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WITTGENSTEIN ON SCEPTICISM

ABSTRACT. An overview of Wittgenstein’s remarks on scepticism in *On Certainty* is offered, especially with regard to the notion of a “hinge proposition”. Several possible interpretations of the anti-sceptical import of this text are then critically assessed, with each view situated within the contemporary literature on scepticism.

“The difficulty is to realise the groundlessness of our believing.”
On Certainty, §166

0. INTRODUCTION

The problem of scepticism informs all of Wittgenstein’s writing, from the remarks on solipsism in the *Tractatus*, to the claims about rule-following put forward in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and right up to his final notebooks dealing with G. E. Moore’s (1925; 1939) famous commonsense response to scepticism, published as *On Certainty*. To survey all of Wittgenstein’s work on scepticism would be the task of a book rather than a paper, and so I won’t be attempting this here. Instead, I will focus on Wittgenstein’s remarks on scepticism in *On Certainty* since—in terms of the specific sceptical issue of our knowledge of the external world at any rate—it is these remarks that have had the most impact on contemporary treatments of scepticism.

Before I begin, I want to note an important *caveat* to my remarks on this text. *On Certainty* is not a book that Wittgenstein ever sanctioned for publication, but rather the edited product of his final notebooks. As such, it would be unwise to try to find a single cohesive set of theses emerging from the text, especially given the fragmentary and, in places, impressionistic nature of the remarks. I will certainly not be trying to offer a definitive interpretation here.

1. HINGE PROPOSITIONS AND THE STRUCTURE OF REASONS

I will begin by outlining what I take to be the leading idea about scepticism that Wittgenstein offers in *On Certainty*. There are two elements to the argument. The first part is quite explicitly expounded in the text and concerns a distinctive picture of the structure of reasons—i.e., what is able to count as a reason for what—which essentially incorporates the elusive Wittgensteinian notion of a “hinge proposition”. The anti-sceptical force of this picture of the structure of reasons arises from the fact that it excludes the kind of fully general epistemic evaluation that is essential to the sceptical argument.

The second part of the argument is developed in a more implicit fashion, and for this reason its anti-sceptical import is often overlooked. It concerns the fact that the picture of the structure of reasons that Wittgenstein offers is the very picture that we ordinarily employ, at least when we are not in the grip of the alternative *philosophical* picture which the sceptic (and, following her, the *anti-sceptic*) employs. Moreover, and here is the crux of the point, the philosophical picture that the sceptic uses is *completely divorced* from the non-philosophical picture that we ordinarily employ. That is, the philosophical picture is not an extension or refinement of the ordinary picture, but a radical departure from it. As we will see, this feature of Wittgenstein’s anti-sceptical view, which often goes unnoticed, has important dialectical implications.

The primary target of *On Certainty* is Moore’s (1925; cf. Moore 1939) famous argument against scepticism. Moore responded to the sceptical challenge by enumerating some of the many things that he took himself to know; in particular, those propositions which he was most certain of, such as that he has two hands. The starting-point for *On Certainty* is the observation that there is something seriously amiss with Moore’s assertions in this respect. As Wittgenstein puts the point:

Now, can one enumerate what one knows (like Moore)? Straight off like that, I believe not.—For otherwise the expression “I know” gets misused. (OC, §6).¹

And later on he notes:

We just do not see how very specialized the use of “I know” is. (OC, §11)

Even without bringing in Wittgenstein’s critique of Moore in this regard, I think we can recognise that there is clearly something amiss with Moore’s claims to know that which he is most certain of. For example, a familiar Gricean constraint on appropriate assertion is that the assertion be relevant to the conversational context. Given this constraint, however,

how can asserting (what will be regarded as) the patently obvious be relevant to the conversational context? Is Moore really aiming to *inform* his audience of something, as one would normally do with a knowledge claim? That seems unlikely.

The Wittgensteinian critique of Moore's assertions goes beyond broadly Gricean complaints of this sort, however. Wittgenstein wants to claim that the impropriety of Moore's assertions relates to the fact that he is in the grip of a faulty conception of the structure of reasons. Moore seems to suppose that he is entitled to make these assertions because he has such excellent epistemic support for his beliefs in the propositions claimed as known. Wittgenstein's contention, however, is that it is precisely *because* of the certainty that attaches to our beliefs in these propositions that we are unable to properly claim to know them.

Consider the following passage:

One says "I know" when one is ready to give compelling grounds. "I know" relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth. [...]

But if what he believes is of such a kind that the grounds that he can give are no surer than the assertion, then he cannot say that he knows what he believes. (OC, §243)

In order to properly claim to know a proposition it is essential that one is able to offer compelling reasons in its favour; the sort of reasons which could 'demonstrate the truth' of what is asserted as known. On the face of it, this constraint on the propriety of claims to know would seem to be congenial to Moore, in that the kinds of proposition which Moore claims as known are those that he is most certain of and hence, one would think at any rate, are propositions his beliefs in which he has excellent epistemic support for. *Ceteris paribus*, then, it would seem that Moore is in an ideal position to put forward his claims to know. Wittgenstein, however, wants to invert this 'Moorean' picture of the structure of reasons, and this is where the second part of the quotation just given becomes important. Wittgenstein's claim is that whatever would count as a reason in favour of a claim to know must be more certain than the proposition claimed as known, since otherwise it would not be able to play this supporting role. But if the proposition claimed as known is something which one is most certain of, then it follows that there can be no more certain proposition which could be offered in its favour and stand as the required supporting reason. The propriety of Moore's claims to know are thus in doubt precisely *because* he is claiming to know that which he is most certain of.

One might wonder at this point why an appropriate claim to know should be supported by reasons which are *more* certain than that which is claimed as known. Why wouldn't it be enough that there is *something* compelling that one can say in favour of what one claims as

known, even though what is claimed as known is more certain? A key part of the explanation for this is that Wittgenstein recognises that claims to know are essentially tied to the practice of resolving doubts. Simply enumerating what one knows with no dialectical purpose in mind is incoherent on the Wittgensteinian picture; we just would not know what you were up to. Rather, one explicitly claims to know something because there is some contextually relevant challenge to what is claimed—a *doubt*, broadly speaking—which this claim to know is designed to meet. Consider the following passage:

It is queer: if I say, without any special occasion, “I know”—for example, “I know that I am now sitting in a chair”, this statement seems to me unjustified and presumptuous. But if I make the same statement where there is some need for it, then, although I am not a jot more certain of its truth, it seems to me to be perfectly justified and everyday. (OC, §553)

And it is clear that, for Wittgenstein, what would (at least ordinarily) count as a “need” for such a claim to know would be some legitimate challenge being raised regarding what one claims as known. It is of course difficult to imagine (non-philosophical) contexts in which a challenge is raised regarding that which we are most certain of, such as that one is presently seated (we will return to this point), but we can easily think of cases where challenges are raised regarding those propositions which we are not most certain of. I may take myself to be seeing a goldfinch in my garden, and make a remark to this effect. And yet someone standing next to me might object to what I say by noting that goldfinches can look an awful lot like goldcrests from this viewpoint. In response I might say that *I know* that that’s a goldfinch. In doing so, I would be representing myself as being in a position to offer reasons which are more certain than what is claimed as known, and which speak to the objection raised. Such reasons could include, for example, that I know from years of experience as an ornithologist that goldfinches have distinctive markings which are lacking in goldcrests, and which are clearly observable at this angle. If called upon to do so, I must be able to offer these grounds.²

Once one recognises that claims to know play this dialectical function of resolving doubts (broadly conceived), then it becomes clear just why the supporting reasons had better be more certain than that which is claimed as known. It is only because it is more certain that the bird in question has the distinctive markings at issue than that it is a goldfinch that the former is able to function as an appropriate supporting reason for the latter. If it wasn’t more certain—if, for example, the markings in question were not clearly visible—then it would cease to be able to perform this supporting role.

