DEFLATIONARY APPROACHES TO SCEPTICISM

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines a traditional philosophical problem within a novel framework. The so-called "problem of the external world" is a problem about how knowledge, and even reasonable belief, about the world are possible, and it is best characterized as the challenge to show how and why scepticism about the external world — the absurd view that such knowledge is impossible — is incorrect. My framework for the examination of this problem involves two major elements.

The first element involves a general characterization of the nature of "perennial" philosophical problems, like the problem of the external world, that attempts to isolate the specific features that render them problematic, which, in turn, isolates what is required for their solutions. Applying this characterization to the problem of the external world, the second element of the framework involves distinguishing between two approaches for the solving of the problem, which I label "constructive" and "deflationary," and establishing why the latter approach is preferable. I further distinguish between two general types of deflationary approaches — "therapeutic diagnosis," and "theoretical diagnosis" — and examine in detail what I take to be the major representatives of each strategy. In the process I offer novel critical interpretations of the work of G.E. Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein, as well as some of the first detailed critical discussions of recent responses to scepticism by Hilary Putnam and Michael Williams.

My general aim is to assess the strengths and weaknesses of both deflationary approaches as responses to scepticism. I argue that all of these attempts to solve the problem are unsatisfactory, and that the challenge to show why scepticism about the external world is incorrect has not yet been met. However, and this is perhaps the most important contribution of the dissertation, I hope to have shown where we should and should not look to meet the challenge.

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Introduction

> All men and women are philosophers; or, let us say, if they are not
> conscious of having philosophical problems, they have, at any rate,
> philosophical prejudices. Most of these are theories which they
> unconsciously take for granted, or which they have absorbed from their
> intellectual environment or from tradition... This is the insecure starting
> point of all science and of all philosophy. All philosophy must start from
> the dubious and often pernicious views of uncritical common sense. Its
> aim is enlightened, critical common sense: a view nearer to the truth,
> and with a less pernicious influence on human life.[1]

Popper expresses a very common conception of the source and aim of

philosophical inquiry in the above passage. Philosophy, on this picture, begins when

one turns a critical eye towards the vulgar theories of "common sense," and ends,

hopefully, with views that are closer to the truth. Although it is undeniable that much

philosophical inquiry fits Popper's characterization of its impetus and goal, the idea

that philosophy *should* be the critique of common sense, and that the commitments of

common sense are "dubious" and "pernicious," has lost currency in recent times.

This resistance is largely due to the paradoxical results of criticism of common

sense — results that have led some to cast a critical eye upon this (traditional)

conception of philosophy. One of my central concerns in this undertaking is to examine

and assess two major lines of resistance to this view of philosophy in connection with a

specific example of the paradoxical results that ensue from the critique of common

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sense. To introduce this concern, I want to spend some time characterizing this traditional view of philosophy and the results of its application.

The most general of (what Popper calls) the "prejudicial theories" of common sense that have been the target of philosophical analysis encompass convictions about the way things are (metaphysically, epistemically, ethically, and so on) that are rarely (if ever) articulated in ordinary or everyday life, but which every sane person implicitly or (as Popper puts it) "unconsciously" accepts. But, as Popper suggests, once articulated and subjected to scrutiny, these convictions may come to seem "dubious," "insecure," and perhaps even "pernicious." Thus, according to this picture, "common sense" is a pre-theoretical attitude or outlook composed of first-order commitments that provide the raw material for philosophical reflection, and philosophy is the second-order activity that discloses these commitments, and assesses their truth and rationality. If these commitments are found to be wanting (i.e., "dubious and insecure" in terms of truth and rationality) this view also licenses (indeed, requires) the philosopher to provide positive theoretical correctives to them.

There are two significant features of this view that should be stressed. First, common sense and philosophy are ultimately understood as distinct viewpoints or outlooks — each of which (either implicitly or explicitly) embodies judgments about the same (topical) concerns — and each of which we can (and some of us sometimes do) assume or occupy. Second, and more importantly, since the judgments of philosophy result from the critical appraisal of common sense, they are considered to

have the upper hand in consideration of truth and rationality. Thus, according to this view, philosophy is in the business of amending our common sense convictions to yield judgments that are, as Popper puts it, "nearer to the truth" — in "enlightened common sense." Or so one would hope.

Popper's innocent sounding portrayal of philosophy as merely fine-tuning our common sense convictions, and the notion that it issues in something that we would be happy to call "enlightened" common sense, gainsays the truism that both the results of the critique of common sense, and the wide array of alternate (and often conflicting) "correctives" to its judgments, are typically *not* consistent and continuous with the original point of view — indeed, they usually seem totally absurd and unbelievable to this point of view.

As an illustration of this point, consider A. J. Ayer's sample of the conclusions (in this case metaphysical conclusions) that philosophers have advanced in light of the critique of common sense. The sample provides a sense of just how little "enlightenment" often eventuates from the critique and revision of our pre-theoretical commitments.

> If we go by appearances, it can hardly be disputed that metaphysics is nearly always in conflict with common sense. This is most obvious in the case of the metaphysician who professes to find a logical flaw, a contradiction or a vicious infinite regress, in one or other of the ways in which we commonly describe the world, and so comes to such startling conclusions as that time and space are unreal, or that nothing really moves, or that there are not many things in the Universe but only one, or that nothing which we perceive through our senses is real or wholly real, or that there is no such thing as matter, or no such things as minds. It is, however, also true of those who maintain not that the features

which common sense ascribes to the external world are unreal, but that they are dependent on our consciousness of them, that space and time are merely forms of human intuition, or that none of the things which we classify as physical objects exist except when they are being perceived, or that the world is my idea.[2]

The two categories of conclusions that Ayer describes illustrate nicely how both the negative and positive results of critical analysis of common sense appear to conflict with its (implicit) convictions, which, collectively, some philosophers have referred to as "The Common Sense View of the World." Most of the conclusions in the first category deny the reality of some entity or phenomenon that common sense (implicitly) affirms (e.g., space, time, motion, matter, minds, and so on) and the conclusions of the second category affirm some positive metaphysical view that common sense denies (e.g., that the reality of the things we commonly ascribe to the world — space, time, material objects — is dependent upon our consciousness of them, and so on).

Assuming (for the nonce) that Popper is right that philosophy involves, and should involve, the critique of such judgments, it is terribly difficult to be optimistic (as Popper seems to be) that philosophy is ever very successful in fulfilling its promise of adding enlightenment to common sense. Rather, its results tend to produce a schism between the two outlooks — a schism which might be characterized as the definitive feature, or at least the definitive symptom, of a philosophical *problem*. That is, it might be claimed, quite plausibly I think, that the reason many of the so-called "perennial" problems of philosophy are considered to be *problems*, turns on the clash between the common sense and philosophical outlooks.

Once such judgments as that "space and time are real," "material objects are real, and continue to exist when they are not perceived," and so on are disclosed, their denial is shocking and totally unbelievable to common sense, since such judgments frame our natural or pre-theoretical view of the world, and *inform* our ordinary or everyday practices (i.e., our practices reflect our commitment to the reality of space, time, matter, mind, and so on). Thus to deny or doubt the truth of our common sense convictions (and the reasonableness of holding them) is to cast a shadow over the very coherence of, as Ayer puts it, "the ways that we commonly describe the world." Yet, since from the philosophical standpoint, the conclusions of philosophy are the result of careful critical reflection and reasoning, intellectual honesty dictates that we cannot ignore these results — indeed, if the reasoning is sound, it would appear that our ordinary commitments (and the practices they inform) must ultimately be deemed false, and our acceptance of them, irrational.

Thus, many philosophical problems are the progeny of this clash of perspectives — a clash that appears to expose, at least in many cases, a truly paradoxical feature of the human condition. If reflection upon our deepest convictions leads to conclusions that appear to undermine our entitlement to them, then as Hume pointed out (concerning the absurd results of epistemological inquiry), we, or at least those of us who sometimes assume the philosophical standpoint, seem condemned to live a rather schizoid existence. While in the study, we become convinced that our reflections reveal errors, confusions, and prejudices in the ways we naturally picture and describe the

world, but the moment we return to the street, we betray the findings of (as Hume puts it) our "profound reasonings" by accepting (at least in deed) the vulgar assumptions of common sense.

Very few philosophers, of course, are content to accept the verdict that we are so condemned, and that is why most believe that the conflict between common sense and philosophy points to *problems* (in need of solution) rather than a deep truth about the human condition. But notice that the philosopher who accepts that philosophy should be the critique of common sense finds herself in a strange predicament when faced with a philosophical problem. Because the results of her critique are unacceptable, she finds that, if she is to avoid acquiescence in Hume's paradoxical picture of the human condition, she must attempt to reclaim entitlement to the very judgments that her investigations have undermined.[3] That is, she must reject the conclusions of philosophy in favour of our common sense commitments.

Philosophers who wish to avoid the Humean verdict about the human condition — i.e., philosophers who take the perennial "problems of philosophy" seriously[4]— differ widely about the best way to reconcile the conclusions of philosophy to common sense. I want to distinguish between two general approaches to philosophical problems which, for lack of better labels, I will call the "constructive" (or "positive") strategy, and the "deflationary" or ("negative") strategy. I believe that the latter strategy represents the best hope of recovering the commitments of common sense that appear to be undermined in the problem that I am concerned with in this study.

The core of my investigation is an assessment of two deflationary strategies that have been employed to deal with one of the clearest examples of how reflection upon the common sense convictions (or "The Common Sense View" that Ayer depicts) can lead to an absurd conclusion. In this case, the conclusion is epistemological and it differs from the metaphysical conclusions that Ayer mentions by denying, not that matter (or the material world) *exists*, but that it is possible to *know*, or even reasonably *believe*, anything about the "external" material world — even *that* it exists. Before sketching how these two deflationary strategies (which, again, for lack of better terms, I will call "therapeutic diagnosis" and "theoretical diagnosis")[5] attempt to deal with the so-called "problem of the external world," I want to explain how this general approach differs from the constructive approach, and why I believe it stands a better chance of resolving the problem.

As we have seen, philosophical problems are created when the critique and revision of our common sense commitments results in conclusions that seem absurd. Many philosophers have thought that the proper tactic for reclaiming our common sense judgments is to look firstly for errors in the considerations that lead to the unsettling conclusion, and then introduce *further* constructive (or positive) considerations that "fix" the errors, and thereby account for, or explain away, the conflict. Obviously, such a strategy will seem matter of course for a philosopher who maintains that philosophical reflection does reveal errors in our common sense view, and that the fruits of such criticism have the upper hand so far as truth and rationality

are concerned. For such a philosopher, the only negative element in the task of restoring our entitlement to common sense commitments is the assessment of the original critique: once the trouble is detected, the remaining chore is to provide the correct philosophical principles which (again, hopefully) results in "enlightened common sense."

The belief that introducing positive philosophical principles is the proper way to solve philosophical problems is illustrated nicely in a passage from Bishop Berkeley's "Dialogues." Remarking on his solution to the problem of the external world, he writes:

> If the principles, which I here endeavor to propagate, are admitted for true; the consequences which, I think, evidently flow from thence, are, that atheism and scepticism will be utterly destroyed, many intricate points made plain, great difficulties solved, several useless parts of science retrenched, speculation referred to practice, and men reduced from paradox to common sense.[6]

Berkeley displays a firm recognition of the nature of the problem here (i.e., that scepticism is a paradoxical position in conflict with common sense), and what is required for its resolution (i.e., a rejection of the sceptical conclusion in favour of common sense).

Unfortunately, the principles that Berkeley proposes to reclaim the judgments undermined by the sceptic's reflections are extremely difficult to "admit for true." Indeed, the positive considerations that Berkeley advances to solve the problem illustrate beautifully what I take to be the major shortcoming of constructive approaches in general; namely, that such considerations tend, more often than not, to produce more

absurdity. Recall the positive assertions in the second category of absurd metaphysical conclusions that Ayer mentions. Berkeley's attempt to reduce "paradox to common sense" includes at least one of these conclusions (i.e., physical objects exist only when being perceived) as well as one of the negative conclusions in the first category (i.e., that there is no such thing as matter). Thus, although Berkeley's principles allow us to reject the absurd epistemological conclusion in favour of common sense (i.e., his "idealism" *does* show how knowledge of the world is possible), this rejection is bought at the expense of introducing a number of metaphysical principles that are equally shocking and unbelievable.[7]

Perhaps due to the repeated failures of constructive strategies to reclaim common sense (through the profusion of further problems created by such approaches), another general strategy for reclaiming entitlement to our common sense judgments has gained prominence (especially in this century). As I suggested at the outset, deflationary strategies are a reaction to the idea that philosophy should be the critique of common sense. Proponents of deflationism typically believe that the absurdities that ensue from the attack on common sense signify that the very idea of criticizing these judgments (however natural such criticism may be) is misguided, and they deny both that philosophical reflection does reveal errors in our pre-theoretical outlook, and that it has the upper hand in terms of truth and rationality. Deflationists see the task of reclaiming our entitlement to our common sense commitments to be a matter of exposing the errors and prejudices of traditional *philosophy.*

Thus, the essential feature of what I am calling a deflationary approach is that it is *purely* negative: the resolution of a philosophical problem is limited *solely* to the detection of errors in the considerations and reasoning that lead to the bizarre conclusions (unlike the constructive approach which sees this as only the first step towards a proper resolution). Both of the deflationary strategies that I will examine attempt to resolve the problem of the external world by merely attacking the considerations which lead to the absurd sceptical conclusion. However, they differ markedly in terms of their metaphilosophical and methodological underpinnings, and these differences, I think, reflect (perhaps unwittingly) the attitudes of supporters of each strategy towards the major stumbling block of deflationism.

I believe that the greatest methodological obstacle facing a deflationary approach to philosophical problems is to effect a plausible resolution of them while remaining *purely* negative. All of the responses to scepticism that I examine face this obstacle and a principal criterion of my assessment of them is how well they overcome it. To anticipate, I examine some of the most powerful representatives of each strategy and show how they are prone to fall prey to the following dilemma: in the attempt to offer a purely negative diagnosis of scepticism, responses from *both* strategies tend to require — in part due to metaphilosophical and methodological commitments — either *positive* theoretical considerations to justify their criticisms of scepticism, *or* a justification as to why they do not *need* to advance positive theoretical considerations to answer the sceptic.

I have chosen to look at a number of representatives of both strategies — each of which (in one way or another) focuses on what strikes me (and apparently them) as the most important consideration that licenses the sceptical conclusion; namely, the view that our knowledge of the "external" world is grounded upon (and hence, must be derived from) the evidence of sensory experience, where that evidence is understood as how the world appears to us. As I will try to show, each attempt to diagnose how and why this view is incorrect, with the exception of one, fails to overcome the obstacle to deflationism, and this failure bears directly on their strength as responses to scepticism. The last response that I consider is an extremely original and powerful critique of the considerations that lead to scepticism that *does*, I think, manage to remain purely negative. Unfortunately, I also think that the price this response pays for remaining purely negative is that it is vulnerable (in a way that at least some of the other responses are not) to a straightforward answer from the sceptic. Thus, there are two central aims of this investigation. The first is to examine some of the most plausible attempts to reclaim the common sense commitment that we know many things about the world around us. The second is to identify the structural features of these (deflationary) responses and expose their limitations. In the remainder of the prologue, I want to sketch briefly the differences between the two approaches, and provide a breakdown of the chapters to follow.

What I am calling "therapeutic diagnosis" is by far the most ambitious strategy as it aims at a complete dismissal of the problem of the external world by attempting to

show that the considerations that license the sceptical conclusion are *unintelligible*. Wittgenstein, of course, is credited with the idea that traditional philosophical problems are the result of "conceptual confusion" and that their resolution requires a kind of "therapy" — a purely negative approach that aims to reclaim entitlement to our common sense picture by exposing the confusions and "fantasies" that underpin the traditional problems. Any approach that attempts to show that scepticism is unintelligible or incoherent, and hence, that the problem of the external world is a mere "pseudo-problem" that must be "dissolved" (rather than straightforwardly solved) I classify as a form of therapeutic deflationism.

Wittgenstein's treatment of scepticism in *On Certainty* is the major version of therapeutic deflationism that I discuss (in chapter 3) and I argue that it fails to overcome the major obstacle of deflationism on at least two counts. According to Wittgenstein, traditional investigations into the nature and grounding of our common sense convictions inevitably distort or misrepresent these convictions and the practices in which they are embedded. Thus, Wittgenstein argues that although it may appear that the sceptic isolates and draws out the implications of our ordinary views about knowledge, doubt, and other epistemic concepts, this is an *illusion*. For Wittgenstein, the sceptical conclusion *and* the traditional (positive) attempts to combat the conclusion are based upon distortions, and he concludes that both are literally unintelligible — they only *appear* to make sense.

Clearly, Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical doctrine that all philosophical problems (and the solutions to them) involve conceptual muddle requires that his diagnosis of scepticism (if it is to be consistent) does not hinge upon any philosophical considerations of the kind that he is trying to dismiss. Wittgenstein's method of "pure description" attempts to satisfy this constraint. The idea behind the method is to merely describe our ordinary (in this case, epistemic) practices and the convictions embedded within them to reveal the "logic" or "grammar" that govern them. Once we attain a "perspicuous representation" of how these practices actually function, we will readily see how the sceptic misrepresents them, and hence, how his reflections and conclusions are shot through with muddle.

I argue that the method itself requires a positive (philosophical) justification, and that Wittgenstein's application of it to the problem of the external world — specifically, to the view that all of our knowledge of the external world is derived from the "evidence" of the "senses" — either yields a dogmatic rejection of scepticism in need of positive support, or oddly enough, a *positive* view that violates the methodological constraints of his version of therapeutic deflationism. Moreover, this positive view requires a revision of some of our common sense commitments — a revision which, not surprisingly, seems absurd — whereas the sceptic's conception of these commitments does not.

Thus, since Wittgenstein's version of therapeutic diagnosis is either question begging or inconsistent (i.e., it fails to remain purely negative), I conclude that it fails

as a response to scepticism. However, even if we ignore the failure of the strategy to remain negative and assess the merits of his positive attempt to convict the sceptic of trading in nonsense independently, his response still fails because it rests upon views that are much more contentious than those that lead to scepticism.

The second general deflationary strategy — "theoretical diagnosis" — does not attempt to dismiss the problem of the external world by showing that the sceptic's picture is (partly or entirely) incoherent; rather, it concedes the intelligibility of scepticism and addresses the (much more humble) issue of whether, as Hume claimed, we are inexorably driven to scepticism the instant we begin to think about knowledge philosophically. That is, theoretical diagnosis questions whether Hume, and more recently, philosophers such as Barry Stroud and Thomas Nagel, are right that acceptance of the sceptical conclusion is "natural" or "intuitive" owing to the platitudinous character of the considerations and reasoning that lead to the conclusion.

It should be evident that if the sceptical (or any other apparently absurd) conclusion is to compel genuine assent, it must not rest upon any obviously gratuitous and contentious theoretical considerations. Otherwise, scepticism about the external world would not point to a deep and disturbing truth about the human condition, but an artificial puzzle that can be dismissed. The theoretical diagnostician accepts that the sceptical conclusion does not rest upon any *obviously* gratuitous assumptions, and her aim is to unearth hidden theoretical conjectures that are by no means intuitive, and hence, which we are not bound to accept. Thus, at the very least, the theoretical

diagnostician's aim (upon exposing the alleged "unnatural" commitments) is to shift the burden of proof back to the sceptic to somehow show either that 1) these considerations are in fact fully intuitive, 2) that her conclusion can be reached independently of these considerations, or finally, 3) that she is not committed to them at all. And if none of these options can be fulfilled, then we can, in good conscience, simply dismiss the conclusion.

Clearly, since this type of deflationary strategy concedes the intelligibility of scepticism and focuses solely on the detection and criticism of unwarranted theoretical assumptions in the sceptic's analysis of our epistemic situation, it can avoid becoming entangled in the trap that renders Wittgenstein's therapeutic deflationism unsatisfactory (and indeed, inconsistent); namely, invoking contentious theoretical views to show that scepticism is nonsense. Thus, on the one hand, theoretical deflationism can skirt some of the problems associated with attempting to show that scepticism is unintelligible — and this is a definite strategic improvement over therapeutic deflationism. On the other hand, to successfully show that the sceptic's views are nonsense is to completely silence him, whereas the less ambitious aim of shifting the burden of proof might only temporarily shut him up.

Indeed, as I will try to illustrate in my discussion of the representatives of theoretical diagnosis, the concession that scepticism is intelligible provides the sceptic with a dialectical advantage. As we shall see, G.E. Moore's treatment of scepticism (which I argue is best seen as a version of theoretical diagnosis) ends in a standoff with

the sceptic — a stalemate that ultimately proves to be in the sceptic's favor, and Michael Williams' theoretical diagnosis hinges upon his detection of an unwarranted theoretical assumption in the sceptical project that I think the sceptic can show to be warranted. I will outline briefly each of these responses to scepticism.

In chapter 2, I discuss Moore's treatment of scepticism as it is presented in "A Defense of Common Sense." Many have found Moore's response to scepticism puzzling since it appears to amount to nothing more than dogmatic counter-assertion to the sceptic's conclusion that knowledge of the world is impossible. Moore insists that he, and many others, *do* know many things about the world (such as that he has two hands) and he seems to be prepared to let the matter stand at that. However, a closer examination of his response reveals that Moore thinks that the *sceptic* is dogmatic since he simply assumes that the representational account of how we acquire (or would acquire) knowledge of the world — the idea that all of our putative knowledge is based upon the evidence of "internal" sensory experience — is true. Moore correctly points out that this theory is only one of a number of possible theories (or what he calls "analyses") of our cognitive relationship to the world, and he (implicitly) concludes, I believe, that since the sceptic simply *assumes* this view, and since his absurd conclusion depends upon it, we can rest assured that our common sense conviction that we have of knowledge of the world is true until the sceptic shows that his analysis is the natural and inevitable result of philosophical reflection.

I argue that Moore is not entitled to this conclusion. The most Moore establishes is that *if* the sceptic's view of the source of knowledge of the world is false and some other view is true, then we have knowledge of the world. But this is not enough to silence the sceptic, in fact, it plays right into his hands. For the situation now is that it *may* be true that we have knowledge of the world, but we have no idea whether we do or not. In order to avoid this "second order" sceptical conclusion, Moore must articulate and defend an alternative (*positive*) account — a task that Moore believes to be (and which I argue *is*) pretty much hopeless. Thus, I conclude that Moore's strategy fails as a response to scepticism due to its inability to overcome the obstacle to deflationism.

I believe that Moore's response to scepticism fails on this count because it does not isolate the right point of attack, whereas Williams' response (the other decidedly "theoretical diagnosis") does. But before I turn to Williams' treatment of scepticism, I want to sketch briefly the other major response to scepticism that I examine in chapter 4. In some of his most recent work, Hilary Putnam's focus is clearly that of reclaiming our common sense conviction that we know many things about the world, and he (like all the other deflationists I discuss) believes that the best way to effect this is to rid ourselves of the idea that all of our knowledge of the world is based upon (and must be derived from) the evidence of sensory experience (or as he describes it, the "interface" idea according to which all our knowledge is "mediated" by "internal

representations"). However, it is very difficult to categorize Putnam's strategy, and I think that his response to scepticism is instructive for precisely that reason.

One thing is certain: Putnam describes his treatment of scepticism as purely deflationary — as an entirely negative attempt to jettison the interface idea without offering any *positive* theory to replace it. And it strikes me that Putnam sees himself as effecting a kind of Wittgensteinian resolution of the problem of the external world — he refers to the interface idea as a "fantasy" and as "unintelligible." Thus, it is tempting to read Putnam's treatment of scepticism as a form of therapeutic deflationism, and a very promising one at that. The reason it is promising is that Putnam does not, or at any rate, not explicitly, subscribe to the general thesis that all philosophical questions, problems, solutions, theories, etc., are unintelligible, nor does he adhere to the method of description — the views that are at the root of most of the problems with Wittgenstein's strategy.

However, none of the considerations Putnam raises for rejecting the interface idea show that the view is unintelligible, nor do they seem to be intended to show that they are unintelligible. Rather, Putnam's arguments for rejecting the view appear to be attempts to show that the view is *false*, and that some alternative theory of knowledge — direct or (what he calls "natural") realism — is true. Thus, given Putnam's *actual* response to scepticism, it appears that it is best categorized as a *positive* or constructive strategy after all. Nevertheless, Putnam insists that his natural realism is not to be understood as an alternative *theory*, but merely our ordinary view concerning our

cognitive (perceptual and conceptual) contact with the world which accounts for how we know the things we take ourselves to know. Accordingly, Putnam does not attempt to fill out the details of the view — the details that explain exactly what it means to be in "direct" cognitive contact with the world. I argue that Putnam's arguments against the interface idea are unsatisfactory, and that even if they were successful, he is not entitled to his deflationary conclusions.

It seems that Putnam thinks his attack on the interface view somehow procures the results of a therapeutic diagnosis — that it exposes the problem of the external world to be a "pseudo- issue," and fully restores our entitlement to our common sense commitment that we have knowledge of the world by reclaiming "natural realism." However, without the metaphilosophical and methodological underpinnings of a therapeutic diagnosis, for instance, the idea that all philosophical problems, theories, and the like, are "nonsense," Putnam does not have the resources to show why his "natural realism" is not to be seen as an alternative theory and why he does not need to flesh out the details of the theory.

Although I think Putnam is right that in *some sense* our ordinary or common sense view is that we are in "direct" contact with the world, I also think that common sense is silent on the details about *how* we are in direct contact with the world; that is, common sense does not include an account or explanation of how we perceive and know the world directly. And clearly, an explanation (or what Moore calls an "analysis") of this ordinary commitment will be a *positive* philosophical account of

how knowledge of the world is possible. Putnam does not offer any reason as to why such a theory is unnecessary, and so his attempt to reclaim entitlement to our view that we know many things about the world is unsatisfactory. In particular, Putnam's treatment of scepticism (like Moore's) runs up against the obstacle to deflationism by failing to show why a positive answer to the sceptic is not necessary.

It should perhaps be mentioned that there might be another way of understanding Putnam's strategy. One of the major arguments Putnam offers for rejecting the interface view is similar to one that I ascribe to Moore, and hence, it might be that Putnam intends his response as a version of theoretical diagnosis. I consider this possibility and argue that if Putnam's intention is to shift the burden of proof back to the sceptic, it fails for precisely the same reasons that Moore's response fails. I think that the fact that Putnam's strategy is so difficult to pin down — it seems possible to read him as a constructivist, a therapeutic diagnostician, and a theoretical diagnostician — is instructive as it illustrates the differences between these approaches and highlights what is required of each to function as a satisfactory response to scepticism. I turn now to the final deflationary attempt to expose why we need not accept the most important consideration that leads to scepticism.

As mentioned, Williams' theoretical diagnosis — the focus of chapter 5 — cuts much deeper than Moore's. Like Moore, Williams believes that the sceptic simply assumes "foundationalism"— the view which he describes as holding that all of our beliefs and putative knowledge about the world owe their credibility to the sole

evidential base of sensory experience (understood as how things appear to us). However, unlike Moore, Williams thinks that this doctrine is present at the *root* of the sceptic's investigation, and he argues that there is no way to motivate the sceptic's conclusion, or indeed, the very *project* of assessing all of our putative knowledge of the world, independently of this doctrine. For Williams, the idea that there is such a thing as "knowledge of the world" — a category of putative knowledge that constitutes a genuine object of assessment or (Moorean) "analysis" — presupposes foundationalist ideas.

Williams argues that foundationalism is much more contentious than is usually thought. Foundationalism, Williams claims, presupposes "epistemological realism" — the highly questionable doctrine that beliefs stand in fixed justificatory relations to one another solely in virtue of the types of beliefs they are. Thus, far from being "intuitive," foundationalism and the epistemological realism it presumes, are totally at odds with our ordinary epistemic commitments and practices. Our ordinary practices accord with "contextualism"— the view that what counts as justification for a given belief is determined by various contextual constraints. Williams argues that since the sceptic's investigation depends upon these wholly gratuitous assumptions, there is no reason to accept the absurd conclusion that is derived from it. Thus, if successful, Williams' strategy avoids all the problems associated with trying to convict the sceptic of unintelligibility, and since it attempts to short-circuit the underpinnings of the sceptic's undertaking (i.e., the very idea that there is an object for his reflections), his

strategy also avoids the trap that Moore (and Putnam) fall into of having to provide a positive response to the sceptic later on. That is, Williams' diagnosis does, I think, manage to remain purely deflationary.

Unfortunately, since Williams concedes that, given these views, scepticism is fully intelligible, a great deal hangs on whether the sceptic is in fact committed to these contentious doctrines, or, if he is, whether or not they are wholly gratuitous. Williams admits that if these doctrines are (like the absurd conclusion is thought to be) "by-products" of otherwise innocuous truisms rather than presuppositions of the sceptic's investigation, then they are fully intuitive, and scepticism is the final verdict on our epistemic credentials concerning knowledge of the world. I argue precisely that. There is no question that the sceptic is committed to these views, but they are not brute presuppositions; rather, the view that all of our knowledge of the world is dependent upon the sole evidential base of sensory experience is something that arises *within* the sceptical project. As a by-product (instead of a presupposition) of the investigation that rests only upon platitudes, the view is fully "natural" in Williams' sense. Thus, I conclude that since Williams fails to isolate a gratuitous and controversial assumption at the base of the sceptical investigation, his attempt to shift the burden of proof back to the sceptic also fails.

