

Facts and certainty¹

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I AM here concerned with the most notorious kind of traditional sceptical paradox. Such paradoxes draw on apparently plausible features of our epistemological situation and generally unquestioned aspects of the concept of knowledge, but seem to prove that whole regions of knowledge which we take to be accessible are actually barred. What is especially disquieting about the best of them is that, if successful, they also rule out any more modest cognitive achievement, like reasonable belief; any opinion about any of the affected statements will be as good as any other.

An acquaintance with scepticism of this general kind is part of any philosophical education. It has not recently been in high fashion as a topic of philosophical research, though some notable efforts continue to be made.² This unfashionableness has been due only in part, I think, to complacency. More widespread than the opinion that we have discovered how to rebut the sceptic's arguments is the idea that they are somehow utterly fruitless, that no purpose can be served by attempting to meet them face-on.³ I am somewhat unsympathetic to both these claims. There are paradoxes which, however **prima facie baffling**, have proved to be sophistical, containing one or more definite errors which, once **recognized**, can be expunged without significant alteration in our ordinary beliefs and habits of reasoning. But the best philosophical paradoxes are not like that. They signal genuine collisions between features of our thinking which go deep. Their solution has therefore to consist in fundamental change, in taking up conceptual options which may have been overlooked. I believe that the traditional sceptical arguments, in their strongest formulations, are such paradoxes. Accordingly, they have to involve presuppositions which we may optionally replace, and exploration of the philosophical costs and consequences of so doing cannot but be fruitful.

In part I of what follows I offer formulations of two simple patterns of argument which can be brought to bear upon a variety of large regions of discourse so as to generate what seem to be genuine sceptical paradoxes.⁴ Part II attempts to corroborate that claim by reflecting on the limitations, in the context of these arguments, of a number of contemporary and recent responses to scepticism. In part III, I suggest that, amidst the great variety

of experimental ideas in that text, Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* may contain pointers to a better, unified approach. This approach is open to further sceptical challenge, which part IV seeks to rebut. The final part outlines how the approach seems to bear on the issue between foundationalist and anti-foundationalist tendencies in epistemology.

I. Two sceptical arguments

Sceptical arguments typically proceed via presentation of some large, purportedly untestable possibility which is somehow supposed to undermine a whole region of what we had fancied to be knowledge. Examples are:

that there is no material world;
that I am dreaming;
that there are no other consciousnesses besides mine;
that the world came into being one hour ago;
that I am a brain in a vat;
that I am hallucinating;

and so on.

Let it be granted to the sceptic that these are indeed possibilities which I cannot conclusively refute: that the flow of my experience and my apparent memories here and now could be just as they are even if I were dreaming, or there were no material world at all, etc. Why would this concession do any damage? Suppose, for instance, the existence of the material world is regarded as a *hypothesis*, the basis of a predictively powerful, highly successful theory—a common enough thought. Could it be reasonable to demand a *conclusive* refutation of the sceptic's possibility, i.e. conclusive evidence in favour of this theory, before I could claim to know that there is indeed a material world? If there were no more to the sceptic's challenge than the claim that his uncongenial possibilities cannot be ruled out once and for all, it would be fair to reply—as so many have—that it is not necessary so to rule them out before they may be reasonably discounted. Such, in effect, is the point of Russell's proposal to concede knowledge to the sceptic while reserving the right to work with the concept of reasonable belief.⁵ The sceptic has therefore to do more. One way or another he must undermine the thought that his possibilities, even if genuine, have the balance of evidence against them.⁶ Both the sceptical arguments which will concern us here attempt this task.

The first argument

Note that the list of sceptical possibilities divides into two kinds. Some—like the non-existence of the material world, or of other consciousnesses—are

inconsistent with the *truth* of enormously many of our ordinary knowledge claims. Others—like the possibility that I am dreaming, or am a brain in a vat—are inconsistent with my acquiring perceptually based knowledge not because they clash with the truth of what I might claim to know but because the states in question are ones in which I cannot *perceive*. Being in such a state also precludes, therefore, my acquisition of perceptually based *reasonable belief*; whereas my being, say, the sole consciousness abroad in the world does not preclude my reasonably, though falsely, believing a host of propositions which *would* be about others' mental states if only there were such states. So the hallucination/brain-in-a-vat dreaming group of possibilities promises more sceptical penetration. Taking, for the sake of tradition, the case of dreaming, the sceptic can propose, with great plausibility, that for any time *t*, and for any proposition *P* which I have gathered no sufficient reason to believe prior to *t* and which I could acquire sufficient reason to believe at *t* only by (then) perceiving,⁷

A: if I am dreaming at *t*, then I do not have sufficient reason to believe *P* at *t*.

This may not seem to carry much threat. Something more dangerous emerges when the principles are invoked:

- (i) that reasonable belief is *transmissible*, i.e. that to have sufficient reason to believe both an entailment and its **premisses** is to have sufficient reason to believe its conclusion,

and

- (ii) that reasonable belief is *iterative*, i.e. that whenever there is sufficient reason to believe a proposition, sufficient reason is available to believe that there is.

Probably neither of these principles admits of proof in any strict sense, but each is certainly sufficiently plausible to subserve the generation of paradox. Transmissibility must surely hold in general if valid inference is to be a means of rational persuasion. Iterativity should hold whenever possession of sufficient reason to believe a proposition is a decidable state of affairs—as it had better in general be if the selection of beliefs for which there is sufficient reason, and hence rationality itself, is to be a practicable objective.

Suppose then that there is sufficient reason to believe *A* and hence its contrapositive; and assume the antecedent of the latter, i.e.—eliminating the double negation—that I have sufficient reason to believe *P* at *t*. Then, by (ii), I also have sufficient reason to believe this, and hence, by (i), I have sufficient reason (at *t*) to believe that I am not dreaming at *t*. That is, granted (i), (ii), and that there is sufficient reason to believe *A*, we may infer

B: if I have sufficient reason to believe P at t, I have sufficient reason (at t) to believe that I am not dreaming at t.

The threat now is of a contraposition. If the sceptic can make a case for

C: at no time t do I have sufficient reason to believe that I am not dreaming at t,

it will follow that at no time t do I have sufficient reason to believe any proposition of the kind we restricted our attention to, viz. propositions which I could come reasonably to believe at a particular time only by perceiving at that time. Once that were accepted, and since the argument applies to anyone, the sceptic ought not to have too much trouble showing the perception could no longer provide a basis for reasonable belief at all, a conclusion which would undermine reasonable belief far and wide.

What is probably the sceptic's best argument for C, due in essentials to Descartes, is pleasantly simple. I cannot acquire sufficient reason to believe that I am not dreaming at t by any empirical procedure. For before carrying out an empirical procedure can give me sufficient reason to believe something, I need to have sufficient reason to believe that it has been properly carried out, *a fortiori* that I have so much as carried it out at all. And I can have sufficient reason to believe that only if I have sufficient reason to believe that I did not dream its execution. So empirically based reason to believe that I am not dreaming is excluded.⁸ Since the proposition seems quite unsuitable to be reasonably believed by me *a priori*, I cannot, the sceptic will contend, acquire sufficient reason to believe it at all.

That, in outline, concludes the first pattern of sceptical argument with which we are concerned. This pattern does not apply happily to the other group of sceptical possibilities—that there is no material world, or no other consciousnesses, etc.—for two reasons. First, as in effect noted above, the appropriate counterparts of premiss A are implausible unless the epistemic concept involved is taken to be factive (truth-entailing). Thus, where P is, for instance, any proposition describing the conscious mental state of another,

A': if there are no other consciousnesses at t, then I do not know at t that Jones is in pain at t

ought to be unexceptionable, but

A'': if there are no other consciousnesses at t, then I do not have sufficient reason at t to believe that Jones is in pain at t

just begs the question against the idea that all the evidence might speak powerfully, although inconclusively, in favour of the existence of other minds. Admittedly, the sceptic might contemplate starting directly from

B': if I have sufficient reason at *t* to believe that Jones is in pain at *t*, then
I have sufficient reason at *t* to believe that there are other consciousnesses at *t*,

the grounds for which would be, presumably, my unquestioned possession of sufficient reason to believe that if Jones is in pain at *t*, then there are other consciousnesses at *t*, plus principle (i) above. But the sceptic would still require

C': I do not have sufficient reason at *t* to believe that there are other consciousnesses at *t*,

and for this no other argument directly comparable to that for *C* seems to be to hand. Even if I allow that in a world of which I was the sole conscious inhabitant my experience *in toto* might proceed just as it actually does, it cannot immediately follow that I do not have strong evidence against that possibility's obtaining. To suppose the contrary is—once again—tantamount to supposing that the very idea of powerful but inconclusive evidence is incoherent.

The second argument

The burden of the second sceptical argument—with which we will not be concerned until the concluding paragraph of the lecture—is that there is indeed no evidence whatever for the existence of other consciousnesses, or of the past, or of the material world. If the argument succeeds, then it will of course supply *C*-type premisses for the simplified strategy just noted. But, as we shall see, the form taken by the argument will provide the sceptic with a better way than that of exploiting the resulting situation.⁹

The argument is best explained by reflecting on the intuitive inadequacy of G. E. Moore's 'proof' of the existence of the external world.¹⁰ Moore reasoned, in effect,

II: I know I have a hand (while I hold it in front of my face, like this, in normal conditions,... etc.)
∴ III: I know that there is an external world (since a hand is a material object, existing in space, etc.).

A common response to Moore's argument is that he has done nothing to meet the challenge of the sceptic who proposes to contrapose where Moore would have us detach. *If* there is a problem about knowledge or reasonable belief that the external world exists, then there is equally a problem with Moore's knowledge that he has a hand, even when the appearances are at their most compelling. But Moore's reply is: if the sceptic believes he has disclosed such a problem, does it rest on principles each of which carries the conviction of the proposition (when entertained in the appropriate circumstances) that I have a hand? If not, we ought to back that conviction against the sceptic's premisses.¹¹

It would be fair to reply that we were never anyway in the market for the sceptic's conclusion. It is quite unphilosophical to seek strength in the reminder that our deepest convictions conflict with it. After that reminder we are no nearer than before to understanding what, if any, definite error the sceptic has committed, or—if he has committed no such error but has merely exploited aspects of beliefs we already hold—how best our beliefs might be modified so as to obstruct his reasoning. But the sceptic himself has a different (and better) rejoinder. He will contend that Moore's argument has not been presented with sufficient explicitness. Proposition II does not express a primitive conviction of Moore but is based on the experiences he has as he contemplates (what he takes to be) his hand in (what he takes to be) appropriate circumstances. It is accordingly the product of an inference from

I: = some proposition describing in appropriate detail Moore's total field of experience for some time before and during the period when he feels he is holding up his hand before his face and thereby demonstrating a philosophical point to a lecture audience.

The suggestion that interpolating proposition I better represents the basis of Moore's conviction—in general, the suggestion that perceptual knowledge is in some such way *inferential*—may be contested. But let it go for the moment. Then the sceptic will contend that Moore has misunderstood the character of the transition from I to II to III. Moore is thinking of the inference on the model of that from

Five hours ago Jones swallowed twenty deadly nightshade berries,
 to: Jones has absorbed into his system a fatal quantity of belladonna,
 to: Jones will shortly die.

Here, the first line describes good but defeasible evidence for the second line, which entails the third; and the grounds afforded by the first line for the second are, intuitively, transmitted across the entailment. But contrast the example, with, for instance, the inference from

Jones has just written an 'X' on that piece of paper,
 to: Jones has just voted,
 to: An election is taking place.

Or consider that from

Jones has kicked the ball between the two white posts,
 to: Jones has scored a goal,
 to: A game of football is taking place.

In these two examples, as in the belladonna case, the first line provides defeasible evidence for the second, which entails the third. But in these cases

the evidential support afforded by the first line for the second is itself conditional on the *prior* reasonableness of accepting the third line. In a situation in which people wrote crosses on paper in many other contexts besides elections, the knowledge that Jones had just done so might have no tendency whatever to support the belief that he had just voted. Notice, to stress, that the point is not that countervailing evidence against the third line *might outweigh* support provided for the second by knowledge of the first. It is that knowledge of the first does not begin to provide support for the second unless it is *antecedently* reasonable to accept the third. Typically, of course, the very observations which would confirm the first would also confirm the third—the scene in the polling booth and the type of paper, for instance, or the cheering crowd in the presence of two full teams on the football field. But that is a contingency. Imagine, for instance, that you live in a society which holds electoral ‘drills’ as often as we hold fire drills, so that the scene you witness of itself provides no clue whether a genuine election is going on or not. In that case, unless you have some further information, the knowledge that Jones has just placed an ‘X’ on what looks like a ballot paper has no tendency whatever to support the claim that he has just voted—it is not that it does supply evidence which, however, is matched or surpassed by contrary evidence that no election is taking place.

The sceptic’s contention is now that Moore’s mistake consists in assimilating the trio, I–II–III, to the belladonna example, when better models of their relations are provided by the voting and football cases. It simply is not true that whenever evidence supports a hypothesis, it will also support each proposition which follows from it. The important class of exceptions illustrated are cases where the support afforded to the hypothesis is conditional upon its being independently reasonable to accept one in particular of its consequences. This, the sceptic will contend, is exactly the situation of the proposition that there is a material world *vis-à-vis* the evidence afforded by our senses for particular propositions about it; and of the proposition that there are other consciousnesses *vis-à-vis* the evidence afforded by others’ behaviour and overt physical condition for particular propositions about their mental states; and of the proposition that the world did not come into being an hour ago *vis-à-vis* the evidence afforded by our apparent memories and other purported traces for particular propositions concerning states of the world more than one hour ago. Once the hypothesis is seriously entertained that it is as likely as not, for all I know, that there is no material world as ordinarily conceived, my experience will lose all tendency to corroborate the particular propositions about the material world which I normally take to be certain. It is the same, *mutatis mutandis*, once the possibility is seriously entertained that there are no other consciousnesses besides my own, or that the world came into being one hour ago. There is hence no question of confirmation flowing downwards from I to II and thence to III in the fashion which the Moorean thought requires. Only if Moore already has grounds for III does I tend to support II.

There's the rub. In the case of the voting and football examples there is no difficulty in describing how independent evidence for the respective third propositions might be gathered. But—the sceptic will argue—it is utterly unclear how evidence might be amassed that there is an external world, that there are other minds, or that the world has a substantial history at all, which is not evidence specifically for *particular* features of the material world, or for the states of consciousness of *particular* people, or for *particular* events in world history. *Direct* evidence for these very general propositions—group III propositions as I shall hence forward call them—is not foreseeable. And indirect evidence has just been ruled out by the sceptic's argument. It follows that they are beyond evidence altogether.

