclusive. In other words, I think that the fact that, if Hume's principles were true, I could not know of the existence of this pencil, is a *reductio ad absurdum* of those principles.<sup>11</sup>

If this is the best available "argument" against scepticism then the situation is truly dismal. For it seems to me that this is no argument at all, but simply a dogmatic assertion that scepticism is false because it conflicts with what Moore says he knows. The issue for the sceptic is precisely how, in light of the sceptical possibilities (principles), we can possibly ever show (prove) that we know (that we cannot be wrong about) the sorts of things that Moore claims to know – how we can ever establish the truth of basic, everyday (best

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<sup>11</sup> G.E. Moore, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1953) 119.

possible case type) beliefs about the world such as "my hands exist" or "this pencil exists".

In effect, what Moore seems to be doing here is simply asserting (even in light of sceptical considerations that he is well aware of) that justification – showing (proving) how (and that) one knows the truth of a particular claim to know – is not necessary for knowledge. Or at least he seems to be asserting that we do not have to prove to the sceptic that we cannot possibly be wrong about basic beliefs such as "my hands exist". Perhaps, for such basic beliefs, justification is not necessary for knowledge. But given the sceptical challenge, I think it needs to be shown (argued) that it is not necessary to prove that we can (and do) know the sorts of things that the challenge seems to undermine.

Granted, Moore claims to be offering a proof – showing that he knows of the existence of external things. But he seems to accept the condition of "showing" (justification) only up to the point where the sceptical considerations get their bite. What the sceptic wants an explanation (justification) for is precisely how Moore knows that his hands exist. Asking for justification at this point certainly seems legitimate (indeed necessary, in light of the sceptical possibilities), and it will not do – as a response to scepticism about the external world – to just simply say (concerning such beliefs) that "I can know things which I cannot prove and therefore there is no good reason to think I

might not know them". The question "How do you know?" seems to be in place here, and indeed it is most pressing at just the point where Moore seems to think it is not necessary to provide an answer.

Moore would likely agree that the demand for justification regarding most of our mundane claims to know this or that (e.g. if I were to claim that I know that there are mountain goats in India) is legitimate. And thus I think Moore would also agree (if one were to challenge my claim to know) that we would (and should) not accept a response of the sort "I can't tell you how I know, or offer you reasons that prove that I do know that there are mountain goats in India, you will just have to take my word for it that I know".

The point is that the sceptical possibilities seem to be relevant to the investigation of our knowledge of the world and they seem to force upon us the condition of justification for our basic beliefs. Because these possibilities seem to undermine even our most basic beliefs about the world, is precisely why, it seems to me, we must take seriously (and try to answer) a question like; "how, given (for instance) the dreaming consideration, do you know that your hands exist?". In any case, the ball, I think, is still in Moore's court and unless he were to argue (in a non-question begging way) for the point that one can know, with certainty, that (for example) one's hands exist without being able to show how one knows, I think the sceptic can safely ignore Moore's proof for

the existence of external things. Of course this is not to say that it might turn out (in a "mature" epistemology) that justification for such basic beliefs is not necessary for knowledge about the world, but Moore does not establish this.

So Moore's response to the problem of the external world does not appear at all to be adequate. For Moore to be successful in his approach (simply asserting the contrary to what the sceptic says) he would have to first show, I think, that the sceptic's theoretical investigation of our knowledge of the world is somehow irrelevant to what we think we know from the everyday perspective. But still many have thought that there is something about Moore's approach that is both appealing and philosophically significant, even if it does not successfully refute scepticism about the external world.

Stroud discusses a couple of interpretations of Moore's work which claim that Moore could not possibly "refute" scepticism about the external world in the way he attempts, and thus he must "really" be doing something else. The two (Wittgensteinian) interpretations that Stroud looks at are those of Norman Malcolm and Alice Ambrose. As Stroud explains, both Malcolm and Ambrose claim that what Moore is "really" doing in his proof is "indicating only that it is perfectly correct use of language to assert, of certain things, that we know them, or 'recommending' that the word know continue to be



used in certain ways, or some such thing".<sup>12</sup> However, as Stroud points out, Moore "steadfastly" denied these interpretations<sup>13</sup> and claimed that he was proving the existence of external objects (by pointing to his hands and insisting that he knows, with certainty, that they do in fact exist).

Now clearly, there is a difference between "indicating" how we use language, and "recommending" that it be used in certain ways. And although I think that we can take Moore at his word that his proof was not intended as a cleverly disguised "recommendation" about the "proper use of language", I do think that there may still be something behind the interpretation that Moore was "indicating" how we do use certain words in everyday life. That is, despite the fact that Moore denied that he was trying to show something like how we *should* use the word "know", the fact remains that we *do* use the word "know" the way Moore does all the time. Moreover, we not only employ the term in Moore's "way", but often satisfy ourselves (and others) that we do know this or that through

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<sup>12</sup> Barry Stroud, "The Significance of Scepticism" in *Transcendental Arguments and Science*, P. Bieri, R.P. Horstmann, and L. Kruger (eds.), (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), 280. We will come across claims similar to the ones that Stroud mentions here when we look at Wittgenstein's work. However, as we shall see, Wittgenstein did not interpret what Moore was doing in this way. Rather when Wittgenstein offers remarks to this effect his intention was to criticize both Moore and the sceptic.

<sup>13</sup> See G.E. Moore, "A Reply to my Critics", in P.A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore*, (New York, 1952), 668-75.

demonstrations of the sort that Moore offers us. As Moore claimed about his proof:

we all of us do constantly take proofs of this sort as absolutely conclusive proofs of certain conclusions – as finally settling certain questions, as to which we were previously in doubt.<sup>14</sup>

Thus if someone were to doubt my claim that I know that there are mountain goats in India, I could prove the matter to her by producing the photos I took of the goats grazing in the Himalayas on last years excursion. And that should settle the matter. The demand for any "extra proofs" for (say) the existence of mountain goats, mountains, cameras, etc. would be ludicrous in such everyday situations, and would (at best) be taken as a joke. That we do accept proofs of this sort (like Moore's) and do use the word know (like he does) in everyday life is certainly something that seems relevant to our conception of knowledge.

But, of course, as I tried to show in part I, the sceptic *does* take the everyday (pre-theoretic) conception of knowledge into consideration and in a few simple steps – using the very features of our everyday conception – seems to render problematic even the most basic of the beliefs which we uncritically accept as items of knowledge about the world around us. The sceptic is well aware of how we use the word "know", and how we "prove" this or that claim to know something in everyday life. But she raises certain

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<sup>14</sup> *Proof*, 147.

considerations which we do not normally take into account when offering "proofs" for our everyday knowledge claims – considerations which seem to expose the inadequacy of the grounds for the proofs we offer for even the most basic ("best case") type of beliefs about the world (thus affecting not just this or that claim to know, but all of what we believe about the world around us).

And once the sceptical considerations are brought to light, we realize that if they obtain and more importantly, if we can not rule them out, we are led irresistibly to the conclusion that our "proofs" are never good enough for knowledge. Thus, even though we do in fact use the word "know" the way Moore does in everyday life, this, by itself, does not show that what we claim or think we know in everyday life, really does amount to knowledge.

So again it seems that it must be shown that the sceptic's considerations are somehow illegitimate before we can go on to say that what we uncritically accept as knowledge in everyday life (and what we call "knowledge"), is in fact knowledge. Moore does not show that the sceptical considerations are somehow illegitimate – he just asserts that the paradoxical conclusion of scepticism about the external world must be false simply because it conflicts with what we uncritically accept as knowledge in everyday life. The sceptic is fully aware that his "excessive principles" conflict with what we say and do in everyday life (himself included), and he

could also agree that if certain clever people had never taken it into their heads to worry about human knowledge, then what Moore attempts to defend would perhaps be "all there is" to knowledge. But it is a very natural thing to think about knowledge in the way Descartes does, and this certainly seems to be something that is relevant to our conception of knowledge.

Surely what is wanted is to somehow show that we do know the very things Moore claimed he knew. The appeal of Moore's "head on" approach is that it attempts to do just this. If Moore had been successful, he would have shown that the view which says that it is possible that I might be wrong in my belief that I am presently sitting in front of the computer is false. The value of Moore's work then, it seems to me, is that he sets out our pre-theoretic understanding of knowledge about the world — the way we uncritically use the word know and justify everyday knowledge claims. And this is useful in that it can be seen as what we want to vindicate in attempting to respond to scepticism about the external world. That is, we want to show that the proofs we offer in support of our knowledge claims are "good" enough, and that we really do know what the sceptic denies we do. Is there a way of showing all this?

I want to now turn to what I think is the most promising approach of the general strategy which attempts to expose the unintelligibility of scepticism. In a way, Wittgenstein can be

seen as attempting to "vindicate" the sort of basic beliefs that we uncritically accept as items of knowledge. However, as we shall see, how Wittgenstein proceeds here is very complicated and involves some (to say the least) rather surprising claims regarding the nature and role of our basic beliefs.

### 3. Wittgenstein: Eliminating the Sceptic

I mentioned that an essential feature of the general anti-sceptical strategy (of which Wittgenstein is one representative) involved showing how the sceptic oversteps the boundaries or conditions of intelligibility. But I also mentioned that this strategy attempts to do this "indirectly" by setting out the conditions and then explaining how the sceptic violates them. Thus what the sceptic assumes about knowledge, and the considerations which lead to the sceptical conclusion, can only be shown to be meaningless or incoherent once the limits have been established. For instance, one of the consequences of this approach (in fact it is one of the consequences of Wittgenstein's approach) might be that the sceptic's demand for justification for our basic everyday beliefs (such as that my hands exist) somehow violates the conditions of intelligibility. Obviously then, the success of the sort of strategy that attempts to "defuse" scepticism

about the external world rides on the success of the determination of the limits of intelligibility.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> One attempt to "defuse" scepticism (in all forms) which (it is widely agreed) failed precisely because of the lack of success in setting out the limits of the meaningful was the "Verificationism" of the Logical Positivist. In a highly illuminating chapter (mostly) on Carnap (see *Significance*, 170-208), Stroud discusses the essential thrust of the best versions of the principle of verification, as well as the nature of its various shortcomings.

Very generally, Stroud argues that the only distance between the position of the sceptic and a position like Carnap's is the principle of verification. That is, Carnap accepts, Stroud claims, the "provisional correctness" of the sceptical conclusion, in that he accepts the sceptic's view that the existence of the external world is neither "confirmable" nor "disconfirmable" in sensory experience. Carnap admits that, given what the sceptic seems to mean by the "external world" (which Carnap characterizes as a thesis about reality as a whole, which is "external" to our "conceptual framework" about particular objects and events — what he calls the "language of things"), no possible sensory experience could ever confirm or disconfirm its existence. But, for this reason, Carnap, with the aid of the principle of verification (roughly formulated as the claim that the truth conditions and hence, meaning, of a given proposition are determined by whether or not the proposition is capable of being confirmed or disconfirmed in experience), goes on to declare the above sceptical claim to be "meaningless" — the problem of the external world is thus dismissed as a confused "pseudo-problem" which we need no longer concern ourselves with.

But the success of this dismissal rides wholly on the plausibility of the principle of verification. Stroud cites several reasons as to why we need not accept the principle. Aside from the general implausibility of the "anti-realism" which emerges from the acceptance of the principle (that the truth or falsity of a claim about the world depends somehow on our experience), problems with the principle range from the difficulty of even formulating a version of it which does not undermine itself, to the difficulty of working out the notion of "empirical confirmation".

In any case, the principle is problematic, and consequently does not by itself, successfully defuse the threat of scepticism about the external world (and in rejecting the principle we again seem to embrace the sceptical conclusion). Wittgenstein's anti-sceptical approach shares, it seems to me, much in common with the strategy of the verificationists, and in what follows I will try to make clear

Minimally then we will have to try to sort out: 1) just what Wittgenstein takes to be the relevant conditions of intelligibility, 2) how the sceptic supposedly (and unwittingly) violates these conditions and 3) just where Wittgenstein leaves us with respect to how we should understand both scepticism about the external world, and human knowledge. From this we will then have to assess Wittgenstein's diagnosis of how and why the sceptic goes wrong, and see if he really has succeeded in showing scepticism about the external world to be unintelligible.<sup>16</sup>

I will begin trying to get at these issues by examining some of Wittgenstein's remarks directed at Moore as well as some remarks directed at the sceptic. We have seen how Moore

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just where the similarities and differences lie.

<sup>16</sup> A disclaimer is perhaps in order here concerning the way in which I have framed what I think are the relevant issues, and how I want to approach them. It is by no means clear that it is possible to provide a precise, systematic account of Wittgenstein's stand on any of the above issues. Indeed, as is well known, Wittgenstein went to great lengths in his later work to avoid a precise, systematic presentation of his views. This does not, I think, reflect a stylistic quirk (or sloppiness). Rather, it reflects Wittgenstein's mature attitude toward the very nature and practice of philosophy. Wittgenstein repeatedly stressed that he was not in the business of advancing philosophical theories of any sort, and he would surely reject the claim that he was attempting to set down the "conditions of intelligibility" (or some such thing). Nevertheless Wittgenstein did express specific views in his later work - views which, if not distinctively "philosophical" (whatever that means), are still relevant to (traditional?) philosophical problems and issues. Thus at the risk of perhaps "missing the point" (the depth? subtlety?) of whatever it was that Wittgenstein was trying to do in his later work, I will attempt to extract explicit views (primarily from *On Certainty*) concerning, for example, the "limits of intelligibility".

tried to prove the existence of external objects (and "refute" the sceptic) by appealing to a certain kind of belief which he claimed he knew to be true. The sort of belief which Moore used as a premise for his proof falls under the category which I have been referring to as "basic" or "fundamental". As I tried to show in part I, the characteristic mark of such a belief is that it is representative of what seems to be the best possible sort of candidate for knowledge of the world around us based on sensory experience. There are obviously hosts of such beliefs, and there is perhaps no clear cut way (no algorithm) for determining which of our beliefs about the world fall under this category. But it is clear that Moore's "here is a hand" and Descartes' "I am sitting in front of the fire" are of the relevant sort. It is the nature and status of these basic beliefs which Wittgenstein is concerned with in *On Certainty*, and his criticisms of both Moore and the sceptic revolve largely around his attempt to get clear about how we are to understand these beliefs.<sup>17</sup>

At first glance (indeed on the first few pages of *On Certainty*), Wittgenstein appears to side with the sceptic in saying that Moore does not know the basic beliefs which he claims to know, and he also seems to endorse the underlying

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<sup>17</sup> And surely this is just the right thing to focus on here. The "status and nature" of the basic beliefs is just what needs to be understood, given that I have tried to set up the problem of the external world as a challenge to explain how, in light of the sceptical considerations, we can ever possibly justify (as knowledge or as even reasonable) the "best possible case" type beliefs about the world.



