SCEPTICISM, CERTAINTY, MOORE AND WITTGENSTEIN

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G.E. Moore’s ‘A Defence of Common Sense’ was first published in 1925 and his ‘Proof of an External World’ fourteen years later. Apparently Wittgenstein had a long-standing interest in these papers and in the last eighteen months of his life, stimulated by discussions with Norman Malcolm while his house-guest in Ithaca in 1949, he composed the notes we now have as *On Certainty*. My question here is whether Wittgenstein’s last philosophical thoughts point to a principled and stable response to the issue at which Moore’s papers had been directed—the issue of scepticism, and particularly scepticism about our knowledge of the material world. My eventual and hesitant answer will be: yes, though the development here will be inevitably sketchy. And it will be focused upon one specific—though as disturbing as any, and very general—form of sceptical argument, which I shall begin by eliciting, ironically, from the consideration of something that was supposed to help—Moore’s curious ‘Proof’ itself.

1.

Moore’s ‘Proof’ and scepticism

Assessments of the accomplishment of Moore’s work in this area are, familiarly, various. Anscocme and von Wright report that Wittgenstein himself rated ‘Proof of an External World’ Moore’s best ever paper and told him so. Moore, it seems, modestly agreed. But many wouldn’t. The greater part of the essay is devoted to some, frankly, turgid ruminations on what it means to describe objects as ‘external’, or ‘outside our minds’ or ‘presented in space’ or ‘to be met with in space’. No particularly startling consequences emerge. And the actual ‘Proof’—which everyone on first reading feels blatantly begs the question—is confined to the last few pages.

Here is the essence of it:

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<th>Premise</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
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<td>Here is a hand</td>
<td>There is a material world (since any hand is a material object existing in space)</td>
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Where the premise is asserted in a context where Moore, as he supposes, is holding his hands up in front of his face, in good light, in a state of visual and cognitive lucidity, etc.

Why is this so evidently unsatisfactory? It is not that Moore is working with some outré concept of proof: his concept of a proof is that of a valid argument from known or warranted premises. That seems pretty standard. And the argument given is (trivially) valid. Nor is it happy to say that the problem is that Moore doesn’t first prove his premise. He perfectly fairly points out that it cannot always be reasonable to demand proof of the premises of a proof—sometimes we must claim knowledge without proof, or proof cannot get started. Moreover the premise—so Moore can plausibly contend—is probably more certain, in the relevant context, than the least certain premise in any sceptical argument, even the best.

Still, the offered ‘Proof’ surely isn’t a proof at all.

The general issue this raises is under what circumstances a valid argument is indeed at the service of proof, i.e. the generation of a rational conviction of—or the rational overcoming of doubt about—the truth of its conclusion. That’s the question, in what is becoming standard terminology, of when a particular epistemic warrant for its premises transmits across an entailment. Here we shall only need part of a more general, theoretical answer. To wit: a particular warrant for its premises transmits across an entailment only when one’s path to that warrant does not require picking up knowledge of the conclusion en route. Obviously that condition will not be met in explicitly circular arguments, when the very conclusion features among the premises. But there are other cases where it is contravened in a more subtle manner.

One important class of such cases connect with the holism of empirical confirmation emphasised in the last two sections of Quine’s ‘Two Dogmas’. Consider some simple examples. At work in my office in New York City, I hear a thunderous rumble and sense a vibration in the building. Is that evidence of an incipient electric storm? Yes, if the sky has darkened and the atmosphere is heavy and still. Probably not, if the sky outside is clear blue, given that my office overlooks Amsterdam Avenue with its regular cargo of outsize trucks. I see a massive-seeming brownish bird of prey perching on a fence post. A sighting of a golden eagle, perhaps? Quite possibly, if I am in the wilds of Torridon in the north-western Scottish Highlands; but not if I am knowingly in Welsh farmland, where buzzards have become quite common.

Such examples suggest that what is normal in empirical cases is information-dependence of warrant. A body of evidence, e, is an information-dependent warrant for a particular proposition P if whether e is correctly regarded as warranting P depends on what one has by way of collateral information, I. Consider any case where one’s collateral information, I, does indeed sustain e’s warranting P but where e could not rationally be regarded as warranting P if certain elements of I were missing and uncompensated for. Such a relationship is always liable to generate examples of transmission-failure: it will do so just when the particular e, P and I have the feature that needed elements of the
relevant I are themselves entailed by P (together perhaps with other warranted premises). In that case, any warrant supplied by e for P will not be transmissible to those elements of I. Warrant is transmissible in such a case only if a rational thinker could cite as her ground for accepting I the fact that she has warrant for P together with the entailment. No rational thinker could do that if the warrant for P supplied by e depends on prior and independent warrant for I.

To fix ideas here are four examples of that shape. First (AIRPORT) suppose you are waiting in an airport lounge and

(e) You hear the agent utter the words, ‘This is a final boarding call for Northwest’s flight NW644 to Minneapolis.’

So you naturally infer

(P) The agent has just orally forewarned passengers in English of final boarding for NW644.

P entails:

(I) The agent understands (some of) a language (English).

But clearly the warrant bestowed on P by e does not transmit across this entailment from P to I. Rather, it is only in a context of collateral information in which I already participates that e provides a warrant for P in the first place.

Or consider (TWINS). Jessica and Jocelyn are identical twins whom you know well but have difficulty distinguishing. Suppose

(e) You see a girl approaching you who looks just like Jessica.