The second pattern of the sceptical argument thus involves the following contentions:

- (a) All our evidence for particular propositions about the material world, other minds, etc., depends for its supportive status upon the prior reasonableness of accepting group III propositions.
- (b) For this reason, group III propositions cannot be justified by appeal to such evidence.
- (c) Such propositions cannot be justified any other way.
- (d) Such propositions may be false.

If each of (a)–(d) is accepted, we seem bound to recognize that all our evidential commerce is founded upon assumptions for which we have no reason whatever, can get no reason whatever, and which may yet involve the very grossest misrepresentation of reality. How, then, can any of the relevant beliefs be reasonable, let alone amount to knowledge?

It should be noted that, although, in deference to Moore, the description of the second pattern of argument has largely proceeded in terms of the concept of knowledge, this was quite inessential. At no stage was the factive character of knowledge presupposed; instances of the argument will establish **wholesale** impossibilities of reasonable belief if they establish anything.^{12,13}

II. Responses

Responses to scepticism are legion. Here I shall briefly review six, comparatively modern responses.¹⁴ I do not hope to do justice to any of them within the restricted space available. My aim is merely to review certain **prima-facie** reasons why it is worth looking elsewhere for a fully satisfactory response to the sceptical challenges outlined.

The second pattern of sceptical argument was envisaged as adaptable to the purposes of the sceptic about the past, the sceptic about other minds, and the sceptic about the external world. So one who argued, for example, for scepticism about the past in this way, would have to allow that

there were absolutely parallel challenges, from the sceptic about the material world and the sceptic about other minds, to his right to be sure of the data—group I propositions concerning present physical traces and apparent memories—from which the conclusions would be drawn about which he is sceptical. In effect, therefore, to endorse the second pattern of sceptical argument without restriction would be to commit oneself to a solipsism of the present moment: the class of a posteriori statements which it could be reasonable for me to accept would be restricted at any particular time to descriptions of my own occurrent mental states and sensory phenomenology. It therefore seems that the argument must be open to assault by any set of considerations which attack the coherence of this terminal position.

One widely discussed and quite widely believed such set of considerations is the polemic against ‘private language’, which Wittgenstein sketches in *Philosophical Investigations*. In order best to see how Wittgenstein’s thought bears on the matter, it is necessary marginally to adjust the usual understanding of ‘private’. A private language should be taken to be, not a language which necessarily only one person can understand but, rather, a language which necessarily no two people can have sufficient reason to believe they share. The adjustment is necessary in any case if Wittgenstein’s argument is to get to grips with the Cartesianism about sensations which is usually taken to be its immediate target. For the Cartesian has no motive for supposing that we *could* not have the same understanding of ‘pain’—it might just be, he will say, that the two sets of sensations which we respectively so describe are appropriately similar. What, it seems, he must accept is that, since (on his view) neither of us can have the slightest inkling about the phenomenal quality of the items which the other characterizes as ‘pain’, we cannot have even the weakest reason to think that such mutual understanding obtains. However that may be, the solipsist of the present moment, since he considers that he cannot have adequate reason to accept so much as the *existence* of other consciousnesses, has no choice but to regard the medium in which he conducts his sceptical train of thought as private in just the adjusted sense. Necessarily it is a medium which no two people can have sufficient reason to think they share with each other, since necessarily—if the sceptical pattern of argument is cogent—no two people can have reason to think that the other exists.

This is not the place to attempt to evaluate Wittgenstein’s argument. Actually there are a number of separable strands, some of which, in my view, do possess a high degree of cogency.¹⁵ But even if Wittgenstein had unquestionably proved the impossibility of private language—whatever on earth such a proof in philosophy could consist in—it is doubtful if we should thereby have a satisfactory response to the sceptic. Certainly, we should have a demonstration that, globally applied, the second pattern of sceptical argument terminated in incoherence. But unless the demonstration somehow incorporated a diagnosis of what goes wrong in that argument, the result would be merely an intensification of the paradox. It is bad

enough to be intuitively unwilling to accept the conclusion of an argument with which one can find no fault; it is much worse if one simultaneously has a proof that the conclusion is unacceptable. Those who would confound scepticism by philosophical demonstration of the absurdity of its results are at least attempting a philosophical response; but in other respects they are making the same mistake as Moore.¹⁶

A second recently popular form of response to the sceptic also originates in Wittgenstein's later philosophy—or does so according to the received wisdom of a large body of commentary. It has been used especially against the sceptic about other minds, and involves rejection of his version of claim (a) (see p. 437). Claim (a) contends that I have sufficient reason to regard aspects of a subject's behaviour and overt physical condition as evidence for his mental state only if I have antecedent reason to project the very concept of mental state beyond my own case in the first place. The second response contends that this mistakes the character of the evidential relation involved: that, for at least a large class of mental ascriptions, behaviour and physical condition have an unconditional, though defeasible, evidential status—in brief, that their status is, to use the standard term of art, *criterial*. When the evidence for a proposition is criterial in character, its supportive status derives from convention, without further assumption.¹⁷

The evident problem with this proposal is, how is the claim that a certain species of evidence is criterial for a class of statements to be appraised? There seem to be no uncontroversial cases of the criterial relationship, to which the situation of statements concerning other minds might illuminatingly be compared. No wonder, since proponents of criteria¹⁸ have left largely uninvestigated the way in which it is supposed to show in our linguistic practice that an evidential relationship is criterial. But just that is what has to be clarified before we can have any right to view the sceptic's contrary contention—claim (a)—as mistaken.¹⁹

Verificationism provides a third modern anti-sceptical trend. Scepticism gets a grip only because the various disquieting possibilities which it canvasses—that there is no material world, that there are no other centres of consciousness, etc.—are interpreted as making no possible difference to the course of our experience. When they are so interpreted, it may seem that experience can give us no reason to discount these possibilities, nor, in consequence, reason to accept more congenial contrary possibilities. In such circumstances verificationism will take issue with the *content* of the alleged possibilities to which scepticism appeals. What can it mean to suppose, for instance, that the world came into being no more than one hour ago, if no possible empirical considerations can count for or against that supposition?

Superficially, it can seem as though verificationism, whatever its independent merits or shortcomings, *must* incorporate an effective response against scepticism. For the sceptic's stock-in-trade are verification-transcendent possibilities; and the essence of verificationism is that no such 'possibility' has genuine content. But this is incorrect: the verificationist attempt to

solve the sceptical problem is open to a simple dilemma. If the verification-transcendent nature of the sceptical possibilities calls their very content into question, where does that leave the more congenial possibilities—that there is indeed a material world, that there are other centres of consciousness much like myself, etc.—with which we want to oppose them? Their content, it seems, must now be in question also; in which case, so far from safeguarding our most platitudinous and profound metaphysical convictions against sceptical depredation, the verificationist has completely undermined them himself. If, on the other hand, the verificationist insists that the sceptical possibilities, and their congenial contraries, must and do admit of empirical testing, that is a consideration which, if true, needs no verificationist underpinning. That there are such tests, and how in detail they might proceed, should be common knowledge. In any case, what was disturbing about the second pattern of sceptical argument was the case it made for the thesis that the part played by the congenial hypotheses in all empirical confirmation places those hypotheses themselves beyond confirmation. Bare verificationism does not engage this case at all.

That is not a complaint which should be levelled against the fourth response. This, like the criterial response, rejects the sceptic's claim (*a*). The thought, however, is not that the inference from a group I proposition to a group II proposition needs no assistance—as the proponent of criteria suggests—but rather that the supposition that there *is* in general such an inference quite misrepresents the epistemology of group II propositions. Rather they may on occasion be known directly, without inference from any epistemologically more favoured basis.²⁰

Expressions of opposition to conceiving of our sensory states as, in the familiar image, a 'veil' between ourselves and the material world are familiar enough in philosophy. A vivid and eloquent exposition of such a point of view is to be found in John McDowell's precursor to the present lecture. There seem to me to be three general grounds for caution about its prospects.

First, there is a question about how far it can go as a global strategy. Just as 'lifting' the veil of perception is to put us, on occasion anyway, in direct perceptual touch with material states of affairs, so a story has to be told explaining how we are similarly, on occasion, in direct perceptual touch with others' mental states and with past states of affairs—or at least, in direct perceptual touch with states of affairs which do better than provide an inconclusive evidential basis for claims about other minds and the past. (Thus it would be enough, as McDowell notes, that we can on occasion perceive, not indeed someone else's pain as such, but the state of affairs that constitutes his *expressing* his pain; he cannot express what he doesn't have.) It would be terribly unfair to complain that McDowell does not, in the compass of a short lecture, complete the work that is necessary here. Still, there is a considerable amount of work to do. Not least, we need to be much clearer about when it is proper to regard knowledge of propositions of a particular kind as inferential (for there need, of course, be no conscious

inference involved) and about what non-inferential knowledge should be held to consist in.

The second reservation is, in effect, the same as that of the conclusion of note 4 on p. 442 about the criterial response. The fact is that we do not engage the sceptic on equal terms. It is no good merely proposing what appear to be possible alternatives to certain of his assumptions. Admittedly, while the alternatives are in play, his conclusions need not seem inevitable. But *second order* scepticism is just as dismaying. If the ‘no veil’ view is merely presented as a possible picture, but no reason is given for thinking that it, rather than the I–II–III framework is correct, then we have no reason to prefer it. And that is just to say that, for all we know, the I–II–III framework is correct. Which—unless we disclose some other flaw in the sceptic’s argument—is to say that, for all we know, we neither know nor have reason to believe any group II or group III propositions. A draw, as it were, is accordingly all the sceptic needs. McDowell’s proposal has therefore to be worked up into a demonstration that the sceptic actually has the epistemology of the various kinds of propositions *wrong*. The mere depiction of more comforting alternatives is simply not enough.

In any case—third—it is quite unclear how to make the ‘no veil’ response speak to the first pattern of sceptical argument in which the assumption that (perceptual) knowledge is essentially inferential plays no evident role.

The fifth of the anti-sceptical responses to be considered in this somewhat breathless tour is that of Robert Nozick in chap. II of *Philosophical Explanations*. In essence, Nozick proposes an account which has the result, he believes, that knowledge need not always be transmitted across known logical consequence. Thus it is possible to know A, to know that A entails B, and yet not to know B. This principle must sometimes be valid, of course, if logical inference is ever to be a source of new knowledge. On Nozick’s view, however, it will fail in cases where B is a group III proposition—one of the sceptic’s large untestable possibilities. According to Nozick’s now familiar analysis, genuine knowledge has to be sensitive to hypothetical variation in the fact known: thus my true belief that P can constitute knowledge that P only if it is true that had P not been the case, I would not have believed it—one half of the so-called ‘tracking’ condition. Nozick’s thought is then—if I may somewhat oversimplify—that whereas if I had no hand, I certainly would not believe that I had a hand (it being, as Tacitus said, conspicuous by its absence), it is not true—in virtue of the verification-transcendent character of the supposition which the sceptic seeks to exploit—that if, the coherence etc. of my experience notwithstanding, there were no material world, I would not believe that there was a material world. Hence, on Nozick’s analysis, the sceptic is right: I do not know that there is a material world—my (true?) belief that there is fails the tracking condition. But it does not follow that I do not know that there is a typewriter on the desk, or that I have a hand. It is at least consistent to hold that we know lots of ordinary propositions about

material objects while at the same time conceding to the sceptic that we do not know that there is a material world. The damage done by the concession can, in Nozick's suggestion, be limited.

I have argued elsewhere that Nozick's strategy is called in question by the role in it of an unargued assumption about the logical behaviour of counterfactual conditionals. To wit: Nozick implicitly assumes that transitivity may fail for such conditionals even when the premisses are accepted in a single informational context. I believe that this assumption is incorrect, but I shall not attempt to support that claim here.²¹ There are two much more basic weaknesses in Nozick's response.

First, it is simply inapplicable, so far as I can see, to reasonable belief. Whatever one thinks of the case for supposing that knowledge is subject to the tracking conditions, no analogous case is possible for reasonable belief. Belief does not have to 'track' the fact that P in order to be reasonable. Reasonable beliefs can be false. And even when they are true, what makes them reasonable may consist in circumstances which do not track their truth. I may reasonably believe P because of what I reasonably take to be symptoms that P even though, in this case, the symptoms would obtain even if it were not the case that P. Accordingly, the 'contrapositive' sceptic, whom Nozick always has in mind can, if he chooses, grant Nozick that knowledge is subject to a tracking condition and re-formulate his scepticism in terms of reasonable belief. Scepticism about reasonable belief is anyway the more insidious (and interesting) version.

Moreover, the sceptic we are most concerned with does not, in any case, follow the contrapositive strategy. His contention is rather that all our evidence for accepting propositions of a certain broad range—group II propositions—genuinely supports such propositions only if it is antecedently reasonable to accept a group III proposition, which in turn can be supported by evidence of no other kind than evidence for the corresponding group II propositions. There is no appeal to the transmission principle in this train of thought; which if, with Nozick, we concede to the sceptic as far as group III propositions are concerned, becomes that much more dangerous—perhaps irresistible.

In the first of his Woodbridge Lectures Sir Peter Strawson writes:

Perhaps the best skepticism-rebutting argument in favour of the existence of body is the quasi-scientific argument I mentioned earlier: i.e., that the existence of a world of physical objects having more or less the properties which current science attributes to them provides the *best available explanation* [my italics] of the phenomena of experience... Similarly, the best argument against other-minds skepticism is, probably, that, given the non-uniqueness of one's physical constitution and the general uniformity of nature in the biological sphere as in others, it is in the highest degree improbable that one is unique among members of one's species in being the enjoyer of subjective states...²²

My own view is that this form of ‘skepticism-rebutting argument’—the last to be considered here—is, in the present context, no argument. Which, precisely, of the sceptical claims, (a)–(d), does it purport to show to be incorrect, and why? To claim that belief in the material world is part of acceptance of the best explanation of the ‘phenomena of experience’ is just to claim that group I data do indeed confirm that belief. That is not to argue against the sceptic; it is to contradict him. However, any attempt to work the thought up into a genuine argument would have to confront a number of specific obstacles which it may be worth while to outline briefly.