(natural) "picture" of our knowledge of the world that the sceptic focuses on in rendering these beliefs problematic. I offer a number of passages in support of this:

1. If you do know that *here is one hand*, we'll grant you all the rest. When one says that such and such a proposition can't be proved, of course that does not mean that it can't be derived from other propositions; any proposition can be derived from other ones. But they may be no more certain than it is itself.<sup>18</sup>

2. From its *seeming* to me – or to everyone – to be so, it doesn't follow that it *is* so.<sup>19</sup>

100. The truths which Moore says he knows, are such as, roughly speaking, all of us know, if he knows them.<sup>20</sup>

13. ... "There is a hand there" follows from the proposition "He knows there's a hand there". But from his utterance "I know..." it does not follow that he does know it.<sup>21</sup>

14. That he does know takes some shewing.<sup>22</sup>

15. It needs to be *shewn* that no mistake was possible. Giving the assurance "I know" doesn't suffice. For it is after all only an assurance that I can't be making a mistake and it needs to be *objectively* established that I am not making a mistake about *that*.<sup>23</sup>

16. "If I know something, then I also know that I know it, etc." amounts to: "I know that" means "I am incapable of being wrong about that". But whether I am so needs to be established objectively.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), 2. (Hereafter cited as OC and page number.)

<sup>19</sup> OC, 2.

<sup>20</sup> OC, 16.

<sup>21</sup> OC, 4.

<sup>22</sup> OC, 4.

<sup>23</sup> OC, 4.

<sup>24</sup> OC, 4.

In these (and many other similar) passages, Wittgenstein seems to be levelling the same sort of charge against Moore which I developed earlier. In passage 1, for instance (an explicit reference to Moore's "Proof of an External World"), Wittgenstein is claiming that Moore's proposition that external objects exist does indeed follow from "here is a hand", but that this is not the sense of "proof" that is of interest to (or which will satisfy) the sceptic. What needs to be "proved" is that Moore does know that his hands exist, and his simply saying "I know" or "I can't be wrong" about the matter "doesn't suffice".

Wittgenstein is also claiming here that in order to show that one (Moore included) does know this or that (some claim about the world), one must be able to show that one cannot be mistaken in the matter and that this needs to be "objectively" established. So far then, Wittgenstein seems to share the natural (Cartesian) picture of knowledge which invites the sceptical conclusion. At this point Wittgenstein seems to be claiming that knowledge is a matter of holding a true belief about the way the world is which has been objectively established to be the case through somehow showing that one cannot possibly be mistaken in the matter. But whereas the sceptic claims that she has good reasons for thinking that no one is ever in a position to ever objectively establish the impossibility of being mistaken (wrong) about any of our beliefs about the world, Wittgenstein offers us numerous

remarks which state (or imply) that the sceptic is highly deluded in thinking this.

In passage 19 Wittgenstein indicates just what he thinks is illusory in the sceptical (which Wittgenstein here refers to as the "idealist") position. In discussing how we often justify our claims to know this or that in everyday life, Wittgenstein says:

19. The statement "I know that here is a hand" may then be continued: "for it's *my* hand that I'm looking at". Then a reasonable man will not doubt that I know. — Nor would 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 shewn in a different way.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the sceptical "illusion" involves thinking that some "further" doubt remains about whether or not one could possibly be wrong about whether one's hands are "there" after one has removed the "practical" doubt (for instance, by looking and pointing to one's hands). Here then, Wittgenstein seems to side with Moore (against the sceptic), in that he seems to be implying that "practical" (or everyday) doubt is the only sort of doubt to be removed in order to show or "prove" a particular claim to know something (because the further doubt is illusory). However, Wittgenstein is also implying here that Moore is mistaken in thinking that settling a "practical doubt" of this sort is in any way a refutation of scepticism about the external world. For Wittgenstein, the

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<sup>25</sup> OC, 4.

sceptic must be shown to be wrong in "a different way" – it must be shown that it is an illusion to think that there is a further doubt behind everyday doubt concerning any of our beliefs about the world. But how will Wittgenstein show that the sceptic's "further doubt" is an illusion?

Surely what Wittgenstein must mean here by "further doubt" is something like a Cartesian sort of doubt which arises when the grounds for our beliefs about the world are examined and shown to be inadequate for knowledge because the "grounding" (sense experience) is entirely compatible with the world being completely different from how it appears. This sort of (further) doubt involves the idea that it is always possible that we might be wrong about any (even the most basic) of our beliefs about the world, and that there does not seem to be any way (based on what we have to go on) to rule out this possibility.

Now, we have just seen that Wittgenstein seems to accept that in order to "know" something about the world it needs to be objectively established that one cannot possibly be mistaken in the matter. Given that Wittgenstein accepts this, then it would seem that the way to show that the sceptic's "further doubt" is illusory would be to somehow show that it is indeed impossible to be mistaken about certain beliefs.

This, in effect, is precisely what Wittgenstein will try to establish but, as we shall see, he does not do this by arguing that the "grounding" for our beliefs about the world

is in fact good enough for knowledge. Rather, Wittgenstein takes the "indirect" approach of setting out the conditions of intelligible doubt and knowledge and then, from this, goes on to try to show that the sceptic is mistaken in his view that our basic beliefs are "grounded" (or even capable of grounding). Thus, when the sceptic tries to doubt (entertain the possibility that we could be wrong about) basic beliefs on the basis that our grounding is not "good enough", he is (unwittingly) overstepping the limits of intelligibility.<sup>26</sup> But we are way ahead of ourselves here. I will now try to develop the essential background of Wittgenstein's diagnosis of the sceptic's illusion (which culminates in the above view).

In 24 Wittgenstein offers us something of what he takes to be Moore's mistake and something of the sceptic's mistake. The passage is as follows:

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<sup>26</sup> To anticipate just a bit more here, I should mention that so far what I have said (and indeed what Wittgenstein himself has said in some of the above passages) about Wittgenstein's views on knowledge is quite misleading. I have said that Wittgenstein seems to endorse the "natural" (Cartesian) view of knowledge, and up to a point this is true. Wittgenstein does claim that knowledge is a matter of holding a true belief about the world which has been objectively established (shown to be true), but, as we shall see, Wittgenstein thinks that ("real") knowledge is only possible for beliefs which are *capable* of being "objectively established" (or grounded). Thus, if basic beliefs are not capable of grounding, then they are not proper objects of knowledge. So, even though Wittgenstein wants to claim that basic beliefs are certain (that we can not be mistaken about them), he will also claim that we cannot properly be said to know them.

24. The idealist's question would be something like: "What right have I not to doubt the existence of my hands?" (And to that the answer can't be: I know that they exist.) But someone who asks such a question is overlooking the fact that a doubt about existence only works in a language game. Hence, we should first have to ask: what would such a doubt be like?, and don't understand this straight off.<sup>27</sup>

Again, in 2, after criticizing Moore with "from it *seeming* to me – or to everyone – to be so, it doesn't follow that it *is* so", the passage continues with "what we can ask is whether it can make sense to doubt it".<sup>28</sup> This passage is immediately followed by:

3. If e.g. someone says "I don't know if there's a hand here" he might be told "Look closer". – This possibility of satisfying oneself is part of the language-game. Is one of its essential features."<sup>29</sup>

Consistent with the above criticisms of Moore then, Wittgenstein is claiming (in 24) that the sceptic's doubt concerning whether or not one ever knows that one's hands exist cannot be successfully responded to by simply saying that one knows that they do exist. Wittgenstein sums up this general criticism in 521 where he says: "Moore's mistake lies in this – countering the assertion that one cannot know that, by saying 'I do know it'".<sup>30</sup>

However, against the sceptic, Wittgenstein is arguing (or rather at this point, simply stating) in the above passages

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<sup>27</sup> OC, 5.

<sup>28</sup> OC, 2.

<sup>29</sup> OC, 2.

<sup>30</sup> OC, 68.

that the sceptic is somehow "overlooking" certain "facts" about "doubt" which suggests the possibility that doubting (say, the existence of one's hands) perhaps does not make sense. Of course Wittgenstein wants to (and will) claim that doubting a basic belief of this sort does not make sense, and in the above passages Wittgenstein is tacitly appealing to some boundaries or limits of intelligibility which the sceptic oversteps in raising such doubts. What are these boundaries or limits?

Wittgenstein says in 24 that a doubt (about existence) only "works" in the "language-game", and in 3 that the possibility of "satisfying oneself" is an essential feature of the language-game. Now leaving aside (for the moment) the (notorious) notion of "the" or "a" language-game, Wittgenstein is here (albeit in an extremely vague fashion) setting out certain conditions for meaningful doubt. I read 24 as saying that unless it is possible to explain or describe what a doubt about a basic belief (in this case about the existence of one's hands) would "be like", the doubt is meaningless, and in 3, Wittgenstein seems to be saying that unless it is possible to somehow settle or answer a particular case of doubt about a given matter, the doubt is meaningless.

It seems to me that the first of these conditions for meaningful doubt can be seen as a sort of blanket condition which Wittgenstein's diagnosis of scepticism about the external world is meant to establish. What I mean by this is

that in asking what a doubt about a basic belief might be like, Wittgenstein is suggesting that it is impossible to explain or describe what such a doubt is like because of what doubt *is* like. That is, Wittgenstein will attempt to show the nature of genuine (meaningful) doubt, and from this go on to show that the sceptic's doubt is illusory (that there is nothing that it is like to doubt a basic belief). Thus, in light of this general condition, I want to begin unpacking Wittgenstein's views on (genuine) doubt and knowledge, the language-game, etc., by firstly discussing the other condition I mentioned for meaningful doubt (suggested in 3).

When we looked at Moore's proof for the existence of external objects, we saw that he appealed to our everyday standards of justification for establishing a claim to know something and for removing or resolving a doubt about a given matter. That is, we saw that Moore attempted to remove a doubt about a matter (i.e. whether or not physical objects exist) by offering us "evidence" (his hands). This standard (practical) sort of procedure is appealed to all the time in our everyday affairs, and the evidence we offer to establish the truth of a given claim often does settle the matter (remove the doubt) to the satisfaction of others (and ourselves).

But, as we have seen (and Wittgenstein agrees), Moore's appeal to "what goes" in everyday life in order to remove the sceptic's (further) doubt, is entirely ineffective. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein thinks that even though Moore does



not remove the sceptic's doubt, his performance does reveal an important condition of "meaningful" doubt; namely, that if a doubt is to be *doubt* at all, it must be capable (in principle) of being removed or settled one way or the other (and this, I think, is what is behind Wittgenstein's remark that the "possibility of satisfying oneself" is an essential feature of the language-game). The basic view here is that unless it is possible to imagine and describe how we might go about establishing the truth or falsity of a given belief (what sorts of things we could offer as evidence), then it does not make sense to doubt the belief (the doubt is not a real doubt at all).

If this is right, then it follows that it does not make sense to doubt a basic belief such as that my hands exist. For the only sort of "evidence" I could offer in support of the belief (in order to establish the truth of the matter and remove the doubt), would be my hands themselves (and here we just repeat Moore's performance). Pointing to my hands is not the sort of evidence which will settle the matter because the existence of my hands is just what is in question. Wittgenstein claims (or implies) in a number of places that the belief that one's hands exist is as certain as (indeed more certain than) anything we could possibly adduce as evidence to establish the matter (and here we get a sense of why these beliefs are basic). As Wittgenstein puts it:

250. My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could

produce in evidence for it. That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it.<sup>31</sup>

Thus appealing (like Moore) to the "sight of one's hands" in "normal" circumstances (we will look at what is involved in this notion a little later), will not do as evidence in order to remove a doubt about their existence.

But since (according to Wittgenstein) "genuine" doubts must be capable of being settled one way or the other (by producing evidence), it follows that a doubt about such a basic belief is no real doubt at all (it is illusory or meaningless). It is meaningless in that a condition essential to what we mean by doubt is not satisfied. Now this is an extremely controversial claim and I will try to get to the bottom of it (the view behind this claim) as we proceed (and here we will look at Wittgenstein's notion of the language-game).<sup>32</sup> At this point I want to press on and look at a

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<sup>31</sup> OC, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Although we have not yet looked at Wittgenstein's underlying view in support of this (and other) conditions of meaningful doubt (and indeed "meaning" in general), it is still perhaps useful at this point to notice just how little distance there is between Wittgenstein and the sceptic here. Wittgenstein claims that because the only sort of evidence we could offer in support of "my hands exist" would be the sight of my hands, it is impossible to settle the matter, and hence doubt here is unintelligible. The sceptic agrees that the sight of one's hands does not settle the matter (prove that one's hands do exist), and thus thinks it possible that we could be wrong about such a belief. Thus, what the sceptic takes as a ground for doubt (the evidence not being capable of establishing the truth of a belief), Wittgenstein takes as a reason for thinking doubt (real doubt) is impossible (because it cannot be removed). Clearly, the issue here between Wittgenstein and the sceptic turns on whether or not what we

couple of other conditions Wittgenstein sets out for meaningful doubt, as this will put us in a better position to understand the background view. But before turning to these other conditions, I should just briefly mention something of Wittgenstein's views on knowledge and knowing.

There is a certain symmetry between Wittgenstein's treatment of doubt and knowledge in *On Certainty*. As with doubt, knowledge, if it is to be knowledge at all, must according to Wittgenstein, rest on some sort of evidence. That is, the condition of "satisfying oneself" also applies to knowing — in order to know this or that, it must be possible

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"mean" by doubt is circumscribed in the way Wittgenstein is suggesting. At this point, the sceptic is in total agreement with Wittgenstein about the impossibility of proving a basic belief, and so far this is the only reason Wittgenstein has offered us for claiming that the sceptic's doubt is illusory.

It is also useful to note in this context, the difference between Wittgenstein's approach, and the similar sort of strategy employed by a positivist such as Carnap. Both Carnap and Wittgenstein attempt to show that scepticism is incoherent, and both claim the possibility of "satisfying oneself" — that it must be possible to confirm or disconfirm a belief — to be a condition for meaning (in some sense). But unlike Wittgenstein, who takes this condition to be a specific condition of doubt and knowledge, Carnap took this as a general condition for meaning anything at all by a proposition, and he also took the means of verification (confirmation) to be sense-experience. That is, Carnap accepted the "sight" of one's hands as the only possible way to confirm the belief (establish the truth) that they do exist (and thus he thought that this sort of "evidence" did in fact establish the matter). However, as we have seen, Wittgenstein rejects the idea that the sight of one's hand can function (in normal circumstances) as evidence at all. Thus, whatever other similarities there might be between Carnap and Wittgenstein, it is at least clear that there is a difference here with respect to the criteria of meaning — just what Wittgenstein does have to say about meaning remains to be seen, but at this point we can just note that he did not think that the limits of the meaningful are determined by sense-experience.

for one to offer some sort of evidence (reasons, grounds) which justifies the belief in question (evidence that establishes the truth of the matter).

But as we have already seen, the only evidence anyone could possibly offer to justify a basic belief such as "my hands exist" would be my hands themselves, and we have also seen why Wittgenstein thinks this sort of evidence does not (and cannot) justify the belief. Thus such basic beliefs are not proper objects of knowledge if "real" knowledge must be justified. In this way the condition of "satisfying oneself" works on both doubt and knowledge (often the removal of a real, meaningful doubt can result in real, meaningful knowledge). If this condition is not observed, then neither doubt nor knowledge are possible. Now all this sounds paradoxical and (as promised) we will look at the underlying view behind all this after discussing a few of the other conditions Wittgenstein sets out for meaningful doubt (and knowledge).

I will introduce the other conditions I wish to examine by looking at passage 23 which stresses the above ("satisfying") condition, as well as another crucial point for intelligible doubt/knowledge.

