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## Moore(anists) and Wittgenstein on Radical Scepticism

### ***Abstract***

In this paper, I present and criticize a number of influential contemporary anti-skeptical strategies inspired by G.E. Moore's "proof of an external world". I argue that these accounts cannot represent a valid response to skeptical worries. Furthermore, drawing on Wittgenstein's criticisms of Moore, I argue that Radical skeptical hypotheses should be considered nonsensical combinations of signs, excluded from our epistemic practices.

### ***1. The Cartesian sceptical paradox***

The defining feature of Cartesian style arguments is that we cannot know certain empirical propositions (such as 'Human beings have bodies', or 'There are material objects') as we may be dreaming, hallucinating, deceived by a demon or be "brains in the vat" (BIV), that is, disembodied brains floating in a vat, connected to super-computers that stimulate us in just the same way that normal brains are stimulated when they perceive things in a normal way. <sup>1</sup> Therefore, as we are unable to refute these skeptical hypotheses, we are also unable to know propositions that we would otherwise accept as being true if we could rule out these scenarios.

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<sup>1</sup> See Putnam (1981).

Cartesian arguments are extremely powerful as they rest on the Closure principle for knowledge. According to this principle, knowledge is “closed” under known entailment. Roughly speaking, this principle states that if an agent knows a proposition (e.g., that she has two hands), and competently deduces from this proposition a second proposition (e.g., that having hands entails that she is not a BIV), then she also knows the second proposition (that she is not a BIV). More formally:

*The “Closure” Principle*

If S knows that p, and S competently deduces from p that q, thereby coming to believe on this basis that q, while retaining her knowledge that p, then S knows that q<sup>2</sup>.

Let’s take a skeptical hypothesis, SH, such as the BIV hypothesis mentioned above, and M, an empirical proposition like “Human beings have bodies” that would entail the falsity of a skeptical hypothesis. We can then state the structure of Cartesian skeptical arguments as follows:

- (S1) I do not know not-SH
- (S2) If I do not know not-SH, then I do not know M
- (SC) I do not know M

Considering that we can repeat this argument for each and every one of our empirical knowledge claims, the radical skeptical consequence we can draw from this and similar arguments is that our knowledge is impossible for us.

One way of dealing with Cartesian style skepticism is to deny the premise (S1) of the skeptical argument, thus affirming *contra* the skeptic that we can know the falsity of the relevant skeptical hypothesis. For instance, in his *Proof of the External world* (1939, henceforth PEW), G. E. Moore famously argued that even an instance of everyday knowledge such as ‘This is a hand’ can offer a direct response against skeptical worries. Moore’s Proof is standardly rendered as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> This is essentially the formulation of the Closure principle defended by Williamson (2000, 117) and Hawthorne (2005, 29).

(MP 1) Here is a hand

(MP 2) If there is a hand here, then there are material objects

(MP C) There are material objects

## **2. The dogmatist reading of Moore's proof**

Moore himself (1942) was not fully convinced by the anti-skeptical strength of PEW, which has generally been considered ineffective if not ludicrous<sup>3</sup>; still, in the recent literature on skepticism there have been many proposals directly inspired by Moore's treatment of skepticism.

An influential 'Moore-inspired' anti-skeptical proposal is the dogmatist reading of the Proof, proposed by Jim Pryor (2000, 2004, 2012) and Martin Davies (2003, 2004)<sup>4</sup>, which stems from Crispin Wright's (1985) famous diagnosis of Moore's Proof. According to Wright, we can reconstruct PEW as follows:

I) It perceptually appears to me that there are two hands;

II) There are two hands;

III) Therefore, there are material objects.

In other words, to state I) amounts to saying that there is a proposition that correctly describes the relevant aspects of Moore's experience in the circumstances in which the Proof was given; in the case of the Proof, for instance, I) will sound like 'I am perceiving (what I take to be) my hand'. Then, from I) follows II) and from II) III), since 'a hand' is a physical object; and given that the premises are known, so is the conclusion.

But, argues Wright, the passage from I) to II) is highly problematic: if Moore was victim of a skeptical scenario such as the 'Dream hypothesis' one and thus was just dreaming his hand, II) would no longer follow from I). More generally, I) can ground II) only if we already take for granted that our experience is caused by

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<sup>3</sup> See Malcolm (1949), Clarke (1973) and Stroud (1984).

<sup>4</sup> As noted by Neta (2007, 37) Davies does not explicitly commit himself to Pryor's dogmatist view of perceptual justification in (2004), even if there is the strong suggestion of an endorsement of this position. Nonetheless, he explicitly sides with Pryor's dogmatist account of perceptual justification in Davies, 2003.

our interaction with material objects; thus, sensory experience can warrant a belief about empirical objects only if we already assume that there are material objects.

Hence, we need to already have a warrant for III) in order to justifiably go from I) to II); and this is why Moore's Proof would be *question-begging* or *epistemically circular*: in considering the premises of Moore's Proof true, we are implicitly assuming the truth of its conclusion.

Thus Moore's Proof would lead to another, subtler form of skepticism that Wright calls *Humean*<sup>5</sup>; while Cartesian-style skepticism goes from uncongenial skeptical scenarios to show that we cannot know any of our empirical beliefs, Humean skepticism argues that anytime we make an empirical knowledge claim we are already assuming that, so to say, things outside of us are already the way we take them to be and more generally that there are material objects.

Again, in order to go from I) to II) to III), we need to have an independent warrant to believe that III) is true; and as we do not have this independent warrant, then the argument fails to provide warrant for his conclusions. This is a phenomenon which Wright calls "failure of transmission of warrant" (or *transmission failure* for short).

Having sketched Wright's diagnosis of PEW, we can go back to the dogmatist reading of the Proof. Recall that for Wright, PEW would be *epistemically circular*. Moore's warrant for premise I) 'Here is a hand' already depends on his having a warrant for its conclusion III) 'There are material objects', since it is only in the context of such an anterior assumption that he can take his sense experience as a warrant for I) 'Here is a hand'. Accordingly, Moore's Proof would fail to be rationally persuasive, for it cannot produce a first warrant to believe its conclusion.

