

## WITTGENSTEINIAN CERTAINTIES

Crispin Wright

G.E. Moore's 'A Defense of Common Sense' was first published in 1925 and his 'Proof of an External World' fourteen years later.<sup>1</sup> Apparently Wittgenstein had a long-standing interest in these papers and during the last eighteen months of his life, stimulated<sup>2</sup> by discussions with Norman Malcolm while his house guest in Ithaca in 1949, he composed the four short sets of rough notes we now have as *On Certainty*. My question here is whether these notes gesture at a principled and stable response to the issue at which Moore's papers had been directed – the issue of scepticism, and particularly scepticism about our knowledge of the material world. My eventual and hesitant answer will be: yes – though the development here must be sketchy and incomplete. It will be focused upon one specific though very general form of sceptical argument – certainly as disturbing as any – which we may begin by eliciting, ironically enough, from consideration of something that was supposed to help: Moore's curious 'Proof' itself.

### 1 Moore's 'Proof' and scepticism

The greater part of Moore's 'Proof of an External World' is devoted to grinding rumination on what it means to describe objects as 'external', or 'outside our minds' or 'presented in space' or 'to be met with in space'. No particularly startling consequences are elicited to reward the reader's ordeal. And the actual 'Proof' – which everyone on first reading feels blatantly begs the question – is confined to the last few pages. Here is the essence of it:

Premise	Here is a hand
Conclusion	There is a material world (since any hand is a material object existing in space)

where the premise is asserted in a context where Moore, as he supposes, is holding his hands up in front of his face, in good light, in a state of visual and cognitive lucidity, etc.

Why is this so clearly unsatisfactory? It is not that Moore is working with some outré concept of proof: his concept of a proof is that of a valid argument from known or warranted premises.<sup>3</sup> That seems pretty standard.<sup>4</sup> And the argument given is (trivially) valid. Nor is it happy to say that the problem is that Moore doesn't first prove his premise. He can perfectly fairly point out that it cannot always be reasonable to demand proof of the premises of a proof – sometimes we must claim knowledge without proof, or proof cannot get started (Moore 1939: 169–70). Moreover the premise – so Moore can plausibly contend – is probably more certain, in the relevant context, than the least certain premise in any sceptical argument, even the best.<sup>5</sup> Still, the offered 'Proof' surely isn't a proper proof at all.

The general issue this raises is under what circumstances a valid argument is indeed at the service of *proof* – i.e. the generation of a rational acceptance of the truth of its conclusion – or the rational overcoming of doubt about it. I have addressed this question – the question, in what is becoming standard terminology, of when a particular epistemic warrant for its premises *transmits across* an entailment – in some detail in other work.<sup>6</sup> But here we only need one very intuitive thought about it. To wit: a particular warrant for the premises of an entailment is transmitted to its conclusion only when one's path *to* that warrant does not require picking up knowledge of the conclusion en route, or depend on some form of prior entitlement to it. Obviously that condition will not be met in explicitly circular arguments, when the very conclusion features among the premises. But there are other cases where it is contravened in a more subtle manner.

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

Such examples suggest that the normal empirical case is *information-dependence* of warrant. A body of evidence, *e*, is an information-dependent warrant for a particular proposition *P* if whether *e* is correctly regarded as warranting *P* depends on what one has by way of collateral information. Consider any case in which one's collateral information, *I*, does indeed sustain *e*'s warranting *P* but in which *e* could not rationally be regarded as warranting *P* if certain elements of *I* were missing and uncompensated for. Such a relationship is always liable to generate examples of transmission failure: it will do

so just when the particular *e*, P and I have the feature that needed elements of the relevant I are themselves entailed by P (together perhaps with other warranted premises). In that case, any warrant supplied by *e* for P will not be transmissible to those elements of I. Warrant would be transmitted in such a case only if a rational thinker could cite as her ground for accepting I the fact that she has warrant for P together with the entailment. No rational thinker could do that if the warrant for P supplied by *e* depends on prior and independent warrant for I in the first place.

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

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

So you naturally infer:

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

P entails:

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

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

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

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

There is a defeasible inference from that to:

- (P) That girl is Jessica.

and an entailment from there to:

- (I) That girl is not Jocelyn.

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

Third, consider (SOCCER), involving as evidence:

- (*e*) Jones has just headed the ball into the net, he is being congratulated by team-mates and the crowd has gone wild.

That provides a defeasible warrant for:

- (P) Jones has just scored a goal.

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

- (I) A game of soccer is taking place.

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

Finally, compare (ELECTION):

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

- (P) Jones has just voted.

- (I) An election is taking place.

Again, we have, in *e*, a good but defeasible warrant for P, which in turn entails I. But suppose the context is that of a society which holds electoral drills – practice elections – rather as we now hold fire drills. And suppose that they are held pretty much as frequently as real elections, so that – unless we have some further relevant background information – it is as likely that Jones is participating in a drill as in the real thing. Then in this situation, Jones' writing an X on a ballot paper stops providing a warrant – even a defeasible one – for his voting. If all we know is that a drill is as likely as the real thing,

and that Jones has written an X on a ballot paper, we have no better reason to suppose that he has voted than to suppose that he has not. However, given independent corroboration of I, *e* once again becomes a warrant for P – only, for exactly analogous reasons as before, not one transmissible across the entailment to I.<sup>7</sup>

The form of scepticism that I want to elicit by reflection on Moore's 'Proof' will begin, plausibly enough, by claiming an analogy between the 'Proof' and the foregoing examples. The sceptic will insist that Moore did not formulate his 'Proof' properly – that he begins in the wrong place, since his premise is something which rests on more basic evidence and is thus more properly viewed as a lemma. A more explicit formulation would rather be something like this (MOORE):

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

Therefore:

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

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

Now, this scepticism is implicitly taking it, of course, that perceptual warrant is indirect: that in acquiring such a warrant, one starts with something more basic – information about the character of one's own state of consciousness – and then moves by a defeasible step to a claim about the local environment. This idea would go with a broadly Lockean view of experience as drawing a kind of 'veil' between the subject and the external world – a mode of activity within an inner theatre, whose specific happenings would be

intrinsically indifferent to whether they occurred in a dream, or in an episode of veridical perception, or in a delusion in waking life. But – it is important to realise – the sceptical argument doesn't need the Lockean view. The essence of the former is that our beliefs about the local perceptible environment have their rational basis in elements of our own *subjectivity* – in how things are with us. It is perfectly consistent with this to grant, as against Locke and in sympathy with those philosophers who have urged that we think of perception as a form of direct acquaintance with the world, that perceiving and, say, dreaming are states of consciousness of a quite different *logical structure*, with literally nothing in common (what has come to be known as the disjunctivist view<sup>8</sup>). For (MOORE) *e* can still serve, even so, as a *neutral description* – neutral, that is to say, with respect to which of the possible 'disjuncts' a present state of consciousness exemplifies – of one's subjective informational state. And the thought is so far unchallenged that it is on information so conceived that the ultimate justification for our perceptual beliefs must rest. Once one accepts that thought, the comparison of Moore's 'Proof' with the four examples and the resultant diagnosis provided of its intuitively question-begging character – that it overlooks the information-dependence of the most basic kind of evidence for perceptual claims – is, I think, compelling. In any case, one kind of material world scepticism certainly so conceives the justificational architecture of perceptual claims. So Moore is begging the question against that adversary at least.<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, though, to recognise that there is a transmission failure involved in, for example, (ELECTION) and (SOCCER) (in the contexts described) does not itself invite *scepticism* about the existence of elections and soccer games. Likewise the collapse of Moore's 'Proof' does not, by itself, invite scepticism about the material world. The form of sceptical argument that now confronts us turns on pressing this question: what – if Moore's warrant for his original premise is information-dependent – could put the needed collateral information (in particular, that there is a material world) in place? Not an inference from any specific proposition about it – that would beg the question, just as Moore did. But how on earth else? The emergent sceptical challenge denies that there is any other way. Specifically, it involves these *five claims*:

- 1 That there is no way of justifying particular beliefs about the material world save on the basis of the (inconclusive) evidence provided by our states of consciousness.
- 2 Such evidence for any particular proposition about the material world depends for its force on collateral information that the material world so much as exists – it would not be warranted to treat how things seem to us as evidence for claims about our immediate physical environment if we were antecedently agnostic about the existence of a material world.