Strawson emphasizes the implausibility of the inference-to-the-best-explanation response as an account of the actual aetiology of our conviction that material bodies, and other minds, exist. But the foremost difficulty in the present context is that the response has to confront a form of sceptical argument which, in addition to the three varieties canvassed, may also be used to generate *inductive* scepticism. A relevant trio of propositions would be, for instance:

- I. All observed As have been B;
- II. All As, past, present, and future, are B;
- III. = some such proposition as that there are certain characteristics which are eternally associated in a dependable and stable way. (‘The future will resemble the past.’)

The situation, as before, is that II entails III, and that I describes the most straightforward kind of evidence for II; but that, once again, knowledge of I provides a reason for believing II only if it is antecedently reasonable to suppose III. Hence, as before, III is insulated from corroboration by means of corroboration of propositions like II by the type of evidence illustrated by I. And it is quite obscure how else it might be corroborated. But now: if there is a doubt whether beliefs arrived at by simple induction are ever reasonably held, it hardly seems likely that inference to the best explanation can escape unimpugned, whatever one’s preferred account of what makes an explanation ‘best’. The methodology of inference to the best explanation has surely to presuppose the reasonableness, *ceteris paribus*, of simple inductive inference.

There are special problems in any case with the two examples of the response which Strawson considers. Even if the other-minds sceptic mysteriously grants me the right to assume the ‘general uniformity of nature in the biological sphere’, the perceived improbability that possession of subjective states is a condition unique to me is entirely dependent on the assumption that mental states generally originate in, or supervene upon biological ones—but how could that be accorded a reasonable assumption if the very existence of other minds is *sub judice*? For its part, the suggestion that the hypothesis of a material world constitutes ‘the best available explanation of the phenomena of experience’ fails to take the measure of the awkward

question: what exactly are supposed to *be* the ‘phenomena of experience’? This is Michael Williams:

It is all very well... to call attention to the constancy of the appearance of the mountains, or the coherence of the appearances presented by [the] fire. But suppose we stick to yellow-orange sense-data (of the kind we may suppose fires to produce under normal perceptual conditions). Maybe we have noticed that the occurrence of such sense-data has been correlated with certain striped sense-data (those produced by the wallpaper on the wall next to the fireplace). But if the conditions of illumination change, if we visit a friend’s house and look into his fire, if we close our eyes for a moment while dozing in front of the fire, if we have the room redecorated—in short, if any one of countless, ordinary events takes place—the generalization linking the occurrence of yellowy-orange flickering sense-data to the occurrence of striped sense-data will be disconfirmed... If we are not allowed to impose any [external] restrictions on the conditions of perception, but are limited instead to the resources of a purely experiential language, we will never be able to formulate any inductively confirmable generalisations about the course of experience.²³

This is surely correct. The manifold regularities in my experience are not purely phenomenal. Everything, or almost everything, which I could offer as a credible generalization of the form,

Whenever P, I suffer experiences of such-and-such a sort,

will involve a ‘P’ which specifies, for instance, my spatial location, physical condition, and other germane physical circumstances. The regularities of experience are only apprehended *within* the framework of our beliefs about the material world. So they may not be conceived as data which those beliefs best explain—where there is real explanation, it is possible to know what has to be explained before knowing what the explanation is.

In truth, I think that the sense in which the material world has seemed—to those to whom it has so seemed—best to explain the phenomena of experience has been more modest than the ‘quasi-scientific argument’ represents. Simply: it has always appeared and continues to appear to us in all respects *as if* we experience a world of material bodies. What better explanation of this could there be than if it is so? Failing other information, the answer must be, ‘None’; if things appear in all respects as if P, then *ceteris paribus*, the best explanation of that will be if P is true. But what is the status of the *explananda* in the cases with which we are here concerned? What is it for our experience to present itself as experience of a material world? If it is just that the kind of experience we have is, broadly, what could be expected if the material world hypothesis is true, then—leaving on one side how that is supposed to be known—it is equally sure that our experience is just of the kinds which could be expected if the material world hypothesis were *deceptively false*. But then it follows that things appear in all respects

as if—i.e. as they would do if—it were deceptively true that there is no material world. If the ‘best explanation’ of that exemplifies the schema above, we will not be grateful for it. In short: in so far as it scarcely exceeds a platitude to suppose that our experience, others’ behaviour, and the phenomena of memory, etc., are best explained if the group III hypotheses are true, it is only because we allow ourselves to describe the ‘data’ in one manner among alternatives—and a question-begging one at that.

I am not suggesting that Strawson is under any illusion about any of this. Indeed it is because he doubts that there is any fully efficacious rational response to the sceptic’s challenge that he prefers the naturalistic path which passes it by.²⁴ But that is not the path we follow here.

III. Facts and ‘Hinge’ propositions

There is a recurrent theme in Wittgenstein’s notes *On Certainty* which is expressed in passages like this:

... 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.²⁵

(341–33)

In a similar vein...

we are interested in the fact that about certain empirical propositions no doubt can exist if making judgements is to be possible at all. Or again, I am inclined to believe that not everything that has the form of an empirical proposition *is* one.

(308)

What are these ‘hinge’ propositions, which superficially resemble but do not function as empirical propositions, and whose being held exempt from doubt is somehow a precondition of all significant doubt and judgement? Interpreting these and similar passages²⁶ is complicated partly by their equivocal formulation—is it, for instance, that some propositions function as ‘hinges’ in any significant inquiry or merely that any significant inquiry requires ‘hinges’?—and partly by the fact that Wittgenstein seems to have various distinct things in mind when he writes in this sort of way which he does not separate clearly. The general promise of the idea is nevertheless evident. The sceptic raised the problem that it seems there has to be antecedent

reason to accept group III propositions before standardly accepted evidence for group II propositions can deserve that status; but that no such reason could be acquired except via evidence for group II propositions. We could escape this bind if it could be reasonable to accept a group III proposition *without reason*; that is, without evidence. Just that possibility is opened up if group III propositions can be made out to be ‘hinge’ propositions: propositions which, although they appear to describe what we take to be highly general but nevertheless contingent features of reality, actually have a quite different function—one which empowers our universal acceptance of them to be something other than the dogmatism which the sceptic charges.

One conception of ‘hinge’ proposition which Wittgenstein often has in mind surfaces immediately after the second passage just quoted:

Is it—he asks—that rule and empirical proposition merge into one another?

(309)

Similarly

Can’t an assertoric sentence, which was capable of functioning as a hypothesis, also be used as a foundation for research and action? I.e. can’t it simply be isolated from doubt though not according to any explicit rule? It simply gets assumed as a truism, never called in question, perhaps not even ever formulated.

It may be for example that all inquiry on our part is set so as to exempt certain propositions from doubt, if they are ever formulated. They lie apart from the route travelled by inquiry.²⁷

(87–88)

This is strongly reminiscent of the conception of the normative role of logical and mathematical propositions prominent in the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. Here are two typical passages:

Certainly experience tells me how the calculation comes out; but that’s not all there is to my accepting it.

I learned empirically that this came out this time, that it usually does come out; but does the proposition of mathematics say that? I learned empirically that this is the road I travelled. But is *that* the mathematical statement?—What does it say, though? What relation has it to these empirical propositions? The mathematical proposition has the dignity of a rule.

So much is true when it is said that mathematics is logic: its moves are from rules of our language to other rules of our language. And this gives it its peculiar solidity, its unassailable position, set apart...!

(RFM, i, 164–65)

... in the series of cardinal numbers that obeys the rule +1, the technique of which was taught to us in such and such a way, 450 exceeds 449. That is not the empirical proposition that we come from 449 to 450 when it strikes us that we have applied the operation +1 to 449. Rather it is a stipulation that only when the result is 450 have we applied this operation.

It is as if we had hardened the empirical proposition into a rule. And now we have, not a hypothesis that gets tested by experience, but a paradigm with which experience is compared and judged. And so a new kind of judgement.²⁸

(*RFM*, vi, 22)

Consider an example. Suppose I am counting the children in a classroom, and that each of the following apparently holds good:

- (i) At t , I count all the boys correctly and find an odd number.
- (ii) At $t + 1$, I count all the girls correctly and find an odd number.
- (iii) At $t + 2$, I count all the children correctly and find an odd number.
- (iv) No child enters or leaves the classroom between t and $t + 2$.
- (v) All the children in the classroom are determinately either boys or girls.

Now although intuitively (i)–(v) comprise an inconsistency, they cannot be made to deliver it up unless we appeal to the proposition (S) that the sum of two odd numbers is even (or to additional premisses which entail it). Wittgenstein's view, to attempt no more than a crude summary, is that the impossibility of deriving a contradiction from (i)–(v) alone is better not viewed as the impossibility of making explicit something which would be there anyway, even if S was not among our arithmetical beliefs. Rather, the idea that (i)–(v) are inconsistent in their own right finds its substance in the consideration that they are collectively inconsistent with a proposition to which we have assigned a normative role. This assignment need not have been arbitrary; indeed it may have been motivated by very profound pragmatic and/or phenomenological considerations. But it will not, in Wittgenstein's view, have reflected a special kind of purely cognitive achievement, the intellection of an arithmetical 'necessity'.²⁹

The normativity (necessity) of S is thus constituted by two things. First, there are sets of propositions, whose members can each be *prima facie* empirically corroborated, from which contradiction can be deduced when they are conjoined with S (or propositions which entail it), but cannot be deduced from them unsupplemented. Second, our practice is invariably to look askance at the other elements of such an inconsistent set, rather than at the normative proposition. It is as if we had the instruction: 'Find an explanation of how, the *prima-facie* evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, something else is false.' It might indeed happen that we seemed to have good evidence for each of (i)–(v); we might, for instance, have assigned separate

observers to monitor each of the three different counts, a fourth observer to scrutinize the behaviour of the children between t and $t + 2$ and a fifth to verify that each of the children was of determinate sexuality. Imagine that all report favourably. Then that is *prima facie* favourable evidence for a group of propositions inconsistent with S and hence *prima facie* unfavourable evidence for S . The normativity of the proposition then comes out in the circumstance that no evidence is allowed to have that status *except* *prima facie*. We immediately incur an obligation to explain it away, to show how, first appearances notwithstanding, one or more of (i)–(v) is actually false.

Wittgenstein's repeated suggestion is that such propositions are best viewed as a kind of rule. If that is so, of course, it goes without saying that sceptical doubt about our right to be certain of their *truth* is out of order. Their special treatment will need no *cognitive* justification. We will have the same right to hold them unassailable as we have to determine the rules that constitute any of our practices. What is novel in *On Certainty* is the extension of this suggestion to propositions outside logic and mathematics, propositions which we should not normally deem to be capable of being known a priori but which have instead, as Wittgenstein says, the appearance of empirical propositions. If the extension is warranted, the interesting possibility will be raised that some traditional forms of scepticism and much traditional thinking about the epistemology of logic and mathematics will be based on parallel mistakes: both will be taking for genuine, factual propositions things whose syntax encourages that thought but which actually function in a quite different, non-descriptive way.

Wittgenstein's examples in *On Certainty* are very various. For some of them—for instance 'Every human being has parents' (239–40) and 'Cats don't grow on trees' (282)—the foregoing picture is not implausible. Such propositions reflect a whole system of beliefs concerning the kind of things which human beings, and cats, fundamentally are. They are propositions which might be suggested by repeated experience, but which have undoubtedly become partially constitutive of our concepts of human being and cat respectively. If that is so, the conceptual space which counter-examples might have filled is closed off. Nothing will count as a human being who was not born of two parents, or a cat which was fruited by a tree.

Others of Wittgenstein's examples seem to enjoy a normative role in certain contexts but not in others. He writes:

My having two hands is, *in normal circumstances* [my italics], as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it.

That is why I'm not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it.³⁰

(250)

In the carnage after a bomb explosion the number of my hands might be an urgent empirical question. Standardly, however, it is certain for me to the

point where prima facie discordant evidence will be bounced off it. I shall treat it as a mark of defective vision, or delirium, if I can't make myself see two hands in front of my face in appropriate circumstances. However, others of Wittgenstein's examples—for instance, 'If someone's arm is cut off, it will not grow again' (274)—are perhaps more straightforwardly empirical and only unhappily assimilated into either of these categories.

The question, however, is how matters stand with the crucial case: the group III propositions. The answer is that there looms an immediate and decisive obstacle to viewing them as possessing this kind of normative role. Only a proposition which can introduce inconsistency into an otherwise consistent, prima facie empirically confirmable set of propositions can play such a role; only such a proposition can be in prima-facie discord with the evidence. But whatever one thinks of the sceptical case that group III propositions are beyond the reach of favourable evidence, it is quite unclear how the balance of evidence might tell—even prima facie—*against* them. What would it be to have evidence that other human beings, and indeed all other creatures of whatever sort are, as it were, unminded? Or evidence that there are no physical objects? Or evidence that all our apparent memories notwithstanding, the world did indeed come into being one hour ago and that what we take to be the manifold traces of a much more ancient history are actually no such thing? It is not that we have some conception of what would be prima-facie evidence for these things, any apparent instance of which would be normatively overridden, so to speak. We have no such conception. In none of these cases is there any prima facie confirmable set of propositions which stands to the group III proposition as (i)–(v) above stand to S. We must conclude that this specific tactic for removing group III propositions from the arena of sceptical debate would be maladroit.

That is not, however, to condemn the strategy. It still remains that if it could somehow be shown that the role of group III propositions, even if not normative, is in some *other way* not a fact-stating one, it might be possible to explain how we are entitled to hold fast to such propositions without what would otherwise seem to be the requisite, specific cognitive achievements. It hardly seems that *On Certainty* contains an unmistakable alternative proposal along these lines. But there is evidence that such an idea crosses Wittgenstein's mind from time to time, not inseparably bound up for him with the idea of normativity. He writes for instance:

What prevents me from supposing that this table either vanishes or alters its shape and color when no one is observing it, and then when someone looks at it again changes back to its old condition?—'But who is going to suppose such a thing!'—one would feel like saying.

Here we see that the idea of 'agreement with reality' does not have any clear application.³¹

(214–15)

What we need is argument to suggest that the idea of group III propositions' agreeing or failing to agree with reality likewise has no 'clear application'. How might such argument proceed?