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<sup>5</sup>This is not to say that Wright would endorse this sort of skepticism; these considerations are just preliminary to his 'Wittgenstein-inspired' anti-skeptical strategy, which he has presented in (2004a, 2004b). For a critical evaluation of this proposal, see Pritchard (2005, forthcoming), Jenkins (2007) and Pedersen (2009).

Pryor argues to the contrary that Moore's PEW can transmit knowledge, doxastically justified belief, from its premises to its conclusions; to defend this point (2004, 358-362), he distinguishes between five types of epistemic dependence between the premises and the conclusion of an argument. Among them, the two most relevant for the present discussion are the following:

Type 4: Another type of dependence between premise and conclusion is that the conclusion be such that that evidence *against it* would (to at least some degree) undermine the kind of justification you purport to have for the premises. Moore's argument clearly *does* exhibit this type of dependence. So long as we maintain the assumption that hands are material objects, any evidence that *there are no material objects* will (to some degree) undermine Moore's perceptual justification for believing he has hands. But is this type of dependence, in itself, a bad thing? That's a difficult question, because many arguments that exhibit it will also exhibit a further type of epistemic dependence.

Type 5. We have this type of dependence when having justification to believe the conclusion is among the conditions that make you have the justification you purport to have for the premise. That is, whenever you need antecedent justification to believe the conclusion, as condition for having that justification for the premise. Type 5 dependence does clearly seem to be an epistemic vice. (Pryor 2004, 359).

Thus, Pryor argues, Type 4 dependence is compatible with knowledge transmission while Type 5 dependence is not; and crucially, PEW exhibits a Type 4 dependence and not a Type 5 one (2000, 534-536). This is so because Moore's Proof is based on a *perceptual experience*, namely on Moore's looking at his hands and believing that p, 'There are two hands'; and to perceive that p, 'There are two hands', would give us a *prima facie* justification for believing that p as long as we have no ordinary evidence able to defeat or undermine our belief that p.

So, according to Pryor, it would be perfectly legitimate to be *dogmatist* about our basic perception, and Moore's Proof transmits knowledge, propositional justification to believe that 'There are material objects'; at least, crucially, since we do *not doubt its conclusion*.

As we have seen, according to the 'dogmatist reading' we have a *prima facie* justification to believe in our perceptually basic beliefs;

thus Moore's Proof is not epistemically circular, as in Wright's reading, but rather, can transmit knowledge from its premises to its conclusion. Still, when skeptical arguments are in play we are led to doubt the conclusion of PEW, namely that there are material objects; and so we lose our doxastically-justified belief in its premises ('Here is a hand' and 'Here is another hand', known *via* perception). Therefore, the Proof is *dialectically ineffective* (2004, 369)<sup>6</sup> against Cartesian-style skepticism, for a skeptic takes both its premises and its conclusion as likely to be false.

Nonetheless, Pryor argues<sup>7</sup>, skepticism is nothing but a disease we should cure ourselves of (2004, 368); this is so because as rational epistemic agents we have to accept a Proof based on a perceptually basic belief such as 'Here is a hand'; accordingly, only a stubborn and ultimately irrational skeptic would not accept PEW as a proof of the existence of material objects. As Pryor succinctly puts the matter: "the skeptic has doubts he ought not to have" (2004, 369).

A first worry concerning this line of argument is that in Cartesian-style skepticism no doubt is entertained. Just recall the feature of Cartesian-style arguments:

(S1) I do not know not-SH

(S2) If I do not know not-SH, then I do not know M

(SC) I do not know M

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<sup>6</sup> In his 2008 work, Davies takes a more sympathetic stance toward Wright's proposal; while still maintaining that PEW would not exhibit a transmission failure when no skeptical hypothesis is invoked, he holds that the Proof's inability to address the skeptical challenge displays a *secondary transmission failure*. Roughly, the thought is that there are two purposes of arguing: 'teasing out', that is drawing out the consequence/consequences of a belief/ set of beliefs, and 'convincing the doubter' (2008, 6-7, 15, 17, 25). These are two independent tasks; Moore's Proof would transmit warrant from its premises to its conclusion in the former, but not in the latter case. To discuss in detail whether this distinction is tenable would take us too far afield and would fall beyond the scope of the present discussion.

<sup>7</sup> Here, I am only considering some of the anti-skeptical implications of the dogmatist reading of PEW; a general discussion of Pryor's account of perceptual justification would go beyond the scope of this essay and is thus not a task I shall set myself here. For a recent critical evaluation of Pryor's views, see Coliva (2009a, 2009b).

where M is an empirical proposition and SH a skeptical scenario such as the Evil Deceiver one. In this argument, no doubt is employed, either rational or ‘irrational’; indeed, whether an agent is seriously doubting if she has a body or not is completely irrelevant for the skeptical conclusion (SC) “I do not know M”.

Also, Cartesian skeptical arguments are, at least *prima facie*, highly intuitive as they rest on the compelling principle of Closure; and to simply dismiss them as a sort of ‘irrational disease’ we should cure ourselves of, without any further clarification of the real nature of the Cartesian skeptical challenge, may sound too simplistic a response to the skeptic.

At most, the dogmatist reading can tell us that in our everyday life we have no reason to doubt the general reliability of our perceptual experience; but this is something we already ‘know’ within our epistemic practices, and, as a philosophical response, will amount to nothing but a pragmatic dismissal of skeptical worries as irrelevant for our ordinary life.

The dogmatist reading of the proof can, paradoxically enough, be considered a viable solution to the skeptical problem only if we minimize, if not completely abandon as irrational, the Cartesian skeptical challenge itself.

### **3. Displaying our knowledge of the external world: Neta’s interpretation of Moore’s proof**

As we have seen, for Wright, PEW would display what he names transmission failure, as it is unable to transmit warrant from its premises to its conclusion. On the other hand, Pryor and Davies maintain that this would not be the case, for the Proof would transmit knowledge, doxastically justified belief, that ‘There are material objects’ on the basis of its premises, at least since skeptical scenarios are not in play.

