# Beyond Doubt, Beyond Justification:
# Hume, Strawson, and Wittgenstein on the Existence of Bodies


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CONTENTS

Contents ........ 2

Abstract ........ 4

Acknowledgments ........ 5

Abbreviations ........ 6

Introduction ........ 7

Chapter 1 – Wittgenstein on the Limits of Doubt - I ........ 17

1. Some Features of Indubitable Propositions ........ 17

2. “Something animal” ........ 21

3. Hinges ........ 23

4. Indubitable Propositions as Norms ........ 25

Chapter 2 – Wittgenstein on the Limits of Doubt - II ........ 33

1. Wittgenstein on Intelligible Doubt ........ 34

2. Indubitability ........ 39

3. Types of Indubitable Propositions ........ 43

4. Groundlessness ........ 45

5. *On Certainty* and Sceptical Problems ........ 51

Chapter 3 – Wittgenstein on “There are Physical Objects” ........ 59

1. What Wittgenstein Did Not Say about Cartesian Scepticism ........ 60

2. What Wittgenstein Said about Cartesian Scepticism ........ 63

3. What Wittgenstein Said about “There are Physical Objects” ........ 68

4. Idealism and Scepticism ........ 73

5. A Comparison with Carnap ........ 77

Chapter 4 – Hume on the Impossibility of Scepticism ........ 81

1. Hume and Scepticism ........ 82

2. Our Inescapable Belief in Body ... 90
3. The Belief in Body as a "Natural Belief" ... 95
4. A Wittgensteinian Hume? ... 99
5. The Right to Believe in Body: The Practical Argument ... 102
6. Idle Scepticism? ... 107
Chapter 5 – Strawson on Inescapable Commitments and Sceptical Challenges ... 111
1. Strawson's Use of the Inescapability Thesis ... 111
2. Scepticism about the Existence of Body ... 118
3. The Naturalistic Answer to Scepticism about Body ... 121
4. Framework Beliefs ... 123
5. Serious and Idle Requests ... 127
Chapter 6 – Idle Scepticism? ... 134
1. Cartesian Scepticism and Answers to It ... 136
2. The Veridicalist Answer to Scepticism ... 139
3. Objections to Veridicalism (1): The Semantic Objection ... 146
4. Objections to Veridicalism (2): Causal Beliefs ... 150
5. Objections to Veridicalism (3): Other People and Value ... 154
6. Conclusion ... 160
Conclusion ... 162
Bibliography ... 166

## ABSTRACT

My aim in this dissertation is to examine P. F. Strawson's claim, in his *Skepticism and Naturalism*, that both Hume and Wittgenstein see our belief in body, that is, our belief in mind-independent objects, as groundless and, at the same time, not open to serious doubt. Theirs is what he calls a "naturalistic" answer to scepticism: the proper attitude towards the sceptic's request for a justification of our belief in body is not to produce such a justification—the belief is groundless—but to point out that this request idle, a pretence. I examine Strawson's claim from an exegetical and philosophical perspective and reach four conclusions, two exegetical and two philosophical. First, Strawson's comparison is not the right one, as there are substantial differences between his position, that of Hume, and that of Wittgenstein. Secondly, there is room for another comparison since their writings contain claims which suggest a similar anti-sceptical argument, one purporting to show that our inability to rule out that we are in Cartesian sceptical scenario does not preclude us from having knowledge of many everyday empirical truths, because the question whether one is in such a scenario has no bearing on the truth of everyday empirical propositions. Thirdly, the naturalistic argument that Strawson attributes to Hume and Wittgenstein, and that he himself endorses, fails. Fourthly, the anti-sceptical line of argument that I uncover in the writings that I examine fails as well.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

*Wittgenstein*

| | |
|---|---|
| BlB | *The Blue Book* |
| OC | *On Certainty* |
| PI | *Philosophical Investigations* |
| TLP | *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* |
| Z | *Zettel* |

*Hume*

| | |
|---|---|
| T | *A Treatise of Human Nature* |

*Strawson*

| | |
|---|---|
| SN | *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* |

# Introduction

It is neither common nor obvious to compare Hume and Wittgenstein. Indeed, everything seems to oppose them: the Newtonian versus the sceptic about the value of scientific progress, the Enlightener versus the Spenglerian, the sociable “homme de salon” versus the asocial hermit, the man of his time versus the nostalgic of Austro-Hungary, the religious sceptic versus the defender of religion.

In spite of these deep divergences, some have offered to compare them, emphasising various points of convergence. Annette Baier (Baier 1991) talks about their common opposition to rationalism and theoretical philosophy and about their return to the ordinary. David Pears (Pears 1995) has written about their naturalism, and so has Oswald Hanfling (Hanfling 1975). Robert Fogelin (Fogelin 2010) talks about what he calls their “defactoism”, that is, their way of stating the facts without going beyond or below them, but also about their common commitment to a form of Pyrrhonian scepticism. Don Garrett (Garrett 2016) thinks that his interpretation of Hume’s epistemology echoes Crispin Wright’s interpretation of *On Certainty* (Wright 2004). Last but not least, Peter Strawson (Strawson 1985) attributes to both a common “naturalistic” reply to Cartesian scepticism which consists in showing that the request for justifications of our belief in physical objects is idle and can be bypassed.

My focus in this dissertation is on Strawson’s comparison. I argue that it fails, that the “naturalistic” argument against Cartesian scepticism fails as well, and that one finds in Hume and Wittgenstein a different suggestion for defending the thesis that the question of the existence of physical objects is idle. According to this suggestion, the question

whether we are brains in vats or in some other sceptical scenario is a question concerning the nature of the world we inhabit—is it a dream world, or a simulated world, or the real world?—and the answer to this question is irrelevant to our theoretical purposes—it makes no difference to the truth of our everyday empirical beliefs—and to our practical purposes. However, I argue that this position is not satisfactory either.

*Strawson's comparison*. In *Skepticism and Naturalism* (Strawson 1985), P. F. Strawson argues that both Hume in his *Treatise of Human Nature* and Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* see our belief in body, that is, our belief in mind-independent objects, as groundless and, at the same time, not open to serious doubt. Theirs is what he calls a "naturalistic" answer to scepticism: the proper attitude towards the sceptic's request for a justification of our natural and inescapable belief in body is not to produce such a justification, but to point out that this request is idle, a pretence, and to "bypass" it.

The problems with Strawson's interpretive claim are numerous. First, as I shall explain, the sceptical question that he discusses differs from the one that Wittgenstein discusses, which in turn differs from the one that Hume discusses. Secondly, while Wittgenstein and Hume do wish to set a sceptical problem aside, their reasons for doing so are quite different. Thirdly, these reasons differ from the one that Strawson attributes to them, that is, their arguments for setting the sceptical question aside do not rely on an appeal to the fact that our belief in body is groundless yet not open to serious doubt. This is especially true of Wittgenstein, who has a conception of groundless indubitable beliefs but never says that our belief in physical objects is one of them. Fourthly, even if they did offer the kind of argument that Strawson attributes to them, their understandings of groundlessness and indubitability differ substantially from each other and from Strawson's.

*What is scepticism about the existence of body?* Although Strawson uses a Humean phrase to refer to the form of scepticism that he examines, the question he discusses is not the one that Hume himself considers in the *Treatise*. In section 2 of Book One Part 4, Hume examines the question whether physical objects exist because his views on perception make their existence potentially problematic. On this account of perception, all we are ever acquainted with are sense-impressions and it is for this reason that the question arises whether these are caused by physical objects (Chapter 4, section 2). This problem differs from the one that Strawson discusses, although it is superficially similar. The similarity concerns the belief which is threatened in both cases—our belief in the existence of physical objects—but while Hume's problem results from a particular view of perception, the problem that Strawson consider does not (Chapter 5, section 2). The sceptical problem which he considers, and which can be called "Cartesian", is a challenge to show that we are in a perceptual state rather than in a phenomenologically indistinguishable state such as dreaming or being deceived by a *malin génie*. While Hume's problem might be dispelled by an argument showing that his account of perception is erroneous, this is not the case with Cartesian scepticism. As for Wittgenstein, the problem that he examines when he discusses the existence of physical objects in *On Certainty* is actually not a sceptical problem, since it is the problem of idealism (Chapter 3, sections 1, 2, and 3). The idealist is not someone who doubts that the familiar objects—tables, chairs, etc.—that we identify in our surroundings exist, but someone who makes a metaphysical claim about their nature. These objects, he says, are mind-dependent.

*Setting scepticism aside*. Strawson's naturalistic argument is his own rather than Hume's or Wittgenstein's. It does have its inspiration in something that Hume writes in passing, namely that: "We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence*

*of body?* but 'tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings." (T 1.4.2.1; SBN 187)[1]. However, when Hume gives reasons for abandoning the project of justifying our belief in body, he does not mention the psychological inescapability of this belief. His actual reasons are that the project of proving that the belief is true cannot be carried out, and that whether bodies exist or not is irrelevant for thought and action (Chapter 4, section 6). As for Wittgenstein, it would be inaccurate to describe him as wanting to set the question of existence of physical objects aside. His position is more ambitious, as he says that the idealist's doubt about the existence of these objects is an "illusion" (OC 19), rather than "vain", or "idle" (Chapter 3, section 3).

*The argument from groundless indubitable propositions*. Strawson's argument for setting aside the sceptical challenge to the belief in body rests on the claim that this belief is groundless yet inescapable (Chapter 5, sections 3, 4, and 5), but Hume and Wittgenstein use this idea in a different way. Hume uses it in a practical argument intended to show that we have a right to hold our belief in body despite our inability to defend it (Chapter 4, section 5), while Wittgenstein uses it to reject certain doubts as senseless (Chapter 2, sections 2 and 5).

*Groundlessness and indubitability*. Finally, there are substantial differences between the ways in which Hume and Wittgenstein understand groundlessness and indubitability. According to Hume, our belief in body is groundless yet indubitable in the sense that we cannot prove that bodies exist but are psychologically unable to believe otherwise (Chapter 4). Wittgenstein, on the other hand, speaks in terms of propositions rather than belief, and holds that a proposition is groundless when it is too certain to be held for reasons (Chapter 2, section 4). There is no lack of evidence for such propositions, as

[1] Unless specified, all emphases in quotes are original.

everything “speaks for” them, but since they are certain none of the facts speaking for them would be appropriately described as the evidence on the basis of which we hold them. As for indubitability, Wittgenstein holds that a proposition is indubitable when one could not be mistaken about it (Chapter 2, section 1 and 2). Strawson, finally, considers our belief in body as psychologically inescapable, so his construal of indubitability is Humean (Chapter 5, section 1). However, his construal of groundlessness is original, as he does not say that our belief is body is, like Wittgenstein’s groundless propositions, too well known to be believed for reasons. Rather, the belief is groundless in the sense that it could not be believed for reasons (Chapter 5, section 5). Believing that bodies exist is like breathing. Breathing is something that we do without a reason—not on the basis of a reason—and, even if we had a reason for doing so, we would not, upon discovering this reason, start breathing *because* we have that reason. In a similar fashion, even if we had a reason for believing in body, we would never hold this belief on the basis of a reason.

*Idle Scepticism*. The argument that Strawson attributes to Hume and Wittgenstein, and that he himself endorses, purports to show that the Cartesian request for a justification of our belief in body, as well as attempts to meet it by argument, are equally “idle”, or not “serious” and can therefore be bypassed, where by “serious”, Strawson means “actually making a difference” (ibid.: 51). This is not Hume’s position and neither is it Wittgenstein’s. However, one finds in their writings another argument which can be used against Cartesian scepticism and which can, to some extent, also be called an argument “from idleness”. In this dissertation, I argue that both arguments fail.

*Strawson’s argument*. Strawson’s argument rests on the assumption that, where we have an inescapable commitment, the request for, as well as the offering of, reasons is idle, or not serious. His reason for thinking so is that, according to him, when we ask for

or give reasons to do or to believe something, we want, or want to give, reasons that could become *our reasons*, that is, the reasons *for which* we could do or believe that thing. Where this requirement is not met, as Strawson thinks is the case with our belief in body, it is pointless to ask for or to give reasons. The problem with this argument is that we may be inescapably committed to some belief and wonder whether it is right to hold it, although the reason why it is right may never become anyone's reason for holding the belief. In the case of the Cartesian challenge to our belief in body, such a question arises because it is assumed that, unless we know that bodies exist, we cannot know any of the everyday empirical truths that we take ourselves to know.

*Hume and Wittgenstein's argument*. A better argument for the claim that it is idle to prove that physical objects exist would therefore be one that shows that whether or not physical objects exist makes no difference to the question whether our everyday empirical beliefs are true. This is precisely the line of argument that can be found in Hume and Wittgenstein. Both philosophers draw a distinction between what could be called "everyday empirical questions" and the "further" question whether bodies exist, and they consider that the answer to the latter is of no relevance to answering the former. Although they do not discuss Cartesian scepticism, the distinction they draw can be directly applied to it. The further question that the sceptic asks concerns the status, or the nature, of the world which presents itself to us in subjective experience. Empirical questions, on the other hand, are settled by relying on ordinary procedures such as looking, touching, or tasting, or more sophisticated ways of collecting and assessing evidence. The world may ultimately be a computer simulation, I can nonetheless smell, touch, and pick flowers in a field, and it is these facts that are relevant to settling the question whether some flower exists, not the existence of flowers outside the simulation. This argument fails because

not all of our empirical beliefs are beliefs about physical objects and because some of them would be false in at least some Cartesian scenarios.

*Outline*. The first five chapters are mainly exegetical and critical. In the first three I present and examine Wittgenstein's views in *On Certainty* and his approach to the idealist's doubts about the existence of physical objects. The fourth chapter is dedicated to Hume, while the fifth is dedicated to Strawson. In the sixth chapter, I review the results of the five preceding chapters, explain the anti-sceptical line of argument that I have uncovered in Hume and Wittgenstein's writings, and argue that it fails.

*Chapter 1*. In the first chapter, I introduce Wittgenstein's views in *On Certainty*, in particular his claim that certain propositions are beyond doubt, and I argue against three ways of explaining why these propositions are beyond doubt. The first is that our commitment to them is "animal". Against this I argue that when Wittgenstein mentions this feature of our commitment to certain propositions, he wants to insist on the fact that we did not come to accept them as the result of a process of reasoning, and on the fact that we simply do not doubt them, none of which can explain why we could or should not doubt them. The second interpretation that I criticise rests on the notion of "hinge". Wittgenstein argues that our questions and doubts require that certain propositions are "exempt from doubt", and that these propositions function like "hinges" on which our doubts and questions turn (OC 341). I argue that while all propositions that are beyond doubt play the role of "hinges", other propositions which are open to doubt sometimes play a similar role, and that being "exempt from doubt" is not the same as being beyond doubt. Finally, I also reject the suggestion that indubitable propositions are indubitable because they express rules, or norms, and are therefore not proper objects of epistemic

evaluation. Against this proposal, I argue that not all indubitable propositions can be analysed as expressing rules.

*Chapter 2.* In this chapter, I offer my own account of propositions that are beyond doubt and beyond justification. I argue that the key to understanding the notion of indubitability is Wittgenstein's account of reasonable intelligible doubt. For doubt to be intelligible, it must be conceivable that a proposition is false, and for it to be reasonable one needs a positive reason to think that this proposition might be false. If the first condition is met but not the second, doubt is merely unreasonable. If the first condition is not met, then the proposition is indubitable: there could be no reason to doubt it. I supplement this account with an explanation of how Wittgenstein conceives of groundlessness, and examine whether he relies on the idea of indubitable propositions when discussing sceptical problems. I consider two forms of scepticism, namely scepticism about induction and scepticism about the continued existence of objects, and argue that while he appeals to indubitability when discussing the former, he does not do so when discussing the latter.

*Chapter 3*. In this final chapter about Wittgenstein, I argue that, contrary to what is sometimes claimed, he did not think of the proposition "There are physical objects" as a groundless indubitable proposition, that he was not concerned with scepticism but with idealism, and that he therefore did not try to reject Cartesian scepticism on the ground that it challenges a proposition that is beyond doubt and beyond justification. His way with the idealist consists in pointing out that his doubt is not a "practical doubt"—the idealist does not mean to question any everyday empirical proposition—but a "further doubt", which Wittgenstein tells us is an "illusion" (OC 19). However, he explains neither how the idealist's doubt is to be understood, nor why it is an illusion. I conclude this

chapter by arguing that the distinction between "practical" doubt and the idealist's "further doubt" can be used in the context of discussing Cartesian scepticism.

*Chapter 4.* In this chapter, I examine Hume's discussion of the existence of "body", that is, of physical objects, in the *Treatise of Human Nature*. I argue that, contrary to what Strawson says, Hume does not reject the question whether bodies exist as idle on the ground that we cannot but believe that they do exist. Rather, he uses the psychological inescapability of the belief in a practical argument purporting to show that, although we cannot justify it, we have a right to hold it. He does, however, believe, like Strawson, that the question whether bodies exist can be bypassed, but on the ground that it is a question concerning the cause of our sense-impressions which has no bearing on the truth of our everyday empirical beliefs.

*Chapter 5*. In this chapter, I examine Strawson's "naturalistic" answer to scepticism in the first chapter of *Skepticism and Naturalism*. Strawson attempts to show that, where we have a natural, inescapable commitment, requests for a justification, as well as attempts to meet them by producing a justification, are idle and can therefore be bypassed. This rests on the assumption that when he asks for a justification, the sceptic asks for a reason that could become "our" reason for believing that bodies exist, that is, he asks for a reason that could become the reason for which we hold this belief. However, in the case of our inescapable commitments, asking for such a reason is of no use, it is not serious, because there is no such thing as the reason why we have these commitments. Against this argument, I argue, as mentioned above, that, although no reason to believe that bodies exist could become our reason, it is not idle to ask for one.

*Chapter 6.* In chapters 3 and 4, I argue that Hume and Wittgenstein both draw a distinction between empirical questions and "further" questions which are irrelevant to answering the former. In Wittgenstein's case the further question is the question whether

idealism is true, while in Hume’s case it is the question whether our sense-impressions are caused by physical objects. In this final chapter I argue that this distinction can be applied to Cartesian scepticism. According to this argument, a subject in a sceptical scenario has many true everyday empirical beliefs, because the truth of these beliefs does not depend on whether or not one is in such a scenario. Even if one is, say, a brain in a vat, one’s belief that one has two hands is still true. If one is mistaken about something, it is about the *ultimate nature* of these hands, and of the world that is presented to one in experience. Cartesian hypotheses are not sceptical, that is, one’s inability to rule them out does not imply that one lacks empirical knowledge. Rather, they are metaphysical hypotheses.

I consider various objections to this line of argument and argue that one of them is conclusive. This objection consists in drawing attention to the fact that there are empirical beliefs which would be false if one were in a Cartesian scenario. This is the case for beliefs about other people if one is in a solipsistic scenario. This objection leads to another worry which concerns value. We consider that the value of our existence depends at least partly on our having meaningful interactions with other people. More generally, we aspire to be in touch with certain aspects of reality that we deem to be valuable. However, in certain sceptical scenarios, we would not be in touch with them, and one’s inability to rule out that one is in one of these scenarios implies that one does not know whether one’s life is as valuable as it seems to be. For this reason, one’s inability to rule out that one is in such a scenario is not a mere theoretical problem. And, if there is an argument showing that it is idle to prove that Cartesian hypotheses are false, it is not one that relies on the distinction that Hume and Wittgenstein draw between empirical questions and “further” questions.

# Chapter 1 – Wittgenstein on the Limits of Doubt - I

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein argues that, alongside propositions that are open to question, there exists a wide range of propositions that are beyond doubt. The reader is told numerous things about these propositions, or at least some of them. Everything "speaks for" them, and nothing for their denials, they are "exempt from doubt", beyond being justified and not justified, they are "something animal", and they might not even be empirical propositions, but "rules" or "norms". The question that naturally arises when considering these claims is: Which feature, or features, of these propositions make them indubitable? In this chapter, I examine three of these features, namely the "animal" character of indubitable propositions, the fact that they function like "hinges" which make our doubts and questions possible, and the suggestion that they are "norms". None of these, I argue, can explain the indubitability of propositions that are beyond doubt.