Ergo:

- 3 Our belief that there is a material world cannot without circularity be based on an accumulation of such evidence for the truth of particular propositions about it.
- 4 But there is *nothing else* on which a belief in the existence of the material world might be rationally based.
- 5 And that belief needs justification since it is a simple, if very general contingency and could, after all, be false.

It is, of course, the counterparts of claim 5 that – by ordinary standards of confirmation – fail for the case of (SOCCER) and (ELECTION). But if each of claims 1 to 5 is accepted, then the upshot is that our entire ‘language game’ concerning the material world turns out to be based upon an assumption for which we have no ground whatever, can in principle get no ground whatever, and which could – for all we know – be false. That seems about as strong a sceptical conclusion as one could wish for (or hope to avoid).

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

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

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

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

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

And: type III propositions could be false.

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

I Jones’ shin bone is visibly shattered and he is thrashing about on the turf. His face is contorted and he is yelling and screaming.

II Jones is in pain.

Therefore:

III There are other minds.

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

It is doubtless superfluous to run through the parallel considerations concerning (SEAWEED):

I There is a line of fresh seaweed on the beach some fifty yards above the ocean.

II The seaweed was washed up by the tide some hours ago.

Therefore:

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

and (BASIC INDUCTION):

I All observed As have been Bs.



## II All As are Bs.

Therefore:

III Some properties are exceptionlessly co-instantiated with others  
(nature is uniform – at least to some extent).

Notice that in no case is it being claimed that the relevant type III proposition provides information *sufficient* to justify the relevant I-to-II transition. The suggestion is rather that collateral information encompassing that proposition is at least *necessary* if the type I proposition is to support the type II proposition; and that the opportunities for acquiring that necessary collateral information are limited in the manner indicated by the generalised versions of the first four of the five claims given above.

Although the I-II-III pattern of sceptical argument has this wide potential generality, there is no initial reason, of course, why the most effective responses to it should be uniform through its various applications. In particular, when it is applied to our beliefs concerning the material world, many philosophers will be tempted by one of two kinds of riposte whose generalisation to other cases would be stretched, or even definitely mistaken. First, some may simply want to reject the inferential architecture which the argument presupposes. According to the argument, the ultimate warrant for claims about the local perceptible environment is supplied by inference from aspects of our subjectivity – from propositions about how things are with us (no matter whether that in turn is given a Lockean or disjunctivist cast). Yet these propositions, for their part, are then conceived as known *non-inferentially*. The question may therefore occur: with what right is the domain of non-inferential warrant – presupposed, of course, if there is to be such a thing as inferential warrant at all – restricted in this way and not allowed to extend outward in the first place to propositions concerning the experienced world? Second, even if that question has a good answer, and we are forced to acknowledge the inferential base for claims about the material world in propositions about subjectivity, there is still scope to question whether the evidential bearing of the latter is properly viewed as information-dependent – whether the evidence of appearances does not rather – in the best circumstances – provide a priori *unconditional* (though defeasible) support for propositions about local perceptibles.<sup>10</sup> If either of these reservations could be made good, the framework demanded by I-II-III scepticism about the material world would be undermined.<sup>11</sup>

However, the plausibility of these two forms of riposte diminishes when we move to other subject matters. While there are temptations – evinced in the treatment of the notion of a *criterion* in the first generation of commentary on the *Philosophical Investigations* – to try to make out that agents' behaviour provides information-independent (though still defeasible) grounds for claims

about their mental states, it would seem – to this writer at least – merely quixotic to attempt to construe claims about others' attitudes and sensations as having a non-inferential epistemology.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, neither tactic seems at all plausible for the case of claims about the remote past (the past beyond living memory). And when it comes to simple empirical induction, the first tactic amounts to a denial of a datum of the problem – that induction is a kind of defeasible *inference* – while the powerful intuitive tug of Hume's problem is testimony to the sense we have that, strictly, the justifiability of this pattern of inference does indeed call for a piece of information (the principle of the Uniformity of Nature: that is, the continuing inductive amenability of the world) for which, as generations of philosophers have found, it is hard to make out any warrant.

Our concern now is nevertheless going to be with one possibility for a uniform response – perhaps better: a uniform *attitude* – to I-II-III scepticism. This will involve pursuing an idea that features in *On Certainty* but in a way that Wittgenstein himself did not explicitly develop it, and doing so in a spirit – perhaps – that is in some respects at odds with his later philosophy of language. The crux will be to point to a possible case that we are within our epistemic rights, as it were, in accepting the type III propositions that we do, their evidential predicament notwithstanding.

## 2 Norms of enquiry

The preoccupation of *On Certainty*<sup>13</sup> with Moore's two papers, even when Moore is not being explicitly mentioned, is evident to anyone who reads it with those discussions in mind. Perhaps the single most prominent and distinctive theme of these last writings of Wittgenstein is his insistence on a contrast, missing from Moore, between knowledge properly so regarded – that is, a state of cognitive *achievement*, based on completed enquiry – and a much wider class of *certainties*: propositions which 'stand fast' for us not because they have won through under scrutiny of relevant evidence but because, so he suggests, they are somehow presuppositional and basic in the very process of gathering and assessing evidence or within our more general 'world picture'. He writes:

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.

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

(OC 151–2)

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

... 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.

(OC 94)

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

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

(OC 95)

*The truth*

– he had better mean: not the fact of the truth but our *acceptance* as true –

of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference.

(OC 83)

A little more explicitly:

Here I am inclined to fight windmills, because I cannot yet say the thing I really want to say.

I want to say: propositions of the form of empirical propositions, and not only propositions of logic, form the foundation of all operating with thoughts (with language). – This observation is not of the form ‘I know ...’. ‘I know ...’ states what *I* know, and that is not of logical interest.

(OC 400–1)

This sheds light on the character of Wittgenstein’s interest in Moore’s discussions. What, it would seem, impressed him about ‘A Defense of Common

Sense’ in particular was not its official line – Moore’s insistence that ‘I know, with certainty’ each of the propositions he listed there, while conceding that he did not know their ‘correct analysis’ – but the *contents* of the list and the reminder of the special place of these propositions which Moore, almost without realising it, contrived to provide:

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

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

We don’t, for example, arrive at any of them as a result of investigation.

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

(OC 136–8)

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

*On Certainty* presents a number of ideas about that. One relatively clear and salient notion is proposed in the passage which introduces the famous metaphor of the river-bed. It runs in full as follows:

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.

The mythology<sup>14</sup> may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement

of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.

But if someone were to say 'So logic too is an empirical science' he would be wrong. Yet this is right: the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing.

And the bank [sic] of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited.

(OC 96–9)

This passage is commonly – and naturally – read as resonating with the so-called Duhem–Quine thesis, that propositions confront experience not individually but in integrated clusters, thereby presenting a range of revisionary options when awkward cases arise.<sup>15</sup> The 'hardened' propositions would then be those to which we accord a relative (or even something verging on absolute) immobility, so that the revisionary impact is channelled, via the lines of integration, elsewhere.