23. If I don't know whether someone has two hands (say, whether they have been amputated or not) I shall believe his assurance that he has two hands, if he is trustworthy. And if he says he *knows* it, that can only signify to me that he has been able to make sure, and hence that his arms are e.g. not still concealed by coverings and bandages, etc. etc.. My believing the trustworthy man stems from

my admitting that it is possible for him to make sure. But someone who says that perhaps there are no physical objects makes no such admission.<sup>33</sup>

Here then we see Wittgenstein explicitly identifying the condition of "satisfaction" (the possibility of "making sure") as a requirement for knowledge and doubt. A claim to know something only makes sense (it only means or "signifies" something) if the possibility of making sure (justification) can be observed; and where this is not possible, neither the claim to know, nor the claim that perhaps we do not know (a doubt), makes sense. Thus neither the claim that "I know that my hands exist", nor the claim that "perhaps I don't know that my hands exist" makes sense – in *normal circumstances*.<sup>34</sup>

But sometimes it might make sense to raise a doubt (and enter a knowledge claim) concerning a basic belief such as that my hands exist. This suggestion is implicit in the above passage. We can imagine (and describe) cases; specific, everyday situations in which it would make sense to doubt whether my hands exist – where the possibility of settling the matter is in place (and hence where there is also the possibility of knowledge). The essential idea here is that a

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<sup>33</sup> OC, 5.

<sup>34</sup> As we shall see in what follows, what Wittgenstein seems to mean by "normal circumstances" involves the lack of specific, concrete circumstances (or a specific context) which (he claims) provides for the possibility of (say) raising meaningful doubts. Thus, the philosopher (sceptic) does not (and cannot) observe the conditions of intelligibility when he tries to doubt the existence of his hands in normal circumstances (where a concrete, everyday context is not specified).

specific "context" is required for meaningful doubt/knowledge to be possible with respect to basic beliefs. Let me fill out a possible "amputation" scenario and consider the other two conditions for doubt and knowledge.

I can imagine being in an automobile accident and waking up in the recovery room to find my hands (stumps?) completely covered in bandages. Suppose that I seem to have some feeling in my fingers, but that I am also aware of the phenomenon of "phantom limbs". In such a case I can raise a genuine doubt about whether or not my hands (still) exist. I believe (and want to believe) they are still there, but I am not sure (certain). But I can make sure (by asking the doctor, attempting to remove the bandages, etc., etc.). Entertaining the possibility that I could be wrong (mistaken) about whether or not I have two hands does make sense here, not only because I could settle the matter, but also because I have a specific ("context bound") ground for doubting whether or not I have two hands (I can't see them). I can also imagine how I could be wrong or mistaken in my belief that they do exist (it might be a case of "phantom limbs" after all).

Here then are two more closely related conditions of meaningful doubt and knowledge. A real doubt must be based on specific grounds or reasons for thinking one might be mistaken about a given matter, and one must also be able to imagine and describe how one might be mistaken. Along with the condition of "satisfying oneself" then, real doubts (and thus the

possibility of real knowledge) require that it be possible to specify both concrete grounds for doubt, and the nature of a possible mistake. And according to Wittgenstein, these conditions for doubt and knowledge can only be met within specific, everyday (real or imagined) contexts or situations – however unusual or out the ordinary these situations might be. The crucial point here is that doubt or knowledge are possible only in the context of everyday life. This is crucial because we have here an explicit identification of the limits of meaningful doubt/knowledge (and indeed meaning in general) with (what I called in part I) the everyday perspective. That is, the limits of intelligibility for doubting/knowing are determined within the limits of everyday situations in which we engage in the practice of raising and settling doubts, offering and justifying claims to know, and so on.

With this then we arrive at an essential point in Wittgenstein's diagnosis of how and why the sceptic goes wrong. For when the sceptic attempts to doubt a basic belief, she does not provide any specific context or situation within which any of the above conditions are satisfied. In everyday (normal) circumstances (e.g. when I have not been in a car or any other sort of crash), I have no specific reason (or ground) for doubting the existence of my hands, I cannot imagine how I might be mistaken about the matter, and I could not resolve the matter (were I to try to doubt it). Having said this, we are now in a position to look at Wittgenstein's

views about the nature and role of basic beliefs in our doubting/knowing practice. And this will lead us into a discussion of the view underlying Wittgenstein's conditions of meaningful doubt/knowledge.

Wittgenstein claims that in normal circumstances we are *certain* of basic beliefs such as "my hands exist" – this (and countless other) beliefs are indubitable – we cannot be mistaken about them. And this is because such beliefs are at the basis or "foundation" of our everyday perspective from which our practice of doubting/knowing arises, and consequently such beliefs are the basis from which the conditions (or "rules") of meaningful doubt and knowledge arise. This is a crucial point and I will try to fill it out.

According to Wittgenstein, basic beliefs are constitutive of a fundamental (normal) human world view or "picture" that "stands fast" for us when we engage in our practice of raising and removing doubts, justifying claims to know, etc.. Wittgenstein claims that the beliefs constitutive of this picture form "a kind of system" which makes possible all of our thinking about the world.<sup>35</sup> Although these beliefs have

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<sup>35</sup> Again, it is important to stress that for Wittgenstein there is no "algorithm" for determining which of our beliefs are basic. Wittgenstein claims that the "system" of "empirical propositions" which are basic beliefs "do not form a homogenous mass" (OC,29.) and that "...the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing". (OC,98.) I interpret such comments as saying that our "system" of basic beliefs is not a hard and fast "written in stone" type of system, and that sometimes the status of a certain proposition is not immediately obvious. What we may consider as basic in



the form of "empirical" propositions (i.e. contingent propositions about the way the world is which we "discover" to be true or false by means of sense experience), Wittgenstein claims that they actually play a role or function akin to that of logical (necessary) propositions in that they form the basis of all our operating with concepts (using language) in intelligible ways. As Wittgenstein puts it in 401: "I want to say: propositions of the form of empirical propositions, and not only propositions of logic, form the foundation of all operating with thoughts (with language)..."<sup>36</sup> Wittgenstein echoes this notion in a number of places, and in a short commentary on Wittgenstein, Peter Strawson offers a nice assemblage of the relevant passages which runs as follows:

Wittgenstein says that "certain propositions seem to underlie all questions and all thinking" (415)...[which] in "the entire system of our language-games belong to the foundations" (411). Again, he speaks of "propositions which have a

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some circumstances (e.g. "my hands exist"), might come to have a different status in the system in other circumstances (e.g. the belief that my hands exist can become something which is subject to doubt/knowledge). Similarly, what we might consider as a basic proposition at one time ("the earth is flat" or "no one has been on the moon"), might come to be rejected at another. As we shall see, Wittgenstein thinks that the way to detect what is basic and what is not is to "look" at the context in which the belief (proposition) occurs, and "see" what role it plays in that context (at a given time). Concerning this last point however (the "relativistic" sounding notion that some beliefs, considered basic at one time, might come to be rejected at another), it should be mentioned that, for Wittgenstein, some beliefs (e.g. that we have hands) are so basic (i.e. "ahistorical", "trans-cultural") that nothing could render them doubtful in normal circumstances.

<sup>36</sup> OC, 51.

peculiar role in the system" (136); which belong to our "frame of reference" (83); which "stand fast or solid" (151); which constitute the "world-picture" which is the "substratum of all my enquiring and asserting" (162) or the "scaffolding of all our thoughts" (211) or the "element in which arguments have their life" (105).<sup>37</sup>

Thus, being at the foundation of our operating with concepts at all, basic beliefs are also the basis for the meaning of the concepts crucial to our doubting/knowing practice (and indeed to the meaning of our concepts generally).

Another way of putting all of this is to say that our "world-picture" (the un-homogeneous mass of basic beliefs) functions as the foundation of all our multifarious "language-games" (and here our interest is with the doubt/knowledge game).<sup>38</sup> The doubt/knowledge game is our everyday practice of

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<sup>37</sup> P.F. Strawson, *Scepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 15.

<sup>38</sup> We are now in a position to characterize Wittgenstein's notion of a language-game. At the most basic level, a language-game is a human practice involving the use of a shared system of concepts (expressed in natural languages by words) in intelligible ways for specific purposes (e.g. for communication – construed as something like a conceptual transaction involving two or more parties which results in mutual understanding). Obviously, a condition for the possibility of any language game at all is agreement (or what Cavell calls "attunement") in the meanings of the concepts used in the game and, according to Wittgenstein, this agreement is possible only if the participants in the game share a basic world-picture (or what he sometimes cryptically refers to as a "form of life"). Of course, "world-pictures" can vary somewhat (and if we count specific disciplines e.g. science, art, etc. as world-pictures, then they can vary greatly), and thus the language-games which are based upon the picture can also vary (and what this means is that the meanings of the concepts – concepts which might occur in several games – are determined by the role the concept plays in that game). However, the language-game we are looking at (doubt/knowledge) is not esoteric and rests on what we might

raising and settling doubts (claims to know etc.) in which we use the concepts of "grounds", "evidence", "mistake", "certainty", etc.; and how we actually engage in this practice (how we use these concepts) is determined by our fundamental world view – our basic beliefs. Thus the meanings of the concepts (and the limits for intelligible application or employment of the concepts) are determined by how they are used in the game, and this is parasitic on our world-picture.

The trick then to seeing how and when the doubt/knowledge game is being "played correctly" (meaningfully), is to "look and see" (and describe) how we actually use the concepts crucial to the game in everyday life. When we look and see how we actually use the concepts, we thus observe the "rules" or "conditions" (what Wittgenstein sometimes called "logic" or "grammar") of the game. All of *On Certainty* can be seen as Wittgenstein's attempt to do just this, and this is how he establishes the conditions for meaningful doubt and knowledge (a few of which I have set out above). I want to try to make all of this clearer by again looking at the belief that my hands exist.

I said that Wittgenstein claims we are certain of this belief in normal circumstances – that we cannot be wrong or mistaken about it. As he states in 25: "One may be wrong even

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call the basic human world-picture – the beliefs constitutive of the picture are basic human beliefs. Thus, this picture could be said to be the underlying picture of all of our language-games.

about there being a hand here. Only in particular circumstances is it impossible."<sup>39</sup> From what has been said above, the reason why in particular (normal) circumstances it is impossible to be wrong about such a belief is that the belief belongs to the foundations (scaffolding, substratum) of our world-picture which makes possible the doubt/knowledge game, and thus the belief plays an essential role in the determination of how the concepts of certainty, mistake, etc. are used – how they are meaningfully employed.

Thus when we "look and see" how we actually use the concept "certainty", we see that we apply it to a belief like "my hands exist". In this sense then, the belief represents what we *mean* by certainty or a belief that is certain, and thus it also represents the limits of intelligible employment of the concept.

Similarly the concept "mistake" is given its "life" from such basic beliefs in that (being certain) they set the limit for intelligible use of "mistake". That is, the concept of a mistake cannot be meaningfully applied to "my hands exist" except in real or possible (everyday) scenarios where there is the possibility of describing how one might be mistaken (e.g. if I am not sure that my hands have been amputated); and this is because in normal circumstances, the existence of my hands represents what we mean by a belief that we cannot be mistaken about.

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<sup>39</sup> OC, 5.

The same sort of "logic" (conditions or rules for the meaningful use of concepts) is evident for all of the concepts involved in the doubt/knowledge game (when we look and see). Let us return to the conditions I looked at earlier and fill out the sceptic's conceptual errors.

When the sceptic engages in her project of raising doubts about (even) basic beliefs, she is not, according to Wittgenstein, observing the rules of the doubt/knowledge game – she (albeit unwittingly) is not playing the game "correctly" (meaningfully). I mentioned much earlier that in 24 Wittgenstein sets out a kind of "blanket" condition for meaningful doubt in that when he asks what a doubt about a basic belief "might be like", he is inviting the answer "nothing" (because of what real doubt is like). One observer, in commenting on this passage, captures a fundamental assumption of the traditional sceptic which much of Wittgenstein's "diagnosis" is directed against:

Traditionally, philosophers have tended to take the meaningfulness of questions for granted and then set directly about answering them. We know what it is to doubt and we know what it is to have hands, so surely there is no difficulty in understanding what it means to doubt that one has hands. This is Moore's standpoint, and for this reason he will attempt to refute the idealist by showing him his hands. Against this, Wittgenstein holds that the idealist's doubts cannot be answered because they make no sense.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Robert J. Fogelin, *Wittgenstein*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1987), 231.

The sceptic is thus under the illusory impression that he can doubt the existence of his hands and it is just this (natural, but ultimately empty) assumption which Wittgenstein is at pains to show mistaken through describing the logic of the language-game.

The logic of the doubting/knowing game requires; that a doubt – real doubt – needs grounds (real grounds), that a mistake (a real mistake) be possible, that evidence (real evidence) could (in principle) be provided to remove the doubt, and so on. What we mean by the concepts of "grounds", "mistakes", "evidence", etc. is determined by how we use them within the everyday doubt/knowledge game (which is based on our world-picture). And thus, as we have already seen, in normal circumstances the sceptic does not have a real ground for doubting the existence of her hands, cannot specify how she might be really mistaken, etc., etc. – her "further" doubt is illusory ("idle", "hollow")...nonsense. The concept of doubt simply cannot be intelligibly applied to basic beliefs in ordinary circumstances. But then neither can the concept of knowledge. I have already touched on this view of Wittgenstein's and I want to fill this out a bit more as it is important for understanding how Wittgenstein thinks the basic (what I called our natural) picture of "our knowledge of the world" (which I also claimed is the shared picture from the everyday and theoretical perspectives which invites scepticism) is confused.

We saw earlier that the logic of the doubt/knowledge game requires that the condition of "satisfying oneself" must be observed if knowledge is to be real knowledge. In other words, Wittgenstein thinks that whenever a claim to know something is offered, the offerer must be in a position to give reasons (evidence) which justify the claim – she must be in a position to show how she knows the claim to be true (the question "how do you know?" is relevant here).

For instance, I might claim to know that the discoloration on my hand is a liver spot. I could, if someone were to ask me how I know that it is a liver spot, offer some reason (evidence) in support of my claim (the doctor's diagnosis, etc.). If this person was still not satisfied and were to raise a doubt about the matter – perhaps on the *grounds* that many doctors have been known to *mistake* liver spots for freckles (and here two of the conditions for meaningful doubt are observed) – I can assure this person that my doctor was aware of this common mistake and performed all the necessary tests etc., which established that it was in fact a liver spot. Here I can offer reasons in support of my claim to know that the spot is in fact a liver spot, and this should settle the matter.

But now if this person were to ask how I know that my hands exist, everything breaks down. In this context, the question is unexpected (I should not know how to take him – is he joking? mad? a philosopher?) and indeed, entirely out of

place. But even supposing the person explained that he was serious (and was in fact trying his hand at philosophy), I could point out that his question "how do you know?" is still entirely out of place by describing the logic of the doubting/knowing game.

The question "how do you know?" is a call for justification of a claim to know and this is only applicable to beliefs which are capable of justification. But as we have already seen, there is nothing I can offer in support of my belief that my hands exist which could possibly justify the belief. Such a belief is not capable of justification, and thus is not a proper object of knowledge if knowledge requires justification.