There is a defeasible inference from that to

(P) That girl is Jessica.

and an entailment from there to

(I) That girl is not Jocelyn.

But given your discriminatory limitations, there is no question of treating e as a warrant for P and then transmitting it across the entailment to conclude I. Rather you—though not perhaps someone who can distinguish the twins purely visually—will need the latter already in place as collateral information before you can reasonably take e as a warrant for P.

Third, consider (SOCCER), involving as evidence
(e) Jones has just headed the ball into the net, he is being congratulated by team-mates and the crowd has gone wild.

That provides a defeasible warrant for

\[(P)\] Jones has just scored a goal

which entails (assuming that it is only in the context of a soccer game that a soccer goal can be scored) that

\[(I)\] A game of soccer is taking place

But suppose the circumstances are special: you are in the vicinity of a film studio which specialises in making sporting movies and you know that it is just as likely that the witnessed scene is specially staged for the camera as that it is an event in a genuine game. Once you’re equipped with this information, you will rightly regard \(e\) as providing no warrant for \(P\). What you need, if \(e\) is to provide a warrant for \(P\), is precisely some independent corroboration of the context—that is, of \(I\). You ask a bystander: is that a genuine game or a film take? If you learn the game is genuine, you acquire a warrant for the claim that a goal was just scored. But it would be absurd to regard that warrant as transmissible across the entailment from \(P\) to \(I\). You don’t get any additional reason for thinking that a game is in process by having the warrant for \(P\). It remains that your only ground for \(I\) is the bystander’s testimony and it is only because you have that ground that witnessing the scene provides a warrant for \(P\).

Finally compare (ELECTION)

(e) Jones has just placed an X on a ballot paper in that booth.

\[(P)\] Jones has just voted.

\[(I)\] An election is taking place.

Again, we would normally have in \(e\) a good but defeasible warrant for \(P\), which in turn entails \(I\). But suppose the context is that of a society which holds electoral drills—practice elections—rather as we now hold fire drills. And suppose that they are held pretty much as frequently as real elections, so that—unless we have some further relevant background information—it is as likely as not that Jones is participating in a drill rather than the real thing. Then in this situation, Jones’ writing an X on a ballot paper stops providing a warrant—even a defeasible one—for his voting. If all we know is that a drill is as likely as the real thing, and that Jones has written an X on a ballot paper, we have no better reason to suppose that he has voted than to suppose that he has not. However, given independent corroboration of \(I\), \(e\) once again becomes a warrant for \(P\)—only, for exactly analogous reasons as before, not one transmissible across the entailment to \(I\).
The form of scepticism that I want to elicit by reflection on Moore’s ‘Proof’ will begin, plausibly enough, by claiming an analogy between the ‘Proof’ and the foregoing examples. The sceptic will insist that Moore did not formulate his ‘Proof’ properly—that he begins in the wrong place—since his premise is something which rests on more basic evidence and is thus more properly viewed as a lemma. A more explicit formulation would rather be something like this (MOORE):

(e) My current state of consciousness is in all respects like being aware of a hand held up in front of my face.

(P) Here is a hand.

Therefore

(I) There is a material world (since any hand is a material object existing in space).

What Moore requires is that the defeasible warrant recorded by (MOORE) e for the belief in (MOORE) P is transmissible across the inference from that belief to the conclusion that there is a material world. The sceptical riposte will then be that the proper formulation of the ‘Proof’ exemplifies exactly the template for transmission failure latterly illustrated: that the status of Moore’s experience as a warrant for his original premise, ‘Here is a hand’, is not unconditional but depends on needed ancillary information and that paramount among the hypotheses that need to be in place in order for the putative warrant for the premise—Moore’s state of consciousness—to have the evidential force that Moore assumes is the hypothesis that there is indeed a material world whose characteristics are mostly, at least in the large, disclosed in routine sense experience. So Moore’s original ‘Proof’ begs the question: its premise (P) is warranted only if Moore is independently entitled to its conclusion, just as in the other four illustrations.

The sceptic is here implicitly proposing, of course, that perceptual warrant is inferential: that in acquiring such a warrant, one starts with something more basic —information about the character of one’s own state of consciousness—and then moves by a defeasible inference to a claim about the local environment. The essence of the inferential proposal doesn’t need this Lockean view. The idea would go with a broadly Lockean view of experience as drawing a kind of ‘veil’ between the subject and the external world—a mode of activity within an inner theatre, whose specific happenings would be intrinsically indifferent to whether they occurred in a dream, or in an episode of veridical perception, or in a delusion in waking life. But it’s important to realise that the inferential proposal doesn’t need this Lockean view. The essence of the former is that our beliefs about the local perceptible environment have their rational basis in elements of our own subjectivity—in how things are with us. It would be
perfectly consistent with this to grant, as against Locke and in sympathy with those philosophers who have urged that we think of perception as a form of direct acquaintance with the world, that perceiving and, say, dreaming are states of consciousness of a quite different logical structure, with literally nothing in common (what has come to be known as the Disjunctivist view\(^6\)). For (MOORE) e can still serve, even so, as a neutral description—neutral, that is to say, with respect to which of the possible ‘disjuncts’ one’s present state of consciousness exemplifies—of one’s informational state. And the thought is so far unchallenged that it is on information so conceived that the ultimate justification for our perceptual beliefs must rest. Once one accepts that thought, the comparison of Moore’s ‘Proof’ with the four examples and the resultant diagnosis provided of its intuitively question-begging character—that it overlooks the information-dependence of the most basic kind of evidence for perceptual claims—is, I think, compelling. In any case, one kind of material world scepticism certainly so conceives the justificational architecture of perceptual claims. So Moore is begging the question against that adversary.