So, for Wittgenstein, appropriate claims to know require compelling supporting reasons where, because of the dialectical role of a claim to know in resolving doubts, such

compelling reasons must be more certain than the proposition which is claimed as known. Thus far, the Wittgensteinian picture of the structure of reasons is merely imposing constraints on when one can appropriately claim knowledge. It ought to be clear, however, that such a picture also has ramifications for doubt as well, in that it imposes constraints on when a doubt can be rationally entered. Wittgenstein tries to get us to see that just as claims to know need to be supported by specific grounds, grounds which are more certain than what is claimed as known, so too do doubts (e.g., OC, §458).

Consider the following passage:

If a blind man were to ask me “Have you got two hands?” I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don’t know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn’t I test my *eyes* by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? *What* is to be tested by *what*? (OC, §125)

This passage neatly illustrates the point that the Wittgensteinian conception of the structure of reasons imposes a constraint on appropriate claims to know. Clearly, in this case one could not appropriately claim to know that one has two hands as a means of resolving the issue in question, since there is nothing that one could cite in favour of such a claim to know which is more certain than what is claimed as known. If, for example, one is less certain that one’s eyes are functioning properly than that one has two hands, then how can what one sees be coherently cited as a reason in favour of one’s having hands? What is important for our purposes, however, is that this passage also illustrates how this conception of the structure of reasons also imposes a constraint on what can count as a reason for *doubting* (or otherwise challenging) a belief.

A blind man can rationally doubt whether I have two hands since he has specific grounds available to him to make such doubt rational (i.e., he can’t see how many hands I have, and we may assume that he does not have knowledge of this subject matter via another route, such as through my testimony). But imagine now an otherwise normal situation in which someone who can see perfectly well that I have two hands nonetheless inquires as to how many hands I have, thereby expressing some doubt in this regard. How could we make sense of such an assertion? More pertinently, what could possibly suffice as an adequate response to this query? After all, one could not simply draw his attention to your hands, since he can see your hands already. But if this does not satisfy him, then what would?

Wittgenstein wants to disabuse us of a conception of doubt such that expressions of doubt (like claims to know) are ‘free’—i.e., can be entered into a conversational context without motivation. In contrast, Wittgenstein reminds us that doubts do not function like that,

such that when they are entered without motivation they are incoherent (e.g., OC, §§154; 247; 372). Moreover, the picture that Wittgenstein offers of the structure of reasons now becomes relevant to help us to see that certain doubts just could not of their nature be grounded, and a doubt about whether or not one has hands—when one’s hands are in clear view—is a case in point. For now a reason needs to be offered to motivate the doubt and, crucially, such a reason must be more certain than what is doubted since otherwise one would have more reason to doubt the reason for doubt than to doubt what is doubted. In normal circumstances, however, what reason could there be for doubting whether or not the person before you (in clear view) has two hands which was not less certain than that she has two hands?

Wittgenstein’s ultimate point about doubt goes beyond offering a mere constraint on *expressions* of doubt, however, and extends to doubt itself, expressed or otherwise. Imagine that I try to formulate a doubt myself about whether or not I have two hands. Like an expression of doubt, Wittgenstein wants to maintain that such a doubt needs to be motivated if it is to have any content. It is unclear, however, what could possibly motivate such a doubt given that it concerns a proposition which I am optimally certain about. For example, suppose that I try to motivate the doubt on the grounds that I cannot at that moment see my hands. Presumably, however, I am less certain that my eyesight is functioning correctly than that I have two hands. Accordingly, on the Wittgensteinian picture of the structure of reasons the former cannot rationally be used as a ground for doubt regarding the latter. This is because the lesser certainty of the ground for doubt will inevitably ensure that it is more rational to doubt the ground for doubt than to doubt the target proposition. That is, I’ve more reason to doubt what I see (in this case that I don’t just now see my hands) than for doubting that I have two hands on the basis of what I (don’t) see. Doubt of that which is most certain is thus necessarily groundless, and hence incoherent (e.g., OC, §§4; 122-3).

Wittgenstein makes this point rather neatly in the quotation cited above with his remark about testing, where the target belief is ‘tested’ relative to the grounds offered against it. If I regard my having two hands as being more certain than that my eyesight is functioning properly, then I cannot rationally ‘test’ the former by appeal to the latter. If, for example, I were to look to see where my hands should be and not see them, then, given that I regard the reliability of my eyesight as being less certain than that I have two hands, this would be a reason to doubt my eyesight rather than a reason to doubt whether or not I have hands. In short, we ‘test’ claims relative to other, more certain, claims.

So Wittgenstein is offering a picture of the structure of reasons such that that which we are most certain of cannot be properly claimed as known or, for that matter, properly

doubted. Such propositions are, as he describes them elsewhere, “hinge” propositions (OC, §§341-3); propositions which by their very nature “lie apart from the route travelled by enquiry” (OC, §88).³ That I have two hands is clearly a hinge proposition for Wittgenstein, which is why Moore cannot properly claim to know it. He writes:

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. (OC, §250)

That is, in normal circumstances at least, there is nothing more certain than that I have two hands. If this is right, then, given the foregoing discussion about the structure of reasons, it follows that any claim to know that I have two hands cannot be coherently supported by reasons (and hence is inappropriate) and neither can it be rationally doubted.

It is worth noting that the examples that Wittgenstein offers of hinges are diverse in character. Aside from the specific ‘Moorean’ claim that one has hands, he cites, for instance, quite general claims about the world, such as that it has existed for a long time (e.g., OC, §§182-92; 233; 262; 327; 411), along with elementary mathematical claims, such as that twelve times twelve equals one-hundred and forty-four (e.g., OC, §§447-8). Moreover, although hinges are *in a sense* indubitable, the indubitability in question here is rather different than that which is usually at issue in classical epistemology. For example, when Descartes treats the *cogito* as indubitable, and thus foundational, he has in mind a conception of indubitability whereby in doubting the proposition in question one *ipso facto* ensures its truth, so making rational doubt of this proposition impossible. The indubitability of the *cogito* is thus an indication of its truth. The kind of indubitability that Wittgenstein has in mind, however, is not of this sort. Instead, the claim is only that one can never offer the necessary rational support for such doubt. Clearly, that this is so in itself offers no indication of the truth of the target proposition.

A further issue regarding hinge propositions concerns what sense we can give to the idea that they are rationally grounded *at all*. While there is clearly a distinction that can be made between the reasons that one can legitimately cite in favour of a claim to know a proposition and the reasons that support one’s belief in that proposition, it is not clear that on the Wittgensteinian picture of the structure of reasons such a distinction has any grip. The point is that while it is through an examination of our practices of claiming knowledge that this picture of the structure of reasons is revealed, the picture doesn’t seem to only apply to reasons *qua* reasons offered in support of a claim to know (or in defence of a doubt). Suppose, for example, that one were to simply reflect on the epistemic standing of one’s belief that one

has two hands. Given the fact that one is unable to adduce any reason in support of this belief that is more certain than this belief, it now becomes an open question whether this belief is adequately rationally supported. Furthermore, it is not as if one can take the traditional route here of thinking of one's beliefs in hinge propositions as being somehow foundational—such that they do not require epistemic support from other beliefs in order to be rightly held—since these beliefs lack many of the features of foundational beliefs on the traditional picture. They are not, for example, self-evident or incorrigible, and while they are in a sense indubitable, as we have already seen they are not indubitable in the required manner.

Given that such beliefs do not appear to be appropriately rationally grounded, and given in addition that they do not seem to fulfil the usual classical foundationalist rubric for basic beliefs, we might well regard the epistemic standing of these beliefs as suspect. There are places in which Wittgenstein seems to encourage this thought, as when he writes that the “difficulty is to realise the groundlessness of our believing” (OC, §166). Indeed, that we hold hinge propositions as certain in the way that we do appears to reflect merely a kind of groundless *faith* on our part. But if my belief in something so basic as that I have two hands is not rational (and hence, it seems, not a case of knowledge), then it is hard to see how *any* belief could be rationally held (and thus that I could know anything). Thus far, then, the Wittgensteinian picture of the structure of reasons, rather than offering a route out of the sceptic's clutches, seems to actually *imply* scepticism. Scepticism of a sort at any rate, since the constraint imposed on rational doubt ensures that one could not follow through one's scepticism by rationally doubting one's beliefs. Instead, one is left with a kind of epistemic *angst* regarding one's epistemic position, albeit one that does not licence rational doubt.