For Wittgenstein, basic beliefs represent the limits of intelligible use of the concept of justification. How we use the concept (and hence what we mean by the concept) is based on our world picture and thus cannot be meaningfully applied to that picture itself. Basic beliefs are what "stand fast" for us in our practice of justification – they represent the terminal point in our practice of offering reasons in support of our claims to know. G.H. von Wright summarizes the above point this way:

The evidence which we produce for the truth of a proposition which we claim to know consists of propositions which we accept as true. If the question is raised, how do we know these latter propositions, further grounds may be offered to show how we know them and further evidence given for the evidence of the propositions thus claimed to be known. But the chain of ground (evidence) has



an end, a point beyond which no further grounds can be given. This is a thing which Wittgenstein often stressed. The reason, why Moore was mistaken in thinking that his knowledge of the "common sense" truths was founded on evidence, Wittgenstein would have said, was that they were themselves such "end-points" in chains of grounds. They might serve as evidence for other propositions which someone claimed to know. But nothing would count as evidence for them...the concept of knowledge does not itself apply to that which is presupposed in its use, that is, to the propositions which "stand fast" in any given knowledge situation.<sup>41</sup>

And, in summarizing the underlying view concerning why Wittgenstein thinks that the concept of knowledge does not apply to basic beliefs, von Wright claims:

The core of Wittgenstein's thoughts on these matters could perhaps be paraphrased as follows. In every situation where a claim to knowledge is being established, or a doubt settled, or any item of linguistic communication (information, order, question) understood, a bulk of propositions already stand fast, are taken for granted. They form a kind of "system". If this were not so, knowledge and doubt, judging and understanding, error and truth would not "exist", that is, we should not have and handle those concepts in the way we do.<sup>42</sup>

Thus in examining the logic of the doubt/knowledge game, Wittgenstein discovers that if it were not for our basic (shared) world-picture we would not even "have" the concept(s) of knowledge (justification, etc.); and consequently how we (coherently) "handle" these concepts is determined by (and limited to) this picture. Once this is brought to light, we

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<sup>41</sup> G.H. von Wright, "Wittgenstein On Certainty" in *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, vol. 8, John V. Canfield (ed.), (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986), 254-55. (Hereafter cited as WOC)

<sup>42</sup> WOC, 255.

see that the concept of knowledge does not extend to basic beliefs in that they are not justified, not capable of justification, and indeed, they do not need justification. And here we arrive at perhaps the most crucial error of the sceptic; namely, her demand that we justify basic beliefs. Let us look at this in more detail.

When we looked at Moore's approach to the problem of the external world, I claimed that the basic issue between Moore and the sceptic came down to whether or not, in light of the sceptical possibilities (e.g. the dreaming consideration), it became necessary to try to justify basic beliefs (i.e. to try to prove that, and how, one knows beliefs such as that one's hands exist to be true). I argued there that Moore simply denied (without argument) that we need justify such beliefs in order to "know", with certainty, that they are true. And thus I claimed the sceptic won this battle and that the ball was still in Moore's court to show that it is not necessary to fulfil this (justification) requirement in order to possess genuine knowledge.

But if Wittgenstein's description of the logic of our doubting and knowing practice is correct, then the disagreement between Moore and the sceptic is based on a mistaken picture of knowledge. Both are wrong in thinking that the concept of knowledge is even applicable here, and thus when Moore claims that he can know things without being able to say how he knows (and the sceptic thinks Moore is simply

begging the question), Wittgenstein claims that the whole issue has gone out of focus.

The sceptic is right in thinking that knowledge needs justification, but if justification is to be justification at all, it must "come to an end". That is, something must "stand fast" for the concept of justification to be meaningfully applied, and what "stands fast" is the un-homogeneous mass of basic beliefs (our world-picture). This picture is the ground which makes possible the doubt/knowledge game – the ground which makes possible the practice of justification. Thus the sceptic is mistaken in asking for justification for the ground itself, and Moore is mistaken in claiming that he can know the ground to be true. The "ground" is not itself "grounded", nor can it be, and it is incoherent to demand that it needs to be. Wittgenstein stresses the above points in the following passages:

164. Doesn't testing come to an end?<sup>43</sup>

192. To be sure there is justification; but justification comes to an end.<sup>44</sup>

253. At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded.<sup>45</sup>

166. The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing.<sup>46</sup>

204. Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;- but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part;

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<sup>43</sup> OC, 24.

<sup>44</sup> OC, 27.

<sup>45</sup> OC, 33.

<sup>46</sup> OC, 24.

it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.<sup>47</sup>

205. If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true*, nor yet false.<sup>48</sup>

94. But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.<sup>49</sup>

83. The *truth* of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference.<sup>50</sup>

Our world-picture then is not itself grounded or *true*, but is the basis for the practice of grounding and distinguishing between true and false.<sup>51</sup>

The sceptic's demand then for proof that basic beliefs are true does not make sense. The sceptic (albeit unwittingly) oversteps the boundaries of the logic of the doubt/knowledge game in thinking that a doubt can be meaningfully raised concerning a basic belief (on the basis that the grounding for

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<sup>47</sup> OC, 28.

<sup>48</sup> OC, 28.

<sup>49</sup> OC, 12.

<sup>50</sup> OC, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Here then, we can see that for Wittgenstein, our world-picture also represents the limits for the intelligible application of the concepts of truth and falsity. Thus, I do not think Wittgenstein would be happy with von Wrights' characterization of the world-picture as the "foundation of accepted truth" (WOC, 259). As the ungrounded foundation of our language practices, the basic beliefs constitutive of the world-picture cannot properly be said to "agree with reality", rather, for Wittgenstein, such beliefs represent our understanding or our "picture" of "reality". We proceed (in our language, and other practices) from within this picture and thus, our certainty of the picture, as Wittgenstein suggests in 204, is perhaps, at bottom, best characterized as "certainty of action" – the certainty is reflected in "what we do".

the belief is not adequate to establish the truth of the belief). For Wittgenstein, such beliefs cannot be grounded – cannot be shown to be true or false – and it is meaningless to think I might be wrong about them on the basis that the grounds are not good enough.

On this note I want to begin to wrap up my look at Wittgenstein's diagnosis of scepticism about the external world by briefly summarizing what has been said above. I have been trying to show that Wittgenstein's diagnosis of how and why the sceptic goes wrong involves the attempt to show that the considerations inherent in the sceptic's theoretical investigation of knowledge (which lead to the sceptical conclusion and hence the "paradox" of knowledge about the world), involve "subtle" violations of the conditions of meaningful doubt and knowledge. From the theoretical perspective, the sceptic raises (seemingly intelligible) considerations which seem to render problematic all of what we believe about the world – these considerations lead us to think that it is possible that we might be wrong about even the most basic sort of belief. But, if Wittgenstein is right, the sceptical project is not intelligible because it is based on a mistaken picture of knowledge.

That this picture is mistaken (or better, confused) becomes evident when we survey the "logic" of our doubt/knowledge practices. In a sense, Wittgenstein's survey turns the sceptic's assumed picture of knowledge on its head,

in that it reveals that the certainty of basic beliefs is a condition of there being any such thing as doubt and knowledge at all.

Thus, in a way Wittgenstein's diagnosis of scepticism amounts to a "vindication" of the basic beliefs which constitute our everyday perspective. But by "vindication" I do not mean showing that they are true or false in the sense that the sceptic demands – by proving (conclusively) that they accurately "represent" the "way the world is". Rather, for Wittgenstein, these beliefs are constitutive of our "picture" of "reality" – what we mean by the "way the world is." Our ungrounded acceptance of this picture is prior to, and a condition of, any and all of our talk (our operating with concepts) about the "world". Thus, we might say that the sceptic's fundamental error involves the attempt to somehow "step outside" our world-picture and assess whether or not we have good reasons for (or whether or not we are justified in) accepting it.

If Wittgenstein is right about all of this then it seems that scepticism about the external world has been "defused" or dissolved – that is, the sceptical threat has been shown to be an illusion which arises from a confused theoretical framework. Hence, once we come to see just where the confusion lies (how and why the sceptic goes wrong), we will also see that there was never really any problem here to "solve", and that we should resist the temptation to engage in the

traditional investigation of knowledge. But, has Wittgenstein really "defused" the sceptical challenge?

#### 4. Closing: An Appraisal

We must now begin sorting out and assessing Wittgenstein's diagnosis of scepticism about the external world. There is a surprising lack of critical commentary on Wittgenstein's approach to scepticism, and much of the commentary that has been offered is, it seems to me, surprisingly superficial. For instance Keith Lehrer, in an article defending global scepticism<sup>52</sup>, offers us a couple of pages of criticism of the anti-sceptical view which we have "inherited" from "Wittgenstein and his followers". To begin my assessment of Wittgenstein's strategy, I want to look briefly at Lehrer's critique as this should help to bring into focus what I take to be the proper line of attack.

Lehrer's attack on Wittgenstein (and his followers) focuses on the following interpretation of what Wittgenstein's view amounts to:

...those who have maintained that what the sceptic says is meaningless have implied that he utters words with the intent of affirming or asserting the truth of something, but, in fact, he has not succeeded in asserting or affirming anything! Negatively put, he intended to deny something by uttering the words he did, namely, that we know the

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<sup>52</sup> Keith Lehrer, "Why Not Scepticism?", in *Essays on Knowledge and Justification*, Pappas & Swain (eds.), (London: Cornell University Press, 1978), 346-363. (Hereafter cited as *Why?*)

things we think we know, but he has failed because the words he utters are without meaning.<sup>53</sup>

Now this, I suppose, does capture something of the upshot of Wittgenstein's diagnosis of scepticism. We saw that Wittgenstein's investigation of the logic of the doubt/knowledge game resulted in a view similar to the one that Lehrer here attributes to him — that the sceptic's "denial" fails because it is meaningless. But this is only the upshot of Wittgenstein's investigation, and Lehrer seems to ignore completely the background view which is meant to support the claim that what the sceptic says is meaningless.

Thus the following criticism of Lehrer's seems highly superficial:

The sceptic may surely regard it as a peculiar matter that words should go about losing their meaning in this way. You say you know, the sceptic says you do not know, and according to the dogmatist, the words the sceptic utters suddenly have no meaning. But this is implausible. We do understand what the sceptic says precisely because we can tell that he has denied what we have affirmed. No matter how hard one tries not to understand, one cannot fail to understand that much. Thus, because you understand what you affirm, you must understand what the sceptic denies.<sup>54</sup>

Lehrer is surely right in insisting that "we" affirm things (claim to know this or that), and that the sceptic denies what we have affirmed. But it seems to me what Lehrer misses here is that the essential thrust of Wittgenstein's diagnosis involves trying to show that the "understanding" which Lehrer

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<sup>53</sup> *Why?*, 354.

<sup>54</sup> *Why?*, 354-55.



here speaks of is illusory. That is, where Lehrer claims that we understand what the sceptic denies because we understand what we affirm, Wittgenstein claims that neither we nor the sceptic really understand what is being affirmed or denied – things only "look" intelligible here. For Wittgenstein, what we affirm and the sceptic denies is based on a confused "picture", and thus the issue between "us" and the sceptic is only a pseudo-issue based on subtle and deep conceptual error.

In other words, it seems to me that Lehrer's criticism does not dig deep enough. If we really did understand what we affirm and the sceptic denies (e.g. when we claim to know the truth of a basic belief such as that my hands exist), then Lehrer's criticism would have some bite (then it would suffice to merely point out that we cannot help but understand the sceptic because we understand what we are saying). But since Lehrer does not address the issue of whether or not "we" actually understand what we affirm (since he does not address Wittgenstein's reasons for thinking that we are confused here), his criticism seems to simply beg the question.

What needs to be shown here is that the picture of knowledge operative in the debate between us and the sceptic (the picture which involves the idea that the sorts of things that we want to claim we know, and which the sceptic challenges, are things which are capable of being *known*), is not confused in the way Wittgenstein thinks it is. This, it seems to me, is the proper locus for assessing whether or not

Wittgenstein succeeds in defusing the threat of scepticism about the external world. To this end then, I propose to critically investigate the connections between Wittgenstein's underlying view (from which his conditions for intelligible doubt and knowledge arise), and the consequent view that the picture of knowledge which the sceptic focuses on from the theoretical perspective is confused.

Much earlier, when I examined the first of Wittgenstein's conditions for meaningful doubt, I claimed that at that point there was not much distance between Wittgenstein and the sceptic (see note 31). There we saw that both Wittgenstein and the sceptic agreed that our evidential base was inadequate for establishing (justifying) the truth of a basic belief such as that my hands exist. But whereas the sceptic saw this as a reason for thinking that we might be wrong about such a belief (as a reason for doubt), Wittgenstein claimed that this is precisely the point where genuine doubt (and knowledge) becomes impossible (because he thought that real doubt, and hence the possibility of real knowledge, requires that it be possible to satisfy ourselves about whatever it is that is in question). And, as we have seen, it seemed at that point as if Wittgenstein was just dogmatically asserting that what we mean by the concepts of doubt and knowledge is limited to how we happen to use them in everyday life.

But since then we have seen something of Wittgenstein's reasons for thinking that the meaning of such epistemological

concepts is limited in the above way. The basic view here, we saw, was that the mass of beliefs constitutive of our everyday world picture functions as the ground which provides for the very possibility of our language practices (the possibility of conceptualizing and understanding the "world"). Thus the meanings of our epistemic concepts (and our concepts generally) are determined by how we apply them in the language-games based on our world picture. Thus the acceptance of this picture is prior to, and a condition of, the doubt/knowledge game, and this is why epistemic terms such as "justification" cannot be meaningfully applied to the framework beliefs of the picture itself. What about this view? Does this really show that (and how) the theoretical investigation which leads to scepticism about the external world is incoherent? That is, does this show that it is really unintelligible to think that we might be wrong about basic beliefs on the basis that our grounding (sense-experience) for such beliefs seems to be inadequate to establish whether or not they are true (whether or not they reflect the way the world is)?

This last question, I think, brings out the essential issue for our investigation of the dispute between Wittgenstein and the sceptic. Wittgenstein tries to persuade us that the sceptic misapprehends the nature and role of basic beliefs in that in the course of her investigations, she is led to view them "epistemically" (as potential items of

knowledge – i.e. as beliefs which are capable of being shown to be true or false on some basis or grounds). And it is this "misapprehension" which involves the sceptic in violations of the logic of the language-game – her misunderstanding here prompts her, in light of her sceptical possibilities, to press the demand for justification of (or, better, to attempt to apply the concept of justification to) basic beliefs. The question here then is whether or not Wittgenstein's views about the basis and nature of the doubt/knowledge game (how we come to "have and handle" our epistemic concepts) do in fact show that the sceptic misapprehends the nature of basic beliefs (and thus that her use of our epistemic concepts is unintelligible).

Perhaps the best way to begin answering this question is to point out that the sceptic need not disagree with Wittgenstein's views about how the meanings of our epistemic concepts are determined. The sceptic can (and I think does) accept that we share a world-picture made up of countless Moore-type beliefs which act as a foundation for operating with concepts in meaningful ways. Moreover, the sceptic is well aware of how we actually use the epistemic concepts of doubt, knowledge, (grounds, certainty, mistake, justification, etc.) in everyday life. The sceptic is quite aware, for instance, that we apply the concept of certainty to beliefs such as that my hands exist or that I am sitting by the fire. Not only does the sceptic agree that we apply the concept of

certainty to such beliefs, he can also admit Wittgenstein's point (echoed by von Wright) that we would not even "have and handle" the concept in the way we do, if we did not share a "system" of basic beliefs that "stand fast" for us.