Before turning to the detailed examinations of these treatments of scepticism about the external world, I feel I should explain the inspiration for this study and where I envision its niche within recent scholarship on the problem of the external world. In a

sense, this study is a response to Michael Williams' reply to Stroud. Williams claims, quite rightly, that Stroud's discussion of scepticism about the external world in *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, has been instrumental in reviving interest in the problem of the external world. One reason that Stroud's work has been so influential is his "Humean" emphasis (mentioned earlier) on how the traditional investigation of knowledge of the world seems to lead so naturally to scepticism. Stroud argues that the sceptic appears to reach her absurd conclusion by merely employing platitudes or truisms about the nature, source, and content of worldly knowledge, and that the intuitiveness of these considerations is the factor that makes the sceptical conclusion appear so compelling.

I think Stroud is surely right that scepticism certainly *seems* to arise from mere platitudes, and hence, that it seems to be a wholly "intuitive" or "natural" problem. And in chapter 1, I try to make a case (somewhat different than Stroud's) for thinking that scepticism really is such an intuitive problem. Williams believes that Stroud is right that the force of sceptical arguments depends upon their being wholly natural, and his entire project in *Unnatural Doubts* can be seen as an attempt to show that they are not at all intuitive. Thus, the original motivation for this study arose from Williams' challenge to Stroud — in a nut shell, my inspiration was to investigate whether Williams' challenge could be met.

As my exploration of the differences between Williams and Stroud progressed, the scope of my interest in the problem of the external world widened, and the resulting

product is modeled after Stroud's book. In addition to emphasizing the naturalness of scepticism, another reason that Stroud's work has been so influential is that he provides powerful critical examinations of a number of influential responses to scepticism; including those from Kant, Carnap, Moore and Quine. The bulk of *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* is devoted to showing how and why all these anti-sceptical strategies fail, and many (myself included) have thought Stroud's critiques of these strategies to be devastating. The bulk of this study is also entirely critical, and thus, in this sense, I see it as a continuation and refinement of Stroud's work.

I think it is continuation of Stroud's work since I examine critically a number of responses to scepticism that Stroud does not, and it is a refinement in that these critiques are framed in terms of different *types* of responses to scepticism. Stroud does not make a distinction between types of anti-sceptical strategies — between what I am calling "constructive" and "deflationary" strategies, nor (obviously) does he have a view about which type of strategy is preferable. As mentioned, I believe that there is an important distinction between these strategies, and that deflationary responses are preferable to constructive strategies. I also believe (following Williams) that there is an important distinction to be made within this general approach to scepticism — a distinction between "therapeutic" and "theoretical" diagnoses — and that it is worthwhile to try to sort out their relative strengths and weaknesses. The following is a gesture in that direction.

Finally, this project parallels Stroud's work in one other respect. The upshot of my discussion of these deflationary strategies is quite pessimistic: the problem of the external world remains unsolved, and (as Stroud puts it) scepticism about the external world appears to be "provisionally correct." That, of course, is not to say that we must accept the absurd conclusion (indeed, I believe that is impossible, at least outside of the study). Rather, I believe it is to say that we must better appreciate that scepticism represents a genuine and profound challenge to our knowledge of the world.

But, like most people (philosophers included) I do not believe that scepticism is true, and I also believe that its absurdity suggests that there must be something amiss somewhere within the considerations that lead to it. Thus, although the sceptical challenge has yet to be met, I think that it must be possible to meet it. And even though my project is almost entirely critical, I believe that (if nothing else) it does provide some insight as to where we should and should not look to meet the challenge.

NOTES

[1]Karl Popper, "How I See Philosophy," in C.J. Bontempo and S.J. Odell (eds.), *The Owl of Minerva* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975), 48.

[2]A.J. Ayer, "Metaphysics and Common Sense," in J. David Newell (ed.), *Philosophy and Common Sense* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980), 109-10.

[3]It should be evident, I think, why a resolution of the conflict between common sense and philosophy obliges the philosopher to try to recover the judgments of common sense: the reason why the clash of perspectives represents a problem is that the results of *inquiry* are considered unacceptable. There would not be a *problem* if the conclusions of philosophy did not conflict with common sense, and hence, solving the problem requires that one somehow render the results of philosophy consistent with the judgments they conflict with. Alternatively, if one is prepared to accept the paradoxical conclusions of philosophy (and disregard the judgments of common sense), then, again, there will not be a problem in need of resolution: common sense will be deemed false and irrational.

[4]Some philosophers (e.g., Richard Rorty) have been inclined to simply dismiss the perennial problems as relics of a number of erroneous theories and views from our misguided predecessors. It is one thing to claim that such views are erroneous and misguided and quite another to prove it. The philosophers I have in mind do not attempt to prove that these theories are false or incoherent (or whatever), instead, they tend to rely on the mention of arguments of other philosophers who they believe have shown us how to see our way past the traditional problems. Of course, the mere mention of these arguments does not establish that the tradition is "dead," and part of my concern here is to examine some of these arguments to see how much they do in fact establish.

[5]I have adopted these labels from Michael Williams' discussion of approaches to scepticism in *Unnatural Doubts* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1991). Although Williams does not distinguish between what I am calling "constructive" and "deflationary" approaches to scepticism, he does distinguish between "therapeutic" diagnosis and his own approach, "theoretical" diagnosis, both of which, I believe, are clearly deflationary.

[6]George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1979), 4.

[7]Although I do not want to argue here that all positive solutions to philosophical problems end up advancing absurdities (and hence, creating more problems), I believe that even a cursory survey of some of the positive solutions to other perennial problems (such as the problem of "free will" and the "mind/body" problem) reveals this unpleasant pattern. However, as nothing crucial hangs on this general claim for my

purposes, the discussion of the shortcomings of positive solutions is limited to the problem at hand throughout this investigation.

Chapter 1

Radical Scepticism About the External World

1.1 The Problem of the External World

Radical scepticism about the external world is the view that knowledge and even *reasonable belief* about the objective world is impossible. Although this conclusion is in profound tension with our common sense commitment — exemplified in our ordinary practices of making and accepting knowledge claims — that we know many things about the world, Hume, and many of his contemporary admirers (who, collectively, Michael Williams aptly refers to as the "New Humeans"), believe that the conclusion is the inevitable result of reflection upon common sense platitudes about the nature and source of knowledge that we all (for the most part, tacitly) accept. For Hume, the key to understanding the inevitability of the negative outcome of epistemological inquiry turns on the recognition that "sceptical doubt arises *naturally* [my emphasis] from profound and intense reflection on those subjects."[1]

The New Humeans (in particular, Barry Stroud) have revived and extended Hume's observations about the "naturalness" of sceptical doubts. Stroud, in his influential *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* emphasizes how we find the sceptic's progress intuitively "gripping" due to its simplicity and obviousness, and

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thus, how we can easily (if only temporarily) become persuaded that the sceptic's view

is theoretically unassailable. As Williams explains, the New Humeans see scepticism as

an:

> *intuitive* problem, a problem that can be posed and understood without
> prior indoctrination in contentious theoretical ideas ... In thinking of
> scepticism as an intuitive problem, the New Sceptics are rightly
> impressed by the simplicity, brevity, and seeming transparency of typical
> sceptical arguments, compared with the difficulty and frequent obscurity
> of the positive theories of knowledge advanced to combat them.
> Sceptical arguments, they tend to think, appeal to something deep in our
> nature ... scepticism is the inevitable outcome of questions that, to
> creatures like us, come naturally.[2]

Nevertheless, the New Humeans (like Hume himself) realize that regardless of how

dazzling and impressive an initial encounter with scepticism may be, and regardless of

our mindfulness that as a product of careful reflection and argument, intellectual

honesty dictates that the conclusion should compel our assent, it is impossible to accept

it from our everyday standpoint. Not only is the conclusion totally unbelievable outside

the study, but, as Hume observed: "all human life must perish, were [the sceptic's]

principles to universally and steadily prevail."[3] Scepticism is unlivable: we cannot but

accept the beliefs and judgments that sceptical arguments appear to undermine, and act

as *if* we know many things about the world.

Thus, as Marie McGinn points out, the encounter with the sceptical appraisal of

our epistemic situation leaves us:

> with an unappealing choice between a philosophical position that is the
> product of reason and careful argument but which we cannot for a
> moment believe or take seriously, and one which reaffirms our

irresistible common sense outlook but which has now been made to look dogmatic and presumptuous.[4]

An unappealing choice indeed: we must either assent to the rational view that we cannot believe or embrace the believable view that we cannot rationally accept. We might say, then, that the *problem* of the external world is to show why we need not be driven to accept one or the other of the above alternatives. Specifically, it requires rejecting the absurd sceptical conclusion in favour of common sense by showing how and why scepticism about the external world is incorrect; and hence, showing why our acceptance of the common sense commitment that we know many things about the world, and our ordinary practice of making and accepting knowledge claims about the world, are not matters of irrationality. Before examining how we might attempt to reclaim our ordinary epistemic convictions and practices, it is necessary to explain why scepticism about the external world appears so compelling.

1.2 Apparent Platitudes

As mentioned, the considerations that generate scepticism about the external world arise only within the rarefied context of "profound and intense" philosophical reflection — and they arise very naturally upon reflection on our ordinary epistemic practices and convictions.[5] Most philosophers — critics and supporters of scepticism alike — agree that Descartes' *Meditations* is the exemplar of such a context. Descartes' aim, of course, is to secure a solid foundation upon which "firm and lasting" knowledge of the sciences could be ensured. Realizing "how many were the false opinions that in my youth I took to be true, and thus how doubtful were all the things

that I subsequently built upon these opinions,"[6] Descartes proposes to assess *all* of the opinions he has come to hold over the years to determine whether *any* of them amount to genuine knowledge.

Descartes adopts a "method of doubt" to assess all of his (putative) knowledge. The method involves a systematic search for reasons to doubt the adequacy of the grounds for his beliefs, which, unless ruled out, will show that they do not amount to knowledge. But how is one to set about assessing *all* of one's beliefs? Descartes believes that it is not necessary to "survey each opinion one after the other, a task of endless proportion."[7] According to Descartes, it is possible to identify broad classes of belief that owe their credibility to a single ground. Thus, he thinks that one need only apply the method of doubt to the ground "because undermining the foundations will cause whatever has been built upon them to fall down of its own accord."[8] In other words, Descartes believes that if he can find some reason for doubting the credibility of the grounds for the beliefs of a given class, he will thereby show that entire class to be epistemically wanting.

The task Descartes sets himself is certainly unusual, and it assumes a number of epistemological ideas. But both the task and the ideas seem innocuous enough: indeed, they seem to mirror our ordinary epistemic practices and convictions. Obviously, the scope of Descartes' undertaking is striking in its generality: he wants to assess *all* of his putative knowledge in a given category all at once. But there is nothing unacceptable about assessing large classes of belief *per se*. To borrow an example of Stroud's, one

might be led to investigate whether anything one believes about the common cold amounts to knowledge. Many of us have been taught a number of different things about the causes and remedies for a cold. For instance, over the years I have been told that a cold is the result of such diverse causes as an airborne virus to standing in a draught with wet hair, and I have also been told that the best cure for a cold ranges from ingesting vitamin "C" to eating copious amounts of chicken soup.

Suppose that I believed that I knew all of these things about the cold. I might (perhaps upon the realization that some of these beliefs seem to be inconsistent) be led to assess all of my putative knowledge about the common cold. This is hardly a controversial proposal. As Stroud claims, to undertake a project of assessing whether or not one's beliefs in a wide area of interest amount to knowledge is the sort of task that:

> we are perfectly familiar with in everyday life and often know how to answer...There is nothing mysterious about it. It is the sort of task that we can be led to undertake for a number of reasons, and often with very good reasons, in so far as we have very good reasons for preferring knowledge and firm belief to guesswork and wishful thinking or simply taking things for granted.[9]

Thus, as Descartes' undertaking appears to parallel familiar cases of epistemological inquiry, it seems that it is peculiar only in its reach.

Descartes' methodology and the assumptions which underlie it also seem to be in keeping with ordinary epistemological practices and convictions. Descartes appeals to such ideas as that there is a difference between knowledge and mere opinion or belief; that one of the differences is that beliefs can be false, while knowledge is never

false; that establishing that one's beliefs really do amount to knowledge requires assessing whether the grounds for one's beliefs are adequate, and so on.

That these considerations appear to reflect our ordinary views about knowledge can be illustrated by considering how one would determine whether, say, the belief that standing in a draught with wet hair can cause a common cold really amounts to knowledge. Suppose I had always believed (and claimed to know) that one could catch cold by standing in a draught with wet hair, but for some reason I am led to investigate whether I really do know this. Clearly, the natural way to begin an assessment of the belief is to consider the reliability and strength of my reasons for holding it. Suppose, upon reflection, I determine that my reasons for holding the belief are that I was told, as a child, that one could catch a cold this way, and that I seem to recall catching a cold on some occasion shortly after I had been outdoors with wet hair. I think it is evident that I (and indeed, most everyone) would quickly conclude that this evidence is insufficient to accredit the belief as an item of knowledge. But why?

The reason that we must admit there is an epistemic failure here is that my evidence clearly underdetermines the truth of the belief — there are reasonable and relevant grounds for doubting the reliability of my evidence, and at the time of reflection upon the status of the belief, I have no way of ruling these doubts out. Thus, even if it is *true* that one can catch a cold by standing in a draught with wet hair, it is certainly possible that I was misinformed as a child and it may have been pure coincidence that I caught a cold after being outdoors with wet hair (if indeed this

happened at all). These possibilities show how the evidence for my claim to knowledge is wholly compatible with its being false that one can catch cold by standing in a draught with wet hair, and they point to specific ways that I might be mistaken about the matter. Thus, since I cannot rule them out, I must conclude that I don't *know* the belief to be true (or false).

Such ordinary cases where we evaluate the epistemic status of a belief (or claim to knowledge) illustrate, I think, that there is nothing mysterious or controversial about Descartes' method of assessment or the epistemological ideas it embodies. Admittedly, first-person assessments of putative knowledge claims are probably far less common than assessments prompted by the challenges of others, but the principles involved seem to be identical (and so, again, the most we can say is that Descartes' investigation is *unusual*, but not necessarily unnatural). In particular, I think it is evident that our ordinary practice of challenging and assessing knowledge claims is governed (generally) by two principles.

First, claims to know some proposition "X" to be true are always open to the question "How do you/I know 'X' to be true?" This question is a call to *justify* the claim — to furnish the reasons or grounds one has for accepting the claim as an item of knowledge. Thus, "assessing" a claim to knowledge involves evaluating one's justification for the claim. Second, if one's justification is to certify the claim as genuine knowledge, it must not be open to a specific, reasonable, and relevant doubt about its reliability — i.e., a challenge to one's evidence that specifies exactly how it is

inadequate, and hence, exactly how one might be in error about the matter — that cannot be ruled out. And if one's justification is to even *approach* adequate certification of the claim as an item of knowledge, it must not be open to a specific challenge that shows that the evidence for the claim is *wholly* inadequate because it wholly *underdetermines* its truth.[10] I believe that it is possible to see Descartes' assessment of all of his putative knowledge as relying upon nothing more than these (surely commonplace) epistemic principles, and thus, when he reaches the negative (but, for him, tentative) verdict that nobody knows (or has reasonable grounds for believing) anything about the external world, his progress (again) appears to fully parallel our everyday epistemic practices.

1.3 An Argument for Radical Scepticism

At the beginning of the first *Meditation*, Descartes identifies the first class of putative knowledge that he will assess (which is the class of interest to us here). He claims that the class includes those "opinions" that he "had admitted until now as most true;" namely, all of the opinions arrived at "either from the senses or through the senses." Here Descartes makes explicit (what certainly appears to be) the obvious truism that the "senses" are (in some manner) the primary source of belief and putative knowledge about the world around us. Although we rarely, if ever, take heed of this truism in ordinary life, the slightest reflection shows that all of our dealings with the world presuppose it. In the broadest terms possible, we might characterize this as the idea that it is only in virtue of our sensory organs that we come to believe anything at

all about the world — we see, touch, smell, etc., "things" in the world, and on that basis make judgments about the *way* they are, and even more fundamentally, *that* they are.[11] In other words, reflection reveals that all of our beliefs and putative knowledge about the world (including the most fundamental commitment that there is a "world") ultimately owe their credibility to the "information" obtained through or by the senses.[12]

Having made explicit (if only to later reject)[13] the (apparent) truism that our knowledge of the world ultimately depends upon the evidence of the senses, Descartes points out that his senses have sometimes "deceived him," and he claims that it is prudent to never wholly trust that which sometimes deceives. But, of course, from the observation that the senses sometimes deceive us, it does not follow that they always do, and in everyday life, we can often detect the reasons why we come to hold false beliefs about the world based on what we see, touch, hear, and so on. Less than optimal conditions of observation, human carelessness, intoxication, fatigue, and other such factors contribute to (and explain) the creation of erroneous beliefs based on sense-perception. Thus, so far Descartes has no reason to think that the senses are generally inadequate for knowledge of the world.

Of course, he quickly finds a reason for thinking that even in cases where he can rule out the familiar causes of error, sense-perception is an unreliable ground for knowing and even reasonably believing anything about the world. Descartes considers a case which seems to be among the best possible candidates for really knowing

something based on what he sees, feels, and so on; namely, his present belief that he is sitting by the fire holding a piece of paper. In such a situation, one can take stock of common sources of error and rule them out (e.g., one can judge the quality of the lighting, one's sobriety, and the like). By carefully attending to such factors, and focusing clearly on the immediate data conveyed to his sensory organs, Descartes considers that nothing short of madness could prevent him from accepting, as the clearest kind of example of something he *knows*, that he is sitting by the fire holding a piece of paper. Then, the following consideration strikes him:

> How often has my evening slumber persuaded me of such customary things as these: that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, seated by the fireplace, when in fact I am lying undressed between the blankets! But right now I certainly am gazing upon this piece of paper with eyes wide awake. This head which I am moving is not heavy with sleep. I extend this hand consciously and deliberately and I feel it. These things would not be so distinct for one who is asleep. But all of this seems as if I do not recall having been deceived by similar thoughts on other occasions in my dreams. As I consider these cases more intently, I see so plainly that there are no definite signs to distinguish being awake from being asleep that I am quite astonished.[14]

This, of course, is Descartes' famous dream argument, and it is the argument that many of the New Humeans (Stroud in particular) think so naturally establishes radical scepticism about the external world. The argument supposedly shows that from the consideration of another platitude (i.e., what sometimes happens in dreams), we are led irresistibly to the conclusion that the grounding for all of our beliefs and putative knowledge of the world is totally inadequate — that sense-perception does not provide

a reasonable basis for accepting (as knowledge or justified belief) anything at all about the objective world — even that there *is* a *world*.

Clearly, if Descartes is "lying undressed between the blankets," his belief that he is seated by the fire is false. But since the ground for his belief that he is sitting by the fire is that he sees the fire, feels its warmth, and so on, and he has qualitatively identical experiences in his dreams, it seems that unless he can find some way to distinguish between the two situations, it may be the case that he really is "between the blankets" — his belief might be false. But, as Descartes "so plainly" sees, there seems to be no way for him to distinguish between the two situations — that is, to *rule out* the possibility that he is dreaming — because the only thing he can appeal to is the evidence of what he sees, feels, and so on. But obviously, he cannot (or at least not without circularity) appeal to this as evidence that he is not dreaming since the adequacy of this evidence is precisely what is in question. Thus, for all he can tell, given what he has to go on, it might be the case that Descartes is lying between the blankets — he does not know, or have any rational ground for believing one way or the other, whether he is sitting by the fire.

At this point in Descartes' reflections the sceptical verdict that we may be wrong about all of our beliefs about the world does seem inevitable. What the dreaming consideration apparently shows (or better, *reveals*) is that the only evidence we can appeal to for justifying what we believe to be "most true" about the world is worthless. Since all of our beliefs about the world are based upon the evidence of the senses and

this evidence is perfectly compatible with the dreaming hypothesis, and more importantly, since there is no non-question begging way to rule out this hypothesis, it seems to follow that we can never know, or even *reasonably believe* anything about the world — *given what we have to go on*. All that we can really be said to know, or reasonably believe, is how things appear to us.

Thus, by making explicit and reflecting upon common sense convictions about the source and nature of our putative knowledge of the world — i.e., such convictions as that all of our putative knowledge of the world is ultimately based upon the evidence of the senses; that this evidence must not be open to genuine and relevant doubts about its reliability if it is to be adequate for certifying our beliefs about the world as reasonable or as items of knowledge, and so on — Descartes, relying only upon other platitudes (e.g., in our dreams we seem to perceive the world) appears to reveal that there is an epistemic gap between our experiences and the world that undermines our common sense conviction that we have knowledge of the world around us.

Stroud would certainly have us believe that this is the right way to see matters here, and although he acknowledges that the sceptical verdict concerning our knowledge of the world is absurd to common sense, he is impressed by the simplicity, brevity, and above all, the intuitiveness of Descartes' progress. Stroud is surely right to emphasize the intuitiveness of the considerations that lead to the sceptical conclusion, since it is evident that to compel our assent at all, scepticism *must* be an intuitive problem. Unless the considerations that lead to the sceptical conclusion are mere

platitudes or (as Stroud puts it elsewhere) "unavoidable truths" involved in our ordinary ways of thinking about knowledge and the world, then they would not disclose a deep paradox about the human condition, but rather, an artificially created puzzle.

Stroud illustrates this point with the example of someone announcing the apparently absurd discovery that there are no physicians in New York City. When pressed for the details of this astonishing news, we learn that his find is based upon a definition of "physician" as "anyone who has a medical degree and can cure any conceivable illness in less than two minutes." Clearly this definition of "physician" is gratuitous, and once it is understood how the term is being used, the air of absurdity at the pronouncement disappears. If any of the considerations that lead to the sceptical conclusion are gratuitous like the re-definition of "physician," and these considerations are exposed, then we should expect the air of absurdity and paradox at the sceptic's pronouncement to disappear as well. Or at the very least, we can demand that the sceptic defend these considerations (just as we might demand a defense of the re-definition of "physician") and thereby shift the burden of proof back to the sceptic. As I outlined in the introduction, this is precisely the strategy employed by the two representatives of theoretical diagnosis that I discuss.

1.4 Two Rejoinders

Before I turn to Moore's version of theoretical diagnosis, I want to look briefly at two other (related) attempts to charge the sceptic with helping himself to gratuitous assumptions in order to make out his absurd position. I want to discuss (and dismiss)

these versions of theoretical diagnosis here since neither of them focus on (what I claimed in the introduction to be) the most important consideration that leads to the sceptical conclusion; namely, that all of our putative knowledge of the world owes its credibility to the evidence of the senses, where that evidence is understood as how the world appears to us.

The first attempt to show that the sceptical conclusion rests upon controversial assumptions is parallel to the case in which "physician" is redefined. The charge is that the sceptic has distorted (or perhaps conveniently "re-defined") the concept of knowledge in such a way that it no longer bears any resemblance to one used in ordinary life. Descartes is usually the one thought to be responsible for this distortion since early in the first *Meditation* he explicitly claims that a proposition cannot be known unless it is "absolutely certain." As he puts it "reason now persuades me that I should withhold my assent no less carefully from those things which are not plainly certain and indubitable than I would to what is patently false."[15] This is unreasonable, the critic chides, since it is obvious that in ordinary life we do not require that a proposition be established as absolutely certain or shown to be beyond any possible doubt before we accept is as an item of knowledge. Thus, it is clear that Descartes' sceptical conclusion rests upon some imaginary and unreasonable conception of knowledge that is certainly not ours.

I think there are a number of problems with this line of argument. The first is that to point out the undeniable fact that in everyday life we do not require absolute

certainty of a proposition — that is, a justification of the proposition that establishes the impossibility of error — before we *accept* it as an item of knowledge does not settle the question about the content of our ordinary concept of knowledge. It might be that in everyday life, we are somewhat cavalier about how we apply our concepts and that if we were to stand back and reflect upon our epistemic practices, we might find that our ordinary concept of knowledge really does require this (seemingly) very rigorous standard of justification.

I think it is certainly possible to make a case, drawing only from surface features of our practices, that our concept really does require what the sceptic (allegedly) claims it does. For instance, we might point to the fact that we will accept the locution "I believe 'X,' but I might be wrong," but not "I know 'X,' but I might be wrong." Although this fact about linguistic usage perhaps does not, by itself, settle the issue, it does lend some evidence to the view that our ordinary concept does require that a proposition be absolutely certain if it is to count as an item of knowledge. For the second locution seems to suggest that if it is even *possible* that one could be mistaken about the proposition in question, we will not accredit it as knowledge.

If, for the moment, we assume that this is right, then I think that at least a partial explanation of why we often tend to ignore this requirement and continue to accept (as knowledge) propositions that do not measure up is that we are often lax owing to practical exigencies. Most of us simply do not have the time to subject the propositions we accept as knowledge to such careful critical scrutiny, nor are most

everyday matters important enough to demand that we do so. It should be noted;

however, that the more important an issue is, the more careful we are to assess

propositions. And in some cases (e.g., literally cases of life and death, such as the

decision to convict a person facing the death sentence in a court of law), our assessment

standards will demand something resembling absolute certainty. In any case, it is not

my intention to establish here that our ordinary concept of knowledge demands absolute

certainty since (and this is my second complaint with the above argument), it is not

clear the Descartes (or a genuine sceptic) *needs* to be understood as committed to this

view.

I argued that Descartes arrives at his radical scepticism about the external world

on the basis of the requirement that one's justification for a claim to knowledge must

not be open to a specific, reasonable, and relevant doubt about its reliability that cannot

be ruled out (and especially one that shows that we have no reason at all, on the basis

of the evidence, for thinking the claim more likely to be true than false). And this

requirement, I argued, is surely one that we do accept in ordinary life. Thus,

Descartes' (unfortunate) remarks concerning the criterion of justification that he seems

to employ, and the question of whether or not our ordinary concept of knowledge

involves this criterion, are beside the point. So those who argue that Descartes' (and

indeed the *genuine* sceptic's) radical conclusion is established only on the basis of some

distorted or re-defined concept of knowledge (so that it requires some unreasonable

standard of justification) are, I think, simply mistaken.

The second (related) attempt to convict the sceptic of introducing gratuitous (and certainly not "ordinary") considerations to draw his absurd conclusion takes off at the point where the first attempt ends. In this case the theoretical diagnostician accepts (or at least, can accept) that Descartes (and the sceptic) need only be seen as committed to the weaker constraint for justification that relevant and reasonable doubts about a proposition be ruled out if it is to amount to knowledge, but complains that the doubt that appears to license the sceptical conclusion is neither relevant nor reasonable since in ordinary life it is patently obvious that we do not believe (or even consider) that, as a general condition for knowing some proposition about the world to be true, we must rule out the hypothesis that we might be dreaming.

My response to this objection is that it is true, but misses the mark. It is obvious that we do not *normally* consider the dreaming hypothesis as a relevant consideration to be ruled out before accepting a proposition as an item of knowledge. But it must be emphasized that Descartes' and the sceptic's context of inquiry is certainly not "normal," and neither of them are (or need be) concerned with what we take to be relevant and reasonable error possibilities in everyday life. As I have argued all along, the considerations raised by Descartes and the sceptic *parallel* our ordinary epistemic convictions and practices in so far as they employ the same concepts and assessment procedures within the *extraordinary* context of assessing *all* of our putative knowledge of the world.

In ordinary life, our epistemic practices presuppose that we have knowledge of the world, and our standards of what is relevant and reasonable must be viewed relative to that assumption. The situation changes entirely when we step back to consider whether *any* of our worldly beliefs amount to knowledge. Once this step is taken, and we make the (apparent) discovery that the senses are the sole evidentiary source for all of our putative knowledge of the world, then the dreaming hypothesis *does* become relevant and reasonable. Thus, the above objection, I think, confuses the standard of relevance and reasonableness applicable in the ordinary and epistemic contexts, and it incorrectly assumes that the sceptic believes that it is always relevant to consider the dreaming hypothesis as an error possibility. The dream possibility is only appropriate within the context of epistemological inquiry, but since its employment within that context makes use of our ordinary epistemic concepts and assessment procedures, this objection misses the point.

Thus, neither of these attempts to show that the sceptical conclusion about our knowledge of the external world rests upon contentious theoretical assumptions are successful. At this point, it certainly appears that the New-Humeans are right about the intuitiveness of the considerations that lead to the radical verdict that knowledge and reasonable belief about the world are impossible.[16] Before I turn to what I think are the most powerful deflationary attempts to show how and why this conclusion is incorrect, I want to take a moment to dwell on the significance of the New-Humean's conception of the problem of the external world.

1.5 The Significance of Scepticism about the External World

If scepticism about the external world really is an intuitive or natural problem, then this fact highlights perhaps the most paradoxical feature of traditional epistemological inquiry; namely, that the convictions of common sense which inform our everyday practices contain the seed of their own undoing. That is, it appears that the conflict between the absurd sceptical conclusion and our common sense conviction that we know many things about the world is a result of merely drawing out the implications of, and interrelations between, our common sense commitments themselves. We might say, then, that in a sense, common sense is in conflict with itself: philosophical reflection merely exposes that our ordinary convictions are in profound tension with each other.