I take it that what motivates this sceptical line of thought, at least in part, is the idea that it is consistent with the conception of the structure of reasons that Wittgenstein offers, and of the role of hinges within that conception, that there could be an epistemic evaluation of our beliefs as a whole which found their epistemic standing wanting. It is precisely this possibility, however, that Wittgenstein wants to deny, and which he diagnoses as being part of the faulty conception of the structure of reasons that Moore buys into by enumerating what he is most certain of as claims to know. As the term “hinge” itself indicates, our commitment to hinge propositions is essential to *any* epistemic evaluation—this commitment is the hinge on which any epistemic evaluation must turn. Wittgenstein is thus opposing a standard epistemological picture which would allow a wholesale epistemic assessment of our beliefs with a different philosophical picture which excludes such a possibility. Consider the following passage:

[...] the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend upon the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

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

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (OC, §§341-3)

As these remarks make clear, what Wittgenstein is suggesting is that it is not in any way *optional* that there be propositions which we believe and which play this hinge role of being devoid of rational support and yet nevertheless indubitable. (As Wittgenstein remarks elsewhere, certain doubts aren't "doubts in our game", but he goes on to emphasise, in parentheses, that it is "not as if we *chose* this game" (OC, §317)). In short, the suggestion is that the very possibility that one belief can count as a reason for or against another belief presupposes that there are some beliefs which play the role of being exempt from needing epistemic support, and thus that it is not arbitrary that one believes hinge propositions. The hinge proposition idea is thus essential to ensuring that Wittgenstein's thesis as regards the structure of reasons does not lead directly to an epistemic *angst* akin to (but not equivalent to) scepticism, since it is only with this idea in play that one can avoid the conclusion that our commitment to hinge propositions is, from a purely epistemic point of view at least, entirely arbitrary—i.e., the conclusion that, strictly speaking, none of our beliefs are rationally held.

There is a further feature of the Wittgensteinian picture of the structure of reasons which is important here, and which is often missed. Much of what has been said about Wittgenstein's view of the structure of reasons thus far could equally apply to similar anti-sceptical remarks made by J. L. Austin regarding when it is appropriate to enter a doubt or a claim to know (see, especially, Austin 1961). Like Wittgenstein, Austin is also suspicious of the idea of a fully general epistemic evaluation and the theses that might be thought to go with such an idea, such as that there are no in principle constraints on when a doubt can legitimately be entered or on when a claim to know can legitimately be made. Moreover, like Wittgenstein, Austin's suspicions are backed-up by a subtle commentary on how we actually enter doubts and claims to know, a commentary which reveals that our ordinary epistemic practices themselves eschew the idea of a fully general epistemic evaluation. And if one can show that our ordinary epistemic practices exclude the kind of fully general epistemic evaluation that leads to the sceptical problem, then it would appear that one can thereby argue that the default position is the anti-sceptical view advocated by Austin rather than the alternative sceptical picture. Put simply, the sceptic is now exposed as being in the grip of a

contentious philosophical theory, and if this is right then it seems that we can legitimately dismiss the sceptical conclusions as being simply the product of this faulty theory.

As Barry Stroud (1984, chapter 2) famously argued, however, the problem faced by this Austinian approach to the sceptical problem is that the anti-sceptical import of this observation is moot. The reason for this is that the sceptic does not need to claim that our ordinary epistemic practices license such epistemic evaluation in order to show that her doubts are not the product of a faulty theoretical picture. All she needs to do is maintain that the picture that she works with, while not the one we in fact use, is nevertheless a *purified* version of our everyday picture. The sceptic could argue, for example, that while it is true that we never undertake fully general epistemic evaluations in normal life, the reason for this is that such an evaluation would be impractical. The sceptical claim would thus be that in the context of an epistemologically ‘pure’ inquiry—i.e., one in which we set all practical limitations like time and opportunity cost to one side—we *would* seek a fully general epistemic evaluation. The sceptical claim, therefore, is that while there are good reasons why our ordinary epistemic practices do not lead to fully general epistemic evaluations, such practices nevertheless do legitimate such evaluations since it is only mere practical considerations which prevent the everyday epistemic practices transforming themselves into the kinds of practices envisaged by the sceptic. Accordingly, the sceptic can maintain that she is not in the grip of a faulty theoretical picture at all, but simply working with a more refined version of our ordinary epistemic practices.

It is for this reason that I think it is important to the Wittgensteinian line not merely that it shows that our ordinary epistemic practices do not licence the kind of fully general epistemic evaluations employed by the traditional epistemologist (both sceptic and anti-sceptic), but also that it highlights why such practices are in fact completely *disconnected* from the sceptical picture on which fully general epistemic evaluations are possible. And, indeed, this is exactly what Wittgenstein does in *On Certainty* with the picture that he offers of the structure of reasons with the notion of a hinge propositions at its heart: it is precisely not a mere practical limitation on our practices that certain propositions are exempt from epistemic evaluation, but part of the very logic of an epistemic evaluation. Such, indeed, is the moral of the §§341-3 that we cited above.⁴

There are other arguments that Wittgenstein offers in order to motivate the idea that all epistemic evaluation must essentially presuppose commitment to hinges, many of which are direct consequences of the picture of the structure of reasons that he offers. For example, one argument that Wittgenstein puts forward in this respect proceeds by noting that these

commitments are required in order for one to even make sense of the doubt in the first place—i.e., for the doubt to be meaningfully expressed. In essence, the claim is that given the certainty attached to hinges, to doubt them is to call the framework as a whole into question, and with it all that one believes. But if one does that, then one can no longer be confident of the meaning of one's words, and the ability to understand the doubt diminishes accordingly. As Wittgenstein remarks at one point:

If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either.

If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty. (OC, §§114-5; cf. OC, §§514-5)

And elsewhere, “A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt” (OC, §450; cf. OC, §§370; 490; 613).⁵ Wittgenstein is thus again challenging the sceptical picture whereby a wholesale epistemic evaluation of our beliefs is even possible.

A related claim that Wittgenstein makes in this regard is that certain kinds of mistake are impossible. For example, he writes:

If my friend were to imagine one day that he had been living for a long time past in such and such a place, etc. etc., I should not call this a mistake, but rather a mental disturbance, perhaps a transient one.

Not every false belief of this sort is a mistake. (OC, §§71-2; cf. OC, §§54; 155-8)

The point behind these remarks concerns how accounting for a false belief as a mistake requires that one can place that belief within some rational structure. If the putative mistake is too extreme, however, then it cannot be so placed. Accordingly, we cannot offer *reasons* for the mistake, but can instead only look for *causes* (in this case that of a mental disturbance). Hence, the sceptic cannot coherently offer grounds for thinking that our beliefs as a whole may rest on a mistake, she can only at best suggest possible causes for such massive error.

2. VARIETIES OF NON-EPISTEMICISM

A key issue facing the anti-sceptical import of the hinge proposition thesis concerns the epistemic standing of our beliefs in these propositions. As we noted above, it is hard to make sense of how such beliefs could be rationally grounded on the Wittgensteinian picture, and if they are not so grounded then—at least given that such beliefs are not foundational in any classical sense—it would seem to follow that they cannot be cases of knowledge either. But can we really make sense of the idea that, for example, I am unable to know that I have two

hands (at least in normal circumstances)? In order to engage with this issue, we need to explore the notion of a hinge proposition further. There are three main anti-sceptical theses in the contemporary epistemological literature that are inspired by this picture of a hinge proposition. Each has a different take on the claim that hinges are unknown. I will consider them in turn, starting with the *non-epistemicist* view that simply takes at face value the claim that hinges are unknown, a thesis that would clearly demand quite a radical revision in our epistemological outlook.

This position can be developed in a number of ways, depending on the explanation one gives for why hinge propositions are unknowable. The most radical explanation for why hinge propositions are unknowable is that hinges are not in fact propositions at all. Call this the *non-propositional* reading.⁶ One advantage that such a view has is that it ensures that our failure to know hinge propositions does not represent ignorance on our part, since there is *nothing*, strictly speaking, for us to be ignorant of. This feature of the view is obviously very important for its anti-sceptical credentials.