## 1. Some Features of Indubitable Propositions

Wittgenstein started thinking about the various issues he examines in *On Certainty* after having discussed Moore's papers "A Defence of Common Sense" and "Proof of an external world" with Norman Malcolm (Malcolm 1958). In these two papers, Moore mentions various facts that he knows for certain, for example, that he has two hands, that he has a body, that this body has never been far from the surface of the earth, or that there are other human beings. What struck Wittgenstein was Moore's saying that he *knew* these

things for certain. While agreeing that there was no doubt about any of the items on Moore's list, Wittgenstein questioned whether they could correctly be said to be known and he tried to show that this was not the case. The mistake made by Moore was to fail to "see how very specialized the use of 'I know' is." (OC 11). It is "specialised" in at least two ways. First, according to Wittgenstein, we ordinarily do not use this expression to report facts that are obvious to those who are part of the conversation or facts that are too well known to be mentioned. "I know" is only used to introduce some piece of information that is not already available to our interlocutors. In the case of propositions such as "I have two hands", when my hands are clearly visible to my interlocutors, or in the case of propositions expressing widely known facts such as "Water boils at 100°C", it seems difficult to imagine what purpose could be served by saying that one knows them.

Secondly, the legitimate use of "I know" requires the ability to specify how one knows: "if he knows something, then the question 'how does he know?' must be capable of being answered" (OC 550); "'I know' often means: I have the proper grounds for my statement" (OC 18). But, according to Wittgenstein, the propositions that are beyond doubt are "groundless" (OC 166) and, therefore, cannot be said to be known. This should not be construed, as it sometimes is, as a kind of concession to scepticism.[1] By denying that we have any grounds for propositions that are beyond doubt, he does not mean that we have no evidence for them or that this evidence is insufficient, rather, he means that this evidence cannot qualify as a ground because it is no more certain than, or less certain than, what it is supposed to prove: "And here the strange thing is that when I am quite certain of how the words are used, have no doubt about it, I can still give no *grounds* for my way of going on. If I tried I could give a thousand, but none as certain as the very thing they were supposed to be grounds for." (OC 307) Again: "My having two hands is,

[1] For such a suggestion, see (Pritchard 2005: 200).

in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it. That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it." (OC 250)

The picture that Wittgenstein draws in *On Certainty* is one on which there are, roughly speaking, two kinds of propositions. On the one hand, there are propositions that are open to doubt. These are the propositions that we discuss, for which we can give grounds, and which, when these grounds are satisfactory, can be said to be known. On the other hand, there are propositions that are beyond doubt, groundless, and not known. These propositions have also other features, in particular (1) they are like "hinges", (2) they are not empirical propositions but "norms", (3) they are "animal".

(1) *They are like "hinges"*. Wittgenstein writes that "when Moore says he *knows* such and such, he is really enumerating a lot of empirical propositions which we affirm without special testing; propositions, that is, which have a peculiar logical role in the system of our empirical propositions." (OC 136) By this, Wittgenstein means several things. One of them concerns what he calls "logic of our scientific investigations" (OC 342). This logic requires that "certain things are *in deed* not doubted" (ibid.): "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" (OC 341). I could not, for example, raise a question about tomorrow's weather if I doubted the meaning of the words I use or if I doubted that there will be a tomorrow.

(2) *They are not empirical propositions but norms*. One way in which Wittgenstein draws the distinction between propositions that are open to doubt and propositions that are indubitable is in terms of empirical propositions and "norms". While "'an empirical proposition can be *tested*' (we say)" (OC 109), indubitable propositions "turn[ed] from an empirical proposition into a norm of description" (OC 167), constitute "rule[s] of

testing" (OC 98), whose "role is like that of rules of a game" (OC 95), and which, although they have the "form of empirical propositions", "were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid" (OC 96).

(3) *They are "animal"*. Wittgenstein writes that he wants to conceive of certainty "as it were, as something animal" (OC 359). One should not, according to him, have an over-intellectualised picture of ourselves and of our relation to the propositions that are certain for us. He points out that most of them were never explicitly learned but were, so to speak, "swallowed" (OC 143) as the result of engaging in certain practices: "Children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc. etc.,—they learn to fetch books, sit in armchairs, etc. etc." (OC 476) A related, but different, point is that we did not come to accept our "picture of the world" as the result of an intellectual process, "by satisfying [ourselves] of its correctness" (OC 94). A third related idea is that certainty is practical rather than intellectual. Justifications come to an end, but "the end is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting" (OC 110, see also OC 204), that is, what is certain for me does not manifest itself in some explicit proposition striking me as true, but in the confidence with which I act. "Why do I not satisfy myself that I have two feet when I want to get up from a chair? There is no why. I simply don't. This is how I act." (OC 148)

Since these features are attributed to indubitable propositions, the question that naturally arises with respect to them is whether any of them explains why these propositions are beyond doubt. In the following sections, I examine each feature in turn and argue that none of them are key to understanding indubitability.

## 2. “Something animal”

On several occasions in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein stresses what could be called the “animal” dimension of certainty, that is, he tries to counter an excessively intellectualistic picture of ourselves. This is a constant feature of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy (Glock 2001), and one which takes various forms in *On Certainty*. First, Wittgenstein argues that we did not argue ourselves into accepting our world-picture. Secondly, some indubitable propositions are “swallowed” in a purely practical way. Finally, he claims that they bear a special connexion to action. None of these ideas, however, are relevant to the elucidation of indubitability.

“*I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness” (OC 94)*. Although it is certainly true, the fact that one accepted a proposition on trust rather than as the result of examining the evidence for it is irrelevant to whether it is open to doubt or not. I learnt at school that the earth is round, and this fact is indubitable. I may also have learnt from my parents that Jesus performed miracles and rose from the dead, both of which are eminently doubtful.

*Certain indubitable propositions are “swallowed”*. Wittgenstein stresses the fact that many of the propositions that we hold as certain were never explicitly taught but were interiorised as the result of engaging in certain practices: “Children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc. etc.,—they learn to fetch books, sit in armchairs, etc. etc.” (OC 476) A child “doesn’t learn *at all* that that mountain has existed for a long time: that is, the question whether it is so doesn’t arise at all. It swallows this consequence down, so to speak, together with *what* it learns” (OC 143). “It simply gets assumed as a truism, never called in question, perhaps not even ever formulated.” (OC 87) Certain propositions are “swallowed” while learning how to do certain things, but others are so while learning

other propositions. For example, the proposition "the earth has existed for many years past" is swallowed when learning various historical and geological facts. This, again, is not relevant to whether or not a proposition is indubitable. The fact that there are books, armchairs, or that the earth has existed for many years past are beyond doubt, however, this is not because they were never explicitly learned or even mentioned that they are so.

*Indubitable propositions bear a special connexion to action*. Wittgenstein conceives of certainty as practical rather than intellectual. Justifications come to an end, but "the end is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting" (OC 110). "Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game" (OC 204). The claim that justification comes to an end is a claim about what would happen if one kept pressing the justificatory question. Traditionally, some philosophers have claimed that one would reach propositions that are self-evidently true or propositions about sense-perception. The fact that Wittgenstein denies that justification ends with a kind of seeing suggests that he disagrees with this position. If we kept pressing the justificatory question, we would not reach a set of propositions but, he tells us, a "way of acting".

Understanding what is meant here requires looking at those remarks where Wittgenstein stresses the connexion between certainty and action: "Why do I not satisfy myself that I have two feet when I want to get up from a chair? There is no why. I simply don't. This is how I act." (OC 148) The claim about the end of justification could therefore be interpreted as meaning that, if one were confronted with a philosopher who kept asking "Why?", at some point one would reach some proposition *p* then add: "Why do I not satisfy myself that *p*? There is no why. I simply don't. This is how I act". If this is what Wittgenstein means, then the connexion between certainty and action is of no help for

understanding indubitability. For the idea that the end of justification is a way of acting seems to be the idea that we simply we do not doubt certain things. But the fact that we do not doubt certain things does not mean that they are beyond doubt.

## 3. Hinges

The idea that certain propositions are like hinges which make our doubts, questions, and enquiries possible is not the key to understanding indubitability either. Why this is so can easily be seen by considering what Wittgenstein means when he speaks of hinges:

> 341. That is to say, 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.
> 342. That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in deed not doubted.
> 343. 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.

What Wittgenstein is saying here is merely that it is not possible to doubt, or ask a question, if one does not take some things for granted. This by no means implies that what one takes for granted is beyond doubt. Some of the propositions that we take for granted are "exempt from doubt" for purely practical reasons: "we just can't investigate everything". For example, an undergraduate student writing an essay on Wittgenstein's notion of "language-games" will take a lot of things for granted: that there was an Austrian philosopher called Wittgenstein, that most of his texts were written in German and published posthumously, that they have been reliably translated into English, that he uses the term "language-games" or a German equivalent in some of these texts, that there is a secondary literature on the topic, etc. Some of these propositions are beyond doubt—for example the one about Wittgenstein's existence and the one about his having written

in German. However, some others are open to question. One might for example wonder whether Wittgenstein's texts have been well translated into English. The student does not enquire into this matter, he simply assumes that he can rely on translations available to him, and this fact functions like a hinge to his enquiry. If he started to have doubts about it, he would no longer be able to write his essay: he would have to check how good the translations are, and only then would he be able to enquire into how Wittgenstein uses the notion of "language-game". There are numerous propositions which, although open to doubt, are exempt from doubt for practical reasons. Supposing the student decided—after finishing his essay, of course—to enquire into the quality of the translations, he would have to rely on dictionaries, unless he was perfectly bilingual. Since Wittgenstein was Austrian and since languages evolve, it is open to question which dictionary he should use. Moreover, dictionaries are sometimes inaccurate, which creates more opportunities for doubt, to which it must be added that speakers and writers of a language sometimes have their own idiosyncrasies and that a dictionary is of no help for identifying and clarifying them. Finally, it is open to question what counts as a good translation. Anyone worrying too much about these questions would never start answering the question whether Wittgenstein's work has been well translated. However, once again, numerous propositions that one must take granted to launch in this particular enquiry are seriously open to doubt.

Noticing that propositions that are exempt from doubt are not necessarily beyond doubt is important for understanding the exact import of the idea that doubt requires hinges. If raising a question or expressing doubt presupposes that some things are not doubted, then one cannot doubt everything at once: "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything" (OC 115); "A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt" (OC 450). In other words, universal doubt is impossible. However,

this claim is compatible with the idea that *any* proposition could be revised or questioned. One would simply need to choose what one wants to hold fixed, that is, what one wants to keep exempt from doubt. This is Quine's thesis in his "Two Dogmas of Empiricism":

> Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system. Even a statement very close to the periphery can be held true in the face of recalcitrant experience by pleading hallucination or by amending certain statements of the kind called logical laws. Conversely, by the same token, no statement is immune to revision. (Quine 1951/1961: 43)

Wilfrid Sellars expresses a similar idea in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*: "Empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once" (1956/1997: 79). Both Sellars and Quine agree that universal doubt is impossible. However, Wittgenstein goes further than them. It is not only that *all* claims cannot be put in jeopardy at once, it is also that *not any* claim can be put in jeopardy. And why this is so, that is, why some propositions are beyond doubt, cannot be explained by the fact that doubt presupposes certainty.[2]

## 4. Indubitable Propositions as Norms

The idea that indubitable propositions are norms is more difficult to understand than the two previous proposals and therefore needs to be carefully unpacked. The passages quoted in the overview are worth quoting again. Wittgenstein writes that certain propositions "turn from an empirical proposition into a norm of description" (OC 167), that they constitute "rule[s] of testing" (OC 98), whose "role is like that of rules of a

[2] For attempts at using the "doubt presupposes certainty" thesis in such way, see (Wright 2005).

game" (OC 95), and which, although they have the "form of empirical propositions", "were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid" (OC 96).

Some commentators see these remarks as the key to understanding Wittgenstein's account of indubitability (McGinn 1989; Moyal-Sharrock 2004; Coliva 2010). Although there are differences between their readings of *On Certainty*, their positions share a similar structure. According to them, indubitable propositions are not empirical but normative, that is, they do not aim at representing the world but express norms, or rules. Norms are conventional, they are neither correct nor incorrect. They are not proper objects of epistemic assessment and this is the reason why they are beyond doubt. As Annalisa Coliva puts it, the fact that a proposition is normative

> suffices to place it beyond the possibility of being sensibly doubted. For norms can't be subject to epistemic evaluation, hence they can't either be justified or doubted. Of course, they might in principle be changed or abandoned. Yet this won't be the result of their being *epistemically* assessed. Rather, it may be a product of a decision or, simply, of contingent facts which may force us to abandon a given norm and perhaps substitute it with another one. (Coliva 2010: 133)

I shall examine two versions of this argument, which rely on different understandings of the way in which indubitable propositions are normative. According to the first one, indubitable propositions are normative because they are rules of what could be called our "epistemic game", that is, rules which define, among other things, what kinds of claims can be made, what counts as evidence for or against them, and when a mistake is possible (Coliva 2010). According to the second interpretation, indubitable proposition are normative because they are what Wittgenstein calls "grammatical propositions", that is, propositions expressing rules which govern the use of words (McGinn 1989, Moyal-Sharrock 2004). I examine these proposals in turn. In both cases, I argue that not all indubitable propositions are normative in the relevant sense.

The first way of understanding the idea that indubitable propositions are rules is to compare them to rules of a game. Asking a question, giving a justification, making a mistake, or doubting are similar to making a move in a game—say, chess—and just as making such a move presupposes certain rules that define what a piece is and how it can move, our epistemic game—or games—require a specification of what kinds of questions can be asked, what counts as a justification, when a mistake is possible, or when doubt is legitimate.

The problem with this suggestion is that not all indubitable propositions seem to function like rules in this sense. I know, for example, how to tell whether I have been to a certain place or not. I remember that I went to this or that school as a child, or that I went skiing in Switzerland ten years ago, and I know that I have never been to Norway. I also know that not recollecting that I have been to a place is not always a reason to believe that I have not been there. Some trips I was too young to remember, and it sometimes happens that one visits a place without being aware that it is *that* place that one is visiting. I may for example have stopped in Burgundy on my way to the South West of France without realising that the place where I stopped was in that region. But I also know that if some place was my destination and I reached it, I will know that I have been to that place. Unless, of course, I suffer from amnesia or some other impairment of memory, in which case I would need to rely on other people's testimony or other kinds of evidence (e.g. stamps in my passport) to decide whether I have been to a certain place or not.

These propositions seem to play the role of rules: they specify what kinds of claims can be made, what counts as evidence for or against them, when a mistake is possible, and when one has a reason to believe that a mistake has been made. But what of an indubitable proposition such as "I have two hands"? It is surely more similar to a move

in the game than to the rules that govern it. For it does not specify what kinds of claims can be made, what counts as evidence for or against them, when a mistake is possible, etc. It does not seem to play any role in regulating our communicative behaviour. Not all supposedly indubitable propositions, therefore, are rules of our epistemic game.

What defenders of the interpretation under consideration get right, however, is that, if one questions an indubitable proposition, one is rejecting the rules that govern our practice of justifying, asking questions, or expressing doubts, leaving one without a clear notion of mistake, justification, or evidence. As Annalisa Coliva puts it: "If doubts were raised against what makes it possible for us to conduct our epistemic enquiries, this would deprive us of those very practices and, therefore, of all epistemic norms. As a consequence, it would deprive us, and a sceptic, of the very *notion of epistemic rationality*." (Coliva 2010: 132)

This is an important idea, to which I shall return in the next chapter. What I want to stress here is that it does not imply that all indubitable propositions are like rules of a game. Someone who questioned whether I really have two hands in a context where there is no doubt about it would be either lacking an understanding of the game of making perceptual reports or would in effect be rejecting that game as a whole. However, it would not be correct to say that, because doubting that I have hands where the rules exclude doubt amounts to rejecting the game, that this proposition expresses a rule.

The second proposal for interpreting indubitable propositions as rules faces the same difficulty. This proposal is put forward by Marie McGinn: "We are not … to think of Moore-type propositions as stating empirical truths, in the sense of something which has turned out to be so but which may have turned out otherwise. … The purpose of Moore-type propositions is to show us (teach us), e.g., what a hand is, what a chair is, what colour

red is, and so on.” (McGinn 1989: 142)[3] By “show[ing] us what a hand is”, McGinn does not mean that Moore-type propositions are anatomical or physiological, she means that they are what Wittgenstein calls “grammatical propositions”, that is, propositions which explain how words are used.

However, even if some indubitable propositions can be construed as grammatical propositions in disguise, this cannot be the case for all propositions that are beyond doubt. “This is a hand” can be understood as specifying the proper use of the word “hand”, and “Physical objects, e.g. books, do not simply vanish into thin air” might be understood as partly explaining the use of the expression “physical object”—if something vanishes into thin air, or pops in and out of existence, it is not a physical object. It is, however, difficult to see how some other indubitable propositions could be construed as grammatical, for example, “I have never been to the moon” or “the earth has existed for many years”.

An additional difficulty with this interpretation is that it is questionable that those indubitable propositions which can be construed as grammatical are actually grammatical. Whether a given statement expresses a grammatical proposition depends on how it is used. The same statement, for example “Here is a chair”, can be used to explain how the word chair is used, but it can also be used to make a descriptive claim about the presence of a chair. Proponents of the view that indubitable propositions are grammatical are aware of this fact and they offer an argument purporting to show that indubitable propositions merely have the “form” of an empirical proposition, while not being empirical. However, this argument fails.

Their argument rests on Wittgenstein’s claim that one cannot meaningfully utter an indubitable proposition to state an empirical fact. In several remarks of *On Certainty*, he

[3] See also (Moyal-Sharrock 2004: 173-4).

argues that it is difficult to imagine contexts in which an indubitable proposition could be uttered to say something *informative* about the world (OC 461):

> 461. Suppose that I were the doctor and a patient came to me, showed me his hand and said: "This thing that looks like a hand isn't just a superb imitation—it really is a hand" and went on to talk about his injury—should I really take this as a piece of information, even though a superfluous one? Shouldn't I be more likely to consider it nonsense, which admittedly did have the form of a piece of information?

If one were to say "This is a hand" to state an empirical truth one would not be saying *anything*, and the same is true of other indubitable propositions. We can however imagine that one utters them as a joke (OC 463), in an exclamation (OC 468), as a quotation (OC 393), or as a piece of linguistic instruction intended to explain the meaning of a word (OC 36), and this is the idea on which proponents of the present interpretation rely.

One problem with Wittgenstein's suggestion is that its import is limited. Many indubitable propositions can be uttered to say something informative about the world. This is of course the case in a teaching context, in which students do not yet know that the earth is round or that it moves around the sun. But one can even utter an indubitable proposition to say something informative to someone who already knows that this proposition is true. If a person is caught driving above the speed limit in town and the police officer tells them "The speed limit is 30 mph", he is stating a fact that is known to him and to the driver (and that each knows to be known to the other, etc.), but because the latter was behaving as if they did not know or had forgotten it, it makes sense for the officer to utter such a reminder. Another similar case is religious sermons intended to remind us that "All human beings are mortal". We need to be reminded of this fact because, although we all know that we will one day die, the preacher believes that we fail to appreciate its significance for how we should live. For him, we live as if we did not know that we are mortal and that is why he thinks it necessary to mention it from time to time.

The main objection to the claim that indubitable propositions are not empirical, however, concerns the transition from the fact that it is difficult, or even impossible, to imagine a context in which one could utter an indubitable proposition and say something informative about the world to the fact that these propositions are not empirical. Wittgenstein himself expresses doubt about the idea that these propositions, or at least some of them, have the "form of empirical propositions" without being empirical: "In this remark [OC 401] the expression 'propositions of the form of empirical propositions' is itself *thoroughly bad; the statements in question are statements about material objects*" (OC 402, emphasis added). Not all empirical propositions are about material objects, some are about events or people, but they all purport to describe the world and their truth depends on how the world is. It is this feature that makes them empirical, and the fact that what they say about the world is too obvious to be informative is a different feature. Whether a proposition is informative or not depends on the context in which it is uttered. If one's interlocutor is already aware of the fact that is being mentioned to them, then one is not saying anything informative. If, on the other hand, they are not already aware of it, then one is saying something informative. This, however, has no implication for the question whether the proposition is empirical or not.

Moreover, in order to appreciate the fact that some statement is informative or not, one needs to understand it first. It is because I know that the proposition "I have two hands" is empirical, that is, that it is about the world, and about an aspect of the world that will usually be clearly visible to my interlocutors, that I know I would not be saying anything informative by mentioning it.

