

WITTGENSTEINIAN EPISTEMOLOGY AND CARTESIAN SKEPTICISM

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue that Wittgenstein's remarks on 'hinge propositions', correctly understood and developed, would help us dismissing Cartesian-style skepticism as the result of a *conceptual error*.

The feature of Cartesian-style skeptical arguments is that we cannot know empirical propositions (such as "I have a body", or "There are external objects") as we may be dreaming, hallucinating, deceived by a demon, or be "brains-in-the-vat" (BIVs—i.e., disembodied brains floating in a vat connected to supercomputers).

Cartesian arguments are extremely powerful as they rest on the *Closure principle for knowledge*:

The "Closure" 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 ¹.

Now, let's take a skeptical hypothesis, SH, such as the BIV hypothesis mentioned above, and M, an empirical proposition like "I have a body" 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

The radical skeptical consequence that we can draw from this and similar arguments is that our everyday knowledge is impossible.

A way of dealing with "Cartesian style" skepticism is to deny the premise S1) of the skeptical argument. For instance, in his "*A defence of commonsense*" (1925, henceforth DCS) and "*Proof of the external world*" (1939, henceforth PEW), G. E. Moore famously argued that we can have knowledge of the "commonsense view of the world", that is of propositions such as "I have a body" or "There are external

¹ This is essentially the formulation of the Closure principle defended by Williamson (2000, 117) and Hawthorne (2005, 29).

objects”.

But, argues Wittgenstein, to say that we simply “know” Moore-style propositions would be misleading. First, because in order to say, “I know” one should be able to produce evidence and/or to offer compelling grounds for his beliefs. But (OC 245), *Moore’s grounds aren’t stronger than what they are supposed to justify*. If an evidence has to count as a compelling ground for our belief in a certain proposition then that evidence must be more certain than the belief itself. If the evidence we adduce to support p is less secure than p itself, then this same evidence would be unable to support p.

Also (OC 138) there is no inquiry, no method of analysis or recognized process of investigation that can make us surer than how we are without inquiry about a Moore-style proposition. But if we cannot ‘know’ Moore-style propositions, we cannot doubt them either.

If someone were holding the denial of a Moore-style proposition we would not consider her belief as a mistake (OC 155); if for instance I believe that I have no body this belief would not be merely an error; but more likely the result of a sensorial or mental disturbance (OC 526).

Also, for Wittgenstein doubts must be based on *grounds*: if they don't, they are constitutively empty. Wittgenstein gives the example (OC 310) of a pupil that constantly interrupts a lesson questioning about the existence of things, or of the meaning of words. His doubts will lack any sense, and at most it will lead to a sort of epistemic paralysis: he will just be unable to learn the skill/subject we are trying to teach him (OC 315). More generally, for Wittgenstein any proper epistemic inquiry presupposes that we take something for granted; if we start doubting everything, there will be no knowledge at all.

Neither knowable nor doubtable, for Wittgenstein Moore-style propositions are “hinges” (OC 341/343); apparently normal empirical contingent claims, that on closer inspection perform a different, more basic role in our epistemic practices.

A very influential “Wittgenstein-inspired” proposal is Crispin Wright’s “rational entitlement” (2004a/2004b). For Wright, every and each of our epistemic practices would rest on indubitable presuppositions; but still, this does not and cannot undermine our confidence in our ways of inquiry.

Cartesian skepticism would only be able to show that every process of

knowledge-acquisition rests on ungrounded presupposition. But a system of thought, purified of all liability to Moore-style propositions, would not be that of a rational agent; and because rational agency is a basic way for us to act we have therefore a default rational basis, an *entitlement*, to believe in hinges.

In this way, Wright's proposal can motivate the claim that we can know the denials of skeptical scenarios; and if we can have some sort of knowledge of "hinges" s we will therefore be able to retain both the Closure principle and our confidence in our everyday empirical knowledge claims.

There are many problems that Wright's account has to face.

First, (see Pritchard, 2005, Jenkins, 2007, and Pedersen, 2009) Wright seems to miss a crucial distinction between *practical* and *epistemic* rationality. That is, to accept a non-evidentially warranted hinge would be *practically* rational, as we obviously need to set aside Cartesian skeptical concerns to pursue any kind of inquiry and to achieve cognitive results (Jenkins, 2007, 26). But even if it would be entirely rational to set aside skeptical concerns whenever we want to pursue a given epistemic practice, a Cartesian skeptic can nonetheless argue that the fact that we *need* true beliefs about the world does not make our acceptance of 'hinges' epistemically rational.

Second, (Pritchard, forthcoming a/b) to believe a proposition is to believe that proposition *to be true*; and we have no reason to take hinges to be true but the fact that we need them. Accordingly, if we cannot say strictly speaking that we believe in a hinge, then we cannot have knowledge of it either; a mere trusting of or acceptance in the hinge at issue will not suffice.

Another dominant "OC inspired" anti-skeptical proposal "Wittgensteinian contextualism" (1991, 2001).