At least as regards certain propositions which might plausibly be classed as hinges, there is actually quite strong support for this reading. In particular, Wittgenstein's treatment of 'There are physical objects' (e.g., OC, §35) seems to fit this reading. As Michael Williams (2003) has noted, the first sixty-five sections of *On Certainty* are focussed not on Moore's (1925) 'Defence of Common Sense', but rather on his 'Proof of an External World' (Moore 1939). Crucially, however, whereas the former paper is concerned with showing that we have knowledge of many of the everyday propositions that we think we know—such as that the earth has existed for many years—the latter paper is specifically concerned with the problem of idealism, and thus tries to prove that there are physical objects. As regards the statement that there are physical objects, however, Wittgenstein seems to want to hold that it does not succeed in saying anything at all. He refers to such a statement as “nonsense” (OC, §35), and goes on to explain why by saying that 'physical object' is a “logical concept”:

“A is a physical object” is a piece of instruction which we give only to someone who doesn't yet understand what “A” means, or what “physical object” means. Thus it is instruction about the use of words, and “physical object” is a logical concept. (Like colour, quantity, ...) And that is why no such proposition as: “There are physical objects” can be formulated.

Yet we encounter such unsuccessful shots at every turn. (OC, §36; cf. OC, §§35-7)

The point being made here is that such a statement serves a purely grammatical role of showing how certain words can be used, and thus cannot play a fact-stating role.

Let us grant that a statement like 'There are physical objections' fails to express a

proposition. The important question is what follows from this. In particular, it is far from clear that we should on this basis grant that hinge propositions are not, strictly speaking, propositions at all. One reason for this arises out the point that Williams makes concerning how the early sections of *On Certainty* seem to have a different focus to the rest of the remarks published as this text. Accordingly, one could regard Wittgenstein as offering a different treatment of the anti-idealist claims made by the Moore of 1939 in contrast to the ‘commonsense’ claims to know put forward by the Moore of 1925. Indeed, I think there is a great deal of merit in taking this interpretive line. After all, it is very much in the spirit of the more general Wittgensteinian approach to philosophical language to regard the theoretical statements made by philosophers—such as ‘There are physical objects’—as suspect.

What (1925) Moore is at least *trying* to do with his claims to know, however, is not state some contentious philosophical thesis, but rather simply affirm commonsense, so it is unclear why Wittgenstein’s resistance to philosophical language should spill-over to undermine the content of these claims. Of course, in saying this we need to remember that Moore is trying to make a philosophical point with his assertions, and part of the Wittgensteinian response to Moore is to (at least) argue that Moore cannot make the point that he wants to make in this way. It is beyond dispute, then, that what Moore is asserting is unclear, that it is in some way conversationally inappropriate, and that it is philosophically ineffective. One can grant this much, however, without thereby conceding that Moore fails to say anything at all.

A further problem facing anyone who adopts the non-propositional reading of *On Certainty* is that Wittgenstein clearly wants to hold that a statement like ‘There are physical objects’ is *always* contentless, and yet part of the point of the hinge proposition analogy is that what is at one time a hinge may not function as a hinge at another time. Consider these passages:

The propositions describing this world picture [*i.e.*, *the hinges*] might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened and hard ones became fluid.

The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movements of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other. (OC, §§95-7)

Even putting to one side the fact that Wittgenstein here clearly regards the hinges as

propositions, it is also obvious that he thinks it is of the very nature of a hinge proposition that at certain times that very same proposition may no longer function as a hinge. The plain unvarying contentlessness of a statement like ‘There are physical objects’ on the Wittgensteinian view thus seems to decisively count against its being a hinge.

A different source of support for the non-propositional reading of *On Certainty* comes from the way that Wittgenstein often associates hinge propositions with a kind of visceral conviction which he contrasts with a judgement. Consider the following passage:

Giving grounds [...] 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; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game. (OC, §204; cf. OC, §§110; 148; 232; 342; 402)

Elsewhere, Wittgenstein characterises the certainty that attaches to hinges as being “something animal” (OC, §§358-9). One might extract from these remarks the thought that what Wittgenstein is fundamentally interested in is our hinge-like convictions to act in certain ways, rather than in there being certain propositions which we are convinced of.

Still, if this is the account of hinge propositions that Wittgenstein has in mind then it is at least odd that he refers to hinges throughout *On Certainty* as propositions. The proponent of the non-propositional view therefore has a fairly stiff exegetical task on her hands. A less radical form of non-epistemicism which avoids this difficulty holds that while hinges are indeed propositions, they are not fact-stating propositions but rather express norms. Call this the *non-factual* account of hinge propositions. Indeed, the ‘river-bed’ passages just quoted themselves provide strong support for this reading. After all, in talking of the hinges as “rules of a game” (even despite being “of the form of empirical propositions”), and also as “channels” for ordinary empirical propositions, the conclusion might naturally be drawn that hinge propositions express norms rather than being fact-stating. But if they do not express facts, then it follows that they are not in the market for being known either, and hence we get an explanation of just why hinge propositions are unknowable.⁷

Taken at face value at least, there is certainly more mileage in this weaker non-epistemicist reading of *On Certainty*. While it avoids some of the more pressing problems that face the non-propositional account of hinge propositions, it retains the key advantage of that proposal that there is nothing, strictly speaking, that one is ignorant of when one fails to know a hinge proposition, since this would presuppose that there is something—a fact-stating proposition—which was in the market for knowledge in the first place. Nevertheless, such a view still needs to contend with the problem of explaining how a proposition like ‘I have two

hands' can be non-fact-stating, and this is no easy task.

This reading also has the advantage of avoiding two problems that afflicts a third type of non-epistemicism.⁸ This view is even weaker than the non-factual proposal in that it allows that hinge propositions do indeed express fact-stating propositions. It thereby avoids the problem of explaining how a proposition like 'I have two hands' can fail to be fact-stating. Nevertheless, it retains the core thesis of non-epistemicism that such propositions are unknowable. Call this view the *simple non-epistemic* account of hinge propositions.

One immediate problem that faces simple non-epistemicism is that there is now something that one is ignorant of when one fails to know a hinge proposition; i.e., the fact-stating proposition in question. The problem, however, is to explain how such a view is to be differentiated from scepticism. After all, the sceptic would surely agree that we are unable to know the most basic propositions which we believe.

One way of doing this which would be very much in keeping with the approach to philosophical problems that Wittgenstein urges throughout his work would be to argue that what Wittgenstein is trying to get us to recognise through his remarks in *On Certainty* is the illegitimacy of the philosophical context in which a problem like scepticism emerges. The import of this to the simple non-epistemicist reading of *On Certainty* is that the issue of the epistemic status of hinge propositions only arises in philosophical contexts.⁹ Accordingly, if Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* enable us to see that such a context is somehow illegitimate, then this could be one way of reconciling us to the fact that hinge propositions are unknown. After all, if we (rightly) never enter the philosophical context, then we can feel no sense of loss at our lack of knowledge of these propositions.

For our purposes we can set to one side the issue of what motivates the claim that the philosophical context is illegitimate, since I think we can show that there is a fundamental problem facing simple non-epistemicism whatever thesis one puts forward in this respect. Moreover, it is also a problem which, as we will see, Wittgenstein himself alludes to.

The problem relates to the so-called closure principle for knowledge. We can formulate this principle, roughly, as follows:

The Closure Principle

If S knows that p , and S knows that p entails q , then S knows that q .¹⁰

So construed, the principle seems entirely uncontentious. For example, if I know that I am presently seated, and I know that if I am presently seated then I am not standing, then I also know that I am not presently standing. The principle only becomes contentious, however,

once we feed-in hinge propositions. After all, there are, it seems, non-hinge propositions which we know and which we know entail hinge propositions. If that is right, then it appears that we do know hinge propositions after all, contrary to what the simple non-epistemicist tells us.