Thus far then, the sceptic need not disagree with this part of Wittgenstein's analysis of the doubt/knowledge game. Indeed, he might think that Wittgenstein has done an admirable job of articulating something of how what we take for granted from the everyday perspective determines the way we come to acquire and use language. But what the sceptic might wonder at this point is just what an articulation of the way we come to have and handle our epistemic concepts in everyday life has to do with his fundamental worry; namely, whether or not the world-picture that we take for granted here actually reflects the way the world really is (and thus whether or not we are warranted in applying the concept of certainty to the beliefs constitutive of this picture). The sceptic might wonder why it could not be the case that we could still come to have and handle epistemic concepts based on a world-picture which might be entirely different from the "world" itself (if there is such a thing at all).

Of course, Wittgenstein would likely say that the sceptic who wonders such a thing has missed the point of his description of the logic of the doubt/knowledge game – he still thinks it makes sense to ask how we can tell if our world picture corresponds to "reality". This question is based

on a misunderstanding of the nature and role of our world-picture which prompts us to seek justification for it (to try to prove that it is correct). The world-picture is the ground which makes possible the practice of justification, and thus to try to treat this picture as itself subject to justification (or proof), is to deprive the concept of any intelligible application.

To repeat, the concept is only given life (meaning) in the language-game based upon our world picture, and thus the limits of intelligible employment of the concept are determined by how we actually use it in the game. And how we actually use it (what we call justification) involves our practice of offering grounds or reasons for our knowledge claims, and the only sort of grounds and reasons we can offer here are beliefs which "stand fast" for us in our world-picture. Moreover, for justification to be justification, it must come to an end — and our world picture represents the terminal point for all chains of offering support for our claims.

But again, it seems to me that the sceptic can accept that what we mean by justification is determined by how we actually use it within the language game based on our world-picture, but it is not obvious why he must accept the notion that our world-picture represents the limits for intelligible application for the concept. Why can't the sceptic agree with Wittgenstein's analysis of the genesis and standard usage of

the concept (and indeed all of our epistemic concepts), and then go on to claim (and argue) that his "usage" of the concept, in his "context", is perfectly intelligible in that he means the same thing by the concept that we do in everyday life? How does an account of how we come to have a concept, and how we (uncritically) apply it in everyday life, automatically establish that the concept cannot be meaningfully applied to the picture from which we come to have and handle it?

To answer these questions I want to again look at how, from the theoretical perspective, the epistemologist comes to see our world-picture as something which is subject to justification; and from this we should be able to determine whether or not the sceptic's usage of justification (and our other epistemic concepts) is unintelligible.

In part I, I tried to show that the sceptic reaches her paradoxical conclusion by focusing on what I called the "natural" picture of the nature, source, and content of our knowledge of the world around us. I claimed that the natural starting point from which the sceptic's investigation proceeds is the uncritical view that there is a "world" to know something about. That is, he starts by noticing that we all hold hosts of beliefs about the way the world is which we naturally accept (the most basic of which is that there exists a world of objects). But since to hold a belief is to think something to be the case (to be true), our natural stance can

be characterized as our uncritically accepting as true a basic world view (Wittgenstein's world-picture).

Now at this point in the investigation, the *epistemologist* has isolated the basic backdrop against which we ordinarily make and justify knowledge claims. In Wittgenstein's terminology, the background against which the doubt/knowledge game is given life has been isolated. For Wittgenstein, this backdrop represents the ground from which we come to use the concept of justification (as referring to our practice of offering grounds for our knowledge claims), and our acceptance of this picture also allows us to ask (and often determine) whether or not the grounds we offer for our knowledge claims are good enough to justify them.

When the grounds are accepted to the satisfaction of others, we say that the belief is justified and that one does in fact know the claim to be true (as opposed to merely believing it). But of course, if the grounds that one offers do not seem acceptable (i.e., if there is some reason for doubt about the validity of the grounds which make it seem possible that one might be wrong about the claim), then we will say that one does not *know* the matter in question (to be true). And thus here we see how we use (and what we mean by) epistemic concepts such as justification, doubt, knowledge, and so on.

But now that the epistemologist is aware of what we mean by such terms – that is, now that she *has* these concepts and



is aware of how we use them, she takes what seems to be a very natural step in applying them in a context which attempts to identify how we come to have the world-picture that we do. In other words, the philosopher is now equipped with the conceptual arsenal and basic starting place from which to begin her investigation of the nature, content, and source of what we uncritically accept as true about the world around us.

It is at this point that the philosopher, armed with such concepts, raises a question of the sort "what is the source of our beliefs about the world around us?" or "how is it that we come to hold any of our beliefs about objects around us?". And it is here that the philosopher inevitably identifies perceptual experience as the source for our basic beliefs about the world — we see sticks, stones, hills and humans... we touch tomatoes, tables, dogs and drums... But now, having identified the source of our beliefs about the world, the philosopher, realizing that he has, on occasion, come to hold erroneous (mistaken) beliefs about the world (based on what he sees, hears, etc.), wonders if perceptual experience is generally a good enough ground to establish (justify) the truth of the beliefs which are based on it.

This step in the epistemologist's investigation is, of course, the point at which she construes our basic beliefs (such as that sticks and stones exist) epistemically — as beliefs which rest on grounds which may or may not be good enough to establish whether such beliefs really reflect the

way the world is. And this is just where Wittgenstein thinks the epistemologist oversteps the boundaries for the intelligible application of epistemic concepts.

But it seems to me that the philosopher's use of epistemic concepts (grounds, justification, etc.) is perfectly legitimate here. That is, she seems to be using them in precisely the same way that they are used in everyday life. In identifying sense experience to be the ground for our coming to hold basic beliefs about the world around us (as one might identify the ground for one's belief that there are mountain goats in India to be a generally unreliable neighbour's say-so), the philosopher then goes on to ask whether or not this ground is good enough (just as one might rightly ask whether or not the neighbour's testimony is good enough) for establishing the truth of such beliefs. She wonders if there is some chance (some reason for thinking) that one might be mistaken about a belief such as that I am now sitting in front of the computer (just as one would, or should, wonder about the neighbour's say-so).

It certainly may be the case that our acceptance of a world picture is a condition for the acquisition and use of epistemic concepts, but I do not see why this picture represents the limits of intelligible application of such concepts. Indeed it seems to me that how we use (and what we mean by) these concepts in everyday life provides for the possibility of the theoretical investigation of the source,

nature, and content of human knowledge. Thus, as I tried to show in part I, the theoretical perspective is *parasitic* on our everyday perspective in that the latter provides the conceptual apparatus for investigating the basis and nature of what we accept from this perspective. It allows us to ask such questions as "on what grounds do we come to believe anything about the world?" and "do these grounds in fact justify our beliefs?".

Thus I want to claim that the stage of the epistemologist's inquiry where such questions are raised (and where beliefs such as that my hands exist or that I am sitting in front of the computer come to be seen as potential items of knowledge) does not represent an attempt to use epistemic concepts in a way that is unintelligible. On the contrary, it seems that such concepts are being used in the same way that we use them in everyday life (in accordance with Wittgenstein's description of how we use them in the doubt/knowledge game).

But still, it may again seem that an essential aspect of Wittgenstein's analysis of the doubt/knowledge game has been overlooked. This is his notion that cases of real knowledge require that it be possible to offer grounds (real grounds) which actually justify (really justify) the belief in question. That is, what we mean by a ground involves the appeal to something which is actually capable of establishing the truth of a belief. But throughout *On Certainty*, as we have

seen, Wittgenstein repeatedly stresses that there is nothing we could appeal to in order to establish the truth of a belief such as that my hands exist. He stresses that, in normal circumstances, "the sight of my hand" will not do as a ground (or evidence) here, and thus it seems to follow that "sense-experience" is no "real" ground at all (and from this arises Wittgenstein's view that such beliefs do not rest on grounds, and hence are not the sort of things that are capable of being shown to be true or false).

Against this, however, I want to claim that at the stage in the epistemologist's investigation that we have been discussing (the stage at which seeing, hearing, touching, etc. is identified as the source of our most basic beliefs about the world), all that has been asked is whether or not our seeing, feeling, etc. is a good enough ground for our basic beliefs. Realizing that we are sometimes mistaken about beliefs based on sense-experience (and hence, that we do not know such beliefs to be true), the philosopher merely wonders if this ground is generally good enough for knowledge. So far the epistemologist is in no way committed to a negative answer here – the answer to this question might turn out to be "yes, our grounds are good enough" (and indeed many philosophers, Descartes among them, have tried to show that sense experience is a good enough ground).

The point here is that when Wittgenstein claims that the sight of one's hands will not do, he has, in effect, conceded

the issue to the *sceptic*. The mere raising of the question however does not automatically commit one to scepticism. It is only later in the investigation (when the sceptic enters the picture and raises considerations such as the dreaming possibility) that the negative answer (that sense-experience is not good enough) seems forced upon us.

Thus at the point where the epistemologist comes to see the beliefs constitutive of our world-picture epistemically, it is an open question as to whether or not the ground he has identified is good enough to show our basic beliefs to be true. And since Wittgenstein's rejection of sense experience as a genuine ground (because what we mean by a ground is something which is capable of justifying our beliefs) assumes the negative (sceptical) answer to the question from the outset, I do not see why we need accept Wittgenstein's view that basic beliefs (such as that my hands exist) do not rest on "real" grounds (and hence should not be thought of as potential items of knowledge).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> And here I think it is worth noting that Wittgenstein's approach to the problem of the external world seems (to me anyway) to lead to an implausible (or at least, counter-intuitive) view about our epistemic relationship with the world. That is, it seems to me that Wittgenstein's view that basic beliefs are not to be thought of as potential items of knowledge (construed "realistically" as beliefs which might "agree" or "disagree" with "reality" or "the way the world is"), leads to a kind of "anti-realism". In Wittgenstein's case, the view seems to take the form of (what Bernard Williams has called) "linguistic idealism" in that, Wittgenstein often seems to be claiming that what we mean by "the way the world is" involves how we happen to conceptualize (think and talk) about it. This is borne out by comments such as "the truth of certain empirical propositions belongs to our

It seems then that Wittgenstein's articulation of the doubt/knowledge game does not show that the traditional theoretical investigation of human knowledge is inherently confused. That is, I see no reason to accept the view that the traditional epistemologist oversteps any boundaries or conditions for the intelligible application of epistemic concepts when he applies them to our world-picture. Which, of course, is to say that I see no reason to accept the boundaries or conditions of meaning set out in *On Certainty*.

What Wittgenstein has offered us, I think, is a thorough and illuminating description of the workings of our everyday epistemological practices (how we come to have and how we actually handle epistemic concepts). But what I have tried to show is that once the epistemologist has a handle on how such concepts are used in everyday life, there is nothing preventing him (there is no conceptual ban here) in applying them, in a theoretical context, to the beliefs constitutive of our world-picture – the philosopher uses these concepts in the same way they are always used.

It seems then that Wittgenstein's attempt to rule out the theoretical investigation of our world-picture on the basis

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frame of reference" (OC,12). I find such views difficult to swallow for the simple reason that I just cannot shake the conviction that whether or not it is true that I am now sitting in front of the computer, depends on whether or not I *really am* really sitting in front of the computer – on some actual state of affairs in the world (and not on what I happen to think about the world). In any case, I just mention the "counter-intuitive" implications of Wittgenstein's approach here as I do not want to pursue the matter further.

that our acceptance of this picture is a condition for coming to acquire and use epistemic concepts, (and that consequently it must represent the limits for the intelligible application of them), is ultimately question begging. That is, describing how we use concepts in everyday life – what we "call" (and what passes for) justification, grounds, etc. from this perspective is one thing. But going on to claim that the meaningful application of these concepts is limited to this perspective is quite another. And the only reason Wittgenstein offers in support of this limitation is that our acceptance of the world-picture is a condition for using language.

Nagel expresses his dissatisfaction with Wittgenstein's "limitation" as follows: "...I do not see on what grounds Wittgenstein can draw the line between legitimate and illegitimate extensions [of concepts] beyond the range of actual agreement in judgements".<sup>56</sup> Elsewhere, Nagel substantiates this sentiment with the following:

...certain kinds of scepticism...cannot be ruled out as violations of the language because they are part of the data about how people are naturally inclined to use the language, the judgements – of ignorance, of possibility, of doubt – which they naturally agree to in certain circumstances. If these are errors, they are not linguistic errors, and the disposition to make them must be taken as important evidence of how the language works: what factual judgements and claims to knowledge mean...<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *View*, 107.

<sup>57</sup> *View*, 106.

Thus (as Nagel seems to be suggesting here), the theoretical investigation of knowledge about the world, it seems, should not be seen as representing the limits of the intelligible use of epistemic concepts, but as revealing something about their "natural" extension.

But now if we admit that the traditional epistemologist's use of epistemic concepts is intelligible, and thus allow that the question of whether or not the grounding for our basic beliefs is good enough to show that they are true, it seems we are inevitably led to the negative answer. The sceptical possibilities immediately present themselves, and they seem to force upon us the view that sensory experience is not good enough to justify any of our beliefs about the world around us – it certainly seems that we might be wrong about even the most basic of our beliefs (and that certain knowledge of the world is forever beyond our reach).<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> But if this is so, then it seems that the sceptic has *discovered* that what we take to be (what we are happy to call) knowledge, really is not. But then doesn't this show that what the sceptic *means* by knowledge, from the theoretical perspective, is something different from what we all (the sceptic included) mean by knowledge from the everyday perspective? I don't think so. From both perspectives, "knowledge" means (something like) a true belief about the world which one cannot possibly be mistaken about. In rendering even our most basic beliefs about the world problematic (by showing how and that we might be mistaken about them), the sceptic does not change the meaning of "knowledge", rather, it seems to me that he shows our (uncritical) everyday usage of the concept to be unwarranted. That is, I think that anyone who can follow the sceptical reasoning is forced to admit our everyday usage of the concept to be unwarranted (unless, of course, scepticism about the external world can be shown to be incorrect – which is just the problem here).



But in admitting that the epistemologist's investigation appears to inevitably lead to this unpalatable position, we do not, I think, concede Wittgenstein's view that the epistemologist's "ground" is not a real ground or that the subsequent doubt is illusory. Rather I think that the correct way to see this is as pointing to a genuine and deep problem about human knowledge (and more generally about the human condition). To repeat something of what I tried to set out in part I, the problem facing us here arises from our acknowledgement of the paradoxical situation that is forced upon us by the traditional philosophical investigation of knowledge — from this point of view scepticism seems inevitable and unassailable, but from our everyday point of view it is not only unbelievable, but also seems unpracticable. And of course, again, the problem then is to somehow show how and why scepticism about the external world is incorrect.

One option here, of course, is to try to show that our basic beliefs are in fact justified — a strategy which is proven to have a pretty dismal track record.<sup>59</sup> Another

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<sup>59</sup> Although it is worth noting here that this does seem to be a true possibility. Just because no one has just yet hit upon a "knock down" argument to show that our basic beliefs are justified (say, by showing that the grounding for our basic beliefs is good enough), it does not follow that it is impossible to show that they are (and notice how few "knock down" arguments there are in philosophy). In any case, the relevant point here for our purposes is that if the strategy of justifying our basic beliefs is an open possibility (a possibility which some day might be realized), then it seems that Wittgenstein's condition for "real" justification;

option, the one that we have been considering here, is to try to show that the everyday perspective is in order as it is by arguing that the move to the (traditional) theoretical perspective which leads to scepticism is inadmissible. But the representative we have been looking at (Wittgenstein) ultimately fails to show that this move is inadmissible (and seems to rule out by fiat the intelligibility of the traditional investigation).