Despite their differences, both Wright and the Dogmatists thus share two fundamental views: namely, the idea that Moore’s Proof is unable to overcome skeptical doubts about its conclusions and that Moore’s aim in PEW was to provide knowledge of the existence of the external world. According to Ram Neta (2007),

these points both misrepresent Moore's real project and the efficacy of his Proof.

Neta (2007, 27) starts his interpretation from the following passage of PEW:

My proof, then, of the existence of things outside of us did satisfy three of the conditions necessary for a rigorous proof. ... I do want to emphasize that, so far as I can see, we all of us do constantly take proofs of this sort as absolutely conclusive proofs of certain conclusions – *as finally settling questions, as to which we were previously in doubt*. Suppose, for instance, it were a question whether there were as many as three misprints on a certain page in a certain book. A says there are, B is inclined to doubt it. How could A prove that he is right? Surely he could prove it by taking the book, turning to the page, and pointing to three separate places on it, saying “There's one misprint here, another here, and another here”; surely that is a method by which it *might* be proved! (Moore 1993b, 167; emphasis added.)

According to Neta, this passage suggests two things: first, that Moore thought that his Proof would have been able to rationally overcome skeptical doubts; secondly, and more importantly, that, nonetheless, his aim was not to provide us with knowledge of the truth of the conclusion. As Neta writes at one point:

On Moore's view, knowing that there are external things – or at least having learned that there are external things – is a necessary condition of knowing that there are two hands, so whatever epistemic properties the Proof might transmit, it cannot transmit knowledge (2007, 30).

Thus, argues Neta, Moore was well aware of the fact that PEW cannot enhance our epistemic status concerning the existence of external things, for it cannot prove against a Cartesian skeptic that there are material objects. Still, this is not a problem for PEW as the Proof's aim is to *display our knowledge of the existence of the external world* (2007, 28).

To understand this point, just consider the following example offered by Neta. Riding a bicycle displays the fact that we know how to ride a bicycle and can then rationally overcome doubts about our ability to ride bicycles; similarly, PEW displays our knowledge of the external world and would then be able to overcome doubts about the existence of material objects. Still, the



Proof cannot address the Cartesian challenge and overcome skeptical doubts; but crucially, Neta argues, merely to doubt that *p* does not imply that we do not know that *p*. As he writes at one point:

[...] I can know that *p* even while I doubt that *p*, so long as my doubt is unreasonable. For instance, if a philosopher talks me into doubting whether or not the universe has existed for more than five minutes, it doesn't follow that I no longer know that the universe has existed for more than five minutes [...] If I know that I ate breakfast 3 hours ago, then I can also know that the universe has existed for more than 5 minutes. My doubt is unreasonable, of course. But [...] it could be a doubt that I don't recognize to be unreasonable. But still it does not destroy my belief, or my knowledge that I ate breakfast 3 hours ago. I can know that I ate breakfast, even when I also (unreasonably) doubt that the universe is more than 5 minutes old (Neta 2007, 29-30).

A consequence of this thought is that Moore's Proof cannot rule out skeptical doubts; but this does not necessarily undermine our knowledge of the existence of material objects displayed, not proven, by PEW.

A first worry against Neta's proposal is his account of the unreasonableness of skeptical hypotheses. Even if Neta dissociates himself from Pryor and does not consider skeptical doubts as necessarily pathological, it is not clear why we should dismiss them; while Pryor stresses the, so to say, intrinsic rationality of being dogmatist with regard to our basic perceptual beliefs, Neta does not provide any reason why we should consider Cartesian skeptical worries unreasonable.

Also, he tells us that these 'unreasonable' doubts (which, as I have argued above, are not so unreasonable for they are based on the very compelling logical principle of Closure) are compatible with our knowledge claims in the same sense in which, for instance, my knowledge that *p*) 'I ate breakfast 5 minutes ago' cannot be undermined by skeptical doubts.

Even if we grant that certain kinds of doubts are compatible with knowledge, a point which is far from uncontentious, there are still a number of objections we can raise at this juncture. Firstly, as we have seen while presenting the Dogmatist approach, in Cartesian skeptical arguments no doubt is entertained, whether

rational, irrational or unreasonable; on the contrary, we do not even need to assume that an agent is seriously doubting whether or not she is the victim of a skeptical scenario such as the BIV one. Nonetheless, the issue is that we cannot know whether we are BIV or not and thus, given Closure, knowledge is still impossible for us.

Secondly, we can surely grant that in our ordinary life skeptical doubts have minimal or no strength against our knowledge; however, what can be considered reasonable in our everyday life can still be under question in a philosophical context. That is to say, in our everyday life no skeptical hypothesis such as the BIV one can sensibly undermine our knowledge that, for instance, p) ‘I ate breakfast 5 minutes ago’; but once skeptical hypotheses are in play, we have to admit our inability to know that p, for our memories can also be the result of constant deception.

Moreover, recall that following Neta’s reconstruction, Moore’s Proof would display a knowledge we already possess, as riding a bicycle displays the fact that we know how to ride a bicycle. But this kind of ‘knowledge’ cannot ‘rationally overcome’ skeptical worries at all; for following Cartesian arguments, Moore’s performance, and more generally the ‘knowledge’ we already possess of the existence of material objects, can still be the result of a dream, of the action of an Evil Deceiver and so on. Accordingly, the anti-skeptical implications of Neta’s reading of PEW are somewhat moot.

#### ***4. Michael Fara and the plea for proof***

Michael Fara (2008) has recently proposed a somewhat different reading of the anti-skeptical implications of PEW, which I will consider in this section.

Fara (2008) starts his reading of PEW considering the three criteria that, according to Moore, a rigorous proof has to satisfy in order to be considered valid:

- i) Its conclusion must be different from its premises;
- ii) Its conclusion must follow from its premises and
- iii) Each of its premises must be known.

As we have already seen, a Cartesian skeptic will not concede iii). This leads Fara (2008, 3) to reconstruct the skeptical challenge against Moore as follows:

S1\*) The premises of PEW cannot be proved;

S2\*) Proof is required for knowledge;

SC\*) Therefore the premises of PEW are not known (and so its conclusion).