For example, one proposition which Wittgenstein cites as being a hinge is that the earth has existed for a long time and has not recently come into existence (e.g., OC, §§84ff.). Presumably, however, concrete historical claims are not hinges. One can discover, and coherently offer reasons in support of one's discovery, that such-and-such happened at some point in the fairly distant past. Accordingly, one can know such concrete historical claims. But surely one also knows that these concrete historical claims entail that the earth has been around for a fairly long time and has not recently come into existence. With closure in play, then, it seems that we must know at least some hinges after all, in virtue of how they are entailed by other non-hinge propositions which we know.¹¹

Wittgenstein alludes to this difficulty in the following passage:

“It is certain that after the battle of Austerlitz Napoleon. ... Well, in that case it's surely also certain that the earth existed then.” (OC, §183; cf. OC, §§182-92)

There would clearly be something amiss with anyone who reasoned in this way, and the obvious explanation of why is that it is an inference that takes one from a non-hinge proposition to a hinge proposition. It is hard to see, however, why such an inference should be problematic on the simple non-epistemicist view. One can know non-hinge propositions, and surely one can also know the entailments that exist from non-hinge propositions to (fact-stating) hinge propositions. Given the closure principle, then, one is committed to holding that hinge propositions can be known after all.

One option available to the simple non-epistemicist is, of course, to deny the closure principle. Motivating the denial of such a principle is far from easy, however, given how intuitive it is, and so this is not a dialectical option to be taken lightly.¹²

Moreover, notice that even if it is the case that it is only in the illegitimate philosophical context that the issue of the epistemic status of hinge propositions explicitly arises, this doesn't seem to help the proponent of simple non-epistemicism deal with this problem. Presumably, in a normal context one can know the non-hinge proposition, know the relevant entailment, and (on this basis) believe the hinge proposition, even if an occasion never arises which would bring one to assert either the entailment or the entailed proposition. Just so long as one meets these conditions, however, and the closure principle holds, then

knowledge of the hinge proposition is inevitable.¹³

The moral we should draw from this problem is clear. If we are willing to go so far as to grant that the hinges are indeed fact-stating propositions—and if we want to retain the basic anti-sceptical thought that we are able to know lots of (non-hinge) propositions—then it is essential, given the highly intuitive closure principle, that we also regard hinge propositions as knowable. If one wishes to sustain a form of non-epistemicism, it is thus essential that one opts for either a version of the non-propositional account or a version of the non-factual account. Given the fairly major problems that affect the former, the latter seems the best option. In what follows, however, we will be considering two anti-sceptical views that are inspired by Wittgenstein’s remarks on hinges and the structure of reasons in *On Certainty* but which allow, in contrast to non-epistemicism, that we *can* know these propositions.¹⁴

3. CONTEXTUALISM

The first *epistemicist* conception of hinges that we will consider is a view that I will call *contextualism*.¹⁵ According to contextualism, the hinges are known just so long as one does not enter a context where such hinges are brought into question (which will usually be a philosophical context). Moreover, like weak non-epistemicism, this view also trades on a claim about the illegitimacy of the philosophical context in which the problem of scepticism arises. Although it is not offered as an interpretation of *On Certainty*—but merely as a position which is suggested by some themes in this text—Williams’ (1991) inferential contextualism offers a good example of how such a view might run.

The starting point for Williams is the Wittgensteinian idea that all epistemic evaluation presupposes a groundless commitment to a set of hinge propositions—what Williams (1991, 121-5) calls “methodological necessities”—where the hinges determine what counts as evidence for what. Williams notes that the standard sceptical response to this picture is to argue that while we may indeed take certain things for granted in normal everyday contexts, the true epistemic standing of our beliefs is exposed once we enter the philosophical context. In this context we abstract away from the practical constraints that operate in normal contexts and instead consider the epistemic standings of our beliefs while taking nothing for granted (think, for example, of the method of doubt employed by Descartes in the *Meditations*). Relative to this context we discover, claims the sceptic, that we do not know

any of the propositions which we thought we knew.

Williams' way of dealing with this sceptical response is ingenious. He argues that the force of sceptical arguments lies in the way that they seem not to depend on any theoretical claims at all, but rather simply fall out of common-sense.¹⁶ In contrast to this picture of sceptical doubt, Williams argues that the sceptic is in fact committed to a highly theoretical claim—what he calls “epistemological realism”—to the effect that the propositions we believe have an epistemic standing simply in virtue of the kind of propositions they are. For example, if one were a classical foundationalist, then one would partition beliefs into different epistemic kinds (basic and non-basic) in terms of the sort of proposition believed (e.g., whether the proposition concerned the ‘inner’ realm of the mental, rather than being concerned with the ‘outer’ realm of the world). The kind of contextualism that Williams claims is inspired by *On Certainty* instead holds that

[...] the epistemic status of a given proposition is liable to shift with situational, disciplinary and other contextually variable factors: it is to hold that, independently of such influences, a proposition has no epistemic status whatsoever. (Williams 1991, 119)

Moreover, Williams argues that to suppose otherwise is to commit oneself to a highly theoretical and dubious claim. Thus, scepticism does not fall out of common-sense at all, but is rather a product of a contentious piece of epistemological theory. It can thus be rejected with impunity.

In particular, Williams' claim is that while the sceptic appears to have presented us with a context in which an epistemic evaluation takes place that is not relative to a set of hinges, in fact all they have presented us with is a context which takes as a hinge the theoretical commitment to epistemological realism. They have not then offered us a counterexample to the Wittgensteinian claim that all epistemic evaluation is relative to a set of hinges, but merely presented us with a context which has different hinges to those in operation in normal, non-philosophical, contexts.

Williams thus grants to the sceptic that it is true that in the sceptical context we do indeed know next to nothing, and thus that scepticism is in this sense correct. Nevertheless, that the sceptic can create a context in which we lack knowledge does not mean that we lack knowledge in *quotidian* contexts where our everyday hinge beliefs are not brought forward for epistemic evaluation. The crucial point here is that Williams claims that the sceptical context is just another hinge-relative context, and so the conclusions derived in that context must be understood in that light. As Williams puts the matter:

The sceptic takes himself to have discovered, under the conditions of philosophical reflection, that knowledge of the world is impossible. But in fact, the most he has discovered is that knowledge of the world is *impossible under the conditions of philosophical reflection*. (Williams 1991, 130)

That is, the sceptical context is now just one context amongst others, with no theoretical ascendancy over other contexts and with unquestioned hinges of its own. That it is true, relative to the hinges of the sceptical context (such as the assumption that there is a context-invariant epistemic structure that can be discerned via philosophical reflection), that we know very little, does not mean that in everyday contexts in which different hinges are in play we fail to know what we take ourselves to know, which is what the sceptic claims.

Unlike the non-epistemicist, however, Williams *does* claim that one can know the hinge propositions of one's context and, accordingly, he does not face the problem that we saw was posed by the principle of closure for simple non-epistemicism above. If I know that Napoleon won the battle of Austerlitz in 1805, and know that this entails that the earth did not spring into existence five minutes ago (replete with the apparent traces of a distant ancestry), then I also know that the earth did not spring into existence five minutes ago, even though commitment to such a claim is clearly part of the hinges of any normal context. What is crucial for Williams is that one cannot use the historical reasons that one might cite in favour of the former claim in order to motivate the latter claim, the hinge. In doing so, claims Williams, one is thereby no longer taking the relevant hinges for granted and so one enters a new context with different hinges and thus a different inferential structure. In particular, Williams argues that it is only in response to prompting by the sceptic that one would seek such a grounding for one's hinge beliefs, and so the context that one would enter would be the sceptical context. In this context, though, one lacks knowledge not only of the fact that the earth did not come unto existence five minutes ago, but also of the historical fact in question. There is thus no single context in which both propositions are explicitly considered, and both known.

This is an elegant way of developing the Wittgensteinian line. It has affinities with some non-epistemicist views in that it in effect regards the philosophical context, with its claim to offer a fully general epistemic evaluation of our beliefs that does not presuppose any hinges, as essentially suspect. Crucially, though, in allowing us knowledge of hinge propositions, this view avoids the key problem posed for simple non-epistemicism by the closure principle, while also enabling us to clearly distinguish this anti-sceptical thesis from scepticism.