Finally, defenders of the claim that indubitable propositions are grammatical appeal to Wittgenstein's idea that expressing doubt about an indubitable proposition can amount to expressing doubt about the meaning of one's words—"If this is not a hand, then I do not

know what a 'hand' means". This idea is correct, but it does not imply that indubitable propositions state linguistic norms.[4]

The upshot of the present discussion is that the idea that indubitable propositions are normative does not help understand why they are indubitable. Whether understood as the claim that they are rules of our epistemic game or as the claim that they are rules of grammar, this view is false because not all indubitable propositions are rules in either sense.

[4] On this point, see (Glock 2016: 291).

# Chapter 2 – Wittgenstein on the Limits of Doubt - II

In the previous chapter, I approached Wittgenstein's account of indubitable propositions by examining some of the features—others than indubitability—that he attributes to some of them. The hope was that one of these features would explain why these propositions are beyond doubt. This approach, however, proved to be unfruitful.

In the present chapter, I approach indubitability from a different angle, namely that of doubt. I argue that, according to Wittgenstein, doubt requires grounds and that some propositions are beyond doubt because one could not have a reason to doubt them.

Having done so, I turn to the topic of scepticism, and argue for two claims. First, I argue, against some commentators, that Wittgenstein's account of indubitable propositions does not involve an accommodation of scepticism. I argue that, although he says that these propositions are "groundless", he does not mean that they *lack* a justification. Rather, he wants to draw attention to the fact that we do not hold them on the basis of reasons. He does not deny that they have a positive epistemic status, but he criticises the idea that they do so because we have good grounds for them.

Secondly, I examine Wittgenstein's answer to two forms of scepticism that he mentions in *On Certainty*, namely scepticism about the reliability of induction and scepticism about the continuous existence of objects. I argue that while he appeals to indubitability in his answer to the former, Wittgenstein does not do so in his answer to the latter.

## 1. Wittgenstein on Intelligible Doubt

In order to understand how Wittgenstein conceives of indubitability, it is necessary to examine what he says about intelligible doubt. The best way of approaching this topic is to consider a case in which one would express doubt or raise a question. Suppose that I am waiting with a friend at the train station for some other friend called Matthew. The train arrives, the passengers leave, but Matthew is nowhere to be seen. Luke, the friend with whom I am waiting, says that he must have missed the train. I point out to him that this is by no means certain, since Matthew is known for being unreliable, changing plans at the last minute, and forgetting meetings. Since Luke was the one who had arranged the meeting, I also ask him when he last talked to Matthew, and whether he had bought his ticket by then. It turns out that he had not. Given this information and all that I know about Matthew, it becomes more and more probable, although by no means certain, that he did not miss the train: he never tried to catch it in the first place.

My doubts about Luke's statement have two important features. The first one is that *I have a reason to doubt* that it is true. Knowing what I know about Matthew, some other explanation seems at least as plausible as the one that Luke offers. The second important feature is that these considerations *count as a reason to doubt* that specific claim. Given a certain type of claim about a certain subject-matter, we know what kinds of considerations can be put forward for or against them. We know what kinds of doubts are possible, what kinds of grounds need to be present for them to be legitimate, and how these doubts could be removed, that is, what kinds of considerations would settle the question and remove the uncertainty.

These two features of doubt are central to Wittgenstein's account of intelligible doubt in *On Certainty*. The first feature, namely that "one doubts on specific grounds" (OC

458), does not need much elaboration. The important point is that it is not enough for doubt that some rival hypothesis is conceivable. In order to have a ground for doubt one must have a reason to suspect that this hypothesis is true.

The second feature, however, requires more elaboration. This requirement for intelligible doubt is sometimes formulated in terms of "language-games": "Doubt presupposes the mastery of a language-game" (Kenny 2006: 162). This way of putting the thesis is potentially misleading for two reasons. First, there is a difference between the claim that doubt is only possible *within a language-game*—which is a way of expressing the idea that doubt is only intelligible where the possibility of a mistake has been defined—and the claim that one can only doubt *if one has mastered a language-game*. Secondly, since the mastery of a language-game involves a commitment to a certain number of indubitable propositions, the second requirement for intelligible doubt is better expressed with the phrase "doubt presupposes a system". I discuss these two points in turn.

*One cannot express doubt if one hasn't mastered a language-game*. Wittgenstein is quite insistent about this point, in particular when he discusses the case of what could be called the "wayward pupil":

> 310. A pupil and a teacher. The pupil will not let anything be explained to him, for he continually interrupts with doubts, for instance as to the existence of things, the meaning of words, etc. The teacher says "Stop interrupting me and do as I tell you. So far your doubts don't make sense at all".
> 311. Or imagine that the boy questioned the truth of history (and everything that connects up with it)—and even whether the earth had existed at all a hundred years before.
> 312. Here it strikes me as if this doubt were hollow. But in that case—isn't belief in history hollow too? No; there is so much that this connects up with.
>
> 315. That is to say, the teacher will feel that this is not really a legitimate question at all. And it would be just the same if the pupil cast doubt on the uniformity of nature, that is to say on the justification of inductive arguments.—The teacher would feel that this was only holding them up, that this way the pupil would only get stuck and make no progress.—And he would be right. It would be as if someone were looking for some object in a room; he opens a drawer and doesn't see it there; then he closes it again, waits, and opens it once more to see if perhaps it isn't there now, and keeps on like that. He has not learned to look

> for things. And in the same way this pupil has not learned how to ask questions. He has not learned the game that we are trying to teach him.

The pupil's questions are not "legitimate", they "don't make sense at all", because he has not yet mastered the system within which doubts could be expressed. Just like looking for a certain kind of object presupposes an understanding of what an object of that kind is and, in particular, of the fact that objects of that kind do not pop in and out of existence, asking questions and expressing doubts about a given claim presupposes an understanding of the subject-matter of that claim as well as an understanding of the kinds of questions that can be asked about such claims. Because he does not know enough, someone lacking the appropriate understanding won't be able to express genuine doubts or ask genuine questions. Such a person could, of course, ask the kind of questions that one asks when one does not know something, that is, when one is learning—e.g., in the case of mathematics, "What is an number?", "How many are there?", or "How do you perform an addition?"—but not questions such as: "Is this result correct?" or "Are you sure you haven't made a mistake here?".

*Doubt presupposes a language-game*. One needs to have mastered a language-game to be in a position to doubt, but this is not the whole story. A comparison with chess might be enlightening here. In order to play the game, one needs to have mastered the rules, that is, to know the names of the pieces, how they are allowed to move, and what counts as a victory or a defeat. This was the previous point. The present point is that, in the absence of these rules, there would be no game: no move of a piece would count as a chess move, one would just be moving a piece of wood on a board. But the game itself presupposes some other propositions: that there are human beings, that they play games, in particular boardgames, that some of them are for two players only while others can have more participants, but also that the pieces do not move by themselves (OC 346). Playing the

game presupposes the acceptance not only of the rules, but also of a mass of empirical propositions.

In a similar fashion, my expressing doubts requires the existence of a language-game, that is of "rules" which define what kinds of doubts are permitted, but also of a mass of other propositions on which the language-game itself rests. Wittgenstein speaks of certain "facts" being "fused into the foundations of our language-game" (OC 558). For example, the fact that the earth has existed for many years past is such that "in the entire system of our language-games it belongs to the foundations. The assumption, one might say, *forms the basis of action, and therefore, naturally, of thought*." (OC 411, emphasis added) Or: "It is part of the language-game with people's names that everyone knows his name with the greatest certainty" (OC 579). These propositions are so obvious that they very often go unmentioned—think of the propositions that chess pieces do not move by themselves—and so do the rules of the games—"the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules" (OC 95). However, we are nonetheless committed to these propositions and they provide the background, which Wittgenstein sometimes describes as a system, within which our doubts, arguments, and enquiries "have their life":

> 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.
>
> 410. Our knowledge forms an enormous system. And only within this system has a particular bit the value we give it.

The idea that this system is the "element in which arguments have their life" or in which a "particular bit" has "the value we give it", is the idea that a consideration can only count as a reason for or against a proposition, or as a ground for doubt, given other propositions.

We know what kinds of facts there are, how we can come to know about them, what kinds of claims we can make about them, where these claims can go wrong, and how this can be discovered. For example, we know how judgments about colours can go wrong—one may be colour-blind, or the light may be artificial, or the colour may be unfamiliar and one may use the wrong word to describe it. What we know and believe on these matters defines various possibilities for error, reasons for doubt, and methods for discovering whether an error was made. For this reason, rather than saying that doubt presupposes a language-game, I shall say that it presupposes a system.

Now, Wittgenstein speaks alternatively of the system of our "convictions" (OC 102), of our "empirical propositions" (OC 136), of our "empirical judgments" (OC 137), of "what is believed" (OC 144), and "of knowledge" (OC 286). He also speaks of our "system of evidence" (OC 185), our "system of verification" (OC 279), and of the "system of our language-games" (OC 411). These various expressions refer to different aspects of the same phenomenon. Speaking of our system of evidence involves an emphasis on the idea that we treat certain kinds of things as evidence for certain kinds of claims. However, our treating certain kinds of things as evidence for certain kinds of claims itself depends on numerous empirical beliefs. For example, it is part of our system of evidence that archive documents are evidence for historical claims. But the fact that we treat these documents as evidence depends on many things that we know about human beings, for example, that they use writing, that they write various types of documents, that some of these are stored in archives, etc. For this reason, the various expressions listed above should be understood as referring to the same thing and, in what follows, I shall be using the phrase "system of knowledge" to refer to it.

The import of Wittgenstein's conception of a system goes way beyond his point about the conditions for doubt. The existence of such a system is, more generally, a requirement

for having beliefs. According to Wittgenstein, one cannot have just one belief: "When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)" (OC 141); it is "*A totality* of judgments [that] is made plausible to us" (OC 140):

> 142. It is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another mutual support.
>
> 144. The child learns to believe a host of things. I.e. it learns to act according to these beliefs. Bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed, and in that system some things stand unshakeably fast and some are more or less liable to shift. What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it.

In the absence of such a system, there would be no believing at all, and this point is of crucial importance for understanding the limits of doubt, to which I now turn.

## 2. Indubitability

Doubt presupposes a system of knowledge as well as grounds. Both conditions are important for understanding how some proposition can be beyond doubt: a proposition is indubitable if one cannot have a reason to doubt it because, given one's system of knowledge, it is not conceivable that one is mistaken. What I wish to do in this section is clarify how this last claim is to be understood.

The best starting point for this endeavour is to consider an example. On several occasions in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein discusses the proposition "No one has ever been to the moon" and describes it as indubitable:

> 106. … What reply could I make to the adults of a tribe who believe that people sometimes go to the moon (perhaps that is how they interpret their dreams), and who indeed grant that there are no ordinary means of climbing up to it or flying there?

> 108. … It is certain that no one has ever been on the moon. Not merely is nothing of the sort ever seriously reported to us by reasonable people, but our whole system of physics forbids us to believe it. For this demands answers to the questions "How did he overcome the force of gravity?" "How could he live without an atmosphere?" and a thousand others which could not be answered. But suppose that instead of all these answers we met the reply: "We don't know how one gets to the moon, but those who get there know at once that they are there; and even you can't explain everything." We should feel ourselves intellectually very distant from someone who said this.

Although Wittgenstein is sometimes mocked for having written that it was beyond doubt that no one had ever been to the moon (White 1970; Ayer 1984), the claim is partly defensible. To a certain extent, it is true that it was not beyond doubt that no man had been to the moon when Wittgenstein was writing. Given his "system of physics", he certainly had a general idea of how a man could be sent to the moon—for example by means of a rocket—and it was not completely inconceivable that a country such as Russia or the United States were sufficiently technologically advanced to have designed such a rocket. There was no evidence that a human being had been sent to the moon like that: "nothing of the sort [is] ever seriously reported to us by reasonable people", that is, by people sharing and understanding the same scientific picture. However, in this case, the absence of evidence made it simply *unreasonable* to believe that such a thing had happened. It was, after all conceivable that this achievement was being kept secret for some reason. However, two things were, and remain, indubitable. First, that no man has ever climbed or flown to the moon—flown without a rocket—a point which Wittgenstein's tribesmen accept. Secondly, that no one without an appropriate knowledge of science and without a sufficiently advanced technology could get there.

This example brings to light the difference between doubt that is merely unreasonable and doubt that is, as Wittgenstein puts it, "logically impossible" (OC 454). What characterises unreasonable doubt is that one can conceive that things could be otherwise, although one has no evidence that they are so. "Logically impossible" doubt, on the other

hand, is such that these other possibilities are ruled out by one's background knowledge. It is, for example, beyond doubt that anyone has been to the moon apart from cosmonauts because, given what we know about physics, about human beings, and about space, there is no other conceivable way in which that feat could be achieved.

If one were wrong about *this* then this would mean that the world is a *very* different place from what one has taken it to be. In order to have doubts about this proposition, one would have to doubt an innumerable number of other propositions: "If I wanted to doubt the existence of the earth long before my birth, I should have to doubt all sorts of things that stand fast for me" (OC 234). One can elaborate on this example: I would have to doubt people's reports about what happened before my birth, most historical propositions, scientific accounts of the birth of life and of the beginning of the universe, etc. It would also become uncertain whether I should trust what other people tell me. If the world came into existence with my birth, they came into existence at that moment too, but do they share with me in the illusion that it has existed for a very long time, or do they know it is not true and have been lying to me? Certain propositions, however, would remain beyond doubt, such as "1+1=2" and "I have two hands". Indubitable propositions are such that one can say about them: "This statement appeared to me fundamental; if it is false, what are 'true' or 'false' any more?!" (OC 514); "… in that case the foundation of all judging would be taken away from me" (OC 614) Because doubting them would "toppl[e] all other judgments" (OC 419), one would be left with no picture of what the world is like and how we can get it right or wrong, leaving one without any "system of knowledge".

It is not, however, because one could not doubt them without also doubting a whole range of other propositions that indubitable propositions are beyond doubt. The reason why these propositions are beyond doubt is that it is not conceivable, given our background knowledge, that we could be mistaken about them.

Now, this does not mean that *someone else* could not have doubts about *some* propositions which, for us, or for me, are beyond doubt. For a vast number of propositions, whether they are indubitable or not is relative to a subject's evidence or situation. For example, it is indubitable for me that I have two hands, but it is not to a blind man (OC 125, 413). And while it might be indubitable for me that I flew to an exotic island, it would not necessarily be so to the members of the tribe who inhabit it:

> 671. I fly from here to a part of the world where the people have only indefinite information, or none at all, about the possibility of flying. I tell them I have just flown there from.... They ask me if I might be mistaken.—They have obviously a false impression of how the thing happens. (If I were packed up in a box it would be possible for me to be mistaken about the way I had travelled.) If I simply tell them that I can't be mistaken, that won't perhaps convince them; but it will if I describe the actual procedure to them. Then they will certainly not bring the possibility of a *mistake* into the question. But for all that—even if they trust me—they might believe I had been dreaming or that magic had made me imagine it.

In all these cases, there is an asymmetry between me and the other person. I know something that he does not, or have access to some fact or facts that are not available to him. When there is such an asymmetry, another person can intelligibly doubt something that is beyond doubt for oneself.

Where there is no asymmetry and in the case in which the potential doubter is oneself doubt is senseless, unintelligible. First, it is unclear what possibility is being contemplated: "If someone said 'The earth has not long been...' what would he be impugning? Do I know?" (OC 236) "What would it be like to doubt now whether I have two hands? Why can't I imagine it at all? What would I believe if I didn't believe that? So far I have no system at all within which this doubt might exist." (OC 247)

Secondly, we do not understand what exactly someone would mean by this claim or question, but we also do not understand what reason one may have to suspect that things are not as we think they are: "Supposing it wasn't true that the earth had already existed long before I was born—how should we imagine the mistake being discovered?" (OC

301); “We should ask ‘What is it like to make such a mistake as that?’—e.g. what’s it like to discover that it was a mistake?” (OC 32)

Finally, we would also be at pains to understand what a person who raises such doubts would consider a reason to stop doubting: “If someone said to me that he doubted whether he had a body I should take him to be a half-wit. But I shouldn’t know what it would mean to try to convince him that he had one. And if I had said something, and that had removed his doubt, I should not know how or why.” (OC 257) The person pressing such doubts could be either confused, or they could have failed to master our language, or, again, they might be ignorant of certain facts but, apart from these cases, there seems to be no room for intelligible doubt.

## 3. Types of Indubitable Propositions

Certainty, I said in the previous section, is relative. What is certain, or indubitable, for some people is not necessarily so for others. There are, however, propositions that Wittgenstein believes are indubitable for everyone: “we might speak of fundamental principles of human enquiry” (OC 670). Although he does not say, of any of the propositions that he discusses in *On Certainty*, that it is universally held and beyond doubt, one can legitimately assume that propositions such as “[An object] does not vanish away” (OC 134), or “The earth has existed for many years past” (OC 411) are among them, together with certain propositions about human physiology, psychology, and behaviour.

All the other indubitable propositions are such that they are not beyond doubt for everyone. These propositions are very diverse, and it is therefore impossible to classify

them into neat categories. There are what could be called “personal certainties”, that is, things that only I know. Other propositions are certain for a restricted group of people. For example, propositions about my body or about my recent past (OC 415, 431), which will be certain for me but also for those people who interact or have interacted with me. The group of people who are certain of the meaning of certain words or of some historical or geographical facts will be even larger.

Some of these propositions, together with those propositions that are beyond doubt for everyone, form what Wittgenstein calls a “world-picture” (OC 95, 162, 167) or “picture of the world” (93, 94, 233, 262). He does not explain what a world-picture is and does not specify which propositions belong to it. What he says about it, however, can shed some light on what belongs to such a picture and what does not:

> 95. The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.
> 96. It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.
> 97. The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.
> 98. But if someone were to say “So logic too is an empirical science” he would be wrong. Yet this is right: the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing.
> 99. And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited.

World-pictures are formed by propositions that constitute the “hard-rock”, which never changes, and which correspond to the common core of human thought which he thinks is the same for everyone. But other propositions belong to that part of the riverbed which shifts. These are propositions which, although certain at one point, were given up, or which are certain now but will be given up in the future. Wittgenstein does not give any examples of them, but the term “world-picture” suggests that what he has in mind is, for

example, propositions about the age and shape of the earth, about geography—for example about the number of continents. If this characterisation is correct, it is possible to understand how a change in world-picture may occur. A proposition such as "The sun moves around the earth" was once considered certain. However, with the progress of science, we came to be in the position to realise that it was false. Other propositions were given up, not because they had always been false, but because, although they used to be true, at some point they became false, for example "No one has ever been to the moon".

## 4. Groundlessness

I now turn to the topic of scepticism. The question that I shall examine in this section is whether Wittgenstein's account of indubitable propositions involves a concession to scepticism.[1] What motivates this worry is the emphasis that he puts on what he calls the "groundlessness of our believing" (OC 166). I shall argue, however, that Wittgenstein does not use this expression in a sceptical way. He does not wish to question the epistemic standing of indubitable propositions, that is, to suggest that we do not have good grounds for them. Rather, he wants to draw attention to the fact that these propositions are not held on the basis of reasons and that we could not hold them on the basis of reason, because they are more certain than any reason we might give for them.

The temptation to construe groundless in a sceptical way finds its source in Wittgenstein's denial that what we can say in favour of propositions that are beyond doubt amounts to a proof:

> 240. What is the belief that all human beings have parents based on? On experience. And how can I base this sure belief on my experience? Well, I base it not only on the fact that I

[1] For this view, see (Pritchard 2005: 200).

> have known the parents of certain people but on everything that I have learnt about the sexual life of human beings and their anatomy and physiology: also on what I have heard and seen of animals. But then is that really a proof?
>
> 282. I cannot say that I have good grounds for the opinion that cats do not grow on trees or that I had a father and a mother.
>
> 600. What kind of grounds have I for trusting text-books of experimental physics?
> I have no grounds for not trusting them. And I trust them. I know how such books are produced—or rather, I believe I know. I have some evidence, but it does not go very far and is of a very scattered kind. I have heard, seen and read various things.