Perhaps, however, this is still not the end of the matter. In a recent work (which focuses on many of the concerns I have raised), Marie McGinn argues that an assessment of *On Certainty* that culminates in the charge of "begging the question" (presumably something along the lines of my claim that Wittgenstein just sets the limits of intelligibility within the everyday perspective), is an entirely "mistaken appraisal" of Wittgenstein's account. Now, although McGinn does not actually detail any of the appraisals she may have in mind, she does argue for an interpretation of Wittgenstein's project which she thinks shows that he need not be seen as attempting to address (or answer) the paradoxical issues and problems that arise from the traditional investigation.

McGinn's interpretation revolves around the notion that Wittgenstein should be understood as offering an "alternative"

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namely, that justification must come to an end, is at least in principle, capable of being realized from the theoretical perspective.

(to that of the traditional) account of the nature and role of the beliefs (judgements, propositions) basic to our world-picture – an account which "never allows the sceptic's misapprehensions to arise and threaten ordinary practice or the naturalistic outlook that characterizes our initial position in philosophy".<sup>60</sup> McGinn claims that both Wittgenstein and the sceptic engage in the investigation of a human practice (i.e. our everyday epistemological practice), and that both start from the same "naturalistic" starting point (i.e. treating the practice initially as a real, objective phenomenon). But whereas the traditional philosopher comes to see the beliefs of our world-picture epistemically (and hence is led to down the road to scepticism), Wittgenstein offers us an alternative description of the practice which leads to a different understanding of the nature of the beliefs which compose the picture.

But since both start from the same place (but travel different roads, and arrive at different destinations), McGinn thinks that the charge that Wittgenstein begs the question against the sceptic is unwarranted. She claims that Wittgenstein is not attempting to "grapple with scepticism at the point where the criticism of our system of judgements and knowledge claims has already begun",<sup>61</sup> and thus does not find

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<sup>60</sup> Marie McGinn, *Sense and Certainty: A Dissolution of Scepticism*, (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1989), 149-150. (Hereafter cited as *Sense*)

<sup>61</sup> *Sense*, 151.

"himself in a position of attempting to recover lost ground".<sup>62</sup> Thus McGinn feels that "philosophers have not gone far enough back in their attempt to deal with the sceptic",<sup>63</sup> and she concludes as follows:

It is, therefore, by paying attention to the preliminaries of the sceptical argument, in which the sceptic takes up his reflective attitude towards human practice, that we have been able to make out a case for holding that Wittgenstein's rebuttal of the sceptic is not question begging. In so far as Wittgenstein provides an alternative assessment of the fact that we do not possess or require justifications for judgements that form the frame of our practice, he prevents scepticism from arising, and we never find ourselves deprived of the natural attitude or unqualified common sense. The crucial point is to recognize that Wittgenstein's account of the role of Moore-type propositions is to allow us to avoid ever losing ground to the sceptic.<sup>64</sup>

There is much in all this that seems to me problematic.

Firstly, McGinn straightforwardly identifies Wittgenstein's account of our epistemic practice as an "alternative" to the traditional account, and she claims that his account acts as a "rebuttal of the sceptic". But it seems to me, that given the whole tone of what McGinn wants to argue here (that Wittgenstein should not be seen as begging any questions), her claim that Wittgenstein's account is to be seen as a "rebuttal" is entirely contrary to her purpose. For if Wittgenstein's account is to be a rebuttal, it would seem

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<sup>62</sup> *Sense*, 151.

<sup>63</sup> *Sense*, 151.

<sup>64</sup> *Sense*, 151-52.

that this can only mean that his account has been established as the correct account of our practice, and that the sceptical version has been shown to be incorrect. But this does not seem to sit very well with the general nature of McGinn's interpretation.

She claims that the investigations of both Wittgenstein and the sceptic start from the same place, and that (fortunately) Wittgenstein's account manages to avoid falling into the traditional problematic (and thus he begs no questions). But if this is so, then Wittgenstein has merely offered a *competing* account of the nature of our epistemic practices which may or may not be "correct". McGinn gives us the impression that in merely stating an alternative to the traditional view, Wittgenstein somehow shows the latter to be incorrect (and that his view is somehow self-vindicating). But the only reason that McGinn seems to offer in support of the claim that Wittgenstein's account is a rebuttal, is that it avoids falling into the sceptical predicament. And this seems truly question begging.

Surely to show how or why the traditional view is incorrect one must do more than construct an account which (deliberately) avoids the sceptical standpoint. Or at least if we want to convince anyone that the new version is correct, and the old one incorrect, we must offer reasons (arguments) for accepting and rejecting here – we must somehow address the old view. It might be true that we can read Wittgenstein as

merely offering an alternative account of our epistemic practices (and thus he need not be seen as begging any questions against the traditional view), but to go on to call this a rebuttal does seem to assume precisely what needs to be shown.

Moreover, McGinn even seems to betray her own interpretation with the way she frames the specifics of Wittgenstein's alternative. For instance, she claims that Wittgenstein's account avoids allowing the "sceptic's misapprehensions to arise" and that he "provides an alternative assessment of the *fact* that we do not possess or *require* justification for the judgements that form the frame of our practice". This just *assumes* that the sceptic has "misapprehended" something, and that it is a *fact* that our judgements (basic beliefs) do not require justification. But these are just the sorts of things that an alternative account must establish if we are to accept it as the correct way of looking at things.

Thus it seems to me implausible to read *On Certainty* as merely offering an alternative account of our practice (which starts from the same place as the traditional account but ends up at a more desirable destination). I think Wittgenstein was indeed offering us an alternative account which was intended as a rebuttal of scepticism – as an attempt to show how and why the sceptic goes wrong from her point of view. And thus I think that he does attempt to "grapple with scepticism at the

point where the criticism of our system of judgements has already begun", in that his account is constructed in light of this view and is an attempt to show ("diagnose") what is wrong with it.

Wittgenstein does try to show that the sceptic has "misapprehended" the nature of our basic beliefs, and he does try to show why we should not see them as in need of justification. Thus Wittgenstein does seem to be attempting to "recover lost ground" from the sceptic (and hence his account has the potential to be a rebuttal). But it also seems to me that the reason Wittgenstein offers us for thinking that the traditional understanding of basic beliefs is confused or unintelligible is ultimately question begging, in that it rests on the assumption that such beliefs represent the limits for the intelligible application of epistemic concepts (and for language in general).

## III

## THE PROBLEM OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD REVISITED

## 1. Opening: Recent Trends

...in our tradition a large, and not necessarily appropriate, burden of...ideas are now coming under critical scrutiny, and the result promises to mark a sea change in contemporary philosophical thought.<sup>1</sup>

I want to suggest, as I think the later Wittgenstein was suggesting, that this project is now in total shambles. Analytic philosophy has great accomplishments, to be sure; but those accomplishments are negative...analytic philosophy has come to end of its own project – the dead end, not the completion.<sup>2</sup>

I think that analytic philosophy culminates in Quine, the later Wittgenstein, Sellars, and Davidson – which is to say that it transcends and cancels itself.<sup>3</sup>

...it seems to be rapidly becoming a new orthodoxy that the whole enterprise from Descartes, through Locke and Kant, and pursued by the various

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Davidson, "The Myth of the Subjective" in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, M. Krausz (ed.), (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 159. (Hereafter cited as *Myth*)

<sup>2</sup> Hilary Putnam, "After Empiricism" in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, J. Rajchman and C. West (eds.), (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 28.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism and Philosophy" in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, K. Baynes, J. Bohman, and T. McCarthy, (eds.), (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1987), 32. (Hereafter cited as *Pragmatism*.)



nineteenth- and twentieth-century succession movements, was a mistake.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this part is to try to sharpen the focus of the general problematic I have been developing in the first two parts of this study. Specifically, I want to expand and comment on two current, but conflicting, attitudes regarding the status and significance of the classical problem I have been looking at. The two sorts of attitudes I have in mind here involve, on the one hand, philosophers who maintain that the traditional epistemological investigation of the source, nature, and content of human knowledge is still a legitimate and intelligible enterprise (and that consequently scepticism about the external world is still a serious and important problem); and those philosophers who, on the other hand, feel (like Wittgenstein) that the whole enterprise has been shown to be confused or incoherent (on various grounds), and thus we need no longer take scepticism seriously.

The above passages reflect, of course, the latter attitude towards the traditional enterprise (and the problems which, until recently, "analytic" philosophers thought they had to solve). As Taylor suggests, it does seem to be the case that the numbers are steadily increasing in this latter camp, and I will discuss (briefly) some of the landmark views which are appealed to in support of the claim that the traditional

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology" in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation*, K. Baynes, J. Bohman, and T. McCarthy (eds.), (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989), 465.

project has been "undermined". Now even though the number of adherents to this view is growing, and that much excitement has been generated concerning the "death" or "transformation" of traditional philosophy, it seems to me that often philosophers who support this view simply ignore (or level charges of "Philistinism" at) the views of those who are unimpressed by the recent onslaught of iconoclasm (and it also seems to me that undue significance is often attached to the arguments which supposedly undermine the tradition).

Perhaps unfortunately, I find myself siding with these more sober-minded traditionalists for the simple reason that I find the "natural" picture of knowledge assumed from the everyday perspective, and the subsequent reasoning (arguments) from the theoretical perspective which lead to scepticism (in short, the entire picture outlined in part I of this study), more plausible than any of the arguments of late which are purported to have undermined the traditional enterprise. In any case, I want to merely point out here that there are opposing sides concerning the significance and legitimacy of such a problem as scepticism about the external world, and that it is by no means obvious that it is "way too late in the day" to take such problems seriously (and that the only worry currently facing philosophers is how they should now "transform" the discipline).

Richard Rorty is perhaps the most outspoken critic of the traditional (Cartesian/Kantian) epistemological tradition

(which he often simply equates with "philosophy"), and has done as much as anyone in shaping the current debate about the significance and status of traditional epistemological issues. I want to start this overview of the current scene by briefly looking at Rorty's views about why we need no longer take the traditional issues seriously, as well as something of what Rorty thinks follows from the "death" of the tradition. From this, I will turn to some of the specific views (primarily those of Davidson) which Rorty uses to buttress his position, and assess how such views fare against those of more traditional minded philosophers (like Stroud, Nagel, and sometimes Cavell) in terms of the nature and status of the traditional worries.

## 2. Rorty: The "Death" of Traditional Epistemology

In a number of books and essay collections,<sup>5</sup> Rorty carries out a detailed polemic against traditional epistemology through the device of "historical narrative". Rorty tells us the "story" of how figures such as Descartes and Kant set up the traditional epistemological framework by constructing (or "inventing") such entities as the "mind" (which was somehow endowed with the power to represent outside "reality"), and how, from this, knowledge came to be seen as

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<sup>5</sup> In particular, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), *Consequences of Pragmatism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), and *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

a matter of "accurate inner representation" of "outer reality".

Rorty describes how this sort of view (along with several associated notions, "dualisms", distinctions, etc.) came to form the traditional framework which gave life to the corpus of traditional philosophical problems that philosophers have, (until recently), thought they have had to solve (one of which, of course, is the problem of the external world).

Around the turn of this century, Rorty's story continues, philosophy took a "linguistic turn" (marking the rise of Western "analytic" philosophy) where the traditional problems (e.g. whether or not the mind accurately represents reality) were transformed into linguistic problems (e.g. if and how language "hooks onto the world"). The central problems remained (although in a linguistic guise), but the methods employed to solve the problems were different (e.g. conceptual analysis). Now, according to Rorty, as analytic philosophy continued to grow and develop, a marked change or shift occurred (largely due to philosophers such as the "later" Wittgenstein), in that certain philosophers began to move away from trying to "solve" the traditional problems, and instead came to focus and apply their analytical talents on the central assumptions, dichotomies, etc. constitutive of the traditional framework.

Rorty claims (as we have seen from the above quote) that philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Quine, Davidson, and

Sellars have thoroughly dismantled the traditional framework by showing this or that presupposition, distinction, etc., to be incoherent, and that we can now simply drop (stop worrying about) questions such as whether or not our beliefs correspond with the way the world is (or "reality"). Rorty puts it this way:

These thinkers successfully, and rightly, blur the distinctions between the semantic and the pragmatic, the analytic and the synthetic, the linguistic and the empirical, theory and observation. Davidson's attack on the scheme/content distinction, in particular, summarizes and synthesizes Wittgenstein's mockery of his own *Tractatus*, Quine's criticisms of Carnap, and Sellar's attack on the empiricist "Myth of the Given." Davidson's holism and coherentism shows how language looks once we get rid of the central presupposition of Philosophy: that true sentences divide into an upper and lower division – the sentences that correspond to something and those that are "true" only by courtesy or convention.<sup>6</sup>

Thus this sort of wholesale "dismantling" (especially by Davidson with his "holism and coherentism") supposedly rids us of the (presumably mistaken) presupposition that certain sentences held true (beliefs), are "made" true because they accurately reflect (correspond) with the way the world is. As Rorty puts it:

...true sentences are not true because they correspond to reality, and so there is no need to worry what sort of reality, if any, a given sentence corresponds to – no need to worry what "makes" it true.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Pragmatism*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> *Pragmatism*, 30.

In other words, Rorty's "heroes" have shown us that we can now safely drop the (incoherent) picture that our beliefs (expressed in language) somehow represent the world, and thus we need no longer worry about whether or not they represent it accurately (and from this we can see how it could be a short step to the view that scepticism about the external world is no longer an issue). Rorty often mocks the view that language somehow "corresponds" to the world by claiming that this view represents the:

impossible attempt to step outside our skins – the traditions, linguistic and other, within which we do our thinking and self-criticism – and compare ourselves with something absolute.<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere, Rorty claims that the view embodies the absurd idea that there is "some way of breaking out of language in order to compare it with something else".<sup>9</sup>

This is roughly the way Rorty's story goes about how analytic philosophy has "transcended and cancelled" the traditional corpus of epistemological issues. Now this sketch is admittedly sketchy, but it does, I think, illustrate the nature of Rorty's entire polemic and the fundamental issue he is at pains to persuade us that we can now "drop"; namely, the idea that language (or thought) somehow represents or corresponds with the world. Now leaving aside for the moment the issue of whether or not the arguments of Rorty's "heroes"

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<sup>8</sup> *Pragmatism*, 33.

<sup>9</sup> *Pragmatism*, 32-3.

do in fact show this notion to be mistaken or confused (and the issue of whether or not these arguments do in fact "dissolve" the traditional problems), I want to briefly look at what Rorty thinks follows (and what we gain) when we drop this notion. For without even considering the views which supposedly allow us to drop the notion, it seems to me that the position that Rorty seems to think follows from these arguments is an awfully high price to pay for allowing us to stop worrying about (say) scepticism. The position that Rorty embraces is not only highly implausible, but also, I think, paradoxically self-defeating, in that it appears to be just another form of scepticism.

Rorty, I think, sees the most desirable effect of rejecting the view that sentences which we hold true (beliefs) about the world are "made" true (or false) because they correspond (or fail to correspond) with the way the world is, to be that we can no longer seriously raise worries such as whether or not the world might be different from how we think or believe it to be. In dropping this assumption, Rorty, I think, sees the traditional sceptical threat as being defused or dissolved in the same way that Wittgenstein's strategy attempts to defuse the threat (i.e. by showing the threat to be illusory – the product of a mistaken picture). But it seems to me that a fair question to ask here is; if it is now possible to do without this "presupposition", where does this leave us? If it is incorrect to think of language (or our

beliefs expressed in language) as reflecting the way the world is, then what is the correct view here?