One potential problem that Williams' view faces concerns the odd status of the

sceptical context. After all, Williams would surely agree that unless the hinges of one's context (the relevant ones at any rate) were true, then one could not gain knowledge via any inquiry conducted in that context. For instance, if the earth did indeed spring into existence five minutes ago, then I don't have any historical knowledge. The trouble is, the sceptical context employs a hinge proposition which Williams seems to be suggesting is *a priori* false. Accordingly, it seems that the sceptic does not "discover" anything at all in the context of philosophical reflection, since to discover is to come to know, and the sceptic doesn't know even the truth of her scepticism. Thus, the sceptic's context is not only illegitimate because of its use of a contentious theoretical hinge, but it is also a context in which nothing can be known.

In itself, this may seem to be more of an advantage to the view than a disadvantage, in that it further emphasises the anti-sceptical credentials of the position. The problem emerges once one factors-in that Williams wants his position to accommodate the *prima facie* pull which philosophers feel towards scepticism. That is, like all contextualists, he wants to offer a sense in which the sceptic is right, albeit not in the way that the sceptic supposes. Provided that we read his view correctly, however, it turns out there is no truth in scepticism at all, not even in the context inhabited by the sceptic.

Moreover, if this is right then it is hard to see why we should regard the view as a *contextualist* thesis at all. After all, if it is true that all epistemic evaluation takes places against a backdrop of a groundless commitment to hinges, and that scepticism presupposes a theoretical picture which is committed to a conflicting account of epistemic evaluation, then these two points alone will suffice to deal with the sceptical problem. We do not seem to need to appeal to contexts, much less to the idea that "the epistemic status of a given proposition is liable to shift with situational, disciplinary and other contextually variable factors" (Williams 1991, 119).¹⁷ In any case, it isn't at all clear that we can make sense of the thesis of epistemological realism as being a hinge, especially given that it is such a highly theoretical claim. Hinges, recall, are more akin to 'solidified' chunks of common-sense, rather than contentious philosophical and theoretical theses.

A related problem facing Williams' position concerns the status of the context in which he conducts his own investigations into scepticism. If merely running thought the 'Napoleon' inference described above suffices to take one into the sceptical context, then why aren't Williams' own reflections on knowledge conducted within such a context, and so (by his own lights) essentially pointless (since, recall, nothing can be discovered in this context)?

A final problem facing this position concerns how it can account for our knowledge of

hinges given that such knowledge cannot be grounded in reasons. Since this problem faces any epistemicist treatment of hinge propositions—i.e., any view which treats such propositions as knowable—we will examine this problem in the light of the second epistemicist thesis that we will be looking at here.

4. NEO-MOOREANISM(S)

The critical focus of *On Certainty* is, of course, Moore's remarks on scepticism. Given that Moore's central claim is that he knows the relevant hinge propositions, one might think that Wittgenstein's strong critical reaction entails that he must regard us as being unable to know such propositions. As we have seen, there is some support in the text for this thesis, though the view faces some problems. Nevertheless, there are also grounds for caution on this score, since there are other passages which suggest a weaker reading according to which we can know these propositions, though not in any way that would license the sort of assertions that Moore makes. As Wittgenstein puts it at one point:

Moore's mistake lies in this—countering the assertion that one cannot know that [*a hinge*], by saying “I do know it”. (OC, §521)

One influential version of this thesis—what I shall refer to as *neo-Mooreanism*—can be found in recent work by Crispin Wright (e.g., 1991; 2000; 2002; 2003a; 2003b; 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; cf. Davies 1998; 2000; 2003; 2004). Wright's idea is that what Wittgenstein is highlighting is that there are certain propositions belief in which is a pre-requisite of engagement in any epistemic evaluation, and which therefore cannot be offered supporting grounds. Nevertheless, argues Wright, this does not mean that such beliefs are not epistemically supported (and so cannot be known), but only that the epistemic support that these beliefs enjoy cannot, as Wright puts it, be “earned”. Instead, these beliefs enjoy epistemic support which is “unearned”, but which is positive epistemic support nonetheless.

Central to Wright's thesis is a distinction between the principle of closure and a related principle which he refers to as “transmission”. We can roughly express the transmission principle as follows:

The Transmission Principle

If *S* knows that *p* on the basis of supporting grounds *G*, and *S* competently deduces *q* from *p* (thereby coming to believe *q* while retaining her knowledge that *p*), then *G* is sufficient to support *S*'s knowledge that *q*.¹⁸

The key difference between the closure principle and the transmission principle is that while the former simply states that the known to be entailed proposition is itself known, the latter specifies the manner in which this proposition is known. In particular, it specifies that the very same grounds which epistemically support knowledge of the entailing proposition will also support knowledge of the entailed proposition. This difference ensures that the transmission principle is more demanding than the closure principle.

We saw above that some of Wittgenstein's remarks on hinge propositions seem to have the result that closure must be rejected. This is because there are proposition which, it seems, we can know by Wittgenstein's lights but which are known to entail (fact-stating) hinge propositions, propositions which, on one reading of Wittgenstein at any rate, are unknowable. Wright's idea is that the distinction between closure and transmission can help us out here. What follows from Wittgenstein's claim that belief in hinge propositions cannot be epistemically supported is only that the transmission principle fails, since the grounds we have for belief in non-hinge propositions cannot 'transmit' across a known entailment to be grounds for belief in a hinge proposition. Nevertheless, that doesn't mean that closure fails, since it remains an option that hinge propositions are known so long as they are not known on the basis of grounds that we can coherently offer in favour of belief in these propositions (i.e., the epistemic standing of our belief in such propositions must be unearned).

Consider again the problematic inference that we considered above:

- (1) Napoleon did X after the battle of Austerlitz.
- (2) If Napoleon did X after the battle of Austerlitz, then the universe did not spring into existence five minutes ago replete with the apparent traces of a distant ancestry.
- (C) The universe did not spring into existence five minutes ago replete with the apparent traces of a distant ancestry.

If closure holds, then if an agent knows (1) and (2), she will also know (C). There certainly does seem something wrong with this inference, however, and the Wittgensteinian explanation of what is wrong with it appears to fit very neatly. That is, if we grant that propositions of the sort that figure in (C) can function as hinges—such that they are the framework relative to which epistemic evaluations are conducted, and so cannot be subjected to an epistemic evaluation themselves—then it follows that there must be something wrong with an inference of this sort. After all, how can reasoning in this way provide one with supporting grounds for (C) given that a prior, and groundless, commitment to (C) must be in place in order for one to coherently offer grounds in favour of (1) in the first place? Recall our description of the Wittgensteinian conception of the structure of reasons. If (C) is a hinge

proposition, then nothing is more certain than it, and so nothing can count as a supporting ground for it. Furthermore, (1), since it isn't a hinge proposition, is certainly less certain than (C). It would clearly be incoherent, then, for (1) to constitute one's supporting ground for (C).

This line of thinking naturally prompts one to wonder whether the principle of closure should be rejected in order to deal with the problem, but Wright's proposal offers an alternative strategy. Rather than holding that the problem here is that (C) is unknowable (at least *qua* hinge), one can instead maintain that the difficulty facing this inference is only that the grounds in favour of (1) do not transmit across the known entailment to offer support for (C). This claim, however, is consistent with the thought that (C) is nonetheless known, at least if we can make sense of an "unearned" epistemic support for our belief in hinge propositions. But can we make sense of such support?

Here is the progression of argument in Wright's most recent article on this topic. First, we have the Wittgensteinian claim about the necessity of hinge propositions:

To take it that one has acquired a warrant for a particular proposition by the appropriate exercise of certain appropriate cognitive capacities [...] always involves various kinds of presupposition. [...] I take Wittgenstein's point [...] to be that this is essential: *one cannot but* take certain such things for granted. (Wright 2004c, 16).

