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## WITTGENSTEIN'S *ON CERTAINTY* AND CONTEMPORARY ANTI-SCEPTICISM

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper examines the relevance of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* to the contemporary debate regarding the problem of radical scepticism. In particular, it considers two accounts in the recent literature which have seen in Wittgenstein's remarks on "hinge propositions" in *On Certainty* the basis for a primarily *epistemological* anti-sceptical thesis—*viz.*, the inferential contextualism offered by Michael Williams and the 'unearned warrant' thesis defended by Crispin Wright. Both positions are shown to be problematic, both as interpretations of Wittgenstein and as anti-sceptical theses. Indeed, it is argued that on a reading of *On Certainty* which has Wittgenstein advancing a primarily epistemological thesis, there is in fact strong evidence to suggest that Wittgenstein thought that no *epistemic* response to the sceptic was available—at best, it seems, only a *pragmatic* anti-sceptical thesis is on offer. Such a conclusion is not without import to the present debate regarding radical scepticism, however, since it poses a general challenge for how the sceptical argument is conceived in the contemporary literature.

### 1. CONTEMPORARY ANTI-SCEPTICISM

Epistemology has seen a quite dramatic resurgence in recent years, and to a large extent this general renewal of interest in epistemological questions has been driven by the more specific renaissance in the epistemological sub-topic of philosophical scepticism.<sup>1</sup> If one thinks of the main epistemological proposals that are currently 'live' in the contemporary literature one usually finds that these accounts gained their initial impetus from their application to the sceptical problem. The obvious examples in this respect are, of course, the 'sensitivity-based' theories of knowledge first advocated by Fred Dretske (1970) and Robert Nozick (1981), the 'semantic contextualism' put forward by Keith DeRose (1995), David Lewis (1996) and Stewart Cohen (e.g., 2000), and the 'safety-based' theories of knowledge advanced by, amongst others, Ernest Sosa (1999) and myself (e.g., Pritchard 2002d). In each case, the chief attraction of the view is that it is able to offer a relatively compelling resolution of the sceptical problem, where that problem is understood, in essence, in terms of the incompatibility of the following three claims, each of which is plausible when taken on its own:<sup>2</sup>

- (S1) We are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses.
- (S2) If we are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, then we are also unable to know any one of the 'everyday' propositions which we typically take ourselves to know.
- (S3) We are able to know everyday propositions.

The first claim is intuitive because sceptical hypotheses—such as the hypothesis that one

might undetectably be a brain-in-a-vat (BIV) who is being ‘fed’ her deceptive experiences of everyday life by futuristic neuroscientists—are defined in such a way that it seems that we could not possibly know them to be false.<sup>3</sup> After all, if there is nothing phenomenologically available to us that could indicate that we are not BIVs, then how could we possibly know that this scenario has not obtained?

The second claim is intuitive because it rests on the compelling principle that knowledge is ‘closed’ under known entailment, or the closure principle for short. This can be roughly expressed as follows:

*Closure for Knowledge*

For all agents,  $\varphi$ ,  $\psi$ , if an agent knows a proposition  $\varphi$ , and knows that  $\varphi$  entails a second proposition  $\psi$ , then that agent also knows  $\psi$ .<sup>4</sup>

It is hard to see how such an apparently uncontentious principle could possibly be false. Moreover, when we plug-in the propositions that are relevant to the sceptical argument to the closure-based inference, we find that the reasoning employed by the sceptic is extremely plausible. If I know that I am, say, sitting here now, then I surely must also know that I am not a BIV (since I know that BIVs don’t *sit* anywhere). Accordingly, if I am unable to know the denial of the sceptical hypothesis that I am a BIV, then it follows that I am also unable to know the relevant everyday propositions that I know to be inconsistent with this hypothesis, such as that I am currently seated. Closure thus licenses (S2).

With (S2) in play, however, the sceptic is able to infer the denial of (S3) from the further sceptical premise (S1). Call this ‘the sceptical argument’. The problem is, of course, that we are unable to accept that the conclusion of the sceptical argument—that we are unable to know anything of substance—is true. Indeed, the suggestion that we are unable to know any everyday propositions is absurd—the *reductio ad absurdum*, if you like, of sceptical reasoning. In short, we can’t coherently reject (S3).

It is important to highlight that the sceptical claim here is that we are *unable* to know everyday propositions, rather than just the mundane contention that we do not, as it happens, know them. It is not at all counterintuitive to suppose that we might be the victims of a sceptical hypothesis, and to further note that if this were the case then we would not know very much. The force of the sceptical argument is due to its claim that *regardless* of whether we are in fact the victim of a sceptical hypothesis, it remains that we do not know these everyday propositions—even if, as it happens, we are *not* the victim of a sceptical hypothesis and the world is very much as we currently take it to be. It is this modal dimension to the conclusion of the sceptical argument that makes it so troubling

since it means that no matter what the actual world is like, we lack knowledge of much of what we take ourselves to know.

One further feature of the sceptical argument is also worth commenting on, which is that it is a *paradox*. That is, the three inconsistent claims noted above are all, taken independently, highly plausible and yet, taken collectively, they generate a contradiction. The question is thus which of these intuitive claims should go. This point about scepticism posing a paradox is important because it highlights the distinctive theoretical burden that faces the anti-sceptic. In short, this burden is this: it is not enough in responding to the sceptic that one simply motivates an *impasse*, with equal considerations on either side—a *draw*, if you will—because in terms of the sceptical debate a draw is as good as a loss. In order to see this, imagine for a moment that one responded to the sceptic as one would to a philosophical adversary who simply proposed an alternative position. Here it would be legitimate to do two things that one cannot legitimately do in the debate with the sceptic. The first is to charge one's opponent with offering absurd claims. The second is to say that there is as much reason to hold one's own position as there is to hold the adversary's position, and thus that one's adversary's criticisms are inadequate to the task. In both cases such a manoeuvre when employed against the sceptical paradox would quickly backfire. In the first case this is because, as things stand, the sceptical paradox is only making use of conceptual resources that we have otherwise granted—the noted inconsistency is therefore an inconsistency that is present, it seems, in *our own* concepts, rather than merely in the claims of an imagined adversary. Charging the sceptic with absurdity is thus tantamount to charging *ourselves* with absurdity, and is thus an entirely impotent dialectical move. In the second case this is because if there is simply an *impasse* between the sceptic and the anti-sceptic then this seems in itself sufficient to motivate a second-order scepticism which concludes that there is no good reason *not* to be a sceptic, and this is just as troubling as its first-order counterpart.

One can highlight this point by considering a simple-minded response one might make to the sceptic—what we will tendentiously call a 'Moorean' response.<sup>5</sup> Suppose one argued that since one's intuition is that one knows lots of everyday propositions—in line with (S3)—and that since one also has the further intuition that closure is correct—in line with (S2)—it follows that the way to deal with the sceptical problem is to simply deny that we are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses—i.e., deny (S1). That is, the claim would go, we have at least as good a reason as the sceptic to use closure in this direction rather than use it in the other direction as undermining our everyday knowledge. Furthermore, one might add, it is the sceptic who is offering the absurd position here, and so the burden of explanation ought to be, all other things being equal, on her shoulders rather than ours. So whilst it is puzzling to discover that we are able to know such anti-

sceptical propositions as that we are not presently BIVs, nevertheless, it is at least *less* puzzling to suppose this than that we might know next to nothing at all.

Clearly such an approach to scepticism will not get us very far. The sceptic is, properly understood, not an adversary at all, but simply our intellectual conscience who is highlighting the inconsistency of our beliefs about knowledge. It is irrelevant, then, to learn that the sceptic is proposing something absurd, since, as matters stand, it is *we* who are believing absurd things. Moreover, if the only consideration that we can offer for denying one of the inconsistent triad, (S1-3), is that this enables us to evade the sceptical problem, then this will give us little in the way of intellectual comfort. After all, on this conception of the sceptical debate we have just as much reason to accept the conclusion of the sceptical argument as we do to accept the conclusion of the Moorean argument, which means that for all we have reason to believe, scepticism could well be true. This is hardly an appealing intellectual position to be in.

The way to avoid offering such irrelevant responses to the sceptic is to remember that there is, in fact, no such person as the sceptic, no actual adversary that we are arguing with.<sup>6</sup> If there were such a person, then it would be relatively easy to expose their position to ridicule and send them on their way. The ‘sceptic’ is instead our own intellectual creation, the product of our discovery that our beliefs about knowledge are inconsistent in the way described above. It is not enough, then, to simply remark that the sceptical conclusion is absurd and move on, or, relatedly, simply deny one of the three claims listed above. What is needed, at the very least, is some explanation of why this claim is false, and why, in particular, we might have thought that it was true in the first place.