Well, one obvious sort of position that naturally follows from a rejection of the idea that our beliefs do not represent or correspond to the world (and consequently cannot be shown to be true or false by "comparing" them with the way the world itself is), is some version of our old friend "Idealism". And indeed, Rorty does embrace a kind of root and branch "anti-realism". Although he denies he has a philosophical position at all, he does make strong claims (and continually defends them) to the effect that "language goes all the way down" or that there are only "versions" or "interpretations" of...the world?. In short, Rorty embraces the idea that the "world" "is" the way we happen to be talking about it at any given time. There are, for Rorty, no "privileged representations" of the world or beliefs which accurately correspond (or correspond at all) to the world. Rorty says there are beliefs (and it is difficult to see what more there could be here), some of which are true – but the only content we can give to "true belief" anymore, according to Rorty, is to say that it is a belief which happens to "cohere" with the "web" which we happen to accept (or agree upon) at any given time, in a given discipline. (Rorty sometimes defines "true" as a "compliment" we pay to beliefs that we find are "paying their way" or "helping us cope").



But now the familiar difficulties with this sort of view immediately present themselves. It is clear that on this sort of view one is permitted to say one's belief that, for instance, "I am now sitting in front of the computer" is "true". But this is not to be understood as a belief which has been (or can be) shown to be true (i.e. by proving that it matches up or corresponds with some actual state of affairs in the world), rather, it is to be understood as a belief which is found to be "paying its way" – one that "coheres" with other beliefs within some interpretation or another of the world. But then it is difficult (perhaps impossible) to see how this belief (or any of the other beliefs with which it coheres) could be part of an interpretation *about the world*.

To say that language "goes all the way down" (whatever that means) or that it is impossible to step outside our language and compare it with something else, seems to say that there is only *language* (and here we have a kind of wholesale linguistic idealism). On this view we seem to have lost the entire "world" (and isn't this just the conclusion of the sceptic?). What is there left here to "interpret"? How can there possibly be linguistic interpretations or versions of anything if our language does not represent anything? To say there are interpretations of *the world* seems to commit one to the view that there is a world to interpret. But this re-introduces, it seems, the notion that our language "represents" something (or at least, that there is both

language and the world). Thus, "dropping" the presupposition that our beliefs represent the world, on Rorty's view, commits us to the strange (and implausible) view that there is only language (and this to avoid worrying about scepticism!)

But even leaving aside the difficulty of making sense of the view that language does not represent the world (even though there are linguistic interpretations of the "world"),<sup>10</sup> let us grant Rorty that there are only interpretations, none of which are any more "privileged" than any other. What follows from this? If we admit that there are only versions of the world at a given time (in a given discipline), and that none are more "accurate" than others, then we seem to embrace another kind of sceptical or relativistic philosophical thesis (and it *is* a philosophical position).

Whatever we accept as "true" (what ever happens to cohere with the web at a given time within a given version), may or may not be "true" under another interpretation (it may not cohere with *that* web) and so becomes...false? The very idea of "objective" truth (the way things are) is inadmissible on this view, and we are left to face (what Rorty calls) the "radical

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<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it is possible to make sense of this kind of anti-realism by seeing it as view which holds that language somehow "constitutes" or "creates" the world. If this makes any sense at all, then we perhaps could say that language does not represent anything. But then we would have to try to make sense of this (highly implausible sounding) view and, in any case, it is surely a high price to pay in order to avoid scepticism.

contingency" of all things (or better, versions). Thus (to echo Nagel commenting on an anti-sceptical view of Putnam's), "if this doesn't qualify as scepticism, then I do not know what does." This view just says that there is no such thing as the "way" the world really is (or at least that the "the way the world is", is dependent on particular, and perhaps incompatible, interpretations or versions). This is certainly a (radical) sceptical position, and to embrace it seems to be an awfully strange way to go about showing that we need no longer worry about traditional epistemological issues.

In any case, this is all I want to say about the view Rorty embraces. I find it ironic that this is the view that Rorty thinks results from the "dismantling" of the traditional epistemological framework. It seems to be to be just another (hard to swallow) alternative (a philosophical alternative with traditional roots) to the natural realist view. And I fail to see how embracing such a view allows us to stop worrying about traditional issues such as scepticism (indeed it seems we just embrace another form of it). But it is important that the position just described is *Rorty's* position — it is the position he thinks follows from *his* interpretation of the arguments of the philosophers who have supposedly dismantled the framework.

I do not think that any of Rorty's "heroes" would accept the position Rorty cheerfully claims to be the upshot of the arguments these philosophers have levelled at particular

aspects of the traditional framework (indeed, both Quine and Davidson are on record as explicitly rejecting Rorty's positive view). And I have emphasized Rorty's positive views here in order to bring out the (admittedly rhetorical) point that, if Rorty's view is what follows from the dismantling of traditional epistemology, then perhaps we should have not bothered – the cost of allowing us to stop worrying about scepticism is to embrace another wild and radical form of it (and isn't this a worry?).

Surely what is wanted (as I have stressed earlier) from any attack on the framework from which the sceptic is led to his conclusion, is to somehow show that the body of "Moore-type" beliefs is secure from the sceptical attack.<sup>11</sup> And indeed, this seems to me precisely what Davidson's attack on the so-called "scheme/content" distinction is meant to establish.

This argument is meant to show that a crucial assumption of the Cartesian/Kantian tradition is incoherent, and that consequently scepticism about the external world cannot even be formulated (and thus has been defused or dissolved). Moreover, Davidson thinks that this argument does show most of our (basic) Moore-type beliefs *must* be true (and not just true under some interpretation or another – Davidson claims that

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<sup>11</sup> And this is why I think that Wittgenstein's approach is so important. Wittgenstein takes the sceptical threat seriously and offers us a sustained and systematic attempt to show how and why the sceptic goes wrong, and hence why our everyday world-picture is immune from her considerations.

the argument undermines significant forms of relativism as well). And finally, Davidson is at pains to reject the "anti-realist" implications of rejecting this distinction, and indeed, claims his view to be a form of realism.

Thus it seems to me that if Davidson's argument is on the mark, then we might be able to legitimately stop worrying about the sceptical threat in a way which does not lead us to embrace another form of it. I want to briefly look at Davidson's argument and see if it really does undermine the "third dogma" of the traditional epistemological enterprise (and thus whether or not scepticism has been defused).

### 3. Davidson: Another Attempt to Defuse the Sceptical Threat

The basic target of Davidson's attack is the traditional ("empiricist") assumption that the way we come to know (or believe or understand) anything about the world is a matter of our using a system of concepts (language or "a conceptual scheme") to "interpret" or "organize" the "information" (or content) that is "given" to us through perceptual experience. Davidson surveys a number of ways in which this dualism has historically been formulated, and offers us a couple of different versions of his attack on the dichotomy. I want to look at the version of Davidson's argument that is directed specifically at scepticism about the external world.

Davidson wholeheartedly accepts Quine's attack on the analytic/synthetic distinction (the notion that sentences

divide up into two categories – those that are true or false solely by virtue of their meanings and those whose truth or falsity depends upon a combination of what they mean and the way the world is), and thus he accepts the subsequent "holism" and "coherentism" (that Rorty refers to) concerning meaning and truth. That is, Davidson agrees with Quine that the meaning and truth value of a sentence is determined within a "theory" (or possibly "version"), and thus the idea that we can isolate the meaning and truth value of a specific sentence, without reference to its status and relationship to other sentences within the "theory", is no longer tenable.

Or at least for Quine this idea is no longer tenable for "non-observation" sentences. Quine thinks that the meanings (and truth values) of non-observation sentences within the theory are determined (and justified) by other sentences within the theory, but he also thinks that there must be some basic sentences whose truth and meaning are not dependent on other sentences. For Quine, "observation" sentences (sentences whose meaning and truth values are "read" directly off the "world" through sensory experience or "stimulations") serve as the "foundation" for the theory.

It is this residual notion – that some sentences held true (beliefs) are justified by the "evidence" of our senses – which Davidson finds objectionable in Quine's work. Quine claims that since science tells us that our only source of "information" about the world around us is that of the

"sensory stimulations" that are caused by natural phenomenon (which are also explained through science), the entire epistemological enterprise could (and should) be seen as an enterprise within natural science. But even though Quine thinks that epistemology can be "naturalized" (that the study of human knowledge can be carried out "scientifically" through investigating how the "impacts" on our sensory organs connect with our theories about the world) – Davidson thinks (rightly) that the view that some of our beliefs are based on the evidence of the senses just paves the way for traditional scepticism about the external world, and that it just begs the question (against the sceptic) to suggest that we can now treat epistemology as just another branch of science.<sup>12</sup>

In a "Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge", Davidson expresses his commitment to a thorough-going "coherentism" with respect to belief justification, and quotes Rorty in

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<sup>12</sup> In what seems to me to be an extremely penetrating and powerful critical analysis of Quine's "naturalized epistemology" (see *Significance*, 209-254), Stroud emphasises the question begging nature of Quine's suggestion that we can (and should) treat epistemology as just another branch of scientific inquiry. Stroud forcefully points out that even though such an "empirical" investigation (of, for instance, the physical phenomena involved in the relationship between the impacts on our sense organs and our formulation of "theories") might be a worthwhile endeavour for its own sake, it has no bearing or relevance to the traditional (theoretical) investigation of knowledge (and the issues and problems central to the traditional investigation). Thus, Stroud argues that in order for Quine to "make good" his claim that we can now treat epistemology as merely a scientific enterprise, he must first show how and why the traditional investigation is no longer relevant to worries about human knowledge.

support of the following claim: "what distinguishes a coherence theory is simply the claim that nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief."<sup>13</sup> Thus Davidson, like Rorty, rejects the idea that any of our beliefs about the world are justified by the "evidence" of our senses. But unlike Rorty, Davidson acknowledges that once we accept the view that "we cannot get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence", we must still ask how we "nevertheless can have knowledge of, and talk about, an objective public world which is not of our own making."<sup>14</sup>

Hence, if we want to avoid the view that the world is somehow a "construction" (i.e. if we want to hold the view that there is a real "objective" world), and also maintain that the only thing that could possibly justify a belief is another belief, one must face, Davidson claims, the familiar sceptical question: "Why couldn't all my beliefs hang together and yet be comprehensively false about the actual world?"<sup>15</sup>

Davidson thus acknowledges that in giving up the traditional "correspondence" view of justification in favour

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<sup>13</sup> Donald Davidson, "Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, E. LePore (ed.), (New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1986), 310. (Hereafter cited as *Coherence*).

<sup>14</sup> *Coherence*, 310.

<sup>15</sup> *Coherence*, 309.



of coherentism, we do not magically eliminate sceptical worries. As he puts it:

The search for an empirical foundation for meaning or knowledge leads to scepticism, while a coherence theory seems at a loss to provide any reason for a believer to believe that his beliefs, if coherent, are true. We are caught between a false answer to the sceptic, and no answer.<sup>16</sup>

Thus what is needed, Davidson claims, "...to answer the sceptic is to show that someone with a (more or less) coherent set of beliefs has a reason to suppose that his beliefs are not mistaken in the main."<sup>17</sup>

Davidson thinks that it is possible to provide a reason for thinking that most of our beliefs about the world must be true. The reason involves showing that the traditional view which attempts to treat the "deliverances" of the senses (the "content" side of the scheme/content distinction) as evidence (which is, or can be, used to justify our beliefs about the world), is a mistaken view of the nature of belief and belief formation.

Davidson agrees that belief (meaning, and knowledge) "depends" on "experience, and experience ultimately on sensation. But this is the 'depend' of causality, not of evidence or justification."<sup>18</sup> In a number of different articles, Davidson tries to show that the correct

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<sup>16</sup> *Coherence*, 314.

<sup>17</sup> *Coherence*, 314.

<sup>18</sup> *Coherence*, 313-14.

understanding of the nature of belief and meaning involves the realization that the meanings of certain (basic) sentences held true (beliefs) are determined by their *causes* – the content of such a belief is "fixed" by whatever causes us to assent to (or hold true) the sentence.

Davidson thinks that this "causal" model of belief reveals that belief is "intrinsically veridical". For if the content of basic beliefs is fixed or determined by the objects and events (in the world) that cause them, there is no room for any epistemic gap between our "believings" and the world – the "gap" which is generated by the introduction of "intermediaries" such as "experience" which may or may not "correspond" to the world (and thus which leads the sceptic to conclude that we can know nothing about the world around us). Thus we find Davidson often making claims of the following nature: "A sentence which one has been conditioned by the learning process to be caused to hold true by the presence of fires will be true when there is a fire present."<sup>19</sup>

Davidson appeals to the enterprise of "radical interpretation" to support and clarify this view of the nature of belief. As interpreters (or "field linguists"), confronted with a completely foreign people, we employ a method of translation which correlates the foreigner's utterances with events and objects in the world. Through repeated and systematic correlation of the speaker's utterances with

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<sup>19</sup> *Myth*, 164.

objects, events, etc., we come to understand what the speaker means and what he believes about the world. Eventually, communication becomes possible.

But for interpretation or communication to be possible at all (that is, for it to be possible to render the native's utterances intelligible to us), we must assume (from the outset of interpretation) the natives to be sufficiently like us (i.e. that they share with us a certain body of sentences held true about the world). In being "charitable", we provide for the possibility of translation and communication which, in turn, is attained by the correlations we have observed between the native's utterances and the world. And since translation and communication are clearly possible, this illustrates that the nature of meaning and belief is to be understood in terms of whatever causes us to assent to certain sentences: "Communication begins where causes converge: your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same objects and events."<sup>20</sup>

Having thus illustrated that the nature of meaning and belief is to be understood in causal terms, Davidson goes on to claim that it is meaningless to think that we might be in "massive error" (or globally wrong) about the way the world is. This possibility is ruled out because:

...if we accept that our simplest sentences are given their meanings by the situations that generally cause us to hold them true or false...we

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<sup>20</sup> *Coherence*, 318.

see that general scepticism about the deliverances of the senses cannot even be formulated, since the senses and their deliverances play no central *theoretical* role in the account of belief, meaning, and knowledge if the contents of the mind depend on the causal relations, whatever they may be, between the attitudes and the world. This is not to deny the importance of the actual causal role of the senses in knowledge and the acquisition of language, of course.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, in getting clear about the nature of belief, Davidson thinks that we can provide an answer to the sceptic's query about the coherence view of justification (i.e. why couldn't all my beliefs "cohere", yet be false about the actual world?), by pointing out that:

The agent has only to reflect on what a belief is to appreciate that most of his basic beliefs are true, and among his beliefs, those most securely held and that cohere with the main body of his beliefs are the most apt to be true. The question, how do I know my beliefs are generally true? thus answers itself, simply because beliefs are by nature generally true.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Myth*, 165.