Although Wittgenstein was explicitly setting his sights on 'propositions of the form of empirical propositions, and not only propositions of logic', he was – like Quine after him, and independently – attracted by this thought as an account – or reconstruction – of our intuitive conception of the *necessity* (or analyticity: Quine made no distinction) of logic and mathematics ('the hardness of the logical *must*' (RFM I 121)). Necessity, on this proposal, is a matter of (near-) absolute *entrenchment*: the necessity of  $13 + 7 = 20$ , for instance, consists in the fact that we so use that proposition that nothing is allowed to falsify it.<sup>16</sup> Imagine that you count the pieces of fruit in a bowl containing just satsumas and bananas. You get thirteen satsumas and then seven bananas but when you count all the fruits together, you get twenty-one. Yet you seem to have made no mistake, and no piece of fruit is added or removed – so it seems – during the three counts. So you have evidence for each of the following four propositions individually:

- that there are thirteen satsumas in the bowl;
- that there are seven bananas in the bowl;
- that there are twenty-one pieces of fruit in the bowl;
- that every piece of fruit in the bowl is a satsuma or a banana.

Then, according to the mooted account, the necessity of  $13 + 7 = 20$  is somehow grounded in the fact that such appearances are not *allowed* collectively to stand as veridical. Rather, we inexorably dismiss them out of hand – 'You must have miscounted somewhere', 'Another piece of fruit must somehow have been slipped in', etc.<sup>17</sup> The rule is that the proposition that  $13 + 7 = 20$

is to 'stand fast', so the appearances are accordingly discounted and an obligation thereby created – if the situation is to be explained – that fault be found with at least one in particular of the four propositions and hence with the evidence that provides for the appearance of their simultaneous truth:

The mathematical proposition has, as it were officially, been given the stamp of incontestability, i.e.: 'Dispute about other things; *this* is immovable – it is a hinge on which your dispute can turn.'

(OC 655)

However – its distinguished provenance notwithstanding – there is cause to regard this as a quite misguided proposal about logical and mathematical necessity. In effect, it conflates necessity with confidence.<sup>18</sup> The judgement that a proposition, P, holds of necessity may without any incongruity be quite *tentative*, and this tentativeness may extend to the judgement that P itself. That will be the situation, for instance, wherever one judges tentatively that P but confidently that if P, then necessarily P. There are such cases even when the necessity in question is conceptual. An example might be a formal axiom proposed as a faithful capture of some informal mathematical concept, or a purported explication of one, such as Church's Thesis. The judgement that P is necessary is a (possibly qualified) judgement *about* P with a particular content – the content, roughly, that the proposition may be relied upon in reasoning about an arbitrary *hypothetical* situation. It is not (just) a judgement *of* P – i.e. of P's *actual* truth – made with especial sureness. It is simply a muddle to identify the two.

Although the Wittgensteinian (Quinean) idea therefore offers a lame account of the *meaning* of a claim of logical or mathematical necessity, we can acknowledge that the *kind of usage* to which the quoted passages from *On Certainty* invite attention is nevertheless importantly characteristic of basic logical and mathematical propositions in empirical application. But presumably Wittgenstein meant more than merely to log a reminder of this aspect of their use. Individual experiences, when they are mistaken, do not themselves communicate that they are. The conception of experience as a *fallible* indicator of how matters stand in the world is wholly dependent on our possession of principles for appraising *clusters* of experiences and adjudging them collectively misleading – 'recalcitrant' in Quine's favoured vocabulary. If we lacked any principled way of undertaking such appraisal, we would lack the means for empirical belief revision and thereby – arguably – empirical belief itself. Wittgenstein's underlying idea, prominent in both *On Certainty* and the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, is that (some of) the needed principles of appraisal are provided in the guise of the certainties of elementary logic and mathematics; and that the unwavering – dogmatic – confidence we repose in these propositions, rather than being the product of a different kind of – superlatively sure, a priori – form of cognition, at-

taches to them in their role as, in effect, *rules*: norms of enquiry whose job it is to regulate the appraisal of empirical evidence after the fashion I illustrated whereby the proposition that  $13 + 7 = 20$  determines that the experiences which motivate the four listed propositions may not all be allowed to stand as veridical.

This general idea contrasts with a more traditional, rationalist way of seeing things. According to traditional rationalism, the non-veridicality of the pool of experiences which collectively motivate the four listed propositions would be regarded as a *prior fact*: it is, as it were, *already* the case that the four propositions are mutually inconsistent, whatever principles of appraisal we do or do not use, and a sound arithmetic had better respect the point. On this view, logic and mathematics are answerable to predetermined constraints incorporated in the antecedent meanings of the statements among which they provide for inferential traffic. The rejection of this general conception is a dominant theme of the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*.<sup>19</sup> It belongs with the general rejection in Wittgenstein's later work of the broad conception of the relationship between language and the world which he had lionised in the *Tractatus*, and the associated invention of a category of 'grammatical' propositions whose role, rather than to reflect aspects of any supposed kind of logical, mathematical or metaphysical reality, is to regulate the language game and thereby to play a role in constituting the meanings of moves within it.

What is new in *On Certainty* is the extension of this radical and problematic thought to empirical-seeming propositions, and also its qualification – allowing for its extension to yet a further range of examples – in two ways. First, it is now emphasised that the resilience accorded to such norms in the face of awkward experiences need not be absolute – it can be a matter of degree, so that a proposition which functions for a time as a norm may eventually, in the light of empirical developments, be deprived that role.<sup>20</sup> That kind of shift is explicitly canvassed in the river-bed passage and it is, of course, precisely the kind of transformation which Quine, in 'Two Dogmas', urged as a possibility even for basic logic and mathematics. Second, the regulative role of empirical propositions that have been 'hardened' may be relativised to context, so that a proposition which in some circumstances functions as a norm of empirical enquiry may in others be its object. Such is the status, Wittgenstein suggests, of 'I have two hands':

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 position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it.

(OC 250)

In normal circumstances, 'I have two hands' will function as a norm. My

certainty that I have two hands will 'stand fast' above the flow of evidence making, e.g. the sight of my hands into a confirmation of the functioning of my visual system, rather than of their existence. By the same token, were I to have a – visual, or tactual – impression that I did *not* have two hands, then I should treat it just on that account as unreliable. But of course in abnormal circumstances – when I am recovering consciousness after surgery in which doctors have tried to save my badly damaged hand, or emerging in shock from the debris of a terrorist bomb attack – the proposition becomes a straightforwardly empirical one.

Against this, there is an inclination to protest that – rather than calling attention to any rule-like function – the example merely attests to the differing degrees of *empirical* confidence that may attach to one and the same proposition in different circumstances. But I do not think Wittgenstein needs to be read as saying anything antithetical to the idea that one's confidence, for example that one has two hands, is ultimately empirically based. The thrust is rather that if your certainty that you have two hands would dominate a sensory impression that represented them as *missing*, then you are implicitly prioritising one kind of evidence – something like: your lifelong experience of yourself as handed, together with the absence from your experience of any worrying tendency of material objects abruptly and inexplicably to go missing – over another. And that priority is not itself justified by *experience*:

But isn't it experience that teaches us to judge like *this*, that is to say, that it is correct to judge like *this*? But how does experience *teach* us, then? *We* may derive it from experience, but experience does not direct us to derive anything from experience. If it is the *ground* of our judging like *this*, and not just the cause, still we do not have a ground for seeing this in turn as a ground.

(OC 130)

When a statement such as 'I have two hands' functions as a norm of description, it may still express an empirically based belief. But the Wittgensteinian point is that its normative role is not imposed by that empirical basis. In treating the proposition as a norm, we are implicitly taking it that the basis in question constitutes *superior* evidence. And it is not itself a thesis justified by experience that the evidence in question is superior:

What counts as an adequate test of a statement belongs to logic. It belongs to the description of the language-game.