If it is true that the problem of the external world is natural in this sense, then we not only have an explanation as to why the sceptical conclusion seems so compelling, but also an explanation (or at least a partial explanation) of why the introduction of positive philosophical considerations to resolve this conflict between philosophy and common sense often tends to produce nothing but more absurdity. If this conflict really ensues from merely drawing out the hidden implications of these platitudes, it seems that the attempt to resolve this conflict by attempting to "correct" the problem by positing positive theoretical considerations will likely involve a denial (or a revision) of some of our most basic convictions. If this is correct, then it is evident why a deflationary strategy that attempts to show that the "platitudes"

traditional inquiry purports to isolate are either not fully intelligible or fully intuitive

represents our best hope of reclaiming our conviction that we know many things about

the world around us. I turn now to the first representative of the latter strategy.

NOTES

[1]David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 218.

[2]Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1991), xv.

[3]David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 160.

[4]Marie McGinn, *Sense and Certainty* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 2.

[5]It should perhaps be mentioned that scepticism about the external world may also "arise" from reflection upon a positive metaphysical theory in the sense that the theory may imply or suggest that knowledge of the world is impossible. And it is surely true that a metaphysical view that implies or suggests this absurd conclusion is problematic (at least) on the count that it conflicts with our common sense commitment that we know many things about the world. However, this is not what I have in mind by "*the* problem of the external world." I want to reserve *that* label here for the traditional problem (exemplified in Descartes' *Meditations*) that results from reflection upon our most ordinary ideas about the nature, source, and content of knowledge.

[6] Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 57.

[7]Ibid, 57.

[8]Ibid, 57.

[9] Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 2-3.

[10]Notice that this constraint on justification is extremely weak. It says merely that if a given knowledge claim is to count as a genuine item of knowledge, it must be possible to rule out challenges that show the evidence for the claim to be so inadequate as to provide *no reason at all* for thinking that the claim is more likely to be true than false. Although in ordinary life we rarely (if ever) encounter a justification for a knowledge claim that is so woefully inadequate, when we do encounter one (if we ever do) then it is certain, I think, that we would immediately point out that it is open to an obvious challenge that reveals its inadequacy, and reject the claim out of hand as an item of knowledge. Thus, I avoid here the question of what our ordinary epistemic convictions and practices deem as "adequate" justification for a claim to knowledge in general. Since I believe that, despite Descartes' official pronouncements (which I discuss later) as to what constitutes "adequate" justification (e.g., "absolute certainty" and "indubitability") his assessment (or better, a genuine *sceptic's* assessment) of the various classes of putative knowledge can be seen as employing merely this extremely weak (and surely commonplace) criterion of justification, it is not necessary to attempt

to answer the thorny question of what constitutes our ordinary conception of "adequate justification" in general.

[11]This idea, I think, is central to what I referred to in the introduction (in connection with Ayer) as the "Common Sense View of the World." This view (which is essentially a form of naive form of Realism) includes such basic metaphysical convictions as that there exists a world of objects which have certain properties independently of any creature's perceptions of them, and so on. Descartes exploits this basic picture in his assessment of our putative knowledge about the world by raising a few considerations which, precisely because they are included in this picture, appear to undermine the basic conviction that sense-perception is an adequate ground for knowledge of the world.

[12]To claim that all of our beliefs and putative knowledge of the world ultimately depend upon the "information" delivered by the senses is to explicitly characterize their reports in terms of evidence — as our reasons or grounds for accepting them. This certainly appears to be an innocent and intuitive way of expressing the idea. However, we will have occasion to question, particularly when we discuss Wittgenstein's and Williams' responses to scepticism, just how intuitive this characterization really is.

[13]It should be recalled that the sceptical arguments that Descartes employs to show that we may be wrong about all of our beliefs and putative knowledge about the world are intended as an *attack* on the empiricist view that the senses are the primary source of such knowledge. Thus, for Descartes, the radical thesis (arrived at in the first *Mediation*) that the senses are wholly inadequate to ground knowledge of the world is merely the first stage of his ultimate goal to show that all worldly knowledge is ultimately grounded in reason. However, few (if any) believe that Descartes manages to show this, and his sceptical challenge remains unanswered. Thus (unfortunately) Descartes scepticism is a much more important element of his work than his proposed solution to it.

[14]Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 58.

[15]Ibid, 57.

[16]It should be noted in passing that some philosophers have claimed that we can afford to accept the sceptical verdict that *knowledge* of the world is impossible so long as "knowledge" is thought to require "absolute certainty." Such philosophers believe that although none of our beliefs about the world may ever satisfy this standard, they are still well justified and wholly rational. I have been arguing that this is a mistake, and that such philosophers seriously underestimate the scope of the dream (and other) sceptical argument(s). The upshot of the dream argument, as I have tried to show, is that sense-perception provides *no reason at all* for accepting that the "world" we

believe we experience even exists (let alone that it is the way it presents itself). It is this result that distinguishes the above (uninteresting) form of scepticism that concedes that we can get by with less than "absolute certainty" from *radical* scepticism about the external world. And notice that the criterion of justification that licenses this radical form of scepticism is, ironically, much weaker than that of absolute certainty — it states merely that it is necessary to rule out relevant challenges to knowledge claims that show we have no reason at all for thinking the claim more likely to be true than false.

Chapter 2

Moore's Theoretical Diagnosis of Scepticism About the External World

2.1 Puzzlement About Moore's Strategy

G.E. Moore is widely acclaimed as a philosopher whose work few have matched in terms of clarity, rigor, and painstaking attention to detail. Nevertheless commentators are almost unanimously baffled by one of the most central elements of his philosophy; namely, his concern to defend common sense propositions against such absurd philosophical conclusions as that knowledge of "material things" or the "external world" is impossible. The bewilderment does not reflect any lack of clarity in either Moore's explication of his intentions or the central claims of his defense — Moore is extremely clear about what he hopes to accomplish and how he goes about it. Rather, what has so puzzled commentators is how Moore could believe that to simply insist that common sense propositions are *known* to be true could possibly act as a plausible rejection of scepticism (and a "defense" of common sense). His response to the sceptic seems to be sheer dogmatism. Perplexity about Moore's anti-sceptical strategy has led some commentators to believe that it must be much more subtle than it appears, which, in turn, has given rise to a number of re-interpretations of it in an effort to render it plausible.

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I believe that the commentators who attempt to discover hidden subtleties in Moore's response to scepticism, as well as those who think the response as obvious as Moore seems to, share a mistaken conception of the *type* of strategy Moore offers. Both sets of commentators fail to see another possible interpretation of Moore's strategy — an interpretation that is suggested by Moore's overall view of philosophical inquiry. I believe that Moore's anti-sceptical strategy is best seen as a version of what I am calling theoretical diagnosis — the attempt to show that scepticism is not an "intuitive" problem by unearthing unwarranted theoretical assumptions in the sceptic's investigation of knowledge that, unless defensible (and defended), show that the sceptic has failed to make his case.

If Moore's strategy is seen as an attempt to shift the burden of proof back to the sceptic, his central claims need not be re-interpreted (as some commentators think) in order to explain how they could meet the requirements for a successful response to scepticism. Indeed, Moore's central claims can be taken at face value once his strategy is properly understood. Moreover, there is no longer any need to speculate, as other commentators do, as to why Moore offers such an obviously flawed response since it is not the one they identify. Although I believe that Moore's response to scepticism is much less subtle (and much more plausible) than some commentators think, Moore's diagnosis ultimately fails to silence the sceptic. I argue that the most that Moore attains is a temporary stand-off with the sceptic — a stand-off that plays out in favor of scepticism.

My interpretation of Moore's treatment of scepticism is developed in four parts. First I shall outline the central claims of Moore's response to scepticism about the external world as they are presented in "A Defense of Common Sense." I will then examine briefly some of the most influential interpretations of Moore's response, and show that they all rest upon the same (but, I think, mistaken) identification of his aims. Next, I shall show that once his anti-sceptical strategy is understood as a version of theoretical diagnosis, Moore can be cleared of the charge of dogmatism, and his central claims can be taken at face value. Finally, I assess Moore's response to scepticism.

2.2 A Defense of Common Sense?

In the opening sentence of "A Defense of Common Sense," Moore announces that the central task of the article is to merely state how his "philosophical position differs from positions that have been taken up by some other philosophers."[1] This pronouncement is already suggestive of the puzzlement many encounter upon completion of the paper. How could any mere outline of how one's position differs from other positions amount, as seems promised in the title of the paper, to a *defense* of anything? Unfortunately, one's sense of bewilderment is only deepened as the paper progresses. It is clear that Moore is primarily concerned to voice his disapproval of various forms of scepticism, and for most of the paper, Moore *is* solely concerned to explain how and why he disagrees with these views without offering, or so it would seem, any arguments in support of his own views. Although he does offer a few explicit criticisms of the sceptical views he discusses, they seem to be so easily

dismissed that one cannot help feeling mystified about how Moore could believe they would silence his opponent.

Moore begins by depicting his position in the following list of propositions that he eventually characterizes as the "Common Sense View of the World." The list includes:

> There exists at present a living human body, which is *my* body. This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has continued to exist ever since...Ever since it was born, it has been either in contact with or not far from the surface of the earth; and, at every moment since it was born, there have also existed many other things having shape and size in three dimensions...from which it has been at *various distances*.[2]

Moore continues with what he regards as a different class of propositions:

> I am a human being, and I have, at different times since my body was born, had many different experiences, of each of many different kinds: e.g., I have often perceived my own body and other things which formed part of its environment, including other human bodies; I have not only perceived things of this kind, but have also observed facts about them, such as, for instance, the fact which I am now observing, that that mantelpiece is nearer to my body than that bookcase.[3]

Moore makes it evident that he has been mindful to include a variety of different types of particular propositions so that, collectively, his list implies the reality or existence of entities denoted by the concepts "space," "time," "material objects," and "self." Philosophical sceptics, of course, have denied the possibility of knowledge and reasonable belief concerning any proposition that asserts or implies the existence of one or more of these entities. Moore explains that the chief difference between his position and such sceptical positions is that he knows, with certainty, that all of the propositions

on his list are wholly true, and hence, he knows that the entities whose existence is implied by these propositions do in fact exist.

Clearly, if Moore does know such propositions to be true, then any position that denies knowledge of them must be false. Hence, one would expect that Moore would attempt to show *how* he knows them, or minimally, that he would attempt to *argue* that the position that denies knowledge of them is mistaken. Instead, Moore simply *states* that, in his "opinion," sceptical views are false because each of the propositions outlined in the list is known (by Moore) to be true. Moore adds that he thinks he also knows that many others besides himself know (with certainty) propositions that correspond to Moore's first-person assertions (e.g., others know that they have a body, and so on).

It is not difficult to see why so many have been baffled by Moore's answer to these various forms of scepticism. Surely, if Moore is concerned to *defend* the propositions of common sense against the sceptical denial of them, it would seem that he will have to do more than merely offer his "opinion" about their epistemological status. If he is to persuade anyone that he knows the propositions on his list, Moore must (at the very least) address the considerations and reasoning that lead to the sceptical denial of them, and then try to show how and why they are mistaken.

At one point (almost in passing) Moore discusses what he takes to be the absurd consequences that result from the denial of knowledge of a given class of propositions. This is the closest Moore comes to explicitly addressing the various forms of scepticism

he disagrees with. But the type of objection Moore advances against these denials seems so weak that one suspects that he either misunderstands or deliberately ignores the nature and force of them. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this is Moore's objection to the denial of knowledge of propositions that assert or imply the existence of "other-selves." According to Moore, such a denial commits the philosopher to the contradictory claim that: "There have been many human beings besides myself, and none of them (including myself) has ever known of the existence of other human beings."[4] Clearly, a sceptic about other-selves who articulated his position in such a transparently contradictory way should blush at Moore's reminder that his view is inconsistent. But (and one would think that Moore must be aware of this) few sceptics are so careless.

A careful sceptic about other selves could better state his position as follows: "Although it certainly seems to me that there have been many other selves besides myself, philosophical analysis seems to reveal that the grounds for my belief are inadequate. Hence, it appears I do not *know* that there are any other selves. If there are other-selves, and their epistemic position is like mine, then none of them know of the existence of other selves either." This statement of the sceptical position, unlike Moore's, makes no claim to the actual existence of others, and hence escapes the charge of inconsistency. The most that Moore has shown is that philosophers might articulate their views in a sloppy way.[5]

Since Moore's claim that this (and by implication) other forms of scepticism cannot be framed without contradiction seems to be his sole criticism of such views, it seems fair to conclude that he offers no compelling reasons for thinking that such views are false or otherwise defective. Thus, given the weakness of these criticisms, and the lack of any additional reasons to reject scepticism, Moore's attempt to defend knowledge of common sense propositions against the sceptic's denial that they are (or can be) known would appear to be totally unsuccessful. Strangely, Moore seems to acknowledge as much and concede that he has nothing more to say in support of his position:

> But do I really *know* all the propositions [on the list] to be true? Isn't it possible that I merely believe them? Or know them to be highly probable? In answer to this question, I think I have nothing better to say than that it seems to me that I *do* know them, with certainty.[6]

It seems that Moore rests against scepticism by merely affirming what the sceptic denies. And so, again, it is not difficult to see why many find Moore's response to the sceptic so bewildering. Moore's "defense" of common sense seems to so flagrantly beg the question that it has inspired some readers to insist that the real point of the paper must lie elsewhere.

Convinced that Moore was too shrewd to simply beg the question against the sceptic, many commentators have attempted to show that the true force of his response turns on a subtle view of the relation between the particular (or "concrete") propositions Moore claims to know, and the general propositions held by the philosophers he disagrees with. Norman Malcolm,[7] Alice Ambrose,[8] and other

"ordinary language" philosophers have suggested that Moore was attempting to show that it is a "misuse of language" to claim that knowledge of propositions about material objects or the external world (or other selves, past times, and so on) is impossible. On this view, Moore's claims to knowledge are understood as reminders of the "correct" application of language: Moore refutes the sceptic by pointing out the proper use of the expression "know for certain."

Largely in response to difficulties in squaring this account with what Moore actually says he is doing (and indeed, in light of his subsequent disavowal of the "ordinary language" interpretation of his defense),[9] more recent commentators are prepared to take his defense at face value, and confront head on the impression that as an argument it is a non sequitur. Stroud argues that Moore simply failed to see the "external" nature of sceptical challenges to knowledge, and thus mistakenly believed that the sceptic could be refuted in the same way that "internal" or everyday, garden variety claims to knowledge are settled.[10] A more charitable explanation of why Moore thought he could simply beg the sceptic's question is provided by Marie McGinn. McGinn suggests that in claiming to know the propositions on his list, Moore is exploiting the fact that the sceptic's position is totally unbelievable and certainly unlivable. McGinn sees Moore as resting his case against the sceptic by pointing out the absurd consequences of his position — Moore, in effect, is telling the sceptic to get lost, and he hopes to persuade his readers to join him in this dismissive attitude.[11]

Although commentators differ on whether or not Moore's response to scepticism is dogmatic, all of them agree that, in one way or another, he is attempting to offer a straightforward *refutation* of the sceptic's view of our epistemic credentials — they interpret Moore's response as an attempt to show that sceptical views are *false*. Those who see Moore's rebuttal as sheer dogmatism believe, of course, that Moore's defense is unsuccessful: one cannot refute the sceptic by merely affirming what he denies. And this is why other commentators are led to speculate about Moore's "real" refutation of scepticism.

It is certainly understandable that all of these commentators read Moore as attempting to show the falsity of the various forms of scepticism he addresses. For it seems obvious that the proper way to deal with views that contradict one's own is to show how and why they are mistaken. But it is also surprising, given Moore's remarks about the nature of philosophical inquiry, that a different interpretation has not suggested itself to these commentators. Moore's work is permeated with the view that the central, methodologically basic task of philosophy is the "analysis" of the Common Sense View of the World. I suggest that this metaphilosophical view is relevant to Moore's treatment of scepticism. My contention is that once Moore's metaphilosophical views are taken into account, one can see his defense as essentially negative or deflationary — as a version of theoretical diagnosis.

2.3 Moore's Delflationism

That Moore's response to the sceptic may be a version of theoretical diagnosis is suggested by the final section of "A Defense of Common Sense." Moore writes:

> As I have explained ... I am not at all sceptical as to the *truth* of such propositions as "the earth has existed for many years past," "Many human bodies have each lived for many years upon it," i.e., propositions which assert the existence of material things: on the contrary, I hold that we all know, with certainty, many such propositions to be true. But I am very sceptical as to what, in certain respects, the correct analysis of such propositions is. And this is a matter as to which I think I differ from many philosophers. Many seem to hold that there is no doubt at all as to their *analysis*, nor, therefore, as to the analysis of the proposition "Material things have existed," in certain respects in which I hold the analysis of the propositions in question is extremely doubtful; and some of them, as we have seen, while holding that there is no doubt as to their *analysis*, seem to have doubted whether any such propositions are *true*. I, on the other hand, while holding that there is no doubt whatever that many such propositions are wholly true, hold also that no philosopher, hitherto, has succeeded in suggesting an analysis of them, as regards certain important points, which comes anywhere near to being certainly true.[12]

Although Moore does not explain what he means by "analysis" in the above passage, it is apparent from the subsequent discussion that it involves an attempt to explicate what it is *to know*, including what it is *that* we know — i.e., the content or "object" of knowledge — in knowing a general common sense proposition like "Material objects exist" to be true. That this is what Moore has in mind by "analysis" is evident from his description of a possible analysis of the particular proposition "This is a hand."[13] A possible (partial) analysis of this proposition, according to Moore, involves:

> that whenever I know...such a proposition to be true, there is always some *sense-datum* about which the proposition in question is a

proposition — some sense-datum which is a subject (and, in a certain sense, the principal or ultimate subject) of the proposition in question.[14]

Hence, for Moore, the analysis of propositions asserting the existence of material objects (and by extension, the analysis of the general proposition "Material objects exist") involves philosophical inquiry into, and ultimately, a philosophical theory of, knowledge of material objects.

Moore believes that the basic philosophical task involves the elucidation of knowledge of the entities (e.g., material objects, selves, space, and time) the existence of which is implied by such propositions as are on his list, and he seems to hold that such common sense propositions function as the primary data of philosophical inquiry in at least two ways. First, philosophical investigations (analyses) must start with our everyday (or pre-theoretical) view of the world. The second, and much more important, sense in which the propositions of common sense are primary for Moore, I believe, is that scepticism (and its rejection) *depends upon* the correct analysis of them. Moore suggests that what makes the sceptical conclusion possible in a given area is a quite particular analysis of the relevant class of propositions, and according to Moore, all such analyses are (in his view) "extremely doubtful."[15]

In one part of his sketch about how his view differs from other views, I believe that Moore exposes what he thinks is an unwarranted assumption in the sceptic's analysis of propositions that assert or imply the existence of material objects or the external world. Although he offers only a very brief (and vague) description of the sceptic's analysis, it seems clear that he believes it involves the thesis that we do not

know of the existence of material objects *directly*. And it certainly seems that Moore is

right about this. As we saw in the last chapter, the upshot of the dream argument is that

we are only directly aware of how the world appears to us, and this seems to be

equivalent to the idea that (in Moore's jargon) all we directly know are (internal)

"representations" of the world or of "external" (including "material") objects.

Recall that this view results from the following considerations. First, the sceptic

articulates the (non-controversial) notion that our putative knowledge of material

objects is in some sense obtained by means of the senses. Upon initial assessment of the

adequacy of the senses as a ground for knowledge, he notices that they are sometimes

deceptive. But realizing that occasional fallibility does not license a general dismissal of

the senses as a ground for knowledge of the world, the sceptic isolates what appears to

be the best possible type of case for knowledge based upon what he sees, feels, and so

on; namely some proposition describing the objects (e.g., a dressing gown, a fire, a

piece of paper, etc.,) in his immediate perceptual field.

At this point, the sceptic introduces a ground for doubting the reliability of his

senses even in this best possible type of case (e.g., the possibility that he is merely

dreaming that he is in the presence of a dressing gown, fire, and so on). Finally, the

sceptic discovers that there is no non-circular way of ruling out this hypothesis, and

hence, that it is quite possible that he is mistaken about this representative case for

knowing anything about material objects. Thus, the sceptic concludes that the evidence

of the senses is wholly inadequate for knowledge and even reasonable belief about

material objects, since on the basis of this evidence, he has no reason for thinking it more likely to be true than false that they even exist.

Clearly, the fatal stage of the sceptic's analysis of what it is (or would be) to know material objects occurs when he considers the dreaming hypothesis as a ground for doubting the reliability of the senses as the basis for his knowledge of them. It is the apparent impossibility of ruling out this hypothesis that licenses a general rejection of the senses as an adequate ground for knowledge of the world, but it appears the impossibility of ruling out the hypothesis hinges on the assumption that all worldly knowledge must be derived or inferred from the evidence of internal representations. Although Moore never directly attacks (in the paper under consideration) this part of the sceptic's analysis, I think he implicitly challenges the reasoning that leads to it.

Considering the proposition "This is a hand," Moore says:

> Two things only seem to me to be quite certain ... namely that whenever I know, or judge, such a proposition to be true, (1) there is some *sense-datum* about which the proposition in question is a proposition — some sense-datum which is a subject (and, in a certain sense, the principal or ultimate subject) of the proposition in question, and (2) that, nevertheless, *what* I am knowing or judging to be true about this sense-datum is not (in general) that it is *itself* a hand, or a dog, or the sun, etc., as the case may be...In other words, to put my view in terms of the phrase 'theory of representative perception,' I hold it to be quite certain that I do not *directly* perceive *my hand*; and that when I am said (as I may be correctly said) to 'perceive' it ... I perceive ... something that is *representative* of it.[16]

Although in this passage Moore seems to buy the idea of internal representations and perceptual knowledge as inferences from them, he is careful to stress that it is an open question whether the "sense-datum" is identical with part (of the surface) of his hand or

not. The reason why Moore claims that he must be aware of a "representation" of his hand (and not the hand itself) is that he does not perceive his *whole* hand, but only a part of the surface of the hand. To claim that he is aware only of representations in *this* sense, Moore does not commit himself to the view that all worldly knowledge is based upon internal representations.

Moore tries to elucidate his concept of sense-data in the following passage:

> Things *of the sort* ... of which this thing is, which he sees when looking at his hand, and with regard to which he can understand how some philosophers should have supposed it to *be* the part of the surface of his hand which he is seeing, while others have supposed that it can't be, are what I mean by 'sense-data.' I therefore define the term in such a way that it is an *open question* whether the sense-datum which I now see in looking at my hand and which is a sense-datum of my hand is or is not identical with that part of its surface which I am now actually seeing. [My Italics][17]

The reason why, I believe, Moore does not take a stand upon whether sense-data are identical with parts of the surfaces of material objects or internal representations is that this cannot be determined merely by attending to what is "present to consciousness" when we know or judge that "This is a hand." I believe it is too often taken for granted, both by sceptics and non-sceptics, that what is directly known in perception is *always* a mind-dependent representation of an "external" object. This assumption, as Moore suggests, cannot be justified on purely phenomenological grounds — by merely examining what is presented to consciousness when perceiving an object. Further considerations are needed to determine whether the direct objects of perception are internal representations.

But isn't the dream hypothesis such a consideration? The dreaming consideration vividly illustrates the truism that we sometimes seem to perceive material objects even when there is no "external" object there to be perceived. Does this not establish that sense-data cannot be identical with parts of material objects? Not necessarily. It might be argued that the dream hypothesis shows only that *some* of the sense-data we directly perceive are not identical with parts of material objects, and that such phenomena as dreams and other error possibilities (e.g., hallucinations) provide evidence that usually the sense-datum is identical with part of a material object since it is only possible to make the distinction between "directly" perceiving an object and perceiving a "representation" of an object by detecting cases of error where the object is absent.

It is not my intention to pursue this line of argument here. I mention it only to illustrate that the dream consideration does not necessarily settle the issue of whether our epistemic relationship to the world is invariably (internally) representational, and hence, that Moore appears to be right that the correct analysis of this relationship remains an open question. I suggest that Moore's response to the sceptic trades on precisely this point. In effect, Moore is claiming that since the sceptical conclusion depends crucially on one of a number of possible analyses of our epistemic relationship with the world, and the sceptic seems to simply *assume* that the (internal) representational analysis is true, we need not accept his absurd conclusion unless he provides further reasons for accepting this particular analysis.

Thus, when Moore lists off philosophically contentious propositions that he claims he knows, he is not merely reaffirming what the sceptic denies, nor is he attempting to refute the sceptic at all. The propositions on Moore's list are carefully chosen to reveal his conception of the proper starting point of philosophical inquiry. Moore then points out that the sceptic's conclusions are only possible on a particular analysis of such propositions that the sceptic has not established. Thus, Moore is attempting to shift the burden of proof back to the sceptic: he is pleading innocence on behalf of common sense until it is proven guilty. For Moore, dealing with the sceptic does not require that he attempt to reconcile the absurd sceptical conclusion to common sense by somehow showing that he *does* know the propositions the sceptic's denies. Moore seems to hold that there is a *prima facie* assumption in favor of our common sense view that we do know these propositions, and thus, since it is the sceptic who sees fit to challenge them, it is then up to *him* to show that Moore *does not* know the propositions on his list by defending the contentious assumption Moore has exposed. We can see then why Moore steadfastly maintains that he knows all the propositions the sceptic claims he does not know, and why he does not feel compelled to say anything more in favor of his position — he believes that does not *need* to defend his view since the sceptic has failed to undermine it.

Understood as a version of theoretical diagnosis — as an attempt to shift the burden of proof back to the sceptic — Moore's anti-sceptical strategy is much more plausible than it is usually given credit for being. For such a deflationary strategy, if

successful, manages to reclaim our common sense conviction that we know many things about the world without dogmatism and without itself invoking contentious theoretical considerations (such as some distinction delineating "correct" from "incorrect" uses of "I know," as on Malcolm's interpretation). Unfortunately, I do not think that Moore's diagnosis is successful. Moore may manage to temporarily silence the sceptic, but there are at least two related (and, I think, insurmountable) problems with Moore's response to the sceptic as it stands.

2.4 Assessment of Moore's Diagnosis of Scepticism

The first problem is that Moore's admission that the epistemic status of common sense propositions is affected by their analysis, and that it is an open question whether the (internal) representational or direct (realist) analysis is correct, plays right into the sceptic's hands. Although the sceptic has not established the representational view, Moore provides no support for direct realism. Instead he claims that both views face "grave objections," and suggests that neither account is provably correct. The sceptic will now claim that if direct realism is true, we will know that material objects exist, whereas if the representational account is correct, we won't. But if neither view can be established, although we may in fact know that material objects exist, we will never know that we do: scepticism arises at the second-order.

The most Moore has established is that the sceptic's theory of perceptual knowledge is not inevitable. But the sceptic can afford this so long as Moore concedes that both views are on equal footing, and that the *epistemic status* of common sense

propositions — whether or not they genuinely amount to *knowledge* — *depends upon* which view is correct.[18] This standoff is decidedly in the sceptic's favor since to admit that it is a completely open question whether direct realism or the sceptic's view is correct is to admit that we simply don't know whether common sense propositions really amount to knowledge: the epistemic status of such first-order propositions is wholly underdetermined by their theoretical interpretation. The sceptic could hardly ask for more.

One way that Moore could prevent this predicament would be to argue for direct realism. Then there would be something to speak for the view that common sense propositions amount to knowledge (other than the fact that the alternative denies this), and Moore could demand that the sceptic demonstrate that such propositions are really not known. But in the absence of any positive reason for thinking direct realism is true, the sceptic can insist that Moore provide a reason for thinking they are known: the ball is back in Moore's court.

This last point about the absence of positive reasons for thinking that direct realism is correct ties into the other major problem with Moore's response to the sceptic. For it seems that, properly understood, the dream argument places a permanent impediment to establishing that we *ever* directly perceive, and hence know, the world. Recall that the force of Descartes' dream argument trades on the inability to distinguish veridical from non-veridical sense-perceptions. If this is understood as the difference between knowing objects directly while awake, and knowing representations of objects

while dreaming, the reason that it is impossible to distinguish between the two cases is that in both we apparently see, feel, hear, etc., objects in our immediate surroundings. Since this is the only evidence to which we can appeal to distinguish between directly knowing the world and knowing representations of it, we cannot, without circularity, appeal to it.

Does this show that our epistemic relationship with the world is invariably representational? No, we *may* — perhaps even most of the time — experience the world directly, but this seems to be something that can never be established based upon what appears to be the only evidence available. In effect, this is just a reiteration of the point made earlier that we cannot decide the correct analysis of what it is to know material objects based upon what is "presented to consciousness" when we perceive them, but notice that this consideration plays out in the sceptic's favor. I agree with Moore that we cannot, on the basis of this consideration alone, conclude that our epistemic relationship to the world is invariably representational, but neither can we conclude that it is *ever* direct. Thus, Moore is surely right that the sceptic should not assume the former thesis, but this does not amount to shifting the onus to prove the view back to the sceptic, rather, once the implications of the dream argument are brought to the fore, it shows that the sceptic does not *need* the view at all for her conclusion to go through.