At the same time, Wittgenstein occasionally speaks in a way suggestive that we do have good evidence for indubitable propositions. For example, he writes that "everything speaks for" them and that their denials have "nothing on their side":

> 4. …But what about such a proposition as "I know I have a brain"? Can I doubt it? Grounds for doubt are lacking! Everything speaks in its favour, nothing against it. Nevertheless it is imaginable that my skull should turn out empty when it was operated on.
>
> 93. The propositions presenting what Moore 'knows' are all of such a kind that it is difficult to imagine why anyone should believe the contrary. E.g. the proposition that Moore has spent his whole life in close proximity to the earth.—Once more I can speak of myself here instead of speaking of Moore. What could induce me to believe the opposite? Either a memory, or having been told.—
> Everything that I have seen or heard gives me the conviction that no man has ever been far from the earth. Nothing in my picture of the world speaks in favour of the opposite.
>
> 190. What we call historical evidence points to the existence of the earth a long time before my birth;—the opposite hypothesis has nothing on its side.

I want to suggest that these two sets of remarks are not contradictory. They can be reconciled if one understands Wittgenstein as trying to find an appropriate characterisation of indubitable propositions. These propositions have a positive epistemic status, however, this is not in virtue of being supported by reasons. Many facts speak in favour of them, but they should not be construed in terms of evidence or grounds *on the basis of which we would hold these propositions*.[2]

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[2] However, these facts could be evidence for someone for whom these propositions are not so certain—at least in the case of propositions that are not indubitable for anyone who believes them.

While there are things that we believe for a reason, some others are too well known to be believed for a reason. They are so certain that nothing could function as our ground for them, and Wittgenstein insists on several occasions on the idea that it is a requirement for some consideration to be a ground that it is more certain than what it grounds:

> 111. I want to say: my not having been on the moon is as sure a thing for me as any grounds I could give for it.
>
> 185. It does not strike me as if this system were more certain than a certainty within it.
>
> 250. My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it.
> That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it.
>
> 307. And here the strange thing is that when I am quite certain of how the words are used, have no doubt about it, I can still give no grounds for my way of going on. If I tried I could give a thousand, but none as certain as the very thing they were supposed to be grounds for.

Consider my belief that Australia exists. This is a belief that I could hold, and maybe have once held, on the basis of evidence. This is also a belief that I could defend by giving reasons for it. I could mention, for example, that "I have often seen the continent marked on maps, I have friends who have lived there, I have had letters from there, seen planes depart thither, seen pictures of Australian cities and deserts, drunk Australian wine, seen Australian animals in zoos, and so on" (Kenny 1992: 15). However, none of these facts would be *my* reasons for holding the belief, since some of them are as certain as the belief, while others are less certain than it—was the wine I drunk really Australian? Was this or that picture really a picture of an Australian desert?

Now, Wittgenstein seems to think that this analysis of groundlessness applies to all indubitable propositions, and I would like to express some reservation about this idea. One may want to draw a distinction between the groundlessness of perceptual beliefs and memories and that of beliefs which are part of one's world-picture. The latter type of belief is groundless for the reason outlined in the previous paragraph: they are more

certain than anything that could be said in their favour. The former type of belief, on the other hand, should be analysed in a different way. In the case of what we see, or hear, or remember, there does not seem to be a set of facts that speak in favour of the belief while not playing the role of evidence. For example, no fact speaks in favour of my having two hands, this is simply something that I see. With Anthony Kenny, one may want to say that beliefs of this type are groundless not because they are too well known to be believed for a reason, but because what one perceives, or remembers, is not something one believes for a reason, it is something one knows. As Kenny puts it, these are not beliefs that one holds on the basis of evidence but beliefs that are "evident to the senses" and "evident to memory" (ibid.: chap. 1 and 2).

The fact that Wittgenstein does not draw this distinction is of little consequence for the correctness of his position. However, it is relatively important for my purpose in this section. For the groundlessness that one may be tempted to interpret in a sceptical way is that of beliefs such as "Australia exists", rather than that of beliefs that are evident to the senses. In what follows, I therefore focus on beliefs of the former type, which concern what Wittgenstein calls "propositions of the word-picture".

One of the things that Wittgenstein is trying to do in *On Certainty* is to find an adequate description of the relation in which propositions of our world-picture stand to other propositions. The main danger, in carrying out this task, is to think of them in terms of beliefs held for reasons. Hence the insistence on groundlessness. But, this does not mean that what is certain for us is "grounded in [our] stupidity or credulity" (OC 235), and that our world-picture is "arbitrary" (OC 105). We are not insensitive to the pressure that the facts put on us: "I learned an enormous amount and accepted it on human authority, and then I found some things confirmed or disconfirmed by my own experience" (OC 161):

> 288. I know, not just that the earth existed long before my birth, but also that it is a large body, that this has been established, that I and the rest of mankind have forebears, that there are books about all this, that such books don't lie, etc. etc. etc. And I know all this? I believe it. This body of knowledge has been handed on to me and I have no grounds for doubting it, but, on the contrary, all sorts of confirmation.
>
> 603. I am taught that under such circumstances this happens. It has been discovered by making the experiment a few times. Not that that would prove anything to us, if it weren't that this experience was surrounded by others which combine with it to form a system. Thus, people did not make experiments just about falling bodies but also about air resistance and all sorts of other things.
> But in the end I rely on these experiences, or on the reports of them, I feel no scruples about ordering my own activities in accordance with them.—But so far as I can judge—yes.

The picture of confirmation by experience is not the only one that Wittgenstein uses. The propositions of our world-picture loosely fit with a whole range of other propositions, which "surround" them and with which they form a "system" (OC 603). They are "held fast by what lies around [them]" (OC 114). They are "plausible" not one by one, but as a "totality" (OC 140), as forming "a system in which consequences and premises give one another *mutual* support" (OC 142). Writing about our belief that the earth has existed for many years, Wittgenstein says that "there is so much that this connects up with" (OC 331). These various phrases are indicative of the fact that the groundlessness of our world-picture ought not to be understood in a sceptical fashion. The propositions which belong to this picture do not lack a justification. Rather, in their case, talk of justification is inappropriate. According to Wittgenstein, these propositions have a positive epistemic status, that is, we have a right to hold them to be true. However, since we do not believe them to be true on the basis of reasons—they are too certain to be held on the basis of reasons—this positive epistemic status ought not to be characterised in terms of our having good reasons for holding them to be true, hence his insistence on groundlessness.

I want to conclude this section by addressing a worry similar to the one that Wittgenstein's talk of groundlessness might ultimately amount to a form of scepticism. It has been argued that Wittgenstein's view of world-pictures amounts to a form of

relativism (Grayling 2001). On the picture of knowledge and justification that one finds in *On Certainty*, there would be no way of deciding between alternative world-pictures, and some passages of the text seem to support this allegation. For example, Wittgenstein considers the case of a confrontation with people who consult an oracle instead of relying on physics (OC 609). Is it wrong for them to do so? Wittgenstein expresses doubts about this. It is wrong from our perspective, but is our perspective the right one? (OC 610) And he points out that we would not give reasons to these people but would rather try to *persuade* them that they are wrong (OC 612). This set of claims gives rise to two different difficulties. First, if "wrong" is only "wrong for us", there is no objective way of deciding between world-pictures. Secondly, if we can only *persuade* people whose world-picture differs from ours, change of world-picture is not achieved by way of proof and, to that extent, resembles conversion rather than rigorous argument.

Both difficulties are addressed in *On Certainty*. First, when discussing the case of people who believe that one can go to the moon, Wittgenstein writes: "We say: these people do not know a lot that we know. And, let them be never so sure of their belief—they are wrong and we know it. If we compare our system of knowledge with theirs then theirs is evidently the poorer one by far." (OC 286) Although there is no Archimedean point from which we could compare different systems of knowledge, we are not left without standards that allow us to assess the respective merits of our system and that of our interlocutor. In this passage, Wittgenstein mentions one criterion of assessment, namely "richness". He does not explain how exactly this notion should be understood, but he gives us at least one form that richness can take when he writes that "these people do not know a lot that we know" (ibid.). Our system of knowledge incorporates a range of facts that is broader, more detailed, and more complex than that which is included in these people's system. And, although Wittgenstein does not say so, one may assume that

some of the facts that these people are unaware of stand in contradiction to their view of the world. Hence the superiority of our system of knowledge.

Secondly, Wittgenstein's point about persuasion can be understood as a point about the limits of argument. Understanding the import of an argument requires some background knowledge. If the world-picture of the person with whom we are arguing is too different, that person will fail to grasp the strength of our reasons. We therefore have to rely on some other strategy, which Wittgenstein calls "persuasion", although what he actually means is that, before engaging in argument, we would have to teach our interlocutor and impart our world-picture to him:

> 262. I can imagine a man who had grown up in quite special circumstances and been taught that the earth came into being 50 years ago, and therefore believed this. We might instruct him: the earth has long... etc.—We should be trying to give him our picture of the world.
>
> 205. If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not true, nor yet false.
> 206. If someone asked us "but is that true?" we might say "yes" to him; and if he demanded grounds we might say "I can't give you any grounds, but if you learn more you too will think the same".

Change of world-picture, although it is not a matter of argument, is not irrational as it involves learning. Once this point and the previous one are brought to light, it becomes clear that the accusation of relativism is misplaced.[3]

## 5. *On Certainty* and Sceptical Problems

In the previous section, my concern was with the worry that what Wittgenstein calls "groundlessness" might refer to a lack of justification and that his position in *On Certainty*

[3] This is does not mean, however, that Wittgenstein was not committed to some other form of relativism. For the claim that he held a form of conceptual relativism, see (Glock 2016: 294).

might ultimately be a form of scepticism. In that section, I did not consider any particular form of scepticism, and this is what I shall do in the present section.

By "particular forms of scepticism", I mean to refer to traditional forms of scepticism, which concern specific beliefs, most prominently the reliability of induction, the existence of physical objects, of the past, or of other minds. Not all of these forms of scepticism are discussed in *On Certainty*. Wittgenstein does not mention the problem of other minds and he says very little about the existence of physical objects, but this is a topic which I shall leave for the next chapter. The two forms of scepticism which he discusses and which I shall consider here are scepticism about induction and what can be called scepticism about the continuous existence of objects. My purpose in discussing these forms of scepticism is not to assess what Wittgenstein says about them but to show how his discussion of doubt and certainty bears on the topic of scepticism. I argue that, while he relies on the idea that some propositions are indubitable when he discusses induction, Wittgenstein does not do so in his response to scepticism about the continuous existence of objects.

The problem of induction concerns the rationality of forming beliefs about the unobserved on the basis of inferences from the observed. Such inferences are used to justify generalisations and predictions, and it is with regard to the latter that the problem is usually formulated. Predictions are said to presume the uniformity of nature, that is, the assumption that future observations will, in relevant respects, resemble past ones, but it seems impossible to prove that this assumption is true. It cannot be established by deductive argument and neither can it be established inductively, since such an inductive argument would be circular. The conclusion of this argument is that there is no rational basis for prediction. In other words, although we treat past and present observations as

evidence for beliefs about the future, it seems that we are not warranted in doing so, and the problem of induction is that of showing that we are.

Attempts at solving the problem take three different forms. The first one is not so much an attempt at solving it than at *dis*solving it. P. F. Strawson argues, in his *Introduction to Logical Theory*, that there can be no question whether it is rational to reason inductively since by "being rational" we mean, among other things, using induction (Strawson 1952). The second type of answer consists in showing that it is rational to use induction because induction can be justified. For example, David Papineau argues that the kind of circularity involved in an inductive justification of induction is not problematic (Papineau 1992). Finally, the last type of answer consists in showing that it can be rational to use induction *in spite of* our inability to justify it. For example, Crispin Wright has argued that, although we are unable to justify our belief that nature is uniform, we are nonetheless entitled to assume that it is (Wright 2004).

Where does Wittgenstein stand on this question? In *On Certainty*, he mentions induction and the assumption that nature is uniform, or that some past regularity will continue holding in the future, on a very few occasions. Induction is mentioned in OC 287, 315, 499, 617-9, and the assumption that nature is uniform in OC 167, 315, 338, 555. Some of these remarks are elusive, and it is sometimes difficult to see what point he is making.

This is especially the case with OC 499 and OC 618, 619. In the former, Wittgenstein writes that "the 'law of induction' can no more be grounded than certain particular propositions concerning the material of experience", but it is by no means clear what he means by "propositions concerning the material of experience". In OC 618, which is part of a string of remarks concerning the question whether our language-games are "conditioned by certain facts" (OC 617), he writes: "Can one say that only a certain

regularity in occurrences makes induction possible? The 'possible' would of course have to be '*logically possible*'". In this case, the unclarity concerns how one should understand the expression that Wittgenstein emphasises. Finally, in OC 619, he writes: "Am I to say: even if an irregularity in natural events did suddenly occur, that wouldn't *have* to throw me out of the saddle. I might make inferences then just as before, but whether one would call that 'induction' is another question." Here, it is unclear what kind of irregularity Wittgenstein has in mind. We do encounter irregularities in natural events, however, they are usually not of the type that could "throw us out of the saddle". For example, the boiling temperature of water is not always 100°C, but there is nothing unsettling about this fact, which we explain in terms of another regularity, that which holds between the boiling temperature of a liquid and the applied pressure. Wittgenstein must therefore have in mind "something *really unheard-of*", for example, "houses gradually turning into steam without any obvious cause" (OC 513). But, if similarly bizarre things happened constantly in all sorts of ways with all sorts of objects, it is unclear whether one could really go on making predictions as before.

One passage, however, is clearer. This passage is the one I quoted in the first section when introducing the idea that doubt presupposes the mastery of a language-game, and in which Wittgenstein considers the case of a wayward pupil who asks illegitimate questions:

> 315. That is to say, the teacher will feel that this is not really a legitimate question at all. And it would be just the same if the pupil cast doubt on the uniformity of nature, that is to say on the justification of inductive arguments … this pupil has not learned how to ask questions. He has not learned *the* game that we are trying to teach him.

The teacher is teaching the pupil our "game" of making inductive inferences. In doubting that nature is uniform, the pupil is doubting a constitutive rule of this game, namely that past and present facts are treated as evidence for claims about the future. That

he is expressing this doubt shows that he has not mastered the game yet. One who has mastered the game, on the other hand, will not ask this question, because this doubt "isn't one of the doubts in our game" (OC 317), that is, it is just part of our game of making inductive judgments that some considerations counts are reasons or grounds. Answering the child's question, Wittgenstein tells us, would "characterise a *method*" (OC 318), that is, we could only answer by explaining again how to reason inductively.

This answer is the same as the one we would give if we were teaching the child how to play chess and he asked why one wins by checkmate: "This is just what winning is in chess". It would be wrong to try to prove that this rule is true or correct because it is arbitrary, at least in the sense in which Wittgenstein regards grammar as arbitrary. However, there is a difference between our game of making inductive judgments and games such as chess since it is not up to us to play the latter: "not as if we *chose* this game" (OC 317).

What lends support to this interpretation is that Wittgenstein offers a similar response to inductive scepticism in the *Philosophical Investigations*:

> 480. … If it is now asked: But how can previous experience be a ground for assuming that such-and-such will occur later on?—the answer is: What general concept have we of grounds for this kind of assumption? This sort of statement about the past is simply what we call a ground for assuming that this will happen in the future.
>
> 481. If anyone said that information about the past couldn't convince him that something would happen in the future, I wouldn't understand him. One might ask him: What do you expect to be told, then? What sort of information do you call a reason for believing this? What do you call "convincing"? In what kind of way do you expect to be convinced?—If *these* are not reasons, then what are reasons?—If you say that these are not reasons, then you must surely be able to state what must be the case for us to be warranted in saying that there are reasons for our supposition.

Like Strawson after him, Wittgenstein offers a dissolution of the problem of induction by claiming that the question of the justification of induction is not intelligible. Questions of justification require that some standard of justification be specified, that is, that one

specifies what would count as a reason for or against some claim, but the sceptic fails to meet this requirement.[4] If he is relying on the same standards as we do, then his question does not arise, there is no room for doubt. And if he is relying on different standards, he would need to tell us what they are, but that is something he has not done. The proper answer to the question "Why do certain past and present facts count as reasons for claims about the future?" is simply to say that these are the kinds of facts that we call "reasons" for such claims.[5]

A second form of scepticism that Wittgenstein mentions in *On Certainty* targets our belief that objects have continuous existence, that is, that they keep existing when not perceived. He approaches this form of scepticism in two different ways. When considering the wayward pupil, he imagines various propositions that he may question: the existence of the past (OC 310-1), the uniformity of nature (OC 315), but also the continuous existence of objects.

> 314. Imagine the schoolboy really did ask "and is there a table there even when I turn round, and even when *no one* is there to see it?" Is the teacher to reassure him and say "of course there is!"? Perhaps the teacher will get a bit impatient, but think that the boy will grow out of asking such questions.

When Wittgenstein writes, at the very beginning of (OC 315) that the teacher will feel that "this question" is not a legitimate question at all, it is to this question that he is referring. It is therefore plausible to assume that he would answer the pupil's question about the continuous existence of objects in the same way he answers his question about the uniformity of nature. That objects cease to exist when not perceived is excluded by

[4] Strawson writes: "But to what standards are we appealing when we ask whether the application of inductive standards is justified or well grounded? If we cannot answer, then no sense has been given to the question" (Strawson 1952: 257).

[5] Strawson makes a similar point, although about the *rationality* of reasoning inductively: "To ask whether it is reasonable to place reliance on inductive procedures is like asking whether it is reasonable to proportion the degree of one's convictions to the strength of the evidence. Doing this is what 'being reasonable' *means* in such a context." (Ibid.: 257, original emphasis).

our language-game with them. We can wonder whether some object is still where we last saw it, but by doing this we just wonder whether it has been moved or destroyed.

However, OC 314 is not the only place where Wittgenstein mentions this form of scepticism. He examines it earlier in *On Certainty* and responds to it in a very different way. First, he says that we have no evidence that would allow us to rule out the hypothesis that objects do not vanish away when no one is around them: "But can it also be said: Everything speaks for, and nothing against the table's still being there when no one sees it? For what does speak for it?" (OC 119) We cannot establish that objects do not vanish when not observed, because the hypothesis is so designed that there could be no evidence against it.

Secondly, Wittgenstein stresses the idleness of this hypothesis: "But if anyone were to doubt it, how would his doubt come out in practice? And couldn't we peacefully leave him to doubt it, since it makes no difference at all?" (OC 120) Since the hypothesis is so designed that objects are always where they would be if they had continuous existence, accepting it would make little difference to how one acts and thinks.[6] As Wittgenstein puts it elsewhere: "the supposition … would strike me as idle. Nothing would follow from it, nothing be explained by it. It would not tie in with anything in my life." (OC 117)

Finally, Wittgenstein seems to suggest that we have not been given a reason to doubt that objects vanish when not observed:

> 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."

[6] Intuitions might differ on this point. One may feel that the confidence with which we act rests on our confidence that the world is there, so to speak, to back us up. If one really believed that objects only exist when one observes them, one's confidence in action might be at least partly undermined.

“Who is going to suppose such a thing” could be glossed as “Why suppose such a thing?” If this interpretation is correct, then Wittgenstein is appealing to the fact that doubt requires grounds. The sceptic has introduced the possibility that objects vanish when no one is perceiving them, but he has given no reason to believe that this possibility obtains. Unlike in the case of induction, there is an intelligible question which could arise. However, it does not arise, because we have no reason to believe that the belief under consideration is false.

The upshot of this discussion is that there does not seem to be a unified response to various forms of scepticism in *On Certainty*. One should resist the temptation to assume that, because most of his remarks focus on indubitability, Wittgenstein thought that all the forms of scepticism that he considers ought to be rebutted by pointing out that the propositions under threat are indubitable. As I shall argue in the next chapter, this temptation is at its strongest in the case of the proposition “There are physical objects”, which many commentators take to be an indubitable proposition, while Wittgenstein himself thought of it as a piece of philosophical nonsense.

# Chapter 3 – Wittgenstein on "There are Physical Objects"

In the two previous chapters I have focused on Wittgenstein's account of groundless indubitable propositions in *On Certainty* and I concluded the last one with a discussion of forms of philosophical doubt that the text addresses, namely scepticism about induction and scepticism about the continued existence of objects. Most commentators, however, also think that Wittgenstein also addresses Cartesian scepticism. In this chapter, I argue that this claim is not entirely correct, but that one can devise an original answer to this form of scepticism by elaborating on some remarks that Wittgenstein makes.