<sup>22</sup> *Coherence*, 319. It is worth noting here something of the similarities between Davidson's strategy and Wittgenstein's. Like Wittgenstein, Davidson also attempts to do away with the idea that our beliefs about the world are justified or grounded on the evidence of our senses. And also like Wittgenstein, Davidson tries to show that our basic beliefs are nevertheless immune to the threat of scepticism. But whereas Wittgenstein argues that our beliefs are secure on the ground that our acceptance of them is a condition for the possibility of using epistemic concepts in intelligible ways (such as evidence), Davidson seems to go further than Wittgenstein in trying to show that our basic "world-picture" is secure on the grounds that what we mean by belief is that it is intrinsically veridical. The essential parallel here, I think, is that both philosophers make their cases by appealing to certain "facts" about language (meaning, communication, etc.) which are meant to establish the "conditions" for the meanings of crucial epistemological notions (which in turn, supposedly show that the traditional understanding of the

What are we to make of this view? Davidson tries to short circuit the view that I might be wrong about even a basic belief such as that "I am sitting in front of the computer", by claiming that such a belief is directly caused by my actually sitting in front of the computer (instead of being a belief "based" on any "evidence"). But how successful is the causal model here? Not very, it seems to me, in that even if we grant Davidson the idea that my present belief is not based on any experiential evidence, but is to be understood as being determined by whatever causes me to hold it (and justified by other beliefs with which it coheres), I think the sceptical considerations can still be brought to bear here.<sup>23</sup>

Suppose for instance, that while I am sound asleep, I dream that I am sitting in front of the computer. Suppose further (as sometimes happens), that while dreaming I begin to think about scepticism and ask myself if it is possible that I am not now sitting in front of the computer. Clearly, in my dream I can properly be said to be holding the belief that I

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nature or "logic" of such concepts is mistaken or confused).

<sup>23</sup> But it is worth noting just how much it seems we are granting Davidson here. For it seems to me that the thrust of Davidson's whole effort to short-circuit scepticism about the external world — by claiming that the nature of belief and meaning is properly understood in terms of the objects and events in the world that cause us to hold them — is question begging from the outset. That there are "objects and events" in the "world" is precisely what the sceptic has called into question, and it certainly seems to beg the question (as a response to the sceptic), to simply claim that our basic beliefs must be true because they are caused by those "objects and events".

am sitting in front of the computer (as I am questioning the belief in my dream). According to Davidson, the content of this belief is to be understood as being fixed by whatever causes it. That is, the content of my belief that I am in front of the computer is properly understood as being fixed by, it seems, my *dream* that I am sitting in front of it. But surely this is just what resists identification.

When I am sitting in front of the computer (if I ever am) and I believe that I am, then I can identify ("link up" or trace) the cause of my belief that I am sitting in front of the computer with the content of my belief. But I cannot do this in the dreaming case. For clearly, if I were to try to trace the cause of my belief here, I would certainly not cite "the dream" as the cause, rather I would cite the cause to be that I am actually sitting in front of the computer (for this is the content of what I believe). But since I would be lying in bed and not sitting in front of the computer, I would be mistaken about the cause of my belief (were I to try and trace it).

On Davidson's model, my identification of the cause of my belief that I am sitting in front of the computer should be "the dream", but anyone who has dreamt can testify for themselves that this is just what we would not think (and this, I think, is why the dreaming hypothesis is such a plausible and devastating sceptical consideration). Of course it could be the case that while dreaming (perhaps after just

having read Davidson), one might think one is dreaming and thus identify the cause of a given belief with "the dream". But this (like Moore's "Duke of Devonshire" case) would be at best a coincidence (and certainly would not count as an item of knowledge). Thus if we can be mistaken about the causes of our beliefs in some cases, it seems a short step to the sceptical hypothesis that it is possible that we might always be mistaken.

However, Davidson makes clear that the content of our beliefs is to be understood as being fixed by the objects or events in the world that "systematically" cause them. Thus the dreaming scenario would be an aberrant case – set aright by realizing that the "systematic" causes of our beliefs about the world are not dreams. But as C.B. Martin has pointed out:

We need to be reminded that very similar effects can have very different causes, even *systematically* different causes...because of this, it would appear that the very same belief-effect could have very different, even systematically different content-causes. The sceptic then would put the question – "You can't, as you argue, read off from the 'inside' what the real content-causes are. How then, do you read from the outside back in?"<sup>24</sup>

Martin continues:

The belief-effect itself has its "content fixed", Davidson claims, by what "common objects and events in the world" "systematically cause" it. What then is there about such a belief-effect when it is caused by something very different (as in the case of hallucination) that *resists* having its content fixed by that different cause? If there is *nothing* then why doesn't the belief-effect have the content

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<sup>24</sup> C.B. Martin, "The New Cartesian", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, (1986), 243.

of whatever causes it? In which case, there is no possibility of false belief. If there *is* something about the belief-effect that *resists* having its content fixed differently by different causes then why *couldn't* it have been regularly caused by those different causes or still others?...It seems that the sceptic's question is raised again.<sup>25</sup>

Martin's point is that "scepticism can be stated just as well in terms of alternative possible causes of belief" (rather than in justificatory or evidential terms), and this seems right. Unless the possibility of systematically different causes for our beliefs about the world can be ruled out, it seems that all of our beliefs could "cohere" with one another and yet not be caused by anything in the actual world. Davidson has not shown us that we can rule out this possibility (and thus I do not think that he has shown that "belief" is intrinsically veridical and that most of our beliefs must be true). There seems to be no way that we can read off from the content of our beliefs what the actual content fixing causes of our beliefs are. Given that the content is all we have to go on here, and this content seems perfectly compatible with alternative causes (hallucinations, dreams, demons, scientists, etc.), I do not see how these possibilities can be ruled out.

Moreover, given these possibilities, I see no reason why it could not be the case that, as interpreters, we could come to translate and communicate with the "natives" through correlating their utterances with objects and events in the

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 243-44.



"world" which are not "there" at all – it could all be part and parcel of the "evil demon's" trickery. In any case, the essential point is that I do not think that doing away with the "scheme/content" distinction does away with scepticism about the external world.

It seems that in committing to a "realist" (the "natural") view – put in terms of the idea that there are, on the one hand, our beliefs about the world and, on the other, an objective world which is not of our own making – one also commits to the possibility that our beliefs might not be about the "world" at all. That is, the sceptical considerations seem to undermine any such account. With or without "epistemic intermediaries" (which may or may not accurately correspond to the world), the gap between our beliefs about the world and the "world" itself (the cause), still seems to be open. Having said this, I want to end my look at Davidson's work and see where all this leaves us with respect to the current controversy about the status and significance of traditional epistemology.

#### Closing: The Status of Scepticism About the External World

I opened this part of the study with a number of remarks offered by philosophers who think that analytic philosophy has come to an end. When Putnam, for instance, claims that the achievements of analytic philosophy are negative achievements and that the project has come to a "dead end" (and not the

"completion"), I take him to be echoing Rorty's view that the grand hopes of analytic philosophy, namely, the promises of solving traditional problems through "analytic methods", have been dashed.

But these hopes have been "dashed", not because the methods proved to be inadequate for solving such problems, rather, the idea here is that analytic philosophers have used these methods to investigate and "de-construct" the theoretical framework in which the problems have arisen (and thus they have "dissolved" the problems by exposing them to be mere "pseudo-problems" or illusions based on an incoherent picture).

Now it seems to me that most of the recent "meta-philosophical" remarks of the above nature are, at best, exaggerated and rhetorical, and at worst, irresponsible and totally groundless. Often the conclusion that analytic philosophy has undermined itself is drawn from highly dubious interpretations of specific arguments – interpretations which rhetorically distort and embellish the original arguments, attach unwarranted (and un-argued for) significance to the reach of such arguments (how much they actually establish), neglect potential implications and criticisms of the arguments, and finally, are used to support wildly implausible views.

Thus I want to claim that we can ignore the grand conclusion that philosophy is dead (that the theoretical

framework has been dismantled). But this is not to say that we can ignore the actual arguments used in support of the grand conclusion. Indeed, I think it is essential that philosophers examine such arguments in terms of the sorts of things just mentioned (e.g. what they actually say, and might accomplish).<sup>26</sup> And this is why I have thought it important to spend some time trying to sort out Wittgenstein's views (and something of Davidson's views as well).

It does seem that both Wittgenstein and Davidson try to show that the traditional framework is somehow confused or incoherent, and that consequently scepticism about the external world is an illusion. But I have tried to show (in different ways) that neither philosopher has shown scepticism to be a pseudo-problem.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Clearly, I think there is something to Putnam's (and Rorty's) claim that analytic philosophy has, of late, been largely "negative" — that it has focused on many of its own presuppositions, distinctions, etc.. But I want to suggest that much work needs to be done (in terms of assessment) before any grand conclusions can be drawn. Perhaps what I find most offensive about the "grand" conclusion is that the philosophers who draw it, often seem to think that the arguments which supposedly show us "the way out of the bottle" are somehow beyond criticism (the final say in all matters). But these are *just* arguments and, as long as there are clever people interested in such matters, I fail to see how such arguments can possibly escape criticism (and I am also sure that none will come out unscathed). Of course, much work has already been done in this respect and will presumably continue.

<sup>27</sup> To point out something of the differences here, I tried to show that Wittgenstein's "diagnosis" does not expose the problem as an illusion, in that I saw no reason to accept the view that the meanings of our epistemic concepts are limited in the way Wittgenstein claims they are. Thus, I claimed that we can give substance to the sceptic's doubts, and hence

It seems to me that the "indirect" approach to dealing with my traditional problem (which earlier I characterized as the attempt to show how or why scepticism about the external world is incorrect through showing that the sceptic oversteps the boundaries of intelligibility from her theoretical perspective) is perhaps the "best" (and perhaps the only) approach going these days. Indeed it does seem that the "dissolving" approach is the dominant way of dealing with philosophical problems and, to be sure, there is something to be said for the approach in terms of the "gains" that have been made in trying to understand the underpinnings of the problems and the problems themselves. But, I also think that if there really has been "progress" in this respect, no one has yet succeeded in "dissolving" scepticism about the external world (or other forms of scepticism for that matter).

In fact, I am pessimistic about the idea of ever dissolving such a problem (which is to say that I think that our "best" hope does not hold much promise). The main reason why I am pessimistic about ever dissolving sceptical problems is simply that I think that sceptical arguments are some of the best (most plausible and powerful) arguments around. As I tried to show in part I, the view that we can never know

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substance to her challenge. But, concerning Davidson's approach, I tried to show that the problem is not an illusion on the grounds that, even if we grant Davidson's attack on the scheme/content distinction, the sceptical problem can still be formulated, and hence we have no reason to accept his dictum that "most of our beliefs must be true".

anything about the world around us arises in such a way that it seems impossible to deny its intelligibility or its truth.

For, the view arises by assuming our common sense perspective about the nature, source, and content of our knowledge about the world (things we all naturally accept), and then raises certain considerations – considerations that we also accept *from the common sense perspective* (e.g. what we all accept happens in dreams) – and then shows that these very considerations lead irresistibly to the sceptical conclusion.

Starting from what we all accept and understand, the sceptic could not be more "charitable" in posing her challenge. Moreover, since all reasonably intelligent people can follow the sceptic's progress to her conclusion (and repeat it for themselves, tell others about it, etc.), it certainly does not seem that the challenge is nonsense – it appears to be a real, genuine problem. It seems to be a real problem about the human condition – one telling of the predicament we find ourselves in when we think about ourselves in relation to the "world".

In any case, I find the reasoning which leads us to the sceptical conclusion to be more convincing than any of the attempts (so far) to show that it is nonsense. Nagel puts this point in an even stronger way when he claims:

Critics of scepticism bring against it various theories of how the language works – theories of verifiability, causal theories of reference, principles of charity. I believe the argument goes in the opposite direction. Such theories are refuted by the evident possibility and

intelligibility of scepticism, which reveals that by "tree" I don't mean just anything that is causally responsible for my impressions of trees, or anything that looks and feels like a tree, or even anything of the sort that I and others have traditionally called trees. Since those things could conceivably not be trees, any theory that says they have to be is wrong.<sup>28</sup>

Stroud also argues that the weakness of the sort of anti-sceptical strategy which brings against scepticism views about language and meaning (in trying to dissolve the problem), is that such views depend on at least equally (and I think far more) suspect arguments, and thus as he puts it (specifically with respect to "verificationism"):

...for anyone who finds the sceptical argument at all persuasive its very persuasiveness provides just as strong an argument against accepting the verifiability principle as that principle can provide against the meaningfulness of the sceptical conclusion.<sup>29</sup>

I think that Stroud is right about this, and I also think that his point can be extended to Wittgenstein's "conditions" of intelligibility and Davidson's views about the nature of belief. Simply, both of these views seem less plausible than the sceptical arguments.

I claimed earlier that the "dissolving" strategy represented the "best" hope of ever coming to show how or why scepticism about the external world is incorrect. But I have also claimed that I do not think it is possible to ever dissolve the view (to show that it is meaningless). I think

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<sup>28</sup> *View*, 73.

<sup>29</sup> *Significance*, 205.

that scepticism is meaningful, and that the problem of the external world is a real problem. But the only reason I claimed that the "dissolving" strategy is our best hope is that the alternative, namely, "solving" the problem, seems absolutely hopeless.

This sort of strategy tries to somehow prove that we do know the things that the sceptic denies we know (and hence tries to show that scepticism is false rather than incoherent). But, although this sort of strategy acknowledges the reality of the problem, the attempts to try to show the falsity of scepticism are notoriously unsatisfactory (e.g. Descartes' guarantee that he could not possibly be wrong about his belief that he is sitting in front of the fire because God would not allow it, or Moore's proof that he could not be wrong about his belief that he is holding up his hand, because the possibility that he might not be, conflicts with what he knows!).

I have admitted that I think that the problem of the external world is a real problem (that is, I do not think the problem has, or can be, "dissolved") and I have also claimed that I do not think it is possible to straightforwardly solve the problem. But in admitting that the view that we can know nothing about the world around us is intelligible, and that it seems impossible to solve it, am I not admitting that I am a sceptic?

I guess I am admitting that once we take up the theoretical perspective about the nature, source, and content of our knowledge of the world, it seems impossible to rationally deny that we cannot know anything about the world around us – this seems to be the honest intellectual stance to take about our actual relationship to the "world". But this does not sit easy. I cannot shake the opposing conviction that scepticism must be wrong. But I have no idea what it would be like to show that it is wrong – and without this it seems I should accept the "truth" of scepticism (and all that it entails).

But, like Hume, I cannot accept scepticism about the external world (and all that it entails) because it entails that I should not (if I want to be honest or rational) continue to believe that I am now, for instance, sitting here typing. I do not think that any of us can literally accept this consequence of scepticism (and thus it seems we are all condemned to a life of "conscious irrationality"). We cannot accept this consequence because the beliefs that we accept from the common sense perspective are, as Hume points out, forced upon us – we simply cannot help having them.

But if we cannot help having them, then why should we feel bullied by what reason tells us is our actual predicament – why *should* we be rational (or honest) and try to pretend that we do not believe what we cannot help but believe? Reason tells us that our actual predicament is one in which we cannot



reasonably believe anything about the world around us, but then, given that it seems impossible to live in accordance with such "excessive principles", I do not see why we should be reasonable here.

The investigation of human knowledge forces upon us the (paradoxical) Jekyll and Hyde like predicament that I mentioned at the start of this study – and it seems we must acknowledge, and learn to live with the fact, that we will be pulled in opposite directions concerning what we can know (or reasonably believe) about the world, at the levels of theory and practice. And the seeming irreconcilability of these two perspectives seems to me to be an important discovery about the human condition. But even though I do think that scepticism about the external world is theoretically correct, I do not see how it is possible (or even what it would be like to try) to live in accordance with it. Thus, it seems we are condemned to a life of conscious irrationality, but we are innocent victims.

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