I mentioned three types of anti-scepticism above which each responded to the sceptical paradox as we have just outlined it, and it is worth briefly noting (the details of each account aren’t important to us here) how each of these anti-sceptical strategies responds to this problem. The first, the sensitivity-based approach, deals with the problem by motivating a modal theory of knowledge which is independently plausible (i.e., it captures a number of our intuitions about knowledge) but which has as a consequence the result that closure must fail. In essence, they claim that a necessary condition for knowledge is that the agent’s belief should match the truth in the nearest possible worlds in which what is believed is false. Significantly, however, such a ‘tracking’ condition on knowledge appears to exclude knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses *tout court*, whilst leaving everyday knowledge untouched. Proponents of this view therefore deny (S2) in the inconsistent triad.<sup>7</sup>

The second view mentioned, the semantic contextualist thesis, responds to the sceptical paradox by claiming that ‘knows’ is an indexical term such that in different contexts of utterance the very same sentence employing this term can mean different things. In particular, contextualists of

this ilk tend to claim that the sceptic is raising the epistemic standards by introducing sceptical hypotheses in such a way as to make their claim that we lack knowledge of everyday propositions true in this context. In contrast, however, they also claim that in everyday contexts in which sceptical hypotheses are not under consideration, our assertions of sentences involving the word ‘know’ which ascribe knowledge to agents will tend to express truths. The sceptical argument is thus correct relative to one context of assertion, but false relative to another. Moreover, since there is no single context in which both (S1) and (S3) is true, the contextualist is therefore in a position to claim that he can deal with the sceptical problem whilst retaining closure.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, there is the safety-based approach which also retains closure. This strategy appears on the surface of things to be the same as the Moorean anti-sceptical approach that we just considered and discounted, in that it argues that we can know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, and thus that (S1) is false. What is different about this approach is that it combines such a view with a modal analysis of knowledge which can explain how we could come to know such propositions and which can also explain away our counter-intuitions here in terms of a misplaced epistemological internalism. Proponents of the safety-based view—or ‘neo-Mooreans’ as they are sometimes known—thus engage with the sceptical paradox in a way that the Moorean approach does not.<sup>9</sup>

Our primary concern here is not with these particular anti-sceptical proposals, however, but rather with the question of how the remarks made by Wittgenstein (1969) in *On Certainty* (OC) bear on the contemporary response to the sceptical problem. On the face of it, the impact of *On Certainty* on the contemporary literature as regards scepticism is quite limited, in that there are only really two influential proposals in the epistemological literature that could be thought to be inspired by Wittgenstein’s remarks in this text. The theses that I have in mind here are the ‘inferential contextualism’ that is put forward by Michael Williams (principally in Williams 1991), and the ‘unearned warrant’ thesis defended by Crispin Wright (2000; 2002; 2003a; 2003b; 2004; cf. Davies 1998; 2000; 2003; 2004), and it is these two views that I will be discussing here. There is a reason for this current lack of exposure, which is that the dominant research programme regarding the sceptical problem is a predominantly *epistemic* one, when what many commentators take the later Wittgenstein to be offering is a primarily *semantic* response to scepticism, one that takes issue with the very content of sceptical (and anti-sceptical) assertions.<sup>10</sup> Wittgensteinian anti-scepticism is in fact alive and well, it is just that it doesn’t feature prominently in the current literature regarding scepticism because that literature is focussed on primarily epistemic responses to the problem. The primary aim of this paper is to examine the prospects of the unorthodox *epistemological* reading of *On Certainty* made by Williams and Wright to see if there is any primarily epistemological response to the sceptic that can be extracted from this text. First, however, we need to say something about

the Wittgensteinian notion which is central to both of these anti-sceptical theories—*viz.*, “hinge” propositions.

## 2. WITTGENSTEIN ON “HINGE” PROPOSITIONS—THE MINIMAL READING

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein offers a sustained (though fragmentary) examination of a number of epistemological issues. Central to this examination is his conception of a certain type of proposition that performs a peculiar epistemic role. One of the ways in which Wittgenstein characterises this sort of proposition is through the metaphor of the “hinge”:

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

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

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (OC §§341-3)<sup>11</sup>

As this quotation indicates, what is odd about these propositions is that, unlike other seemingly empirical propositions, our belief in them does not seem to either stand in need of evidential buttress or, for that matter, be legitimately prone to coherent doubt. And this property is not explained merely by the fact that these propositions are “*in deed* not doubted”, since the situation is rather that we do not doubt them because, in some sense, we *ought* not to doubt them. Even despite their lack of sufficient evidential support, their immunity to coherent doubt is part of “the logic of our scientific investigations.”

In proposing this notion Wittgenstein was explicitly challenging the conventional epistemological wisdom that a belief is only legitimately held if it is sufficiently evidentially grounded (otherwise it is open to legitimate doubt), and that *no* belief in an empirical proposition is beyond coherent doubt should the grounds for that belief be found wanting. In particular, Wittgenstein's remarks here were primarily targeted at G. E. Moore's (1925; 1939) famous “common-sense” response to the sceptic, so it is worthwhile beginning our commentary there.<sup>12</sup>

The response to scepticism put forward by Moore is ‘Moorean’ in the manner specified above at least in that it is in this vein that Moore claimed that, *contra* the sceptic, he knew certain propositions that were typically thought to be open to sceptical doubt. In particular, Moore famously ‘proved’ the existence of the external world (and thus the denial of any sceptical hypothesis designed to show that there was no such world), by simply gesturing with his one hand and saying

“Here is one hand”, and then gesturing with the other and saying “And here is another”. Since, he claimed, he had established that he knew that he had two hands—and thus that two ‘external’ objects existed—so he had thereby established that he knew there was an external world as well. Moore regarded this as being a perfectly “rigorous” proof, reminding us that

[...] we all of us do constantly take proofs of this sort as absolutely conclusive proofs of certain conclusions—as finally settling certain questions, as to which we were previously in doubt. (Moore 1939, 147)

To illustrate this he gives the example of proving that there are at least three misprints on a page. To settle this question we simply look for one, then another, and then another. If this is an adequate ‘proof’ of the contested proposition in this context, then why should the gesturing of one’s hands be deficient in response to the sceptic? So Moore answers the sceptical challenge by straightforwardly *affirming* various contested propositions along with the empirical grounds he possesses which justify this belief. He also offers a further *caveat*: that, at the very least, the truth of these propositions is more certain than the soundness of any sceptical argument which is intended to counter our belief in them. So whereas the sceptic argues from doubt of a general anti-sceptical proposition, concerning, say, our relationship to the external world, to doubt of a class of everyday propositions which presuppose the truth of this anti-sceptical proposition, the ‘Moorean’ style of response is to argue from a putative instance of knowledge of one of the contested everyday propositions to knowledge of the general anti-sceptical proposition.

One of the key components of Wittgenstein’s critique of this approach is the claim that in arguing in this way Moore has misdescribed our epistemic practice by treating a hinge proposition as if it were just straightforwardly empirical. Wittgenstein focuses upon Moore’s claim to know P, “I have two hands”, in this respect. Moore says that he knows P and, furthermore, that his knowledge of this proposition is evidentially supported (he says that he can *see* that he has two hands and so forth). This initial contention that Moore makes is pivotal because once this knowledge claim is secured, the anti-sceptical conclusion follows relatively unproblematically. If one *does* know that one has two hands (and knows that having hands entails that there is an external world), then, intuitively at least, one must know that there is an external world, or that one is not a (handless) BIV (cf. OC §1). Crucially, however, as Wittgenstein argues throughout *On Certainty*, one cannot properly claim to *know* a hinge proposition.

For instance, Wittgenstein argues that the evidential grounds that Moore adduces to support his claim to know P are entirely irrelevant. What makes P certain, and therefore exempt from doubt, is not the fact that it enjoys a high degree of evidential support,<sup>13</sup> but rather that it performs a

framework role in normal circumstances. It is because P performs this role that we are unwilling to let anything count against it, since whatever could count against it could be no more certain than P itself. It is thus mistaken to think, as Moore does, that our belief in P is evidentially grounded. As Wittgenstein stresses, if evidence is to be coherently thought of as counting as a ground for belief in a certain proposition, then that evidence must be regarded as being more certain than the belief itself. The trouble is, this is not possible in the case of a hinge proposition such as P because *nothing* is more certain than this proposition in normal circumstances. Here is Wittgenstein:

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)

Moore's belief in P cannot be coherently thought of as grounded by the sight of his hands (as he alleges), since it is not plausible to think that he is more certain of his sight than he is of the existence of his hands. This is illustrated by the fact that if one were to seriously doubt something so certain as whether or not one had hands, then why should one trust the evidence of one's sight? If, in normal circumstances, the former is open to doubt, then so, surely, is the latter. As Wittgenstein puts it:

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

The problem is, in claiming to know a proposition one thereby implies that one can offer grounds that would support that claim—one implies, that is, that one is in a position to say *how* one knows—where supporting grounds are grounds that are more certain than the proposition claimed. But since hinge propositions are not evidentially grounded (since nothing is more certain than a hinge proposition), this can never be adequately done (OC §§14ff., 23, 438, 441, 483-4, 550-1, 564, 574, 576). Imagine, for example, that one attempted to legitimate one's claim to know P by appealing to the evidence that one has for P; regarding what one sees and what one has been told in this respect and so forth. In what way is this explanation to serve any role if all the evidence adduced in support of P is itself less secure than P? As Wittgenstein puts the matter:

One says "I know" when one is ready to give compelling grounds. "I know" relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth. Whether someone knows something can come to light, assuming that he is convinced of it.

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

Accordingly, Wittgenstein says that instead of saying that he *knows* a proposition like P, Moore

should have more honestly claimed that such a proposition “stands fast for me” (OC §116; cf. OC §253).<sup>14,15</sup>

This does not mean, however, that Wittgenstein thought that Moore would be entitled to express doubt about such a proposition on the grounds that it lacks sufficient evidential support, for the very hinge role that this proposition plays ensures that any claim to doubt such a proposition would be equally incoherent. What, for example, could ground such a doubt? After all, whatever could serve as a ground for an expression of doubt in this respect must be more certain than the proposition doubted and yet, as we have seen, *nothing* is more certain than this proposition. Hinge propositions are thus exempt from epistemic evaluation of both a positive *and* a negative sort, since no claim to know or doubt such a proposition could ever be properly made (e.g., OC §10).

In general, then, Wittgenstein argues for a radical revision of how we understand the structure of reasons and evidence, one that generates the immediate consequence that an assertion of a first-person knowledge claim regarding a hinge proposition is always conversationally inappropriate. That is, our reasons do not, as it were, ‘go all the way down’ to the bedrock, since our practice of offering grounds for our beliefs, and for our doubts, presupposes a backdrop of hinge claims that are both groundless and yet also immune to doubt. Indeed, Wittgenstein is here inverting the classical foundationalist epistemological paradigm, since his claim is that the propositions that we hold the most certain are, *of their nature*, lacking in evidential support. The certain hinge ‘foundations’ for our knowledge are thus understood in such a way that they are not only not self-justifying (they are not self-evident etc.), but also not justified by anything else that the agent believes. Since an appropriate claim to know implies that one can offer relevant grounds in favour of that claim, however, it follows from this thesis about the structure of reasons and evidence that any claim to know such a necessarily groundless hinge proposition is, at the very least, improper. Crucially, however, this picture of the structure of reasons also means that any doubt of a hinge proposition will also be necessarily groundless. Accordingly, since any claim to doubt a proposition also requires sufficient grounds to support that claim, it follows that any asserted doubt of a hinge proposition will also be, at the very least, conversationally inappropriate. Hence, not only is the Moorean claim to know hinge propositions improper, so too is the sceptic’s claim to doubt such propositions.