It is not entirely true that Wittgenstein is addressing Cartesian scepticism because, although he mentions it twice, his response to it is not the one that is usually attributed to him. This response consists, roughly, in treating the proposition "There are physical objects" as an indubitable proposition. Against this interpretation, I argue for two claims. First, Wittgenstein does discuss this proposition but puts it in the mouth of an idealist and not of a sceptic (OC 19-20), and he does not characterise it as indubitable but as nonsensical (OC 35-7).

Secondly, when he does discuss Cartesian scepticism, he focuses on the hypothesis that he may be dreaming and rejects it, not because it is indubitable that he is not dreaming, but because the hypothesis is self-refuting. I argue, however, that the anti-sceptical import of this argument is limited since other sceptical hypotheses are available which do not face the same difficulties as the dreaming hypothesis.

Having explained what Wittgenstein said and what he did not say about Cartesian scepticism, I turn to what he said about "There are physical objects", that is, I turn to the

topic of idealism. I argue that Wittgenstein does not offer a refutation of idealism. He argues that "There are physical objects" is nonsense, but his argument is intended to show that the way the idealist states his position is inadequate. A refutation of idealism would require an account, and a critique, of what the idealist is trying to say, but Wittgenstein gives us neither.

In the last two sections, I return to the topic of Cartesian scepticism. I argue that, although an answer to idealism is not an answer to scepticism, one can nonetheless draw inspiration from Wittgenstein's discussion of idealism to devise a response to the Cartesian sceptic. This response consists in seeing Cartesian hypotheses as metaphysical hypotheses. On this construal, a person in a sceptical scenario has hands, although these hands are not flesh and blood ones, and one's inability to rule out that one is not in such a scenario do not imply that one does not have empirical knowledge, but merely that one lacks metaphysical knowledge. Although this position is close to the one attributed to Carnap by Barry Stroud (Stroud 1984), I argue that it is superior to it since it does not involve a problematic commitment to verificationism.

## 1. What Wittgenstein Did Not Say about Cartesian Scepticism

The vast majority of publications on *On Certainty* focus on the topic of scepticism. The difficulty of surveying and assessing this literature is not simply due to the sheer quantity of what has been published on the anti-sceptical import of Wittgenstein's remarks. The main problem is that different authors approach the text with very different agendas and often with a very different understanding of what scepticism is. One can, of course, start with an analysis of what one takes to be the sceptical problem and then discuss various

Wittgensteinian answers to it, assessing whether or not they are satisfactory.[1] However, such an approach does not do justice to the reviewed authors, and examining how each one them approaches the text, how accurate their interpretation is, and whether the argument they attribute to Wittgenstein is cogent, would take a book of its own. The reason why I want to mention at least some contributions to the literature on *On Certainty* and scepticism is because they are typical of certain misunderstandings.

The first misunderstanding concerns the place of scepticism in *On Certainty*. There is, it is important to stress, no agreement on what scepticism is, nor on what the sceptical problem, or challenge, is. However, numerous books and papers devoted to this text discuss "scepticism". This is surprising for two reasons. First, the adjective "sceptical" occurs only once in the text (OC 524), and likewise the term "scepticism" (OC 37). Secondly, on that occasion, Wittgenstein speaks of the "scepticism of the *idealist*" (ibid., emphasis added). The first reason for surprise concerns the little space that Wittgenstein devotes to scepticism, and this remains true even if one takes into account those passages in which he discusses idealism. The term "idealism" is never used in the text, and there are only two occurrences of "idealist" in addition to the one already mentioned (OC 19, 24). The second reason for surprise concerns Wittgenstein's focus when he discusses the proposition "There are physical objects" (OC 23, 35-37). This proposition can be challenged in a sceptical way, that is, one may introduce sceptical scenarios in which one is, for example, deceived by a Cartesian *malin génie*. In such a scenario, our experience is *as of* a world filled with physical objects, but it is not veridical, as there are no such objects. Our ability or inability to rule out this kind of scenario occupies centre-stage in discussions of scepticism, as it is supposed to have implications for the rationality of our holding certain beliefs, or for the legitimacy of our making certain knowledge claims.

[1] See (Pritchard 2016 and 2017) for such an approach.

Wittgenstein, however, considers this kind of scenario only twice, when he mentions the suggestion that he might be dreaming (more on this in the next section). He does speak of the "scepticism" of the idealist, but, as I shall argue, there isn't anything sceptical about idealism because the idealist does not think that we are deceived. When an idealist questions, or denies, that there are physical objects, the focus is on the term "physical": what is at stake is the fabric of reality or the interpretation of our experience, but not rationality or knowledge.

None of this, of course, means that one could not *use* some of the things that Wittgenstein says in *On Certainty* to discuss rationality or knowledge. A typical example of such a use can be found in the work of Duncan Pritchard (Pritchard 2016). According to him, there is a sceptical problem, which results from the apparent incompatibility of three intuitively plausible claims: first, we do not know that we are not in a sceptical scenario; secondly, there are numerous everyday empirical propositions that we know to be true, propositions such as "I have two hands"; thirdly, the principle of closure under known entailment, that is, the principle which states that, if one knows that *p* and that *p* entails *q*, then one can come to know that *q* by validly inferring that *q* from *p*. These claims are apparently incompatible because "I have two hands" seems to entail "I am not in a sceptical scenario", which contradicts the first claim. Faced with this contradiction, one may either reject one of the three claims—embrace scepticism, that is, deny that one knows anything, reject closure, or claim that one knows that one is not in a sceptical scenario—or try to show that the paradox is merely apparent. This is Pritchard's own strategy. He believes that the principle of closure only applies to propositions that can be an object of knowledge, that only propositions that can be an object of belief can be an object of knowledge, and that Wittgenstein has successfully shown, in *On Certainty*, that

the denials of sceptical hypotheses cannot be an object of belief. Because the principle of closure is so limited, our three intuitions are not in conflict.

This example is typical of a second kind of misunderstanding. Most remarks in *On Certainty* concern propositions such as "I have two hands", "I have never been to the moon", "the earth has existed for many years past", or "human beings have a father and mother". And what many authors do when they discuss scepticism is try to show that what Wittgenstein says about the indubitability of *these* propositions directly applies to the proposition that scepticism about physical objects threatens or challenges, namely "There are physical objects" (McGinn 1989, Moyal-Sharrock 2004, Wright 2005). However, Wittgenstein does not think that this proposition is on par with the other propositions that he discusses. It is not a groundless indubitable proposition but a piece of nonsense (OC 35-7).[2]

## 2. What Wittgenstein Said about Cartesian Scepticism

As I have mentioned in the previous section, Wittgenstein mentions Cartesian scepticism twice in *On Certainty*. Strictly speaking, he mentions this form of scepticism only once, when he mentions "the argument 'I may be dreaming'" (OC 383). However, another remark is relevant here, in which he discusses the possibility of being right or wrong when dreaming:

> 383. The argument "I may be dreaming" is senseless for this reason: if I am dreaming, this remark is being dreamed as well—and indeed it is also being dreamed that these words have any meaning.

[2] Very few commentators notice that Wittgenstein's treatment of "There are physical objects" differs from that of the other propositions that he discusses in *On Certainty*, and these commentators are also those who notice that his focus is on idealism and not scepticism. See (Coliva 2010; Glock 2004; Williams 2004). However, some of them ultimately treat idealism and scepticism as equivalent (Williams 2004).

> 676. "But even if in such cases, I can't be mistaken, isn't it possible that I am drugged?" If I am and if the drug has taken away my consciousness, then I am not now really talking and thinking. I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming. Someone who, dreaming says: "I am dreaming," even if he speaks audibly in doing so, is no more right than if he said in his dream "it is raining," while it was in fact raining. Even if his dream were actually connected with the noise of the rain.

Wittgenstein's suggestion in these two remarks is not that "I am not dreaming" is indubitable but that the hypothesis that one is dreaming is self-refuting, in the sense that one's *asserting* that one is dreaming contradicts the *content* of what is being asserted. It is, according to him, impossible to assert anything while being asleep. The only case in which I could assert that I am dreaming is the case in which I am not dreaming, and, in this case, the assertion is false, if understood literally.[3]

Before examining this argument, a preliminary clarification is needed concerning what is meant by "being asleep". Norman Malcolm, who offers an argument similar to Wittgenstein's, draws a distinction between being half asleep and being sound asleep (Malcolm 1956). A person who is half asleep is partly awake. He is partly aware of his surroundings and reactive to them. He may mumble an answer to a question that someone asks him, or grunt about some noise. And, when fully awake, he will be able to give a partial account of what happened in his vicinity while he was drowsing. A man who is sound asleep, on the other hand, is neither aware of his surroundings not reactive to them. His dreams may be affected by his environment—he may, for example, dream that it is raining because of the noise of the rain—but, upon waking up, he will be unable to recount what happened while he was sleeping—for example, he will have no recollection of hearing the noise of the rain. Malcolm's argument and Wittgenstein's one concern the case of a person who is sound asleep, and not that of one who is merely half asleep.

[3] There are no non-literal uses of "I am dreaming", although one could imagine using it like "I must be dreaming", to express one's astonishment.

Now, does Wittgenstein want to show that it is completely impossible to assert anything while sleeping? Or does he want to make the weaker claim that one can make assertions while sleeping but not about the world outside one's dreams? The two examples he considers seem designed to establish the second thesis. The first example is that of a person uttering "I am sleeping" while being asleep, and this sentence is one which seems to say something about the world outside his dream.

The second example he mentions is that of a person who is sleeping and utters the words "It is raining".[4] Wittgenstein's suggestion is that it would be incorrect to say that this person is right—that he is making an accurate report about the world outside his dream—because his uttering this sentence does not amount to making such an assertion. This claim is correct. In order to make an assertion about something, the person would have to have the intention of saying something about it but, being asleep, he is not in a position to have such an intention.

However, could this last example be used to establish the stronger thesis that it is impossible to make any assertion while sleeping? Compare with the following situation. On a rainy day, a literature teacher asks a student what the weather is like in the play they are analysing and the student answers "It is raining". The student is making an assertion about the weather in the play, not the actual weather outside the classroom. Like the person who is sleeping, he is uttering the words "It is raining" while the weather is rainy, but this utterance does not amount to an assertion about the actual weather. But the student

[4] Similar examples are considered in *Zettel*:

> Imagine an unconscious man (anaesthetized, say) were to say "I am conscious"—should we say "He ought to know"?
>
> And if someone talked in his sleep and said "I am asleep" should we say "He's quite right"?
>
> Is someone speaking untruth if he says to me "I am not conscious"? (And truth, if he says it while unconscious? And suppose a parrot says "I don't understand a word," or a gramophone "I am only a machine"?) (Z 396)

is nonetheless making an assertion. One could argue that, in a similar fashion, the dreamer can, and does, make assertions, but not about the real world. When he speaks in his sleep and says: “It is raining”, he is actually making an assertion about the weather in his dream.

Wittgenstein makes two remarks which can be used to counter this claim. First, he says in *Zettel* that such a person is not making an assertion but merely dreaming that he is making one and uttering the corresponding words:

> Is the following situation possible: Someone says “I believe I am now dreaming”; he actually wakes up soon afterwards, remembers that utterance in his dream and says: “So I was right!”—This narrative can surely only signify: Someone dreamt that he had said he was dreaming.

Why is making an assertion about something that one is dreaming of different from dreaming that one is making such an assertion? Wittgenstein does not answer this question, but one could make the following suggestion. Making an assertion is an intentional act but, in our dreams, we do not act intentionally, we merely dream that we do. It is the absence of intentional agency in dreams which precludes the possibility of making assertions in dreams.

Secondly, Wittgenstein says in OC 383 that, if I am dreaming, I am not only dreaming that I am speaking but also dreaming that my words have a meaning. This time, the argument is that I cannot make an assertion while dreaming because it is a requirement for making an assertion that the words one uses have a meaning and this requirement is not met if one is dreaming. Annalisa Coliva glosses this argument in terms of language-games (Coliva 2010: 119-24). For our words to have a meaning, they must belong to a language-game. This means that they are meaningful only if used in certain circumstances. Outside these circumstances, they have at most the appearance of meaning. Dreams do not count among the circumstances in which words can be

meaningfully used. Therefore, in dreams, we merely have the impression that we are saying something meaningful.

This is a very strong claim, and one that is difficult to defend. We sometimes remember dreams, or bits of dreams, which involve a conversation. And the dreamed conversations that we remember seem perfectly meaningful: we do understand what we dreamed was being said. But, if Wittgenstein were right, this would not be possible: while dreaming, we would have the impression that something meaningful is being said but, upon waking up, we would realise, if we remembered the dream, that nothing meaningful had been said, that we had merely dreamed that some words had been used in a meaningful way.

It is therefore unclear that this claim about the meaninglessness of words in dreams can be defended. However, this is not a problem for Wittgenstein since he has other, better, arguments for the impossibility of making assertions during sleep.

There is, however, a difficulty with this argument against the dreaming hypothesis because, even if it is successful, its anti-sceptical import would be limited. We take our subjective experience to disclose to us a world of objects and people. Sceptical hypotheses describe potential scenarios in which our subjective experience would be exactly the same, but in which this experience would be merely *as of* a world of objects and people. There might be people and objects, but they are not the objects and people that we seem to perceive. These do not exist. A further component of such hypotheses is that they describe scenarios in which we can form beliefs and make assertions. Without this further requirement, it would be impossible to speak of the person in a sceptical scenario as having false beliefs or as being deceived.

What Wittgenstein's argument purports to show is that it is impossible to make assertions while dreaming. This argument, if successful, would merely show that one cannot use the hypothesis that one is dreaming for sceptical purposes. But it is always

possible to rely on some other scenario. What is needed for the sceptical challenge to get off the ground is simply the conceivability of a situation in which one has experiences as of objects, but this experience is not caused by these objects, and that one forms beliefs and make assertions about them. Talk of dreaming, of evil geniuses or of brains-in-vats are different scenarios that would meet the requirement just mentioned. For this reason, the anti-sceptical import of Wittgenstein's argument is limited.

Despite the limitation of this argument, I shall show that one can arrive at a different argument against Cartesian scepticism by drawing inspiration from what Wittgenstein says about idealism. I proceed in two steps. In the next section I examine Wittgenstein's discussion of idealism and, in the section after that, I explain how one remark he makes can provide inspiration for an original answer to scepticism which consists in construing sceptical hypotheses as metaphysical hypotheses.

## 3. What Wittgenstein Said about "There are Physical Objects"

One may be misled into thinking that one of Wittgenstein's concerns in *On Certainty* is Cartesian scepticism because he discusses the proposition "There are physical objects". However, his discussion of this proposition is targeted at idealism, not scepticism. This discussion is limited to a handful of remarks which contain three claims about it. First, idealism does not contradict any everyday empirical claim and cannot be refuted by pointing to any empirical fact. Secondly, the idealist is expressing his position by making a statement about the existence of physical objects, but this way of expressing himself is inadequate. Finally, in order to refute idealism, we ought to understand what the idealist is trying to say and to identify the error that leads him to say it. Ultimately, Wittgenstein

does not tell us what the idealist is trying to say. Neither does he make any suggestion concerning why it might be wrong.

In his first two remarks on idealism, Wittgenstein emphasises that an idealist is not someone who wishes to deny the truth of any empirical claim:

> 19. The statement "I know that here is a hand" may then be continued: "for it's my hand that I'm looking at". Then a reasonable man will not doubt that I know. Nor will the idealist; rather he will say that he was not dealing with the practical doubt which is being dismissed, but there is a further doubt behind that one.—That this is an illusion has to be shewn in a different way.
>
> 20. "Doubting the existence of the external world" does not mean for example doubting the existence of a planet, which later observations proved to exist.—Or does Moore want to say that knowing that here is his hand is different in kind from knowing the existence of the planet Saturn? Otherwise it would be possible to point out the discovery of the planet Saturn to the doubters and say that its existence has been proved, and hence the existence of the external world as well.

Like Berkeley, Wittgenstein insists that doubting, or denying, the existence of physical objects does not amount to denying that there is a tree in the garden.[5] The idealist is making a claim about the *nature* of the tree, not about its existence. For this reason, Moore's proof that he has two hands is irrelevant to the refutation of idealism.

Wittgenstein's next remarks are intended at establishing that the idealist is using the sentence "There are physical objects" inadequately. The idealist's is "a misfiring attempt to express what can't be expressed like that" (OC 37). Rather surprisingly, he does not argue for this conclusion on the ground that idealists and realists disagree on the nature of reality and not on a question of existence.[6] His argument is not that they are expressing themselves in a misleading way because they talk about existence while they are actually

[5] John Wisdom reports that when Wittgenstein heard Moore's proof of an external world he said: "Those philosophers who have denied the existence of Matter have not wished to deny that under my trousers I wear pants" (Wisdom 1942: 431).

[6] It is true that idealists such as Berkeley deny the existence of matter, that is, of mind-independent objects. However, they do not need to commit themselves to such a denial. An idealist might limit himself to saying that objects such as chairs and trees are mind-dependent and remain agnostic concerning the existence of mind-independent objects.

arguing about whether the world is mind-dependent or not. Instead, his focus is on the impossibility of making a meaningful existential claim by using the sentence "There are physical objects".

The first remark in which this line of thought is expressed involves a reference to language-games:

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

I have explained, in the previous chapter, how doubt presupposes a language-game. In order to be able to express doubt about the existence of something, we must have an understanding of what type of thing that thing is, of what it is for it to exist, of how one could establish its existence or nonexistence, and of what would count as a reason for doubting that it exists. For example, if the place where I live is hit by a hurricane and I hide in the basement for protection, I may wonder whether the old tree in my garden is still there. To take the example of a non-empirical proposition, one may take a set of natural numbers and wonder whether it contains numbers that have a certain property. In the case of "physical objects", however, we lack the background which would give a meaning to the question whether they exist. If the idealist was making an empirical claim, that is, if he was denying that chairs, trees, and other similar objects existed, then we would have a language-game within which we could make some sense of his claim, although this denial would be nonsensical (OC 54). But he is not making an empirical claim, and this is why we lack a language-game. The idealist tries to make a non-trivial claim about what he calls "physical objects", and this claim is meaningless.

Wittgenstein presses this point further in the next two remarks on idealism. This time, he makes the point that "There are physical objects" is nonsense:

35. But can't it be imagined that there should be physical objects? I don't know. And yet "There are physical objects" is nonsense. Is it supposed to be an empirical proposition?—
And is *this* an empirical proposition: "There seem to be physical objects"?

36. "A is a physical object" is a piece of instruction which we give only to someone who doesn't yet understand either what "A" means, or what "physical object" means. Thus it is instruction about the use of words, and "physical object" is a logical concept. (Like colour, quantity,...) And that is why no such proposition as: "There are physical objects" can be formulated.
Yet we encounter such unsuccessful shots at every turn.

According to Wittgenstein, there is a distinction between at least two kinds of concepts: genuine concepts—for example "tree", "chair"—which can be used in existential claims, and what could be called "pseudo concepts"—for example "object", "colour", or "quantity"—which cannot not be used in this way. Wittgenstein calls the latter "logical concepts" and identifies, as their distinctive feature, the fact that they can only be used to make claims about language, in particular claims about types of concepts. "Red is colour" or "A chair is a physical object" are not informative statements about the world but they amount to saying to "red" and "chair" are concepts of a certain type.[7]

However, there is at least one occasion on which Wittgenstein seems to allow for existential claims involving logical concepts. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein considers the proposition "Red exists", and suggests that it can mean one of two things. It can either mean "The word 'red' has a meaning", in which case it is not an existence claim but a claim about our language, about our use of the word "red", or it can mean that some things exist which are red (PI 58). In a similar fashion, "There are physical objects" can mean either that we use a certain type of concepts, of which "chair", "tree", or "hand" are examples, or it can mean that objects such as chairs, trees, and hands

[7] The notion of "logical concept" is an inheritor of the notion of "formal concept", which Wittgenstein uses in the *Tractatus* (TLP 4.126, 4.127; 4.1272). Such concepts, Wittgenstein argues, are not genuine concepts because they do not pick a category of things by means of a property. What they do is define a domain of quantification. In other words, as Peter Hacker puts it: "formal concepts … are in effect variables representing the constant form of all their values" (Hacker 1996: 126).

exist. If it is meaningful at all, this sentence is either expressing an existential proposition which is trivially true or it is stating a fact about our conceptual framework.