(OC 82)

Again: norms-in-context, as we might call them, may have evidential support drawn from outside the relevant context. But if they do, their relative certainty will reflect an assessment of the weight of that support which is

not itself evidentially grounded but belongs with the 'logic' of the language-game.

### 3 Other 'hinges'

'Hardened' propositions are, however, only one of a number of different kinds of example offered in Wittgenstein's notes of the overarching idea expressed in the following celebrated passage:

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

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

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.

My *life* consists in my being content to accept many things.

(OC 341–4)

That overarching idea is, roughly that empirical practice – having a 'life' – presupposes unearned certainties, propositions 'exempt from doubt'. Propositions which serve in one way or another as rules for our 'scientific investigations' are natural candidates for such 'hinge' status. But how far does the range of unearned certainties extend? Maybe mathematical propositions have 'as it were officially, been given the stamp of incontestability' but, Wittgenstein writes:

... one can *not* say that of the proposition that *I* am called L.W. Nor of the proposition that such-and-such people have calculated such-and-such a problem correctly.

(OC 656)

This is a peculiar passage. To be sure, the proposition which identifies my name would be naturally classified along with 'I have two hands' as a potential norm-in-context: a proposition whose relative certainty would dominate *prima facie* evidence to the contrary – for instance, the persistent delivery to my home of mail addressed otherwise – in much the manner in which 'I have two hands' might dominate a failure to perceive one's hands when very cold in pitch darkness. So OC 656 might reasonably be taken as emphasising a difference between norms-in-context and 'officially' incontestable, or 'fossilised' (OC 657) propositions, like those of simple mathematics. But then what are we to make of Wittgenstein's pairing of 'I am called L.W.' with – to make what I take it is an irrelevant reformulation – 'This calculation has been done

correctly'. Norms-in-context present what we may call *standing* certainties – certainties one *brings to* any normal context, as contrasted with convictions *acquired in* a particular context. But that such-and-such a calculation has been done correctly would be verified by a routine investigation – it would seem to be a case of normal *knowledge*, resting on cognitive achievement and concerning a specific situation. It does not seem to be, in the sense that interests us, a 'hinge' at all. So what comparison is Wittgenstein making?

Possibly this. It is a common characteristic of some standing certainties – like 'I am called so-and-so' – and some contextually acquired ones – like 'That calculation has been done correctly' – that our confidence in them is fundamental in the sense that disturbing it would be epistemically catastrophic:

... not only do I never have the slightest doubt that I am called that, but there is no judgement I could be certain of if I started doubting about that.

(OC 490)<sup>21</sup>

To doubt that I rightly take my name to be 'Crispin Wright' would have the effect of putting in jeopardy a huge amount of what I normally take for granted about myself – how could I be mistaken about my name unless I am mistaken about enormously much else besides? A shadow would be cast over all of the large framework of personal beliefs in which my life – my history, family and projects – are defined for me, and thereby implicitly over all the routine empirical means by which I have arrived at them and had them reinforced on countless occasions. But *this* is true of some contextually acquired certainties as well: how could I be mistaken about the correctness of this calculation (after I have checked and double-checked it, asked you to do the same, and so on) without calling into question the reliability of my best methods of checking such things and indeed my senses and faculties in general?

If I don't trust *this* evidence, why should I trust *any* evidence?

(OC 672, second emphasis added)

So Wittgenstein appears to have in mind at least two different distinctions: on the one hand, that between rules governing enquiry and the propositional objects of enquiry; and on the other, that between beliefs whose revision would consist with our general methodology for appraising belief and beliefs to jettison which would be potentially catastrophic, leaving us with no principled conception of what kind of evidence might generally be relied upon in other contexts. But there is an underlying more general notion: it is the idea of a 'hinge' proposition as a kind of 'certainty of methodology', as it were – a proposition a doubt about which would somehow commit one to doubting

not just particular beliefs which we already hold but aspects of the way we habitually appraise beliefs, 'our method of doubt and enquiry'.

Very well. But how does this incipient taxonomy connect with the kind of 'hinge' illustrated in this passage?

I have a telephone conversation with New York. My friend tells me that his young trees have buds of such and such a kind. I am now convinced that his tree is . . . Am I also convinced that the earth exists?

The existence of the earth is rather part of the whole *picture* which forms the starting-point of belief for me.

Does my telephone call to New York strengthen my conviction that the earth exists?

Much seems to be fixed, and it is removed from the traffic. It is so to speak shunted onto an unused siding.

Now it gives our way of looking at things, and our researches, their form. Perhaps it was once disputed. But perhaps, for unthinkable ages, it has belonged to the *scaffolding* of our thoughts. (Every human being has parents.)

(OC 208–11)

Here, strikingly, Wittgenstein comes close<sup>22</sup> to formulating an example of the very character I used earlier to illustrate failures of transmission:

(e) My New York friend tells me over the phone that his trees have buds of such and such a kind.

(P) His trees do have buds of such-and such a kind.

So:

(I) The Earth exists.

The initial question of OC 210 is of course rhetorical – there is no question of transmission of the warrant supplied by *e* for *P* across the entailment to *I*. But the metaphor of 'shunting onto an unused siding', followed by 'Perhaps it was once disputed', reveals that Wittgenstein is not fully clear about what is here in effect a type III proposition – about what is distinctive about it. If a proposition is to serve as a norm of enquiry in the manner of either of the two models earlier distinguished – the respective models of '13 + 7 = 20' and 'I have two hands' – then it has to be such as to allow of at least *potentially* disconfirming experience. If it is to be significant to speak of **exempting a proposition from** doubt, it has first to be such that experience might otherwise, in a context of suitable other beliefs, call it into question

– might seem to go against it. And whatever its merit as a proposal about the status in our thought of some of his examples, this general idea is not apt for propositions like 'The earth exists' (OC 210), 'The earth has existed during the last hundred years' (OC 138), 'The earth has existed for many years past' (OC 411) and 'This table remains in existence when no one is paying attention to it' (OC 163).<sup>23</sup> There is no content in the image of our long ago removing 'The earth exists' from the hurly-burly of empirical rail traffic unless we can envisage how the use of that proposition might have gone in a setting *before* it got 'shunted onto an unused siding' – becoming part of the 'scaffolding' of our thought. But what might we *ever* have counted as potential evidence *against* the existence of the earth? Here there is simply no clear content to the idea of even a *prima facie* disconfirmation, so any comparison with norms-in-context or more completely 'fossilised' norms is inappropriate. Evidence cannot count against a type III proposition – if it could, it could count *for* the hypothesis that there is indeed no material world (or that all other humans are zombies, that the world is indeed no more than five seconds old and that there are no inductive regularities).

The other point of comparison – that a doubt would involve extensive undermining of investigative procedures and norms of assessment – is more apt. Suspension of confidence in a type III proposition would indeed have the effect of undermining a whole genre of evidence and thereby disabling all empirical enquiry – into the past, or the future, or the external material world, or the mental states of others – of one particular very general kind. But there is a difference here as well, to do with *how* a doubt would generate this destructive effect. Before, we had in view a class of propositions doubting which would mean doubting the weight of a body of evidence which is normally taken overwhelmingly to support them, and therefore being forced to doubt the relevance of that evidence; in short, propositions such that, as Wittgenstein puts it, everything speaks for them and nothing against them (OC 203). But in doubting a type III proposition, one would not be setting oneself against any overwhelming body of evidence. We don't have any evidence for them, for it is a peculiarity of their situation that they are beyond *supportive* evidence too. As the sceptical argument shows, if confidence in them were once suspended, no evidence could make it rational to reinstate them again.