Still, recognising that there is a transmission failure involved in, e.g., (ELECTION) and (SOCCER) (in the contexts described) does not itself invite scepticism about the existence of elections and soccer games. Likewise the collapse of Moore’s ‘Proof’ does not, by itself, invite scepticism about the material world. The form of sceptical argument that now arises turns on pressing the question: what, if Moore’s warrant for his original premise is information-dependent, could put the needed information (that there is a material world) in place? Not an inference from any specific proposition about it—that would beg the question, just as Moore did. But how else? The emergent sceptical thought denies that there is any other way. Specifically, it involves these five claims:

(i) That there is no way of justifying particular beliefs about the material world save on the basis of the (inconclusive) evidence provided by our states of consciousness.

(ii) Such evidence for any particular proposition about the material world depends for its force on collateral information that the material world so much as exists—it would not be warranted to treat how things seem to us as evidence for claims about our immediate physical environment if we were antecedently agnostic about the existence of a material world.

Ergo

(iii) Our belief that there is a material world cannot without circularity be based on an accumulation of such evidence for the truth of particular propositions about it.

(iv) But there is nothing else on which a belief in the existence of the material world might be rationally based.

(v) And that belief needs justification since it could, after all, be false.
It is, of course, the counterparts of claim (iv) that—by ordinary standards of confirmation—fail for the case of (SOCCER) and (ELECTION). But if each of (i)–(v) is accepted, then the upshot is that our entire ‘language game’ concerning the material world turns out to be based upon an assumption for which we have no ground whatever, can in principle get no ground whatever, and which could, for all we know, be false. That seems about as strong a sceptical conclusion as one could wish for (or hope to avoid).

An argument—paradox—of this kind will be available whenever we are persuadable (at least temporarily) that the ultimate justification for one kind of claim—let’s say: a type-II proposition—rests upon defeasible inference from information of another sort—type-I propositions. In any such case, the warrantability of the inference will arguably depend upon the presupposition that there is indeed a domain of fact apt to confer truth on type-II propositions in the first place, a domain whose details are broadly reflected in type-I information. So it will depend, a fortiori, on the first component of that: that a domain of fact which type-II propositions are distinctively apt to describe so much as exists. Let this supposition be the relevant type-III proposition—a proposition of sufficient generality to be entailed by any type-II proposition. The schematic form of the emergent sceptical argument—I’ll call it the I–II–III argument—is then this:

Type-II propositions can only be justified on the evidence of type-I propositions.

The evidence provided by type-I propositions for type-II propositions is information-dependent, requiring inter alia collateral warrant for a type-III proposition.

So: type-III propositions cannot be warranted by transmission of evidence provided by type-I propositions for type-II propositions across a type-II-to-type-III entailment.

But: type-III propositions cannot be warranted any other way

And: type-III propositions could be false.

This form of argument is very widely applicable. It may be used, for instance, to provide a simple crystallisation of each of scepticism about other minds, about the past, and about inductive inference. Consider the following reasoning (PAIN) by a subject who is a bystander at a sporting injury:

I Jones’ shin bone is visibly shattered and he is thrashing about on the turf.

His face is contorted and he is yelling and screaming.

II Jones is in pain.

Therefore

III There are other minds.
The sceptical argument is exactly as schematised. It will assert that it is only if we have independent warrant for (PAIN) III, (and that Jones is very probably ‘minded’), that (PAIN) I may be taken to confirm (PAIN) II. The evidential bearing of (PAIN) I on (PAIN) II is not something which is appreciable from a standpoint which starts out agnostic about the existence of other minds. So, like ‘There is a material world’, the role of the proposition There are other minds’ seems to be, as it were, institutional. And that, sceptically construed, is just a polite way of saying that there is no prospect of any kind of independent justification for it, nor therefore for bona fide justification of the particular beliefs about others’ mental states which it mediates.

It will be superfluous to run through the parallel considerations concerning (SEAWEED):

I There is a line of fresh seaweed on the beach some fifty yards above the ocean.
II The seaweed was washed up by the tide some hours ago.

Therefore

III The world did not come into being ten seconds ago replete with apparent traces of a more extended history.

and (BASIC INDUCTION):

I All observed As have been Bs.
II All As are Bs.

Therefore

III Some properties are exceptionlessly co-instantiated with others (Nature is Uniform, at least to some extent).

Notice that in no case is any claim being advanced that the relevant type-III proposition provides information sufficient to justify the relevant I-to-II transition. The suggestion is rather that collateral information encompassing that proposition is at least necessary if the type-I proposition is to support the type-II proposition; and that the opportunities for acquiring that necessary collateral information are limited in the manner indicated by the generalised versions of the first four of the Five Claims.