Thus, since Moore's diagnosis of scepticism about the external world culminates in a stand-off concerning the correct analysis of propositions that assert or imply the

existence of material objects, and it appears that either the sceptic emerges as the victor by default, so to speak, or it is up to Moore to establish what appears to be (as Moore admits) a view that cannot be proven, we must, I think, conclude that the diagnosis is a failure. That Moore fails to shift the burden of proof to the sceptic, and indeed, is required to advance and defend direct realism for his response to the sceptic to be effective, illustrates one of the ways (described in the introduction) that deflationary strategies fail to remain purely negative. I turn now to the major representative of therapeutic deflationism.

NOTES

[1] G.E. Moore, "A Defense of Common Sense," in G.E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), 32. (Hereafter cited as *Defense.*)

[2] *Defense*, 33.

[3] *Defense*, 33.

[4] *Defense*, 43.

[5] One might argue that Moore has much more in mind when he charges the sceptic with inconsistency. Indeed, Moore's charges might be interpreted as pointing to either a very *general* "theoretical" inconsistency or possibly to a form of "pragmatic" inconsistency. The former charge might be articulated as follows: the sceptic holds an inconsistent total belief set since he believes (outside of the study, at least) that we know many things about the world, other-selves, and so on, and he *also* believes (while in the study) that no one knows anything about the world, other-selves, and so on. Hence, since Moore's total view is self-consistent and the sceptic's is not, Moore has the dialectical advantage over the latter. It certainly seems plausible to think that Moore may have had some such criticism in mind, and hence, the charge of inconsistency is perhaps much stronger than merely pointing out the sceptic might articulate particular sceptical conclusions in a sloppy way. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the criticism still fails since I think it is *false* that a philosopher impressed by sceptical arguments really holds *both* beliefs.

It strikes me that the majority of such philosophers do *not* hold that knowledge of the world, other-selves, and so on, is impossible. That is to say that there are very few (if any) *genuine* sceptics. In a sense, the unnamed soul I have been referring to as "the sceptic" is a fiction that represents a *challenge* — a challenge embodied in the considerations and reasoning that leads to the absurd conclusion — to knowledge in a given domain. As I have stressed, for most philosophers who take scepticism seriously, the absurd conclusion represents a *problem* that compels her to somehow reconcile the conclusion with common sense.

Alternatively, if there are any genuine sceptics — people who sincerely believe that we do not and cannot know anything about the world or other-selves, etc., — it seems to me, as I mentioned earlier, that they would simply deem the common sense belief that we know such things as false and irrational. Thus, this interpretation of Moore's charge fails since it is doubtful that anyone holds (or at any rate, it is not necessary that anyone need hold) both the belief that we know many things about the world and the belief that we do not.

However, perhaps this is still not the end of the matter. On the assumption that the alternative view just discussed is a real possibility — i.e., that someone somewhere really holds that knowledge of the world is impossible and that our common sense belief that we do is false — is it not true that he is guilty of a pragmatic inconsistency? Perhaps Moore's charge is intended to highlight the obvious fact that the person who

really believes that knowledge of the world is impossible, nevertheless continues to eat, drink, play backgammon or tennis, visit with friends, walk the dog, and hosts of other activities that show that he certainly *acts* as if he knows many things about the external world, other-selves, and so on, since these activities presuppose the existence of these entities. But to point out that the sceptic acts as though he knows that such entities exist does not address, let alone refute, his reasons for accepting the sceptical conclusion. At most, such a criticism shows the sceptic to be something of a hypocrite, but not that his view is false or that the reasoning that leads to it is erroneous. Thus, if Moore's charge is intended to convict the sceptic of pragmatic inconsistency, it fails since it is a mere Ad Hominem attack — it commits the fallacy that is sometimes called "Tu Quoque." As such, the criticism is simply irrelevant to the sceptic's *arguments* for holding his position.

[6]*Defense*, 44

[7]Norman Malcolm, "Moore and Ordinary Language," in P.A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore* (New York: Tudor, 1952), 345-68.

[8]Alice Ambrose, "Moore's 'Proof of an External World'," in P.A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore* (New York: Tudor, 1952), 395-417.

[9]G.E. Moore, "A Reply to My Critic's," in P.A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore* (New York: Tudor, 1952), 660-77.

[10]Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 83-127. Stroud's distinction between "external" and "internal" challenges to knowledge is taken from Carnap. An external challenge is made from a "detached" perspective and calls into question all knowledge within a specified domain, whereas an internal challenge issues from *within* a given domain, and calls into question specific knowledge claims that can be met by appeal to other items in the domain.

[11]Marie McGinn, *Sense and Certainty* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 40-53.

[12]*Defense*, 53.

[13]Moore claims that the analysis of specific propositions asserting the existence of material objects, selves, and so on, is the key to understanding the correct analysis of general propositions such as "Material objects exist" which describe the Common Sense View of the World.

[14]*Defense*, 54.

[15]Some Commentators – e.g. Lynd Forguson, in *Common Sense* (London: Routledge, 1989), 128-156 – claim that, for Moore, an analysis of a common sense proposition has no bearing on its truth value or epistemic status. But this would suggest that Moore believed sceptical denials of such propositions are arbitrary: something, for some inexplicable reason, the sceptic just *says*. I believe that Moore was well aware of the sceptical implications of certain analyses of common sense propositions, and indeed, that his defense of these propositions turns on the realization that scepticism depends upon such analyses.

[16]*Defense*, 54-5.

[17]*Defense*, 54-5.

[18]I mentioned earlier that Moore seems to hold that there is a prima facie assumption in favor of the view that common sense propositions are known to be true, and so it might be thought that Moore's defense of them might be merely that of pitting the relative certainty of his conviction that they are known against his certainty of any analysis of them. But, of course, Moore's "certainty" here would be merely the ordinary, common sense certainty — the subjective feeling of "being sure" that knowledge of the world is possible — that *all* of us share *pre-theoretically*. Thus, if this were Moore's defense, it would suggest that Moore did not think that the philosophical investigation of common sense propositions — the "objective" analysis of them (in particular, the analysis of *how* they are known) could in any way affect the determination of whether or not such propositions are indeed (as an objective truth about human beings) known to be true. That is, this would seem to commit Moore to holding that the truth and epistemic status of common sense propositions can in no way be affected by the results of analysis.

I must say that I find this implausible. I believe it is much more plausible to think that Moore holds that the results of philosophy — the results of analysing common sense propositions — does affect, indeed, *determine*, their epistemic status, which is why I have offered this (admittedly unorthodox) interpretation of his defense. If Moore really believed that the analysis of how common sense propositions are known had nothing at all to do with their truth and epistemic status, then it would not only render puzzling just what Moore thought the *point* of such an analysis was, but it would also seem to either commit him (as I suggest in note 15) to the extremely odd (and, I think, unlikely) position of having no idea why the sceptic holds his absurd view (since it is clear that to understand why the sceptic holds his absurd view is just to understand the upshot of his analysis, upon which the conclusion *depends*, of how we would know common sense propositions). Alternatively, if Moore held that the analysis of them *does* affect their epistemic status, but nevertheless continued to insist that he is more certain that he knows them than he is of any analysis of them, it would be extremely difficult to avoid seeing Moore's defense (once again) as dogmatic since he would then be simply insisting that he knows these propositions even in the face of an analysis of them that clearly *implies* that we do not.

Chapter 3

Wittgenstein's Therapeutic Diagnosis of Scepticism About the External World

3.1 The Nature of Wittgenstein's Strategy

The upshot of my discussion of Moore's treatment of scepticism about the external world was that it is unsuccessful whether it is interpreted straightforwardly — as simple counter-assertion to the sceptic's conclusion — or as a deflationary attempt to shift the burden of proof onto the sceptic. Interpreted straightforwardly, Moore fails to even address the considerations and arguments leading to the sceptical conclusion, while on the deflationary interpretation, Moore at best attains a stand-off with the sceptic at the level of first-order theories of knowledge. And the sceptic, I argued, will always win a tie of this sort.

Wittgenstein devotes a great deal of attention to Moore's rejection of scepticism in *On Certainty*: more attention, in fact, than to any other philosopher's views he ever discussed. Wittgenstein interprets Moore's strategy straightforwardly, and thus believes Moore's rejection of scepticism is unsuccessful. Nevertheless, he thinks that the propositions which Moore asserts to counter the sceptic are of enormous importance in providing an adequate diagnosis and refutation of scepticism.

Wittgenstein believes that Moore and the sceptic accept a confused picture of the

relations between such propositions and our epistemic practices — a picture that confers an appearance of intelligibility to both the sceptic's attempt to attack and Moore's attempt to defend their epistemic status. Careful investigation of our ordinary epistemic practices reveals, according to Wittgenstein, that the sceptic's denial and Moore's insistence that these propositions are known to be true are both unintelligible.

Wittgenstein's treatment of scepticism is thus much more ambitious than any strategy that attempts to show (like Moore on the deflationary interpretation) that the case for scepticism is less than compelling. Wittgenstein aims at a thorough dissolution of scepticism by showing that it is a pseudo-problem that only appears to undermine our knowledge of the external world.[1] Indeed, if Wittgenstein's diagnosis of the confusion endemic to the picture which leads to scepticism is correct, it pinpoints why Moore's attempt to shift the burden of proof fails (although it seems not to have occurred to Wittgenstein that this may be Moore's defence). Much like Hume and the New Sceptics, Wittgenstein holds that it is very natural to accept the considerations that lead to scepticism. But however natural, to accept these considerations is to buy into a tangle of conceptual disorder which corrupts any attempt *within* this picture to effect a successful rebuttal of scepticism. Although Wittgenstein agrees with Moore that the sceptic's denial of knowledge of the world is absurd, and that there is no question of our entitlement to common sense propositions, Moore's misconception of their relation to our epistemic practices renders ineffectual his use of them to either refute or shift the burden of proof onto the sceptic.

Thus, the advantage Wittgenstein's "therapeutic" deflationism has over any strategy which concedes the intelligibility (but perhaps not the force) of the considerations that lead to scepticism is that there is no longer any room for the sceptic to manoeuvre when confronted with concerns about the details of his case. If scepticism is shown to be unintelligible there is no latitude for such further debate, and no question of the sceptic winning any ties. Moreover, revealing that the sceptical assessment of our epistemic situation is the result of conceptual confusion would seem to be equivalent to showing that common sense propositions were never really in jeopardy, and hence, our unqualified entitlement to them is fully reinstated.

The greatest disadvantage, or at least the greatest obstacle such a strategy faces, however, is to establish the *prima facie* implausible claim that scepticism is *unintelligible*. As the New Sceptics repeatedly emphasise, we find the sceptical reasoning "immediately gripping," and its conclusion to be the result of a perfectly comprehensible project of assessing large categories of putative knowledge: the sceptic's project certainly seems to be fully intelligible. In fact, some philosophers have gone so far as to assert that our sense that the sceptic's project is fully intelligible is enough to refute any view which claims that it is not.[2] Although such dogmatism settles nothing, it does perhaps accent a requirement that any credible therapeutic diagnosis of scepticism must satisfy. If the considerations raised to show the unintelligibility of scepticism are to carry any lasting conviction, it would seem they should be at least as intuitively gripping as the apparent platitudes that lead to scepticism. Our sense that

scepticism is fully intelligible will always trump any conclusion that it is not if the latter is based on contentious theoretical considerations.

Wittgenstein's diagnosis of scepticism involves a number of considerations about the employment of such epistemic concepts as "doubt," "knowledge," "justification," "evidence," "error," and so on, which culminates in the view that the attempt to apply these concepts to common sense or "Moore-type"[3] propositions results in "nonsense." For Wittgenstein, Moore-type propositions represent the limits of the meaningful application of such concepts, and I detect two strands of thought in *On Certainty* that attempt to establish this view. I will argue that neither of these strands successfully establishes the thesis, and that these different lines of reasoning are evidence of a fatal tension in Wittgenstein's therapeutic approach to scepticism. To anticipate, I will show that one of Wittgenstein's attempts to establish the thesis is dogmatic, but in keeping with the methodological constraint that therapeutic diagnosis should be purely descriptive. The other attempt avoids the dogmatism of the first, but violates this constraint by grounding the thesis in a positive theory of Moore-type propositions — a theory, moreover, which is far more contentious than the sceptic's conception of these propositions.

3.2 The New Method

Moore records that during the series of lectures upon his return to Cambridge, Wittgenstein announced that he had discovered "a new method" of doing philosophy — a method that resembles traditional philosophising only in such formal features as the

generality of its results and their independence from those of science.[4] Moore notes that

Wittgenstein never systematically explained the "new method," but offered hints as to

its nature. It is worth citing Moore's chronicle of these hints at length since most of

them are echoed throughout Wittgenstein's later work. Moore indicates that the new

method:

> consisted in 'something like putting in order our notions as to what can
> be said about the world', and [Wittgenstein] compared this to the tidying
> up of a room where you can move the same object several times before
> you can get the room really tidy. He said also that we were 'in a muddle
> about things', which we had to try to clear up; that we had to follow a
> certain instinct which leads us to ask certain questions, though we don't
> even understand what these questions mean; that our asking them results
> from 'a vague mental uneasiness', like that which leads children to ask
> 'Why?' and that can only be cured 'either by showing that a particular
> question is not permitted, or by answering it'. He also said that he was
> not trying to teach us any new facts: that he would only tell us trivial
> things — 'things which we all know already'; but that the difficult thing
> was to get a 'synopsis' of many trivialities...finally...he held that though
> the new method must say a great deal about language, it was only
> necessary for it to deal with those points about language which have led,
> or are likely to lead, to definite philosophical puzzles or errors.[5]

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein reiterates the theme that traditional

philosophical questions and problems are the result of muddles about the workings of

the concepts that comprise them, and that the new method aims to put these notions in

order — not by educing any new facts, but by simply re-arranging the "trivialities" that

we already know. The goal is to provide a "perspicuous representation" of the proper

functioning of such concepts, and thereby expose the confusions of the traditional

problems. The following two sets of remarks from the *Investigations* exemplify

Wittgenstein's views about the character and source of traditional philosophical

problems, and the new "therapeutic" method for handling them. Regarding the source

and nature of philosophical perplexity, Wittgenstein claims:

> A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words.— Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity.[6]

> The problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language have the character of *depth*. They are deep disquietudes; their roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language and their significance is as great as the importance of our language.[7]

> A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside of it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it for us inexorably.[8]

> A philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about."[9]

And "curing" such perplexity involves:

> ...looking at the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to recognise those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.[10]

> When philosophers use a word—"knowledge," "being," "object," "I," "proposition," "name"— and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself, is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?—What *we* do is bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.[11]

> The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance to us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things.[12]

> The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose.[13]

> And we cannot advance any kind of theory. There must be nothing hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And that

description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems.[14]

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.—Since everything is open to view there is nothing to explain.[15]

Thus, for Wittgenstein, the muddle of traditional philosophical problems stems from the deep, but systematically misleading, patterns of conceptual employment in our various linguistic practices or "language-games."[16]

The new method (or what Wittgenstein refers to as "philosophy" in the second set of remarks) attempts to provide a *purely descriptive* account of the patterns (the "grammar") governing our ordinary linguistic practices which, as Wittgenstein indicates in §116, partly involves comparing how philosophers attempt to use such concepts as "knowledge," "object," and so on, with their ordinary usage. The idea, presumably, is that clarifying the grammar governing our ordinary employment of these concepts will simultaneously expose the confusion of the philosophical employment of them. Thus, according to Wittgenstein, traditional philosophers go astray by violating the grammar of our ordinary linguistic practices: they overstep the boundaries of the meaningful employment of certain concepts.[17]

If the methodological and metaphilosophical considerations I have attributed to Wittgenstein are correct, it is evident why he insists that his investigations should be purely descriptive. Since their point is to expose how and why traditional philosophical problems are pseudo-problems, the investigations must not trade in contentious philosophical speculation themselves. Attempts to solve philosophical problems by

advancing positive theories or explanations are infected with the same disease that generated the problem in the first place. Thus a methodological constraint of Wittgenstein's therapeutic diagnoses is that they remain wholly deflationary: philosophical problems cannot be straightforwardly solved, rather they must be "dissolved" by focusing on platitudes concerning our ordinary language-games, and thereby showing how traditional philosophy violates them.

3.3 Pure Description and our Ordinary Epistemic Practices

One line of thought in *On Certainty* attempts to establish the view that Moore-type propositions represent the limits of the intelligible use of epistemic concepts while observing the deflationary constraint just described. Wittgenstein continuously draws our attention to how such concepts as "doubt," "knowledge," "mistake," "evidence," and the like function in ordinary linguistic practices, and what emerges is an outline of the "grammar" or "logic" of (what I will call) the epistemic language-game.[18] Some of the considerations Wittgenstein advances certainly qualify as platitudes; indeed many of them are truisms that the New Sceptics believe are central to sceptical reasoning. For instance, in criticising Moore's dogmatic response to scepticism, Wittgenstein reminds us of the following features of our ordinary concept of knowledge:

> "There is a hand there" follows from the proposition "He knows that there's a hand there." But from his utterance "I know..." it doesn't follow that he does know it.[19]

> It needs to be *shewn* that no mistake was possible. Giving the assurance "I know" doesn't suffice. For it is after all only an assurance that I can't be making a mistake, and it needs to be *objectively* established that I am not making a mistake about *that*.[20]

Clearly, Wittgenstein agrees with the sceptic that to simply insist that one possesses

knowledge in the face of considerations purporting to show that one might be mistaken

is unsatisfactory.

Although Wittgenstein accepts the sceptic's view that our ordinary concept of

knowledge requires ruling out the possibility of error, he disagrees that this

requirement, aside from very special cases, applies to Moore-type propositions. The

grammar of our ordinary usage of such concepts as "doubt," "knowledge," "mistake,"

"justification" and so on, exhibits certain conditions of our epistemic language-game

which are not, and cannot, be fulfilled when Moore and the sceptic attempt to apply

them to propositions such as "Here is a hand."

In the following remarks, Wittgenstein illustrates one essential condition of our

ordinary practice of advancing and challenging knowledge claims that neither Moore

nor the sceptic satisfies:

> If e.g., someone says "I don't know if there's a hand there" he might be
> told "Look closer".— This possibility of satisfying oneself is part of the
> language-game. It is one of its essential features.[21]

> If I don't know whether someone has two hands (say, whether they have
> been amputated or not) I shall believe his assurance that he has two
> hands, if he is trustworthy. And if he says he *knows* it, that can only
> signify to me that he has been able to make sure, and hence that his arms
> are e.g., not still concealed by coverings and bandages, etc., etc. My
> believing the trustworthy man stems from my admitting that it is possible
> for him to make sure. But someone who says that perhaps there are no
> physical objects makes no such admission.[22]

Clearly, when Moore claims to know and the sceptic claims to doubt the proposition

"Here is a hand," the issue between them has nothing to do with circumstances such as,

e.g., trying to determine whether what one sees in bad lighting is a hand, or whether

one's hands have been amputated. Rather, the dispute between them concerns the

epistemic status of *any* proposition that asserts or implies the existence of physical

objects: whether knowledge of an objective world is possible at *all*. For Moore and the

sceptic, the proposition "Here is a hand," when uttered by someone in normal

circumstances (e.g., when the lighting is good, etc.,) represents the best possible type

of case for knowledge of the existence of physical objects precisely because ordinary

sources of potential error are lacking. But, Wittgenstein suggests, because the

proposition "Here is a hand" is envisioned as a place-holder for knowledge of physical

objects (or the external world) in general, a requirement of our ordinary epistemic

practices — the requirement of adducing evidence to justify a claim to knowledge or to

settle a doubt — cannot be fulfilled.

Wittgenstein's view appears to be that there is no evidence in the offing which

could settle the issue of whether one knows of the existence of physical objects, and the

debate between Moore and the sceptic is unintelligible (partly) for that reason. Only in

circumstances where it possible to "make sure" or "satisfy oneself" does it make sense

to apply epistemic concepts to Moore-type propositions such as "Here is a hand."

Wittgenstein alludes to such constraints in the following remark:

> For suppose you were guiding a blind man's hand, and as you were
> guiding it along yours you said "this is my hand"; if he then said "are
> you sure?" or "do you know it is?", it would take very special
> circumstances for that to make sense.[23]

I want to postpone further discussion of the suggestion that the issue between Moore

and the sceptic is "nonsense" since the condition of "making sure" cannot be satisfied

until another related aspect of the grammar of our epistemic language-game has been

examined.

Immediately following the observation that the epistemic language-game

includes the proviso that evidence be available to establish a claim to knowledge or

remove a doubt, Wittgenstein details a related requirement of our doubting practices,

and suggests how the sceptic (or "idealist") violates it:

> The idealist's question would be something like:
>
> "What right have I not to doubt the existence of my hands?" (And to that
> the answer can't be: I *know* that they exist.) But someone who asks such
> a question is overlooking the fact that a doubt about existence only works
> in a language-game. Hence, that we should first have to ask: what would
> such a doubt be like?, and don't understand this straight off.[24]

Indeed, according to Wittgenstein, we will never come to understand the *sceptic's*

"doubt" since we can't imagine what it would be like to think we might be wrong about

the existence of our hands, except, again, in very special circumstances. Wittgenstein

suggests that in normal circumstances, the sceptic's doubt about whether one knows the

proposition "Here is a hand" is somehow "outside" all language-games: it is not based

on some specific *ground* such as waking up from a coma and finding one's arms

covered in bandages, which, again, could be settled by removing the wrappings.

Thus, a genuine ground for doubting a proposition, according to Wittgenstein,

requires not only specification of how one might be mistaken about the matter in

question, but also that it should be possible in principle to determine whether the error

possibility is realised or not. Wittgenstein expresses this point by considering our

response to Moore if he were to try to doubt the proposition "Here is a hand":

> We should not understand him if he were to say "Of course I may be
> wrong about this." We should ask "What is it like to make such a
> mistake as that?"— e.g., what's it like to discover that it was a
> mistake?[25]

The expected answer to both questions, of course, is "nothing." Just as the grammar of

"know" requires that it be possible to provide evidence — to "make sure" — that one

is not in error about a given proposition, the grammar of "doubt" requires that it be

possible to determine that one *is* in error if the doubt is to be intelligible. The sceptic's

doubt about our knowledge of the existence of physical objects, Wittgenstein is

suggesting, precludes the possibility of ever detecting that we are in error, and hence it

violates the grammar of our ordinary epistemic language-game.

The upshot of these (and related) considerations about how our ordinary

epistemic practices function is that Moore and the sceptic are under the illusion that it

makes sense to treat Moore-type propositions as stand-ins for entire classes of putative

knowledge. In the absence of a special context (such as the amputation case) it is

nonsense to claim to either know or doubt a proposition like "Here is a hand" since

certain crucial conditions governing our use of epistemic concepts cannot be satisfied.

Thus, it seems to follow that such propositions represent the limits of the application of

the concepts of doubt and knowledge, and hence, that the debate about whether or not

knowledge of the world in general is possible is a pseudo-problem. Of course

"knowledge of the world" is possible, so long as the phrase is understood to mean that we can point to many specific examples of propositions where *genuine* possibilities of error — genuine *doubts* — have been ruled out.

3.4 Unhelpful Reminders

Let us grant that Wittgenstein has assembled a number of truisms about how the concepts of doubt and knowledge actually function in our ordinary language-game. Wittgenstein often gives the impression that these reminders are enough to convict the sceptic (and Moore) of unintelligibility, and it seems that they should be enough if we are to take seriously his view that the new method in philosophy should confine itself to simply describing the workings of our ordinary linguistic practices. But it is difficult to see how these reminders alone show that scepticism is nonsense. Indeed, as I will try to show, to conclude that Moore-type propositions represent the limits of the intelligible application of epistemic concepts on the basis of these considerations alone is not only presumptuous, but also presupposes a firm comprehension of Moore's and the sceptic's use of these concepts.

Moreover, as should by now be evident, this descriptive attempt to establish that our epistemic concepts do not apply to Moore-type propositions leaves the status of these propositions unspecified and mysterious. For we are told that in normal circumstances it is senseless to try to doubt such propositions, yet, it is also senseless to say we *know* them. This suggests that normally Moore-type propositions lie somewhere outside our ordinary epistemic language-game, and this makes it difficult to see how an

account of their status could *itself* be intelligible if philosophy is to confine itself to mere description of the language-game. I will take up each of these points in turn.

Wittgenstein claims that it is unintelligible to attempt to apply the concepts of doubt and knowledge to a proposition such as "Here is hand" on the grounds that outside of some special (everyday) context, there is no evidence we can appeal to which would confirm or disconfirm it. And clearly, Wittgenstein is right that we do advance evidence to support a claim to knowledge or settle a doubt in ordinary life. But, one might ask, what justification is there for the view that the constraints observed in ordinary life establish the limits of the intelligible application of epistemic concepts? So far as I can see, this thesis does not fall out of the descriptive elements examined thus far, and hence, it seems to be either a brute assumption or perhaps a tacit appeal to a theory of meaning.[26] Thus, it appears that Wittgenstein deems the "philosophical" application of epistemic concepts to be nonsense either by fiat, or by potentially violating a methodological constraint to therapeutic diagnosis (by appealing to a philosophical theory). But even supposing that this thesis was a truism that could be read off our ordinary linguistic practices, is it true that Moore's and the sceptic's use of "knowledge" and "doubt" are *unintelligible?*[27]

Ironically, it appears that Wittgenstein's criticisms of the philosophical use of epistemic concepts are themselves intelligible only on the assumption that the sceptical project and Moore's response to it are fully intelligible as well. Wittgenstein claims that because it is *impossible* in normal circumstances to "make sure" or discover that one is

in error about the proposition "Here is a hand," it does not make sense to either doubt or claim to know it. But how has Wittgenstein arrived at the view that there is no evidence to appeal to which could establish whether such a proposition is true or not? The obvious answer is that he is acquainted with the sceptic's claim that the only possible evidence that we could appeal to decide the matter; namely, the sight, smell, touch, and so on, of someone's hand is perfectly compatible with dreaming that one is seeing, touching, etc., one's hand when there is no hand present at all. In other words, it seems the only reason anyone would claim that in normal circumstances it is *impossible* to make sure or to discover that one is mistaken about whether or not there is a hand (or a foot, chair, or any other physical object) in one's presence is that he or she has fully grasped and accepted the sceptic's arguments that appear to undermine the only possible evidence for deciding the issue.

I believe Wittgenstein reveals that he is influenced by such sceptical considerations in the following two remarks:

> If I say that "I have two hands", and that is not supposed to express just my subjective certainty, I must be able to satisfy myself that I am right. But I can't do that, for my having two hands is not less certain before I looked at them than afterwards.[28]

> 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.[29]

Of course, Wittgenstein intends these observations to illustrate that since in normal circumstances the sight of one's hands cannot establish whether one is right or wrong about their existence, to claim to know or doubt the matter is nonsense. But notice that

Wittgenstein explicitly identifies the sense of sight as the only evidential candidate for satisfying himself that he has two hands, and that the reason why the sight of his hands cannot be used as evidence for their existence is that such evidence is no more certain than his conviction that they exist. Why would anyone be inclined to accept this? Again, presumably because one is familiar with the sceptical considerations that purport to show that the sight of one's hands is not a reasonable ground for believing that they do exist: that such evidence is wholly compatible with the non-existence of one's hands. But if one has *accepted* the sceptic's reasons for thinking that it is possible that we are mistaken even about propositions such as "I have two hands," then it seems that to charge that the sceptic's use of the concept "doubt" is unintelligible is wholly gratuitous.

To see that (and how much) Wittgenstein's objections seem to be influenced by (and seemingly presuppose the intelligibility of) the considerations that lead to scepticism, consider the likely response to the claim that even in normal circumstances one cannot properly be said to know that e.g., "Here is a hand" by someone who really did not fully grasp the reasoning that leads to it. The likely response would be something along the lines of Dr. Johnson or Moore — something like "What gibberish! Of course I know there is a hand here, it's right in front of my eyes!" That is, the likely response *would* be an appeal to the sight, touch, etc., of one's hand: the last response one would expect from one who really did not fully understand the sceptic's argument would be something like, "What you say is unintelligible because genuine doubt and

knowledge requires that evidence be available which could settle the issue, but, in this case, you have *demonstrated* that no such evidence is available." Such a response is tantamount to saying "Although I understand why you say that I might be wrong about there being a hand here, that is, why you doubt the matter, your use of the concept 'doubt' is nevertheless unintelligible to me."

But perhaps this line of criticism is unfair, and misses Wittgenstein's point about how the concepts of doubt and knowledge function in our ordinary epistemic language. Again, assuming it were true that how we actually play the language-game sets the limit to how it can be meaningfully played, doesn't Wittgenstein have a point that the sceptic's use of "doubt" and Moore's use of "know" violate such conditions as "discovering error" and "making sure"? Perhaps Wittgenstein is suggesting that "evidence" which could never *in principle* establish whether or not we are right or wrong about a given matter is not really evidence at all. That is, perhaps Wittgenstein's reminders are intended to illustrate that it is a confusion to think of sensory experience as the ground for establishing the truth of such propositions as "Here is a hand."