There are many disputes in philosophy in which one party maintains that a certain class of propositions—ethical, aesthetic, scientific-theoretical, or pure mathematical, for instance—has a genuinely factual subject matter while the other—expressivist, instrumentalist, or formalist, e.g.—denies it. It would take us very far afield to review these disputes, and to explore whether anti-factualists have used weaponry elsewhere that might be of service on the present point. But the example of ethics is suggestive. Those who have been attracted towards expressive, or 'emotive' theories of ethical judgement have no doubt been impressed by a variety of reasons, but one consideration which stands out is the problem of reconciling ethical 'knowledge' with any broadly naturalistic epistemology. Consider by contrast the situation of colour. We are in a position to give at least the beginning of an account of what, in physical terms, colour is, of what makes it the case that a particular object is coloured thus-and-so, and of what it is about us—our physical make-up—which puts us in a position to respond to states of affairs of the relevant sort. None of this is true of ethical qualities. We have no notion of what sort of physical basis they could have—indeed, the idea of their having any is faintly ludicrous—still less any idea about what it could be, in broad terms, about human physiology that could put us in position to 'detect' ethical value.

Someone who opposed ethical factualism on this kind of ground—I make no judgement on the strength of the case—seems to be appealing to something like the following principle:

PI: The statements in a particular class are factual only if: (i) it is our practice to appraise opinions about their acceptability as better or worse; and (ii) such appraisals can be legitimated within a satisfactory naturalistic epistemology—a theory of us, of our cognitive powers, and of what, in making such appraisals, we are cognitively responding to.

How would group III propositions fare by this principle? Undoubtedly they satisfy the first condition: our belief is most certainly that the opinions that there is a material world, that other consciousnesses do exist, and that the world has a history running back through billennia, are superior to the alternatives. But is the second condition satisfied—can these appraisals be rationalized within the framework of a satisfactory naturalistic epistemology? Intuitively, of course, they can: it is unthinkable that such an epistemology might get by without representing us as conscious of our material environment, the manifestations of others' mental states, and the traces of the past. But the sceptic can be expected to say that such an epistemology would not be satisfactory. Precisely by representing our cognitive interaction with the world in terms of these categories—matter, other minds, and the past—it

would exceed the limits of empirical warrant. That is what the sceptic *must* say. For if, as his argument purports to show, there can in principle be no evidence that these categories are realized, it has to be an objection to what is supposed to be an empirical epistemology that it invokes them.

The effect of **PI** thus appears to be that if the sceptic is right, he is wrong. If his negative point about evidence is correct, it should be interpreted not as calling for sceptical doubt about the status of group III propositions but as showing that they are nowhere in cognitive space.

It is, I think, of some interest that one of the intuitive thoughts about the ethical dispute, generalized in a natural way, has this result. But of course no reason has been disclosed why the sceptic should accept **PI**; it certainly has not been shown to be analytic of the idea of factuality, or anything like that. Let me for the moment leave matters like that and introduce a different proposal, albeit related in spirit.

Suppose that the sceptic is right that our group III beliefs are indeed cut off from all possibility of empirical confirmation. Suppose also, as suggested above, that the same is true of their negations. If these suppositions are true, that they are is no reflection merely of contingent human limitations. The sceptical argument purports to establish, for instance, that sense experience can afford no evidential basis for beliefs about an external material world. But sense experience is not merely a mode which we poor humans, limited as we are, are forced to utilize in the attempt to know our physical environment, and which could be contrasted with some superior, more direct mode of cognition which would serve the same end but which is denied us. We have absolutely no inkling of the nature of any such superior mode of cognition. Parallel, though qualified, claims hold for other minds and behaviour/physical condition, and the past and memory respectively.³² The sceptical argument, if successful, does not just show that *human beings* cannot obtain grounded beliefs about the material world, other minds, etc. Its conclusion should be that there *is* no attaining grounded beliefs about those areas, that we have no conception of the cognitive powers which grounding such beliefs in a way immune to the sceptic's attack would call for.

Consider therefore the following principle:

P₂: The members of a class of statements are factual only if it is possible to explain what would constitute cognitive abilities commensurate to the task of acquiring knowledge of, or sufficient reason for believing, statements in that class.

I think this principle has considerable attractions. What business could we have postulating an ontology of states of affairs of a certain sort which are not merely beyond human ken—even highly idealized human ken—but which are such that we can provide no theory whatever of what a mind would have to be like on which they were capable of making some kind of differential impact and thereby revealing themselves?³³ But to treat the

sceptical argument as demonstrating the absolute uncertainty of the material world, other consciousnesses, etc., is implicitly to rule against P₂. With what right? What exactly is the sceptic's alternative conception of fact, and why is it supposed that there are any such facts?

There may seem to be an obvious danger in this counter-attacking strategy. It grants the sceptic the success of his argument—at least provisionally—but counters that if successful, it removes the object propositions from 'fact-stating space' and hence has no tendency to call for an agnostic attitude toward them. But then, unless some additional fault is found with the sceptic's argument, shall we not wind up with the conclusion not indeed that radical scepticism is called for concerning states of the material world, etc., but that there *are* no such states, no 'facts of the matter'? That is surely just as bad.

It would be just as bad, but I do not think it is in prospect. The reason is that, as the second sceptical argument is developed, the absolute unjustifiability of group II beliefs of some specific kind is *inferred from* the absolute unjustifiability of the appropriate group III belief. To rehearse: the sceptic contends, first, that treating group I propositions as evidence for group II propositions is justified only if we are justified in holding the corresponding group III proposition; second, that justification (evidence) for the group III proposition can only be achieved by justifying specific group II propositions; hence, third, that justification (evidence) for the group III proposition cannot be achieved at all; hence, fourth, we are unjustified in accepting it; hence, fifth, we are unjustified in treating group I propositions as evidence for group II propositions; hence, sixth, since there is no other conceivable kind of evidence, we are unjustified in holding any group II beliefs. If P₂ is invoked as soon as the third stage of this reasoning is reached, then the move to the fourth stage, and with it the rest of the argument, is flawed by a lacuna. Simply: where non-fact-stating 'propositions' are concerned, the lack of evidential warrant for accepting them need be no criticism of our doing so. And if, on the contrary, we are within our rights, so to speak, in accepting the group III proposition, then our right to assign the evidential value to group I propositions, *vis-à-vis* group II propositions, which (the sceptical argument assumes that) we do, is also unimpeached. So P₂ no longer threatens to outlaw the group II propositions in question.

Finally consider one more proposal, of similar effect:

P₃: The members of a class of statements are factual only if a rational subject could *try* to use them to speak the truth.

A case for this principle might be made along the following lines. To suppose that a statement is factual is at least to suppose—whatever further account we might want to go on to offer—that it is apt to be (in some stronger than a merely disquotational sense) true or false; and the conditions under which it is, respectively, so true or false will determine its meaning.

Meaning, however, is essentially normative: the meaning of a statement embodies the constraints which those who understand the statement thereby understand that they should aim to comply with in their use of it. However, the (putative) association of particular truth-conditions with a statement can constitute no such constraint unless one can aim to regulate one's use of the statement by reference to whether or not those conditions are realized. Basically, that means: aim to assent to the statement only when it is true. And in order for that aim to be feasible, it is necessary that the aim of volunteering the statement only when it is true also be feasible, which is the condition imposed by P_3 .

What is the reason for thinking that group III propositions—if the sceptic is right about their absolute evidential isolation—will fail the condition imposed by P_3 ? It is the strain put on the ordinary notion of intention by the idea that success, or failure, may both be absolutely, and in principle, undetectable. Consider this example.³⁴ Suppose I place before you two identical-seeming small boxes, each of them sealed, one of which—I assure you—contains an ancient Egyptian scarab while the other does not. The empty box, however, contains an inner lining of the same material and weighs the same as the other. Neither rattles. They are impervious to X-ray, etc. And—the crux—if you break the seal on either box, its content—scarab or inner lining—will vaporize instantly and tracelessly. Can you, in these circumstances, so much as try to pick the right box? And if you think you can, what does doing so consist in? You might reach out and touch one of the boxes, but that performance could equally express the intention to pick the wrong box, or just to pick a box. Your gesture might be accompanied by the thought, 'That is the box with the scarab in', or something to that effect. But even that does not suffice for the intention; it may yet be a matter of indifference to you where the scarab is, and even if it is not, there is anyway a difference between doing something in the hope of a certain result and intending that result. So, to repeat: what would it *be* to have the intention?

What the example does is pare away a number of features which standardly supply the background to ascriptions and avowals of intention, and enable the concept to grip and have purpose. Intentions are not events in consciousness, like sensations, nor are they, like moods, states of mind through which a subject can pass independently of what else is true of him. Rather, an attribution of intention takes place in the context of the whole scheme of beliefs and goals presumed to be possessed by the subject; and is defeasible by any considerations which suggest that what it claims to be intended behaviour cannot be rationalized within that scheme. In particular, in order to be properly described of intending to bring about a certain result, the subject must *want* to bring it about, and this want has to make sense in the context of the more generalized and fluid system of wants which in part determines his character. In addition, the subject must have specific beliefs about *how* to bring about that result; crediting a subject with action upon a particular intention presupposes that an account is to hand of just why he

would do exactly what he did *if* that were his intention (if only ‘he believes that course of action often leads to that result’). Third—closely related to the first point—there are certain internal relations between the intentions that it is proper to ascribe to a subject and his responding with satisfaction or frustration as events unfold.

None of these features **are** satisfactorily displayed in the example of the scarab. It is quite unclear what motive you could have for wanting to pick the right box when success can have no *consequences*. If you are rational, you will have absolutely no beliefs about how to go about it. And there is no question of responding with satisfaction or frustration to the outcome; there is not going to be any ‘outcome’. Someone who is prepared to avow, or ascribe the intention to pick the box containing the scarab in the circumstances outlined makes a claim that can do no evident explanatory work and, in effect, demands to be construed, illicitly, as a report of a mental episode.³⁵

What goes for undetectable scarabs goes for undetectable truth-values too. Indeed matters are worse. In the case of the boxes, one might at least begin to try to give the ascription of intention some grounding by appeal to such a counterfactual as ‘If a scarab were found in that box, I should be disappointed’. But the counter-factual account is a non-starter in the case of undetectable truth. If the sceptic is right, the truth of the proposition, e.g. that there is a material world, is *necessarily* absolutely undetectable. There is accordingly, at best, grave doubt about the *content* of a counter-factual like ‘If it were to turn out that there is indeed a material world, I should be pleased’, or whatever.

Three principles have now been canvassed, each of which would entitle us to grant the sceptic the correctness of his claim that there can be no evidence whatsoever for group III propositions without any sceptical paradox ensuing. My own view is that the second and third principles are appealing.³⁶ But of course, no strict *proof* has been offered of any of them. It is hard to know what such a proof could be like. Such argument on their behalf as I sketched proceeded from background premisses which were not further examined but were simply presented as plausible. Yet if any of the principles is indeed representative of our actual concept of factuality, ought it not to be possible definitely to recognize that it is? Is not this way with the sceptic’s argument in effect open to the same complaint levelled earlier against McDowell’s strategy? It is no good just telling a story—whether about the epistemology of group II propositions, or about the notion of a genuinely factual statement, or about any other of the sceptic’s presuppositions—which, if it were true, would short-circuit the sceptical argument. We have to know the story *is* true. Otherwise, the case is not proven, and scepticism triumphs at second order.

While the onus remains on us not merely to disclose an assumption of the sceptical argument for which the sceptic has provided no justification but actually to prove it to be false, the sceptic seems to be in an unassailable

position. But I think there is a way out of the impasse. Someone who finds P_2 , say, highly plausible on general grounds and is satisfied that it has no grossly counterintuitive consequences,³⁷ should consider adopting it as a *convention*, partially implicitly definitional of his concept of fact and fact-stating discourse. These are concepts which the sceptical argument implicitly presupposes, and which the sceptic must therefore, presumably, allow to be encoded, somehow or other, in our linguistic practices and in things which we can offer by way of explicit explanation. So the mere idea of such a convention, as part of such an explanation, cannot be objectionable in its own right. If there is to be an objection, it must be to the *specific content* of the convention. In other words: the *sceptic* now has to show that the convention in question, coming after the event as it were, misrepresents the concept of fact which we actually have or, by criteria we acknowledge, ought to have.

IV. The fundamental dilemma of epistemology, and a further sceptical challenge

The second sceptical argument was never complete. It assumed from the outset that group III propositions are factual, so that a complete and essential lack of evidence would show them up for dogma. If this is the right view of their status, it ought to be seen to issue from a general account of factuality which sceptics, past and present, real and imaginary, have repeatedly failed to supply. Whatever other epistemological errors particular sceptical arguments commit—and I have not meant to exclude that the one on which I have primarily concentrated might in the end be cogently opposed on a number of other grounds—the principal interest of the strategy just described is the prospect it offers of a *guarantee* of the impossibility of cogent argument for scepticism, a way of turning the very power of any sceptical argument against a sceptical conclusion. If the strategy can be successfully prosecuted, every sceptical argument will face the dilemma that it is either internally flawed in some way or demonstrates at best that a certain class of propositions are not genuinely factual and so removes them from the range of significant doubt. Admittedly, to impale the sceptic on the second horn of this dilemma would be rather cold comfort if we very much wanted the propositions in question to be fact-stating. And the strategy requires, in any case, that some appropriate P-principle can indeed harmlessly be accepted as a convention, without demonstrable violation of our antecedent concept of factuality. Whether this is so is a matter for further investigation. But, on the first point, I have illustrated how in the case of any sceptical argument which proceeds via a lemma to the effect that some fundamental belief of ours is beyond support, *ergo* unjustified, the threatening spread of ‘unfactuality’ need go no further than that belief. Such is the structure possessed by almost all such arguments known to me.³⁸

The traditional kind of *foundationalism* in epistemology has two requirements. First, there have to be propositions which are epistemologically basic in the sense that their justification does not have to proceed via the adduction of defeasible evidence but is somehow constituted by the very fact that they are believed: their being held true has to generate some kind of logical presumption of their truth. (This is less than saying that such beliefs have to be conceived as incorrigible.) Second, the evidential connections to which we are to appeal when we start to work upwards from the basic class must either involve no further assumptions or depend only upon hypotheses which can themselves somehow be supported, without further assumption, by reference only to basic beliefs. Statements concerning inner experience—in particular, ‘sense-datum’ statements—and criterial connections have been two popular ways of trying to meet these respective demands. However, the dominant opinion has come to be that neither demand can be met satisfactorily, and that foundationalism in epistemology is a misconceived aspiration.