#### 4 Scepticism unhinged?

Let's take stock. No doubt a much more fine-grained account of Wittgenstein's (and Moore's) examples would be possible, but we have done enough to suggest the following loose generic characterisation of the 'hinges on which our doubts turn'. Such beliefs are ones whose rejection would rationally necessitate extensive reorganisation of – or more, might even just throw into confusion – our highly complex conception of what kind of thing should

be taken as evidence for what kind of proposition. We have observed three salient classifications:

- 1 propositions (simple arithmetical equalities, 'I have two hands') which it is our practice, always or normally, to insulate from disconfirming evidence, and which thereby serve as, in effect, rules for the evaluation – re-direction – of the significance of such evidence;
- 2 propositions ('My name is C.W.', 'This calculation is correct') which are supported by – by normal standards – an overwhelming body of evidence, whose significance would have to be overridden if they were doubted;
- 3 propositions of type III ('The earth exists', 'Physical objects continue to exist when unperceived', 'The earth has existed for many years past') to doubt which would have the effect of undermining our confidence in a whole species of proposition, by calling into question the bearing of our most basic kinds of evidence for propositions of that kind.

These groupings capture, as we have seen, a variety of significantly different kinds of case, the most important dimension of difference being what kind of evidential support their members in principle allow of or whether they allow of evidential support at all. The cases are, however, unified – so I read Wittgenstein as suggesting – by their constituting or reflecting our implicit acceptance of various kinds of *rules of evidence*: rules for assessing the specific bearing of evidence among a range of germane propositions, rules for assessing the priorities among different kinds of evidence, and rules connecting certain kinds of evidence with certain kinds of subject matter. One dominant theme of *On Certainty* is that some things that Moore misguidedly took himself to know are actually effectively the articulation, in declarative propositional garb, of such rules, our unhesitating acceptance of which allows for no defence in terms of the idea of knowledge. And the reader forms the impression – though I do not know that it could be decisively corroborated by explicit quotation – that it was meant to go with that theme that our accepting the propositions in question is likewise not to be *criticised* in terms of the idea of *failure* of knowledge. The Sceptic's attack was to be pre-empted by the same idea that undercuts Moore's 'Defense'.

But how *exactly* might the reflections outlined contribute towards the dissolution of sceptical doubt? The central thrust of knowledge-sceptical argument, of whatever stripe, is, after all, precisely that what we count as the acquisition of knowledge, or justification, rests on groundless presuppositions. So, far from saying anything to offset that charge, Wittgenstein seems open to the complaint that he has merely elaborated the theme. How does it help to have a reminder in detail of the various *kinds* of groundless assumption that we make? So long as it is uncontested that these assumptions *are* both essential – in the sense that we cannot avoid them – and groundless – in the

sense that we can produce no reason for thinking them to be true – isn't the sceptical point effectively taken? Yet Wittgenstein is completely explicit:

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

(OC 253)

Since *On Certainty* is not a sceptical treatise, Wittgenstein's idea can only be that taking the point about groundlessness doesn't impose the consequences usually thought to attach to it – in particular, that to recognise that enquiry is inevitably founded on unfounded beliefs need not call all our procedures into question, or expose them as being somehow arbitrary and irrational, or open the flood gates to all manner of prejudice and dogma. But how are those consequences avoided?

It may seem obvious. The key idea, someone may say, is surely that of *rule*. In each of the three kinds of case that we have distinguished, it is the suggestion of *On Certainty* that a proposition's 'standing fast' for us is to be attributed to its playing a role in or reflecting some aspect of *the way we regulate* enquiry, rather than being presumed – erroneously – to be an especially solid *product* of it. Sceptical argument purports to disclose a lack of cognitive pedigree in a targeted range of commitments. Rules, however, *don't need* a cognitive pedigree. The *merit* of a rule may be discussible: rules can be inept, in various ways. But, since they *define* a practice, they cannot be *wrong*. Any sort of *sceptical* concern about our warrant to accept a proposition whose role is actually to express or otherwise reflect such a rule is thus a kind of *ignoratio elenchi*.<sup>24</sup>

However, the thought is, of course, much too swift. For one thing, it won't cover all the cases: if the account given of norms-in-context is as proposed above, then their normative status *does* presuppose a degree of cognitive pedigree and might therefore be undercut by a successful sceptical attack on that. But the real trouble is more general. Rules governing a practice can be excused from any external constraint – so just 'up to us', as it were – only if the practice itself has no overall point which a badly selected rule might frustrate. But that is hardly how we think of empirical enquiry. Empirical enquiry does par excellence have an overall point, namely – it may seem the merest platitude to say – the divination of what is true and the avoidance of what is false of the world it concerns. So 'rules of evidence' must presumably answer to this overall point. It will therefore seem as though there has to be a good question whether and with what right we suppose that the rules we actually rely on in empirical enquiry are conducive to that point. Let it be that the certainty of basic arithmetic, for example, reflects its regulative role, its serving as a constraint upon the acceptance of certain kinds of sequences of *appearances* as veridical and hence as a control upon the use of statements such as 'You miscounted somewhere along the line'



and 'Another object was added to the group while the count was in progress' which it bids us to affirm when, for example, things do not 'add up'. Still, these would seem to be claims with an *independent meaning* and – presumably, at least in a wide class of cases – determinate truth-values. To regard simple arithmetic as a compendium of rules for the appraisal of evidence therefore provides no easy escape from the thought that, in making such appraisals, it is a prime desideratum that we not be led to *misassess* the truth-values of such non-arithmetical statements as lie within its sphere of influence. To regard arithmetic – and logic – as regulative of the 'language-game' does not enjoin that they should be absolved from *conservativeness* with respect to the correct assessment of the statements whose use they regulate.

An analogous point engages our practices of treating one kind of evidence as superior to another. Of course there is a complex ranking here: it matters, for instance, whether perceptual impressions are repeatable and whether they are single- or multi-sense; how they stack up against memory impressions, and the products of empirical theorising; and how they relate to the testimony of others. I suggested that when an empirical proposition is treated as a norm-in-context – in the fashion of 'I have two hands' – that will reflect aspects of this background ranking. But the point of the ranking – one would naturally suppose – is to lead one to give relative weight, in cases of conflict, to the species of evidence that are most likely to promote true belief. So, again, the ranking has an external objective, and one cannot absolve it from all concern about its fitness for that just by reflecting that the priorities it involves have the character for us of rules of procedure.

The case of type III propositions is perhaps the most stark of all. To allow that 'The earth has existed for many years past' serves as a rule of evidence – plays a role in determining our conception of the significance of presently available states and processes – is not even superficially in tension with thinking of it as a substantial proposition, apt to be true or false. It goes without saying that our conception of the significance of items of evidence we gather will depend on what kind of world we take ourselves to be living in. That in no way banishes the spectre of profound and sweeping error in the latter regard.

Now, it would be perfectly fair to observe that this general kind of objection belongs with the rationalistic mind-set contrasted above with the outlook on logic and mathematics which permeates the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. It is thus anyway out of kilter with what seems to be the larger idea in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, underpinning the doctrine of logic and mathematics as 'antecedent to truth': the idea that the 'rules of the language-game' precisely do *not* have to answer to anything external to it. According to the philosophy of language at work in the *Tractatus*, there was a separation between what constitutes the *meaning* (truth-conditions) of a statement – which is a matter of an essential (in the *Tractatus*, indeed, pictorial) relation between the statement and a potential worldly truth-conferer

('fact') – and the rules which we accept as governing its *use*. So provision was made for a good metaphysical question about whether the latter are felicitous by the standards set by the former, whether there is the intended general correlation between the obtaining of what we treat as warrant for a statement, which will be a reflection of the rules of the language-game, and the obtaining of what it pictures. By the time of the *Investigations*, by contrast, Wittgenstein had shifted to – indeed, perhaps invented – the type of outlook that Hilary Putnam later dubbed *internal realism* or *internalism*: now, it is our linguistic practice itself that is viewed as conferring meaning on the statements it involves – there is no meaning-conferer standing apart from the rules of practice and no associated external goal.