As we will see in a moment, Wittgenstein actually says much more than this about hinge propositions in *On Certainty* than this brief sketch indicates, but the additional theses in this respect are controversial so we will stick to what he *at least* says in this text. Call this, then, the ‘*minimal*’ hinge proposition thesis in *On Certainty*. Any *Wittgensteinian* response to the scepticism which

employs the notion of a hinge must be at least sensitive to the minimal reading of *On Certainty*.

So what are the stronger claims that Wittgenstein appears to want to motivate in *On Certainty*? To begin with, whilst the minimal interpretation only has Wittgenstein contending that claims to know (or doubt) hinge propositions are conversationally improper, there are a raft of remarks in *On Certainty* which suggest the much stronger thesis that such claims to know are more than just improper but also incoherent or even just plain meaningless. Wittgenstein notes, for example, that saying that one knows a hinge proposition is not analogous to merely asserting something which, though true, is superfluous, but rather akin to someone saying “good morning” in the middle of a conversation (OC §464; cf. OC §350). In short, it offends against the *grammar* of epistemological claims (OC §§10, 111-2, 116, 151, 243, 347-50, 372, 414, 461, 468-9, 576).

Indeed, it is worth noting in this respect the oddity of the terminology of a hinge “proposition”. Even by the lights of the minimal interpretation hinge “propositions” are, it seems, *beliefs* rather than propositions since the very same proposition can be at one time a hinge and at one time an empirical proposition.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, if one takes the line that such assertions are meaningless then one may well be tempted to argue that for Wittgenstein hinge “propositions” are not *propositions* at all.<sup>17</sup> If one interprets the Wittgensteinian account of hinge “propositions” more robustly than the minimal interpretation along these semantic lines, however, then it ceases to be obvious that *On Certainty* is offering an *epistemological* response to the sceptic. On this view both Moore and the sceptic try to say what simply cannot be said, and this accounts for the apparent incoherence of both sceptical and anti-sceptical assertions. Of course, this thesis will still have epistemological ramifications, since it will call into question any epistemology which, for example, treats sceptical doubt as being on a par with normal everyday doubt. Nevertheless, what is important for our purposes is that such an anti-sceptical strategy would be motivated on primarily semantic rather than epistemic grounds.

The anti-sceptical theses that are our concern here, however, try to respond to the sceptical problem in a way that is in keeping with the Wittgensteinian conception of hinges, at least in some broad sense, but in such a way that a primarily epistemological response to the sceptic is on offer. Accordingly, we will henceforth set-aside the semantic reading of *On Certainty* just noted.

Clearly, any epistemological response to the sceptic will still need to extract a stronger thesis about hinges from *On Certainty* than the minimal thesis just described. There are three inter-related reasons for this. The first is that the minimal thesis tells us next to nothing about what the conditions for knowledge are, focussing instead on what the appropriate conditions are for *claims* to know (or claims to doubt). Unless one is willing to make some further assumptions about the nature of knowledge, there need be no essential connection between, on the one hand, the impropriety of

sceptical claims to doubt and, on the other, anti-sceptical claims to know and the issue of whether or not we really do have the knowledge that the sceptic contests. That is, as matters stand, it could just be that we have the knowledge of hinges that the sceptic contests, but just can't properly claim it (or, conversely, it could just be that we lack the knowledge that we think we have, as the sceptic claims, but that we cannot properly express this doubt). The same applies to the related minimal Wittgensteinian thesis about the structure of reasons and evidence. It is only if one understands knowledge along evidentialist lines that the lack of evidential support for belief in these propositions would entail that one lacks knowledge of them, and this extra thesis is not clearly a feature of *On Certainty*.

The second reason is that the minimal interpretation of *On Certainty*, if understood as an anti-sceptical thesis, makes the mistake noted above of treating the sceptic as an embodied adversary, someone who is committed to making appropriate claims about their epistemic position (and ours). Recall, however, that there is no sceptic in this sense, but rather simply a sceptical paradox that needs responding to. It is thus hardly surprising that sceptical assertions have an air of absurdity about them, since such assertions simply reflect the putatively paradoxical nature of our epistemic concepts. In short, that it is incoherent to make sceptical assertions does not in itself entail that what is asserted by those assertions is not *true*.

The third reason why we need more than the minimal interpretation of *On Certainty* if we are to extract an epistemological anti-sceptical thesis from the text is related to the second, and concerns the manner in which the minimal interpretation seems to favour a sceptical reading of our epistemic predicament over an anti-sceptical reading. After all, if there is an immediate epistemological moral to be drawn from the minimal interpretation's claim that our practice of offering grounds depends upon an acceptance of certain claims which are entirely ungrounded it is surely one that is *sympathetic* to scepticism in that it offers support to the sceptical contention that our 'knowledge' is, at root, groundless, and so not *bona fide* knowledge at all. As Wittgenstein puts it at one point, "the difficulty is to realise the groundlessness of our believing" (OC §166).<sup>18</sup>

With these three points in mind, we will consider the two styles of broadly Wittgensteinian (epistemic) anti-scepticism that are advanced in the literature, beginning with the account offered by Wright.

### 3. WRIGHT ON UNEARNED WARRANTS

The most recent Wittgensteinian anti-sceptical line suggested by Wright initially appeared as a side-thesis of his approach to the so-called ‘McKinsey’ paradox regarding the putative incompatibility of first-person authority and semantic externalism.<sup>19</sup> This paradox appears to show that first-person authority is inconsistent with semantic externalism in the sense that the two theses combined produce the implausible consequence that one is able to have *a priori* knowledge of empirical facts about the world. We need not get into the details of this puzzle here,<sup>20</sup> except to note that the paradox has essentially the same logical structure as the sceptical argument, in that one can use two apparently uncontentious claims—about content externalism and first-person authority—to generate a conclusion that is extremely implausible. Indeed, the structural similarity is even stronger once one notes that the standard formulations of this locally sceptical argument also involves knowledge transferring across a known entailment (albeit specifically *a priori* knowledge), thereby presupposing a variant on the closure principle for knowledge cited above.

Essentially, Wright’s response to this puzzle is to argue that whilst closure must not be rejected because of its clear intuitiveness, one can avoid the puzzle with closure intact by rejecting a sister principle that he labels “transmission”. The difference between the two principles is that whilst closure simply maintains that knowledge transfers across known entailments, transmission demands something stronger, namely that what grounds the agent’s knowledge of the antecedent proposition *thereby* grounds the agent’s knowledge of the consequent proposition. What this means is that someone who gained the grounds which supports his knowledge of the antecedent proposition will, via transmission, thereby come to gain grounds which support his knowledge of the consequent proposition, and so learn something new in the process. This is different to closure in that closure does not demand that the agent’s knowledge of the antecedent proposition should have epistemic priority in this way. Accordingly, it allows that the agent’s knowledge of the consequent proposition could have been acquired *prior* to the agent’s knowledge of the antecedent proposition.

Wright offers a number of different formulations of this principle, but the canonical account he offers of transmission is in terms of the related notion of “cogency”. In a recent paper he puts the point as follows:

A valid argument is one thing. A valid argument with warranted premises is a second. But a *cogent* argument is yet a third: it is an argument, roughly, whereby someone could/should be moved to rational conviction of the truth of its conclusion—a case where it is possible to *learn* of the truth of a conclusion by getting warrant for the premises and then reasoning to it by the steps involved in the argument in question. Thus a valid argument with warranted premises cannot be cogent if the route to warrant for its

premises goes—of necessity, or under the particular constraints of a given epistemic context—via a prior warrant for its conclusion. Such arguments, as we like to say, ‘beg the question’.

Say that a particular warrant, *w*, *transmits* across a valid argument just in case the argument is cogent when *w* is the warrant for its premises. (Wright 2003, 58)<sup>21</sup>

The guiding thought here is that transmission is a more demanding principle than closure, at least insofar as this last principle is understood in terms of warrant rather than knowledge—i.e., as the thesis that if one is warranted in believing one proposition, and knows that this entails a second proposition, then one is warranted in believing the second proposition. The idea is that it could well be true that one could not be warranted in believing the antecedent proposition without also being warranted in believing the (known to be entailed) consequent proposition, without this meaning that what grounds the warrant for one’s belief in the antecedent proposition could be such that, employing those grounds alone coupled with the known entailment to the consequent proposition, one could *thereby* come to have a warranted belief in the consequent proposition. And what works for closure for warrant ought to likewise work for the closure principle for knowledge, as formulated above, on the grounds that knowledge entails warrant. Hence, it ought to be likewise possible on this view that one could only know the antecedent proposition provided one also knows the consequent proposition, without this meaning that what grounds the knowledge of the antecedent proposition could be such that these grounds alone in concert with the known entailment to the consequent proposition could enable one to thereby acquire knowledge of the consequent proposition.

Indeed, as Wright points out, question-begging arguments are an obvious case in point in this regard, in that such arguments—where knowledge of the consequent is simply *presupposed* in the agent’s knowledge of the antecedent—obviously must adhere to closure, but will not thereby instantiate transmission. Consider the following question-begging argument:

I know that God is responsible for creating and sustaining the universe.  
I know that (if God is responsible for creating and sustaining the universe, then God exists).  
Therefore, I know that God exists.

Here we have a question-begging argument, in that knowledge of the proposition embedded in the conclusion is simply presupposed in the agent’s knowledge of the proposition embedded in the first premise. Clearly, however, such an argument will conform to closure because if the agent does know the embedded proposition in the first premise then he can hardly be thought to fail to know the embedded proposition in the conclusion, at least given his knowledge of the relevant entailment. Crucially, however, this argument will not conform to transmission because the grounds the agent has for believing the embedded proposition in the first premise already presuppose knowledge of the

embedded proposition in the conclusion, in the sense that if that agent was not already entitled to the claim that God exists, then he could hardly be entitled to believe the more specific claim that God is responsible for creating and sustaining the universe. Accordingly, what grounds the agent's knowledge of the antecedent proposition could not be such that, in conjunction with his knowledge of the entailment, he could thereby come to have knowledge of the consequent proposition, since it is only if he already knows the consequent proposition that he can know the antecedent proposition in the first place. Moreover, in order for this to be an argument which would generate rational conviction in the conclusion, then it had better be an argument that conforms not only to closure in this way but also to transmission. No-one who did not already believe in God's existence would be persuaded to believe in the existence of a God on the basis of this argument.