It is a nice question, however, why this opinion does not, in effect, serve the sceptic’s cause. Michael Williams, for instance, presents an opposing anti-foundationalist picture in which none of our beliefs is basic and every evidential connection is mediated by background empirical claims.³⁹ However, as he himself in effect notes, it seems impossible to understand this picture—if it is not to impute circularity to our justifications at some point—except as involving our reliance on so far untested assumptions.⁴⁰ It seems to remain for the sceptic to remark that circular justification is no justification, and that to have evidence for a certain belief only relative to untested assumptions is to have, so far, no reason for that belief.

Foundationalism calls for concepts which it seems highly questionable can be made good. But anti-foundationalism seems to play into the sceptic’s hands. A worthwhile epistemology must somehow break this fundamental dilemma. What, if any, contribution to its solution is promised by the ideas with which we have been concerned? One natural thought is that they may help us to see how the anti-foundationalist position need not be vulnerable to the sort of sceptical attack just outlined. Simply: it is now in prospect that the ‘hypotheses’ which mediate the most basic evidential connections need not require justification but may be ‘hinges’.

However, in order to realize this prospect, it is necessary to deflect a further sceptical challenge. For while—according to the second sceptical argument anyway—that we may indeed reasonably accept a relevant group III proposition, is a necessary condition of our justifiably passing from an appropriate group I proposition to a group II proposition, it would not, apparently, *suffice* for justification. It would be, for instance, consistent—or so the sceptic now goes on to urge—to suppose both that there is indeed a material world and that our sense experience is, by and large, a grossly inadequate guide to how matters therein stand. Similar pairs of suppositions, *mutatis mutandis*, would apparently be consistent in the case of other minds and the past respectively. In order for the transition from an

appropriate group I to a group II proposition to be justified, presupposition seems to be called for not merely of group III propositions of the original sort but of propositions like:

Mostly: our experience is a tolerably accurate guide to how things stand in the material world.

Mostly: others' behaviour and overt physical condition is a tolerably accurate guide to how it is with them mentally.

Mostly: evidence presently available, including apparent memories, is a tolerably accurate guide to how matters stood in the past.

These are not group III propositions as that category was originally understood. For they are not in general entailed by the group II propositions for whose reasonable acceptability on the basis of particular group I propositions they would provide. So—the good news—the second type of sceptical argument cannot establish that they are beyond all evidential support or disconfirmation. But—the bad news—unless they are, P_2 (and the other P-principles) will pose no obstacle to their classification as factual. And if they are factual, the further sceptical challenge will be to indicate what reason *we* have for supposing them to be true.

Consider the brain-in-a-vat example. Imaginatively I can cast myself in the role of the mad scientist, controlling every aspect of the thought and experience of the hapless disembodied brain. But then the thought is apt to seem compelling that the proposition which for that consciousness would be expressed by the words 'I am not a brain-in-a-vat' is something which, so far from being nonfactual, is empirically disconfirmed by me.⁴¹ Now, if I can cast myself in the role of the experimenter, why not in the role of the experimental subject? And do I not in that case have to admit the possibility of another, superior perspective—that of the experimenter—from which the thought which I express by 'I am not a brain-in-a-vat' is likewise empirically disconfirmable? If so, then the P-principles pose no objection to the factuality of the proposition.

A similar play with the idea of a 'superior perspective' suggests that the P-principles carry no threat to the factuality of

[i] Mostly: our experience is a tolerably accurate guide to how things stand in the material world.

We, the claim will be, can imagine being in a position to compare the sensory experience of certain subjects, as manifest in their judgements, with how matters stand in the material world; and it might be that their experience will be found more or less deficient. But then must it not be intelligible in turn to suppose that there could be creatures who from a superior perspective could evaluate *our* sensory capacities? If so, P_2 (and the other P-principles) seem to carry no threat to the factuality of [i]. It would then want only a demonstration that *we* can gather no evidence for or against [i] to set the sceptical carousel in motion again.

For the purposes of the argument let us grant the sceptic the assumption that we can indeed gather no evidence bearing on [i] and other propositions of the same genre. The issue is accordingly whether the fantasy of a superior perspective—SP—for whom such evidence might be available, is coherent. And the key question, in the context of P₂, is how SP's cognitive abilities are indeed commensurate to the task of knowing, or reasonably believing, that [i] is true (or false). For, plainly, SP must not itself fall prey to sceptical arguments—otherwise, it can scarcely embody the cognitive powers called for by P₂. But then, how exactly can SP contrive to meet those arguments? How in particular, do matters stand for SP in regard to

[i*] Mostly: SP's experience is a tolerably accurate guide to how things are in the material world,

and

[ii*] SP is not a brain-in-a-vat?

A trilemma now looms. The first possibility is that

P₂ (or some other acceptable principle) has the effect that [i*] and [ii*] are to be classified as non-factual.

But before it can be allowed that that might be so, it needs to be explained why, from SP's point of view, the fantasy of a *further* superior perspective—SSP—cannot get a grip, cannot inspire in SP realizations like those that the original fantasy is supposed to inspire us. The point is not just that the original fantasy lacks detail; it is not clear what *sort* of detail could introduce such an asymmetry, could render [i*] a non-factual proposition while leaving the factuality of [i] unimpugned.

The second possibility is that

P₂ (or some other acceptable principle) classifies [i*] and [ii*] as factual, but SP can nevertheless know or reasonably believe them.

But again, in the presence of the sceptical claims that *we* cannot know or reasonably believe [i], and that none of us can know that he or she is not a brain-in-a-vat, what is the explanation of the asymmetry? What is it about SP that gives it the advantage *vis-à-vis* [i*] and [ii*]? Again, it is quite mysterious what sort of detail could explain this.

Third is the possibility that

P₂ (or some other acceptable principle) has the effect that [i*] and [ii*] are classified as factual, but SP cannot know or reasonably believe them.

But now the sceptic should concede that, lacking any reason to believe in the reliability of its senses, SP is not in a position to know or form a reasonable opinion about the truth value of [i]. Accordingly, it no longer qualifies as the ‘superior perspective’ whose possible existence was to reconcile, under the aegis of P₂, the factuality of [i] with our putative inability to gather evidence for or against it.

I conclude that the fantasy of a ‘superior perspective’ cannot accomplish what the third sceptical challenge wants of it. The trouble is that the very assumptions of the challenge leave no space for an account of what its superiority could consist in. To imagine a perspective from which it might seem to be empirically confirmed that I, for instance, am a brain-in-a-vat is to imagine a perspective which ought immediately to be disturbed by the realization that a *further* perspective is imaginable... etc. If we really could conceive of a perspective from which a world, absolute from our point of view, might be compared with the deliverances of our senses, it could only be—or so the sceptic should allow—by building into it the means to confirm a counterpart of [i] in a fashion we cannot emulate. In default of an explanation of how that might be done, the third sceptical challenge has no explanation of what would make the envisioned perspective *superior*, so no right to the kind of dialectical play with the notion which it attempts.⁴²

V. Conclusion

If the gist of the preceding is correct, the thought that our most fundamental evidential transitions may be sanctioned by essentially groundless yet in no sense unreasonable beliefs, lives to fight on. Of course, the idea that a groundless belief need not *eo ipso* be dogma is hardly novel—though I do not think that those who have wanted to support it have always been able to do so without wishful thinking. What may be novel is the suggestion that the sceptic, if he does his work well, *himself* provides the ground for the distinction; that to demonstrate the impossibility in principle of evidence for or against a statement is to make as good a case as could be wished for its exclusion from the class which are apt to ‘agree with reality’—at least when the case is appraised in terms of any concept of factuality which we ought to want. Still, two qualifications must be emphasized.

First, non-factuality does not, or ought not to, mean that anything goes. It implies an immunity to one kind of criticism: that which emphasizes lack of epistemic pedigree. But much more is needed by way of clarification of the kinds of criticism, if any, to which ‘hinge’ beliefs *are* properly subject, and of their origins in our thinking, if an intellectually satisfying account is to emerge along the lines proposed. While I must defer the attempt to provide such clarification to another occasion, I can hardly forbear to give at least some indication of certain of the themes on which, I believe, it might be fruitful to concentrate. To begin with, the *naturalistic* response to scepticism which Strawson⁴³ approvingly finds in Hume and Wittgenstein

acquires an attraction, to my mind, in the present setting which it somewhat misses in Strawson's original. If, as Strawson inclines to suggest, the sceptic's challenge cannot really be successfully confronted, it is wistful comfort, if comfort at all, that we cannot but hold the challenged beliefs, that our nature falls short of an ideal which our reason admires. Better, surely, if it can be shown that the sceptic has not displayed an ideal but merely a misconception, that the reason has no cause to deplore as a deficiency something which is essential to the status of the beliefs in question and which, properly viewed, utterly absolves them from the shackles of evidential constraint. Once that is accepted, it is a quite unmelancholy consideration, if true, that our nature does not, at this level, provide us with alternatives; and it is a completely satisfactory answer to anyone inclined to press the thought that in its most general form—that of the demand for a demonstration of the superiority of our deepest beliefs over alternatives—the sceptical challenge can yet be urged. Our 'hinge' beliefs are (non-epistemically) superior to the alternatives because, for us, there are no alternatives.

Still, if this is true, I do not think it is the whole truth. It is not as if, fitted with a perfectly definite idea of what it would be to suspend belief in the material world, other minds, or the past, we find it merely beyond our actual powers to do it. Rather it is seriously unclear what it could be to suspend these beliefs, or hold others contrary to them. What might be the scheme of beliefs and goals of a rational subject who doubted the existence of matter? How, from a viewpoint within our scheme, might he be expected to behave?⁴⁴ A more purely philosophical, indeed transcendental programme of enquiry would tackle such questions as:

Does the specific role played in our thought by the deepest 'hinges' somehow defeat the attempt to describe, in terms thinkable within the framework which they supply, any alternative to their acceptance?

What are the conditions for the emergence of group III propositions—must they be found whenever the strongest type of evidence for the propositions of a certain genre is invariably in principle defeasible by supplementation (as with each of the applications herein illustrated of the second pattern of sceptical argument)?

If so, at what cost might a 'conceptual scheme' eschew all such categories of evidence?

Prosecution of these and similar issues may yield the result that some at least of the barriers here confronting our powers of (dis)belief are imposed not by nature but by conceivability.

All this, however, potentially speaks only to one issue posed by what I styled the 'fundamental dilemma': the provision of a conception of evidence which steers between the variously unsatisfactory alternatives proposed by foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. It therefore needs emphasis—the second qualification—that nothing has been said to address

the other, equally awkward issue: that of either seeing our way past the criticisms which have been levelled against the foundationalist's conception of 'basic propositions', or determining with what it should be replaced.

If the terms of the evidential relation are propositions, it simply is not coherent to suppose that all a rational subject's beliefs could be based on evidence. So, even when it is allowed that evidential relations may be mediated by 'hinges', the gravitational pull towards basic propositions remains. If the anti-foundationalist is prepared to grant that there must be propositions which are not accepted on the basis of evidence, but which are nevertheless accepted reasonably, the question has to arise, what makes their acceptance reasonable? Anti-foundationalism of Williams's sort would answer: it is a matter of empirical theory that human beings are, by and large, reliable detectors of the states of affairs which these propositions describe.⁴⁵ But then, is the relevant empirical theory supported by evidence? And, if so, in virtue of what are the beliefs which constitute the termini for the resulting evidential chains *reasonable beliefs*? Regress, or circularity, continues to threaten. The idea has long been abroad that a sort of holistic ceremony can weave a spell that will make possible the feat of levitation that seems to be called for. It would indeed be good to have this idea explained unmistakably.

Wittgenstein's epistemology in *On Certainty* is explicitly anti-foundationalist,⁴⁶ and there is, familiarly, evident sympathy with certain holistic ideas.⁴⁷ But there is no evidence that his response on the present point would be any version of the idea that a sufficient interweaving of theories can somehow turn the trick. What it seems he might wish to bring to bear is the slide between normative and descriptive role touched on above in discussion of 'I have two hands'.⁴⁸ Structurally, the thought would be that there can indeed be propositions at the termini of chains of evidence, which, as the foundationalist supposes, are certain, and whose certainty involves no further appeal to empirical theory. But the foundationalist errs when he supposes that such certainty would have to derive from some kind of guarantee of the general reliability of our beliefs about such propositions. What it is based on is their possession, in contexts in which they are the termini of evidence chains, of a quasi-normative role: they are absolved from doubt just in so far as our practice does not admit their being doubted—in such contexts they provide, in terms of one of Wittgenstein's favourite images, the measure rather than the object measured. The mistake of a sceptic about the certainty of these propositions, so used, is to draw the wrong conclusion from the absence of anything we can point to as a sufficient *cognitive* basis for the certainty attached to them. What constitutes their certainty is merely the high priority assigned to them by our rules of procedure.⁴⁹ However, the anti-foundationalist is right to the extent that such propositions may, in a different context, take on a more purely hypothetical role; and that our confidence in them, in such a context, may be defeasible by empirical or theoretical considerations.

I offer these remarks only by way of orientation. I do not know whether they really point to a viable, epistemological project. Difficulties, not least in the notion of a contextual role, are obvious enough. But the two themes put together—non-factual, evidence-conditioning ‘hinge’ propositions and contextually quasi-normative observation statements—do at least promise to break the foundationalist/anti-foundationalist opposition which so easily polarizes our attempts at coherent epistemology.

Wittgenstein is drawn to contrast knowledge, properly so regarded, and *certainty*.⁵⁰ This is not the contrast between knowing and being sure—(it would hardly be worth while emphasizing that, even in personal notes). His idea is rather that certainty is an attitude which may legitimately outstrip cognitive achievement, indeed which may, in the limit, be taken to propositions which are not candidates to be known at all, not because they are false or because there is no proper basis for confidence in their truth but because they are not in the market for truth in any serious sense of that term—the idea of their ‘agreement with reality’ has no clear application. It is here, finally, that we come to a point of contact with Nozick’s discussion and a way of blocking the first sceptical argument. Nozick claims that knowledge is not in general transmitted across known logical consequence. If we contrast knowledge with certainty after the fashion just indicated, restricting the former to cases of genuine cognitive achievement, then this claim is correct. It is correct not because the known consequences of propositions which are known may be subject to sceptical doubt, as Nozick suggests, but because they may fall outside the domain of what may be known, reasonably believed, or doubted. They may be non-factual. Now, the argument for premiss C of the first sceptical argument (that at no time *t* do I have sufficient reason for believing that I am not dreaming at *t*) showed at most that I cannot achieve a well-founded empirical certainty that I am not dreaming. If the concept of reasonable belief in terms of which the argument is formulated is to be the concept of a cognitive achievement, then the sceptic’s case for premiss C has still to be answered. But the appeal which he needs to make to the transmission principle, in order to pass from premiss A to premiss B, will not now be upheld; and without B, there seems to be no way of doing damage with C. If, on the other hand, the concept of reasonable belief appealed to embraces *certainty* in Wittgenstein’s more inclusive sense, then the argument for C fails: it does not follow from the impossibility of my achieving cognition that I am not dreaming at *t* that I cannot be legitimately certain that I am not.^{51,52}

Notes

- 1 “Facts and Certainty” by Crispin Wright. First published 1985 in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Volume 71. www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/proc/files/71p429.pdf (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0).