The metaphysical crux is thus the idea of truth as an objective of empirical enquiry to which our rules of assessment are at best externally related. If I am to be seriously troubled by the thought that painstaking and conscientious appraisal by the standards of my actual linguistic practice may be consistent with there being massive but undetectable error generated by a quite mistaken conception of some large aspect of the world, then I must be thinking of what determines the *content* of my beliefs as something extrinsic to that practice – with some version of the classical, molecular, truth-conditional account, the only salient type of candidate. But while there is, to my knowledge, no evidence that Wittgenstein ever became uneasy with the opposed internalist vision of meaning and truth that had come to dominate his thinking by time of the *Investigations*, it is at least much less obtrusive in *On Certainty*. True, there are one or two suggestive passages.<sup>25</sup> But such – infrequent – passages do more to raise the issue to which the ultimate intelligibility of sceptical doubt is hostage than to propose a definite stand on it. In taking it for granted (the fifth claim in the schematisation I gave earlier) that type III propositions 'might just be false' – as a matter of metaphysical bad luck, as it were – I–II–III scepticism sets out its stall against the internalism of the *Investigations*. The type III proposition is simply conceived as fitting the way of the world or not, whatever grip on the matter may or may not be possible for us. But if Wittgenstein at the time of his last notes regarded that view of such propositions as scepticism's Achilles heel, he did not pause – beyond the suggestion that the idea of their 'agreement with reality' has no 'clear application' – to elaborate an opposing internalist perspective on them.

What might such an internalist perspective be like? In 'Facts and Certainty' I began – in effect though not under that description – to outline one such account. The key thought was that scepticism might be made to succumb to a kind of irony: that the very evidential isolation of type III propositions could have the effect that they cease to qualify, properly speaking, as 'factual' – as propositions whose content fits them robustly to represent or misrepresent the world. If that thought could be sustained, it would follow that our lack of grounds – in any sense involving cognitive achievement – for such propo-



sitions would not have to compromise our right to accept them and work within the framework of the norms of evidence which they constitute.

My lecture reviewed various principles whereby the claim of the non-factuality of type III propositions might be motivated. But I have never felt entirely comfortable with the general approach which they illustrated.<sup>26</sup> That approach presupposes a connection between a proposition's having a genuinely representational content and the status of 'stand-offs' – intractable disputes centred on that proposition. If a type III proposition is beyond all evidence, for and against, that indeed ensures a stand-off between one who accepts it and one who denies it. But before that consideration can license the intended anti-factualist conclusion, it is necessary to show that the factuality of the type of proposition in question would imply that disagreements, real or imagined, about it should be in principle resolvable. In short: intransigent disagreement is an indicator of 'no fact of the matter' only where we are entitled to suppose that *were* there a fact of the matter, it would be detectable – would show up in the pattern of available evidence. That supposition has some plausibility in many of the cases – matters of taste, or comedy, for instance – where the possibility of intransigent disagreement has been taken by philosophers as an indication that the discourses in question do indeed not deal in genuinely factual matters. What sense can we attach to the idea of something's really being funny, for instance, if there is nothing to choose between the opinion of one who agrees and one who doesn't? But we precisely do not have *that* intuitive response to the present range of cases, and for a simple reason: it is only by virtue of their extreme generality that type III propositions differ from others – the corresponding type II propositions – which we *do* want to regard as factual. How could there be real facts about the winners of the FA Cup in the 1930s but no real fact that the world did not come into being five seconds ago replete with apparent traces of a much more extended past?

I do not hereby mean to disclaim any theoretical merit for my former proposal – which, in fairness to it, was actually presented as a potential *revision* of our ideas about factuality – but only to acknowledge its unattractiveness at the intuitive level. We do intuitively regard disputes about, say, comedy and certain kinds of value as answerable to no real 'fact of the matter', and of the point as being connected with the possibility of their being rationally adjudicable in particular cases. But we don't think of type III propositions as answerable to no 'fact of the matter' in the same kind of way. If the groundlessness of a certain type of belief, as evidenced by the possibility of rationally intractable disagreement about it, always provided reason for regarding it as non-factual, sceptical argument should intuitively impress us as no more disturbing than a corresponding scepticism about taste or comedy. But that is not our typical reaction at all. The essence of any internalist response to I–II–III scepticism must be to maintain that there is no good sense in the idea that our acceptance of the type III propositions which we do accept could be *mistaken*. Whatever strong theoretical grounds might be

given for that claim, the very capacity of scepticism to disturb shows that it is not our intuitive view.

In sum, internalism is a great metaphysical issue. Still, great as it may be, it is notoriously unclear and stubbornly difficult to resolve. And while thinking of linguistic practice in a broadly later-Wittgensteinian way may make at least some forms of sceptical doubt hard to hear, the fact remains that we – many of us – seem to ourselves to hear them quite clearly. That makes it intellectually unsatisfying just to point out that the ultimate intelligibility of sceptical doubt is hostage to deep and unresolved issues in the theory of meaning. Rather, what we should ideally like – as an insurance, if you will – would be a rebuttal of – or at least a 'liveable' accommodation with – sceptical doubt which avoids joining the debate at that deep theoretical level, leaving the intelligibility of scepticism unchallenged. If we are approaching the issues in this spirit, we will not be tempted to make much of the idea that at least some of the propositions targeted by scepticism really lie *hors de combat*, functioning innocently as rules for the appraisal of evidence or – for whatever other reason – incapable of intelligible mismatch with the world.

## 5 Towards an entitlement

So: what is the worst-case scenario, as it were? Can there be an *intuitive* accommodation with scepticism – one which raises no doubt about the intelligibility of the sceptical challenge? If type III propositions are to be regarded as no less descriptive or contingent than the type II propositions which entail them, is there some relatively benign 'spin' or cast to be given to the situation to which an otherwise unchallenged I–II–III argument would call attention? I shall suggest that there is – a quite different kind of response prefigured by one tendency in Wittgenstein's remarks. I conclude by giving the briefest indication of it.

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

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

(OC 163)

Compare:

One cannot make experiments if there are not some things that one does not doubt. But that does not mean that one takes certain

presuppositions on trust. When I write a letter and post it, I take it for granted that it will arrive – I expect this.

If I make an experiment I do not doubt the existence of the apparatus before my eyes. I have plenty of doubts, but not that. If I do a calculation I believe, without any doubts, that the figures on the paper aren't switching of their own accord, and I also trust my memory the whole time, and trust it without reservation.

(OC 337)

The thought in these passages has a connection with the issues about transmission of warrant across entailment reviewed earlier. We noted that warrant does not transmit from a premise to a validly inferred conclusion if it consists in defeasible evidence for the premise whose force depends on having the conclusion as collateral information. That is an instance of something simpler and more general: that one cannot transmit a warrant to a validly inferred conclusion in cases where the very possession of the warrant for the premises in the first place depends on a prior warrant for the conclusion. This more general idea extends to cases where the warrant for the premises is non-inferential. To take it that one has a warrant for a particular proposition not by (defeasible) inference from other warranted propositions but directly, by the appropriate exercise of certain appropriate cognitive capacities – perception, introspection, memory or intellection, for instance, – always involves various kinds of presupposition. These presuppositions will include the proper functioning of the relevant capacities, the suitability of the occasion and circumstances for their effective function, and indeed the integrity of the very concepts involved in the formulation of the proposition in question. Because they are needed to underwrite the validity of any warrant one acquires, the general constraint just stated places (specific forms of) such presuppositions beyond the range of what may be confirmed by inference from the proposition that one takes oneself to have warranted.