On the face of it, of course, this conclusion is just as much a ground for scepticism than for any anti-sceptical thesis, since one might naturally conclude that from a purely epistemic point of view we lack adequate grounds in support of our beliefs (ultimately, our beliefs are groundlessly held). Wright's response to this charge is to argue, in effect, that what the Wittgensteinian thesis regarding the necessity of hinges highlights is that we are in the grip of a faulty conception of the epistemic landscape, and therefore aspiring to something that we should recognise as both unobtainable and incoherent. He writes:

Since there is *no such thing* as a process of warrant for each of whose specific presuppositions warrant has already been earned, it should not be reckoned to be part of the proper concept of an acquired warrant that it somehow aspire to this—incoherent—ideal. [...] This strategy of reply concedes that the best sceptical arguments have something to teach us—that the limits of justification they bring out are genuine and essential—but then replies that, just for that reason, cognitive achievement must be reckoned to take place *within such limits*. The attempt to surpass them would result not in an increase in rigour or solidity but merely in cognitive paralysis. (Wright 2004c, 17-18)

A quick reading of these passages might well give the reader the impression that what Wright is urging upon us here is a purely pragmatic response to the sceptical problem.¹⁹ That is, that since the goal of earning a warrant for all of our beliefs, including our beliefs in hinges, is impossible, hence we should not allow all warrants to be earned. After all, to

suppose otherwise would lead to “cognitive paralysis”. One who is already swayed by sceptical arguments will not be persuaded by such a pragmatic line, however. It is hardly news to the sceptic that sceptical reasoning leads to cognitive paralysis.

But such a purely pragmatic reading of Wright’s anti-scepticism is too quick. In order to see this, suppose for a moment that one is a truth seeker who has come to recognise that there is no alternative but to groundlessly presuppose hinge propositions in one’s inquiry. The choice, then, is between continuing one’s inquiries and allowing the hinges to “lie apart from the route travelled by enquiry” (OC, §88), and ceasing to inquire at all. Given that the later strategy would be *guaranteed* to prevent one from gaining true beliefs—and given that the former strategy is, *ex hypothesi*, the best strategy available for gaining true beliefs—wouldn’t it be *rational* for such an agent to choose a hinge-directed inquiry over cognitive paralysis?²⁰ Moreover, and this is the crux of the point, since the goal here is explicitly the epistemic goal of gaining true beliefs, isn’t the rationality in question here entirely *epistemic*?

This, I suggest, is the right way to read Wright’s proposal; not as advocating a pragmatic response to scepticism, but rather as attempting to highlight that an anti-sceptical consequence of the picture of the structure of reasons offered by Wittgenstein is that it is epistemically rational to believe hinges even though we necessarily lack any direct epistemic support for them.²¹

Still, such a view faces a serious problem even on this construal, which is to explain in virtue of what the epistemic support for our hinge beliefs consists, given that it is not an epistemic support that comes through being appropriately grounded (this, recall, was the final problem facing Williams’ contextualist thesis that we alluded to above). The reasoning that we just ran through—if successful at any rate—would certainly provide indirect support for our hinge beliefs by showing that such belief is epistemically rational, but this fact won’t obviously be of any assistance to those mere mortals who lack the intellectual resources to run through the argument, and that is hardly satisfactory.²²

Part of the problem that someone like Wright faces on this score is that he wishes to maintain this style of anti-scepticism whilst also holding on to his commitment to epistemic internalism (e.g., Wright 2004c, 29). Typically, epistemic internalists hold that a necessary condition of knowing a proposition is that one has adequate reflectively accessible supporting grounds in favour of one’s belief in that proposition, and Wright would normally impose such a demand on knowledge. When it comes to (our everyday) belief in hinge propositions, however, he is forced to make an exception, and that has the problem of making his anti-sceptical strategy look *ad hoc*. After all, it is not as if our belief in hinge propositions could be

thought to be self-justifying in any way—such beliefs are not self-evident, for example. What, then, from an internalist point of view, could possibility epistemically support such beliefs?

If one is willing to endorse some form of epistemic externalism, however, and consequently drops the requirement that knowledge always be supported by adequate reflectively accessible grounds, then this problem need not be decisive. An obvious example of an externalist theory of knowledge that could be relevant here is agent reliabilism, as defended by John Greco (e.g., 1999). On this view, knowledge is analysed as (roughly) true belief that arises out of the reliable operation of an agent's epistemic virtue, broadly conceived—that is, her intellectual virtues and cognitive faculties. Is one's belief in hinge propositions virtuous on this conception? For the person in the street, this question reduces to whether the strategy they unconsciously employ of taking the hinges for granted is indeed a reliable way of getting to the truth. If it is, then, since no reason has been presented for thinking that this strategy is problematic, one could certainly make the case that it is virtuous to believe hinge propositions.

One could claim, of course, that the virtuous person would always seek rational support for a belief before holding it, but there seems no obvious reason why we should build this demand into the notion of epistemic virtue, at least not unless we were already convinced by epistemic internalism. Moreover, the requirement to always seek grounds in favour of one's beliefs seems very unlike a virtue for the simple reason that a virtue, standardly conceived, lies between two viceful extremes. The epistemic virtue of being conscientious is surely intermediate between the epistemic vice of carelessness and the epistemic vice of being far too careful, such that one's inquiries become completely stymied.

The case of the agent who has confronted the sceptical problem raises a separate issue, however. That the conscientious person should not always actively seek epistemic support for her beliefs is one thing; that the conscientious person should not actively seek epistemic support for a belief which has *by her own lights* been called into question is quite another. Here, it seems, intellectual virtue demands that one remain agnostic where possible until further support is found. Nevertheless, the kind of 'epistemic rationality' interpretation of Wright's strategy outlined above could well suffice to ensure that such belief was again epistemically appropriate, so long, of course, that the reliability condition was also being met.

Epistemic externalism may thus have the resources to enable one to both allow that our beliefs in hinge propositions lack direct epistemic support in the form of reflectively accessible grounds while nevertheless being such that these beliefs can count as instances of knowledge. On the face of it, such an externalist response to the sceptical problem seems like

a thousand miles away from what Wittgenstein was up to in *On Certainty*. That said, it is not obvious that such an approach is inconsistent with what Wittgenstein has to say there. After all, this approach grants the key Wittgensteinian point about the structure of reasons and the role that hinges have to play in that structure. Moreover, as noted above, Wittgenstein's primary focus is on Moore's *assertions* that he knows these hinge propositions, and our related practice of offering reasons for and against certain claims. The issue of whether or not Moore does indeed know these propositions is never fully resolved—what we are told is just that such knowledge (if it is possessed) is not grounded in reasons, and thus that a claim to know in this regard is inappropriate, possibly even incoherent.

Here, then, in essence, is the idea.²³ We take the Wittgensteinian conception of the structure of reasons as only imposing a constraint on both knowledge claims and doubts—i.e., this account of the structure of reasons entails both that we are unable to rationally doubt or properly claim to know hinge propositions. Both Moore's anti-sceptical assertions and the sceptic's doubts are thus undermined. Nevertheless, this claim about the propriety of certain assertions and the rationality of certain doubts is differentiated from the issue of whether we know hinge propositions, thus opening up logical space for an account of knowledge which allows knowledge to be possessed even in the absence of adequate reflectively accessible support grounds for the target belief.²⁴

On the face of it, this line of argument may seem to trivialise Wittgenstein's remarks on scepticism, since it appears to radically constraint their import for the debate. I'm not convinced that this is so, however, at least once one spells-out the idea adequately. After all, that we are unable to claim to know these propositions which we are most certain of clearly does require a radical revision in our conception of the epistemic landscape, especially since this constraint also impacts upon sceptical counterclaims as well. Moreover, the Wittgensteinian thesis that our practices of offering grounds presupposes a framework of ungrounded certainties is essential to giving this stance the motivation it requires, since it is only with this claim in play that we come to see that what the sceptic and the anti-sceptic are trying to achieve with their assertions is hopeless.

It would seem, then, that Wittgenstein's approach to scepticism has important ramifications for contemporary epistemology even if it is set within an externalist framework. Indeed, one might go further than this and plausibly argue that recognising and incorporating the insights provided by Wittgenstein's treatment of scepticism in *On Certainty* is essential to the proper development of any externalist anti-sceptical epistemology.^{25,26}

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NOTES

¹ Here, and in what follows, I use ‘OC’ to refer to *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1969).

² This example is, of course, from Austin (1961). There are many common themes in Austin’s and Wittgenstein’s work on this score. I comment further on this below.

³ Although the “hinge” metaphor is the dominant symbolism in the book, it is accompanied by various other metaphors, such as the following: that these propositions constitute the “scaffolding” of our thoughts (OC, §211); that they form the “foundations of our language-games” (OC, §§401-3); and also that they represent the implicit “world-picture” from within which we inquire, the “inherited background against which [*we*] distinguish between true and false” (OC, §§94-5).