- 2 The present lecture owes much to the stimulus provided by Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Clarendon Press, 1981), Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism* (Clarendon Press, 1984), John McDowell's Philosophical Lecture, 'Criteria, Defeasibility and Knowledge', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, lxxviii (1982), 455–79, and Michael Williams, *Groundless Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell 1975).
- 3 A distinguished recent example in this spirit is provided by Sir Peter Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*, 1983 Woodbridge Lectures at Columbia University (London: Methuen 1985).
- 4 The first argument is close to the surface in chap. I of Stroud's book but never quite becomes explicit. I know of no previous source for the second argument, though it surely captures the reply the sceptic should make to Moore's 'proof of the existence of the external world'. Each of the arguments is as destructive of reasonable belief as of knowledge. The first has the additional virtue of not presupposing any version of the 'veil of perception'; the second involves no presupposition of the transmissibility of knowledge (reasonable belief) across known (reasonably believed) entailment. (I do not mean to suggest that I think that either presupposition would be wrong.)
- 5 See, e.g., *The Problems of Philosophy* (Clarendon Press, 1959), pp. 21–24.
- 6 Or equivalently: that their more congenial contraries supply 'best explanations'. See pp. 446–49 of part II below.
- 7 This category is not restricted to propositions concerning what is perceivable. Any proposition may be included for which any possible kind of *evidence* needs to be perceived to be appreciated. So the argument will bear directly on reasonable belief concerning other minds and the remote past. In order to extend it to the recent (recollectable) past, a strengthened version of *A* will serve which relies on dreaming's exclusion not only of perception but of memory.
- 8 Cf. Stroud, *op. cit.*, p. 429, n. 1, pp. 21–22.
- 9 See p. 438, n. 2.
- 10 G. E. Moore, 'Proof of an External World' in his *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959).
- 11 Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 434, n. 2, p. 226.
- 12 There may seem to be a question whether it would be consistent to endorse both kinds of argument. For the first relied upon principle (i)—the principle that reasonable belief is transmitted across reasonably believed entailment—whereas a presupposition of the second might seem to be precisely that that principle is not unrestrictedly acceptable, but is counter-exemplified in the sorts of example considered. But that is mistaken. It remains true, for instance, that *if* Jones's behaviour and physical condition provide me with reason to believe that he's in pain, then I have reason to believe that there are other consciousnesses besides my own. There is here no counter-example to the principle that if I have reason to believe both a conditional and its antecedent, then I have reason to believe its consequent. What the second pattern of argument finds fault with is not this principle in general but the more specific idea that the *very* reason which I have for believing the antecedent is *there by* transmitted to the consequent, becomes a reason for believing it also. The second pattern of argument involves failure of the transmission principle for reasonable belief, in other words, only if the principle is read along the lines:

What is reasonably believed to be a consequence of reasonably believed premisses is *thereby* reasonably believed (or at least, reasonably believable).

By contrast, no failure is demanded of the principle which results from deleting the 'thereby'. (The analogous principle for knowledge—without the 'thereby'—is what Nozick has argued does fail. More of that below.)

The first pattern of argument does not need, so far as I can see, to make use of the more specific principle: it requires only that having sufficient reason to think that one has a sufficient perceptual basis at *t* for the belief that *P* requires that—one way or another—one has sufficient reason to think that one is not dreaming at *t*. Nothing in what follows, however, will depend on whether the sceptic can consistently endorse both argument patterns. In particular (what I take to be) the Wittgensteinian response to both which I shall eventually canvass makes no assumptions about that.

- 13 The second pattern of argument, if sustained, will provide the sceptic with analogues of the earlier premiss *C* for the group III propositions and hence will make possible the kind of sceptical argument prefigured earlier, involving just a *B*- and a *C*-type premiss, and contraposition. I said above that I did not think that this was a particularly happy way to present the sceptical case. It should now be clear why. The manner in which the *C*-type premiss is supported by the second argument renders the contrapositive manoeuvre otiose. Precisely because—if the second argument is correct—evidence for the *P* which features in the antecedent of the *B*-type premiss will presuppose antecedent sufficient reason to accept the *C*-type premiss, a demonstration of the impossibility of the latter already accomplishes what the contraposition would establish.
- 14 My discussion of them is intended to complement (sketchily) that which Stroud offers of Austin, Kant, Carnap, and Quine. (See Stroud, *op. cit.*, p. 429, n. 1, chaps. II, IV, V, and VI respectively.)
- 15 For an account of what seems to me the most important, see my 'Does *Philosophical Investigations* 258–60 suggest a cogent argument against Private Language?' in John McDowell and Philip Pettit (eds.), *Subject, Thought and Context* (Clarendon Press, 1986).
- 16 Indeed it is somewhat moot whether, rather than reduce the sceptic to incoherence, the conclusion of the private language argument would not merely supply the means for a further sceptical step: a *reductio ad absurdum* of the assumption, governing the dialectic concerning the past, other minds and the material world, that any form of rational use of symbols—whether for soliloquy or debate—is so much as possible.
- 17 For misgivings about the Wittgensteinian origin of this notion see McDowell, *op. cit.*, p. 429, n. 1.
- 18 I have in mind principally the concluding chapter of P. M. S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion* (Clarendon Press, 1972) and G. P. Baker, 'Criteria: a New Foundation for Semantics', *Ratio*, xvi (1974), 156–89.
- 19 What happens, I think, when philosophers are attracted to a criterial response to scepticism may be something like this. Let us say that the relation between a certain kind of data and the claim which it purportedly warrants is *symptomatic* just in case it is possible to describe an empirical research programme which would determine whether or not the obtaining of such data was indeed a reliable indication of the truth of such statements. Clearly the relation between, e.g. physico/behavioural data and a large class of descriptions of others' mental states is not symptomatic in this sense: we have no conception of how an empirical research programme might go which could disclose a dependable correlation of the appropriate kind. The reason is simply that we have no conception of what it might be for ourselves, or even for a superior being, to be able to appraise the truth of descriptions of others' mental states independently of physico/behavioural data. That seems to leave just two possibilities: first—what the sceptic is urging—that the 'evidential' status of such data depends on a background theory which cannot be empirically corroborated but is tantamount to dogma; and second, that the evidential relation is grounded not in theory but in convention—what people

say and do is criterial for their mental states. So a criterial account is apt to seem the only way of acknowledging the non-symptomatic status of a type of data without falling prey to the second type of sceptical argument. But it is no response until the appropriate theoretical work is done. The sceptic's challenge cannot be met simply by describing a more congenial scenario in which it could not be presented. The scenario has to be shown to be actual. (For further discussion of criteria, and pessimistic conclusions about their anti-sceptical efficacy see my 'Second Thoughts about Criteria', *Synthese* (1984), reprinted in my *Realism, Meaning and Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).)

- 20 Notice that 'on occasion' is quite sufficient. If my knowledge of some aspect of my physical environment is ever correctly represented as consisting in a conscious apprehension of that very aspect (rather than the conclusion of an inference from characteristics of my sensory condition which might obtain even if I were, for example, hallucinating), then the second pattern of sceptical argument has no objection to bring against the transmission of the reason that I thereby acquire to believe a proposition about my typewriter, say, across the entailment to the proposition that the material world does indeed exist. Once having gathered, in this way, reason to believe that proposition, the sceptical argument can then be blocked in cases—if any—where there really is an inference and the I–II–III scenario is apt.
- 21 See my 'Keeping Track of Nozick', *Analysis*, xliii (1983), 134–40. Also E. J. Lowe, 'Wright vs. Lewis on the Transitivity of Counterfactuals', *ibid.*, xlv (1984), 180–3; C. Wright, 'Comment on Lowe', *ibid.*, pp. 183–5; and E. J. Lowe, 'Reply to Wright on Conditionals and Transitivity', *ibid.*, xlv (1985), 200–2.
- 22 Strawson, *op. cit.*, p. 429, n. 2, p. 20.
- 23 Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 429, n. 1, pp. 140–41.
- 24 Strawson, *op. cit.*, p. 429, n. 2, p. 3.
- 25 All references henceforth are (by paragraph numbers) to *On Certainty* unless otherwise stated.
- 26 Cf. 103–5, 136–8, 151–3, 208–11, 400–2, 411, 509, 512.
- 27 See also 93–9, 167–68, 319–21, 380–2, 651–58.
- 28 3rd edn., Oxford: Blackwell, 1978.
- 29 For further discussion of this see my *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Duckworth/Harvard University Press, 1980), chaps. XXI–XXIII. Also 'Inventing Logical Necessity' *inj.* Butterfield (ed.), *Language, Mind and Logic* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- 30 Cf. 54, 57–59, 98, 125, 245–47, 362–68.
- 31 Cf. 261–62, and perhaps 498–500.
- 32 The qualification is occasioned by the point that with other minds we may—telepathy?—and with the past we certainly do—other kinds of traces besides memory—want to allow a variety of other kinds of evidence. However, it is impossible to see how the reliability of these types of evidence could be established without comparison with the deliverances of the basic sources: behaviour and physical condition, and memory. So it is fair to say that we have no conception of how others' states of consciousness, and the past, could be the objects of reasonable belief unless reliance on behaviour and physical condition, and memory, is legitimate procedure.
- 33 It is tempting to add that such a state of affairs would have to obtain quite outside space and time as we ordinarily conceive them and could sustain no causal relations; otherwise it seems a mind would have to be possible which could be sensitive to its effects, and which should in principle admit of description. But actually, since the reality of our ordinary conceptions of space and causation,

if not perhaps of time, is disputed by the sceptic, these conceptions cannot provide neutral ground in terms of which the implications of his arguments may be described.

- 34 Also discussed in my *op. cit.*, p. 440, n. i, and in the Introduction to *Realism, Meaning and Truth* (see pp. 441–42, n. 4).
- 35 Similar thoughts are part of the point, I believe, of Wittgenstein's repeated caveats in *Philosophical Investigations* against construing *understanding* as a mental process or state.
- 36 P_3 , if sustained, might seem to suggest some form of anti-realism, in one widespread sense of that term: the view that the evidentially unconstrained idea of truth, dominant, for example, in the Platonist philosophy of mathematics and the Cartesian philosophy of mind, is at odds with connections between meaning and truth which are fundamental to both notions. It will be, in my view, no objection to P_3 if it has this general effect. But I take no stand upon the issue here. Notice, though, that, in the absence of any specification of the powers of the 'rational subject', it is actually doubtful whether the principle is any stronger than P_2 .
- 37 It is my intention that it should have *no* controversial consequences but its manner of classification of group III propositions.
- 38 That is, the structure of the sceptic's contentions is almost always
- (1) B—some fundamental belief of ours—is beyond evidence, *ergo* unjustified; and
 - (2) If B is unjustified, then all propositions of a certain kind are beyond evidence, *ergo* unjustified.

And the point is simply: in order for P_2 (or some similar principle) to classify the larger class of propositions as unfactual, we have to be able to detach the consequent of 2; whereas the antecedent of 2 follows from the evidential isolation of B only if that isolation is *not* interpreted in the light of P_2 .

Clearly, one way for the sceptic to attempt to remuster is to seek such a B which is merely beyond *our* powers of evidence-gathering, to whose factuality P_2 will therefore carry no objection. Such a further challenge is the topic of this section.

- 39 See his *Groundless Belief*, p. 429, n. 1, especially chaps. 3 and 4.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- 41 I ignore complications to do with the semantic role of **T** in that proposition.
- 42 I do not mean to suggest that we can make nothing of the fantasy of a superior perspective—or, for that matter, that it is perfectly intelligible either. The conclusion is only the dubious coherence of the *conjunction* of the three claims that *we* can have no reason to believe [i], that we can imagine a superior perspective which could, and that lack of reason to believe [i] entails lack of reason for our group II beliefs about the material world.
- 43 See especially *op. cit.*, p. 429, n. 2, pp. 10–29.
- 44 I deliberately choose the case of doubt of the material world. In the case of other minds and the past, the corresponding question may seem less bewildering because of the fundamental role played by the group III propositions in *attitudes*—compassion, love, remorse, regret, and so on—whose suspension seems imaginable. But only superficially, I think.
- 45 Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 429, n. 1, pp. 67 ff.
- 46 See 163–66 and 204.
- 47 See 140–142 and 274.
- 48 Cf. the passages cited on p. 453, n. 1.

- 49 There have to be such rules, of course, or every collision between beliefs would be an impasse.
 50 Consider in particular *On Certainty*, 151, 356–59, 403–5, 414–15, 498–500.
 51 To amplify. Let ‘ $R_tX[P]$ ’ say that agent X has sufficient reason to believe P at time t, and ‘ D_tX ’ that X is dreaming at t. The premisses of the argument are then:

- (A) $R_tX[D_tX \vdash \neg R_tX[P]]$, when t is an arbitrarily selected time, and
 (C) $(\forall t) \neg R_tX[\neg D_tX]$;

and the rules for ‘R’ are:

$$(i) \frac{R_tX[A_1 \dots A_n], R_tX[A_1 \dots A_n \vdash B]}{R_tX[B]}$$

and

$$(ii) \frac{A_1 \dots A_n \vdash R_tX[P]}{A_1 \dots A_n \vdash R_tX[R_tX[P]]}$$

The argument then proceeds as follows. Suppose that at t X reasons from $D_tX \vdash R_tX[P]$ to

- (1) $R_tX[P] \vdash \neg D_tX$.
 Then (2) $R_tX[R_tX[P] \vdash \neg D_tX]$, (by A, X’s recognition of the validity of the inference to (1), and (i)).
 Assume (3) $R_tX[P]$.
 Then (4) $R_tX[R_tX[P]]$, (by 3 and (ii)).
 Hence (5) $R_tX[\neg D_tX]$, (by 2, 4, and (i)). But 5 contradicts C. Hence
 (6) $\neg R_tX[P]$, (by C, A, X’s recognition of the validity of the inference to (1), (i), and (ii)).