Although the I–II–III pattern of sceptical argument has this wide potential generality, there is no a priori reason, of course, why the most effective responses to it should be uniform through its various applications. In particular, when it is applied to our beliefs concerning the material world, many philosophers will be tempted by one of two kinds of riposte whose generalisation
to other cases would be stretched, or even definitely mistaken. First, some may simply want to reject the inferential architecture which the argument presupposes. According to the argument, the ultimate warrant for claims about the local perceptible environment is supplied by inference from aspects of our subjectivity—from propositions about how things are with us (no matter whether that in turn is given a Lockean or Disjunctivist cast). Yet these propositions, for their part, are then conceived as known non-inferentially. The question may therefore occur: with what right is the domain of non-inferential warrant—presupposed, of course, if there is to be such a thing as inferential warrant in the first place—restricted in this way and not allowed to extend outward in the first place to propositions concerning the experienced world? Even if that question has a good answer, and we have to be prepared to grant the inferential base for claims about the material world in propositions about subjectivity, there is, second, still scope to question whether the evidential bearing of the latter is properly viewed as information-dependent, whether the evidence of appearances does not rather—in the best circumstances—provide a priori unconditional (though defeasible) support for propositions about local perceptibles. If either of these reservations could be made good, the framework demanded by I–II–III scepticism about the material world would not apply.7

The plausibility of these two forms of riposte diminishes, however, when we move to other subject matters. While it might be tempting, for instance, to try to make out that agents’ behaviour provides information-independent (though still defeasible) grounds for claims about their mental states, it would seem—to this writer at least—merely Quixotic to attempt to construe claims about others’ attitudes and sensations as having a non-inferential epistemology.8 Moreover, neither tactic seems at all plausible for the case of claims about the remote past (the past beyond living memory). And when it comes to simple empirical induction, the first tactic amounts to a denial of a datum of the problem—that induction is a kind of defeasible inference—while the powerful intuitive tug of Hume’s problem is testimony to the sense we have that, strictly, the justifiability of this pattern of inference does indeed call for a piece of information (the ‘Uniformity of Nature’, that is: the continuing inductive amenability of the world) to which, on the face of it, it is hard to make out any entitlement.

My concern now is nevertheless going to be with one possibility for a uniform response—perhaps better: a uniform attitude—to I–II–III scepticism. This will involve beginning to develop hints and suggestions that feature in On Certainty in a way that Wittgenstein himself did not explicitly develop them, albeit in a spirit—that is in some respects at odds with his later philosophy of language. The crux will be to make a case that we are within our rights, as it were, in accepting the type-III propositions that we do, their evidential predicament notwithstanding.
2. 

Hinges against scepticism?

The preoccupation of *On Certainty* with G.E. Moore’s ‘Defence of Common Sense’ is evident to anyone who reads it with Moore’s discussion in mind. One of its most prominent themes is Wittgenstein’s insistence on a contrast, missing from Moore, between what belongs to our knowledge properly so regarded—that is, our body of cognitive achievement, based on enquiry—and a much wider class of certainties: propositions which ‘stand fast’ for us not because they have won through under scrutiny of relevant evidence but because, so he suggests, they are somehow presuppositional and basic in the process of gathering and assessing evidence or within our more general ‘world picture’. He writes:

151 I should like to say: Moore does not know what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as also for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our method of doubt and enquiry.

152 I do not explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast for me. I can discover them subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates. This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility.

Here the image of the axis is crucial. Its point is that nothing external holds these basic certainties in place: they do not provide foundations after the fashion of the classical Cartesian aspiration—foundations of the kind which primitive and especially sure cognitive achievements would provide:

94…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.

So far from being products of cognitive achievement, Wittgenstein is proposing that the propositions in question play a pivotal role in our methodology of judgement and thereby contribute to the background necessary to make cognitive achievement possible, a background without which the acquisition of knowledge would be frustrated by a lack of regulation:

95 The propositions describing this world-picture 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.

83 The truth [he means: not the fact of the truth but our acceptance as true] of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference.

A little more explicitly:
400 Here I am inclined to fight windmills, because I cannot yet say the thing I really want to say.

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). —This observation is not of the form ‘I know …’ ‘I know…’ states what I know, and that is not of logical interest.

This casts some light on Wittgenstein’s flattering assessment of Moore. What, it would seem, impressed him about the ‘Defence of Common Sense’ in particular was not its official line—Moore’s insistence that he ‘knows, with certainty’ each of the propositions he there listed (while conceding that he did not know their ‘correct analysis’) —but the contents of the list and the reminder of the special place of these propositions which Moore, almost without realising it, contrived to provide:

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

137 Even if the most trustworthy of men assures me that he knows things are thus and so, this by itself cannot satisfy me that he does know, only that he believes he knows. That is why Moore’s assurance that he knows …does not interest us. The propositions, however, which Moore retails as examples of such known truths are indeed interesting. Not because anyone knows their truth, or believes he knows them, but because they all have a similar role in the system of our empirical judgements.

138 We don’t, for example, arrive at any of them as a result of investigation. There are e.g. historical investigations and investigations into the shape and also the age of the earth, but not into whether the earth has existed during the last hundred years. Of course many of us have information about this period from our parents and grandparents; but mayn’t they be wrong?—‘Nonsense!’ one will say. ‘How should all these people be wrong?’—But is that an argument? Is it not simply the rejection of an idea? And perhaps the determination of a concept? For if I speak of a possible mistake here, this changes the role of ‘mistake’ and ‘truth’ in our lives.

The immediate and crucial issue, of course, is what exactly the ‘peculiar logical role’ of the propositions in question is supposed to be.