So, the skeptic assumes against Moore that he needs to prove the premises of PEW in order to say that he knows its conclusion. And this is a point of disagreement between Moore and the skeptic: Moore admits that, even if he knows his premises, he cannot say how he knows them and also that he cannot prove that his premises are true.

This is so because it would be impossible to prove against a Cartesian skeptic that he was not dreaming while giving his proof; at most, he can have conclusive evidence that he was awake, but this is completely different from being able to prove it. Any evidence adduced in support of p) 'I am now not dreaming' will then be compatible with skeptical hypotheses.

Nonetheless, according to Fara this does not necessarily represent a failure for Moore's PEW, but will, rather, lead to what he calls *Moore's secondary Proof (MsP)*, which goes as follows:

MsP 1) The premises of PEW cannot be proved

MsP 2) The premises of PEW are known. Therefore

MsP C) Proof is not required for knowledge (Fara 2008, 3)

So, we are in front of what Fara calls a philosophical 'standoff': on the one hand, Moore does not consider it necessary to prove his premises in order to say that he knows them, while on the other hand the skeptic argues that in order to say that we know the premises we must prove them first (2008, 4).

Still, following the skeptical line of reasoning we should also be able to prove the premises S1\*) and S2\*) of the skeptical argument *contra* Moore; but crucially, the skeptic cannot prove the premises of her argument. Therefore, she is not in a position to say that

proof is required for knowledge, and so her argument cannot prove her skeptical conclusion.

So, following Fara's account the skeptical challenge is in some sense self-refuting because its premises cannot be proved; while Moore's argument, stating that we do not need to prove the premises of his Proof, can indeed prove the existence of the external world.

Even setting aside questions about the plausibility of this proposal as an interpretation of Moore's Proof, it should be clear that the kind of skepticism Fara has in mind has little in common with radical skepticism. Just recall the feature of Cartesian-style arguments:

(S1) I do not know not-SH

(S2) If I do not know not-SH, then I do not know M

(SC) I do not know M

where M is an empirical proposition and SH a skeptical scenario such as the BIV one; now compare this argument with the one employed by Moore's skeptical opponent:

S1\*) Premise MP\*) of Moore's main argument cannot be proved

S2\*) Proof is required for knowledge

SC\*) Therefore premise MP1\*) is not known.

In the first argument, what is at issue is not whether Moore or more generally an epistemic agent should be able to prove that M) in order to know that M). Rather, the point of the skeptical challenge is that each and every one of our knowledge claims, and every piece of evidence we can adduce to support them, could be the result of a constant deception; accordingly, as we are unable to refute skeptical hypotheses, we are unable to know anything at all. Thus, a Cartesian skeptic is not concerned with Moore's inability to prove the premises of his proof or with our inability to prove our mundane propositions M), but with our inability to rule out

skeptical hypotheses which, given Closure, entails that we are unable to know anything at all.<sup>8</sup>

### **5. Wittgenstein and Moore on skepticism**

If, as we have seen, in PEW Moore claims that even an empirical knowledge claim such as ‘This is a hand’ can positively address the skeptical challenge, in his ‘A Defence of Common Sense’ (1925, henceforth DCS) he famously argued that we can have knowledge of the ‘commonsense view of the world’, that is of very general ‘obvious truisms’ such as ‘I am a human being’, ‘Human beings have bodies’, ‘The earth existed long before my birth’ and that this knowledge would offer a direct response against skeptical worries.

Wittgenstein wrote the 676 remarks published posthumously as *On Certainty* (1969, henceforth OC) under the influence of DCS and PEW, and in particular in the context of conversations he had about these papers with his friend and pupil Norman Malcolm.<sup>9</sup>

As we have seen supra, according to Moore, it is possible to provide a direct refutation of Cartesian-style skepticism, thus claiming contra the skeptic that we can know the denials of skeptical hypotheses.

But, Wittgenstein argues, to say that we simply ‘know’ Moore’s ‘obvious truisms’, or that ‘There are material objects’, is somewhat misleading for a number of reasons.

Firstly (OC 349, 483), because in order to say ‘I know’ one should be able, at least in principle, to produce evidence or to offer compelling grounds for one’s beliefs; but Moore cannot ground his knowledge-claims in evidence or reasons because (OC 245) his grounds are less certain than what they are supposed to justify. As

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<sup>8</sup> Greco (2002) has proposed a version of PEW, which is informed by his account of epistemic reliabilism which it would be impossible to summarize here. For other ‘Neo-Moorean-anti skeptical proposals’, not directly inspired by PEW but more generally by Moore’s epistemology, see Sosa (1999, 2000) and Pritchard (2002).

<sup>9</sup> While writing OC, Wittgenstein was also heavily influenced by Henry Newman’s lectures on religious beliefs (see Newman 1844, 1870-1985). For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between Newman’s and Wittgenstein’s anti-skeptical strategies, see Pritchard (2000).

Wittgenstein points out, if a piece of evidence is to count as compelling grounds for our belief in a certain proposition then that evidence must be at least as certain as the belief itself. This cannot happen in the case of a Moorean ‘commonsense certainty’ such as ‘Human beings have bodies’ because, at least in normal circumstances, nothing is more certain than the fact that human beings have bodies (Pritchard 2014b). As Wittgenstein writes in OC:

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 should be tested by what? (OC 125)

Imagine, for instance, that one attempted to legitimate one’s claim to know that p by using the evidence that one has for p (for example, what one sees, what one has been told about p and so on). Now, if the evidence we adduced to support p was less secure than p itself, then this same evidence would be unable to support p:

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)

Moreover, Wittgenstein argues, a knowledge-claim can be challenged by, for instance, the appeal to evidence and reason; more generally, when we challenge a knowledge claim, we can recognize what and if something has gone wrong in the agent’s process of knowledge-acquisition. Things are somewhat different in the case of denials of Moore’s ‘obvious truisms of the commonsense’ or of the conclusion of PEW; if, for instance, I believe that I am sitting in my room whilst I am not, there are no *grounds* on which this belief could be explained as a mistake, as an error based on negligence, fatigue or ignorance. On the contrary, a similar ‘false belief’ would more likely be the result of a sensory or mental disturbance (OC 526). As Moyal-Sharrock points out (2004, 74), Wittgenstein notes that if someone were seriously to deny Moore’s ‘truisms’ or the conclusion of PEW (i.e., she believed that she had no body or that there are no material objects) we would not investigate the truth-value of her affirmations, but instead her

ability to understand the language she was using or her sanity (OC 155).