It then remains to generalize on ‘P’, ‘X’, and ‘t’ in order to infer the conclusion that no one ever has sufficient reason to believe any statement of the kind the paradox restricts attention to. However, if the supposed success of the sceptic’s argument for C has the effect, via, e.g. P₂, of disclosing that ‘ $\neg D_tX$ ’ expresses a non-factual proposition for X at t, then C is acceptable only if ‘R’ expresses *cognitive achievement* rather than the more inclusive Wittgensteinian *certainty*. But then (i) fails of unrestricted validity since factuality is not closed under entailment and cognitive achievement is restricted to the factual. And since i provides, presumably, an example of such non-closure, the inference to 5 is invalid.

Notice that a variant of the paradox could proceed via

$$(i)' \frac{R_tX[A_1 \dots A_n]; A_1 \dots A_n \vdash B}{R_tX[B]}$$

and the weakened

$$(ii)' \frac{A_1 \dots A_n \vdash R_tX[P]}{A_1 \dots A_n \vdash possibly : R_tX[R_tX[P]]}$$

provided we have the strengthened

$$(C^+) \text{ Necessarily: } (\forall t) \neg R_tX[\neg D_tX].$$

Arguably, it is C⁺ which the sceptic’s ‘pleasantly simple’ reasoning (p. 433) establishes, if anything; and (ii)’ which is really suggested by the remarks on

p. 432. It is debatable whether (i)' loses any plausibility to (i) for the interpretations of 'R' which are germane. Again, let me stress that I do not mean to exclude that both the original and the variant might be cogently criticized on a number of grounds. But the challenge, to repeat, is to provide a simultaneous solution both of these paradoxes and all versions of the second pattern of sceptical argument concentrated upon in the text. (The variant requires a modal logic which allows the necessitation of any true entailment statement. I leave it to the reader to satisfy himself of the details.)

- 52 Versions of this material were presented at seminars at Birkbeck College, London, and at my own university, St Andrews, during the spring of 1985, and at colloquia held at Princeton University, the University of Southern California, the University of Miami, the University of Toronto, and the University of Western Ontario during the autumn. I should like to acknowledge the many helpful suggestions and criticisms of those who participated in these discussions, and to thank especially Paul Benacerraf, Harry Field, and Leslie Stevenson. The final draft was prepared by the secretarial staff of the Princeton philosophy department, whom I hereby cordially thank for excellent work based all too often on barely decipherable manuscripts and recordings.

5 Facts and certainty

An introduction and retrospect¹

Crispin Wright

A philosopher worth his or her salt should try to have a worked out response to at least most of the great traditional philosophical challenges. One such challenge is presented by the sceptical thought that no objective difference separates our knowledge, or more generally those of our opinions that we are inclined to regard as fully justified, from convictions we dismiss as empty, superstitious, prejudicial or dogmatic. My Henriette Hertz lecture for the British Academy in 1985 (henceforward *Facts*) represented my own first attempt to respond. Its overall gist was conceived in resistance to a climate of opinion, during the late 1970s and early '80s, when epistemologists tended to divide into two broad camps: those who, in Wittgenstein's name or under the lingering influence of 'ordinary language' philosophy, were prone to dismiss sceptical doubt as nonsensical, or as involving more or less subtle forms of abuse of ordinary epistemological concepts; and those who meekly conceded that the strongest versions of the sceptical challenge are simply unanswerable, permitting nothing better by way of response than a Strawsonian, or Lewisian, shrug of the shoulders. My conviction, stimulated by then recent writings of Nozick and Stroud, was that it was worth trying, and should be possible, to do much better: that scepticism is neither nonsense nor intellectually unassailable but the dead-end conclusion of a range of (in detail, significantly differing) *paradoxes* of which two importantly differing forms—what I came to call, respectively, the Cartesian paradox and the Humean paradox—are developed in the lecture. Paradoxes are things that, if we are rational and smart enough, we should be able to dispel or solve. *Facts* essays a strategy for a head-on, rationalistic response to the paradoxes of scepticism that was broadly inspired by one central element in Wittgenstein's notes *On Certainty*, and which I have subsequently developed in a fashion whose most significant stages are marked in "Scepticism and Dreaming: Imploding the Demon" (1991),² "(Anti)-Sceptics, Simple and Subtle" (2002),³ "Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free)?" (2004)⁴ and "Welfare State Epistemology (Entitlement II)" (2014).⁵ Although there continues to be little consensus among epistemologists about the proper handling of scepticism, and some continue to regard it as philosophically unimportant, it is gratifying that

my own progression has been matched by a significant change of outlook in the profession at large, manifest in the current widespread interest in and recent proliferation of writings on the topic.

Facts was preoccupied with Humean scepticism and fashions its response under the aegis of a number of ‘rules of engagement’ which I continue to regard as vital constraints on any intellectually satisfying response to any of the sceptical paradoxes. First, as implicit in the representation of the sceptical challenge as indeed that of a set of paradoxes, it is important to drop the idea of ‘The Sceptic’ as an (imaginary) philosophical opponent on whom one is charged to inflict a dialectical defeat. That way of thinking about the challenge makes things seem easier than they are. For example, a philosophical opponent may be trapped into self-refutation and thereby defeated; but a paradox is not solved just by pointing out that its conclusion could not coherently be accepted by one who accepted its premises. Second, the fundamental issue posed by the strongest of the paradoxes isn’t so much about knowledge as *warrant*—understood as a property that distinguishes belief responsibly arrived at and held in good intellectual conscience from its disreputable opposite. In *Facts* I directed this point against philosophers who, like Russell, have been inclined to try to make peace with scepticism by suggesting that, although sceptical argument may show that we do not *know* that there is, for instance, an external world, we may nevertheless be well enough warranted in believing that there is (the “Russellian Retreat”). The (best of the) paradoxes, however, need no assumption of the factivity of the epistemic operator concerned and therefore attack not just knowledge but a wide class of virtuous epistemic states whose achievement we would normally have no hesitation in claiming. Yet in view of the large number of epistemologists who draw anti-sceptical comfort from *externalist* conceptions of knowledge and justification, a version of this point merits re-emphasis. Unless you think not merely that knowledge is ‘external’—that is, roughly, that knowing consists in truly believing for causes and in circumstances that may not be apparent to reflection (for instance, the belief in question is generated by a reliable method, or holds good in all circumstances that might easily have obtained, or wouldn’t have been held had it been false...)—but that *all* forms of doxastic merit are external, the kinds of response to the paradoxes which externalism makes possible won’t engage either their application to our pretensions to these other merits—in particular, to warranted belief—or address a certain kind of higher-order sceptical doubt. We may indeed know that there is an external world, if we are lucky enough to live in such a world and, say, our ways of forming beliefs about it are reliable. But merely to emphasise that there is this congenial possibility, and that no sceptical argument shows it not to be realised, takes us no closer towards being in a position *rationally to claim* that it *is* realised. Moreover, when knowledge may be externally grounded, it need not suffice for being in that position merely that one knows that one knows. Rather what is wanted are considerations that allow the claim that one knows to be made in good

conscience—something which merely externally constituted second-order knowledge need not do. The tendency of the sceptical paradoxes, properly gauged, is not to assail the possibility of knowledge—an attack that, when knowledge is suitably conceived, externalism might well deflect—but to engineer a crisis of *intellectual conscience*: to bring about a dialectical situation where we seem to be in no position to lay claim to the knowledge which, if externalism is right, it is possible we have.⁶

A third—and particularly demanding—constraint emerges with this perspective, which *Facts* expresses by saying that Scepticism wins a draw (442). Suppose we have a sceptical argument: a derivation from certain premises of the conclusion that none of our beliefs of a certain kind that we routinely take to be fully warranted is in fact so. What status must its premises have in order for this to pose a problem? It's natural to think that they must be well motivated—must have some *a facie* plausibility at least. But if the warrant operator is closed under (shown) entailment, so—as the reader may care to verify—is the compound operator, “It is not warranted that not”. So the paradox will convert to a second-order version whose conclusion—still unacceptable—will be that, just provided we have no warrant actually to *deny* any of the premises of the argument, we have no warrant to deny that none of our beliefs of the kind in question is warranted, and hence no warrant to affirm that they *are* warranted. It follows that a satisfactory response to a sceptical paradox, assuming its argument is valid, must involve actively challenging one of its premises—it isn't good enough merely to point out, even if it is true, that they have not all been well motivated. This constraint completely scotches any attempt to address scepticism by arguing merely for the “non-compulsory” character of certain of the premises of the sceptical reasoning.

I continue to find it useful to differentiate the two broad forms of sceptical paradox distinguished in *Facts*. What I called *Cartesian scepticism* is the familiar type of sceptical routine which makes play with subjectively undetectable scenarios of perceptual or more general cognitive impairment—envathood, sustained deception by a powerful *malin genie*, sustained coherent dreaming, and so on. Some of these fantasies are inconsistent with the truth of most of what we ordinarily take ourselves to know, some merely inconsistent with our ability to know it. It is sometimes supposed that scepticism depends on accepting an insinuated confinement of the scope of our direct awareness to our own occurrent mental lives, leaving us then in a predicament of chancy inference ‘outwards’ to conclusions about the external material world, others’ mental states, the past and future, and so on. The punch of Cartesian scepticism is that, properly formulated, it needs no such presupposition of internal retrenchment but can go to work on any cognitive faculty which is presumed to afford direct engagement with a certain subject matter. Just two premises are needed, plus a proof theory for the targeted epistemic operator that includes a suitable form of closure. The premises are first, that the acquisition of warrant for a large class of beliefs depends

on the proper functioning of the targeted cognitive faculty (and that this is something which we are warranted in believing); and second, that there is no (acquiring a) warrant for thinking that one is in a state of such proper functioning, rather than in a radical impairment scenario providing a perfect subjective counterfeit of that state. This simple set-up suffices for the conclusion that we are in no position to lay claim to warrant for the large class of beliefs in question. The exact detail of this type of sceptical argument had not, to the best of my knowledge, been made fully explicit before *Facts*. (Not that it is any too difficult to fill it out.⁷)

Humean scepticism contrasts with the Cartesian variety in two important respects. First, it engages large classes of our beliefs for which we conceive of even the strongest warrant as essentially based on indirect, defeasible evidence, whereas the Cartesian paradox arises for what are presumed to be faculties for the acquisition of non-inferential warrants. Second there is, in the Humean case, no reliance on the closure of warrant across known entailment. This was and is important in view of the prominence of the proposal in the influential writings of Dretske and Nozick that scepticism might be addressed by rejection of closure. Even philosophers to whom that does not seem a desperate remedy need to recognise that it will not cure all forms of the **disease**. The Humean form of paradox makes no play with dreams, demons, or crazed scientists but—in a fashion for which Hume's doubts about enumerative induction provide a prototype—argues that our best procedures involve a vicious evidential circularity. The template for this form of scepticism is schematised by what I have called the *I–II–III argument*, laid out in *Facts* and revisited in detail in *Simple and Subtle*. It is nicely illustrated, ironically, by an adaptation of G.E. Moore's celebrated "Proof of an external world"—in essence, this train of thought: "Here is a hand. If there is a hand here, then there is an external world. Therefore, there is an external world". The kernel of the Humean sceptical doubt is that Moore's premise, "Here is a hand", is not just a datum but rests on the evidence of the appearances, and that the evidential support so provided needs the setting of a *prior* acceptance of the conclusion of the 'Proof', *viz.*, that there is an external world (and one, moreover, broadly manifest to us in routine sense-experience). Only with that thesis already in place as background 'theory' does routine sense-experience have any tendency to support claims about external material reality. But a background acceptance of the thesis, in turn, so the paradoxical reasoning contends, is rational just in case one has warrant for it. So, in effect, the empirical warrant—which one may indeed have—for one's belief that there is a hand where one seems to see it actually depends on one's *already having* warrant for the conclusion of Moore's argument. The 'Proof' is therefore epistemically circular, or, as I have usually put it, it *fails to transmit warrant* from its premises to its conclusion.⁸

The straightforward application of the Humean form of sceptical paradox to undermine the warrants generated by perception does indeed

depend on the repudiation of direct realism implicit in insisting on a separate evidential layer of appearances.⁹ But a corresponding direct realist move is only dubiously available in the case of knowledge of other minds, and unavailable for knowledge of the past beyond living memory, the future and general laws. Wherever you draw the line, *some* of our claims to knowledge are going to turn out to be essentially based on defeasible evidence; and for those cases, the charge of circularity—of presupposition, in order for the evidence types in question to have their normally attributed evidential relevance, of certain very general “hinge” or framework beliefs for which warrant can be foreseen only by inferring them in turn from more local beliefs putatively justified by the kinds of evidence in question (just as Moore tried to do)—will arise.

The notion of failure of transmission of warrant (across a valid argument) is independently interesting and important. Its varieties, proper characterisation and role in the sceptical landscape and (arguably) other paradoxes (for example, McKinsey’s argument that content externalism wars with the possibility of ‘armchair’ psychological self-knowledge) take centre stage in several of my papers and have recently received increasing attention from others.¹⁰ Transmission-failure needs to be sharply distinguished from the idea of failure of *closure* of warrant (across a valid argument) with which some of the critics of the latter, like Nozick and Dretske, originally tended to confuse it. For example, a famous alleged counterexample to closure of Dretske’s: the inference from (i) “The animals in that cage are zebras” to (ii) “The animals in that cage are not cleverly disguised mules”, when the warrant for the first is given by casual observation too crude to distinguish the animals in vision from cleverly disguised mules, is arguably a failure of transmission: it is not that one can have a casual observational warrant for (i) but *no* warrant for (ii), but rather that it is only when (ii) (and a range of kindred propositions) are presupposed that casual observation warrants (i). The difference between transmission-failure and the breakdown of closure can be put thus: when closure fails, one may be warranted in believing the premises of a valid argument yet have *no* warrant for its conclusion. When transmission fails, one will have *a* warrant for the conclusion of the argument if one has warrant for the premises, but it will not be possible to *acquire* warrant for the conclusion by reasoning from the premises; rather one will need to warrant the conclusion *en route* to acquiring warrant for the premises. In essence, when transmission fails, the epistemic order—the order of warrant acquisition—inverts the deductive order.