There is no simple answer covering all cases. Wittgenstein’s (and Moore’s) examples are various. While a more fine-grained taxonomy would be desirable, a reader of On Certainty will speedily notice three salient classifications:
Propositions (those of basic arithmetic and logic, ‘I have two hands’) which it is our practice, always or normally, to insulate from prima facie disconfirming evidence, and which thereby serve as, in effect, rules for the evaluation—redirection—of the significance of such evidence;

Propositions (‘My name is CW’, ‘This calculation is correct’) which are supported by—by normal standards—an overwhelming body of evidence, whose significance would have to be dismissed if they were doubted;

Propositions of type-III (The earth exists’, The earth has existed for many years past’, ‘Material objects do not just disappear when no one observes them’) to doubt which would have the effect of undermining our confidence in a whole species of proposition, by calling into question the bearing of our most basic kinds of evidence for propositions of that kind.

However, these various cases are unified—so I read Wittgenstein as suggesting—by their constituting or reflecting our implicit acceptance of various kinds of rules of evidence: rules for assessing the specific bearing of evidence among a range of germane propositions, rules for assessing the priorities among different kinds of evidence, and rules connecting certain kinds of evidence with certain kinds of subject matter. One central idea of On Certainty is that some things that Moore misguidedly took himself to know are actually effectively the articulation, in declarative propositional garb, of such rules, our unhesitating acceptance of which allows of no defence in terms of the idea of knowledge. And the reader forms the impression—though I do not know that it could be decisively corroborated by explicit quotation—that it was meant to go with that idea that our acceptance of the propositions in question could likewise not be criticised in terms of the idea of failure of knowledge, of lack of cognitive achievement. The sceptic’s attack is to be preempted by the same idea that undercuts Moore’s ‘Defence’.

But how exactly? The central thrust of knowledge-sceptical argument, of whatever stripe, is after all precisely that what we count as the acquisition of knowledge, or justification, rests on groundless assumptions. And so far from saying anything inconsistent with that, Wittgenstein seems merely to elaborate the theme! How does it help to have a reminder in detail of the various kinds of groundless certainty that we go in for? Once granted that these presuppositions are both essential and ungrounded, isn’t the sceptical point effectively taken? Yet rather than contesting the point, Wittgenstein seems repeatedly to emphasise it. Indeed, he is quite explicit that he is, in effect, taking a sceptical point:

253 At the foundation of well founded belief lies belief that is not founded.

Since On Certainty is not a sceptical treatise, Wittgenstein’s idea can only be that taking the point about groundlessness doesn’t have the consequences usually thought to attach it—in particular, that to recognise the role of foundational but
unfounded beliefs does not call all our procedures into question, or expose them as being somehow arbitrary, dogmatic and irrational. But how not?

The answer may seem obvious. The key idea, you might think, is that of rule. In each of the kinds of case distinguished, it is the suggestion of *On Certainty* that a proposition’s ‘standing fast’ for us is to be attributed to its playing a role in or reflecting some aspect of the way we regulate enquiry, rather than being presumed—erroneously—to be an especially solid product of it. Sceptical argument purports to disclose a lack of cognitive pedigree in a targeted range of commitments. Rules, though, don’t need a cognitive pedigree. The merit of a rule may be discussible: rules can be inept, in various ways. But, since they define a practice, they cannot be wrong. So any sort of sceptical concern about our warrant to accept a proposition whose role is actually to express or otherwise reflect such a rule is thus a kind of *ignoratio elenchi*.

There are passages where Wittgenstein appears to have something like this thought in mind. Consider for instance:

494 ‘I cannot doubt this proposition without giving up all judgement.’

But what sort of proposition is that?...It is certainly no empirical proposition. It does not belong to psychology It has rather the character of a rule.

495 One might simply say, ‘O, rubbish!’ to someone who wanted to make objections to the propositions that are beyond doubt. That is, not reply to him but admonish him.

496 This is a similar case to that of showing that it has no meaning to say that a game has always been played wrong.

But of course the line is much too swift. Rules governing a practice can be excused from any external constraint—so just ‘up to us’, as it were—only if the practice itself has no overall point which a badly selected rule might frustrate. But that is hardly how we think of empirical enquiry Empirical enquiry does *par excellence* have an overall point, namely—it may seem the merest platitude to say —the divination of what is true and the avoidance of what is false of the world it concerns. So ‘rules of evidence’ must presumably answer to this overall point. There therefore has to be, prima facie, a good question whether and with what right we suppose that the rules we actually rely on in empirical enquiry are conducive to that point.

The case of type-III propositions is perhaps the most stark in this connection. To allow that ‘there are other minds’, say, serves as a rule of evidence—plays a role in determining our conception of the significance of people’s behaviour—is not even superficially in tension with thinking of it as a substantial proposition, apt to be true or false. It goes without saying that our conception of the significance of items of evidence we gather will depend on what kind of world we take ourselves to be living in. That in no way banishes the spectre of profound and sweeping error in the latter regard.
I am, of course, perfectly aware that this general kind of objection is out of kilter with a cardinal idea in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy: the idea that the ‘rules of the language game’ precisely do not have to answer to anything external to it. According to the contrasted philosophy of language at work in the *Tractatus*, there is a separation between what constitutes the meaning (truth-conditions) of a statement—which is a matter of an essential (in the *Tractatus*, indeed, pictorial) relation between the statement and a potential worldly truth-conferrer (‘fact’)—and the rules which we accept as governing its use. So provision is indeed made there for a good metaphysical question about whether the latter are felicitous by the standards set by the former, whether there is the intended general correlation between the obtaining of what we treat as warrant for a statement, which will be a reflection of the rules of the language game, and the satisfaction of its truth-conditions. But by the time of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein has shifted to—indeed, has perhaps invented—the outlook that Hilary Putnam later dubbed internal realism or internalism: it is our linguistic practice itself that is viewed as conferring meaning on the statements it involves—there is no meaning-conferrer standing apart from the rules of practice and no associated external goal.