Williams names the doubts that are excluded from any particular inquiry *methodological constraints* (MC), while he names the unquestionable presuppositions that make any specific inquiry possible, his reading of the Wittgensteinian "hinge propositions", *methodological necessities* (MN). Any inquiry is defined by MC and MN; this is not for pragmatic purposes only but rather belongs to the same logic of our epistemic practices. By doubting the "hinges" of our most common epistemic practices, the skeptic leads us from a context in which it is legitimate to hold them fast

toward a philosophical context in which everything can be doubtable. But this move cannot affect our common-day practices; at most, what the Cartesian skeptic is able to show us is that, in the more demanding context of philosophical reflection, we do not know anything at all.

A crucial problem for Williams' proposal is that following his account Cartesian skepticism would persist as an unsolvable problem at a philosophical level; his Wittgensteinian contextualism would then lead, at most, to the recognition of skepticism as a sort of philosophical "incurable disease"; and it is far from obvious which sort of intellectual comfort his views can give us.

According to another interpretative line (McGinn, 1989, Moyal-Sharrock, 2004), we should consider hinges as 'rules of grammar'. Just consider the following entries:

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* (OC 95, my italics).

Even if they resemble empirical knowledge claims, Moore-style propositions would then play a different, more basic role in our system of beliefs, namely that of *norms* drawing a line between sense and nonsense rather than between truth and falsity. This is especially true for Moore style propositions such as "I have a body" or "There are external objects", that Wittgenstein considers as "the scaffolding of our thoughts" (OC 211) or like "foundation-walls" (OC 248), the "substratum of all our enquiring and asserting" (OC 162).

This would have two promising anti-skeptical implications. First, following this account of the "hinge proposition" strategy, Cartesian-style skepticism would be the result of a *conceptual error*; the Cartesian skeptic would be simply treating hinges as beliefs while in fact they are norms of representation.

A second and more important consequence of this account is that it will not affect closure. As Duncan Pritchard points out (forthcoming a, forthcoming b), one of the important aspects of this principle is that the *belief* in the consequent proposition should be acquired on the basis of the relevant competent deduction. But "hinges" are not the expressions of a propositional attitude such as a *belief in*; rather, they are the expression of non-propositional norms. Thus, the very fact that we, strictly speaking, do not know the denials of skeptical scenarios would be then compatible with closure;

for hinges are not beliefs, so they are not in the market for propositional knowledge.

REFERENCES

- _ Baker, G., Hacker P.M.S, (1985) *Wittgenstein: Rules Grammar And Necessity*, Blackwell, Oxford
- _ Hawthorne, J. (2005) ‘The Case for Closure’, *Contemporary debates in Epistemology*, (eds.) E. Sosa & M. Steup, 26-43, Oxford, Blackwell.
- _ Jenkins, C. (2007), ‘Entitlement and Rationality’, *Synthese* 157, 25-45.
- _ Moore, G.E. (1925) ‘A defence of Commonsense’, *Contemporary British Philosophers* (2nd series) (ed.) J.H. Muirhead, Allen and Unwin, London;
- (1939) ‘Proof of an External world’, *Proceedings of the British academy* 25, 273-300.
- _ McGinn, M., (1989) *Sense and Certainty: a Dissolution of Skepticism*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell;
- _ Moyal-Sharrock, D. (2005) *Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty*, London, Palgrave Macmillan
- (2010), ‘Hinge Certainty’, draft;
- _ Pedersen, N.J. (2009), ‘Entitlement, Value and Rationality’, *Synthese* 171, 443-57.
- _ Pritchard, D.H. (2005), ‘Wittgenstein’s On Certainty and contemporary anti-skepticism’, in D. Moyal-Sharrock and W.H. Brenner (eds.), *Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty*, London, Palgrave, 189-224;
- (forthcoming a), *Entitlement and the Groundlessness of our believing*;
- (forthcoming b), *Wittgenstein and the Groundlessness of our believing*;
- _ Williams, T. (2001), *Knowledge and Its Limits*, Oxford: Oxford University Press;
- _ Williams, M., (1991), *Unnatural Doubts*, Cambridge (Mass.), Blackwell;
- (2004a), ‘Wittgenstein’s refutation of idealism’, D. McManus (ed.), *Wittgenstein and Skepticism*, 76-96, London, New York Routledge.
- (2004b), ‘Wittgenstein, truth and certainty’, in M. Kolbel, B. Weiss (eds.), *Wittgenstein’s lasting significance*, Routledge, London;
- (2005), ‘Why Wittgenstein isn’t a foundationalist’, in D. Moyal-Sharrock and W.H. Brenner (eds.), 47-58;
- _ Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations* (PI);
On Certainty (OC)
Remarks on the foundation of mathematics (RFM)
- _ Wright, C. (1985), ‘Facts and Certainty’, *Proceedings of the British academy* 71, 429-72;

(2004 a), 'Warrant for nothing (and foundation for free)?' *Aristotelian society Supplement*, 78/1, 167-212;

(2004 b), 'Wittgensteinian Certainties', in D. McManus (ed.), 22-55.