But again, this thesis seems to not only presuppose that the sceptic's project is fully intelligible, but that his position is true! Recall that the sceptic's challenge turns on his identifying (like Wittgenstein) what appears to be the only ground for establishing the truth of a proposition like "I have two hands," and then arguing that this ground is not good enough to determine whether it is true or not. At this point, the sceptic has merely posed a challenge to knowledge of the external world that *might* be met by

trying to show that the ground is in fact good enough. Certainly, many philosophers have tried to show that sensory experience is a good enough ground for knowledge of the world by arguing either that the epistemological gap the sceptic opens up between our experience of the world and the world itself is only apparent (e.g., idealism *and* direct realism), or by providing some independent assurance that we can successfully bridge the gap (e.g., Descartes' appeal to God, or more recent attempts to show that the existence of the external world is the best explanation of the course of our sensory experiences). Thus, to claim that it is a confusion to think of sensory experience as evidence for knowledge of the world on the basis of its inability to justify our most basic convictions about the world assumes that the sceptic's challenge cannot be met (which, of course, presupposes that his challenge is intelligible).

Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the various attempts to meet the sceptic's challenge testify to the intelligibility of applying epistemic concepts to Moore-type propositions. For it appears that the conditions of "making sure" and "detecting error" *are* capable of being satisfied, at least in principle, on the basis of sensory experience. If, for instance, some form of idealism or direct realism were shown to be true, then it *would* be possible to satisfy ourselves that we have two hands by looking at them in normal circumstances. Thus, to apply the concepts of "doubt" and "knowledge" to Moore-type propositions does not violate the conditions of our ordinary epistemic practices: only if one concedes that the sceptic is right about the epistemic worth of the ground for our knowledge of the world can it be made to appear that it is

impossible to "make sure" that Moore-type propositions are either true or false.

The final problem with this "descriptive" strand in *On Certainty* is that it leaves the nature of Moore-type propositions mysterious. Wittgenstein's reminders are intended to show that it is nonsense to treat such propositions as "Here is a hand" as general representatives for knowledge of the world since the confirmation/disconfirmation conditions of ordinary epistemic practice cannot be met — such propositions can only be known or doubted *within* our ordinary language-games where these conditions are in place. Thus, Moore and the sceptic attempt to treat these propositions as though they were somehow outside our epistemic language-games. But as I have tried to show, the requirements of "making sure" and "discovering error" are in place in the debate between Moore and the sceptic (i.e., in their "higher order" language-game of whether knowledge of the external world is possible) and hence, their application of epistemic concepts is perfectly consistent with ordinary usage. Indeed, it is the view that (in normal circumstances) Moore-type propositions can be neither doubted nor *known* which appears to treat these propositions as somehow standing outside our epistemic language-games.

If it really did not make sense to apply epistemic concepts to the proposition "Here is a hand" except in extraordinary circumstances, then exactly what, we might ask, is the status and character of the proposition in "normal" circumstances? And would an account of its status and character itself be intelligible if it did not fall within a description of our ordinary epistemic language-game? If the new method is limited

solely to the description of our language-game, its results should be entirely negative: they can only reveal that certain conditions of the game cannot be met in the philosophical application of epistemic concepts to Moore-type propositions, and hence, that they cannot be known or doubted in normal circumstances. But then the nature of such propositions (in normal circumstances) and their relationship to our ordinary practices is mysterious.

Thus, although Wittgenstein's "descriptive" attempt to establish the view that Moore-type propositions represent the limits of the intelligible application of epistemic concepts (and thereby to show that the problem of the external world is a pseudo-issue) accords with the methodological constraint of therapeutic diagnosis, it is unsatisfactory on at least four counts. First, the general thesis buttressing the attempt — the thesis that the boundary between sense and nonsense is determined by how we use concepts in our ordinary language-games — is not supported.

Second, even on the assumption that the thesis is correct, Wittgenstein's account of how Moore and the sceptic overstep the boundaries of sense — i.e., how their attempts to apply epistemic concepts to Moore-type propositions fail to satisfy the requirements governing our epistemic practices — presupposes that how these concepts are applied to such propositions is fully intelligible.

Third, Wittgenstein's claim that Moore and the sceptic fail to satisfy the requirements governing our actual epistemic practices seems to go through only on the assumption that the sceptic's challenge to show how knowledge of the world can be

derived from sensory experience cannot be met. Since Wittgenstein seems to accept the sceptic's view that sensory experience cannot function as evidence to either justify or reveal that we are in error about a proposition such as "Here is a hand," the charge of unintelligibility seems gratuitous. The proper conclusion to draw from these considerations, it seems, is that knowledge of the world is impossible, or at least that if it is not impossible, we do not know why it is not.

Finally, even if Wittgenstein had successfully shown that it is unintelligible to apply epistemic concepts to Moore-type propositions in normal circumstances, the method of description appears to be without the resources to explain the nature of these propositions and their role in our epistemic practices.

3.5 The Nature and Role of Moore-type Propositions

The charge that Wittgenstein's descriptive attempt to convict Moore and the sceptic of unintelligibility is dogmatic derives its force from the assumption that propositions such as "Here is a hand" are empirical propositions based upon evidence that is incapable of establishing their truth or falsity. That is, I have interpreted Wittgenstein as holding that it is unintelligible to doubt or claim to know Moore-type propositions *because* the evidence for them is impotent to establish whether they are true or false. And I think that Wittgenstein's remarks about why the sight of his hands cannot function as evidence for Moore-type propositions (i.e., that the evidence is no more certain than the propositions themselves), only make sense if he is thinking of Moore-type propositions as empirical propositions based upon evidence.

However, the other strand in *On Certainty* suggests that this conception of Moore-type propositions misrepresents their nature and role in our epistemic language-game, and some of Wittgenstein's remarks express, albeit with some ambivalence, a radically different understanding of their nature and function. Thus, Wittgenstein seems to be willing, at least part of the time, to provide a *positive* account of the nature and role of Moore-type propositions (in normal circumstances) which appears to offer a non-dogmatic explanation as to why the attempt to apply epistemic concepts to them is nonsensical.

Unfortunately, the positive remarks about Moore-type propositions do not appear to be descriptive "reminders" about how our ordinary epistemic practices function. Indeed, as I have tried to show, it is difficult to see how a positive view or theory could (or indeed, *should*) result by adhering to the constraints of therapeutic diagnosis, and I will argue that the most that can be said about Wittgenstein's descriptive reminders is that they pave the way for a positive philosophical account of Moore-type propositions. Moreover, Wittgenstein's account of Moore-type propositions is intuitively much more implausible than Moore's and the sceptic's conception of them. Thus, I will try to show that Wittgenstein's account not only violates the constraints of therapeutic diagnosis by providing a positive philosophical theory of Moore-type propositions, but it requires a revision of our ordinary understanding of them. Finally, that Wittgenstein's account is revisionist suggests that it is an *ad hoc* attempt to get around the dogmatism of the descriptive strand, and this again shows that

Wittgenstein finds the sceptic's picture to be fully intelligible — at least enough to know where to tinker with it to avoid unjustly charging the sceptic with trading in nonsense.

Obviously, the debate between Moore and the sceptic takes for granted that propositions such as "Here is a hand" are properly understood as empirical — as propositions that are either true or false depending upon how things happen to be in the objective world, and which are determined to either accord with the way things are or not by assessing the evidence in support them. Clearly, this assumption is behind the sceptic's characterisation of Moore-type propositions as the best possible candidates for knowing how things objectively are. Wittgenstein suggests that it is a mistake to think of Moore-type propositions as empirical propositions that are based upon evidence, and which are capable of being true or false.

Where the sceptic assigns Moore-type propositions the role of deciding the fate of all empirical knowledge, Wittgenstein sometimes sees their role as descriptive of a basic "world-picture" that underlies, and indeed makes possible, all of our linguistic practices (epistemic and otherwise). Wittgenstein's characterisation of Moore-type propositions is scattered throughout *On Certainty*, and it is apparent that he is ambivalent about committing to an unequivocal account of them. Nevertheless, I think that the following assemblage of remarks illustrates the most definitive features of his positive account:

> When Moore says he *knows* such and such, he is really enumerating a lot
> of empirical propositions which we affirm without special testing;

propositions, that is, which have a peculiar logical role in the system of empirical propositions.[30]

I should like to say: Moore does not *know* what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as also for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our *method* of doubt and enquiry.[31]

It may be for example that *all enquiry on our part* is set so as to exempt certain propositions from doubt, if they are ever formulated. They lie apart from the route travelled by enquiry.[32]

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such propositions as were not hardened but fluid.[33]

I have a world picture. Is it true or false? Above all it is the substratum of all my inquiring and asserting.[34]

I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.[35]

If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true*, nor yet false.[36]

The propositions describing this world picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically without learning any explicit rules.[37]

It is clear from these remarks that Wittgenstein envisions Moore-type propositions as forming a "system" which plays a foundational role in determining the course of all enquiry and assertion about how things are in the world. That is, these propositions represent a background picture of basic convictions which must be accepted (i.e., exempt from doubt) in order to engage in such epistemic practices as advancing, challenging, and justifying knowledge claims about the world. Thus, despite the

hedging about whether they are "empirical," Wittgenstein suggests that such

propositions as "Here is a hand," "The earth has existed for many years past," "I have

a body," and so on, are more properly characterised as "rules" or "methodological

necessities" that give life to our epistemic language-game, rather than as empirical

hypotheses about the world which may either agree or fail to agree with how things are

(depending upon the results of enquiry). As the background picture of reality against

which we distinguish between true and false, to enquire whether the propositions

constitutive of this picture are themselves true or false would appear to be logically

suspect.

Indeed, if Moore-type propositions do function like rules that dictate how our

epistemic practices can proceed, to attempt to apply any of our epistemic concepts to

them does seem to result in nonsense. For instance, if facility with the concept of doubt

— knowing how and when to apply the concept of doubt — depends upon exempting

Moore-type propositions from doubt, to apply the concept to Moore-type propositions is

a violation of the very condition which makes our doubting practice possible. A

proposition such as "My hands exist" represents or defines what we *mean* by something

which we cannot be mistaken about, and hence to try to doubt such a proposition is, in

effect, to think we might be mistaken about what we mean by "thinking we might be

mistaken." Thus, with this alternative conception of Moore-type propositions,

Wittgenstein provides a reason for thinking that how we do apply epistemic concepts in

ordinary life determines the limits of how they can intelligibly be applied. Since our

basic picture of the world described by Moore-type propositions determines our facility

with epistemic concepts — what we mean by "doubt," "knowledge," and so on, in our

various language-games — how they can be meaningfully applied is limited within that

picture.

This conception of Moore-type propositions also casts the reminders discussed

earlier in a different light. For it now seems that the reason why the conditions of

"making sure" and "discovering error" cannot be satisfied (in normal circumstances) is

not that the only available evidence for them is inadequate to establish their truth;

rather, such conditions cannot be fulfilled because in normal circumstances, Moore-type

propositions are not properly thought of as true or false, or as based on evidence *at all*.

The concept of evidence cannot attach to propositions such as "Here is a hand" in

normal circumstances since it is functioning as part of the foundation that determines

our facility with the concept of evidence. Only in special circumstances where it is

possible to adduce reasons which might settle a doubt or establish a claim to knowledge

(such as the amputation case) does it make sense to apply the concept of evidence to

Moore-type propositions: in such cases these propositions *are* functioning as empirical

hypotheses. Wittgenstein illustrates the difference between the role of Moore-type

propositions in normal and extraordinary circumstances as follows: "the same

proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as

a rule of testing."[38]

In normal circumstances, then, it is a mistake to think of Moore-type

propositions as empirical hypotheses based on evidence, and hence, as either justified

or unjustified, true or false. Rather, such propositions function as end points in chains

of justification — that is, they are used as evidence for empirical claims, and hence,

illustrate what we mean e.g., by "providing reasons in support of a claim". Thus, for

Wittgenstein, it is nonsense to ask whether our reasons for accepting our world-picture

are adequate: there is no such thing as the reasons why we accept these propositions.

But neither is there any question of our entitlement to them: they are *our* picture of

reality. The debate between Moore and the sceptic about whether we know Moore type-

propositions is a pseudo-issue generated by a misrepresentation of how they inform our

epistemic language-game. Although it is unintelligible to claim we might be wrong

about Moore-type propositions, it is equally nonsensical to claim we know them.

Knowledge and doubt are possible only within our world-picture.

3.6 Inconsistency and Revision

This attempt to establish the thesis that Moore-type propositions represent the

limits of the intelligible application of epistemic concepts avoids the dogmatism of the

descriptive strand since it does not appear to presuppose that how the sceptic and

Moore apply these concepts to such propositions is intelligible. By offering an

alternative conception of the nature and role of these propositions, Wittgenstein is able

to show why the sceptic's attempt to doubt them misfires at the point in his

investigation where Moore-type propositions are isolated as putative knowledge claims.

Thus, the damage done after this point in the investigation is illusory — it only appears

to be intelligible. But if this strand in *On Certainty* manages to avoid the dogmatism of the first strand, it also seems to involve a positive philosophical theory about the nature and role of Moore-type propositions, and hence, would appear to certify itself as nonsense by violating the deflationary constraints of the therapeutic method.

But perhaps Wittgenstein's account of Moore-type propositions is merely a reflection of our epistemic practices. It is, after all, true that we do not doubt or provide evidence for propositions such as "I have two hands" in ordinary life, and indeed, that such propositions are appealed to (although rarely explicitly) in support of other propositions. It is also true that such propositions describe our ordinary picture of the world or reality, and that if we did not hold (I won't say *believe*) this picture we would not apply epistemic concepts in the way that we do. Moreover, if we take into account Wittgenstein's reminders about the conditions governing our use of epistemic concepts discussed earlier, it may be that his alternative conception of Moore-type propositions emerges without violating the constraints of the new method.

Recall that Wittgenstein's description of the grammar of our epistemic concepts revealed such conditions as that genuine doubt needs grounds, that genuine error possibilities can be detected, that genuine knowledge claims can be justified, and that genuine justification comes to an end. I think Wittgenstein is right that these conditions do illustrate (in part) what we mean by our epistemic concepts, and that these conditions can only be observed if something "stands fast" for us as the foundation for all our enquiry — for our practices of issuing, doubting, and justifying knowledge

claims about the world. And, clearly, in ordinary life, Moore-type propositions do function as the terminal point of doubt and justification.

But, of course, these reminders show only that we do not, as a *matter of fact*, ordinarily apply epistemic concepts to Moore-type propositions, and that we would not apply these concepts the way that we do if we did not accept these propositions. The sceptic can (and does) agree that in ordinary life we do not doubt or provide evidence for propositions such as "Here is a hand," and he can also agree that the concepts of "doubt," "evidence," and so on would not mean what they do if something did not stand fast for us. What the sceptic does not agree with is that our ordinary treatment of Moore-type propositions as beyond doubt and as terminal points in chains of justification provides any reason for thinking that they represent the limits of the meaningful application of these concepts. So far, this description of our ordinary practice says nothing about the coherence of applying the epistemic concepts (whose meaning we have mastered by allowing our world-picture to stand fast) to the propositions comprising the picture itself.

To show that we *cannot* (logically) apply these concepts to Moore-type propositions requires more than a description of how we happen to treat such propositions in ordinary life coupled with a genetic explanation of why these concepts mean what they do. What is required is a thesis to the effect that how we ordinarily use these concepts *necessarily* determines the limits of their meaningful application. And one might try to establish this by providing a conception of Moore-type propositions as

necessary principles or rules, or perhaps as "criteria,"[39] that delineate what we can and cannot mean by our epistemic concepts, thus showing that they are not properly thought of as propositions that we accept for reasons which may or may not be good enough to establish their truth. In short, it requires a *positive* philosophical theory of the nature and role of Moore-type propositions. Thus, it does seem that this attempt to convict Moore and the sceptic of unintelligibility does violate the constraints of therapeutic diagnosis, and should be condemned by Wittgenstein as falling prey to the same conceptual disease that it is meant to cure.

Just as with scepticism itself, I do not think that Wittgenstein's positive account of Moore-type propositions is nonsense or conceptually confused, but I do think it is implausible. Perhaps the most expedient way to assess Wittgenstein's account is to re-examine the initial steps in the sceptic's investigation. Recall that the sceptic's endeavour to assess all of our knowledge in general is motivated by the truism that we often claim to know something to be the case which turns out to be false or in want of adequate justification. In either case, there is a failure of knowledge, and once the failure is exposed, the claim to know is (or should be) withdrawn. Sufficiently impressed by this truism, he is led to examine whether anything he currently accepts as knowledge fails in either of the above ways. Obviously, without the benefit of hindsight (i.e., a determination that his beliefs are in fact false), he attends to the adequacy of the grounds for his putative knowledge. It is at this point that the sceptic (or epistemologist) partitions all of his putative knowledge into large classes, and singles out the "senses"

as the ground for one of these classes — the class of beliefs about the world around him. It is also at this point that the sceptic realises that although the "senses" sometimes deceive us, this reminder does not sustain a general rejection of their adequacy as a ground for knowledge of the world. Thus, he is led to consider cases that appear to be the best possible candidates for knowing something based on the senses; namely, those cases where he can rule out the standard causes of error. A case of putative knowledge such as that there is a hand in front of one, when it is based upon one's immediate awareness, and where standard causes of error such as bad lighting, inattention, and so on, have been ruled out, is one such example.

Clearly, the initial steps of the sceptic's investigation rest on truisms about our ordinary epistemic practices and concepts which Wittgenstein accepts (or could accept). The distortion, for Wittgenstein, occurs at the stage where the sceptic singles out propositions such as "Here is a hand" as the best possible candidates for knowledge of the world. The sceptic simply assumes that such a proposition functions as a factual claim about the world that is based upon evidence, and hence, that it makes sense to ask whether the evidence is good enough to show that it really is an item of knowledge. But how plausible is it to say that he *assumes* such a thing? Surely, if we accept the seemingly non-controversial claim that it is by virtue of the sense of sight, touch, smell, etc., that human animals come to believe anything at all about their environment, then it is equally non-controversial to think that we accept that we have (what we call) hands, feet, etc., *because* we see them, feel them, and so on. In other words, the

"assumption" that Moore-type propositions are factual claims about the world which are held on the basis of the evidence of the senses appears to be our ordinary conception of such propositions: ordinary in the sense of being merely *descriptive* of our perceptual relationship to the world. By merely describing our ordinary practices, the sceptic reveals that what we ordinarily treat as beyond doubt (i.e., what "stands fast" for us in daily life) is based upon sensory evidence which may or may not be good enough for knowledge. He reveals that what really "stands fast" for us is how the world appears to us on the basis of sensory experience. Whether the world is really that way is something that needs investigation.

Thus, if the sceptic's conception of Moore-type propositions as empirical claims about the way things objectively are is mistaken, it is a mistake about a platitude, and to correct it we cannot "leave everything as it is." That is, to arrive at a "proper" understanding of Moore-type propositions it seems necessary to revise our ordinary conception of them as factual claims about the world which we come to believe by virtue of our sense organs. But since Wittgenstein's account of Moore-type propositions does not result from a description of our epistemic practices, and indeed, requires a revision of our ordinary conception of them, the only thing that seems to speak in favour of the claim that the sceptic's conception of them is mistaken is that it is part of the view that leads to scepticism. And this, of course, is hardly a *criticism*: it just highlights part of the sceptic's view!

That this attempt to establish the thesis that Moore-type propositions represent

the limits of the meaningful application of epistemic concepts requires a positive theory of Moore-type propositions — a theory which not only violates the constraints of therapeutic diagnosis, but also requires the denial (and revision) of a platitude, should raise suspicions about the new method. The purely descriptive elements in *On Certainty* simply detail how our epistemic practices function, which in turn, discloses the conditions governing their meaningful application and the presuppositions that give life to their employment at all. However, these reminders alone do not establish that Moore and the sceptic's application of epistemic concepts is unintelligible; indeed, as I tried to show, the sceptic can accept Wittgenstein's description about how we come to have and use these concepts, and then go on to claim that his "philosophical" employment of them is totally consistent with their ordinary employment. To claim that it is not begs the question (and presupposes that their "philosophical" employment is intelligible). Thus, to convict Moore and the sceptic of speaking nonsense, Wittgenstein buttresses these remarks with a contentious theory of Moore-type propositions which neither follows from the descriptive elements, nor carries any conviction in its own right.[40]

I think that this reveals a deep tension in Wittgenstein's deflationary strategy against scepticism, which is captured by reversing "explanation" and "mere description" in his slogan "at some point one has to pass from explanation to mere description."[41] And the "explanation" in this case gets its life, I think, from a firm grasp of the problem of the external world. As I have stressed, many of Wittgenstein's remarks reflect that he is influenced (and indeed, persuaded) by the sceptic's

arguments, and I believe that the move from the description of our epistemic practices to the explanation of why Moore-type propositions represent the limits of doubt and knowledge is a function of this influence. Unfortunately, Wittgenstein's explanation invokes considerations that are far more contentious than the considerations that lead to scepticism.

NOTES

[1]Although Wittgenstein targets several other traditional forms of scepticism in *On Certainty* (e.g., scepticism about the past and future), the same type of considerations are raised to combat each of these forms. As my interest is scepticism about the external world, I will focus on those remarks directed at this form of scepticism, and I will use "scepticism" to refer solely to this form.

[2]For example, Thomas Nagel in *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), and Keith Lehrer in "Why Not Scepticism?" G.S. Pappas and M. Swain (eds). *Essays on Knowledge and Justification* (London: Cornell University Press, 1978).

[3]The expression "Moore-type propositions" is borrowed from Marie McGinn in *Sense and Certainty* (New York: Basil Blackwell , 1989). McGinn does not explain the rationale behind her choice of this label, and hence, I am not certain whether her reasons for preferring it to Moore's own label ("common sense propositions") are the same as my own. I prefer this label since Moore often uses "common sense propositions" to refer to either particular propositions such as "here is a hand" or general propositions such as "physical objects exist." Wittgenstein's focus is on the former, and "Moore-type propositions," used here to refer to them, disambiguates between Moore's two uses.

[4]G.E. Moore, "Wittgenstein's Lectures in 1930-33" in *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1959), 252-324.

[5]Ibid., 323

[6]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), §122. (Hereafter cited as *PI*)

[7]*PI*, §111.

[8]*PI*, §115.

[9]*PI*, §123.

[10]*PI*, §109.

[11]*PI*, §116.

[12]*PI*, §122.

[13]*PI*, §127.

[14]*PI*, §109.

[15]*PI*, §126.

[16]A "language-game," as I understand it, is an actual or imagined activity involving the use of concepts (or better, the words used to express them) to effect some end in particular contexts. Wittgenstein likens words to tools employed to perform a task (e.g., to explain or describe something), and to the extent that they successfully accomplish their task, the tools are said to be used correctly. Thus, the meaning of a word

or expression is a function of how it is used in a specific context, and hence, there is no *essential* meaning attached to a given concept. Nevertheless, there are recognizable patterns of conceptual employment within like contexts, and hence, not just any employment of a word or expression will be meaningful within the context (just as one can use a tool incorrectly in a given situation). That is, our various language-games are rule-governed, and only those moves in the game that accord with the rules or "grammar" will convey meaning.

[17]It should be evident that these remarks suggest that to display how such concepts actually *do* function in ordinary language-games is to display the limits of how they *can* intelligibly function. I believe this thesis underpins all of Wittgenstein's attacks on traditional philosophical problems, and part of my critique of his diagnosis of scepticism turns on how the thesis is established.

[18]No doubt it will strike some as misguided to see Wittgenstein as attempting to single out features of something called *the* epistemic language-game. As he points out time and again such concepts as "know" and "doubt" have many different uses, and hence, strictly speaking, there are many different epistemic language games. However, since Wittgenstein's diagnosis of scepticism focuses on a particular use of such concepts (which might be characterized as the "knowing that," "doubting that," "proving that" and so on, use) nothing important rides on designating this as the epistemic language game.

[19]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), §13. (Hereafter cited as *OC*).

[20]*OC*, §15.

[21]*OC*, §3.

[22]*OC*, §23.

[23]*OC*, §413.

[24]*OC*, §24.

[25]*OC*, §32.

[26]I believe this charge of dogmatism also applies to other influential therapeutic diagnoses of scepticism, in particular, those of Norman Malcolm, J.L. Austin, and Stanley Cavell. In "Moore and Ordinary Language" from P.A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore* (New York: 1952), Malcolm tends to insist, without argument, that our ordinary usage of such expressions as "know for certain" is "correct." Likewise, Austin in "Other Minds" from his *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) and Cavell in *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) emphasize various constraints implicit in our ordinary epistemic practices that the sceptic allegedly violates. But again, both Austin and Cavell simply assume that the constraints of ordinary practice represent the limits of intelligibility.

[27] One might perhaps argue that the idea that our ordinary employment of concepts (quite generally) determines the limits of their meaningful employment *can* be read off our ordinary practices by appealing to Wittgenstein's notion of "criteria." As I understand the notion, "criteria" refer to essential characteristics of a phenomenon that allow us to recognize and judge whether or not, in a given case, something is an instance of the phenomenon in question. Although Wittgenstein never explicitly invokes (or indeed, even mentions) the term in *On Certainty* — he employs the notion mostly in connection with the so-called "private language" argument in the *Investigations* to show that recognizing "inner" mental phenomena in others, such as pains, is subject to certain "outward," i.e., behavioral, criteria — one might argue that the notion is at work in the methodology in *On Certainty*. For instance, one might claim that in the case of epistemic phenomena, such as doubting, an essential feature — a criterion — of doubt, might be, e.g., that it must be possible to settle the doubt one way or the other if we are to be able to recognize and judge it as an instance of doubting. The observation, then, of such conditions as "making sure," "discovering error," and so on, might be thought to function as part of the criteria of our epistemic practices, and, as such, determine what we call and mean by, e.g., "doubt," "knowledge," and so on. Hence, one might argue further, that since it is possible to observe epistemic criteria only in our ordinary language-games, the meaningful employment of our epistemic concepts is limited to them, *and* that *this thesis itself* is something that can be seen from merely looking at and describing our ordinary linguistic practices.

My response to this suggestion is that neither of the assertions in the previous sentence is true. Firstly, it does not seem that this thesis is part of a *description* of our ordinary linguistic practices, but rather a "second-order" judgement or *explanation* about the nature of our practices — in particular, how our concepts come to have meaning at all — that may or may not be true. That is, the thesis that our practices are governed by "criteria" that furnish our concepts with their meanings is a positive theoretical thesis that is not *itself* part of our ordinary practices or language-games, and hence, is not something that can simply be described from them, whereas the description of the "criteria" that we appeal to (if the thesis is true) to recognize and judge whether something is a case of, e.g., doubting, might properly be said to be part of our ordinary practices, and hence, is something that is capable of being described. Hence, regardless of the plausibility of the thesis, as a philosophical reflection about the nature of our linguistic practices, it seems to violate a methodological constraint of therapeutic diagnosis. I'll have more to say about this general line of argument when I discuss the second strand in *On Certainty* to establish the claim that Moore-type propositions represent the limits of the meaningful application of epistemic concepts.

Secondly, on the supposition that the thesis that our ordinary epistemic practices

are governed by such criteria as "making sure," etc., is true, I argue in what follows that Moore's and the sceptic's use of epistemic concepts such as "doubt," "knowledge," and so on, fully accords with the criteria of these concepts — that the criteria for recognizing and judging whether or not something is, e.g., a case of genuine doubt, is capable, at least in principle, of being observed when epistemic concepts are applied to Moore-type propositions.

[28] *OC*, §245.

[29] *OC*, §250.

[30] *OC*, §136.

[31] *OC*, §151.

[32] *OC*, §88.

[33] *OC*, §96.

[34] *OC*, §162.

[35] *OC*, §94.

[36] *OC*, §205.

[37] *OC*, §95.

[38] *OC*, §98.

[39] It seems appropriate, given how I understand the notion, to see Wittgenstein's characterization of Moore-type propositions as "rules" as being akin to that of "criteria" (see note 27). Only here, Moore-type propositions (or more generally, the "world-picture") are (or rather, our acceptance of them is) criteria for engaging in our epistemic practices at all. However, as I argued earlier, the notion of "criteria" is a theoretical concept that cannot simply be read off of our practices, and so is of no help in establishing the thesis (at least in terms of avoiding a violation of the constraints of therapeutic diagnosis) that our ordinary employment of epistemic concepts sets the limits to their meaningful employment.

[40] Many commentators, such as G.H. von Wright, "Wittgenstein on Certainty" in *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, J. Canfield (ed.), (New York: Garland Publishing, 1986), P.F. Strawson, *Scepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), and, in particular, Marie McGinn, *Sense and Certainty* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), have interpreted Wittgenstein as putting forward a conception of Moore-type propositions as "rules" or methodological necessities that underpin and give life to our epistemic practices. However, none of these commentators even mention (let alone worry about) the apparent tension between Wittgenstein's avowed aim of dissolving philosophical puzzles through *mere* description of our epistemic language game and offering a philosophical theory of the nature of Moore-type propositions. Perhaps these commentators believe that Wittgenstein's remarks about Moore-type propositions reflect our ordinary conception of them

(although McGinn explicitly characterizes these remarks as an *alternative* conception) or perhaps they are not inclined to take Wittgenstein's methodological remarks very seriously. I believe that we must take Wittgenstein's methodological remarks seriously if we are to read *On Certainty* as an attempt to show that scepticism is a "pseudo-issue." Thus, since I also believe that Wittgenstein's account of Moore-type propositions does not reflect our ordinary conception of them, we must acknowledge the tension in Wittgenstein's diagnosis of scepticism. But even if we were to overlook this tension and see Wittgenstein as a fellow (traditional) philosopher trading in positive theories, it still appears (and this is something, to the best of my knowledge, no one has noticed) that Wittgenstein's account of Moore-type propositions is far less plausible than the sceptic's. Hence, we can, in good conscience, agree with philosophers like Nagel and Lehrer that our sense that we understand the sceptic trumps Wittgenstein's view that we do not understand him since, as I have tried to show, it is based upon a contentious theoretical view.