The Wright line as regards the McKinsey paradox is thus to explore the possibility that what might be failing in such an argument is not closure but rather transmission, so that the premises of the relevant locally sceptical argument in fact do not provide argumentative support for the highly implausible conclusion after all, and thus that the theses of content externalism and first-person authority are off the hook (even though it is true that the antecedent proposition could only be known provided the contentious consequent proposition was also known).

Setting aside the issue of whether this approach can deal with the McKinsey paradox,<sup>22</sup> it ought to be clear that such a strategy has application to the Moorean argument against scepticism that we considered above. What is wrong with such a strategy, on this view, has nothing to do with closure—this part of the reasoning is perfectly fine—it is rather that the argument is in the relevant sense question-begging. That is, one cannot offer support for the claim that one knows that one is not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis on the basis of one's grounds for believing P because those very grounds already assume that one is not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis. That is, it is only on the assumption that one is not the victim of such a sceptical hypothesis that one's grounds give any support to the thought that one has two hands—otherwise, they offer no support in this direction at all.

Whilst the up-shot of this reasoning as regards an assessment of the Moorean argument is in conformity with the minimal interpretation of Wittgenstein described above, as yet there is no obvious sense in which this reasoning has anything to do with the Wittgensteinian conception of hinges, much less that it has any anti-sceptical import. The connection to Wittgenstein, and to anti-scepticism, comes with the further suggestion that Wright makes that the moral to be drawn from this line of argument is that there are certain propositions which perform a 'hinge'-style role in that one is entitled to believe them even though, at least in certain circumstances, one is unable to offer any evidence in favour of them. Moreover, the relevant propositions in question here are those

propositions which express our anti-sceptical commitments—that we are not BIVs and so forth. Whilst it is true that we cannot gain epistemic support for such propositions, as the failure of the Moorean argument illustrates, this is meant to be consistent with the idea, which is claimed to be found in *On Certainty*, that these propositions could nevertheless perform a hinge role such that we are entitled to believe them even in the absence of such grounds. What we have as regards these propositions is thus, as Wright (2004) puts it, an “unearned warrant”.

Moore’s mistake is thus specifically to try to *argue* for his anti-scepticism, to attempt to offer grounds for his belief in anti-sceptical propositions in such a way that would induce rational commitment in those who are attending to his argument. What we must recognise instead is that we have an epistemic entitlement to these propositions that exists even despite the fact that we are unable to offer grounds in favour of them. That is, we are entitled to believe in hinge propositions—i.e., for Wright, the denials of sceptical hypotheses—even despite their lack of epistemic support, and thus no supporting argument is needed to defend these beliefs. Closure is therefore not the culprit here, but rather transmission. If one knows the premises of the Moorean argument, then one knows the anti-sceptical conclusion, but that does not mean that the grounds that one has for believing the premises are thereby grounds for believing the conclusion, and thus one cannot coherently argue for belief in the Moorean anti-sceptical conclusion on the basis of the grounds that the one has for one’s everyday beliefs.

As a reading of *On Certainty* this is, on the face of it at least, somewhat odd. There are three reasons for this. The first is that for Wittgenstein the paradigm case of a hinge proposition, if there is one to be found in the text at all, is surely Moore’s claim that he has two hands, P, not a specifically anti-sceptical thesis, such as that one is not a BIV. Relatedly, second, there is a contextual element to Wittgenstein’s treatment of a proposition like P in that he grants that in some contexts it can be given adequate evidential support (it is just that in these cases an assertion of this proposition has no anti-sceptical implications whatsoever). And, finally, the third reason to be suspicious of this reading of *On Certainty* is that Wittgenstein’s primary claim is that we are unable to properly claim to know hinge propositions and, if this is thought to have any direct epistemological ramifications at all, then one would expect one of these ramifications to be that one cannot therefore have *knowledge* of hinge propositions. On the reading that Wright offers, in contrast, one *can* know hinge propositions—indeed, given that the view defines itself partly in terms of its retention of closure, one *must* know them, if one knows anything much—albeit only in some peculiar ‘unearned’ fashion.

Indeed, this last point relates to the general worry raised above about trying to extract a specifically epistemological anti-sceptical moral from *On Certainty*, in that if any epistemological

moral is to be extracted then it would seem to be the *sceptical* one that, strictly speaking, we lack knowledge of most of what we think we know. The apparently Wittgensteinian claim that our epistemic practices are ultimately groundless because of their dependence on a commitment to hinge propositions is, perversely, converted on this view into the contention that we somehow have knowledge, in a non-standard way, of these hinge propositions after all *even despite* their ungrounded nature. That is, that we have some prior entitlement to belief in these propositions such that epistemic support is not needed for knowledge in this case.

The natural question to ask at this juncture, of course, is just what entitles us to extract this particular anti-sceptical conclusion from the text rather than the sceptical moral that the unavailability of grounds for these propositions means that we cannot know them and thus, given closure, that we cannot know very much else either. After all, the line of thought presumably cannot just be that to suppose that we are unable to have such an unearned entitlement to these hinges would lead us directly to scepticism, and hence that the supposition is legitimate, since this would clearly be to beg the question against the sceptic in the very way that was contentious in the Moorean response to scepticism. Unfortunately, this is just how the argument pans-out in this respect, with the epistemic motivation boiling down to the claim that since we are unable to acquire warrants for these propositions, and since, as the sceptic highlights, if we are not warranted in believing these propositions then most of our knowledge is in question, hence it ought to be acceptable to suppose that we are warranted in believing such propositions.

For example, in his most recent paper on this subject, Wright (2004, 15) quotes the following passages from *On Certainty*:

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)? (OC §163)

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 experience 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 never having been to the moon. (OC §337)

As we noted above, the natural epistemic moral to be drawn from these observations is a dispiriting one about the structure of reasons regarding the “groundlessness of our believing” (OC §166). Wright, however, draws precisely the opposing moral:

To take it that one has acquired a warrant for a particular proposition by the appropriate exercise of certain appropriate cognitive capacities—perception, introspection, memory, or intellection, for instance—always involves various kinds of presupposition. These presuppositions will include the proper functioning of the relevant capacities, the suitability of the occasion and the circumstances for their effective function, and indeed the integrity of the very concepts involved in the formation of the issue in question. I take Wittgenstein’s point in the quoted passages to be that this is essential: *one cannot but take certain such things for granted.* (Wright 2004, 16)

And why is this not simply a sceptical conclusion to draw about the structure of reasons? Wright continues:

Since there is *no such thing* as a process of warrant for each of whose specific presuppositions warrant has already been earned, it should not be reckoned to be part of the proper concept of an acquired warrant that it somehow aspire to this—incoherent—ideal. (Wright 2004, 17)

Later he continues that:

This strategy of reply concedes that the best sceptical arguments have something to teach us—that the limits of justification they bring out are genuine and essential—but then replies that, just for that reason, cognitive achievement must be reckoned to take place *within such limits*. The attempt to surpass them would result not in an increase in rigour or solidity but merely in cognitive paralysis. (Wright 2004, 18)

Clearly, however, this is, at best, merely a pragmatic resolution of the sceptical paradox, since it simply notes that accepting the sceptical conclusion would lead us to absurdity and intellectual stasis and then argues on this basis that we must reject it and therefore accept the legitimacy of our ultimately groundless believing. That not believing in hinges would be intellectually self-subverting in this way is not, however, an *epistemic* reason for thinking that such beliefs are true, but merely a *pragmatic* consideration which counts in favour of our proceeding *as if* they are true. Non-scepticism is thus defended on the grounds that it is the practical alternative, but we knew *that* already. Despite the well-advertised claims to contrary, then, this particular hinge proposition thesis presents us with no epistemic response to the sceptic at all.

Of course, this is not to deny that there is a respectable notion of entitlement available that may be put to use in this regard, only that Wright does not make use of it. After all, epistemological externalists have long made play with such a notion, arguing that agents can legitimately believe all manner of propositions in the absence of supporting reasons just so long as the agent’s belief is formed in the right kind of way, where this is defined externally in terms of, for example, the reliability of the belief-forming mechanism involved. There is nothing peculiar about such a warrant on the externalist view for the simple reason that on this picture there is not a direct correlation between possessing a warrant and possessing adequate reflectively accessible grounds as there is on the alternative internalist picture. Accordingly, an epistemological externalist could approach the

minimal interpretation of *On Certainty* in a way that retains our knowledge of hinge propositions, but do so by treating such knowledge as being of a purely externalist sort which does not stand in need of evidential or rational support.<sup>23</sup> So why doesn't Wright understand the unearned warrant we have for hinges in this way?

The short answer to this question is that Wright is an epistemic internalist, holding (e.g., Wright 2004, 29) that adequate reflectively accessible supporting grounds are essential to the possession of warrant or knowledge (at least as regards propositions which, like hinge propositions, are not 'self-justifying' in the way that foundational propositions are taken to be on the classical internalist picture—i.e., by being self-evident, or incorrigible, and so forth). Straight away, then, one can see the *prima facie* puzzle here for Wright in terms of his acceptance of unearned warrants—warrants which one holds in the (in principle) absence of supporting reasons—because on the internalist view such 'warrants' cannot be *bona fide* at all. Nevertheless, Wright wants to get around this by saying that even though such warrants are in this sense unearned, there are still reflectively accessible grounds that can be cited in their favour—*viz.*, that reflection reveals that the propositions in question are necessary presuppositions of any coherent inquiry and therefore may be believed in the absence of supporting grounds. This is, in a way, a kind of reflectively accessible supporting ground for the beliefs in question. Crucially, however, this is not an *epistemic* ground for belief, and thus, by the lights of a consistent epistemic internalism, such unearned 'warrants' are not really *warrants* at all. The distinction between transmission and closure therefore never gets a handle on this dispute, since once one goes down the internalist road to the extent that Wright does, the only natural conclusion to draw is that, strictly speaking, the sceptic is right after all. Knowledge is essentially to do with the possession of reflectively accessible reasons, and the structure of reasons is such that our believing is ultimately groundless. Wright's anti-sceptical strategy, if understood consistently, therefore collapses into the very scepticism that it tries to avoid.