Even if Moore's knowledge-claims in DCS and PEW are misguided, Wittgenstein argues, both the 'truisms of commonsense' and the conclusion of the Proof are immune from rational doubt. This is so (OC 310) because doubts must be based on *grounds*; that is, they have to be internal to a particular practice and must be in some way or another *justified*. If they aren't, they are constitutively empty. To illustrate this point, Wittgenstein gives the example (OC 310) of a pupil who constantly interrupts a lesson, questioning the existence of material objects or the meaning of words; far from being a legitimate intellectual task, the pupil's doubt will lack any sense and will at most lead to a sort of epistemic paralysis, for she will just be unable to learn the skill or the subject we are trying to teach her (OC 315).

More generally, Wittgenstein argues, all reasonable doubts presuppose *certainty* (OC 114-115); that is, the very fact that we usually raise doubts of every sort at the same time shows and implies that we take something for granted. For example, a doubt about the real existence of an historical figure presupposes that we consider certain an 'obvious truism of the commonsense' such as, 'The world existed a long time before my birth'; a doubt about the existence of a planet presupposes the absence of any doubt about the existence of material objects and so on (OC 114-115, 514-515).

Being neither knowable nor dubitable, according to Wittgenstein, the statements listed by Moore in DCS and at the conclusion of PEW are 'rules of grammar' or 'hinges'. Wittgenstein uses this term on different occasions, as in OC 341-3, where he writes:

The question that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were the hinges on which those turn [...] that is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in deed not doubted [...] If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.

That is to say, 'hinges' are not just apparently empirical contingent claims; on closer inspection, they perform a different, more basic role in our epistemic practices.

## 6. Hinges and rules of grammar

Very generally, in the second phase of his thought, Wittgenstein calls rules of grammar “the conditions, the method necessary for comparing a proposition with reality” (PG 1974, 88). Thus, for Wittgenstein, everything that determines the sense of an expression belongs to its ‘grammar’, which also specifies the legitimate combinatorial possibilities of an expression (for instance, which combinations make sense and which don’t, which are allowed and which are not allowed’, cf. Hacker and Baker, 2005, 146). To understand this point, consider the following statements:

- i) What is red must be colored
- ii) Nothing can be red and green all over
- iii) All bachelors are unmarried
- iv) A proposition is either true or false

Despite their differences, all these share a number of significant common features.

Firstly, they are all normative as they delimit what it makes sense *to say*, for instance licensing and prohibiting inferences. Just consider i): if *p* is called red is correctly characterized as ‘colored’, to say that it is red and to deny that it is colored would be a *misuse of language*, that is, a move excluded from a language-game. Similarly, ii), even if it looks as if it is a description of the physics of color, is in fact a rule that we use to exclude the description of an object as being red and green all over. iii), apparently an empirical description, is not meant to make a true statement of fact about bachelors but rather to explain the meaning of the word ‘bachelor’. iv) looks like a description, a generalization about propositions in the same way that the statement ‘All lions are carnivorous’ is a generalization about lions. However, things are somewhat different for we use iv) to define what may be correctly called ‘a proposition’ in logical reasoning; also, it does not exclude a third possibility but



rather *excludes as meaningless* the phrase ‘a proposition which is neither true nor false’.<sup>10</sup>

A second feature of Wittgenstein’s ‘rules of grammar’ is that they cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed by reality; rather, they determine *what counts as a possible description of reality*. That is to say, statements like i) and ii) cannot be confirmed by empirical evidence, but are, rather, presupposed by any ‘language game’ with color words; also, these grammatical rules cannot possibly be disconfirmed by reality, say by the existence of a ‘colorless red object’ or of ‘something that is red and green all over’. Likewise, we could not verify that iii) by, for instance investigating the marital status of people identified as bachelors, and no ‘married bachelor’ could possibly disconfirm iii).

Similarly, even if we do perfectly well speak of half-truths, or rough or approximate truths or of something being partly true or partly false, this does not affect iv) in any way for the objects of such assertions are not cut to the pattern required for logical inference and thus cannot be considered propositions; therefore, these assertions cannot confirm or disconfirm iv) (Hacker and Baker, 1985, 265).

A third and important feature of Wittgenstein’s ‘rules of grammar’ is that they are not propositions, that is they cannot be either true or false; for their ‘negation’ is not false but *senseless*. Just consider the following sentences:

- i\*) p is red and is not colored
- ii\*) p is red and green all over
- iii\*) Some bachelors are married
- iv\*) a proposition is neither true nor false

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<sup>10</sup> According to the proponents of ‘many-valued logic’ such as Weber and Colyan (2010), statements of the form ‘a proposition which is neither true nor false’ are ‘borderline cases’, whose truth value lies between 0(full falsehood) and 1(full truth); thus, they would not be mere senseless combinations of signs as in Wittgenstein’s account. Even if this approach has been extremely useful in order to treat a number of philosophical issues such as ‘the vagueness problems’, this view is still far from uncontroversial and has generated a huge debate that would be impossible to summarize here. For an up to date discussion on multi-valued logic and the ‘vagueness problem’, see Sorensen (2013).

All these are nothing but *nonsensical*, even if intelligible, combinations of signs<sup>11</sup> excluded from our practices (I.e.  $i^*-ii^*$  are excluded from any sensible practice with color-words).