Now the crucial point made in the quoted passages is that one cannot but take certain such things for granted. By that I don't mean that one could not investigate (at least some of) the presuppositions involved in a particular case. But in proceeding to such an investigation, one would then be forced to make further presuppositions of the same general kinds. The general source of the limitations on warrant transmission in these cases is thus a consideration about the essential limitations of any particular cognitive achievement: wherever I achieve warrant for a proposition, I do so courtesy of specific presuppositions – about my own powers, and the prevailing circumstances, and my understanding of the issues involved – for which I will have no specific, earned warrant. This is a necessary truth. I may, in any particular case, set about earning such a warrant in turn – and *that* investigation may go badly, defeating the presuppositions that I originally made. But whether it does or doesn't go badly, it will have its own so far unfounded – *unbegründet* (OC

253) – presuppositions. Again: whenever cognitive achievement takes place, it does so in a context of *specific* presuppositions which are not themselves an expression of any cognitive achievement to date.

These propositions are not just one more kind of 'hinge' as we have understood that term. Hinges, so far, are standing certainties, exportable from context to context (subject perhaps to certain restrictions on the receiving context). Whereas, the present range of cases are particular to the investigative occasion: they are propositions such as that my eyes are functioning properly *now*, that the things that I am *currently* perceiving have not been extensively disguised so as to conceal their true nature, etc. My confidence in the things which I take myself to have verified in a particular context can rationally be no stronger than my confidence in these context-specific claims. Because of their context-specificity, they are not propositions whose rejection would involve epistemic catastrophe (though generalisations of which they are instances can be expected to have that feature). Our certainty in them as a genre shows in the unhesitant way we set about routine empirical investigation of the world and our ready acceptance of its results.

While these context-specific propositions are thus set apart from the three kinds of hinge already noted, two points of analogy with type III propositions are nevertheless striking. First, both kinds of proposition articulate something a thinker must inevitably take for granted if she is to credit herself with the achievement of any warrants at all of a certain kind, the type III propositions conditioning the acquisition of defeasible inferential warrants while the context-specifics engage both the inferential and the non-inferential case. Second, presuppositions of each kind will unavoidably lack earned warrant at the point at which they need to be made. That much analogy is enough to conjure a scepticism about non-inferential warrant entirely parallel in spirit to I–II–III scepticism. Suppose I set myself to count the books on one of the shelves in my office and arrive at the answer, twenty-six. The sceptical thought will say that the warrant thereby acquired for that answer can rationally be regarded as no stronger than the grounds I have for confidence that I counted correctly, that my senses and memory were accordingly functioning properly, that the books themselves were stable during the count and were not spontaneously popping into and out of existence unnoticed by me, etc. Yet I will have done nothing – we may suppose – to justify my confidence in these specific presuppositions. So how have I achieved any genuine warrant at all?

Here is the line of reply on which I want to focus. Since there is *no such thing as* a process of warrant acquisition for each of whose specific presuppositions warrant has already been earned, it should not be reckoned to be part of the ordinary concept of an acquired warrant that it somehow aspire to this – incoherent – ideal. Rather, we should view each and every cognitive project as irreducibly involving elements of adventure – I *take a risk* on the reliability of my senses, the amenability of the circumstances, etc., much as I take a

risk on the continuing reliability of the steering, and the stability of the road surface every time I ride my bicycle. For as soon as I grant that I ought ideally to check the presuppositions of a project, even in a context in which there is no particular reason for concern about them, then I should agree *pari passu* that I ought in turn to check the presuppositions of the check – which is one more project after all – and so on, indefinitely. So then there will be no principled stopping point to the process of checking and the original project will never get started. The right conclusion – the reply will continue – is not that the acquisition of genuine warrant is impossible, but rather that since warrant is acquired whenever investigation is undertaken in an *epistemically responsible* manner, epistemic responsibility cannot, *per impossible*, involve an investigation of every presupposition whose falsity would defeat the claim to have acquired a warrant. The correct principle is not that any acquired warrant is no stronger than one's independently acquired reasons to accept its presuppositions. It is, rather, that it is no stronger than the warrant for any of the presuppositions about which there is some *specific reason* to entertain a misgiving.

This line of reply has several attractions. It involves, first, no large contention in the metaphysics of meaning, nor any unintuitive claim about factuality. It is not open, second, to the complaint one wants to level against so-called 'naturalistic' responses to scepticism, after the style of Hume and Strawson,<sup>27</sup> that – in emphasising that it is part of our (human) nature to form beliefs inductively, to see each other as 'minded', and so on – it offers a mere *excuse* for our inclination to form beliefs in a fashion which, for all that has been said, falls short of the ideals of our reason. And third, it concedes that the best sceptical arguments have something to teach us – that the limits of justification they bring out are genuine and essential – but then replies that, just for that reason, cognitive achievement must be reckoned to take place *within such limits*. To attempt to surpass them would result not in an increase in rigour or solidity but merely in cognitive paralysis.

The term 'entitlement' has recently come into vogue in epistemology to characterise – perhaps wishfully – a range of propositions which, although unable to make a compelling case on their behalf, a thinker can nevertheless somehow justifiably presuppose or make use of as part of the framework of other investigations. Usually, the idea has been intended in a way that presupposes a kind of division of epistemic labour: an ordinary thinker is entitled to beliefs which experts – local specialists, or even philosophers – can justify, even if she has absolutely no inkling of – indeed, perhaps could not understand – that justification if it were presented to her. However, a somewhat different version of the idea emerges from the foregoing. First (to tidy up our so far somewhat free-wheeling use of the term) let us say that P is a *presupposition* of a particular cognitive enquiry if to doubt P would be a commitment to doubting the significance or competence of the enquiry. Then one kind of *entitlement* may be defined as a *presupposition* meeting

the following two conditions: (i) there is no extant evidence against P and (ii) someone pursuing the relevant enquiry who accepted that there is nevertheless an onus to justify P would implicitly undertake a commitment to an infinite regress of justificatory projects, each concerned to vindicate the presuppositions of its predecessor.

That would stand refinement, but the general *motif* is clear enough. If a project (epistemic or otherwise) is sufficiently valuable to us – in particular, if its failure would at least be no worse than the costs of not executing it, and its success would be better – and if the attempt to vindicate its presuppositions would raise presuppositions of its own of no more secure an antecedent status, then we are entitled to – may help ourselves to – the original presuppositions without specific evidence.

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

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

that other people have minds, whose states are broadly in keeping with the way they behave;  
 that the world has an ancient history, broadly in keeping with presently available traces and apparent memories;  
 that there are laws of nature, broadly manifest in finitely observable regularities.

Here, each first conjunct presents a type III proposition as originally conceived, while the second conjunct effects the connection necessary for the favoured kind of evidence to have the force which we customarily attach to it. As earlier observed, we may of course avoid local versions of the I–II–III argument by arguing for a rejection of the justificational architecture which it presupposes – with perceptual claims, perhaps, a prime case for that attempt. But if this is to be a *globally* successful tactic, then we will have to do nothing less than so fashion our thinking that it *nowhere* traffics in propositions related as the P-propositions and Q-propositions in the schema. And that is just to say that *none* of the thoughts we think must be such that their truth-makers are beyond our direct cognition, so that we are forced to rely on finite and accessible putative *indicators* of their obtaining.