#### 4. WILLIAMS ON INFERENCEAL CONTEXTUALISM

Given the foregoing discussion, one might think that the way to rescue Wright's position is simply to reconfigure it along epistemically externalist lines. The problem with this strategy, however, is that there is hardly any textual support in *On Certainty* for such a view. Accordingly, it would be problematic to consider such an externalist 'unearned warrant' thesis to be a Wittgensteinian anti-sceptical position at all. Recall that Wittgenstein says very little about the possession conditions for knowledge, focussing instead on the propriety conditions for knowledge claims. As regards the

latter, he naturally considers the propriety conditions of such claims in terms of the agent's reflectively accessible grounds. If one is an internalist, then one could see in these remarks an implicit internalism about the possession conditions for knowledge. That is, the thought might be that since one cannot properly claim to know hinge propositions, because one lacks appropriate reflectively accessible grounds for holding them, hence it follows that one cannot know such propositions either, because knowledge possession also requires adequate reflectively accessible grounds. Whilst it is not obvious that Wittgenstein wanted to make the further move, there are passages that suggest that he might and it would at least be a natural interpretation to offer.<sup>24</sup> The opposing externalist interpretation of allowing knowledge possession even in the absence of supporting grounds, such that there is no essential connection between the propriety conditions for claims to know and the possession conditions for knowledge, would, however, be an interpretative move too far, since now it is far from obvious what such a view would have to do with the remarks in *On Certainty* at all.<sup>25</sup>

The second Wittgenstein-inspired epistemic anti-sceptical thesis that is prominent in the recent epistemological literature does, however, incorporate an externalist theory of knowledge. This is the *inferential contextualism* put forward by Williams (1991). This view is an inferential species of contextualism in the sense that it holds that what defines a context is not, for example (as in the case of the semantic contextualism considered in §1), the conversational context of the attributer of knowledge, but rather the inferential structure of the subject's context. More specifically, what determines a context is what (for the subject) is tested relative to what, and thus what stands fast, epistemically, relative to what. The idea is that in each context there will be a set of beliefs which will hold fast and therefore be immune to epistemic evaluation in that context—the epistemic status of other beliefs will then be testable relative to this fixed framework of hinge beliefs. Crucially, however, Williams claims that in different contexts different beliefs can play this hinge role, and this will be reflected in the shift in inferential structure that occurs as one moves from one context to another. That is, in one context, a belief might play a hinge role and therefore be immune to epistemic evaluation, either positive or negative. It will therefore form part of the backdrop of certainty against which the epistemic status of other beliefs in this context are tested. In another context, however, that very same belief might not play this hinge role and could therefore be epistemically evaluated relative to a different set of hinge beliefs.

Williams makes two claims that are central to his view, and which distinguish his position from competitor contextualist theories. The first, which we have just noted, is that the basic beliefs of a context—the hinges, or, as Williams (1991, 121-5) prefers to call them, the “methodological necessities”—are held in the absence of supporting grounds, just as we saw Wittgenstein contending

above. The second is even more radical, and this is the claim that there is no hierarchy of contexts, with different contexts being just that, *different*. This is in contrast to semantic contextualism, for example, because on this view sceptical contexts employ more demanding epistemic standards than everyday contexts, and are thus in this sense epistemically superior. For Williams, however, no such ‘ordering’ of contexts is possible, with the epistemic standards of each context being entirely independent of each other.

This last claim has some striking consequences because the epistemologist—and thus the sceptic—is usually understood as operating in a context which is, in the relevant sense, *pure*. That is, whilst we might have all manner of epistemic practices in ordinary life that employ various context-specific rules, in the context of epistemological reflection we are deemed to be able to discover what the *underlying* epistemic architecture is like once the practical limitations of everyday life are stripped away. For instance, if we are a traditional foundationalist, what we think we discover in the context of epistemological reflection is that it is only certain types of beliefs that can serve a foundational role—those that are ‘self-justifying’, as it were, in virtue of being incorrigible or self-evident for example—and that this fact holds across *all* contexts. It is this picture of epistemological theorising that Williams wishes to reject by advancing a form of contextualism which holds that:

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

Williams calls the thesis that there is a context-independent epistemic status that attaches itself to propositions in virtue of the kind of propositions that they are “epistemological realism”, and claims that such a thesis is false. His own contextualist view is a working-out of what it means to deny that claim.<sup>26</sup>

Williams holds that every context will treat certain beliefs as hinges, and thus claims that what defines a context is its hinges, since they in turn will determine inferential structure (they will be what stands fast relative to what is tested in that context). Indeed, Williams claims that one can never epistemically evaluate a hinge because in doing so one changes the context and therefore turns the hinge into an ordinary empirical claim. If we were to question a hinge of an everyday context, for example, then we would leave the everyday context and enter a different context, such as a *sceptical* context of inquiry that does not take *these* claims for granted (though which will take other theoretical claims as given). Once these hinges are brought forward for epistemic evaluation and the context changes in order to make this possible, we then discover that our beliefs in these

erstwhile ‘hinges’ are groundless and so become persuaded by scepticism. Accordingly, we are led into believing that we know next to nothing of what we thought we knew. Williams grants to the sceptic that it is true that in the sceptical context we do indeed know next to nothing, and thus that scepticism is in this sense correct. Nevertheless, argues Williams, that the sceptic can create a context in which we lack knowledge does not mean that we lack knowledge in *quotidian* contexts where our everyday hinge beliefs are not brought forward for epistemic evaluation. The crucial point here is that Williams claims that the sceptical context is just another context, one that has hinges of its own regarding the unquestioned assumption that there is a context-invariant epistemic architecture that can be discovered under the conditions of philosophical reflection. As Williams puts the matter:

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

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

Like the semantic contextualists we considered in §1, then, Williams is able to retain closure. In everyday contexts agents are able to know the hinges that are presupposed in their inquiry, even though such knowledge is by its nature not evidentially grounded (this is the juncture at which Williams’s commitment to epistemological externalism is most transparent). Crucially, however, such knowledge must remain forever tacit because to bring such claims forth for evaluation is itself to enter a different epistemological context—that of traditional (i.e., non-contextualist) epistemology—and in this context different hinges are in play. Moreover, relative to the inferential structure of the sceptical context the sceptical claim that we lack knowledge of these erstwhile ‘hinge’ beliefs, and thus of much else besides, is true. Williams therefore offers a proposal which allows that certain basic anti-sceptical propositions are unknowable in sceptical contexts (just as everyday propositions are unknowable in this context), but which also accepts closure in such a fashion that we *are* able to know these propositions, albeit only tacitly, in everyday contexts (along with everyday propositions). In line with closure, then, there is no single context in which the agent has everyday knowledge and yet lacks knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses. By

retaining closure in this way, Williams is able to account for some of our mixed intuitions about scepticism—in particular, the fact that we seem to find the view absurd in everyday contexts and yet also find it strangely compelling in the context of epistemological reflection.

In order to see the workings of this thesis in more detail, consider the following example. Williams notes that one of the most incoherent elements of any denial of closure is that it appears to permit us to assert such incoherent conjunctions as “Napoleon was victorious at Austerlitz [... *but I do ...*] *not* know that the Earth existed at that time” (Williams 1991, 322). Williams evades this difficulty by arguing that in everyday contexts where our belief that the earth did not spring into existence five seconds ago (replete with the apparent traces of a distant ancestry) is tacit, we do know the anti-sceptical proposition that is embedded in the second half of this conjunction. In sceptical contexts, however—contexts in which this proposition ceases to be tacit because we bring it forth for epistemic evaluation—it is no longer known because we are now guided by the hinges of traditional epistemology and, by the lights of this sort of inquiry, argues Williams, we *do* know next to nothing. That this is so, however, does not mean that we do not know a great deal in everyday contexts, only that there is something amiss with the presuppositions of traditional epistemology. It is not as if, claims Williams, we are doing history in a more rigorous fashion when we consider the epistemic status of these presuppositional claims. Rather, we have simply ceased to be doing history altogether and have begun to undertake a whole new type of investigation that is purely epistemological.<sup>27</sup> The moral is thus that knowledge, whilst practically non-existent in sceptical contexts, is secure in everyday contexts. Closure therefore holds with the false impression that it fails generated by an implicit equivocation that occurs when one considers the sceptical argument—that is, an equivocation between the everyday contexts in which quotidian and discourse-specific propositions are at issue against a backdrop of shared hinge assumptions, and the sceptical context in which these shared assumptions (but not others) are themselves up for evaluation.<sup>28</sup>

It should be clear that even despite its commitment to epistemological externalism, Williams’s line on hinges is more plausible as a specifically Wittgensteinian epistemic anti-sceptical thesis than Wright’s. To begin with, Williams is true to the contextual element to Wittgenstein’s account of hinges—the idea that there are circumstances in which a proposition that in certain cases functions like a hinge might instead function like an empirical proposition. Relatedly, Williams is also able to accommodate the idea that in certain contexts quite mundane claims, such as Moore’s claim, P, may well function like hinges, unlike Wright’s view which only treated the denials of sceptical hypotheses as candidate hinge propositions. Finally, Williams’s view at least attempts to be sensitive to the underlying epistemic pessimism at the heart of *On Certainty*. After all, Williams

grants, in a way that Wright doesn't, the fact that there are some contexts in which the sceptical conclusion is true.

Nevertheless, there are features of the view which make it problematic, both as a potential reading of *On Certainty* and as an epistemic anti-sceptical thesis. The first is the fact that this position allows that we do know the hinges of a context, albeit in a tacit way. This is the element of the view that brings out the implicit externalism in play here since clearly such knowledge can have nothing to do with the reflectively accessible grounds possessed by the agent as it is a central part of the thesis that no such grounds could ever be possessed in favour of believing a hinge. The only explanation of the epistemic status of this belief—bar the pragmatic, and therefore non-epistemic account we saw Wright offering above—is to understand it along externalist lines, and this is indeed what Williams does, claiming that, properly understood, inferential contextualism is an essentially externalist thesis. Given the consideration raised above about the implausibility of allying Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* with externalism, however, this immediately counts against treating this proposal as a plausible interpretation of this text.