This is a great metaphysical issue. And it seems perfectly right that sceptical doubt in the Cartesian tradition implicitly takes sides on it. If I am to be seriously troubled by the thought that painstaking and conscientious appraisal by the standards of my actual linguistic practice may consist with massive but undetectable error generated by a quite mistaken conception of some large aspect of the world, then I must be thinking of what determines the content of my beliefs as something extrinsic to that practice—and the classical, molecular, truth-conditional account then seems to be the only candidate. Still, great as it may be, the metaphysical issue is notoriously unclear and difficult to resolve. And while thinking of linguistic practice in a broadly later-Wittgensteinian way may make at least some forms of sceptical doubt hard to hear, the fact that we—many of us—seem to ourselves to hear them pretty clearly will make it intellectually unsatisfying just to point out that the ultimate intelligibility of sceptical doubt is hostage to deep and unresolved issues in the theory of meaning. Rather, what we should ideally like would be a rebuttal of—or at least a ‘liveable’ accommodation with—sceptical doubt which can avoid joining the debate at that murky level. If we approach the issues in that intuitive spirit, the idea that at least some of the propositions scepticism targets really function innocently as rules for the appraisal of evidence is hobbled as a response to sceptical doubt, in just the way I have emphasised.

3. **Entitlement**

So: what is the worst-case scenario, as it were? Can there be an intuitive accommodation with scepticism—one which raises no question whether type-III
propositions are just what they look like, very general contingent descriptions of
the world? Is there some relatively benign ‘spin’ or cast to be given to the
situation to which an otherwise unchallenged I–II–III argument would call
attention? I shall suggest that there is—a quite different kind of response which
can be elicited from one tendency in Wittgenstein’s final remarks.

The passages I have in mind are typified by the following,

163...We check the story of Napoleon, but not whether all the reports
about him are based on sense-deception, forgery and the like. For
whenever we test anything, we are already presupposing something that is
not tested. Now am I to say that the experiment which perhaps I make in
order to test the truth of a proposition presupposes the truth of the
proposition that the apparatus I believe I see is really there (and the like)?

Compare

337 One cannot make experiments if there are not some things that one
does not doubt. But that does not mean that one takes certain
presuppositions on trust. When I write a letter and post it, I take it for
granted that it will arrive—I expect this.

If I make an experiment I do not doubt the existence of the apparatus
before my eyes. I have plenty of doubts, but not that. If I do a calculation I
believe, without any doubts, that the figures on the paper aren’t switching
of their own accord, and I also trust my memory the whole time, and trust
it without reservation. The certainty here is the same as that of my never
having been on the moon.

Consider any case where one claims a warrant for a particular proposition not by
inference from other warranted propositions but directly by the appropriate
exercise of certain appropriate cognitive capacities—perception, memory or
intellection, for instance. Such a claim is not innocent of presupposition. The
presuppositions will include the proper functioning of the relevant capacities, the
suitability of the occasion and circumstances for their effective function, and
indeed the integrity of the very concepts involved in the formulation of the
proposition in question. And the crucial point made in the quoted passages is that
one cannot but take such things for granted. By that I don’t mean that one could
not investigate (at least some of) the presuppositions involved in a particular
case. But in proceeding to such an investigation, one would then be forced to
make further presuppositions of the same general kinds. The point concerns
essential limitations of cognitive achievement: wherever I achieve warrant for
a proposition, I do so courtesy of specific presuppositions—about my own
powers, and the prevailing circumstances, and my understanding of the issues
involved— for which I will have no specific, earned warrant. This is a necessary
truth. I may, in any particular case, set about earning such a warrant in turn—and
that investigation may go badly, defeating the presuppositions that I originally made. But whether it does or doesn’t go badly, it will have its own so far unfounded—*unbegründete* (253)—presuppositions. Again: whenever cognitive achievement takes place, it does so in a context of specific presuppositions which are not themselves an expression of any cognitive achievement to date.

These propositions are not standing certainties but are particular to the investigative occasion: they are propositions like that my eyes are functioning properly now, that the things that I am currently perceiving have not been extensively disguised so as to conceal their true nature, etc. My confidence in the things which I take myself to have verified in a particular context can rationally be no stronger than my confidence in these context-specific claims. My certainty in them as a *genre* shows in the unhesitant way I set about routine empirical investigation of the world and my ready acceptance of its results. Their context-specificity sets them apart from some of the other kinds of ‘hinge’ proposition already noted. But two points of analogy with type-III propositions are nevertheless striking: first, each type of proposition articulates something a thinker must inevitably take for granted if she is to credit herself with the achievement of any warrants at all, the type-III propositions conditioning the acquisition of defeasible inferential warrants while the context-specifics engage the non-inferential case; and second, presuppositions of each kind will unavoidably be themselves unwarranted at the point at which they need to be made.

That much analogy is enough to invite a scepticism about non-inferential warrant entirely kindred in spirit to I–II–III scepticism. Suppose I set myself to count the books on one of the shelves in my office and arrive at the answer, twenty-six. The sceptical thought will say that the warrant thereby acquired for that answer can rationally be regarded as no stronger than the grounds I have for confidence that I counted correctly, that my senses and memory were accordingly functioning properly, that the books themselves were stable during the count and were not spontaneously popping into and out of existence unnoticed by me, etc. Yet I will have done nothing—we may suppose—to justify my confidence in these specific presuppositions. So how have I achieved any genuine warrant at all?