I continue to accept that both the Cartesian and the Humean forms of sceptical paradox make a correct point about the epistemic architecture of the beliefs of ours that they target. We should agree that since the acquisition of, e.g., perceptual warrant does indeed require, as a matter of conceptual necessity, that one not be dreaming, or envatted, one is in position to claim such warrant in any particular case only insofar as one is in position to claim that no such uncongenial possibility obtains. And we should also agree that

one is in position to claim warrant for, e.g., one's beliefs about the mental states of another on the basis of evidence concerning what they say and do only insofar as one is in position to claim in the first place that there are other minds besides one's own, whose states are broadly revealed in others' sayings and doings. So to resist the sceptical conclusion, a case must be made that we *are* in position to discount the uncongenial scenarios of dreaming, envatment, and so on, and that we *are* in position to claim the requisite prior warrant for the general hinges, like "there are other minds" and "the world did not come into being five minutes ago, replete with apparent traces of a much more ancient history", on which the possibility of defeasible justification of specific beliefs about other minds and the past turns. But what is that case?

The proposal about this in *Facts* was encouraged by something that seems to bubble to the surface in those occasional passages in *On Certainty* that seem to insinuate that sceptical doubt feeds off a misunderstanding fuelled by the *superficial form* of hinge propositions. For instance at §§213–5, Wittgenstein writes:

(213) Our 'empirical propositions' do not form a homogeneous mass. (214) What prevents me from supposing that this table either vanishes or alters its shape and colour when no one is observing it, and then when someone looks at it again changes back to its old condition?—"But who is going to suppose such a thing!"—one would feel like saying. (215) Here we see that the idea of 'agreement with reality' does not have any clear application.

[my underlining]

Compare the throwaway remark at the end of 308:

We are interested in the fact that about certain empirical propositions no doubt can exist if making judgements is to be possible at all. Or again: I'm inclined to believe that not everything that has the form of an empirical proposition is one.

[my underlining]

According to *Facts*, the suggestion Wittgenstein is making here is that, their indicative surface notwithstanding, these hinge propositions do not actually function as purported *representations of reality*, that they are not "factual", and hence that their acceptability is absolved from the conditions of good evidence or cognitive achievement that are presumed to govern the rational acceptance of purported statements of fact. Sceptical doubt holds our acceptance of them should be hostage to ~~by~~ such conditions. But that is to misunderstand their role.

Section III of *Facts* argues in some detail against one way that Wittgenstein himself tended to elaborate on this idea—the idea that hinge propositions are normative over the description of empirical contingencies in roughly the way that basic propositions of logic and mathematics are—and then canvasses

three other, positive proposals about how the thesis of the non-factuality of hinge propositions might be motivated. None of these, however, seemed absolutely compelling to me at the time and my discussion moved to the suggestion that one might merely adopt one or other of them as a convention, stipulatively determining thereby boundaries for the factual that would serve the anti-sceptical point. However I quite soon began to have misgivings about this direction. For one thing, the required idea that factuality might not be closed over entailment seemed difficult to swallow: how could it be that, on any intuitive understanding of the notion, “I have two hands,” for example, expresses a factual proposition but its consequence, “There are external material objects,” differing just by generalisation, does not? For another, on any particular occasion of utterance during my lifetime, there surely is a factual (though under certain conditions, possibly a vague) claim made by someone else’s utterance of “Wright is not now asleep and dreaming”—how and why should factuality evaporate if what is intuitively an equivalent claim were expressed in the first person? And finally, even granting their non-factuality, more would still need to be said about what does, positively, warrant us in accepting certain hinge propositions, or in taking them for granted. Sure, non-factuality would absolve the propositions in question from meeting certain conditions of cognitive evidence. But unless the proposal is to be that any non-factual acceptance is as good as any other—a proposal which, applied to hinge propositions, would presumably rapidly enforce defeat by the sceptical challenge as formulated at the beginning of the present essay¹¹—an account still needs to be offered of why, positively, we are justified in accepting that there is an external material world, that there are other minds, and that we are not, each of us, right now in the midst of a sustained and coherent lucid dream, etc.

Imploding (1991) took on the task of trying to supply such an account, but one that discarded the proposal of non-factuality, arguing directly and *a priori* against the key premise in any Cartesian sceptical paradox: the premise that one has no warrant to deny that one is in a situation of subjectively undetectable impairment of the relevant cognitive faculty. On the contrary, it is there contended, we *must* think of ourselves as warranted in believing that we are not now dreaming or envatted, that our memories are not systematically impaired, and so on. The details of the argument and its ramifications are complex, but the basic idea was a simple one, turning on a version of the Cartesian paradox that, as it were inadvertently, provides a *reductio* of the conjunction of its own premises. These, recall, may be schematised like this:

PREMISE (I): There is no warrant for thinking one is not now cognitively impaired (in the relevant way).

PREMISE (II): One is warranted in accepting that [for any of a large class of beliefs, P, one has no warrant for accepting P unless one is not so cognitively impaired].

These entail (assuming closure) that one has no warrant for taking P as warranted, for any of the class of beliefs concerned. The central idea of *Imploding* was to turn this paradox against the faculties involved in engaging with the paradox itself, grouped together under the heading of “intellection”. So I invited the reader to envisage a kind of state—*maundering*—in which all the subjectivity of lucid intellection is present but the real (internal causal) conditions for cognitive achievement by means of intellection are not met. The two resulting premises allow of exactly analogous support to that which they receive in all instances of the Cartesian paradox, and the conclusion duly follows that we have no warrant to regard as warranted any belief whose warrant would depend on intellection. One such belief, however, is given by the material in square brackets in Premise (II). So our conclusion implies that there is no warrant for premise (II). Since this is false, and since Premise (II) is actually (one may argue) true, Premise (I) has to be false. The complexity of the paper is then occasioned by the attempt to generalise this finding to all versions of the paradox, including the classic case of the Dreaming argument itself. If the attempt succeeds—as, of course, some critics have doubted¹²—the very resources marshalled in developing the sceptical paradox suffice to undermine its key premise.

That must prompt the question: why did the key premise seem correct? In particular, why is there any even *prima facie* plausibility in the suggestion that one has, in the end, no warrant to discount the idea that one’s present experience is but a lucid dream? There are various sceptical ploys to support this premise, but all rely on an equation of warrant with *evidence* and then make a case that the identification of evidence for thinking of one’s present experience as broadly veridical, as waking experience rather than a dream, will rest on the presupposition that one really has the evidence and isn’t just dreaming it up! So the point, in essentials, is that we cannot non-question-beggingly identify an *evidential warrant* to believe we are not dreaming.

This, it occurred to me, offered the prospect of a crucial point of contact with Humean scepticism and the possibility of a unified solution. The Humean sceptical argument makes a case that we cannot attain an evidential warrant for a large hinge proposition—for instance, that there is an external material world—which, it contends, had better be warranted if we are to be justified in accepting the evidence for specific propositions within the ‘domain’ of the hinge that we do. So what emerges is that both forms of paradox rely on the assumption that the only admissible kind of warrant either to dismiss the possibility that one might be dreaming right now, or to ground the belief that there is an external world, is evidential. This observation paves the way for the strategy of simultaneous response to Cartesian and Humean scepticism broached in *Warrant for Nothing*: both paradoxes might be resisted if it could be argued that rational warrants extend beyond—can consist in something other than—the provision of evidence. In particular, if it is possible to have *non-evidential* warrants

for acceptance of “I am not dreaming now” and of “There is an external world”, neither form of sceptical paradox can reach its depressing conclusion.

The argument of *Imploding* was not clearly well adapted to delivering on this general suggestion, however. The form of rebuttal of scepticism developed there elaborates a kind of nemesis for the sceptical thought that phenomenology alone cannot certify the causal provenance of one’s experience, so cannot justify “I am not dreaming now”—namely, that in that case neither can one justify “I am not maundering now”, in which case one has no warrant for other elements on which the Cartesian style of paradox depends. There is no evident immediate extension of the argument to cover “There is an external material world”, or “There are other minds” as they feature in their respective Humean-style paradoxes, where the sceptical doubt concerns not one’s cognitive functioning but, broadly, the cooperativeness of the world.

I continue to regard the argument of *Imploding* as good for the purpose of showing that elements of the Cartesian sceptical routine embody a commitment to some notion of non-evidential warrant, and hence that such sceptical paradoxes implicitly undercut one of their own premises. But it still remains to argue that, quite consistently with their factuality, we do indeed have such non-evidential warrants for the hinge propositions, and propositions about our effective cognitive functioning, which the paradoxes deny, and to explain why. That is the project I took up in *Warrant for Nothing* and have continued in subsequent work, including most recently *Welfare State*.

My approach has been pluralistic, involving the making of a case for several different kinds of non-evidential warrant, gathered under the catch-all term, *entitlement*. The one most germane to the possibility of vindicating the rationality of believing that one is not now dreaming is *entitlement of cognitive project*. It is proposed that one has such an entitlement to accept, or presuppose, P if the following conditions are satisfied:

- i P is a *presupposition* of the cognitive project at hand—in the sense that to doubt P (in advance) would rationally commit one to doubting the significance or competence of the project.
- ii There is no extant sufficient reason to believe that P is false; and
- iii The attempt to justify P would involve further presuppositions in turn of no more secure a prior standing, ..., and so on without limit; so that 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.

When these conditions are met, to run the project in question, and to take its findings on board, rationally requires that one take it for granted that

P, even absent any evidence in its favour. So if the project concerned is of a kind—for example, **deciding what to do, or inferring**—which is of the very essence of rational activity, then it is rational, so long as all three conditions are met, to have no doubt that P. I leave it to the reader to think through the suggestion that the proposition that one’s cognitive faculties are functioning properly in conditions conducive to their doing so passes the test. If so, there is a rational entitlement to take it that one is not now dreaming.

It is another matter whether this particular notion of entitlement can extend to all the hinge propositions whose apparent evidential isolation is argued for and exploited in the various paradoxes. The suggestion of *Warrant for Nothing* was that this is not so: that other modes of entitlement will need to be disclosed and developed if the unified strategy is to succeed. Some possibilities are explored both there and in *Welfare State*, which also responds in detail to **recent** criticisms, lodged by Jenkins, Pritchard and others, to the very idea of using the notion of epistemic entitlement to address scepticism.

Wittgenstein’s own response to scepticism in *On Certainty* is often read as naturalistic—as, like Hume, emphasising the idea of the blamelessly “animal” in our habits of belief-formation. There are certainly passages that support that reading but I incline to see my own work in this field as responding to and developing a different, aprioristic tendency in Wittgenstein’s last notes, illustrated by passages such as these:

105. All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system. And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments: no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life.

163. Does anyone ever test whether this table remains in existence when no one is paying attention to it? 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.

509. I really want to say that a language-game is only possible if one trusts something (I did not say “can trust something”).

519. Admittedly, if you are obeying the order “Bring me a book”, you may have to check whether the thing you see over there really is a book, but then you do at least know what people mean by a “book”; and if you don’t you can look it up,—but then you must know what some other word means. And the fact that a word means such-and-such, is used in such-and-such a way, is in turn an empirical fact, like the fact that what you see over there is a book. Therefore, in order for you to be able to carry out an order there must be some empirical fact about which you are not in doubt. Doubt itself rests only on what is beyond doubt.

As is familiar, Wittgenstein's last notes were written in reaction (and tribute) to Moore's "Proof of an External World" and "Defence of Common Sense". Since the turn of the millennium there has been an upsurge of interest in these contributions of Moore's, including a very good debate between so-called liberals (for instance, Pryor and Peacocke), who tend to view Moore's notorious 'Proof' as epistemically (though not perhaps dialectically) unexceptionable and so-called conservatives (for instance, Neta, White and myself), who regard the proof as epistemic wheel-spinning. As I read *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein would have sided with the conservatives. For perceptual liberalism, the warrant conferred on claims about the local perceptible environment by our experience is, though defeasible, presuppositionless. The quoted passages, by contrast, gesture at a general thought of which one implication is the *necessarily propositionally situated* character of all reflective enquiry, the sense in which the rational uptake of the results of any cognitive project—the appreciation of what if anything has been shown or justified—must rest upon a willingness to trust in certain claims without specific evidence. That can seem like a sceptical point. It would be so if such unevidenced trust was epistemically unjustified. I take Wittgenstein to have observed that, to the contrary, it is a point about the essence of enquiry, and grounds an entitlement for any enquirer to take certain things for granted. Which things, and in which context, is of course the crucial question.

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Notes

- 1 I would like to thank the editors for giving me the opportunity to republish “Facts and Certainty” in the present volume. The remarks to follow are aimed both at helping a new reader to get a sense of the project of my lecture, and at providing some sense of how, more than thirty years on, I now rate its core proposals—what I would still emphasise and what I no longer endorse.
- 2 Henceforward *Imploding*.
- 3 Henceforward *Simple and Subtle*.
- 4 Henceforward *Warrant for Nothing*.
- 5 Henceforward *Welfare State*.
- 6 For more on how I understand the notion of being in position to claim knowledge and its potential contrast with knowledge of knowledge, externally

construed, see Crispin Wright, “Comment on John McDowell’s ‘The Disjunctive Conception of Experience as Material for a Transcendental Argument,’” in *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge*, ed. Adrian Haddock and Fiona MacPherson, 390–404 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Crispin Wright, “Replies Part IV,” in *Mind, Meaning, and Knowledge: Themes From the Philosophy of Crispin Wright*, ed. Annalisa Coliva, 451–86 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

- 7 At any rate, they are fully explicit both in *Facts*, 471n1 and *Imploding*, 96–99.
- 8 An unfortunate feature of the discussion in *Facts* is the use of the term “transmissibility” to refer to what is in fact the principle of closure. No reader need have been confused however. The intention, and the contrast with what I later came to refer to as warrant transmission—and is now standardly so termed—is fully explicit at 438n1.
- 9 See however *Simple and Subtle* for argument that the template extends to McDowell’s ‘disjunctivism’.
- 10 A useful overview of the issues and debates, and bibliography of the literature up to 2013, is provided by the entry entitled “Transmission of Justification and Warrant” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/transmission-justification-warrant/>. An omission from the bibliography is my “Replies Part IV”.
- 11 That was, recall, “that no objective difference separates our knowledge, or more generally those of our opinions that we are inclined to regard as fully justified, from convictions we dismiss as empty, superstitious, prejudicial or dogmatic.”
- 12 See, for instance, the discussions by Brueckner, “Problems with the Wright Route to Scepticism”; Tymozco and Vogel, “The Exorcist’s Nightmare: A Reply to Crispin Wright”; and Pritchard, “Scepticism and Dreaming” cited in the list of References.

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