Nevertheless, one might think that whilst this element of the thesis is a consideration against thinking of the view as a good interpretation of *On Certainty*, it does enable Williams to offer a plausible anti-sceptical thesis since it evades the tension between internalism and scepticism that we saw hitting right to the core of Wright's account. Incorporating an externalism of this form into the account raises problems of its own, however. After all, what Williams seems to be arguing is that one can know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses by the lights of an externalist theory of knowledge just so long as one is in a context in which such anti-sceptical propositions are not at issue but merely presupposed. The problem, however, is that if we can make sense of the idea that we know these propositions at all, in any sense, then it seems unnecessary to further incorporate the additional inferential contextualist *caveat*. The sceptical claim, encapsulated in (S1), was that we were *unable* to know these anti-sceptical propositions, and it is a component of Williams's view that this is false. Accordingly, this feature of the position *alone* will suffice to block the sceptical puzzle, independently of the further considerations regarding inferential contextualism. If one is willing to make this initial move, then, the natural question to ask is why don't we just simply stop there? That is, why do we need to be inferential contextualists as well if we've managed to motivate an epistemic externalism that can resist (S1)?

Indeed, there is such a view which approaches scepticism in this baldly externalist way—*viz.*, the neo-Moorean response to scepticism that we briefly outlined in §1 which simply offers an externalist explanation of how we might know the denials of sceptical hypotheses. Of course, Williams can offer all sorts of further considerations that might swing the argument back in

his favour, most notably that there is a diagnostic element to his view which accounts for our apparent sympathies with scepticism in certain contexts which is lacking on the neo-Moorean view. But the neo-Moorean proposal has a diagnostic story of its own regarding the pull towards internalist epistemic intuitions in reflective contexts, so such a defensive line is unlikely to impress, especially since Williams himself has signed-up to the externalist critique of epistemic internalism.

There is also a second reason for scepticism about Williams's anti-scepticism, and that is the fact that his resolution of the sceptical problem—especially in contrast to the competing neo-Moorean proposal—has a distinctly 'sceptical' air about it. The neo-Moorean wants to argue that a thorough-going externalism shows that, providing one's beliefs are formed in the right kind of way, we can know the denials of sceptical hypotheses after all. Scepticism is therefore false, in *all* contexts. Williams, in contrast, wants to argue that whilst knowledge is not, as the sceptic claims, impossible, it is *unstable*, in that a mere shift in the context—even where all the usual epistemically relevant factors, such as informational state, remain context—can change the epistemic status of one's belief and make one's knowledge disappear. The anti-sceptical assurances we get from Williams are thus ambiguous, since the epistemic status of our beliefs is now not something that is rescued from the sceptic's grasp *tout court*. Instead, a kind of deep epistemic insecurity is retained on Williams's view, one that reflects the fact that the knowledge that one has is always relative to a particular context. This is the sense in which Williams's response to the sceptical problem is itself what we might call a *sceptical* solution, if indeed 'solution' is the right word here at all.

Finally, we need to note an oddity that lies at the heart of Williams's position, which concerns his ambivalent attitude to the context of philosophical (epistemological) reflection, and thus to the context that the sceptic functions in. As we saw above, we have a natural tendency to regard this context as being one in which the underlying structure of the epistemic architecture can be discerned, and thus as being a context which has a theoretical ascendancy over non-reflective contexts. Williams wants to reject this epistemological realist claim, but the way that he rejects it is ambiguous. After all, Williams argues that the hinges of the sceptical context include the assumptions of epistemological realism, and thus that we should evaluate the claims of this context relative to that assumption. Given that the assumption in question is, he argues, *a priori* false, however, then this seems to imply that we are entitled to disregard the sceptical context altogether. That is, there seems to be a key difference here between the sceptical context and other non-sceptical contexts since in the latter case the hinges are simply those claims which are *presupposed*—and therefore lacking in evidential support—but not also claims which we have *a priori* grounds to think are false.

The problem is, of course, that elsewhere Williams wants to grant the sceptical context a

certain internal legitimacy, in that the conclusions wrought in that context are true, but only relative to that context (recall the quotation cited above, where Williams (1991, 130) remarks that the sceptic “has discovered [...] that knowledge of the world is *impossible under the conditions of philosophical reflection*”). It is easy to see why Williams wants to make this move, since it is only with the sceptical context accorded an internal legitimacy in this way that he can claim to be capturing our intuition that the sceptical conclusion has a *prima facie* plausibility when considered in the light of philosophical reflection and therefore offer the diagnostic element of his view that is so central to the position as a whole. Moreover, if Williams were to maintain that we have *a priori* knowledge of the falsity of the hinge assumptions of the sceptical context then he would be presenting an epistemic evaluation wrought in *a* context of philosophical reflection (if not the same context of philosophical reflection as that in which scepticism functions) which, it seems, has application across *all* contexts. If this is right, then on this interpretation there is an internal contradiction that lies right at the heart of Williams’s view.

There is thus a dilemma facing Williams here. Either the sceptical context is legitimate, in which case the hinge assumption of epistemological realism cannot be *a priori* false. If this is true, however, then we do not get the inferential contextualist picture that Williams outlines. Alternatively, Williams might opt to claim that the sceptical context is illegitimate, in which case there is no context in which scepticism is true, but then we do not get the contextualist diagnostic story that Williams wants to tell, and thus there seems little reason to prefer his contextualist thesis over its neo-Moorean rival. Moreover, since this is an epistemic evaluation that applies across all contexts, contrary to Williams’s own inferential contextualism, then we seem to have good reason for thinking that such a view is not sustainable anyway.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS—THE STATE OF CONTEMPORARY ANTI-SCEPTICISM

Like Wright’s view, then, the hinge-based, and primarily epistemic, anti-sceptical thesis offered by Williams is, ultimately, neither a particularly plausible interpretation of *On Certainty* nor a compelling resolution of the sceptical problem. In the case of Wright the overarching difficulty was making sense of this anti-sceptical thesis in epistemic, rather than just simply pragmatic, terms. This problem reflected the underlying awkwardness of trying to motivate an epistemologically internalist response to the sceptic which denied the key sceptical premise that we are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses. Wright’s conception of hinge propositions also seemed to have very little in common with the view that Wittgenstein sets-out in *On Certainty*.

Williams's position fared better, both as an anti-sceptical thesis which was genuinely epistemic, and as an account of hinges that bore more than a passing similarity to that described in *On Certainty*. Nevertheless, this too was unpersuasive on closer inspection, since it seemed to be troubled by an internal inconsistency that hit right to the heart of the view. Removing that inconsistency either meant completely undermining the view by dropping the core claim that epistemological realism should be rejected, or else leaving the position dialectically in a position which was little different to the neo-Moorean response to scepticism that has next to nothing to do with the remarks on hinges in *On Certainty* (and which was, on this interpretation, implausible anyway). Either way, the position is no long an attractive alternative.

This doesn't mean, of course, that there is no plausible specifically epistemic anti-sceptical thesis to be extracted from *On Certainty*, since there may be further epistemic interpretations that avoid the pitfalls described here. Nevertheless, I think it does indicate that a certain pessimism is in order in this regard, in that if one is looking for a primarily epistemic response to scepticism from Wittgenstein's remarks in this text then one is likely to be disappointed. At best, it seems, all that Wittgenstein offers in this regard is the kind of pragmatic defence of our belief in hinges that Wright was trying to pass-off as being a genuinely epistemic approach to the problem. It thus appears that if there is to be a plausible anti-sceptical thesis inspired by *On Certainty* then that thesis had better be understood along primarily semantic, rather than epistemic, lines.

Before closing, I want to briefly outline what ramifications our discussion of *On Certainty* has for the three main anti-sceptical theses in the contemporary literature that we outlined in §1. For what does seem to be a clear consequence of this discussion is that each of these proposals has a rather limited conception of what the ultimate focus of the sceptical attack is. Consider first those arguments for non-closure that try to maintain that the sceptical problem arises from making our everyday knowledge dependent upon knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses. As our commentary on *On Certainty* has illustrated, such views simply emphasise the fundamental problem here, which is the apparent groundlessness of our believing. By the lights of this anti-sceptical position, our everyday knowledge, and thus the reflectively accessible grounds which support that knowledge, is somehow meant to be secure even despite our inability to know, and thus have sufficient reflectively accessible grounds for believing, the denials of sceptical hypotheses. The problem is to understand how this could possibly be a response to the sceptical problem, as opposed to being simply a recognition of what the sceptical problem ultimately consists in—namely, the claim that our everyday 'knowledge' is in fact entirely groundless.

Of course, one might object here that the arguments for non-closure are focussed on *knowledge* and make no mention of the agent's reflectively accessible grounds—his evidence,

reasons and so forth. Accordingly, since there are theories of knowledge which try to avoid there being any essential connection between knowledge possession and the possession of adequate supporting (and reflectively accessible) grounds, so closure for knowledge could fail without this having any immediate ramifications for the structure of evidence or reasons. Perhaps, then, one could separate out the issue of whether closure for knowledge holds from the related issue of whether a parallel principle for grounds holds (i.e., a principle which maintains that if one has adequate reflectively accessible grounds for believing one proposition, and one knows that this entails a second proposition, then one has adequate reflectively accessible grounds for believing that second proposition also).

Such a move would face a dilemma, however, and, moreover, the nature of this dilemma highlights just what is problematic about the other two anti-sceptical strategies that we looked at in §1—*viz.*, semantic contextualism and neo-Mooreanism. Let us suppose that there is a plausible theory of knowledge available that does not understand knowledge as essentially requiring the possession of sufficient reflectively accessible grounds. Such a theory of knowledge would, of course, be an externalist theory. Now, it is certainly true that on this view one could deny closure without saying anything about whether the grounds one has in favour of one's belief in a proposition are also grounds in favour of believing a second known to be entailed proposition. That is, closure for knowledge could fail without this meaning that the analogue closure principle for supporting grounds should, *ipso facto*, also fail. The crucial question, however, is what would such a distinction gain one in terms of the sceptical debate? After all, the parallel sceptical problem in terms of the groundlessness of our believing remains—all that has been achieved is to separate this problem from the knowledge-based argument that we started with. Indeed, if anything, on this conception of the sceptical debate it seems that it is the grounds-based sceptical argument that is the most pressing, since the only knowledge that is being rescued from the sceptic in the case of the other argument is knowledge that lacks supporting grounds, and this is hardly a desirable intellectually position to be in. That is, the dialectical position now is one of maintaining that, *contra* the sceptic, one can have the knowledge one takes oneself to have after all, whilst also conceding that, just as the sceptic claimed all along, one can never have adequate supporting grounds for such knowledge. Accordingly, even if one does have most of the knowledge that one takes oneself to have, this will not mean that one actually has any reason for thinking that this knowledge is possessed.