What this argument purports to show is that genuine existential claims can only be empirical claims, that is, the type of claims that we make in the course of our everyday and scientific endeavours. Philosophers wish to make existential claims too, but of a different kind. However, if Wittgenstein is right, if these claims mean anything at all, they must be construed as conceptual claims.[8] Wittgenstein does not say this explicitly in *On Certainty*. In OC 37, he emphasises that showing that "There are physical objects" is nonsense is not an adequate answer to the idealist and his realist opponent. It merely shows that "this assertion, or its opposite is a misfiring attempt to express what can't be expressed like that. And that it does misfire can be shewn; but that isn't the end of the matter." (OC 37)

One may however legitimately assume that, according to him, the debate between idealists and realists, although it seems to be a debate about the world, is actually about our conceptual framework. The realist's assertion that physical objects exist is "at best [a] misleading [expression] of allegiance to certain conceptual frameworks or 'forms of language'" (Glock 2002: 253). The idealist's denial that such objects exist, on the other hand, ought to be seen as the misleading expression of what Wittgenstein calls a "discontentment with our grammar" (BlB 57).

One reason to assume that this is how Wittgenstein conceives of the debate between idealism and realism is that he writes in the *Blue Book* that this is how certain philosophical debates ought to be seen. He stresses that "a philosopher is not a man out if his senses, a man who doesn't see what everybody sees" (ibid. 59), but a man who is objecting to a linguistic convention:

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[8] For a discussion of this point, see (Glock 2002).

> On the other hand, he is not aware that he is objecting to a convention. He sees a way of dividing the country different from the one used on the ordinary map. He feels tempted, say, to use the name "Devonshire" not for the county with its conventional boundary, but for a region differently bounded. He could express this by saying: "Isn't it absurd to make *this* a county, to draw the boundaries *here*" But what he says is: "The *real* Devonshire is this". (Ibid. 57)

The philosopher who objects to a linguistic convention is not aware of this fact and neither is his opponent. But merely pointing this out is not sufficient for defending common sense. It allows one to see the problem in a correct light and to approach it from the right angle, but this is only a starting point. What is required for a full refutation of an attack on common sense is to identify the root of the philosopher's discontent with our grammar and to show that this discontent is not legitimate. And this is probably what Wittgenstein has in mind when, in his last remark on idealism, he speaks about the need for an "investigation … in order to find the right point of attack for the critic" (OC 37). However, we are not told why the idealist might want to challenge our grammar, nor why this challenge is illegitimate.[9] I shall not speculate on what the source of the idealist's discontent might be. Instead, I turn to the question whether Wittgenstein's discussion of idealism is relevant to the discussion of Cartesian scepticism.

## 4. Idealism and Scepticism

There is not a simple logical connexion between idealism and Cartesian scepticism. If

[9] References to idealism in other later works are of no help on this question, since Wittgenstein always mentions idealism in passing. In the *Blue Book* and in the *Investigations*, he mentions it together with solipsism: "Does a realist pity me more than an idealist or a solipsist?" (BlB 48); "I shall try to elucidate the problem discussed by realists, idealists, and solipsists by showing you a problem closely related to it" (ibid. 58); "*this* is what disputes between Idealists, Solipsists and Realists look like" (PI 402). In none of these passages, however, does he elaborate on the nature of idealism. He simply points out that the idealist, the solipsist, and the realist agree on the facts but disagree on what words to use to describe them. He also mentions idealism once in the *Zettel*, but only to say that it is merely verbally different from realism (Z 413-4).

one understands idealism as the denial that physical objects are mind-independent, then a refutation of idealism would show that physical objects *are* mind-independent, which has no implication for the problem of Cartesian scepticism. For the Cartesian sceptic is challenging us to show that we are actually perceiving these objects, rather than under the illusion that we are perceiving them.

In a similar way, the truth of idealism would have no anti-sceptical implications (and it might even have sceptical implications)[10]. A sceptic might grant Berkeley's point that objects are bundles of ideas and yet challenge him to prove that he is awake rather than merely dreaming. It is usually claimed, quite correctly, that Berkeley intended his position to be anti-sceptical, however, the type of scepticism that he had in mind was not of the Cartesian kind but of the Humean kind. Humean scepticism about physical objects arises for philosophers who accept a certain view of perception. The immediate objects of perception, they think, are sense-perceptions, which leads them to wonder whether there is a world beyond the mind and whether they can have any knowledge of it. Some philosophers answer these questions positively (Locke), others embrace a form of scepticism (Hume), while Berkeley redefines reality so that it falls within the range of our cognitive reach. We only have access to sense-perceptions but that does not make us ignorant of the world beyond them because the world is nothing but a collection of sense-perceptions. It is in this sense that idealism is anti-sceptical, but being anti-sceptical in this sense is of no help when it comes to Cartesian scepticism.

I think that one can nonetheless get inspiration from some of the things that Wittgenstein says about idealism to devise an original answer to scepticism. It is however unclear whether Wittgenstein would have endorsed it. This answer consists in construing the sceptic's suggestion that one may be dreaming or that one may be deceived by an evil

[10] On this topic see (Tipton 1992).

genius as a metaphysical hypothesis, and in arguing that such a suggestion concerns the nature of reality rather than its existence.

What motivates this comparison is the fact that, like the idealist, the Cartesian sceptic is not challenging any empirical claim. When he questions whether I have hands, he is not suggesting that I lack hands in the "ordinary way", that is, that my hands have been amputated or that I was born handless. Rather he is suggesting that I may be inhabiting a world that in a sense lacks reality. This world is filled with people I can talk to, and chairs I can sit on, just like I can talk to people and sit on chairs in a dream or in a computer simulation. What the sceptic is doing is suggesting that what we call reality is like the world of dreams or videogames. Depending on the hypothesis he is putting forward, our reality can be dependent on another world which is "more real"—this is the case in the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis—or on nothing all all—if the hypothesis is solipsistic.

One can arrive at this view by taking a different route. In the remark about the lack of a language-game for making claims about physical objects, Wittgenstein emphasises that "we should first have to ask: what would such a doubt be like?" (OC 24). The same question can be asked about Cartesian scepticism. The sceptic suggests that everything is illusory. But our claims about illusions are usually local, or specific, they involve a contrast between what is real and what is not. If I enter a restaurant which has a mirror wall, I may at first be under the illusion that there is a second room and start heading towards it. There is, however, no second room: it is illusory, as opposed to the real room in which I can move around, talk to people, and get a table. What is real allows for certain possibilities of action—we can do things with what is real—and it can also affect us—for example, real food nourishes us, real knives can hurt us—while no such interaction is possible with what is unreal.

But if everything is an illusion, what difference could it make? If one is, for example, a brain in a vat, then the simulated world one is presented with in subjective experience might be described as less real than the world in which one's brain is dwelling in a vat. However, lack of reality makes a difference when it concerns one aspect of the world that one inhabits. Compare with games: one may be rich when one plays Monopoly but one's fortune is unreal because real money is the money one can have on a bank account and use to buy things outside the game. But the person is a sceptical scenario has no access to the world outside the simulation, so the unreality of the simulated world makes no difference to how they ought to act.

Moreover, although this world is unreal, there is a difference to be drawn within it between what is "real" and what is not. There is a difference between a simulated restaurant room and the simulated reflexion of such a room in a simulated mirror wall, and there is a difference between simulated money and simulated Monopoly money.

These two points imply that doubting whether one is in a sceptical scenario would make no difference. It would be "idle … Nothing would follow from it, nothing would be explained by it. It would not tie in with anything in my life." (OC 117)

Seen from this angle, Cartesian hypotheses are not sceptical but metaphysical hypotheses. As I have explained in the first section, what makes hypotheses such as the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis sceptical is that our inability to rule them out is thought to imply that we do not have empirical knowledge. If, however, one looks at these hypotheses as metaphysical ones, what follows from such an inability is not that I do not know, for example, that I have hands, but that I do not know whether my hands are "real" flesh-and-blood hands, or simulated hands, or hands the existence of which depends on the mind of an evil genius, etc. In other words, I do not lack empirical knowledge but metaphysical knowledge of the ultimate nature of reality.

What follows from this is that there is no Cartesian sceptical challenge to empirical knowledge and that we do not need to prove that we are not in a Cartesian scenario in order to have such knowledge. We do, however, need to prove it if we want to show that our natural, pretheoretical view of the world, is correct.

## 5. A Comparison with Carnap

I want to conclude by distinguishing this anti-sceptical argument from a similar position attributed to Carnap by Barry Stroud in *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*. What distinguishes these two positions is the addition of a semantic thesis which implies that the sceptical challenge is meaningless.

Stroud's discussion of Carnap relies on two texts: an early text entitled "Pseudoproblems in Philosophy" (Carnap 1928/1963; PsP henceforth), and a later one entitled "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology" (Carnap 1956). Since he erroneously interprets the latter as making the same point as the former, I shall only discuss "Pseudoproblems in Philosophy".[11]

In this text, Carnap rejects various philosophical controversies as "meaningless". One of these controversies is the one that opposes realism and idealism. Like Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*, he draws a distinction between empirical questions and metaphysical ones. He imagines two geographers trying to determine whether some legendary mountain exists. They are asking an empirical question, that is, a question which they can settle by relying on certain observations and experiences. In the legend, the mountain is described as having certain features—for example, a certain shape and a certain location—and, in

[11] For a critique of Stroud's interpretation of "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology", see (Alspector-Kelly 2002).

trying to determine whether it exists or not, the geographers go to the said location and examine whether there is a mountain which fits the description. Supposing that they agree on what features the mountain is supposed to have, they will reach the same conclusion as to its existence after going out in the field and making the appropriate observations.

Although they agree on the answer to the empirical question whether the mountain exists, the geographers disagree on a philosophical point. One of them is a realist and insists that the mountain is "real" (PsP: 333), while the other geographer says that "the mountain itself is not real, only our (or in the case of the 'solipsist' variety of idealism: 'only my') perceptions and conscious processes are real" (ibid.). Carnap goes on to say that while empirical questions and answers to them are meaningful, philosophical questions such as "Are there physical objects?" are not. His argument for this claim relies on a verificationist criterion of meaningfulness which ties meaningfulness and testability. Empirical claims such as "There is a mountain" are meaningful because some criteria have been specified which allow us to determine whether this proposition is true or false. On the other hand, in the case of philosophical claims: "Neither of the disputants suggests that his thesis should be tested through some joint decisive experiment, nor does any one of them give an indication of the design of an experiment through which his thesis could be supported." (PsP 334). Since such a potential experiment has not been specified, the positions defended by realists and idealists are meaningless and so is the question they discuss.

Stroud transposes this argument to the case of Cartesian scepticism. Carnap, he argues, would compare the debate between the sceptic and the anti-sceptic to that between the idealist and the realist. The sceptic and the anti-sceptic agree, for example, that some mountain exists, but they disagree on whether it is "real". The sceptic says: "The mountain that I see I do not really see, I am simply being fed experiences as of a mountain

by an evil genius". On the other hand, the anti-sceptic says: "The mountain that I see is *really* there, I really see it". Given that no experiment could settle who of the anti-sceptic and the sceptic is right, verificationism yields the conclusion that the sceptical problem is meaningless.

The only difference between this position and the one outlined in the previous section is the addition of verificationism. While on the Wittgenstein-inspired position the suggestion that I may be, for example, a brain in a vat is perfectly meaningful, on the Carnapian position it is not. And, for this reason, the former position is preferable to the latter. As Stroud points out in his discussion of Carnap, Cartesian scepticism "certainly does not *seem* meaningless" (Stroud 1984: 205). It is a requirement for a criterion of meaningfulness to be acceptable that it be able to capture the distinction that we draw between meaningful and meaningless statements. And if a criterion failed to meet this test, if it told us that a meaningful statement is actually meaningless, the right thing to do would be to reject it (ibid.: 198-9).

It must be said, in fairness to Carnap, that this might not be a valid objection to *his* verificationism. It has recently been argued by Carnap scholars that his criterion of meaningfulness was never intended to capture of our pretheoterical distinctions between what is meaningful and what is not. It was meant as a proposal purporting to "capture all and only the expressions that are pragmatically useful to the scientist" (Surovell Ms).[12] If this interpretation is correct, then Carnap's aim was much more modest than the one attributed to him by Stroud. He is not "a militant empiricist seeking to refute a metaphysical opponent. … [He] simply gets on with the job of logico-linguistic reconstruction of non-metaphysically significant parts of human discourse" (Uebel 2019: 22). So construed, verificationism has no implications for the meaningfulness of idealism

[12] See also (Uebel 2019).

and of scepticism. It merely amounts to the claim that a reconstruction of scientific language ought not to include metaphysical claims and sceptical hypotheses because they can neither be established nor refuted by appealing to any empirical fact.

But, even if Stroud's objection fails as an objection to Carnap, it retains its strength against attempts at dismissing the Cartesian sceptical challenge as *really* meaningless—that is, as meaningless by our own lights, not by those of a scientifically relevant criterion of meaningfulness. Having rejected this verificationist argument against scepticism, we can fall back on the proposal made in the previous section. Sceptical hypotheses are perfectly meaningful but they are not sceptical. They describe scenarios in which the ultimate nature of reality is not what we think it is, but in which the truth of everyday empirical claims about objects is preserved.

As I shall argue in the next chapter, a similar proposal can be found in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*. And whether such a proposal constitute a satisfactory reason for setting aside the question whether we are in a Cartesian scenario, I shall examine in the last chapter.

# Chapter 4 – Hume on the Impossibility of Scepticism

In the first three chapters, I examined Wittgenstein's claim that certain propositions were beyond doubt and justification, his approach to Cartesian scepticism, and the potential relationship between the two. The conclusion that I reached was that Wittgenstein did not really discuss Cartesian scepticism, that he examined that proposition "There are physical objects" but in connexion with the debate between the realist and the idealist, and that he rejected this debate, but not on the ground that this proposition is beyond doubt and justification.

In this chapter, I set Wittgenstein aside and turn to Hume's discussion of the existence of "body", that is, of mind-independent objects, in the *Treatise of Human Nature*. I argue that, contrary to what Strawson says, Hume does not reject the question whether bodies exist as idle on the ground that we cannot but believe that they exist. Rather, he uses the psychological inescapability of the belief in a practical argument purporting to show that, although we cannot justify it, we have a right to hold it. He does, however, believe, like Strawson, that the question can be bypassed and gives two reasons first doing so. First, he gives an "argument from despair": we ought to set the question aside because we cannot answer it. Secondly, he argues that we ought to do so because whether there are bodies or not does not make a difference to the truth of our everyday empirical claims. I argue that, although the first argument is weak, the second one is more promising.

## 1. Hume and Scepticism

Hume's discussion of the existence of body occurs in Book One Part 4 of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, "Of the sceptical and other systems of philosophy". It starts in the second section of that part, "Of scepticism with regard to the senses", and is resumed in the fourth section, "Of the modern philosophy". My focus in this chapter is the former discussion but it is impossible to understand the nature of Hume's argument without an understanding of his aim in Part 4.

The difficulty that any reader of the *Treatise* faces is that of reconciling Hume's positive, naturalistic, project of a science of human nature, and the at least seemingly sceptical tone of Part 4 of Book One. Before that part, Hume makes no reference to scepticism[1] and is mainly concerned with offering a psychological and epistemological account of cognition that is empiricist—the basic building blocks of our cognitive life are "impressions", Hume's term for sense-impressions—and naturalistic—Hume stresses the continuity between animal and human cognition, in particular in his account of inductive reasoning.[2] His project is constructive, and its destructive elements are merely targeted at erroneous accounts of cognition. The project is equally constructive after the discussion of scepticism, that is, in Books Two and Three, in which Hume respectively discusses the passions and morality. Book One Part 4, on the other hand, seems completely at odds with this project as, in the course of six sections, Hume accumulates various sceptical arguments and ends up in a state of sceptical crisis which he describes in the seventh and last section, "Conclusion of this book".

Much ink has been spilled on the question whether, and how, Hume's seemingly sceptical conclusions can be reconciled with his positive project. It would be beyond the

[1] See (Cummins 1999).
[2] On this point, see (Kail 2007a).

scope of this chapter to review the various attempts at solving this exegetical problem and arguing for my own solution would take up too much space.[3] I shall therefore present my interpretation somewhat dogmatically. I shall also keep the exposition fairly simple, avoiding certain details of Hume's position, so as to focus on what I take to be the general line of argument Book One Part 4. More precisely, I focus on Hume's approach to scepticism in that part, to which only a few sections are relevant.

Of the seven sections, only the first, second, and fourth, and the "Conclusion", are relevant to the topic of scepticism. In the first section, Hume examines an argument against reason which purports to show that we ought not to hold any belief. In the second and fourth sections, Hume examines our belief in body. In the former, he argues that the belief does not have its source in the senses—we do not see that physical objects exist—or in reason—we cannot justify the belief on the basis of our sense-impressions—but in the imagination. In the latter, Hume argues that, if one accepts the "modern" distinction between primary and secondary qualities, then the very notion of body seems empty, as we cannot have any idea of an object having primary qualities once it has been deprived of its secondary qualities: "there remains nothing, which can afford us a just and consistent idea of body" (T 1.4.4.10; SBN 230).[4] This conclusion Hume describes as a contradiction—a "manifest contradiction", as he puts it in the "Conclusion of this book" (T 1.4.7.4; SBN 266)—between two "principles" of the imagination, namely our commitment to the existence of body, and our commitment to causal reasoning—which, according to him, is what leads us to draw the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Finally, in the conclusion of Book One, Hume sums up his sceptical conclusions, describes a sceptical crisis, and offers a solution to it.

[3] For a recent survey of competing interpretations of Book One Part 4, see (Ainslie 2015).

[4] I follow the standard convention for referring to the *Treatise of Human Nature* by specifying the number of the book, part, section, and paragraph that I am quoting from, followed by the number of the page in the Selby-Bigge Nidditch edition of the text.

Although he mentions the "manifest contradiction" in the conclusion, I shall leave it out for the sake of simplicity, and focus on the other main problem that causes the sceptical crisis. Reviewing the other sceptical arguments—that is, the argument against reason and the first argument against body, to which he also adds his position on induction—Hume writes that we are faced with a choice "betwixt a false reason and none at all" (T 1.4.7.7; SBN 268). The point might be better put in terms of beliefs, since the choice is not so much between a false reason and no reason at all, but between relying on reason only and having no beliefs at all, and having beliefs, but ones that are the product of a "false reason", that is, of the imagination. On all three topics—bodies, induction, and "reason"—Hume argues that, if we were rigorously rational, we would not have certain beliefs and that it is only thanks to the imagination that we move, for example, from sense-impressions to beliefs about the future or about bodies. This point is not an epistemological one but a psychological one. Hume's discussion of sceptical arguments does not start as an enquiry into how good the credentials of some beliefs are, but as an enquiry into the *source* of our beliefs. The fact that a belief cannot be justified does not imply that we ought not to hold it,[5] rather, it implies that the belief has its source in something other than reason and, on Hume's account, it is to the imagination—also referred to as "the fancy"—that we owe most of our beliefs.

That his purpose is merely descriptive is clearly expressed at the end of the discussion of reason:

> My intention then in displaying so carefully the arguments of that fantastic sect, is only to make the reader sensible of the truth of my hypothesis, *that all our reasonings concerning causes and effects are deriv'd from nothing but custom; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures*. (T 1.4.1.8; SBN 183)

[5] However, Hume does sometimes speak in normative terms, especially in the discussion of scepticism with regard to reason: "In every judgment, which we can form concerning probability, as well as concerning knowledge, we ought always to correct the first judgment, deriv'd from the nature of the object, by another judgment, deriv'd from the nature of the understanding" (T 1.4.1.5; SBN 182).

And at the beginning of the discussion of body:

> We may well ask, *What causes induce us to* believe *in the existence of body*? but 'tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not*? That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings. (T 1.4.2.1; SBN 187)

However, by the end of that section, having enquired into the sources of our belief in body, Hume finds himself "more inclin'd to repose no faith at all in [his] senses, or rather imagination, than to place in it such an implicit confidence" (T 1.4.2.56; SBN 217). The mechanisms in which our belief in body originate are not dependable, as they cause errors and illusions.