The prime casualty of such a way of thinking would be the thinker's conception of her own cognitive *locality*: the idea of a range of states of affairs and events existing beyond the bounds of her own direct awareness. Globally, to avoid the justificational architecture presupposed by I–II–III scepticism would be to forgo all conception of oneself as having position in a world extending, perhaps infinitely, beyond one's cognitive horizon. In particular, it would be to surrender all conception of our own specific situation within a broader objective world extending *spatially and temporally* beyond us.

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

as a practical reasoner depends upon type III presuppositions. To avoid them is to avoid having a life.

All this, naturally, needs further elaboration. In particular, the notion of entitlement needs a proper generalisation, to cover the case of type III propositions, and there is an issue to address about whether there is any such generalisation which affords everything we want without the cost of being – as many would think – implausibly permissive (netting, for instance, the existence of God along with that of an extended past and the external world) or implausibly relativistic (leaving, for instance, nothing to choose between a normal acceptance of the existence of other minds and solipsism). Those are questions for another occasion.

But let me conclude by summarising the provisional perspective reached by *this* discussion. I suggest that the principal message of *On Certainty* is that scepticism embodies an insight which Moore missed: the insight that to be a rational agent pursuing any form of cognitive enquiry – whether within or outside one's own epistemic locality – means making presuppositions which – at least on the occasion – are not themselves the fruits of such enquiry and are therefore not known. When I go after warranted belief about accessible states of affairs in my own locality, the credibility of my results depends on presuppositions about my own proper functioning, and the suitability of the prevailing conditions, etc. When I go after warranted belief about states of affairs outside, the credibility of my results depends on presupposition of the augmented type III propositions which condition my conception of how the locally accessible may provide indications of what lies beyond. The official sceptical response to this reflection would be to give up on the distinction between warranted and unwarranted belief as a charade. The alternative 'spin' to be taken from *On Certainty* is that the concept of warranted belief only gets substance within a framework in which it is recognised that all rational thought and agency involves ineliminable elements of cognitive risk. Since rational agency is not an optional aspect of our lives, we are entitled – save when there is specific evidence to the contrary – to make the presuppositions that need to be made in living out our conception of the kind of world we inhabit and the kinds of cognitive powers we possess.

To be entitled to accept a proposition in this way, of course, has no connection whatever with the likelihood of its truth. We are entitled to proceed on the basis of certain beliefs merely because there is no extant reason to disbelieve them and because, unless we make some such commitments, we cannot proceed at all. Any epistemological standpoint which falls back on a conception of entitlement of this kind for the last word against scepticism needs its own version of (what is sometimes called) the Serenity Prayer:<sup>28</sup> in ordinary enquiry, we must hope to be granted the discipline to take responsibility for what we can be responsible, the trust to accept what we must merely presuppose, and the wisdom to know the difference.<sup>29</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Both papers are reprinted in Moore 1993. Page references to them are to that volume.
- 2 The editors of *On Certainty* say: 'goaded'.
- 3 See Moore 1939: 166.
- 4 But read on!
- 5 See Moore's 'Some Judgements of Perception', originally published in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 1918–1919 and reprinted in Moore 1922. A relevant passage (about Moore's finger) comes at p. 228.
- 6 See Wright 2000, 2002 and 2003. See also Davies 1998, 2000 and 2003.
- 7 Notice, by the way, that in all these cases there is no example of failure of closure: in all the scenarios, if one has a warrant for P, then one has a warrant for I. The distinction between transmission and closure has been largely missed in the literature, and confusion of it has motivated some unjustified reservations about the latter, weaker principle. For instance, such confusion is at work, I believe, in some of the key examples in Fred Dretske's classic 'Epistemic Operators' (Dretske 1970).
- 8 The disjunctivist idea seems original, at least in modern literature, to J.M. Hinton. See Hinton 1973 and the various earlier articles of his to which he there refers. It is further developed in Snowdon 1981 and deployed against what he terms the 'highest common factor' conception of experience in McDowell's 'Criteria, Defeasibility and Knowledge' (reprinted in McDowell 1998b). See also McDowell 1994 Ch. VI, part 3.
- 9 In fact, he is begging the question in any case. See Wright 2002.
- 10 An interesting recent attempt in this direction is Pryor 2000.
- 11 The rub, though, is in 'made good'. It is not enough just to *propose* one of these lines of resistance – that is, to rest content with the claim that the opposed sceptical perspective has not been proved and is therefore 'not compulsory' (McDowell 1994: 113; 1998b: 385). Let that be so. Still, merely to oppose one non-compulsory conception with another is to leave open the possibility that, for all we know, the Sceptic's view of the justificational architecture is right. And a position where, for all I know, I have no warrant for any claims about the material world, or other minds, etc., is hardly more comfortable than one in which I have apparently been shown that I have no such warrant.
- 12 Notwithstanding McDowell's sympathetic and resourceful handling of the idea in 'Criteria, Defeasibility and Knowledge'.
- 13 Actually, as Michael Williams has pointed out to me, the four parts of the text display something of a thematic division: the first and second parts, comprising respectively §§1–65 and §§66–192, are naturally read as mainly centred on Moore's 'Proof', while the rest of the book – §§193–299 and 300–676 – is primarily reaction to the 'Defense'.
- 14 See OC 95, quoted above.
- 15 Since the Duhem–Quine thesis concerns the bearing of *disconfirming* evidence, it is not to be directly equated with the thesis of the information-dependence of empirical confirmation. However, they are obviously closely related. I won't attempt to explore the details of the relationship here.
- 16 See also OC 87–8.
- 17 See RFM I, 118.
- 18 See McFetridge 1990: 150–4.
- 19 See RFM I, 156 for a typical passage. The attempt to understand this attitude of Wittgenstein's was a central preoccupation of Wright 1980.
- 20 He had allowed in *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* that the contrast was

not a sharp one – that it 'shades off in all directions' (VII, 6) – but the idea of propositions' 'crossing the house', as it were, seems to be new to *On Certainty*.

- 21 Here is how the thought continues:

Do I know or do I only believe that I am called L.W.?' – Of course, if the question were 'Am I certain or do I only surmise. . .?', then my answer could be relied on.

Do I know or do I only believe. . .?' might also be expressed like this: what if it *seemed* to turn out that what until now has seemed immune to doubt was a false assumption? Would I react as I do when a belief has proved to be false? or would it seem to knock from under my feet the ground on which I stand in making any judgement at all? – But of course I do not intend this as a *prophecy*.

Would I simply say 'I should never have thought it' – or would I (have to) refuse to revise my judgement – because such a 'revision' would amount to an annihilation of all yardsticks?

(OC 491–2)

- 22 Strictly speaking, one would need to refashion the choice of *e* to avoid an independent entailment of I.
- 23 To construct a I–II–III argument around this example, take I as 'this table weighs 50 kilograms'; II as 'this table weighs 50 kilograms when no-one is paying attention to it'; III as 'this table exists when no-one is paying attention to it'.
- 24 In some passages, Wittgenstein certainly appears to have such an approach in mind. See, for example, OC 494–6.
- 25 See, for example, OC 197–9 and 214–15.
- 26 In effect, that approach is one of trying to make a case that type III propositions fail to exhibit what I later called Cognitive Command (in Wright 1992).
- 27 See Strawson 1985 Ch. 1.
- 28 I had thought the prayer, or at least its sentiment, original to Augustine, but John Haldane advises me that it is modern, now usually attributed to a Dr Reinhold Niebuhr, of the Union Theological Seminary, New York City, who reputedly composed it in 1932. The official version runs:  
  

God, grant me  
 the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change  
 the Courage to change the things I can  
 and the Wisdom to know the difference.
- 29 My thanks for comments and criticisms to participants at the 2001 Rutgers Epistemology Conference and the conference on *Wittgenstein's Lasting Significance* held at Gregynog, mid-Wales, in July 2001, where parts of this material were presented.