Thus, the difference between ‘rules of grammar’ and their negations is not similar to the difference between true and false statements, *but to that between a rule of expression and a use of words or symbols which that rule excludes as nonsensical.*

## 7. Hinges and epistemic agency

To sum up, Wittgenstein’s ‘rules of grammar’ have three features which make them different from empirical beliefs. Firstly, they are not descriptive but *normative*; secondly, they cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed by reality but, rather, are *ways to make sense of reality*; finally, they are not propositions as their negations are not false but *senseless*. This is true not only for ‘the rules of grammar’ we have seen above, but also for ‘hinges’ such as ‘Human beings have bodies’ or ‘There are material objects’; consider the ‘pupil’s example’ we have already mentioned while presenting Wittgenstein’s criticisms of Moore:

A pupil and a teacher. The pupil will not let anything be explained to him, for he continually interrupts with doubts, for instance as to the existence of things, the meaning of words, etc. The teacher says “*Stop interrupting me and do as I tell you. So far your doubts don't make sense at all.*” [...] That is to say, the teacher will feel that this is not really a legitimate question at all. And it would be just the same if the pupil cast doubt on the uniformity of nature, that is to say on the justification of inductive arguments. – The teacher would feel that this was only holding them up, that this way the pupil would only get stuck and make no progress [...] this pupil has not learned how to ask questions. *He has not learned the game that we are trying to teach him* (OC 310-315, my italics).

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that Wittgenstein considers ‘senseless’ every combination of signs excluded by a ‘rule of grammar’. This is so because grammatical rules are ways to make sense of reality (e.g. ‘All bachelors are unmarried’ is meant to explain what ‘a bachelor’ is) thus their correctness is antecedent to questions of truth or falsity and so they lack truth-value. Accordingly, their putative negations (e.g. ‘Some bachelors are married’) lack truth-value as well; thus, they cannot be considered strictly speaking false but senseless, that is illicit, combinations of signs.

Recall that ‘rules of grammar’ such as I) ‘What is red must be colored’ and II) ‘Nothing can be red and green’ are not descriptive empirical propositions but normative rules of grammar; as such, they are antecedent to questions of truth and falsity as they enable us to engage in any meaningful language game with color words. In a similar fashion, ‘hinges’ like ‘Human beings have bodies’ and ‘There are material objects’ are also antecedent to questions of truth and falsity, as they enable us to engage in any meaningful empirical inquiry.

As we have already seen, for Wittgenstein ‘the game of doubting itself presupposes certainty’ (OC 115), that is, something is taken for granted, at least the meaning of words (OC 676). Accordingly, the skeptic’s never-ending doubt will deprive her words of their meaning and will at most show her inability to engage in the ordinary ‘language-game’ of asking meaningful questions, as to deny or doubt that i) ‘What is red must be colored’ and ii) ‘Nothing can be red and green all over’ will display an agent’s inability to engage in any sensible language game with color words.

This part of Wittgenstein’s proposal resembles Pryor’s and Neta’s Neo-Moorean accounts which we encountered and thus incurs similar problems. Recall that following Pryor’s dogmatist account of PEW, Cartesian skeptical doubts are constitutively irrational, since to accept a proof based on perceptual evidence is what a rational epistemic agent must do. In a similar fashion, Neta considers skeptical hypotheses unreasonable, even if not completely irrational, because of the intrinsic rationality of taking for granted our perceptual beliefs. As I have argued *supra*, both these maneuvers are informed by pragmatic considerations of the nature of our ordinary epistemic practices and can thus be roughly summarized as follows: since in our everyday life there is no reason to doubt the general reliability of our perceptual experience, we should rule out Cartesian-style skepticism as irrational or unreasonable.

On the contrary, according to Wittgenstein, Radical skepticism is not only at odds with our everyday ordinary practices, but actually *undermines the very meaning of the words in which we are expressing*

*our doubts*. Wittgenstein stresses this point in many entries of OC, as in the following remark where he writes:

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

“But even if in such cases I can’t be mistaken, isn’t it possible that I am drugged?” If I am and if the drug has taken away my consciousness, then I am not now really talking and thinking. I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming. Someone who, dreaming, says “I am dreaming”, even if he speaks audibly in doing so, is no more right than if he said in his dream “it is raining”, while it was in fact raining. Even if his dream were actually connected with the noise of the rain (OC 676).

That is to say, once we assumed *ex hypothesi* that we could be victims of a skeptical scenario, it would be hard to understand what could count as evidence for what; each and every one of our perceptions would likely be the result of a constant deception. Thus, to doubt one of Moore’s ‘obvious truisms’ or the conclusion of PEW is not only irrational/unreasonable in the context of our ordinary epistemic practices, as in Neta’s and Pryor proposals, but will rather radically completely undermine the very meaning of expressions such as ‘evidence’ and ‘justification’.

It could be argued (see Fogelin, 1995, 90-95) that when we are facing skeptical hypotheses such as the BIV one, the skeptic is simply raising the ‘level of scrutiny’ of our ordinary epistemic practices. That is to say, when no skeptical hypotheses are in play, we can consistently say that we have enough evidence and justification to support our knowledge of mundane, empirical propositions; but once the ‘levels of scrutiny’ of our epistemic practices are raised, for instance when we evoke skeptical scenarios, we are led to discover that we do not possess any evidence or justification that could rule out skeptical worries and that thus we possess no knowledge at all. Accordingly, the skeptic will not undermine the meaning of expressions such as ‘evidence’ and ‘justification’ but she is just using them in a somewhat ‘specific’, still legitimate, way. To the contrary, according to Wittgenstein, when ‘hinges’ such as ‘Human beings have bodies’ or “There are

material objects' are put in question, the skeptic is not simply leading us toward a highly demanding epistemic context where raised 'levels of scrutiny' are in play but is rather undermining the very notion of 'epistemic inquiry'. Since putting into question rules of grammar such as (a) 'What is red must be colored' and (b) 'Nothing can be red and green all over' will simply prevent us from competently engaging in any meaningful 'language game' with color words, denying or doubting Moore's 'obvious truisms of commonsense' will simply prevent us from engaging in the very language game of acquiring, sustaining and revising our true beliefs about the world. Accordingly, the skeptic will not only show the limitations of our ordinary use of expressions such as 'evidence', 'knowledge' and 'justification', but will rather prevent us from competently engaging in the language game called 'epistemic inquiry'.