[41]*OC*, §189.

Chapter 4

Putnam's Diagnosis of Scepticism about the External World

4.1 Putnam's Aim

We have seen how Moore's theoretical diagnosis and Wittgenstein's therapeutic

diagnosis both fail as responses to scepticism about the external world, and that part of

the reason for this is that both fail (although in vastly different ways) to overcome the

major stumbling block to deflationism. Neither strategy succeeds in providing a purely

negative treatment of scepticism, and in both cases, this has a direct bearing upon their

success in showing how and why we are entitled to our common sense commitment that

we possess knowledge of the world. In his most recent work, Hilary Putnam attempts to

reclaim entitlement to the commitment that (as he puts it) our "knowledge claims are

responsible to reality," [1] and his strategy is expressly deflationary.

Like Moore and Wittgenstein, Putnam believes that the central impediment to

seeing how (and that) our knowledge claims are responsible to the world is the idea that

all such knowledge is (in Putnam's jargon) "mediated by" and must be derived (or

inferred) from the evidence of the senses (or "sense data"). Thus, Putnam (like the

others) believes that it is necessary to jettison the "traditional" view that, as he

describes it, "we must conceive of our sensory experiences as *intermediaries* between

ourselves and the world...[a view which] makes it impossible to see how we can be in

genuine cognitive contact with the world at all."[2] And Putnam believes that we must rid

ourselves of this picture (which, following him, I will refer to here as the "interface

picture") *without* replacing it with a *positive* philosophical account of our cognitive

relationship to the world. Putnam's strategy is plainly an attempt to avert the sort of

"disaster" he refers to in the following remark: "very often, the problem in philosophy

is that a philosopher who knows what he wants to deny feels that he cannot simply do

so, but must make a 'positive' statement; and the positive statement is frequently a

disaster."[3]

It is clear that Putnam sees his anti-sceptical strategy as a purely negative one,

but it is *not* clear precisely how his strategy supposedly averts "disaster" — in

particular, it is not obvious how the considerations he raises against the interface

picture effect the reclamation of our view that we know many things about the world,

without requiring him to articulate and defend a *positive* philosophical account of *how*

we know them. Putnam believes that his attack on the interface view yields "natural

realism," which he describes as the view that we are in "direct" cognitive (perceptual

and conceptual) contact with the world. But Putnam insists that this "direct" or

"natural" realism is not to be understood as an alternative *theory* of any sort, and

accordingly, he does not offer any explanation as to what, e.g., it means to be in direct

perceptual "contact" with the world.

4.2 Perplexity about Putnam's Approach

I am puzzled as to why Putnam thinks that "natural realism" is not to be understood as an alternative theory or (in Moore's jargon) an "analysis" of our perceptual relation to the world that accounts for how we know the things about it that the sceptic denies we know. Or rather, and more precisely, I am puzzled about what Putnam believes are the elements in his attack on the interface view that license the idea that natural realism is not to be understood as such a theory. One possible reason that Putnam does not believe that natural realism should be seen as an "account" of our perceptual relation to the world might be that he holds the view to just *be* our common sense or pre-theoretical view. However, I argue that if Putnam does hold this, he is simply mistaken.

I agree that in *some sense* our naive view is that we directly experience the world, but common sense is silent about what such a commitment amounts to — it is silent about the *details* of what e.g., it means to "directly" perceive an "object." Moreover, I do not think that Putnam can possibly hold this view since (as we shall see) he is willing at one point to sketch the bare bones of what such an account might eventually look like (although with the proviso that it not be understood as an alternative theory!).

Another explanation as to why Putnam holds that natural realism should not be understood as an alternative philosophical theory may be that he thinks he has "dissolved" (in the manner of Wittgenstein) the issue concerning the correct "analysis"

of our perceptual relationship to the world. At a number of points, Putnam suggests that

his attack on the interface view is intended as a version of *therapeutic* diagnosis. He

claims, for instance:

> The "natural realist account" urged upon us by Wittgenstein and Austin,
> is, in the end, not an "alternative...account"...winning through to natural
> realism is seeing the *needlessness* and *unintelligibility* of a picture that
> imposes an interface between ourselves and the world. It is a way of
> completing the task of philosophy, the task that John Wisdom once called
> the "journey from the familiar to the familiar."[4]

This certainly sounds like therapeutic diagnosis. The references to Wittgenstein and

Austin (and indeed Wisdom), as well as the claim that the interface picture is

unintelligible, suggest that Putnam may believe his attack on the interface view

somehow dissolves the considerations that underpin the problem of the external world

(i.e., the debate about the correct analysis of perception), and hence, that it exposes the

problem to be a mere "pseudo-issue." However, it is difficult to square this suggestion

with Putnam's actual attack — with his specific arguments against the interface view.

Hence, my puzzlement.

I suspect that Putnam *wants* the results of a Wittgensteinian "dissolution" of the

problem of the external world — a dissolution which shows that it is a confusion to

think that there is something left to explain once the distortions and "fantasies" of the

sceptic's interface picture have been exposed. If Putnam's diagnosis attained these

results, then it would allow him to "leave everything as it is" — it would provide the

rationale as to why natural realism need not be seen as alternative account, and also

exonerate him from providing the details of the account to show how and *that*

constitute our evidence from which we must somehow infer the existence and nature of such objects). Putnam claims (quite rightly) that the motivation for adopting this view is to be found in Descartes' dream argument. Putnam attributes to the defender of the interface view the following understanding of the dream argument. The phenomenon of dreams shows that when a person, say, Helen, dreams, e.g., that she is standing in front of the Taj Mahal:

> ...Helen is certainly experiencing *something*; what she is experiencing is certainly not the Taj Mahal (that is thousands of miles away) or indeed any physical object (her eyes are closed and the pillow is over her head); therefore what she is experiencing is something mental. So the immediate object of perception is, at least *some* of the time, something mental."[5]

Now if we envision a case of so-called veridical perception, e.g., when Helen is looking at the real Taj Mahal, the defender of the interface view would continue (Putnam claims) as follows:

> We agreed that what Helen was immediately experiencing when she dreamt was something mental...is it not implausible, to say the least, that things as different in nature as a physical building and a mental sense datum could seem exactly alike? Should we not conclude that, on the second occasion too, she was immediately perceiving sense data, mental entities, indeed sense data exactly like the ones she was aware of on the first occasion, but with the important difference that on the second occasion they were actually caused by...the Taj Mahal and on the first occasion they were not?[6]

Clearly, something like the above considerations have led many to adopt the view that we never experience the world directly, and it is also clear that such a view is undesirable since it seems to lead to scepticism about the external world, or as Putnam claims, "it makes it impossible to see how we can be in genuine cognitive contact with

the world at all." Putnam offers three related responses to this argument. I will list them here briefly and then comment on their nature and how they affect the issue of whether or not Putnam's alternative should be understood as a positive theory. I will then consider another possible interpretation of their aim and import and discuss the most important of these responses in detail.

Putnam's first full criticism of the argument (which he claims can be found in the work of both James and Austin)[7] is that if we are willing to admit that, in the case of dreams, what we immediately experience is something internal or mental, it is a straightforward fallacy to infer that the direct object of perception in a veridical experience must also be an internal "sense datum." Putnam claims:

> ...both James and Austin argue that, even if cases of dreaming...*were* perceptions of something nonphysical, and if the experience of someone who dreams *were* more or less exactly like a "veridical experience" of, say, Harvard's Memorial Hall (one of James's favorite examples), there is simply no argument that the object of the veridical experience cannot *be* Memorial Hall itself.[8]

Putnam's second response to the interface view is based upon the possible rejoinder (suggested within the initial argument for the view) that even though it may not follow (deductively) that sense data are invariably the direct objects of our perceptual experiences, it is plausible to posit such internal intermediaries between ourselves and the world to *explain* the similarities between veridical and non-veridical experiences (e.g., dreams). Putnam's rebuttal is that positing internal sense data to account for the similarities explains nothing:

The explanation starts with a familiar fact, the fact that when I am dreaming it seems to me as if I were seeing this or that, and offers an "explanation" in terms of utterly mysterious entities and processes — one that lacks all detail at just the crucial points, and possesses no testability whatsoever. Such an explanation would not even be considered *intelligible* in serious natural science. Of course, if the claim that "Helen had qualitatively identical sense data on the two occasions" is no more than philosophical newspeak for "It seemed to Helen when she dreamt as if she were seeing just what she later saw when she actually saw the Taj Mahal"...the claim is perfectly intelligible; but a mere statement of a fact in a special jargon cannot claim to be an *explanation* of that fact.[9]

Finally, Putnam's last objection to the interface view takes off from another consideration that is often advanced to adopt the theory. Russell, and several others, have argued that even in cases of "veridical" perception, it is obvious that the direct object of perception cannot be external objects themselves, since, for instance, when we look at a table, the properties that we naively take to reside "in" the table (e.g., its color) are not uniform:

Russell points to the fact that the shaded parts of a table have a different look from the parts that are in glare, and concludes that the colors we see when we look at the table cannot be properties of the table itself, but can only be dispositions to produce certain sense data.[10]

Putnam responds that the variances in the "looks" of things do not show that that it is necessary to posit *internal* sense data as the direct objects of perception to account for the disparities, and he stresses that it is certainly preferable not to given the sceptical consequences of the view. Instead, we could adopt a view in which colors (and other properties of objects) are seen as "irreducible (though relational) properties of things (properties that depend in ascertainable ways upon the way those things reflect light, the conditions under which they are viewed, etc.,)".[11]

These, then, are the three major considerations Putnam raises against the interface view. At this point, I do not wish to evaluate the strengths (or weaknesses) of these considerations as reasons for rejecting the view. Instead, I want to first examine these considerations in terms of the *type* of response to the sceptic they seem to comprise, and how they bear on the issue of whether or not "natural realism" is to be understood as a positive account that needs to be fully articulated and defended in order to answer the sceptic.

4.4 Therapy?

I must confess that if Putnam believes that these considerations constitute a therapeutic "dissolution" of the problem of the external world — that they somehow expose it to be "nonsense" — a mere "pseudo-issue" generated by conceptual confusion — I fail to see how they do so. Putnam's attack on the interface view, if successful, shows (at most) that 1) the defender of the view is guilty of a hasty generalization 2) that as an explanatory hypothesis the view is vacuous, and 3) that an alternative hypothesis is available and epistemically preferable. None of these considerations seem to show (or indeed, seem to be *intended* to show) that the view is unintelligible, or that it is a mistake or a confusion to attempt to provide a positive account of our perceptual relationship with the world (e.g., some version of the interface view *or* direct realism).

Granted, in his second objection to the interface view, Putnam claims that as an explanatory hypothesis of the similarities between what we take to be veridical and non-

veridical experiences, "sense data" would not be considered *intelligible* in "serious natural science." I think that Putnam overstates the matter by claiming that the hypothesis would be deemed unintelligible. Clearly, it is cases of so-called non-veridical experiences, such as dreams and hallucinations (in which we seem to see, hear, touch, etc., an object, e.g., the Taj Mahal) that prompt the theorist to posit sense data as the direct objects in all perceptual experience, but it is also clear, I think, that we are all familiar with (and certainly seem to refer meaningfully to) such "mental phenomena."

I think Putnam is right that to posit sense data as the direct object in experience on the basis of such phenomena results in a poor scientific explanation of why "veridical" and "non-veridical" experiences are alike. However, it seems to me (as Putnam suggests) that the reason this results in a poor explanation is not that the sense data hypothesis is unintelligible, but that the ontological character of the sense data — what they *are*, so to speak — is left completely undetermined and mysterious. Hence, their use as an *explanation* of the similarities between veridical and non-veridical perception is not nonsense, but *vacuous* — an appeal to a "something, we know not what."[12]

At any rate, and more importantly, even though I think we can grant that as an explanation of the similarities between "veridical" and "non-veridical" experience the sense-data hypothesis is vacuous, it seems that this is not the primary reason for adopting it. Indeed, the basic reason for accepting the interface view is not explanatory

at all, but rather, *descriptive*: the hypothesis is originally posited to capture one aspect

of our ordinary phenomenological experience; namely, that it sometimes *seems* to us

that we are perceiving an object (e.g., the Taj Mahal) when there is no such object

present at all. Whether or not we label such phenomena as cases of experiencing mere

"sense data" or something else is irrelevant to the point that in such cases we certainly

seem to experience something (indeed, something *mental*), and Putnam's objection to

the interface view as an explanatory hypothesis does not affect this consideration. Thus,

there still may be good reason for accepting it. Putnam's first objection to the view does

address this consideration, but I want to postpone discussion of that objection since I am

now concerned with characterizing the nature of Putnam's response.

Returning to the point at hand, it seems that Putnam has not shown that the

interface view is unintelligible. However, and this is the most important thing to notice

at this juncture, even if Putnam had succeeded in showing that the view is

unintelligible, this does not show that *any* explanation or analysis of our perceptual

relationship to the world — for instance, some view that claims we are in direct

cognitive contact with the world — will be unintelligible or confused (and still less does

it show that it is unintelligible to think of such an account as a *theory*). It seems to me

that to show anything of the sort, Putnam would need to subscribe to some general view

about the limits of intelligibility which *could* license the idea that any attempt to

articulate, for example, the nature of the "direct object" in various perceptual

situations, or to explain the relationship between the "direct object" and consciousness in these situations, is to overstep those limits.

But, of course, as we saw in the case of Wittgenstein's diagnosis of scepticism, to subscribe to a theoretical view about the limits of meaning is to subscribe to a *positive* philosophical thesis, and hence, is to betray the point of therapeutic deflationism. I think that Putnam may well be aware of the inconsistency involved in the appeal to some general theory of meaning to combat scepticism, and thus, wishing to remain purely deflationary, he demurs from any such appeal (which is why I claimed that Putnam may hope to attain the *results* of therapeutic diagnosis). Unfortunately, I do not see how one can make the case that offering a positive philosophical account of our perceptual relations with the world is unintelligible without (explicitly or implicitly) appealing to some view that delineates the meaningful from nonsense. Thus, if Putnam sees his strategy as a version of therapeutic diagnosis, I do not believe that he has the resources to avoid furnishing such an account — he offers no "therapeutic" reason for thinking that natural realism is not an alternative theory that needs to be articulated and defended.

4.5 Another Possibility

Of course, despite the therapeutic tone to some of Putnam's remarks, it may be that he does not see his strategy as an attempt to "dissolve" the problem of the external world by showing that it is a confusion to inquire about the correct analysis of our perceptual relations with the world. Indeed, perhaps the best evidence for this is his

willingness (in the third objection to the view) to sketch at least part of what might *eventually* constitute an account — and I must stress "eventually" since the above passage exhausts Putnam's description of his account — of what we are immediately aware of in experience (or at least in what we take to be *veridical* perceptual experience). The fact that Putnam offers at least this much of a sketch of his alternative seems to show that he does not think it is unintelligible to furnish a positive account, and it also seems to show that he does not believe that natural realism is a view that somehow speaks for itself from our pre-theoretical or common sense point of view.

I mentioned earlier that Putnam's insistence that natural realism not be seen as a competing account of perception might be buttressed by the thought that it just *is* our ordinary view. Thus, Putnam may believe that once the problems he detects with the interface view are presented, our common sense view — natural realism — is fully reclaimed. I also claimed that if Putnam does believe this, he is mistaken. It may be true that in some sense we naively accept the view that we "directly" experience the world. But I think it is clear that we do not hold this view *explicitly*. That is, in ordinary life we might be said to "accept," in *deed*, the view that what we see, hear, touch, and so on are "objects" e.g., books, telephones, footballs, and so on. But, of course, in ordinary life we never consider or articulate the view that we directly perceive or experience such things. And if such a consideration ever does occur to us, we have moved from our first order dealings with things — reading books, answering

telephones, etc., — to second order reflection *upon* our (implicit) first order commitment.

Thus, I believe that the move from the "engaged" perspective to questions and issues about e.g., what we directly perceive in various perceptual situations, is, for better or worse, to embark on a foray into the murky waters of philosophy. Given these considerations, I fail to see how Putnam's natural realism could be seen as anything but a positive philosophical alternative to the interface view — a positive theory that arises after a good deal of reflection upon our "ordinary" view (manifest in our dealings with objects) that we directly see, hear, touch, such things as books and telephones. If natural realism is our ordinary, common sense view, it is so only by virtue of this "practical" commitment. But while engaged in the ordinary, we never articulate this commitment, and common sense is wholly silent about the *details* of what this commitment *amounts* to and whether or not we are justified in "holding" it. Thus, I think Putnam is in error if he holds that natural realism speaks for itself from our common sense point of view.

Moreover, it seems that Putnam himself does not believe that natural realism is somehow obvious from the everyday point of view since, as we have seen, he is willing to sketch out the bare bones of a possible account of the direct object in so-called veridical perception. A claim to the effect that we should think of the "looks" of things (in cases of veridical perception) as "irreducible" but "relational" properties of objects

is certainly not an obvious common sense truism. What, then, should we make of Putnam's anti-sceptical strategy?

4.6 More Perplexity

It strikes me that the thrust of Putnam's attack on the interface picture that the sceptic (allegedly) holds is to show that the sceptic's view is *false*, or at least, not well-defended (a possibility I will return to shortly) and that natural realism is *true*. The first two objections Putnam levels at the view seem to be reasons for rejecting the view, and the third seems be a theoretical corrective to the view. In other words, taken at face value, Putnam's anti-sceptical strategy does not seem to be *deflationary* at all, but what I have been calling a "constructivist" strategy — a strategy where the critic first looks for errors in the considerations that license the sceptical conclusion, and then goes on to provide the positive theoretical corrective which shows how we do in fact know the things that the sceptic denies we know.

But if Putnam's strategy was really constructive, I think we would expect him to provide not only a *full* account of the nature of the "direct object" in veridical perception, but also *some* attempt to explain the character of non-veridical experiences such as cases of dreaming. I believe it is incumbent upon the constructivist to provide such an overall view since she sees herself as taking up the sceptic's challenge to not only isolate the erroneous considerations that lead to the absurd conclusion, but to also provide the corrective (in this case, the proper account or analysis of our perceptual

relations with the world) that shows how knowledge and reasonable belief about the world are indeed possible.

But instead of supplying the full details of such an account, Putnam, immediately after outlining how we might explain the variances of the "looks" of things (in the case of veridical perceptions) without positing internal sense data, goes on to state that to speak of his alternative as a competing "account" "concedes too much,"[13] and he then follows up with the claim cited earlier that we see our way "through to natural realism" by exposing the "needlessness and unintelligibility of a picture that imposes an interface between ourselves and the world." Thus, Putnam clearly does not see his strategy as constructive. But since we have seen no reason so far to think that he has "dissolved" the problem of the external world, or that natural realism is a view that speaks for itself, I am perplexed as to why Putnam believes that natural realism is not to be understood as a positive theory of perception. I am also puzzled about what he takes to be the elements in his strategy that license this claim and which exonerate him from providing the account.

4.7 A Final Possibility

I believe that there may be one final explanation as to why Putnam holds that he does not need to articulate and defend natural realism as a theoretical corrective to the interface view. It may be that Putnam is offering us a version of theoretical diagnosis — an attempt to expose some gratuitous assumptions within the considerations that lead to scepticism. Putnam's first objection to the interface view fits well with this

interpretation of his strategy; however, again, it is not without some puzzlement that one foists this reading of his approach upon him since it still does not explain why he thinks that natural realism is not to be understood as an alternative theory. Indeed, Putnam's first objection, as we shall see, is similar to the interpretation I offer of Moore's strategy, and I think that Moore shows us why natural realism must be treated as a theory. In addition, if Putnam intends his attack to be a version of theoretical diagnosis, then it rests solely upon this consideration, and this consideration is subject to some of the same problems we found with Moore's diagnosis.

Recall that Putnam's first objection to the interface view was that even if we grant that in cases of non-veridical experience, such as dreams, what we are immediately aware of is something "mental," it does not follow that in cases of veridical experience we are also aware of something mental. As Putnam puts it in his example of perceiving Memorial Hall, "there is simply no argument that the object of veridical experience cannot *be* Memorial Hall itself." This argument is very similar to the one I attributed to Moore in chapter two which states that the sceptic simply *assumes* that our perceptual relationship to the world is invariably "representational," and hence, that we need not accept his absurd conclusion without further defense of the view. Thus, Putnam, like Moore, may be charging the sceptic with having based his position on the gratuitous assumption that the interface picture is invariably the correct analysis of perceptual experience.

If Putnam's strategy is a version of theoretical diagnosis — an attempt to shift

the burden of proof back to the sceptic to show that our perceptual relationship to the

world is invariably "indirect" — I think that there are couple of problems with his

diagnosis as it stands. The most serious problem with Putnam's diagnosis is that, being

akin to Moore's diagnosis, it is subject to some of the same objections. I think Putnam

is right that from the fact that in cases of "non-veridical" experiences, such as dreams,

we experience something mental, there is "simply no argument" to the conclusion that

the direct objects in (what we take to be) veridical experience cannot be physical objects

themselves or (to put the point positively) that the direct object is always something

invariably mental or "representational." But, as we saw in the case of Moore's

diagnosis, a proper understanding of the dream argument reveals that the sceptic does

not *need* to assume that the direct object of awareness in veridical experience is

invariably mental for his conclusion to go through.

As I argued in connection with Moore's diagnosis, the force of the dream

argument trades on our inability, *given* the only evidence we have to go on; namely, the

evidence of what we see, hear, feel, etc., to distinguish between cases that we take to

be veridical (understood as cases in which we experience objects themselves) and non-

veridical experience (understood as cases in which we experience mental

representations of objects). The dream argument shows that the only evidence we can

appeal to for determining our actual experiential situation in a given case wholly

underdetermines the matter. But this is quite compatible with the truth of some form of

direct realism — we may, perhaps most of the time, directly experience actual objects, and hence, we may *know* a great deal about such things as books, telephones, buildings, and so on. However, it also seems that this is something that can never be established given the only evidence that we have to decide the matter, and so, once again, a kind of second order sceptical conclusion results: we *may* know a great deal about the world, but we will never know or have good reason to believe that we do.

Thus, I believe that Putnam is mistaken if he thinks his first objection to the interface view manages to shift the burden of proof back to the sceptic. Indeed, just as with Moore's diagnosis, the ball is back in Putnam's court. A proper understanding of the dream argument shows that the sceptic need not assume (indeed I argued that he *should not* assume) that all we ever experience are mental representations for his conclusion to go through, and so it is beside the point that there is "simply no argument" to the view that the direct object in (perhaps most) of our perceptual experiences cannot be the object itself.

If the ball is back in Putnam's court, it is incumbent upon him to try to somehow prove that his natural realist alternative is true if he wants to provide a satisfactory answer to the sceptic — that is, if he truly wants to reclaim our ordinary view that our knowledge claims are responsible to reality. But as we have just seen, this would prove to be, to say the least, very difficult. The dream argument, as I argued in connection with Moore, seems to place a permanent impediment to ever showing that some version of direct realism is true.

Moreover, and this is the other problem I detect with Putnam's diagnosis, if he were to take up the thankless task of trying to show that (usually) the direct object in experience is the object itself, it would require him to articulate and defend natural realism, which, of course, would require that he treat it (like Moore) as an alternative analysis or *theory*. Indeed, even if Putnam was successful in showing that we need not accept the sceptic's conclusion because he fails to make any case at all that the interface view is true, this would not license his insistence that natural realism not be seen as a competing account of perception. As Moore claims, natural realism, as a form of direct realism, is only one of many possible philosophical analyses of what it is to know such common sense propositions as "material objects exist." So, although Putnam's first objection seems to fit well with the interpretation of his strategy as a version of theoretical diagnosis, there is still puzzling question as to why he thinks that his alternative is not a theoretical view.

At any rate, whether or not it is possible to pin down precisely the nature of Putnam's treatment of scepticism (it seems possible to read him as offering a therapeutic diagnosis, theoretical diagnosis, *and* constructivist response!), it would appear that it fails to reclaim the commitment that our knowledge claims are responsible to reality. On any interpretation of his strategy, it fails to silence the sceptic since it fails to overcome the obstacle to deflationism. Like Moore, Putnam is required to articulate and defend — regardless of how disastrous it may turn out — a positive philosophical *theory*.

NOTES

[1]Hilary Putnam, "Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses: an Inquiry into the Powers of the Human Mind," in *The Journal of Philosophy*, XCI (1994), 446. (Hereafter cited as *Sense*). In this article, and the other two "Dewey Lectures" delivered at Columbia University in March of 1994, Putnam explicitly relates his ongoing concern with the realism/non-realism debate to epistemology. As is well known, a great deal of Putnam's work over the years has focused on diagnosing the errors and absurdities associated with various forms of realism and non-realism in an effort to find a plausible alternative to them. Although I believe that one of the absurdities fueling Putnam's quest for a plausible alternative has been epistemological (i.e., scepticism), rarely has he made this explicit. Until very recently, Putnam's alternative involved the attempt, as he puts it, to "paste together" elements of various realist and non-realist views, culminating in his "internal realism." Putnam has now abandoned "internal realism" and opted for "natural realism" — a view which he thinks simultaneously solves the metaphysical and epistemological difficulties associated with the views he has been at pains to criticize, including his own internal realism. As my interest is solely with his recent (and explicit) treatment of scepticism, I will focus primarily on the second "Dewey Lecture," entitled "The Importance of Being Austin: the Need for a 'Second Naiveté,'" *The Journal of Philosophy* XCI (1994), 466-487. (Hereafter cited as *Importance*).

[2]*Sense*, 454.

[3]Hilary Putnam, "William James' Ideas" in *Realism With a Human Face* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 223.

[4]*Importance*, 487.

[5]*Importance*, 472.

[6]*Importance*, 472.

[7]I say that this is Putnam's first *full* criticism of the view since he merely mentions two other arguments against the view (which, again, he attributes to Austin and James). These arguments are 1) the sense datum theorist assumes that in dreams we *perceive* something, and 2) that experiences such as dreams and so-called veridical experiences *are* "qualitatively distinguishable." There are fairly standard (and well known) responses available to the sceptic to both arguments (i.e., the standard response to the first argument is that it is based upon on a misunderstanding of the dream argument, and the response to the second argument is that it presupposes knowledge of the world). However, since Putnam merely *lists* these arguments (with approval) without offering any of their details, *and* (as is evident in the next cited passage) he is willing to grant the defender of the interface view both points, I will neither include them as part of *Putnam's* objection to the interface view, nor will I respond to them anymore here. Finally, even if Putnam did offer the details of these arguments, and we were to include them in his attack, it would not affect the main line of criticism I advance against his treatment of scepticism.

[8]*Importance*, 472-73.
[9]*Importance*, 474-75.
[10]*Importance*, 485.
[11]*Importance*, 486.

[12] Even if Putnam is right that in "serious natural science" a vacuous explanation would be deemed unintelligible — perhaps on the grounds that since what we *mean* by "explanation" is some hypothesis that accounts for or accords with some data, it makes no sense to refer to any hypothesis as an *explanation* that does not — it is important to notice that this sense of "unintelligible" means, roughly, that the hypothesis in question fails to be an instance of those things usually denoted by the term "explanation." It does not mean, however, that the data that the hypothesis is supposed to explain are unreal or that it is nonsense to refer to them, and as I argue in what follows, the primary reason for positing the sense data hypothesis is not to *explain* the similarities between veridical and non-veridical experiences, but to capture the reality of, based upon the perceived *differences* between, *both* types of experiences (or at least what we pre-theoretically take to be the reality of both types of experiences) as they present themselves in our phenomenological lives. Thus I am fully prepared to allow that as an explanatory hypothesis in science, the sense data thesis is, in the sense described above, "unintelligible," since it is of no consequence whether or not the hypothesis *explains* anything. What is important here is whether or not it makes sense to speak of "sense data" as the proposed referents of our experiences in an analysis of our perceptual relationship to the world. And Putnam's critique of the interface view does not show that it is unintelligible to speak of "sense data" in this respect.

[13]*Importance*, 487.

Chapter 5

Williams' Theoretical Diagnosis of Scepticism About the External World

5.1 The Context of Williams' Strategy

We have examined in detail three deflationary attempts to reconcile the absurd conclusion of radical scepticism to our common sense view that we know many things about the world. In one way or another, each of these strategies focuses on what I take to be the most important consideration in the sceptic's investigation that licenses the conclusion; namely, that all of our beliefs and putative knowledge of the world are based upon the evidence of the senses, where that evidence is understood as sensory experience — as how the world appears to us. I have argued that none of these strategies establishes that this view is unwarranted, incoherent or false, and hence, none of them successfully shows how and why scepticism about the external world is incorrect. Moreover, at least part of the reason that each of these particular strategies fail is that they all run up against what I have been calling the major stumbling block of deflationary approaches; namely, providing a *purely* negative diagnosis of why the view is unwarranted or unintelligible.