⁴ It seems to me that many commentators have missed this aspect of the Wittgensteinian anti-sceptical thesis. One key exception, who has very much informed my reading of Wittgenstein here, is Michael Williams. See, especially, Williams (1991, *passim*). I discuss Williams’ view further below.

⁵ There are obvious affinities here with the anti-sceptical use of the principle of charity made by Davidson (1984; 1986).

⁶ For some works which display a great deal of sympathy with the non-propositional construal of hinges, see Stroll (1994), Moyal-Sharrock (2004) and Phillips (2005).

⁷ For what is perhaps the best attempt at running a non-epistemicist response to scepticism that is cast along these non-factualist lines, see Wright (1985), though note that Wright himself grants that such an approach will only work as regards certain kinds of sceptical problem. (We will consider how Wright approaches other types of scepticism below, since his work in this regard is also heavily influenced by *On Certainty*). One can detect (varying degrees of) sympathy with this general approach to hinge propositions in a number of places. See, for example, McGinn (1989), Stroll (1994), Conant (1998) and Minar (2005).

⁸ Albeit not a variety of non-epistemicism which, to my knowledge, has been explicitly defended in the literature (though I have heard this view presented in conversation on a number of occasions).

⁹ Of course, we might question the epistemic standing of these propositions in abnormal (though not philosophical) contexts—such as, in the case of ‘I have hands’, the context of a car accident that was described above—but in such abnormal contexts this proposition would no longer be functioning as a hinge. Relatedly, as we noted above, Wittgenstein seems open to the possibility that the class of hinge propositions might change over time, in which case a proposition which functioned as a hinge in normal circumstances today might be a normal empirical proposition at some point in the future, and so coherently subject to an epistemic evaluation. Again, though, we would not be epistemically evaluating this proposition *qua* hinge proposition.

¹⁰ There are ways of refining the closure principle in order to deal with some fairly uninteresting counterexamples to the simple formulation offered here (such as cases in which one satisfies the antecedent but does not satisfy the consequent because one does not believe the entailed proposition, or believes it for unrelated, and poor, reasons). In order to keep matters simple, I will not engage with these issues here. For the most up to date discussion of the closure principle, see the exchange between Dretske (2005a; 2005b) and Hawthorne (2005).

¹¹ Note that this specific problem does not arise for the other two non-epistemicist readings of *On Certainty* for the simple reason that the relevant entailment cannot go through if the entailed ‘proposition’ is not a proposition (or at least not a fact-stating proposition at any rate). These non-epistemicist readings do face a related problem, however, which is to explain why a fact-stating proposition expressing a normal historical claim does not entail that the universe has been around for long enough to ensure that this historical claim could be true, such that there is a fact-stating proposition which expresses this hinge.

¹² That said, the principle has been denied, most notably by Dretske (1970) and Nozick (1981).

¹³ One possible line of response to this problem that the proponent of simple non-epistemicism could offer could be to claim that hinge propositions, while fact-stating propositions, are nevertheless not in the market for belief. Accordingly, the closure-based inference is blocked in virtue of the fact that the agent concerned is not able to even believe the entailed proposition, let alone know it. There may be some mileage in this manoeuvre since it is certainly true that on some accounts of belief it would be inappropriate to describe our pro-attitude to hinge propositions as being one of belief. Nevertheless, it is far from clear how this proposal helps the view since it still remains that closure is being denied. Moreover, one would be left with the new problem of explaining how one could know a proposition, know that this proposition entailed a second proposition, and yet fail to even believe the entailed proposition. Such a state of affairs is itself mysterious.

¹⁴ My discussion of non-epistemicism is inevitably a little glib, and leaves out a number of important considerations that are relevant to this topic (such as how best to understand the very notion of a proposition). Two further issues are also worthy of note. The first is the extent to which we can treat Wittgenstein as endorsing a radically context-sensitive approach to meaning, a thesis that would obviously be relevant in this regard. For discussion of such a view, see Travis (1989). The second is the issue of how best to understand the nonsense that results on the non-epistemicist view when one asserts (or doubts) a hinge. Is it, for example, just plain nonsense, or is it somehow philosophically significant nonsense (if such a thing is possible)? For more on this issue, see the exchange between Conant (1998) and McGinn (2002).

¹⁵ It is important to remember that this view is very different from the kind of attributer contextualist views that are currently popular in the literature (e.g., DeRose 1995; Lewis 1996; Cohen 2000). For a comparative discussion of these two types of contextualism, see Pritchard (2002c).

¹⁶ As Stroud (1984, 82) famously puts it, scepticism falls-out of “platitudes” that “we would all accept”.

¹⁷ Though, of course, one might have independent reasons for advancing a contextualism of this sort. Interestingly, there has been a recent upsurge of interest in the kind of subject contextualism that Williams advocates, prompted by two influential books by Hawthorne (2004) and Stanley (2005)—though, oddly, neither book so much as references Williams’ version of subject contextualism—and in each case the view is motivated independently of the sceptical problem. It is because of the anti-sceptical irrelevance of the appeal to context that I have argued elsewhere that Williams’ view is best read, *qua* anti-sceptical thesis, as a form of epistemic deflationism, since it aims to ‘deflate’ the epistemological project by showing that the idea of a fully general hinge-independent epistemic evaluation is impossible. See Pritchard (2004).

¹⁸ One might need to complicate this principle in order to get it just right, but this version will do for our purposes here. For example, one might naturally hold that the inference will itself contribute epistemic support to one’s belief in the entailed proposition, and hence that this should be included in the grounds which support that belief. What is important, however, is the idea that it is not just knowledge that transmits across known entailment in cases which satisfy the transmission principle, but also that the grounds which support the entailing proposition also transmit, even if they are necessarily accompanied by further grounds. In any case, in what follows I will set this problem of formulation, and others like it, to one side.

¹⁹ Indeed, that was how I interpreted Wright’s comments in this regard in Pritchard (2005b).

²⁰ Of course, it is important to remember here that it is hardly a *decision* on our part to believe hinge propositions (recall that it is “not as if we *chose* this game” (OC, §317)). Such talk of ‘choosing’ a hinge-directed inquiry should thus be understood very loosely.

²¹ Clearly, this approach requires some spelling-out, which I haven’t the space to attempt here. For a recent critical discussion of this ‘epistemic rationality’ reading of Wright’s conception of hinge propositions, see Jenkins (*forthcoming*). For an excellent critique of Wright’s anti-sceptical view more generally, see McGinn (*forthcoming*).

²² Wright (2004c, 204-5) is in any case explicit that he does not want our unearned epistemic support for our hinge beliefs to be purely the preserve of the philosopher.

²³ I develop this style of neo-Mooreanism in more detail in a number of places. See especially Pritchard (2002a, §8; 2005a, part one; *forthcominga*).

²⁴ Indeed, Wright’s comments elsewhere indicate that he may be amenable to this approach, since he notes (Wright 2004c, 209-11) that his primary concern is with a notion of epistemic support which enables one to properly claim to have knowledge. Thus, he could be read as an internalist about the conditions under which one can properly claim knowledge while nevertheless being an externalist about knowledge who allows that knowledge is sometimes possessed even in the absence of adequate supporting reflectively accessible grounds.

²⁵ One lacuna in this paper is the anti-sceptical writings of McDowell (e.g., 1995) which are in part inspired by Wittgenstein’s remarks on scepticism. Discussing McDowell would take us too far afield which is why I have not included his view here. For an unsympathetic reading of McDowell’s anti-scepticism in the light of Wittgenstein’s remarks in *On Certainty*, see Pritchard (2003), though note that in more recent work—especially Pritchard (*forthcomingb*)—I take a more sympathetic stance.

²⁶ An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the ‘Twentieth Century Philosophy: Scepticism’ conference at the University of Manchester in May 2006. I am grateful to the audience that day, especially Marie McGinn and Michael Williams. I am in addition particularly grateful to Marie for the extremely helpful comments that she subsequently offered on a draft of this paper. Thanks also to Peter Sullivan.