Here is one line of reply. Since there is no such thing as a process of warrant acquisition for each of whose specific presuppositions warrant has already been earned, it should not be reckoned to be part of the ordinary concept of an acquired warrant that it somehow aspire to this—incoherent—ideal. Rather, we should view each and every cognitive project as irreducibly involving an element of adventure—I take a risk on the reliability of my senses, the amenability of the circumstances, etc., much as I take a risk on the continuing reliability of the steering, and the stability of the road surface every time I ride my bicycle. Once I grant that I ought ideally to check the presuppositions of a project, even in a context in which there is no particular reason for concern about them, then I should agree that I ought in turn to check the presuppositions of the check—
which is one more project, after all—and so on; so then there will be no principled stopping point to the process of checking and the original project will never get started. The right conclusion—the reply will continue—is not that the acquisition of genuine warrant is impossible, but rather that since warrant is acquired whenever investigation is undertaken in an epistemically responsible manner, epistemic responsibility cannot, per impossibile, require an investigation of every presupposition whose falsity would defeat the claim to have acquired a warrant. The right principle is not that any acquired warrant is no stronger than one’s independently acquired reasons to accept its presuppositions. It is, rather, that it is as weak as the warrant for any of the presuppositions about which there is some specific reason to entertain a misgiving.

This line of response has several attractions. It involves, first, no large contention in the metaphysics of meaning, nor any unintuitive claim about factuality. Second, it is not open to the complaint one wants to level against so-called ‘naturalistic’ responses to scepticism, after the style of Hume and Strawson, that—in emphasising that it is part of our (human) nature to form beliefs inductively, to see each other as ‘minded’, and so on—it offers a mere excuse for our inclination to form beliefs in a fashion which, for all that has been said, falls short of the ideals of reason. And third, it concedes that the best sceptical arguments have a point—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. To attempt to surpass them would result not in an increase in rigour but cognitive paralysis.

The term ‘entitlement’ is already in vogue in contemporary epistemology to mark off—perhaps wishfully—a range of propositions which, although lacking specific evidence on their behalf, we can nevertheless somehow warrantably lay claim to as part of the framework of other investigations. A specific version of this idea emerges from the foregoing. First let’s be a bit more precise about the notion of a presupposition: say that $P$ is a presupposition of a particular cognitive enquiry if to doubt $P$ would be a commitment to doubting the significance or competence of the enquiry. Then an entitlement is a presupposition meeting the following conditions: (i) there is no extant reason to doubt $P$; and (ii) to accept that there is nevertheless an onus to justify $P$ would be implicitly to undertake a commitment to an infinite regress of justificatory projects, each concerned to vindicate the presuppositions of its predecessor. That doubtless needs refinement, but the general motif is clear enough. If a project is sufficiently valuable to us—in particular, if its failure would at least be no worse than the costs of not executing it and its success would be better—and if any attempt to vindicate its presuppositions would raise presuppositions of its own of no more secure an antecedent status, then we are entitled to make those presuppositions without evidence.

Unfortunately, type-III propositions are not entitlements as characterised, since they fail to meet condition (ii). The problem with type-III propositions is not that—like ‘my visual system is functioning properly on this occasion’—to
accept that there is an onus to justify them in any particular context in which they are presuppositional is to accept an infinite regress of similar justificatory obligations. It is rather that, after the I–II–III argument, one has no idea how to justify them at all. Nevertheless there is one way the spirit of the foregoing ideas might be extended to cover their case. Type III propositions are implicitly in play, as noted, whenever our best justification for the truth of propositions of one kind—propositions of one distinctive type of subject matter—consists in the assembly of information about something else. That’s the architecture which the I–II–III scepticism attempts to impose, with varying degrees of plausibility, on the justification of statements about the material world, about the past, about other minds and on inductive justification. And wherever such is indeed the justificational architecture, it will be plausible that a type-III proposition—actually, a strengthened form of those illustrated earlier—will form part of the informational setting we presuppose in order for the relevant transitions to rank as justified. Very abstractly: suppose it granted that the best justification we can have for a certain kind of statement—P-statements—consists in information of another kind—Q-statements—such that no finite set of Q-statements entails any P-statement. The use of P-statements in accordance with this conception will then carry a double commitment: a commitment to there being true P-statements—and hence truth-makers for them—at all, and a commitment to a reliable connection between the obtaining of such truth-makers and the truth of finite batches of appropriate Q-statements. That is the broad shape of the commitment which surfaces in the specific instances:

There is a material world, broadly in keeping with the way in which sense experience represents it;

Other people have minds, broadly in keeping with the way they behave;

The world has an ancient history, broadly in keeping with presently available traces and apparent memories;

There are laws of nature, broadly manifest in finitely observable regularities.