We saw that Wittgenstein's therapeutic attempt to reject the view fails because it involves either a dogmatic appeal to principles in need of positive support, or because it

advances a *positive* view that not only violates the methodological constraints of his method, but also revises some of our common sense commitments. We also saw that Putnam's attempt to reject the view (on any and all interpretations of his strategy), *and* Moore's theoretical diagnosis to show that the sceptic simply assumes the view, both fail to silence the sceptic since both require an articulation and defense of a positive alternative to the view (e.g., direct realism).

Of course, my examination of possible deflationary approaches to scepticism is not exhaustive, and I do not want to suggest that all such strategies *must* wind up either invoking or requiring positive considerations to provide a satisfactory response to the sceptic. Indeed, Michael Williams' theoretical diagnosis of the problem of the external world — the last deflationary strategy I will discuss, and the focus of this chapter — *does*, I think, manage to remain purely negative. I believe that Williams' success on this count is due largely to his acute sensitivity to the power of sceptical arguments — a power that is a function of the apparent lack of contentious theoretical commitments required to establish the conclusion.

Williams clearly sees that if the considerations summoned in arguments for radical scepticism are genuinely intuitive, the sceptic has an overwhelming dialectical advantage over any deflationary attempt to show that scepticism is less than fully intelligible. Certainly, before the details as to how scepticism is conceptually confused or suspect are announced, it is extremely difficult to swallow the suggestion that what surely appear to be irresistible platitudes about our most ordinary ways of thinking

about knowledge, justification, and so on, are not fully *intelligible*. And, as I have tried to illustrate, once the therapeutic diagnostician announces the details, the charge of unintelligibility appears to be gratuitous and in need of positive support, or to involve positive considerations that are much less plausible than the considerations that they are meant to combat.

Williams also emphasizes that the apparent naturalness of the sceptic's investigation places at a paralyzing disadvantage those philosophers who straightforwardly propose what I have been calling "positive" or "constructive" responses to scepticism. Recall that I characterized a positive approach to scepticism (or indeed, any philosophical problem) as any response where the critic first argues that one or more of the elements in the sceptic's investigation is mistaken, and then provides a theoretical corrective to show how knowledge of the world is indeed possible. The trouble with these responses, as I mentioned much earlier in connection with Berkeley's "idealist" answer to the sceptic, is that the rejection of the absurd conclusion in favour of common sense is usually bought at the cost of yet another affront to common sense. This should not be surprising if the elements in the sceptic's investigation are truly intuitive: if these elements merely reflect our ordinary views about, e.g., the nature and source of human knowledge, then tinkering with any of them will inevitably seem to involve a revision of a truism, and so the subsequent rejection of scepticism is apt to leave us as dissatisfied as with scepticism itself.

Today, for instance, we find many philosophers who are prepared to endorse a contemporary version of Berkeley's response to scepticism — a response that traces the source of the problem of the external world to the sceptic's "realism." It is the sceptic's acceptance of a metaphysical picture that completely dissociates the world from the mind, such a critic claims, that allows for the epistemic gap between our perceptions of, and thoughts about, the world and the world itself. Thus, the way to reclaim knowledge of the world is to close the epistemic gap by embracing an alternative metaphysical picture in which the existence and nature of the world *are* in some sense dependent upon what we happen to think and believe about it.

Such "non-realist" views certainly show how knowledge is possible: since *we* impose order upon or (as it is sometimes put) "carve up" the world with our "conceptual schemes," and so *we* determine, not only that the world "is," but *how* it is, it is impossible that we could fail to know a great deal about it. However, this positive solution to scepticism seems to be a terribly high price to pay since it compromises our common sense commitment that the world is totally indifferent to what we think and say about it — it violates the conviction that the world is *what it is* quite independently of our conceptual grasp of it, and that this would be so even if there were no human beings or conceptual systems at all.

Another contemporary, and very influential, response to scepticism which, I think, we simply cannot afford, identifies the sceptic's conception of knowledge as the mistaken element in his investigation. Specifically, some so-called "externalists" see

the absurd conclusion as arising from the idea that securing knowledge requires the provision of justification, and so they advocate an alternative view that severs justification from knowing. Many externalists argue that one possesses knowledge so long as one's beliefs are true and arrived at by a "reliable" method, but one need not know, or indeed, have any reason at all for thinking, that one's beliefs are the product of such a method.

Again, in so far as such externalist views are intended as responses to scepticism, it strikes me that they not only fail to silence the sceptic, but that they also require a rather drastic revision of our ordinary epistemic views and practices. Although such views show that knowledge of the world is indeed *possible*, it appears that they fall short of establishing that any such knowledge is in fact *actual*, and therefore permit the kind of "second order" scepticism I discussed in connection with Moore. Surely, it is a small consolation to be told that so long as one's beliefs are true and formed by a reliable method one possesses knowledge, since this seems to amount merely to the assertion that we *may* possess all kinds of knowledge. Whether or not we *actually* possess knowledge depends entirely upon whether or not our beliefs *are in fact* true and formed by a reliable method, but these are things the theory claims we need not have the slightest reason to believe. Such a view seems to rob our ordinary epistemic practices of their significance, since, surely, what we are interested in when we engage in our practices of making and challenging claims to knowledge is whether

or not such claims are reliably formed, and hence, whether or not we have good reason for accepting (and often acting upon) them.

5.2 Williams' Strategy

Clearly, much more could be said about both of these views, but it is not my intention to attempt to thoroughly refute them here. I mention them only to illustrate their weaknesses as responses to scepticism, and to provide a context for my discussion of Williams' treatment of scepticism. As mentioned, Williams is very sensitive to the shortcomings of any positive or negative response to scepticism that winds up advocating or requiring a revision of apparent platitudes. For Williams, such responses fall on one horn of what he calls the "epistemologist's dilemma" — either we accept scepticism or we propose a revision of our ordinary epistemic commitments to reject it, and thereby effectively agree with the sceptic that "knowledge," as we have always *understood* it, is indeed impossible. As Williams describes the dilemma:

> ...we can accept scepticism, or make changes in our pre-theoretical thinking about knowledge that shrink the domain, or alter the status of what we previously thought of as knowledge of objective fact. In making such changes, however, we inevitably appear to be making large concessions to the sceptic. Unkindly put, the epistemologist's dilemma is that we can either agree with the sceptic directly or in a roundabout, grudging way — Hobson's choice. [1]

Thus, Williams believes that the only type of strategy that stands a chance of providing a satisfactory response to scepticism is one that avoids a revision of our ordinary platitudes about knowledge, and this requires, he thinks, that we confront head-on the question of whether scepticism really rests upon such platitudes. Recall that a

theoretical diagnosis of scepticism is not an attempt to directly refute the view, but to shift the burden of proof back to the sceptic by unearthing contentious theoretical commitments that give rise to his absurd conclusion. Williams argues that, far from resting upon mere truisms, the conclusion that knowledge of the world is impossible is reached only by assuming a couple of extremely contentious theoretical doctrines that he calls "epistemological realism" and "epistemological foundationalism." Moreover, Williams believes that these doctrines are presupposed at the very outset of the sceptic's investigation — that they are involved in the very idea of "assessing" our knowledge of the world, and that there is no such "project" independently of these assumptions.

In this respect, Williams' strategy is similar to Wittgenstein's — both diagnoses attempt to show that there is something drastically amiss at the root of the sceptic's investigation. I think that this is certainly the right point of attack. If one can successfully forestall the sceptic's progress at the outset, then there is no question of attaining a mere "standoff" with (or to have to otherwise recover lost ground from) the sceptic as we witnessed with Moore's theoretical diagnosis. Indeed, Williams' diagnosis explains why Moore runs into trouble: Moore accepts a fundamental tenet of scepticism; namely, that "knowledge of the world" — the class of putative knowledge that the sceptic sets out to assess (and the anti-sceptic is subsequently compelled to defend) — picks out a theoretically innocuous object of inquiry.

Williams believes that the very idea that there is such a class of putative knowledge presupposes some very contentious theoretical ideas, and he also believes that once one grants the sceptic his object of inquiry, it is extremely difficult to prevent his progress to the negative verdict that such knowledge is impossible. Moore, of course, never doubted that the sceptic had put his finger on a fully "natural" class of propositions for investigation — he just disputed whether the sceptic's "analysis" of these propositions was inevitable. For Williams, conceding the sceptic's object of inquiry is fatal, and Moore's response fails precisely because it allows for debate about the correct account of such knowledge.

In any case, Williams' novel and extremely radical suggestion that the sceptic's object of inquiry presupposes some very unnatural theoretical considerations strikes at the foothold of the sceptic's investigation, and thus holds promise as a *purely* negative response to scepticism. If it is possible to show that the sceptic's project cannot even be formulated without extensive theoretical commitments that are by no means intuitive, and hence, that we are by no means bound to accept, then there is no compulsion to accept the conclusions derived from them. More importantly, a successful short-circuiting of the sceptic's project will preclude the need to try to recover lost ground from the sceptic later on; in particular, it will preclude the need to provide some sort of positive response to the sceptic.

But despite the promise of purity that Williams' diagnosis affords, as a version of theoretical diagnosis, it is vulnerable in ways that therapeutic diagnoses are not. For

a theoretical diagnosis grants that scepticism is completely intelligible, and indeed, inevitable, *given* the sceptic's theoretical commitments. This is a rather large concession to the sceptic since it leaves him room to take up the theoretical diagnostician's challenge to try to show that these commitments are not gratuitous and/or contentious, or perhaps that he is not committed to them at all.

I argue that the sceptic should take up the first option. Although I agree with Williams that the sceptic is in fact committed to the doctrines that he identifies, and that they are contentious, I disagree that they are gratuitous. That is, I disagree that the sceptic simply assumes them, or at least that he *need* assume them. It is crucial that Williams is right that the sceptic presupposes these doctrines, since, as he fully admits, if they arise in the *course* of the sceptic's investigation —that is, if they (like the contentious sceptical conclusion itself) are "by-products" of otherwise innocuous truisms — then scepticism will not only be fully intelligible, but also fully *intuitive*, and hence, the inevitable result of reflection.

Since Williams concedes that if epistemological realism and foundationalism emerge as by-products in the course of the sceptic's investigation, then scepticism is fully intuitive, he spends a great deal of time considering possible suggestions as to how we might see these doctrines as emerging from harmless truisms. Williams argues that each of these suggestions turns out to presuppose the doctrines in question, and his discussion of these suggestions culminates in the radical view (mentioned earlier) that the very idea that there is something to assess — that there *is* such a category as

"knowledge of the world" (as well as other traditional categories of putative knowledge) that the sceptic identifies as his object of reflection (and hence, which provides him with something to be *sceptical* about) — assumes epistemological realism and foundationalism. As Williams puts it: "Foundationalist ideas are buried very deeply in the enterprise of assessing our knowledge of the world as a whole, for they are presupposed by the thought that there is *something* to assess."[2]

As I mentioned earlier, this suggestion focuses on the root of the sceptic's investigation, and Williams sees his argument in support of it as the most important element of his diagnosis of scepticism. Indeed, Williams opens *Unnatural Doubts* with the following pronouncement:

> My claim is this: there is no such thing as knowledge of the external world. The same goes for knowledge of other minds, knowledge of the past, and other such objects of epistemological investigation...My objection is not to what would generally be taken to be *examples* of such knowledge but to the idea of knowledge of the external world as a *kind* of knowledge, which we might assess or explain as a whole. More generally, I am concerned with knowledge as an object of theory. I think that asking how we have to conceive knowledge, for knowledge to be an object of theory, is the key to understanding scepticism.[3]

I agree with Williams that this claim is his most important weapon in his treatment of scepticism, and that the success of his diagnosis depends crucially upon it. Thus, my critique of his diagnosis focuses on his argument in support of it. I believe Williams is quite right, as I will try to illustrate, that the first few suggestions he canvasses as to how we might see the contentious doctrines as emerging from platitudes fail since they ultimately assume the truth of the doctrines in question. However, I do not think that

Williams establishes that either epistemological realism or foundationalism must be assumed at the point where the sceptic partitions off all of his putative knowledge into general categories for assessment.

I offer an alternative understanding of the sceptic's undertaking in which these doctrines *are* seen as by-products of mere truisms. Accordingly, I conclude that Williams' diagnosis fails, and that he is committed to holding that scepticism is the inevitable result of epistemological reflection since the contentious views (and the sceptical conclusion based upon them) conform to his conception of an intuitive problem or position. Before turning to Williams' arguments to show that there is no way to motivate scepticism except on the assumption of epistemological realism and foundationalism, it is necessary to get a handle on what he takes these views to be.

5.3 Contentious Doctrines

Williams never offers a strict formal definition of either of these views, but rather a number of scattered, and slightly varied, characterizations of them. I begin with "epistemological realism." As I understand it, the core of what Williams means by "epistemological realism" is that there are ultimate, context-invariant constraints and relations concerning knowledge and justification that are, so to speak, in the nature of things — the existence of such constraints and relations are understood as brute metaphysical facts, which is why Williams refers to the doctrine as a form of "realism." At times, Williams characterizes this view as a purely formal doctrine — as the view that there is a fact of the matter about the structure of human knowledge and

justification. However, the precise nature of that structure is left open, and thus, an epistemological realist might hold, e.g., that the structure of knowledge and justification is "foundational" in nature or that it is a matter of "coherence" (or possibly some other alternative).

However, at other times, Williams seems to identify the doctrine *solely* with the view that human knowledge in general is foundational in nature — that certain general *types* or categories of belief and knowledge are epistemically "prior" to other general types of belief and knowledge, in the sense that the former constitute the ultimate *evidential* base for the latter. Moreover, it is solely in virtue of belonging to a belief type (and not the specific content of the belief) that beliefs are assigned their justificatory role — beliefs that fall under certain categories *must* be called upon to justify beliefs that belong to other categories. Thus, on this version of the doctrine, the epistemological realist holds that, solely in virtue of belonging to a belief type, particular beliefs have an *intrinsic* epistemological status. As Williams puts it, to suppose that a belief, "considered in abstraction, will have an epistemic status it can call its own...is precisely to fall in with what I call epistemological realism."[4]

Surprisingly, Williams holds that the major traditional theories of knowledge all involve hierarchical structures of justificatory relations based upon the content of belief types, and thus, they all fit this more robust conception of epistemological realism. Williams argues that traditional "coherence" theories of knowledge and justification, although usually seen as the principal *alternatives* to foundational views, ultimately

invoke relations of justification in which some beliefs (e.g., "metabeliefs," within the "system" of beliefs, *about* the content of the beliefs in the system, and how they "cohere" or hang together)[5] must be assigned a privileged status of epistemic priority. Thus, for Williams, coherence theories are, at bottom, essentially foundational in nature, and indeed, he claims that "traditional *epistemology* [my emphasis] is intrinsically foundational."[6]

Although this more substantive conception of epistemological realism maintains that there are such relations of epistemic priority — that human knowledge is foundational in nature — it makes no claim as to which belief types are foundational and which are derivative. However, "foundationalism," as Williams characterizes it, includes a specific assignment of the relations of epistemic priority. Thus, foundationalism can be seen as a particular manifestation of the second version of epistemological realism — it contends not only that there are ultimate justificatory constraints and relations of priority, but it offers as a specific account of the hierarchical order of these constraints and relations between belief and knowledge types.

In the following two passages, Williams describes what I take to be the essential attributes of both foundationalism and (the more robust conception) of epistemological realism, and illustrates the differences between them. The latter doctrine holds that:

> ...our beliefs, simply in virtue of certain elements in their contents, stand in *natural epistemological relations* and thus fall into *natural epistemological kinds.* The broad, fundamental classes into which

all...beliefs naturally fall constitute an epistemic hierarchy which determines what, in the last analysis, can be called upon to justify what. This means that...every belief has an inalienable epistemic character which it carries with it wherever it goes and which determines where its justification must finally be sought.[7]

Foundationalism presupposes epistemological realism...the foundationalist...attributes to justifying inferences a certain structural character *and* identifies the types of beliefs fitted to play the various structurally defined roles: basic, inferential, etc. Thus for the foundationalist beliefs have an *intrinsic epistemological status* that accounts for their ability to play one or other of the formal roles the theory allows. Beliefs of one kind can be treated as epistemologically prior to beliefs of some other kind because they *are* epistemologically prior; some beliefs play the role of basic beliefs because they *are* basic; other receive inferential justification because they *require* it; and all because of the kinds of beliefs they are.[8]

Williams claims that all traditional forms of scepticism, such as scepticism about the past, the future, other minds, and, of course, the focus of this study, the external world, not only presuppose that all of the beliefs within each of the categories owe their credibility to some other ultimate evidential category of belief, but that they also presuppose a particular account of the belief types fitted to play the relevant justificatory roles. According to Williams, the sceptic about the external world must assume the particular foundationalist view that all of our beliefs and items of putative knowledge about the world are ultimately grounded upon (and owe their credibility to) beliefs about sensory experience — beliefs about how things appear to us. Thus, regardless of the specific content of a given belief "about the external world," or the context in which it is held or asserted, the sceptic holds that, in the final analysis, it

owes its credibility to some experiential belief (or beliefs) solely in virtue of belonging to that belief type.

I think that Williams is surely right that the sceptic about the external world holds this view, and it also seems right that Williams should insist that the sceptic *must* maintain that the view is a by-product rather than a presupposition of his investigation. For on the face of things, the doctrine is surely at odds with ordinary epistemic practices. In most of our everyday epistemic dealings, what counts as evidence for a belief or item of putative knowledge "about the external world" is another belief of the same type. Moreover, in ordinary life we simply do not hold that there is some ultimate evidential basis for anything and everything we believe about the world (let alone that there is something called the "external world"), and this is due largely, I suspect, to the fact that we do not have any pre-theoretical categorization of beliefs and knowledge into such general "types."

Williams argues that these observations not only buttress his contention that foundationalism (and the epistemological realism that it presupposes) are extremely contentious, but also that they suggest an alternative view of justification — one that mirrors our actual epistemic practices and commitments, and hence, one that is fully natural or intuitive. "Contextualism" — the view that the justification of a given belief or item of knowledge depends upon contextual constraints such as "topical" or "disciplinary" constraints (determined by the subject of inquiry), "situational" constraints (determined by situational factors, such as the evidence available for the

belief or knowledge claim in question), "dialectical" constraints (determined by the current state of e.g., a problem situation), and so on — is Williams' (apt) label for his alternative to foundationalism, and he believes that we are free to adopt it as a view of justification (since we actually employ it anyway) once it is revealed that the sceptic's absurd conclusion depends upon these very unnatural (and wholly gratuitous) considerations.[9]

Thus, it is imperative, if the absurd sceptical conclusion is to be fully intuitive, that the view that all of our beliefs and putative knowledge about the world are grounded upon beliefs about how things appear — the foundationalist view that Williams dubs "the priority of experiential knowledge over knowledge of the world," and which I will refer to simply as the "priority thesis" — is forced upon us from innocuous truisms during the course of the sceptic's investigation.

5.4 Presuppositions or By-products?

Williams' diagnosis of scepticism begins by extracting what he takes to be two central considerations — considerations that are found in Descartes' arguments for radical scepticism about the external world — that many philosophers have (mistakenly) thought to "naturally" establish not only the priority thesis, but also the sceptical conclusion itself, and he shows how these considerations succumb to circularity. The first consideration is captured in Descartes' dictum that "whatever I had admitted until now to be most true I took in either from the senses or through the

senses,"[10] and the other consideration is that there is a "logical gap" between experience and the world — that no statement (or belief) about our sensory experiences or how the world appears to us entails any statement (or belief) about the objective world beyond our experiences.

I want to consider Williams' discussion of the latter consideration first. Williams admits that the existence of the logical gap is non-controversial, and he thinks that it is vividly illustrated by sceptical thought experiments, such as Descartes' dreaming or "evil demon" hypotheses (or the modern "brain in a vat" hypothesis) according to which one's sensory experiences have a particular "subjective" content, and the way things are in the "objective" external world is radically different. However, as Williams' rightly stresses, the mere existence of the logical gap between experience and the world has no *intrinsic* epistemological significance. It may well be true that all of one's experiences could be a certain way and the world be drastically different, but if this consideration is to have any epistemic significance — in particular, if it is to establish that no one knows, or has any reason to believe, anything about the external world (let alone establish the truth of the priority thesis) — it must already be assumed that sensory experience is the ultimate evidential base from which anything and everything we believe about the world must be derived. That is, one must already assume the priority thesis. As Williams puts it:

> The epistemological significance of the logical gap between experiential knowledge and knowledge of the world derives entirely from the thought that there must be some kind of natural dependence of the latter kind of

knowledge on knowledge of the former. The difficulty of deriving statements about how things really are from information about sensory appearances would not matter if we were not already inclined to think that knowing how things really are depends upon effecting some such derivation. This means that we cannot argue from the existence of the logical gap between experiential beliefs and beliefs about how things objectively are to the general evidential dependence of objective on experiential knowledge. The existence of the logical gap is perhaps non-controversial. But what is at issue is its epistemological significance: its mere existence decides nothing.[11]

At most, the existence of the logical gap establishes what Williams' calls the "neutrality of experience" — the view that when it comes to how things are in the world, experience is evidentially neutral. But again, if this truism is to have any sceptical bite, it must be assumed that knowledge of how things are in the world must be derived from how they appear.

But perhaps the epistemological significance of the logical gap between experience and the world is provided by the other consideration; Descartes' observation that everything held to be "most true" about the world is acquired from "the senses." Arguably, this consideration — which might be said to capture the truism that the primary means by which human beings come to believe or know anything about the world around them is by virtue of their sensory organs — is the consideration that lies behind the thought that the logical gap is epistemologically relevant. For if we accept the apparent platitude that human beings would never come to believe or know anything about the world without functioning sense organs, then it seems very natural

to think that the logical gap between the information acquired through the senses and the world is epistemically relevant.

Williams' response to this suggestion is that Descartes' observation is open to two interpretations. One of these interpretations, he admits, is a truism, the other is just the priority thesis. It is undeniable, Williams claims, that without our sensory apparatuses, we would never come to believe anything at all about the world, and so it is true that in *some sense* knowledge of the world depends upon "the senses." But it may be that this dependence is merely *causal*. Williams claims:

> This much is perhaps a truism: that without functioning sense organs, I would never come to form any beliefs about the external world and so would never come to know anything about it either. But all this shows is that possessing functioning sense organs is a causal precondition for possessing knowledge of the world: it establishes nothing about the general evidential basis of such knowledge, not even that it has one.[12]

Thus, on a causal interpretation of Descartes' observation, there is no suggestion that what we come to believe about the world through sense perception is grounded upon some ultimate evidential base, let alone that it is grounded upon sensory *experience*. And, hence, on this interpretation there is no threat of radical scepticism.

The specter of scepticism is raised only if Descartes' observation is interpreted as the view that all of his beliefs and putative knowledge of the world are based upon the evidence of sensory experience — how things appear to us — and this, of course, is just the priority thesis. Thus, since we must assume the foundationalist reading of Descartes' observation in order to attribute epistemic significance to the logical gap, it

seems we must admit (contrary to what many have thought) that neither the fact that knowledge of the world in some sense depends upon "the senses," nor the truism that there is a logical gap between experience and the world, establishes (alone, or in conjunction) the priority thesis, or the sceptical conclusion that is based upon it.

So far, so good. I think that Williams is right that if these truisms are to generate radical scepticism, one must presuppose foundationalism (and epistemological realism) and so I think that if these were the only considerations motivating the sceptical conclusion, Williams' diagnosis would be successful. However, it is not clear that these are the only considerations motivating the sceptic's absurd conclusion. Williams is well aware of this, and he examines a final suggestion as to how the sceptic might argue that the contentious doctrines are forced upon us within his project.

Williams believes that Stroud's conception of the sceptic's "traditional" investigation of knowledge of the world contains an element from which foundationalism seems to emerge as a by-product rather than a presupposition, and he admits that if this element does not itself take for granted the contentious doctrine, then the "foundationalist reading" of Descartes' observation and the epistemic significance of the logical gap will have been naturally established.[13] Williams, of course, ultimately rejects the idea that the priority thesis emerges as a by-product from this element, and to show this, he introduces what I referred to as his most important weapon in his diagnosis; namely, that the very idea that there is something called "knowledge of the world" presupposes foundationalism.

5.5 A Final Suggestion

Stroud characterizes the traditional epistemological project as "the assessment of all our knowledge of the world at once, and it takes the form of a judgment on that knowledge from what looks like a detached 'external' perspective."[14] Williams detects four central elements here. The traditional investigation aims at 1) an *assessment* of 2) the *totality* of our knowledge of 3) an *objective* world, from 4) a *detached* perspective. The crucial element in this conception, according to Williams, is the second consideration, which he calls the "totality condition."

Recall that Descartes' aim, as I described it in Chapter 1, was to assess all of his present beliefs and putative knowledge, and that this required him to firstly partition off all of his beliefs into very general classes so that all beliefs within the class could be examined in one fell swoop. Recall also that I argued on behalf of Descartes that there was nothing controversial about attempting to assess large classes of belief at once: such an undertaking might be carried out in ordinary life for any number of reasons. Williams believes that the sceptic might argue that the imposition of such a totality condition in the traditional investigation of knowledge of the world *forces* the priority thesis upon us — that foundationalism, and hence, scepticism, is the by-product of the generality that is sought in the traditional project.

According to Williams, the argument proceeds along the following lines. If our aim is to determine whether *any* of our beliefs within a given category of putative knowledge — whether *anything* we believe about the external world, other minds, and

so on, really amounts to knowledge — then we obviously cannot (if we wish to avoid circularity) presuppose knowledge of any of the beliefs within the category to try to show that we in fact possess such knowledge. That is, we cannot appeal to any of the beliefs within the category to justify or explain how (and that) we know anything else within the category. Thus, in order to carry out the assessment at the proper level of generality, it *emerges*, as a constraint on the traditional investigation of knowledge of the world, that we must, as Williams puts it: "trace that knowledge to knowledge that we should still have even if we knew nothing at all about the world."[15] But if this is correct, it appears that the priority thesis is the natural outcome. Williams continues: "once we accept the legitimacy of the epistemologist's question — and we have seen no reason to think that it is unintelligible — we must also accept the priority of experiential knowledge, since experiential knowledge is what remains when knowledge of the world is set aside."[16]

So now it seems that the sceptic does not simply assume the priority thesis and the epistemological realism it presupposes, rather this view emerges naturally from the distinctive generality of the sceptic's project. Moreover, it seems that this generality is the consideration that lies behind, and provides the requisite support for, the foundational reading of Descartes' observation, and hence, is the consideration that turns the logical gap into an epistemological gap (with the aid of the sceptic's thought experiments, of course).

5.6 Williams' Most Powerful Weapon

Williams' response to this argument focuses on the initial (and apparently innocuous) stage in the traditional investigation where the (soon to be) sceptic partitions off all of his putative knowledge into general categories. Specifically, Williams argues that in order to conceive of "knowledge of the world" as a general category that lends itself to wholesale assessment, one must assume the contentious doctrines.

Clearly, the idea of setting out to assess the totality of our knowledge of the world assumes that there is something to assess — that there *is* a non-controversial body of putative knowledge whose epistemic status *can* be evaluated as a whole. It is also clear that it has seemed obvious to almost every philosopher who has ever concerned herself with the problem of the external world that "knowledge of the world" picks out a such a category.