With this in mind the dilemma facing the proponent of non-closure should be clear. The first horn of the dilemma involves understanding knowledge in such a way that it does not require the possession of reflectively accessible grounds, thereby enabling the proponent of non-closure for knowledge to retain closure for grounds. The problem with this proposal is that the resolution of the

knowledge-based argument on offer now seems somewhat muted given that it only succeeds by devaluing the concept of knowledge involved by leaving a further sceptical argument regarding the structure of grounds untouched. That is, proponents of non-closure for knowledge on this view seem to be in the unpalatable situation of acknowledging that whilst they might well know a great deal, they can never have adequate reflectively accessible reasons for thinking that such knowledge is possessed. This is externalism indeed.

Unfortunately, the other horn of the dilemma is little more appealing. On this alternative, proponents of non-closure for knowledge understand knowledge in such a way that there is an essential connection between knowledge and the possession of reflectively accessible grounds, and thereby further motivate an argument for the rejection of closure for grounds.<sup>29</sup> The problem with this strategy is that whilst it might seem (at a push) understandable that one's knowledge of everyday propositions could coexist with a lack of knowledge in the denials of sceptical hypotheses, it is not at all intuitive to suppose that one could genuinely have grounds for believing one proposition, know that this entails a second proposition, and yet fail to have grounds for believing the second proposition, and this is what defenders of this strategy will have to argue. Indeed, it is difficult to see why this should be thought to be an *anti-sceptical* thesis. After all, on this view our grounds rest on what is groundless, and this is, it seems, a thesis that is *congenial* to scepticism, rather than hostile to it. So either the strategy is revealed to be offering an extremely weak response to the problem of scepticism (indeed, not really confronting scepticism in its strongest form at all), or else it offers no real response to scepticism. Either way, the arguments for non-closure for knowledge fail to get a grip on the sceptical puzzle.

With this dilemma in mind, it is easy to see that semantic contextualism and neo-Mooreanism will fare little better as anti-sceptical theses. In each case closure is retained, and this is achieved by allowing that agents can indeed know the denials of sceptical hypotheses. Since there is no internalist construal of knowledge available which could account for this, these proposals are essentially allied to an externalist epistemology.<sup>30</sup> The up-shot of these views is that—at least in everyday conversational contexts—agents can have knowledge of everyday propositions where this knowledge presupposes further anti-sceptical knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses, albeit where this latter knowledge is purely externalist in character (and so is not supported by adequate reflectively accessible grounds). The problem with this anti-sceptical line, however, resides in how it completely fails to confront the parallel sceptical problem regarding the structure of grounds. For all either of these views tell otherwise, it remains true that our beliefs in everyday propositions are groundless and, indeed, the point about everyday knowledge resting on purely externalist anti-sceptical knowledge simply emphasises this fact. That is, like the arguments for non-

closure, we are left in a position in which knowledge is, it is claimed, rescued from the sceptic even though, for all we have been told to the contrary, it remains that the agent has no adequate reflectively accessible grounds available which could indicate that such knowledge is possessed. Again, then, what we have here are anti-sceptical proposals that completely fail to confront the core sceptical problem about the structure of our grounds.<sup>31</sup>

So whilst *On Certainty* might not contain within it a compelling response to the sceptic that is cast along primarily epistemological lines—which is hardly surprising given that the guiding anti-sceptical thought in this work seems to be semantic rather than epistemic—a primarily epistemological reading of Wittgenstein’s remarks on scepticism does contain within it a critique of the very direction of argument of the main anti-sceptical theses in the literature today. The reason for this is that the epistemic focus of this work, such as it is, is on the issue of the structure of reasons and evidence rather than on the possession of knowledge *simpliciter*, and it is here that the core epistemological problem of scepticism resides.<sup>32</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of the recent literature on scepticism, see Pritchard (2002c).

<sup>2</sup> Versions of the sceptical paradox expressed in essentially these terms can be found in DeRose (1995), Sosa (1999), Vogel (1999) and Pritchard (2002d), though as I explain in a moment the paradox is usually expressed as a *reductio ad absurdum* with some version of (S1) and (S2) entailing the absurd sceptical conclusion of the denial of (S3). See also Pritchard (2002c, §§1-2).

<sup>3</sup> The reader should note that the BIV sceptical hypothesis has been described here in such a way that it is immune to the kind of content externalism considerations offered by Putnam (1981, chapter one). In particular, for the Putnam-style argument against BIV-scepticism to get a grip, it is essential that the victim is being 'fed' her experiences by supercomputers rather than neuroscientists (and much more besides). For some of the key recent discussions on Putnam's argument in this respect, and on other related anti-sceptical arguments that function by excluding sceptical

hypotheses on content externalist grounds, see Brueckner (1992); Christensen (1993); Wright (1994); Forbes (1995); Warfield (1998); and Pritchard (2002a; cf. Pritchard 2003; 2005a).

<sup>4</sup> One might supplement this principle in a number of ways in order to deal with potential counterexamples of a trivial nature. One might, for example, stipulate that the agent has all the required beliefs, so that one does not have to worry about what might be the logical possibility that the agent lacks knowledge in the consequent proposition simply because she lacks the relevant belief. Nevertheless, this basic formulation should suffice for our purposes here, at least provided that it is taken in the right spirit. For some of the key discussions in the recent literature of the status of closure in the light of the sceptical problem, see Thalberg (1974); Stine (1976); Brueckner (1986); Vogel (1990); Williams (1991, chapter 8); Hales (1995); Klein (1995); and Pritchard (2002a; 2002b).

<sup>5</sup> This moniker comes from the striking response to the scepticism offered by Moore (1925; 1939) that runs along similar lines. It should be noted, however, that my use of this description is not meant to suggest that Moore himself would approve of this particular anti-sceptical strategy. For an excellent overview of Moore's work which looks in detail at his response to scepticism, see Baldwin (1990).

<sup>6</sup> This general point about the importance of not treating the sceptic as an adversary is also made by Wright (1991, 89) and discussed in more detail in Pritchard (2001b). The reader should note that this point is consistent with the existence of 'lived' sceptical stances, such as the Pyrrhonian sceptical position of antiquity. The crucial point here is that these forms of scepticism, insofar as they are genuinely *ethical* stances, are not as all-encompassing in their doubt as the form of scepticism that we are considering here. In the case of Pyrrhonism, for example, I have argued elsewhere—in Pritchard (2000a)—that the Pyrrhonists were happy to allow a certain kind of knowledge to coexist with their scepticism.

<sup>7</sup> For some of the key discussions of this line of argument for the rejection of closure, see the references listed in footnote 4 above.

<sup>8</sup> For some of the key discussions of this form of contextualism in the recent literature, see Schiffer (1996); Feldman (1999); Heller (1999); Sosa (1999; 2000); Vogel (1999); Kornblith (2000); and Pritchard (2001a). See also Pritchard (2002c, §§5-6).

<sup>9</sup> Since the neo-Moorean view is a relatively recent anti-sceptical proposal, there is, as yet, little in the way of critical commentary, though see Kvanvig (2004). For an overview of the position, and some of the problems that it faces, see Pritchard (2002c, §§8-9).

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the most famous exponent of a line of this sort is Cavell (1979), but see also McGinn (1989; cf. Conant 2002; McGinn 2002) and Travis (1989; cf. Travis 2003), who takes a rather radical Wittgensteinian line in this respect. [Add references to other papers in the volume].

<sup>11</sup> Although the "hinge" metaphor is the dominant symbolism in the book, it is accompanied by various other metaphors such as the following: that these propositions constitute the "scaffolding" of our thoughts (OC §211); that they form the "foundations of our language-games" (OC §§401-3); and also that they represent the implicit "world-picture" from within which we inquire, the "inherited background against which [*we*] distinguish between true and false" (OC §§94-5).

<sup>12</sup> At least if we take those remarks at face-value. It has been suggested (DeRose 1998; Stroll 1994, chapter 1), that the focus of Wittgenstein's notes in this regard was actually on a reading of Moore that was put to him by Malcolm (1949; cf. Malcolm 1952; 1977). Another thinker whose writings had a significant impact on *On Certainty* was Newman (1844; 1985), whose influence pervades the text (although he is only actually explicitly mentioned by Wittgenstein once—OC §1). For discussion of Newman's work in this regard, see Kenny (1992) and Pritchard (2000b). In what follows I will be understanding Moore as being the focus of the book, and interpreting Moore's stance as regards scepticism in the way that Wittgenstein did—I will therefore be setting aside the issue of what the true philosophical stimulus for *On Certainty* is, or whether Wittgenstein did interpret Moore's remarks correctly. For a thorough discussion of Moore's philosophy, see Baldwin (1990).

<sup>13</sup> Some commentators, such as Stroll (1994, 47-8), do take Wittgenstein to be suggesting that certain propositions are hinges due to their high level of evidential support. Stroll seems to be misled by certain locutions that Wittgenstein employs, especially the phrase "everything speaks for it, and nothing against it" (e.g., OC §§190-1). As Wittgenstein is keen to point out, however, this does not indicate an *evidential* support at all, but rather a kind of *agreement* that this proposition should not be doubted (e.g., OC §§163-6, 203, 214-5).

<sup>14</sup> In a related fashion, Wittgenstein argues that just as one cannot say how one knows a hinge proposition, so one cannot say how one might go about convincing someone of the truth of a hinge proposition either. For instance, how *does* one persuade someone who, in normal circumstances, doubts whether or not he has two hands? (Imagine, for example, that he concedes that he, and everyone else around him for that matter, seems to see his hands). And if we did convince him, how could we account for this? (OC §§257, 428) If, in normal circumstances, he does not believe a proposition like P, then it seems that no amount of empirical evidence (which will, perforce, be less certain than the hinge itself) will, or could, satisfy him. Indeed, Wittgenstein argues that although we can imagine a situation wherein someone acted-out his doubt of a hinge proposition, we could make no sense of such a person (we could not regard this

person as rational). The doubt would be regarded as a sign of insanity, misunderstanding, or as being merely rhetorical (perhaps as a joke—OC §463).