Here, each first conjunct presents a type-III proposition as originally conceived, which the second conjunct effects the connection necessary for the favoured kind of evidence to have the force which it is our practice to attach to it. As earlier observed, we may of course avoid local versions of the I–II–III argument by arguing for a rejection of the justificational architecture which it presupposes—with perceptual claims, perhaps, a prime case for that attempt. But if this is to be a globally successful tactic, then we will have to do nothing less than so fashion our thinking that it nowhere traffics in statements related as the P-statements and Q-statements in the schema. And that’s just to say that none of the thoughts we think must be such that their truth-makers are beyond our direct cognition, so that we are forced to rely on finite and accessible putative indicators of their obtaining.
The prime casualty of such a way of thinking would be the thinker’s conception of her own locality: the idea of a range of states of affairs and events existing beyond the bounds of her own direct awareness. Globally to avoid the justificational architecture presupposed by I–II–III scepticism is to abandon all conception of oneself as having cognitive locality in a world extending, perhaps infinitely, beyond one’s gaze. In particular, it is to surrender all conception of our own specific situation within a broader objective world extending, spatially and temporally, beyond us.

It is a crucial question whether there could be any coherent system of thought which both practised exclusively within such limits and provided no resources for a grasp of its own limitations. At the least, it would be a huge difference. All our actual thought and activity is organised under the aegis of a distinction between states of affairs existing at our own cognitive station and directly accessible to us and others that lie beyond. There are issues about what is properly allotted to the respective sides of this distinction—whether, for example, the former encompasses anything beyond our own episodic mental states, as Descartes implicitly thought. But whatever is allotted to the domain of the directly accessible, there are two crucially important categories of fact—those of general natural law and of the past—which must surely be consigned to what lies beyond. Since practical reasoning involves bringing information of both kinds to bear on hypothetical situations—of course this point requires detail which I will not here attempt to provide—it seems certain that any system of thought purified of all liability to I–II–III scepticism could not be that of a rational agent. One’s life as a practical reasoner depends upon type-III presuppositions. To avoid them is to avoid having a life.

All this needs further elaboration, but let me try to draw things together. I think one principal message of On Certainty is that scepticism embodies an insight which Moore missed: the insight that to be a rational agent pursuing any form of cognitive enquiry—whether within or outside one’s own epistemic locality—means making presuppositions which are not themselves the fruits of such enquiry. When I go after warranted belief about accessible states of affairs in my own locality, the credibility of my results depends on presuppositions about my own proper functioning, and the suitability of the prevailing conditions, etc. When I go after warranted belief about states of affairs outside, the credibility of my results depends on presupposition of the augmented type-III propositions which condition my conception of how the locally accessible may provide indications of what lies beyond. The official sceptical response to this reflection is to give up on the distinction between warranted and unwarranted belief as a charade. The alternative ‘spin’ to be taken from On Certainty is that the concept of warranted belief only gets substance within a framework in which it is recognised that all rational agency involves ineliminable elements of cognitive adventure. Since rational agency is not an optional aspect of our lives, we are entitled—save when there is specific reason for doubt—to make the
presuppositions that need to be made in living out our conception of the kind of 
world we inhabit and the kinds of cognitive powers we possess.

This kind of entitlement, of course, has no direct connection with the 
likelihood of truth. We are entitled to proceed on certain assumptions merely 
because there is no extant reason to disbelieve them and because, unless we 
make some such assumptions, we cannot proceed at all. An epistemological 
standpoint which falls back on this conception of entitlement for the last word 
against scepticism needs its own version of (what is sometimes called) the 
Serenity Prayer\textsuperscript{10}: in ordinary enquiry, we must hope to be granted the self-
discipline to take responsibility for what we can be responsible, the trust to accept 
what we must merely presuppose, and—the crucial thing—the philosophical 
wisdom to know the difference.

Notes

1 This paper corresponds closely to my presentation at the Gregynog conference and 
is excerpted from my fuller treatment, ‘Wittgensteinian Certainties’ in D.McManus, 
Ed. Wittgenstein and Scepticism.
2 Both papers are contained in Moore 1959.
3 The editors of On Certainty say: ‘goaded’.
4 Cf. Moore’s ‘Some Judgements of Perception’, originally published in the 
Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 1918–19 and reprinted in his (1922:220–
52). A relevant passage (about Moore’s finger) comes at p. 228 228.
5 Notice, by the way, that in all these cases, interestingly, there is no example of 
of failure of closure: in all the scenarios, if one has a warrant for P, then one has a 
warrant for I.
6 The Disjunctivist idea seems original, at least in modern literature, to J.M.Hinton. 
See his (1973) and the various earlier articles of his to which he there refers. It is 
further developed in Paul Snowdon’s (1981) and deployed against what he terms 
the ‘highest common factor’ conception of experience in McDowell’s (1982). See 
also his (1994) lecture VI, part 3.
7 The rub is in ‘made good’. It is not enough just to propose one of these lines of 
resistance—that is, to rest content with the claim that the opposed sceptical 
perspective has not been proved and is therefore ‘non-compulsory’. Let that be so. 
Still, merely to oppose one non-compulsory conception with another is to leave 
open the possibility that, for all we know, the sceptic’s view of the justificational 
architecture is right. And a position where, for all I know, I have no warrant for any 
claims about the material world is little better than one in which I have apparently 
been shown that I have no such warrant.
8 Notwithstanding McDowell’s sympathetic and resourceful handling of the idea in his 
(1982).
9 See chapter 1 of Strawson’s (1985).
10 I had thought the prayer, or at least its sentiment, original to Augustine, but John 
Haldane advises me that it is modern, now usually attributed to a Dr 
Reinhold Niebuhr, of the Union Theological Seminary, NYC, who reputedly 
composed it in 1932. The official version runs:
God, grant me
the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change
the Courage to change the things I can
and the Wisdom to know the difference.

References