When, in the conclusion, Hume writes that we have a choice between a false reason and none at all, he therefore means that numerous beliefs of ours are the product of operations of the imagination that cannot be, or at least do not seem to be, conducive to truth—the imagination is a "false reason"—and that the alternative would be having no beliefs at all. Faced with this choice, Hume asks the normative question: "How far we ought to yield to these illusions" (T 1.4.7.6; SBN 267).

Now, it is worth emphasising that, for Hume, the question does not arise because some beliefs lack a justification but because the mechanisms that generate them are not dependable. The mere impossibility of finding a justification is not something that Hume sees as problematic, and it is something that he even welcomes since it is part of his case for a "science of human nature". The aim of the *Treatise* is to substitute a naturalistic approach to human beings to a philosophical or metaphysical—but also religious—one. Hume wants to convince his readers to give up a distorted picture of ourselves, but also to abandon certain speculative questions in favour of empirical ones. Sceptical arguments play a role in both projects.

As already mentioned, they play a role in the former since Hume believes that the inability to justify certain beliefs reveals that they do not have their source in reason, and this is supposed to show that human beings are not the "rational" beings that certain philosophers and theologians take them to be.[6]

But these arguments also play a role in the latter project. In the introduction of the *Treatise*, Hume explains that he wishes to offer what could be called an "argument from despair" against certain forms of philosophical speculation. He writes that "we are no sooner acquainted with the impossibility of satisfying any desire, than the desire itself vanishes" and he hopes to rely on this feature of human psychology to cure his readers of the temptation to enquire about the foundations of "our most general and most refin'd principles" by showing that no justification of these "principles" can be found (T Intro 9; SBN xvii-xviii). Instead of enquiring about them, we should direct our attention and energy toward enquiries in which some answers can be found. As Hume puts it in the conclusion:

> For my part, my only hope is, that I may contribute a little to the advancement of knowledge, by giving in some particulars a different turn to the speculations of philosophers, and pointing out to them more distinctly those subjects, where alone they can expect assurance and conviction." (T 1.4.7.14; SBN 273, emphasis added)

By "these subjects" he means those he examines in Books Two and Three, namely the passions and morality: "Human Nature is the only science of man; and yet has been hitherto the most neglected. 'Twill be sufficient for me, if I can bring it a little more into fashion." (ibid.)[7]

Given these elements, it is possible to sketch Hume's general position in Part 4. He starts with a descriptive, psychological, enquiry which reveals that the source of some

[6] On this topic, see (Craig 1987) and (Kail 2007a).
[7] On this topic, see (Harris 2009).

beliefs is not reason. These beliefs are, so to speak, groundless. This position is sceptical, and Hume describes it as such: "In all the incidents of life we ought still to preserve our scepticism. If we believe, that fire warms, or water refreshes, 'tis only because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise." (T 1.4.7.11; SBN 270) However, Hume does not find this form of scepticism troubling, and he does not believe that it implies we ought to suspend judgment. This question, however, does arise, especially with regard to our belief in body, because he thinks he has discovered problems with the operations of the imagination in which beliefs have their source, hence the question how far we ought to yield to these illusions.

Before answering it, he points out that we actually have no choice in the matter, since Nature is ultimately stronger than reason: "I may, nay, I must yield to the current of nature, in submitting to my senses and understanding" (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 269). We are "absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life" (ibid.). However, this does not settle the normative question: we "cannot establish it for a rule, that [refin'd reflections] ought not to have any influence" (T 1.4.7.7; SBN 268). In other words, the fact that certain beliefs are inescapable is not a sufficient reason for endorsing them. We cannot suspend judgment, but this does not mean that we ought not to.

Having made this point, Hume gives a first argument. He argues that one has a right to yield to nature when striving against it is painful and serves no purpose:

> Does it follow, that I must strive against the current of nature, which leads me to indolence and pleasure; that I must seclude myself, in some measure, from the commerce and society of men, which is so agreeable; and that I must torture my brain with subtilities and sophistries, at the very time that I cannot satisfy myself concerning the reasonableness of so painful an application, nor have any tolerable prospect of arriving by its means at truth and certainty? Under what obligation do I lie of making such an abuse of time? And to what end can it serve either for the service of mankind, or for my own private interest? No: If I must be a fool, as all those who reason or believe any thing *certainly* are, my follies shall at least be natural and agreeable. Where I strive against my inclination, I shall have a

> good reason for my resistance; and will no more be led a wandering into such dreary solitudes, and rough passages, as I have hitherto met with. (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 269-70)

This argument is a practical one, although one may also describe it as moral since it relies on two notions—agreeableness and utility—which lie at the heart of Hume's account of virtue and vice in Book Three.[8] He uses this argument to make two points. The first one, which is of no interest here, concerns philosophical enquiries. Why, Hume asks, should he spend hours in his study "torturing [his] brain with subtilities and sophistries"? This kind of philosophical thinking is both unpleasant and useless, and concerns topics on which it is impossible to reach any conclusion. It is therefore to be abandoned, and in the remaining paragraphs of the conclusion, Hume argues that there is a kind of philosophy which is agreeable and useful, and in which one can expect to reach some conclusions, namely, the kind of philosophy that he practices in the rest of the *Treatise*.

But there is also a second use of the appeal to usefulness and agreeableness. Hume says that, if he must be a fool, as any man is when he believes anything with certainty, at least his own beliefs will be "natural" and "agreeable". Recall that, according to him, we owe our empirical and metaphysical beliefs to the imagination. This is the case not only with our "vulgar", pre-theoretical, beliefs, but also of philosophical beliefs. Since the imagination is defective, the vast majority of our beliefs are the products of errors, and Hume considers that the agreeableness of our vulgar beliefs is a reason to prefer them to their philosophical substitutes. To the question "how far we ought to yield to the illusions of the imagination", Hume answers that we ought to yield to them to the extent that they are agreeable.

Although he does not mention the usefulness of our vulgar beliefs in the conclusion, he does so at the beginning of his discussion of "modern philosophy". Here, Hume

[8] See (T 3.3.1.30; SBN 590-1).

answers an objection to his critique of philosophers in the previous section, "Of the antient philosophy". Those philosophers's positions are the product of the imagination and it is on this ground that Hume criticises them, but how strong is this critique if, as he himself believes, we owe all of our beliefs to the imagination? His answer involves drawing a distinction between two kinds of "principles" of the imagination:

> I must distinguish in the imagination betwixt the principles which are permanent, irresistible, and universal; such as the customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes: And the principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular; such as those I have just now taken notice of. The former are the foundation of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin. The latter are neither unavoidable to mankind, nor necessary, or so much as useful in the conduct of life (T 1.4.4.1; SBN 225)

Certain mechanisms of the imagination are universal and are the source of our vulgar views—which are shared by all human beings, including philosophers when they do not philosophise—and Hume gives a preference to them, as well as to the beliefs they generate, not because they have a better epistemic standing—the passage involves no reference to notions such a truth or justification—but because they are more useful. So, according to Hume, we ought to yield to the illusions of the imagination to the extent that they are agreeable or useful.[9]

Hume also offers a second argument at the very end of the conclusion. He endorses what he calls "true scepticism": "A true sceptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction" (T 1.4.7.14; SBN 273). Hume's suggestion is that a true sceptic should not be dogmatic and should, therefore, not be too certain that his own views are correct, even if he does not see any error in them. We ought to yield to the illusions of the imagination because it is possible that they are actually not illusions.

[9] On the role of ethical and practical considerations in Hume's epistemology, see (Owen 1996; Ridge 2003; Kail 2005). For a critical discussion, see (Qu 2014).

It is important to point out that neither argument is, strictly speaking, anti-sceptical. Scepticism about some proposition *p* is the denial that we know that *p* or the denial that we have any epistemic reason, i.e. evidence, to believe that *p*. That the first, practical, argument does not address this topic is obvious. In the case of the second argument, things are slightly more complex since Hume does not say where he thinks the error, or errors, in his position might be located. But, given the important role that the impossibility of finding certain justifications plays in his naturalistic project, it would be natural to assume that the object of Hume's diffidence should not be these arguments but something else, for example the psychological explanations which are the source of his sceptical crisis. Ultimately, Hume is committed to the correctness of sceptical arguments: some of our beliefs simply cannot be justified. In the following section, I examine why he believes this is the case for our belief in body.

## 2. Our Inescapable Belief in Body

Hume's discussion of the belief in body in "Of scepticism with regard to the senses" is long and raises numerous exegetical problems. To keep matters simple, I shall focus on certain key elements.

Our belief in body, according to Hume, is the belief in mind-independent objects which continue to exist when not perceived. These two features are what Hume calls distinct and continued existence. Although these two features are distinct, Hume believes that an object cannot have one without having the other. This thesis is disputable, as one could imagine an object having distinct existence and yet existing discontinuously. However, this is not a problem for Hume's account of the belief since he only needs the claim that

if an object has continuous existence it is mind-independent: "the opinion of the *continu'd* existence of body ... is prior to that of its *distinct* existence, and produces that latter principle" (T 1.4.2.23; SBN 199); "'tis the opinion of a continu'd existence, which first takes place, and without much study or reflection draws the other along with it, wherever the mind follows its first and most natural tendency" (T 1.4.2.44; SBN 210).

Hume's scepticism with regard to the existence of body, that is, his denial that the belief can be justified, rests on his account of perception. The objects of perception, according to him, are not physical objects but sense-impressions:

> We may observe, that 'tis universally allowed by philosophers, and is besides pretty obvious of itself, that nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and ideas ... nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions. (T 1.2.6.7; SBN 67)
>
> Philosophy informs us, that every thing, which appears to the mind, is nothing but a perception, and is ... dependent on the mind. (T 1.4.2.14; SBN 193)
>
> Nothing is ever really present to the mind, besides its own perceptions. (T 1.4.2.21; SBN 197)
>
> The most vulgar philosophy informs us, that no external object can make itself known to the mind immediately, and without the interposition of an image or perception. That table, which just now appears to me, is only a perception, and all its qualities are qualities of a perception. (T 1.4.5.15; SBN 239)

It is because we are only ever acquainted with sense-impressions that the question whether bodies exist arises. This point is important because, since this form of scepticism is motivated by a certain view of perception, it could be refuted by an argument showing that this view is false. If it could be shown that the objects of perception are not sense-impressions but physical objects, then this sceptical problem would not arise. An answer to this form of scepticism would not necessarily be of any help against another form of scepticism, namely "Cartesian scepticism", for even if perception was unmediated, it would remain possible to question whether one is in a perceptual state rather than in some

phenomenologically indistinguishable state such as a dreaming, or being deceived by a *malin génie*.

Hume adduces various arguments in favour of his view of perception, however, I shall not consider them. Neither shall I consider possible rebuttals of these arguments.[10] Instead, I shall assume that Hume is right and that the immediate objects of perception are sense-impressions.

Now, Hume distinguishes two versions of the belief in body. The first one is what he calls the "vulgar" version of the belief. This version is what Hume takes to be our pre-theoretical view on the matter, and he construes it as a form of direct realism. Before engaging in philosophy, we believe that bodies exist *and* that we see them without the mediation of any image. Distinguishing these two components of the claim is important for understanding what Hume says about the vulgar version of the belief. For he claims that the vulgar version is false, by which one may be tempted to understand that Hume denies that there are bodies, while he merely claims that the vulgar mistakenly believe that what we see are bodies: "the vulgar confound perceptions and objects, and attribute a distinct continu'd existence to the very things they feel or see" (T 1.4.2.21; SBN 193).

The second version of the belief, which Hume also rejects, is what he calls the "philosophical" version of the belief. Philosophers, who know that we are never acquainted with anything but fleeting sense-impressions, postulate the existence of bodies which cause, and resemble these perceptions, and which have distinct and continued existence. Hume believes that this position is unwarranted. It is impossible to justify, on the basis of our sense-impressions, the judgment that they are caused by physical objects. Causal judgments can only be justified if one is in a position to observe the constant conjunction of the cause and the effect. However, since we only have access to sense-

[10] For a critical discussion of these arguments, see (Dicker 1998: chapter 6).

impressions, we cannot see bodies causing them, and are therefore unable to justify any causal claim concerning the source of our sense-impressions (T 1.4.2.47; SBN 212).

Thus, once one has adopted the correct view about the objects of perception, there is no reason to think that there are bodies, and Hume feels the need to explain why someone who knows that we only perceive sense-impressions might want to reintroduce mind-independent bodies. The only possible explanation, he thinks, is that philosophers are still in the grip of the vulgar belief: "*the philosophical system acquires all its influence on the imagination from the vulgar one*" (T 1.4.2.49; SBN 213). It is only because our natural, pre-theoretical view of the senses is that they present us with bodies that, upon realising that they do not, we nonetheless try to argue that they do, although in a mediated way. This is why Hume describes the philosophical position is "loaded with … absurdity" because "it at once denies and establishes the vulgar supposition" (T 1.4.2.56; SBN 218).

By saying that Hume rejects this philosophical view, I do not mean that he considers it false. Rather, he merely argues that it is groundless, and, despite his description of it as "absurd", it seems that he ultimately endorses it. This is at least what the opening of Book Two seems to suggest: "Original impressions or impressions of sensation … arise in the soul, from the constitution of the body, from the animal spirits, or from the application of objects to the external organs" (T 2.1.1.1; SBN 275). This endorsement creates a potential difficulty concerning the interpretation of his position. For, if there is an argument from inescapability, as I shall argue there is, then the inescapable belief we are entitled to hold will be the vulgar one. The philosophical view that Hume endorses is not inescapable: philosophers "immediately upon leaving their closets, mingle with the rest of mankind in those exploded opinions, that our perceptions are our only objects" (T 1.4.2.53; SBN 216). It therefore seems as though Hume has an argument from inescapability which legitimises holding the false vulgar belief in body, while he endorses the philosophical

view, which is groundless and not inescapable, and can therefore not be legitimised in such a way.

Now, as I indicated in the previous section, Hume's sceptical worries arise from his psychological account of the source of our belief in body. He holds, as already mentioned, that the philosophical view originates in the vulgar one, and it is in explaining how the latter is generated by the imagination that he discovers a disquieting error, namely, "the error and deception with regard to identity" (T 1.4.2.32; SBN 202). According to him, our visual experience involves sense-impressions which, although qualitatively identical—what Hume calls "constancy" (T 1.4.2.18; SBN 194)[11]—are numerically different—because they correspond to different perceptual episodes—but are mistakenly taken by the mind to be numerically identical, as the mind has a natural tendency to mistake resemblance for identity.

This is not the whole story of how the belief in body originates.[12] However, the details of Hume's psychological explanation do not matter here. What matters is that he believes that the mechanism which generates the belief involves an error, and this is the source of his disquiet:

> I cannot conceive how such trivial qualities of the fancy, conducted by such *false* suppositions, can ever lead to any solid and rational system. … The constancy of our perceptions has the most considerable effect, and yet is attended with the greatest *difficulties*. 'Tis a *gross illusion* to suppose, that our resembling perceptions are numerically the same. … What then can we look for from this *confusion of groundless and extraordinary* opinions but *error and falshood*? And how can we justify to ourselves any belief we repose in them? (T 1.4.2.56; SBN 217-8, emphasis added)

[11] Our sense-impressions are not always "constant". Most of the time they are simply "coherent", that is, they change in regular ways. For example, the impressions one has of a burning fire follow similar patterns (T 2.4.2.19; SBN 195). However, Hume believes that constancy plays a more important role in generating the belief in body than coherence does.

[12] According to Hume, this mistake is not sufficient to generate the belief in body. For a full account of the mechanisms involved in the generation of the belief, see (Wright 1983: chapter 3) and (Kail 2007b: Part I).

And in the following paragraph Hume describes the “sceptical doubt” which results from this enquiry as “a malady, which can never be radically cur’d” (T 1.4.2.57; SBN 218), and which can only be made worse by further attempts at defending the belief:

> ’Tis impossible upon any system to defend either our understanding or senses; and we but expose them farther when we endeavour to justify them in that manner. As the sceptical doubt arises naturally from a profound and intense reflection on those subjects, it always encreases, the farther we carry our reflections, whether in opposition or conformity to it. (Ibid.)

The only remedy to these doubts is to rely on “carelessness and in-attention” (ibid.). The belief in body—at least the vulgar form of it—is inescapable, and the only thing to do in the face of the sceptical conclusion is not to think about it.

## 3. The Belief in Body as a “Natural Belief”

At the end of “Of scepticism with regard to the senses”, Hume does not say that the inescapability of our belief in body makes it right to hold it. And in the “Conclusion of this book”, he is insistent that the impossibility of suspending judgment does not settle the question whether we ought to suspend judgment. He does, however, have an argument from inescapability, that is, an argument purporting to show that we have the right to hold the belief in body *because* it is inescapable.

Now, there are two ways in which one may argue for such a thesis. One may argue that the fact that a belief is inescapable gives one an *epistemic* reason to hold it or, alternatively, that this fact gives one a *practical* reason to hold it. Hume’s position is the latter and not the former, although that position has been attributed to him, and it is this position that I examine here.

The source of this interpretation of Hume is the work of Norman Kemp Smith. In two influential papers and a book (Kemp Smith 1905a, 1905b, 1941), he has argued that Hume offers a theory of "natural beliefs". These beliefs have three main features. First, they possess the following characteristics: "certain beliefs or judgments … can be shown to be 'natural,' 'inevitable,' 'indispensable'" (Kemp Smith 1905a: 152). They are "natural" in the sense that they have their source in "Nature". They are "inevitable" in the sense that they are psychologically inescapable. And they are "indispensable" as they are a prerequisite for thought or for action.

Secondly, natural beliefs are groundless: "All sceptical doubts as to the validity of our natural beliefs rest, not on the demonstration of the falsity of evidence for them, but only on the proofs of the total absence of evidence for them" (ibid.: 166).

Finally, natural beliefs, because they are "natural", "indispensable", "inevitable" are "removed beyond the reach of our sceptical doubts" (ibid.: 152). By this, Kemp Smith means two things. First, he writes that, according to Hume, natural beliefs are certain:

> Hume's … approach to his problems leads him to recognise that belief in the existence of the self and of other selves, belief in the existence of bodies, and belief in causality as holding between such bodies and between our mental experiences, are beliefs which are 'manifest' in experience, and which are therefore *more certain*—being in this respect like gravity—*than any theory that can be brought forward in explanation of them*. (Kemp Smith 1941: 75-6, emphasis added)

Kemp Smith attributes to Hume the claim that the truth of our natural beliefs is *more certain* than any explanation of them. Although he does not say so, one could probably add that they are more certain than any justification or any critique of them. On this account, our natural beliefs are beyond the reach of doubt in the sense that we are more certain of them than of any apparent reason we might have to doubt them.

But Kemp Smith also writes that, according to Hume, we have a right to hold natural beliefs because they are "appropriate":

> [Natural beliefs] have the de facto prescriptive rights which Nature, in thus predetermining us to them, has conferred upon them. (Ibid.: 126)

> When reason "mixes itself with some propensity", it gains a content and direction … which can come only from a natural impulse. Now all Nature's impulses are wholesome and beneficial … and this yoking of reason to the impulses helps to ensure their proportion and appropriateness. (Ibid.: 131)

Kemp Smith believes that Hume identifies natural beliefs with instincts and claims that we ought to hold them because instincts are always beneficial.

Now, there are many ways in which holding a certain belief can be good for us. For example, a belief can be good for us because, although it is false or unwarranted, it is useful. This is not Kemp Smith's position, as he interprets the appropriateness of natural beliefs in epistemic terms: "though our natural beliefs are our sole guides they are reliable and legitimate only within a strictly limited domain" (ibid.: 128). This claim is one that concerns the belief in causality, hence the reference to the restricted domain of legitimacy. Kemp Smith makes this remark within the context of a discussion of "Of the modern philosophy", in which Hume identifies a conflict between our belief in body and the conclusion that we reach if we apply causal reasoning to perceptual experience. Causal reasoning is what leads to the introduction of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, but since we cannot conceive of an object having primary qualities once we have stripped it of its secondary qualities, there remains no intelligible notion of body. Kemp Smith believes that, according to Hume, this contradiction is the result of using causal reasoning where it is not legitimate. Since our belief in body is certain, an argument purporting to show that it is false or contentless must be wrong, and what goes wrong in the present case is that causal reasoning was used where it cannot yield true conclusions.[13] Within its legitimate sphere of use, however, this mode of reasoning is

[13] This interpretation is questionable, as there is no sign in Hume's text that he endorses such a view concerning the legitimate sphere of application of causal reasoning.

reliable and, more generally, Kemp Smith attributes to Hume the view that our natural beliefs are true.