Thus, following Wittgenstein's reflection on the normative nature of 'hinges', not doubting or denying Moore's 'obvious truisms' or the existence of material objects is not something that we do merely out of practical considerations. Rather, it is a constitutive part of 'the essence of the language-game' called 'epistemic inquiry' (OC 370):

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)* [...] If I say "we assume that the earth has existed for many years past" (or something similar), then of course it sounds strange that we should assume such a thing. But *in the entire system of our language-games it belongs to the foundations.* The assumption, one might say, forms the *basis of action, and therefore, naturally, of thought* (OC 401-411, my italics).

That is to say, according Wittgenstein 'hinges' such as 'There are material objects' and 'Human beings have bodies' play a basic, foundational role in our system of beliefs; they are presupposed by any sensible inquiry and to take them for granted belongs to *our method of doubt and inquiry* (OC 151). In other words, even if they resemble empirical propositions or their origin is empirical, within our practices they are used as *rules* which enable us to make sense

of reality, thus drawing a line between sense and nonsense rather than between truth and falsity.

Thus, to doubt or deny Moore's 'obvious truisms of commonsense' will not only go against our practical rationality, but more crucially will also undermine the same notion of 'epistemic inquiry'.

## **8. Wittgenstein and radical skepticism**

As we have seen, then, for Wittgenstein, Moore's 'commonsense certainties' are a condition of possibility of any meaningful inquiry;<sup>12</sup> as he puts the matter, "about certain empirical propositions no doubt can exist *if making judgments is to be possible at all*" (OC 308, my italics). This is a thought which is stressed in a number of remarks in OC, where Wittgenstein defines 'hinges' as "the scaffolding of our thoughts" (OC 211), "foundation-walls" (OC 248), the "substratum of all our enquiring and asserting" (OC 162), "the foundation of all operating with thoughts" (OC 401) and "fundamental principles of human inquiry" (OC 670).

To understand a first promising anti-skeptical consequence of this account, recall the feature of Cartesian-style arguments:

(S1) I do not know not-SH

(S2) If I do not know not-SH, then I do not know M

(SC) I do not know M

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noticing that (see Pritchard, 2001), along with Moore's 'obvious truisms', throughout OC Wittgenstein considers as 'hinges' propositions whose certainty is indexed to an historical period ('No man has ever been on the moon.') together with basic mathematical truths ('12x12= 144') and contingently empirical claims ('This is a hand.'). This is so because as we have seen *supra*, according to Wittgenstein, the same structure of our ways of inquiry presupposes that some statements are excluded from doubt; and this would not be accidental, but rather belongs to what he calls the "logic of our scientific investigations" (OC ,342). A consequence of this thought is that any kind of universal inquiry such as the Cartesian skeptical one is based on a misunderstanding of the structure of our language games (OC,599); that is to say, each and every one of our epistemic practices rests, not on propositional beliefs or sets of beliefs, open to doubt or question, but rather on non-propositional *rules* or 'hinges' (OC: 341-343) whose certainty stems from the foundational role they play in a given practice.

where not-SH can be a ‘hinge’ such as ‘Human beings have bodies’ or ‘There are material objects’. This argument seems most compelling as long as we take ‘hinges’ as *propositional beliefs*, which can be either confirmed by evidence or legitimately doubted once we run skeptical arguments. But even if they resemble empirical contingent propositions, ‘hinges’ are non-propositional *rules of grammar*, which enable us to make sense of reality. Accordingly, skeptical hypotheses such as ‘I might be a disembodied BIV’ should not be regarded as sensible philosophical challenges but rather as *nonsensical*, even if *prima facie* meaningful, combinations of signs. To understand this point, recall the putative ‘negation’ of the rules of grammar we encountered *supra*:

- i\*) p is red and is not colored
- ii\*) p is red and green all over
- iii\*) Some bachelors are married
- iv\*) A proposition is neither true nor false

As we have already seen above, Wittgenstein’s rules of grammar are non-propositional in character, thus they cannot be either true or false; accordingly, their ‘negation’ is not false but senseless, that is, an illicit combination of signs.

In a similar fashion, as ‘hinges’ such as ‘Human beings have bodies’ or ‘There are material objects’ are not propositional, since they have a normative rather than a descriptive role, their putative ‘negation’ should be dismissed as an illicit combination of signs which is excluded from the practice called ‘epistemic inquiry’, as the putative statements i\*) ‘p is red and is not colored’ ii\*) ‘p is red and green all over’ are excluded from any sensible language-game with color words. That is to say, as to seriously hold statements such as i\*) ‘p is red and is not colored’ and ii\*) ‘p is red and green all over’ will undermine any sensible practice with color words, similarly any legitimate epistemic inquiry excludes skeptical hypotheses such as ‘I might be a victim of an Evil deceiver’ or ‘I might be a BIV’. This is so because, as we have seen above, once we assumed *ex hypothesi* that we could be victims of a skeptical scenario, it would be hard to understand what could count as evidence for what; each and every one of our perceptions would

likely be the result of a constant deception. Thus, to doubt ‘hinges’ such as ‘Human beings have bodies’ or ‘There are material objects’ will radically alter, if not completely undermine, the meaning of expressions such as ‘evidence’ and ‘justification’ and more generally the very notion of ‘epistemic inquiry’.

Another promising consequence of a non-propositional account so construed is that it will not affect the Closure principle and at the same time will not lead to skeptical conclusions. Recall the formulation of Closure proposed by Williamson (2000) and Hawthorne (2005):

*The Competent Deduction principle*

If S knows that  $p$ , and S competently deduces from  $p$  that  $q$ , thereby coming to believe that  $q$  on this basis while retaining her knowledge that  $p$ , then S knows that  $q$ .