<sup>15</sup> In a related vein, Wittgenstein argues that one can only properly claim first-person knowledge when that claim has the potential to be *informative*, and this condition is clearly not met in the case of a hinge proposition. Moore only knows P (if he does) provided that (*mutatis mutandis*) everyone else does as well. Accordingly, Moore's use of the *caveat* "I know ..." is at best misleading since it generates the implicature that Moore has some special access to the epistemic buttress of the embedded proposition that others lack. One way in which Wittgenstein develops this thought is via the contention that the "I" in "I know that P" is superfluous (OC §§58, 587-8). The qualification implies a set of relations both to knowledge and a person such that it purportedly adds something extra to the content of the expression "P". But if the certainty accorded to these propositions is common to everyone (at least in normal circumstances) then there is no sense to the idea that Moore has some special knowledge which is unavailable to others, or that he possesses information which he, but not others, has acquired (OC §§84, 100, 401, 462, 466). To support this contention Wittgenstein points out that "I know" only has a meaning when it is uttered by a person (it would be meaningless if, say, a sign at a zoo claimed that "I know this is a zebra" (OC §588)). And since it is indifferent to the epistemic content of P whether or not it is preceded by the claim "I know", so the use of the first-person pronoun is at best misleading.

<sup>16</sup> Wittgenstein remarks, for example, that there are special circumstances in which one can properly assert P, but that in these circumstances P does not have any special epistemic status and so such an assertion has no obvious anti-sceptical import (OC §§23, 347, 349, 387, 412, 483-4, 526, 596, 622). An example of such an abnormal circumstance would be where someone has just stumbled out of the debris of an explosion without any feeling of his hands. In such cases, P fails to perform a hinge role since in these abnormal cases P would no longer be accorded the degree of certainty that is typically reserved for it. As a result, one could properly claim knowledge of such a proposition on evidential grounds (one could, for instance, coherently use one's sight in order to check to see that one's hands are still intact). Crucially, however, Moore's claim to know P is not made in such an abnormal circumstance, for if it were then it would be odd that he should take such a belief to offer sufficient grounds to support his belief in the existence of an external world. Moore is thus caught in a bind. Either his belief in P is completely certain as he claims, in which case P is a hinge proposition and so not a candidate for the requisite epistemic evaluation; or P is a candidate for an epistemic evaluation, in which case it lacks the special property of being a hinge proposition which is treated as absolutely certain. Either way, a claim to know P has no anti-sceptical ramifications whatsoever.

<sup>17</sup> An excellent case is made for this interpretation in Moyal-Sharrock (2004), and I will not rehearse these arguments here.

<sup>18</sup> There are other issues which complicate any epistemological anti-sceptical thesis based on Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, such as the strikingly different approach he takes to propositions such as 'There is an external world' than he does to propositions like 'I have two hands', though it would take us too far afield from the present discussion if we tried to explore all of these issues in detail here. For more on Wittgenstein's very different treatment of these two propositions, see Williams (2003).

<sup>19</sup> Though for a qualification to this claim, see footnote 21 below.

<sup>20</sup> For the key texts that relate to the McKinsey puzzle (aside from those by Davies and Wright), see Davidson (1987); Burge (1988); Boghossian (1989; 1997); McKinsey (1991); Brown (1995); Pritchard (2002a); and the papers collected in the volume edited by Nuccetelli (2003).

<sup>21</sup> The distinction between closure and transmission—at least as regards closure for warrant—was first made in earlier work by Wright (1985), though this was not the only anti-sceptical idea involving hinge propositions that appeared in this paper, and the application of this thought to the McKinsey paradox did not come until later. A very different anti-sceptical proposal regarding hinge propositions in that paper—perhaps the more dominant anti-sceptical proposal of the paper in fact—was that we should regard certain propositions which encapsulate anti-sceptical claims (such as that there is an external world) as non-factual. Wright motivated this primarily *semantic* anti-sceptical proposal on broadly semantic anti-realist grounds which he saw as being supported by some of Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* and elsewhere. The idea of disentangling the thesis regarding the distinction between closure and transmission and the non-factuality thesis, whilst it was clearly present in Wright's lectures that I attended at the University of St. Andrews in the mid-1990s, did not appear in print until Davies (1998), though it was here being specifically applied to the McKinsey paradox (hence my previous assertion that this particular hinge-based anti-sceptical proposal was a "side-thesis" of the McKinsey debate). For more on Davies's view, and its relation to Wright's, see Davies (1998; 2000; 2003; 2004); Brown (2003); McKinsey (2003); McLaughlin (2003); and Wright (2003; 2004).

It should be noted that in between this early paper on hinges and scepticism and the later work that we are currently considering, Wright put forward another anti-sceptical thesis that made use of hinge propositions, though one that, again, could be understood independently of the proposal currently under consideration. In this paper—Wright (1991)—he argued that doubt of a certain sort was epistemically self-defeating because it involved doubt of a hinge proposition, and thus that sceptical arguments which employ certain kinds of sceptical hypotheses were incoherent (as he put it, such arguments "implode"). As I argue in Pritchard (2001d), however, this particular anti-sceptical strategy, whilst epistemic in the relevant sense, does not work.

<sup>22</sup> I've argued elsewhere, in Pritchard (2002a), that it doesn't.

<sup>23</sup> I explore the prospects for an epistemically externalist reading of some of the key passages in *On Certainty* in Pritchard (2001c), although I am careful not to claim that there is anything like unambiguous support for this view in the text.

<sup>24</sup> In a recent article, Ribeiro (2002) has claimed just this—that Wittgenstein was *clearly* proposing an austere internalist epistemology in *On Certainty*. For my own part, I think Ribeiro's claim here is far too strong. In support of his view he repeatedly falls back on just three passages—(OC §§14, 91, 243)—and in each case it is telling, I think, that the focus of the passage is on a *claim* to know rather than on knowledge itself.

<sup>25</sup> That said, there are some remarks in *On Certainty* that might be thought to suggest (with a little interpretative license) a *latent* externalism, and such an approach might be interesting in its own right, regardless of whether we consider it a possible reading of the text. For more on a possible epistemically externalist reading of *On Certainty*, see Pritchard (2001c).

<sup>26</sup> It is for this reason that I've argued elsewhere that the best way to understand Williams's position is as a form of epistemic *deflationism*. See Pritchard (2004).

<sup>27</sup> This is in contrast to those semantic contextualist accounts of knowledge that we considered in §1, since these positions incorporate a context-independent hierarchy of epistemic standards. On their view, a sceptic who participated in an historical context *would* be employing a more rigorous, rather than just a different, epistemic standard.

<sup>28</sup> Critical appraisal of Williams's position has not been as widespread as the view deserves, and I think that this is partly because Williams's inferential contextualism was quickly eclipsed by the semantic contextualism that followed a few years later. For some of the key critical texts on Williams's contextualism, however, see Putnam (1998); Pritchard (2001c; 2004a; cf. Pritchard 2002c, §§5-7); and Ribeiro (2002a). See also the exchanges between Stroud (1996) and Williams (1996); between Rorty (1997), Vogel (1997) and Williams (1997); and between Fogelin (1999) and Williams (1999). I critically contrast Williams's inferential contextualism with semantic contextualism in Pritchard (2002e).

<sup>29</sup> It is actually not essential here that the proponent of non-closure for both knowledge and grounds regard the possession of sufficient reflectively accessible grounds to be *essential* to knowledge. After all, it could be that such grounds are not essential to all knowledge but only most of it, with the counterexamples to closure for knowledge residing in those cases where closure for grounds fails. Accordingly, a denial of closure for knowledge would go hand-in-hand with a denial of closure for grounds even though the possession of sufficient reflectively accessible grounds is not a necessary condition for knowledge. Similarly, it is a logical possibility that the possession of sufficient reflectively accessible grounds is a necessary condition for knowledge and yet closure for knowledge fails whilst closure for grounds does not. This eventuality would occur where what caused the failure of closure of knowledge related to one of the other necessary conditions for knowledge other than this condition. I focus on the possibility that one denies closure for grounds *because* the possession of sufficient reflectively accessible grounds is necessary for knowledge in the text because I take it that this is the most obvious way in which a denial of closure for grounds would be motivated by one who denies closure for knowledge.

<sup>30</sup> A complication in this respect is raised by Cohen's semantic contextualism, which is meant to be understood as an *internalist* theory of knowledge. As Cohen admits, however, such a view is unstable at just this juncture since there is no respectable account of our knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses that can be cast along internalist lines. The only possibility here is, it seems, to regard such knowledge as being in some way *a priori*, though this is a difficult position to maintain, especially given that the knowledge is of a contingent proposition and, moreover, of a contingent proposition that is very unlike other contingent propositions which might plausibly be thought to be candidates for *a priori* knowledge. Here is Cohen:

“What should we conclude? Our options seem to be accepting contingent *a priori* knowledge or endorsing what looks to be objectionable reasoning. However we go then, there is a distasteful consequence. But then again skepticism is a distasteful consequence—and I would maintain more so than any consequence of a contextualist account.”

He continues, and here Cohen must surely be applauded for his intellectual honesty:

“Which contextualist alternative is the best? I prefer the one that endorses *a priori* rationality, but that may be mostly a statement about which bullet I am most prepared to bite.” (Cohen 2000, 106)

There is thus no comfortable way to reconcile epistemological internalism and attributer contextualism, even by the lights of a proponent of such a reconciliation.

<sup>31</sup> As should be clear from this discussion, whilst I favour a neo-Moorean response to the specific sceptical argument that we began with that turns on the closure principle for knowledge, I do not hold, as others do, that this thesis suffices to resolve the sceptical puzzle as a whole on the grounds that this puzzle is, at root at any rate, specifically concerned with the structure of grounds rather than with the possession of knowledge. I explore this proposal in depth in Pritchard (2005b).

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