However, we must ask ourselves, Williams insists, what commitments underpin this idea. Principally, we must ask what provides for the theoretical *integrity* of the category such that the items within it constitute a *kind* of knowledge that can be assessed as a whole. For, according to Williams, it is obvious that there must be some principles that regulate and integrate the various items into a totality if we are to make sense of the idea of assessing the entire category at once. Williams claims:

> If we are to make sense of the project of explaining how anything we
> believe about the world amounts to knowledge, we need a way of
> reducing our beliefs to order. We have to bring them under principles or
> show them as resting on commitments that we can survey. We must
> reveal some kind of *theoretical integrity* in the class of beliefs we want

to assess. If we can do this, human knowledge is a possible object of theoretical investigation. But not otherwise. The very nature of the traditional project demands that the principles in question be all-pervasive. For example, if we are to assess the totality of our beliefs about the world, there must be principles that inform all putative knowledge of the world *as such*.[17]

Williams argues that it is obvious that our beliefs and items of putative knowledge "about the world" are not *topically* integrated. He claims: "'knowledge of the external world' covers not only all the natural sciences and all of history, it covers all everyday, unsystematic factual claims belonging to no particular investigative discipline."[18] Thus, such a category would include an indefinite number of beliefs covering an indefinite number of topics, disciplines, and areas of interest — it would (literally) encompass beliefs about anything and everything under (and indeed, including) the sun. According to Williams: "'beliefs about the external world' is only quasi-topical, bringing together beliefs belonging to any and every subject, or no well-defined subject at all...they do not, that is, add up to an ideally unified theory of everything."[19]

For Williams, this leaves *one* option: our beliefs and putative knowledge about the world are *epistemically* integrated. He states: "In the absence of topical integration, we must look to epistemological considerations for the theoretical integrity we require."[20] Specifically, Williams believes that the consideration at work in the traditional project — the consideration that integrates each and every item of putative knowledge about the world such that they constitute a category capable of wholesale

assessment — is that each item is grounded upon, and owes its credibility to, the evidence of sensory experience. In other words, Williams believes that the principle of integration is the priority thesis. He states that within the traditional project, beliefs and putative knowledge of the world are:

> ...united only by their supposed common epistemological status. The essential contrast to "beliefs about the external world" is "experiential beliefs" and the basis for the contrast is the general epistemic priority about beliefs falling under the latter heading over those falling under the former.[21]

Williams argues that this is obviously the assumption at work in the first *Meditation*. Although Descartes gives the impression that the impediment to assessing each and every one of his beliefs *seriatim* is that it would be tedious, or as he puts it, "a task of endless proportion," Williams claims that this is a sham. Williams states that Descartes':

> grudging concessions are misleading: they imply that the main obstacles to going over our beliefs seriatim are time and energy, whereas the question is certainly not one of convenience. If we are to make sense of the project of explaining how anything we believe about the world amounts to knowledge, we need a way of reducing our beliefs to order.[22]

Thus, we find that Descartes immediately introduces the principle that it is not necessary to survey "each opinion one after the other...because undermining the foundations will cause whatever has been built upon them to fall down on its own accord."[23] And, of course, the "foundation" that Descartes attributes to all of his beliefs about the world (and sets out to undermine) is sensory experience. For

Williams, this is certainly no accident: this is the only way that Descartes can reduce

his beliefs to order so that there is something to assess. Williams claims:

> Thus, Descartes ties his pre-critical beliefs together, thereby constituting
> their totality as an object of inquiry, by tracing them all to "the senses."
> No matter how topically heterogeneous, and no matter how un-
> systematic, his beliefs have this much in common: all owe their place to
> the authority of the senses. If the authority can be called into question,
> each loses its title to the rank of knowledge.[24]

So once again it appears that the contentious foundationalist ideas are simply

assumed at the outset of the sceptic's inquiry. That is, they are *not* constraints that

emerge naturally as a result of carrying out the traditional project at the required level

of generality (as Williams claims might be argued in accordance with Stroud's

conception of the investigation). Williams claims that:

> To treat "our knowledge of the world" as designating a genuine totality,
> thus as a possible object of wholesale assessment, is to suppose that there
> are invariant epistemological constraints underlying the shifting standards
> of everyday justification, which...allow us to determine, in some general
> way, whether we are entitled to claim knowledge of the world. But if
> this is so, foundationalist presuppositions are buried very deeply in the
> Cartesian project. They do not just fall out of the totality condition's
> exclusion of any appeal to knowledge of the world in the course of our
> attempt to gain a reflective understanding of that knowledge. They turn
> out to be involved in the very idea of there being something to assess.[25]

Since it now appears that these contentious views are involved in the very idea that

there is something to assess — that there is no such thing as "knowledge of the world"

and hence, no *problem* of the external world independently of these views — it would

also appear that Williams has successfully shifted the burden of proof back to the

sceptic to somehow defend these principles as "natural." Admittedly, at this point, this

is a prospect that looks pretty bleak. So perhaps we can finally, in good conscience, ignore the sceptic's conclusion and adopt Williams' "contextualism" which actually accords with our everyday epistemic practices.

5.7 Disarming Williams

Unfortunately, I do not think that it is possible to ignore the sceptic's conclusion on the basis of Williams' diagnosis. I believe that Williams' objection that foundationalism (and epistemological realism) must be assumed if there is to exist an object for reflection ignores another possible way that the category, "knowledge of the world," might emerge. Although I think that Williams is right that Descartes certainly appears to provide the theoretical integrity of the category according to the principle that each item within the category owes its credibility to sensory experience, he (or a genuine sceptic) *need not*. Indeed, even in Descartes' case, I think that there may be another principle of unification at work. Thus, if there is a way of obtaining the category "knowledge of the world" that does not depend upon acceptance of the priority thesis, but only upon other harmless platitudes, then, as Williams admits, foundationalism, epistemological realism, and the sceptical conclusion based upon these views, will be fully intuitive by-products of the traditional investigation.

The thrust of Williams' charge that the sceptic assumes the priority thesis seems to be that the items within the category, "knowledge of the world," can be integrated only in terms of *how* they are (allegedly) known: the integrity of the category is

provided solely through the identification of its ultimate justificatory *ground.* He claims:

> "External" in the phrase "external world," does not mean "in one's surroundings" but "without the mind." The essential contrast to external reality is inner experience. The contrast is regarded as significant because beliefs falling on one or the other side of the divide are thought to share a certain ultimate epistemic status: what really unites beliefs about the world is how they are (or can be) known.[26]

I think that Williams is right that "external" means "without the mind," and that "inner experience" has come to be understood as the essential contrast to "external reality," but I do not see why this necessitates that the category "knowledge of the world" must be understood as epistemically integrated — as integrated in terms of how the items within the category are known. It strikes me that it is possible to see the integrity of the category as based upon an *ontological* distinction — a distinction between the *types of things* known, not *how* they are known. And it also strikes me that this distinction captures the fundamental sense of "external" in "the external world."

What I have in mind is that the category "knowledge of the external world" is originally conceived through a distinction between general types of things that *exist,* and which are possible *objects* of belief and knowledge. In the case of the "external world," the relevant distinction can, I believe, be characterized as that between the existence of mind and its contents — i.e., mental entities such as concepts, thoughts, beliefs, desires, and even sensory impressions — things whose *existence* depends upon the mind that entertains them, and the existence of the "world" and its contents — i.e.,

"external entities" such as physical objects, events, states of affairs, and so on — things whose *existence* does *not* depend upon mind. I want to suggest that this "realist" distinction — which is a fundamental (and, as Williams admits, innocuous) *metaphysical* distinction — lies at the root of the category, "knowledge of the external world."

Knowledge of the "external world," then, refers to all of the things we know (or take ourselves to know) about the objects, events, states of affairs, and so on that exist independently of anyone's mind or consciousness. Nowhere in this classification is there mention of *how* these things are known — no mention of the grounds or evidence upon which they are based — *that* is an entirely separate issue. But of course, it is the sort of issue that might arise once we begin to philosophize — once we begin to reflect upon whether any of the things we pre-critically take ourselves to know about the external world really amount to knowledge. It is at *this* point that we may start hunting for the grounds for the items within the category to assess their epistemic status.

Thus, if "knowledge of the world" obtains its integrity as a category on the basis of this metaphysical distinction, then neither the priority thesis nor epistemological realism is presupposed in the traditional project. Indeed, I believe that both of these views emerge as by-products much later in the investigation: they arise once the epistemologist considers, in conjunction with truisms about the types of things that exist, other truisms about the kinds of creatures human beings are, and how they come to acquire beliefs about things that exist externally to their minds.

And notice that, initially, it is an open question as to how we come to know the things we take ourselves to know about the external world — about things that exist independently of consciousness — and hence, what *kind* of general evidential base (if any) there may be for all the items within the category. Thus, if upon inquiry into how we know the kinds of things in the category, we discover that all of the items within the category seem to owe their credibility to a single evidential ground, it appears we then commit to (without *presupposing*) Williams' epistemological realism — the idea that there is an ultimate evidential basis for all the items in the category (and hence, that there are invariant constraints on justification) —but notice that we have yet to commit to the *priority thesis*. Just what the ultimate evidential basis for knowledge of the world turns out to be is something that the epistemologist must *investigate* and *argue* for; and this is a point that I think is evidenced, ironically, by Descartes' investigation.

Recall that Descartes' aim was to establish the "true foundations" of knowledge, including knowledge of the world, and that his sceptical arguments about the worth of sensory experience as ground for such knowledge were merely a *preliminary* to showing that all such knowledge is ultimately based upon *reason*. The fact that there is an option here — that Descartes holds (and can hold) that sensory experience is *not* the ultimate evidential basis for knowledge of the world, seems at odds with Williams' suggestion that the very category presupposes that sensory experience is the basis for all such knowledge. It seems to me that a more plausible reading of Descartes' actual procedure is that he first isolates the sorts of things that he takes himself to know (on

the basis of some ontological distinction like the above), and then goes on to consider various alternatives as to how they are known. He then considers what appears to be the most obvious candidate — "the senses"— and illustrates why they cannot be the true foundation for knowledge of the world. Finally, he argues that the actual foundation can only be reason. In any case, the important point here is that the idea that there is an ultimate evidential basis for knowledge of the world, and the determination of the *nature* of that basis, are by-products of the sceptic's investigation — they emerge after he has obtained his category for reflection.

I think it is worth stressing here an implication of the considerations sketched in the last few paragraphs. Notice that once the category has been established, there is no telling in advance that there will be a *single* evidential basis for all of the items within the category once we begin to investigate how we might know them. Thus, just as we are not committed to the idea that there is (or need be) any particular evidential basis for the category once it has been established, neither are we committed, as Williams thinks, to the epistemological realist idea that there a sole evidential ground.

For instance, the scope of the category I have identified as "knowledge of the external world" is extremely broad and includes all the traditional sub-categories of epistemological reflection. That is, the category includes all of our putative knowledge of things that exist independently of any consciousness, and that includes knowledge of *past* and *future* objects, events, states of affairs and so on, and indeed, knowledge of *other* minds. Thus, given the generality of the category, there is no reason in advance

to think that there need be *one* ultimate evidential base for everything in the category. Only when we isolate particular domains of putative knowledge and set out to assess their epistemic status are we then perhaps led to look for a single ground to which each item in the domain owes its credibility.

But does this mean that the very general category I have identified lacks "theoretical integrity?" If Williams is right that if we are to make sense of assessing a category of putative knowledge all at once, we must be able to trace that knowledge to some other form of knowledge outside the category (if we are to avoid circularity), then it seems that there should be a single evidential basis for the category. My response to this is that the idea that we need to trace our putative knowledge in a category to a single evidential basis outside of the category only becomes relevant once we are concerned with *assessing* our knowledge — with answering the question of *how* we know the things we take ourselves to know. And this shows, I think, not that the general category I have identified lacks integrity, but that the integrity it has — the principle that integrates the general category of all of our putative knowledge of the external world — is *not epistemological*. The category is based upon a very general distinction between types of things that exist and which we take ourselves to know; however, once we set out (if we are so inclined) to *evaluate* the epistemic status of everything within the category, we may find it necessary to subdivide the general category into further categories (e.g., our knowledge of other minds, the past, and so

on), and then invoke considerations about *how* we know the relevant items in each category. Again, epistemological considerations come much later.

I think that further evidence for the claim that the categories of putative knowledge that the sceptic identifies need not be understood as epistemologically integrated is, oddly enough, provided by Williams himself. We have seen that Williams' most powerful argument attempts to establish that the priority thesis and epistemological realism must be assumed in order to generate the general category "knowledge of the world." It strikes me that this argument is in tension with Williams' admission, discussed earlier, that it is non-controversial that there is a "logical gap" between experiential "knowledge" and "knowledge" of the world. If the gap is non-controversial, then it would seem that the existence of the two distinct realms of knowledge that are separated by the gap is also non-controversial. But one wonders how Williams can possibly admit this if the category "knowledge of the world" is only accorded integrity by assuming the priority thesis and epistemological realism. It would seem that if Williams really believes that these are genuine categories of knowledge, then he too must subscribe to the contentious doctrines.

Admittedly, Williams' discussion of the two categories is meant to establish that the logical gap between experiential knowledge and knowledge of the world is only epistemologically significant on the basis of prior acceptance of the priority thesis. So perhaps Williams merely assumes the existence of these categories for the sake of argument — to show what follows epistemically on the assumption that the categories

exist. So, perhaps Williams does not really believe these categories exist. Nevertheless, if one does not see the category, "knowledge of the world," as epistemically integrated — as being derived in terms of how the items within the categories are known — then one can (Williams included) admit the existence of these categories, and speak as freely about their epistemic significance and relations as Williams sometimes does (as though they really existed!)[27]

I believe that I have shown why we do not need to see the sceptic's objects of reflection as epistemologically integrated, and hence, I believe that I have disarmed Williams of his most powerful weapon against the sceptic. Thus, it seems that Williams must admit that scepticism is fully natural, and the inevitable outcome of epistemological reflection, since he agrees that this follows if it is shown that the priority thesis and epistemological realism are by-products rather than presuppositions of the investigation. Specifically, Williams agrees that the "foundationalist" reading of Descartes' observation, and the epistemic significance of the logical gap (which I argued is buttressed by the former consideration), emerge naturally *once* the sceptic's category of putative knowledge is in place.

5.8 Final Considerations

Although I think that if my objections to Williams' diagnosis of scepticism are on the mark, then he must concede that scepticism is fully natural (*given* what he believes needs to be established to show this) I also think, for some of the reasons outlined above, that all of this moves rather too quickly. Before closing, I want to

sketch briefly my differences with Williams concerning the considerations that license the sceptic to draw his absurd conclusion.

Recall that the argument Williams offers on behalf of the sceptic (based on Stroud's conception of the traditional epistemological project) to show how the priority thesis might be seen as a by-product of the investigation, claimed that the doctrine emerges "naturally" from the generality constraint of the traditional investigation, and that Williams claimed that he would be prepared to accept this conclusion (i.e., that the priority is fully intuitive) if the category, "knowledge of the world," could be established without prior acceptance of the doctrine itself. I have argued that one can establish the category without presupposing the doctrine, but I disagree with Williams that the priority thesis immediately "falls out" by the imposition of the "totality condition" alone.

Indeed, as I have argued above, there are a number of intervening steps. Since the category I have identified is extremely general, we can assume neither that there is a *single* evidential base for everything falling under the category, "everything we take ourselves to know about things that exist external to consciousness," nor, obviously, can we assume that sensory experience is the ultimate evidential base. Again, only when we come to reflect upon whether or not we know about the things within the general category, and make further categorical distinctions, are we driven by the required generality of the investigation to search for the ultimate evidential base for the sub-categories we identify.

It also strikes me that there is no *a priori* principle for determining how the sub-categories must be delineated. Some philosophers might maintain that what properly falls under the category, "knowledge of the world," includes everything that I have identified in the general category (including: other minds, objects and states of affairs in the past and future, and so on) and such philosophers might also hold (once they come to reflect upon whether and how such things are known) that there is a sole evidentiary base for everything within the category (and perhaps they might identify it as sensory experience). But notice that it would require an investigation and an *argument* to establish that this is the ultimate evidential base for everything in the category.[28]

Other philosophers, however, might identify a narrower category of knowledge of the external world. Moore, for instance, in his "Proof of the External World," identifies the category as all of our knowledge of "things to be met with in space," which may exclude the existence of other minds. I think that Moore's conception of the category, which he identifies as including (as I believe Austin once put it) "medium sized specimens of dry goods" such as hands, soap bubbles, plants, and desks, and which Moore considers to be "external" in the sense that their existence is "logically independent" of anyone's consciousness,[29] is what is typically identified as the traditional category for epistemological reflection. In any case, whatever the considerations may be for inclusion in the category, once the category is in place, questions about *whether* we know anything within the category naturally lead to

questions about *how* they are known. And once a category such as Moore's is identified, it is very natural to identify "the senses" as the basis upon which we come to believe or know anything about external things — the objects, states of affairs, and so on, that exist independently of consciousness.

At this point in the sceptic's investigation, it may seem that Williams' consideration about the imposition of the totality condition comes into play, and we are naturally led to accept the priority thesis. I think that this is partly right — I think it is true that if we want to assess all our putative knowledge about the external world at once, we cannot help ourselves to any such knowledge to show how and that we know anything within the category, but I also think that the sceptic is not immediately driven to the idea that all of our knowledge within the category must be traced to how things *appear*. Rather, he *argues* to this conclusion.

Let us reiterate, one final time, the relevant considerations of the sceptic's argument. Realizing that the occasional fallibility of the senses — of seeing, hearing, touching, etc., things external to us — does not support a general rejection of them as a basis for our knowledge of such things (and notice that there is no mention of *appearances* yet), he goes on to consider what seems to be the best possible candidate for knowing something based upon the senses; namely, a specific belief about the objects and states of affairs that he sees, hears, touches, etc., in his immediate environment (e.g. the belief that one is sitting in front of a fire, holding a piece of

paper), and he then considers whether his seeing, hearing, touching, etc., is adequate to establish that his belief really amounts to knowledge. Obviously, the sceptic is assuming that if there is a failure of knowledge in such a case, then there will be a failure of knowledge in all cases — that is, his "best possible case" is a representative for the *totality* of all of his putative knowledge of the world. But so far, there is no reason to think of the evidence of "the senses" in terms of how things appear, and it is still an open question as to whether or not the sceptic does or does not know the belief based upon them. However, once the sceptical hypotheses are introduced, the priority thesis (or the "foundationalist" reading of Descartes' observation) is quickly established. The dreaming hypothesis, for instance, shows that one's seeing and touching an external thing (e.g., a piece of paper) is perfectly compatible with there being no external thing there at all. Thus, the dreaming hypothesis establishes that one's evidence that one is in fact holding a piece of paper is that it *appears* that way. And once this is established, the logical gap between experience and the world becomes an epistemological gap, and we driven inexorably to the conclusion that knowledge and reasonable belief about the external world are impossible.

Despite my differences with Williams about what licenses this absurd conclusion, the essential point here is that I have shown how the sceptic can maintain that his conclusion is fully natural by Williams' own standards, and hence, why his theoretical diagnosis fails. By defusing the most powerful weapon in Williams' arsenal,

the sceptic can carry the burden that Williams places upon him, and show that his project, and the doubts that lead to his contentious position, are fully natural.

NOTES

[1]Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1991), 22. (Hereafter cited as *Unnatural.*)

[2]Michael Williams, "Understanding Human Knowledge Philosophically" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (Vol. LVI, No.2, June, 1996), 370.

[3]*Unnatural*, xii.

[4]*Unnatural*, 113.

[5] See Chapter 7 of *Unnatural* for Williams' arguments to show that coherence foundationalist theories involve foundationist relations of epistemic priority among beliefs within the "system." Although I find Williams' arguments for this view quite persuasive, I will not discuss them here, as they are not directly relevant to my interests. What is relevant is that Williams sometimes equates epistemological realism solely with the idea that human knowledge is essentially foundational.

[6]*Unnatural*, 292.

[7]*Unnatural*, 116.

[8]*Unnatural*, 115.

[9]It may seem that Williams' endorsement of "contextualism" as an alternative to foundationalism compromises the purity of his deflationism — that despite his efforts to offer a thoroughly negative response to scepticism he is compelled to propose a positive *theory* of knowledge after all. However, Williams stress that contextualism is not to be seen as a competing theory of knowledge at all, but rather a description of our actual justificatory practices. Thus, he claims that, at most, the view is an account of our ordinary *concept* of knowledge. It is crucial to keep in mind that, for Williams, "human knowledge" does not pick out a genuine category of knowledge, and hence, there is nothing for a theory of knowledge to be *about*.

[10]Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 57.

[11]*Unnatural*, 73.

[12]*Unnatural*, 69.

[13]It should perhaps be noted here that Williams' treats these two considerations (the logical gap and what I have been calling "Descartes' observation") as entirely separate ideas that have (mistakenly) been taken to be truisms that naturally establish scepticism. I have treated them as related ideas, and have tried to show how the sceptic might attempt to establish the epistemic significance of the logical gap by appeal to Descartes' observation. Nothing of importance hinges upon my treatment of these ideas since I agree with Williams that both considerations presuppose the priority thesis. My reason for treating them as related is to provide the strongest possible case for seeing

how the epistemic significance of the logical gap, at least, might be seen as intuitive. However, if it can be shown that priority thesis (captured in the "foundationalist reading" of Descartes' observation) is a by-product by some other means, then I think that the epistemic significance of the logical gap will have been established as well. And, despite our different treatments of these considerations, I think it is fair to say that Williams' would agree.

[14]Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1984), 209.

[15]*Unnatural*, 89.

[16]*Unnatural*, 89-90.

[17]*Unnatural*, 103.

[18]*Unnatural*, 103.

[19]*Unnatural*, 106.

[20]*Unnatural*, 104.

[21]*Unnatural*, 106.

[22]*Unnatural*, 103.

[23]Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 57.

[24]*Unnatural*, 104.

[25]*Unnatural*, 113.

[26]Michael Williams, "Understanding Human Knowledge Philosophically" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (Vol. LVI, No.2, June, 1996), 369.

[27]Notice that if Williams really does believe that the two distinct realms of knowledge exist, then in accordance with his insistence that the only way to unify the general categories of putative knowledge is by tracing them to their ultimate evidential bases, he is not only committed to the priority thesis (in order to get the category "knowledge of the world"), but it would seem that he is also committed to saying that the category of "experiential knowledge" must be unified by tracing all the items within it to their ultimate evidential basis, and so on. I take this threat of regress as more evidence that the principle of unification of the categories depends upon a distinction between what is known, not how it is known.

[28]Notice that the problem of "other minds" is often seen as the problem of inferring the existence of other people's mental states on the basis of their behavior. It might be argued that since this way of formulating the problem presupposes knowledge of other people's bodies, and since our knowledge of other bodies is based upon "the senses," the ultimate evidential basis for our knowledge of other minds is also the senses. Regardless of the merits of such an argument, the essential point here is that

determining the ultimate evidential basis for a given class of putative knowledge is a matter of investigation and argument, and not a brute presupposition that is required to talk about the class in the first place.

[29]See Moore's "Proof of an External World" in *Philosophical Papers* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1959), 127-150.

Conclusion

At the outset of this project, I argued that the definitive feature of a philosophical problem, such as the problem of the external world, is the clash between the implicit convictions embedded in our pre-theoretical or common sense outlook and practices (e.g., the conviction that we know many things about the world around us) and the absurd results of philosophy — the results of disclosing and critically reflecting upon these convictions. I also argued that the resolution of a philosophical problem requires that one attempt to reject the apparently absurd conclusions of philosophical reflection, such as that knowledge and reasonable belief about the world are impossible, in favour of the original commitments. Finally, I distinguished between two possible approaches to reclaim the commitments that are undermined by philosophical reflection — the positive or "constructive" approach, which is an attempt to firstly detect errors in the considerations that lead to absurdity, and then provide a theoretical corrective — and the negative or "deflationary" approach, which attempts to effect the reclamation merely by detecting errors.

In chapter one, I tried to illustrate, in accordance with the views of the "New Humeans," (and Stroud in particular) that the considerations that give rise to the problem of the external world are epistemological platitudes (albeit, employed in an

extraordinary context) and hence, that a deflationary approach represents the best strategy to reclaim our commitment that we have knowledge of the world. Since the reasoning that leads to the absurd conclusion apparently utilizes only the most ordinary epistemological principles, any positive attempt to refute the sceptic that tinkers with these principles will seem to deny one or more platitudes, and hence, generate more absurdity.

I have examined and criticized a number of deflationary attempts to reclaim our commitment that we know many things about the world. In one way or another, each of these strategies focuses on the most important element in the considerations that lead to scepticism about the external world; namely, the idea that all of our beliefs and putative knowledge of the world are based upon, and so owe their credibility to, sensory experience. Each of these strategies attempts to show how or why this view is mistaken without replacing it with a positive philosophical alternative — either by arguing that the view is ultimately unintelligible or unnatural.

My aim in examining these strategies has been to contribute to, and (hopefully) extend, the recent revival of interest and discussion (largely initiated by Stroud) of the problem of the external world. Specifically, I have tried to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of the various deflationary strategies that I identify, both in terms of how well they succeed in reclaiming our common sense commitment that knowledge of the world is possible (and actual), and how well they overcome the stumbling block to deflationism. We have seen that these two criteria are not, at least for the most part,

unrelated. Indeed, with the exception of Williams' theoretical diagnosis, each of the other strategies' failure to remain purely negative has a direct bearing on their success as a response to scepticism. In the remainder of this epilogue, I want to elaborate somewhat on the findings of my critique of these strategies, and offer a few comments concerning what these results suggest about the status of the problem of the external world.

It should be evident that I hold theoretical diagnosis to be the more promising of the two general deflationary strategies for reclaiming knowledge of the world. As I argued in connection with Wittgenstein's strategy, any therapeutic diagnosis — that is, any attempt to show that scepticism is unintelligible — is subject (at the very least) to the following two problems. First, such a strategy must face (and somehow overcome) the overwhelming bias that the considerations that lead to the absurd conclusion are not only *fully* intelligible, but extremely compelling, *due* to their apparent clarity and simplicity. It certainly seems that *what* the sceptic claims about the external world, and *why* he claims it, are fully intelligible. Thus, any view that tries to show that his project is less than intelligible will likely seem much more suspect and less convincing than the sceptical arguments themselves.

Second, since the therapeutic diagnostician is committed to the view that philosophical theories, questions, and problems, such as the problem of the external world, are mere "pseudo-issues" that must be "dissolved" by exposing how the considerations that generate them overstep the boundaries of intelligibility (rather than

solved by appeal to philosophical principles), it is necessary that they not invoke considerations of the same type. Unfortunately, as I argued against Wittgenstein, I do not see how it is possible to avoid invoking such considerations, since to make the charge of unintelligibility stick, one must, at some point, appeal (either implicitly or explicitly) to some view that delineates the meaningful from nonsense. Views about the nature of meaning are clearly "second order" considerations (i.e., they are *philosophical* considerations) that arise from reflection upon our ordinary ("engaged") practices and commitments, and hence, they are as "diseased" as the considerations that they are meant to cure. Thus, it appears that a therapeutic diagnosis of scepticism will be unsatisfactory to the extent that it aims to be purely negative — to "leave everything as it is." Since the appeal to a view that demarcates the intelligible from the unintelligible is itself an appeal to the latter, it will certify the diagnosis that rests upon it as "nonsense."

Theoretical diagnosticians, on the other hand, limit themselves to the much more humble aim of exposing gratuitous theoretical commitments in the considerations that lead to scepticism, and so avoid the problem of inconsistency — of "hoisting themselves on their own petards," so to speak. Thus, I believe that theoretical diagnosis is preferable to any attempt to show that scepticism is nonsense. However, as we have seen, theoretical diagnoses of scepticism are susceptible to a couple of different weaknesses. The first general problem with theoretical diagnosis is that to concede the intelligibility of scepticism, and merely attempt to expose gratuitous theoretical

commitments that lead to it (and thereby shift the burden of proof back to the sceptic) always leaves open the possibility of a direct defense of these considerations. For instance, as I tried to illustrate in my discussion of Williams' diagnosis, the sceptic may try to show that the allegedly gratuitous theoretical commitments he is charged with smuggling into his case are genuinely intuitive after all. That, of course, is precisely what I argued on behalf of the sceptic against Williams in chapter 5. We saw how (and that) it was possible for the sceptic to argue that his "foundationalism" is itself a "by-product" of otherwise innocuous considerations, and hence, is fully natural by Williams' criteria of "naturalness."

The second general problem with theoretical diagnoses, as was evidenced in my discussions of Moore and Putnam (according to one reading of latter's strategy) is that it matters a great deal where one looks for the hidden theoretical commitments. We saw how Moore's diagnosis that the sceptic simply assumes a particular analysis of what it is to know external objects (or the external world) fails because it results in a standoff concerning which of the competing analyses of knowledge is true, and this allows for a kind of second order scepticism to arise. Thus, the standoff plays out in the sceptic's favor, for if Moore's response to the sceptic is to succeed, he is required to prove a particular analysis of knowledge (which, I argued, is impossible).

Thus, unless the theoretical diagnostician finds the right point of attack, as, for instance, Williams does (by focusing on the root of the sceptic's investigation) the sceptic may not even have to defend the (allegedly) gratuitous theoretical commitments

he charged with smuggling into his arguments. Indeed, the upshot of my discussion of Moore's and Putnam's diagnoses is that *they* are the ones who wind up in the position of having to defend a positive view, and it is for this reason that their diagnoses fail to remain purely negative.

So what do these considerations suggest about the problem of the external world? I must confess that my position here is quite pessimistic. I have argued that some of the most powerful representatives of the most promising general strategy (deflationism) — each of which focuses on the most important element in the considerations that lead to scepticism (that knowledge and reasonable belief about the world must be derived from sensory experience) — all fail to reclaim our ordinary commitment that we know a great deal about the world around us. Thus, it seems that we should conclude — as Stroud seems to conclude upon completion of his superb examination and critique of a number of (mostly positive) responses to scepticism — that the sceptical conclusion is "provisionally correct," and that it appears to point to a deep paradox at the heart of the human condition. At the very least, I believe that we should conclude that no one has yet provided a persuasive account as how and why the sceptical conclusion is incorrect, and that the sceptical conclusion certainly *seems* to be not only fully intelligible, but wholly natural — it seems to rest merely upon the most commonplace of considerations. And this, of course, suggests that the prospects are rather bleak that an acceptable diagnosis of scepticism is forthcoming.

Nevertheless, I think we must bear in mind that to conclude that scepticism appears to be correct is just to point to the *problem* of the external world — to the conflict between the everyday and philosophical perspectives. For it remains true that the sceptical conclusion that knowledge and reasonable belief about the world is impossible is totally unbelievable to common sense. Whatever conviction sceptical arguments engender is transient: even the most ardent believer ceases to be a sceptic (at least in deed) once he leaves the study. Thus, those of us who are uneasy with the tension between the common sense and philosophical perspectives — that is, those of us who believe that regardless of how persuasive scepticism may appear, there must nevertheless be *something* amiss in the considerations that lead to such an absurdity — will continue to feel the pull to discover exactly what is amiss, no matter how bleak the prospects may seem.

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