The idea behind this version of Closure is in fact that an agent can come to acquire new knowledge via competent deduction, where this means that the belief in question is based on that deduction. Accordingly, if we cannot rule out a skeptical scenario such as the BIV one, we would be unable to know hinges such as ‘Human beings have bodies’ or ‘There are material objects’ and thus, given Closure, we would still be unable to know anything at all.<sup>13</sup>

The non-propositional nature of Wittgenstein’s account of ‘hinges’ can help us to positively address this issue.<sup>14</sup> As pointed

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<sup>13</sup> Moyal-Sharrock (2004, 2005) proposed a similar anti-skeptical proposal, for which ‘hinges’ are the expression of a pre-rational, non-epistemic animal certainty which is not subject to epistemic evaluation of any sort. A problem for this view (see Salvatore; 2015 ; 2016) is that following this account we will either be forced to reject a very intuitive principle such as Closure or, with Closure still in play, to agree with skeptical conclusions; this is because if ‘hinges’ are simply unknowable, then following Closure we have to admit that we do not know our mundane propositions M.

<sup>14</sup> It is important noticing that throughout OC and more generally in the second phase of his thought, Wittgenstein seems to struggle with the somewhat narrow notion of ‘proposition’ I am using here, to the extent that, while talking of ‘hinges’, he speaks of “grammatical propositions” (e.g. OC 58) as well as of “empirical propositions” (e.g. OC 167); he points out “that the concept ‘proposition’ itself is not a sharp one” (OC 320); and furthermore, he tells us explicitly that “the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing”. (OC 98). Since my purpose here is to present a ‘Wittgenstein-inspired’ anti-skeptical strategy rather than an exegetical reconstruction of Wittgenstein’s views on the matter, to discuss in detail this



out by Pritchard (forthcoming, 14),<sup>15</sup> the crucial aspect of Closure to notice is that it involves an agent *forming a belief* on the basis of the relevant competent deduction. But crucially the negations of ‘hinges’, that is, skeptical hypotheses such as ‘I might be a disembodied BIV’ or ‘I might be deceived by an Evil Demon’ *are not propositional beliefs*. Rather, they are just nonsensical combinations of signs, from which no valid inference or deduction (e.g. ‘If I do not know not-SH, then I do not know M’) can be made. That is to say, if skeptical hypotheses are not propositional beliefs but rather senseless negations of non-propositional rules, then from the fact that we don’t know whether we are victims of a skeptical scenario (‘I do not know not-SH’ where SH is an illicit combination of signs such as ‘I might be a victim of an evil Deceiver’ or ‘I might be a BIV’<sup>16</sup>) we cannot infer or deduce that we don’t know everyday

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point will fall beyond the scope of this essay and is not a task I should set myself here. For a book length defense of the non-propositionality of Wittgenstein’s ‘hinges’, see Moyal-Sharrock, 2004. See also Salvatore (2013).

<sup>15</sup> According to Pritchard (forthcoming; 2014) we should consider ‘hinges’ as a-rational, non-propositional commitments not in the market for propositional knowledge. If this will block the skeptical challenge from one side, it will nonetheless lead to unpalatable conclusions, such as the recognition that our or rational or epistemic practices rest on ungrounded, a-rational presuppositions, a phenomenon that Pritchard calls ‘epistemic vertigo’ (see Pritchard and Boulton, 2013). To the contrary, following the analogy between ‘hinges’ and ‘rules of grammar’ we should consider Moore’s ‘obvious truisms’ and the conclusion of PEW as partly constitutive of what we call ‘epistemic inquiry’ and not as a-rational commitments. For a more nuanced criticism of Pritchard’s position, see Salvatore (2015).

<sup>16</sup> For a similar account of ‘hinges’ and their anti-skeptical significance, see Coliva (2010, 2015). Roughly, according to Coliva ‘hinges’, even if propositional, have a normative role, and their acceptance is a ‘condition of possibility’ of any rational enquiry. A first difference between this account and the one I’m defending here goes as follows; according to Coliva, hinges are propositional (albeit non-bipolar) ; on the contrary, I claim that they are non-propositional, hence their putative ‘negations’ (such as skeptical hypotheses) are senseless and excluded from our epistemic practices. Moreover, and more importantly, Coliva proposes a limitation of the Closure principle (2015, 86; a similar view defended in Avner, 2011), which stems from her views on warrant and epistemic justification that will be impossible to summarize here. However, following my account of hinges there is no need to defend a limitation of Closure; this is because if skeptical hypotheses SH such as ‘I might be a BIV’ or ‘I might be deceived by an Evil Deceiver’ are senseless combinations of signs, so are their putative ‘negations’ not-SH; then from the fact that we don’t know whether we are victims of a skeptical scenario (‘I do not know not-SH’ where both SH and its ‘negation’ are illicit combination of signs) we cannot infer or deduce that we do not know our everyday propositions M even with a ‘strong’ version

empirical propositions ('If I do not know not-SH, then I do not know M'); we are thus in a position to retain Closure (which can be applied only to propositional beliefs, and not to nonsensical alleged negations of non-propositional rules) and our confidence in our everyday knowledge claims.<sup>17</sup>

## 9. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have presented and criticized a number of anti-skeptical proposals inspired by Moore's "proof of an external world". Furthermore, I have argued that following Wittgenstein's remarks on 'hinges', we should get rid of skeptical scenarios as nonsensical, even if apparently intelligible, and consider them excluded from any sensible epistemic inquiry.

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of Closure in play. On Coliva's reading of OC and its anti-skeptical implications, see Moyal-Sharrock (2013) and Pritchard & Boulton (2013)

<sup>17</sup> It is worth noticing that in this work I am not concerned with an exegetical reconstruction of Wittgenstein's epistemological views, which stem from his conceptual analysis of the use of expressions such as 'knowledge', 'doubt' and 'certainty'; on the contrary, I am simply proposing a loosely 'Wittgenstein-inspired' anti-skeptical position, developing some of the anti-skeptical arguments he put forward in OC in order to address Closure-based Radical skepticism. For a general introduction to OC see Morawetz (1978) and Stroll (1994). Other influential 'OC-inspired' anti-skeptical strategies are Conant (1998), Wright (2004a, 2004b) and Williams (2004a, 2004b, 2005). For a recent critical evaluation of these proposals, see Salvatore (2013, 2015, 2016).

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