This interpretation is problematic for several reasons. First, according to Kemp Smith, natural beliefs are certain, but this is not what Hume writes. In "Of scepticism with regard to the senses", he says that: "The only existences, of which we are certain, are perceptions" (T 1.4.2.47; SBN 212). The only thing that one can legitimately be certain of is that one is having certain sense-impressions. Whether there is body or not, on the other hand, is open to doubt, and we cannot reject an argument as incorrect because it contradicts our belief in body.

Secondly, Kemp Smith describes natural beliefs as merely groundless. However, the version of the belief in body which is inescapable is the vulgar one, which is false. But, if our natural belief in body is false, it is hard to see how one could describe it as epistemically appropriate. One could argue that there is a difference between two natural beliefs: the belief in body proper—the belief that some objects exist mind-independently and continuously—and the belief that these objects are directly perceived. While the latter is false, the former is merely groundless, and nothing precludes describing it as "appropriate". Drawing this distinction would be an improvement on Hume's position, since he does not draw it. However, the fact that this distinction is not present in the original text and that it needs to be drawn by the commentator to introduce a belief in body which fits Kemp Smith's theory of natural beliefs strongly suggest that Hume had no such theory in mind when writing the *Treatise*.

Now, my reason for discussing the "natural belief" interpretation of Hume is that, on this interpretation, he seems to be offering an argument from inescapability, that is, an argument purporting to show that we are inescapably committed to certain beliefs and that we have a right to hold them because they are inescapable. So far, I have examined

the theory of natural belief that Kemp Smith attributes to Hume and argued that is textually incorrect. The question that I now wish to address is the following: supposing that Hume did offer the theory of natural belief outlined above, would he be offering what could be called an argument from inescapability?

The answer to this question is negative. For such an argument would be an argument purporting to show that inescapable beliefs have a positive epistemic status and that we have a right to them despite their lack of justification *because* they are inescapable. But this is not what the theory of natural beliefs says. According to this theory, we have a right to hold these beliefs not because they are inescapable but because they have their source in "Nature", whose gifts to us are always "wholesome" and "beneficial". Nature has implanted this belief in a way that makes it inescapable, but the inescapability itself has no epistemic import.

This position seems correct. The mere fact that a belief is inescapable has no implications concerning either its epistemic standing or its truth. For example, the person who suffers from paranoia cannot but believe that other people are watching, and acting against, him or her. This belief, however, is false. The most one can have is an argument showing that one has a right to hold an inescapable belief because what makes it inescapable also makes it true.

## 4. A Wittgensteinian Hume?

Before turning to the practical defence of our belief in body, I want to say a word about the comparison between Hume and Wittgenstein. Doing so after a discussion of Kemp Smith is appropriate since the influence of his interpretation might at least partly explain

why some have thought that there were similarities between Hume's position on the existence of body and Wittgenstein's position in *On Certainty*. The idea that there exist psychologically inescapable natural beliefs which are legitimately held despite our lack of evidence for them does sound very much like Wittgenstein's claim, in *On Certainty*, that certain propositions are groundless yet beyond doubt.

Although some authors who compare Hume and Wittgenstein do not mention Kemp Smith (Bell & McGinn 1990), others do (Hanfling 1975: 48; Jones 1982: 209), and there is a reason to think that P. F. Strawson was influenced by his interpretation, although he does not acknowledge it. One of Kemp Smith's key ideas is that "the maxim which is central in [Hume's] ethics—'Reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions'—is no less central in his theory of knowledge, being there the maxim: 'Reason is and ought to be subordinate to our natural beliefs'" (1941: 11).[14] The exact same claim is made by Strawson in *Skepticism and Naturalism*, in the chapter where he compares Hume and Wittgenstein. Commenting on Hume's idea that our belief in body is inescapable, he writes that: "[Reason] has a part to play, though a subordinate one: as Nature's lieutenant rather than as Nature's commander. (Here we may recall and adapt that famous remark about Reason and the passions" (Strawson 1985: 13-4). It is, therefore, likely that the tendency to compare Hume and Wittgenstein is the result of Kemp Smith's influence on the interpretation of Hume.

Given the shortcomings of this interpretation, the legitimacy of the comparison is questionable. But, even if the interpretation were correct, there would still be substantial differences between the two philosophers. First, Kemp Smith claims that Humean natural beliefs are more certain than the explanations one may give of them, which sounds very like Wittgenstein's claim that some propositions are more certain than the reasons we

[14] Kemp Smith had already advanced this idea in his first paper on Hume's naturalism (Kemp Smith 1905a: 156).

may find for them. However, Wittgenstein does not say that "There are physical objects" is one of these propositions, he says that it is "nonsense" (OC 35).

Secondly, the two philosophers have diverging accounts of groundlessness. For Wittgenstein groundless propositions are propositions which are so certain that they are not held on the basis of reasons, although numerous facts speak in favour of them. They are "held fast by what lies around [them]" (OC 144) and receive "all sorts of confirmation" (OC 288). On this account, groundlessness is not a *lack* of justification, while Hume's conception of groundlessness is precisely that. Our belief in body is groundless because it is impossible for us to justify it on the basis of the evidence of our senses. In connexion with this point, it is worth mentioning that Wittgenstein's philosophy of mind was deeply opposed to that of Hume, and that he had no use for the idea of private sense-impressions.

Finally, while "Nature" occupies pride of place in Hume, it does not do so in Wittgenstein, who mentions it only once in *On Certainty*: "It is always by favour of Nature that one knows something" (OC 505). This remark is mysterious but can be illuminated by the one that precedes it. There, Wittgenstein writes: "Whether *I know* something depends on whether the evidence backs me up or contradicts me" (OC 504). In a similar fashion, when he mentions nature, it is possible that he means: "Whether I know something depends on whether nature backs me up". It is not sufficient for acquiring knowledge that we open our eyes, we also need things to go right, that is, we need what we see to be what we think we see, for example, what we think is a barn to actually be a barn. If this interpretation is correct, by "nature's favour" Wittgenstein refers to the idea that in order to acquire knowledge the circumstances must be favourable. But this idea is very different from the one that Kemp Smith attributes to Hume, namely that we can vindicate our beliefs by pointing out that we owe them to "Nature".

None of this implies that there could not be other comparisons between Hume and Wittgenstein, and I shall offer one in the last section of the chapter. Before doing so, I want to examine Hume's practical argument from inescapability.

## 5. The Right to Believe in Body: The Practical Argument

The inescapability of our belief in body does not give us an epistemic right to hold it. Could it however, gives us a right to hold it on practical grounds? This seems to be Hume's position, since in the context of Part 4 he appeals on several occasions to the usefulness and agreeability of certain beliefs, and in particular to the usefulness and agreeability of our belief in body.

Hume appeals to practical considerations in the "Conclusion of this book" when he considers whether he should resume philosophising and when he considers the question whether "refined reflexions" should have any influence on what we believe. He rejects "abstruse" philosophising because it is useless and disagreeable and recommends enquiring about morality and the passions on the ground that it is useful and agreeable—in particular agreeable to himself, because it satisfies his curiosity. As far as beliefs are concerned, he makes a similar point. Certain beliefs are "useful in the conduct of life" (T 1.4.4.1; SBN 225) and trying to suspend judgment with regard to them is painful, and these facts count in favour of holding them.

Numerous questions arise with regard to this position. What kinds of usefulness and agreeableness count in favour of holding a belief? Why do they count in favour of holding a belief? (The question is especially pressing in the case of agreeableness.) Is each of these features sufficient, on its own, to grant one the right to hold a belief or must a belief

be both useful *and* agreeable for one to have the right to hold it? What ought one to believe if agreeableness points in one direction and usefulness in the other? Does Hume believe that this argument applies to all beliefs or only to a subset of beliefs?

Hume does not provide a clear answer to any of these questions. One can, however, make three observations about how he uses agreeableness and usefulness.

The first observation concerns the way he understand agreeableness and usefulness. Little needs to be said about agreeableness. When Hume mentions it in connexion with beliefs, he contrasts it with the pain which results from trying to believe otherwise. More needs to be said about usefulness. The kind of usefulness that he mentions is what he calls usefulness "in the conduct of life". This expression is potentially misleading, because the expression "the conduct of life" potentially refers to everything that we do. Usefulness "in the conduct of life" could therefore be interpreted as "useful for any kind of practical purpose". However, this interpretation would be incorrect. Hume's focus is on beliefs that are useful in the sense that they are "vital" (the phrase is mine), they are such that without them "human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin" (ibid.).

The second observation is relevant to the question whether usefulness or agreeableness are sufficient, on their own, to give one the right to hold a certain belief. In "Of the modern philosophy" he mentions usefulness without agreeableness and in the conclusion of Book One he mentions the latter without the former, so one may assume that a belief having only one these features is sufficient to make it right to hold it. At the same time, he does not say this explicitly and, more importantly, the kinds of beliefs that he recommends as useful are also those that he recommends as agreeable. It is therefore unclear whether he thinks that it is sufficient that a belief be either agreeable or useful for us to have the right to hold it.

Finally, Hume only appeals to usefulness and agreeableness when discussing beliefs that are psychologically inescapable. It is, therefore, unclear whether he believes that practical considerations are relevant to the question whether one ought to hold a belief in other cases.

This last point is important and calls for a comment. Some authors have recently argued for a position similar to Hume's, although in connexion with a different form of scepticism, namely Cartesian scepticism (Rinard 2017 and forthcoming, McCormick 2019). They argue that the Cartesian sceptic is right when he says that the evidence available to us is insufficient to rule out that we are in a sceptical scenario such as the brain-in-a-vat scenario or the evil genius scenario. But they immediately add that we nonetheless have the right to hold the belief that we are not in such a scenario, and this for *practical* reasons. Their position is very similar to Hume's, but with an important difference. These authors introduce the idea of a practical response to scepticism after having made the case for pragmatism about reasons for belief. In other words, they argue that the rightness of our holding a certain belief is not only a matter of epistemic rationality—that is, a matter of evidence or knowledge.[15] In at least some cases, practical considerations give us the right to hold a belief, and they explain when, and why, such considerations can give us such a right.

An important weakness of Hume's position is that he does not address the questions that these authors discuss when, like him, they argue in favour of a practical right to hold a belief which lacks justification. As a result, his reliance on practical considerations in his answer to scepticism seems ad hoc. This does not mean, however, that his position on what can give us the right to hold a belief is not defensible. I shall not examine how it could be defended and neither shall I speculate on how Hume could have defended it.

[15] The position these authors opposed is commonly referred to under the label "evidentialism". For an enlightening discussion of evidentialism, see (Kenny 1992).

Instead, I shall assume that it is defensible and examine two further questions. First, is Hume's argument an argument from inescapability? Secondly, is his argument a satisfying answer to the kind of scepticism that he addresses?

In the present case, an argument from inescapability would be an argument purporting to show that we have a practical right to hold a belief because it is inescapable. Since Hume mentions usefulness and agreeableness as the two features that a belief can have and that can give us a right to hold it, I examine these in turn. I argue that although there is no argument from inescapability involving usefulness, there is one which involves agreeableness.

The problem with the argument from usefulness is that, although Hume seems to believe that all inescapable beliefs are useful, they are not useful *because* they are inescapable. One may of course assume that Nature has made these beliefs inescapable because they are useful: "Nature … has doubtless esteem'd it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations" (T 1.4.2.1; SBN 187). However, if one has a right to hold these beliefs, it is because they are useful and not because they are inescapable.

A further problem is that, at least with regard to our belief in body, it is not certain that it is useful. Hume writes, in "Of the impressions of the senses and memory": "As to those *impressions*, which arise from the *senses*, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and 'twill always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produc'd by the creative power of the mind, or are deriv'd from the author of our being." (T 1.3.5.2; SBN 84) In other words, the question concerning the existence of body is ultimately a question concerning the source of the impressions. And this question is one that Hume does not seem to consider as an essential one to answer: "Nor is such a question any way material to our present

purpose. We may draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions, whether they be true or false; whether they represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses" (ibid.). The question whether there are bodies is a purely theoretical question, the answer to which has no implications for thought and action since what we reason from is these impressions and since the only thing we need is that our reasonings are coherent with them.

Neither of these problems arise with regard to the argument from agreeableness. It is because a belief is inescapable that any effort to believe otherwise or to suspend judgment will be frustrated, and our belief in body is indeed such that it requires an effort even to imagine that we only have access to sense-impressions and no knowledge of what causes them. If Hume's assumption that a belief's being agreeable (or the effort to relinquish it being disagreeable) can make it right to hold it, then he would have a cogent argument in favour of holding our belief in body.

Is this argument satisfying? One way of challenging it would involve challenging the claim that agreeableness is the kind of feature of a belief that can give us a right to hold it. Or, more generally, one could argue against the idea that pragmatic considerations are relevant to answering questions concerning what we ought to believe or what we have the right to believe. This is not the kind of difficulty that I wish to address. Instead, I want to focus on a different question, namely: Supposing that practical considerations can give us the right to hold a belief, and that we happen to have the right to hold a belief that is threatened by some form of scepticism for practical reasons, would such an appeal to our practical right to hold this belief be a satisfactory answer to scepticism? The answer to this question seems to be negative, and this can be shown by examining the nature of sceptical problems. We want our beliefs to be true and we feel the bite of various forms of scepticism because they target some of these beliefs and purport to show that they

might actually not be true, usually by showing that we are unable to justify them or to exclude the possibility that they are false. Since what is at stake in sceptical problems is the truth of certain beliefs, a satisfactory answer to them is either one that shows that we have no reasons to suspect that these beliefs might be false, or one that shows that these beliefs are true, or at least that they are more likely to be true than false. The problem with practical answers to sceptical problems is that they leave truth aside. They give us reasons for holding certain beliefs despite our inability to justify that their content is true. But even if such reasons were good ones, they would offer little solace in the face of scepticism.

## 6. Idle Scepticism?

I hope to have shown that Hume uses the idea that our belief in body is inescapable to argue that we have a right to hold it on practical grounds. Strawson, on the other hand, believes that Hume uses this idea to show that the question whether bodies exist is idle, or not serious, and that the proper attitude towards it is to pass it by (Strawson 1985). There is an element of truth in this claim. Hume does write, at the beginning of "Of scepticism with regard to the senses", that it is "vain" to ask whether bodies exist since we cannot believe otherwise, and a similar claim is present at the end of the discussion of reason in the preceding section. However, he does not elaborate on this remark and, since I shall examine Strawson's appropriation of it in the next chapter, I want to conclude by discussing two other arguments that Hume gives for setting the question of body aside.

I have already mentioned these arguments in the course of the chapter. The first one, which I introduced in the first section, is the argument from despair: it is idle to ask

whether bodies exist because the question has no answer. The second argument, which I mentioned in the discussion of the usefulness of the belief in body, is the irrelevance argument: it is idle to ask whether bodies exist because the answer to this question is irrelevant to the truth or falsity of our everyday empirical beliefs.

The problem with the argument from despair is that it provides very little reason to set a problem aside. Hume's strategy in the *Treatise* is an illustration of this point. For he introduces the argument from despair by explaining that, by asking certain questions and showing them to be without an answer, he will cure us from the temptation to ask them. It is therefore not idle to examine a question without answer because at least one important thing can be achieved by doing so, namely convincing at least some people that there is no answer to this question.

This point is important, as one needs a characterisation of what makes a question idle. After all, many things can be achieved by examining a question. One may, of course, discover some truth. However, this might not be sufficient, as some truths are unimportant—for example, "How many blades of grass are there in my garden?" Neither is the possibility of reaching a conclusion. One may, for example, benefit from discussing an unanswerable question because doing so involves examining some important subsidiary questions, or simply because doing so is a way of exercising one's intellectual powers.

In order to show that a question is idle, one therefore needs to show that it makes little or no difference to some matter of importance. This is what the argument from irrelevance is supposed to provide.

Strictly speaking, it is more a suggestion of an argument rather than an argument, as Hume does not fill in the details of his position. The main idea on which it rests is that the question whether there are bodies makes no difference to the truth of our everyday

empirical claims. Our sense-impressions are as of bodies but, even if there are no bodies—even if our sense-impressions are "mere illusions" of the senses"—we can form true empirical beliefs.

This idea is more explicitly stated by Malebranche, whose *Search after Truth* Hume had read:

> It is not absolutely necessary to examine whether there are actually beings external to us corresponding to these ideas, as we do not reason on the basis of these beings but on their ideas. We should only be careful that the reasonings we make about the properties of things are in agreement with our sensations of them, i.e., that what we think is in perfect agreement with experience, because in physics we try to discover the order and connection of effects with their causes, either in bodies, if there are any, or in our sensations, if they do not exist. It is not that we can really doubt that there are actually bodies … The point is that it is not first necessary to examine with great reflections something no one doubts, and that is not of much use to the knowledge of physics considered as a true science. (Malebranche *The Search after Truth*: 484)

This argument has a Carnapian and Wittgensteinian ring to it, although it differs from Carnap's and Wittgenstein's position on an important point. Both philosophers argue, respectively in *Pseudoproblems in Philosophy* and in *On Certainty*, that the sceptic, or the idealist, or the anti-realist, agree with their opponent on their answers to what they call "empirical" (Carnap) or "practical" (Wittgenstein) questions. What answer is given to the "further" question "Are there physical objects?" does not make a difference to how one should approach, and answer, these "empirical" questions. On this, Hume agrees with them. Where the difference lies is that both Carnap and Wittgenstein believe they can show that the dispute on the existence of physical objects is not merely idle, but that it is "meaningless" (Carnap) or an "illusion" (Wittgenstein). As I argued in the last chapter, Wittgenstein does not explain why he believes the question is illusory. Carnap, on the other hand, is explicit about it. He is committed to a form of verificationism, that is, to the claim that a proposition is only meaningful if it can be verified or falsified. Because neither the realist nor the anti-realist have specified a method by which one might

establish, or refute, the claim that there are physical objects, the proposition they discuss is meaningless.

Now, Carnap's position is vulnerable to the objection that the question of the existence of physical objects does seem perfectly meaningful, as well as to various objections to verificationism. For this reason, Hume's position is superior to his. The question of the existence of body, although perfectly intelligible, is not a serious one, as what one answers to it is irrelevant to answering those questions which matter to us. Whether this position is defensible I shall examine in the last chapter.

# Chapter 5 – Strawson on Inescapable Commitments and Sceptical Challenges

In this chapter, I shall examine P. F. Strawson's "naturalistic" response to what, following Hume, he calls "scepticism about the existence of body". This response, which he attributes to Hume and Wittgenstein, consists in showing that it is "idle" to ask whether there are bodies and to try to show that there are. Strawson's argument for this claim is that we are naturally and inescapably committed to our belief in body and that, where we have a commitment of this kind, giving and asking for reasons is idle because the reasons that one would give cannot become "our reasons", that is, the reasons on the basis of which the commitment is held. Against Strawson, I shall argue that some requests for a reason can be serious even if the reason in question could not become our reason. What makes such requests serious is that the availability of a reason makes a significant difference of some kind, even if that difference is not one to what we believe. In the case of scepticism about the existence of body, the difference in question is that a justification of our belief would allow us to answer the sceptic and this is important enough to make the request serious.

## 1. Strawson's Use of the Inescapability Thesis

In the first chapter of *Skepticism and Naturalism*, Strawson introduces the notion of "soft", "catholic", or "liberal" naturalism. This label refers to what I shall call the "inescapability thesis", that is, to the idea, inherited from Hume, that certain beliefs, ways

of talking, acting, or reacting, are natural and inescapable. That chapter, however, is not the first place where Strawson refers to Hume and this thesis. It appears as early as 1962, in "Freedom and Resentment", and even earlier, in a response to a critique of his *Introduction to Logical Theory*. In this section, I examine these two texts as well as Strawson's discussion of moral scepticism in chapter 2 of *Skepticism and Naturalism* in order to show that he usually uses an argument from inescapability in conjunction with an argument targeting an error specific to the kind of scepticism he is examining. While the latter is intended to show that *one* specific request for a justification is misguided, the former is supposed is supposed to block *all* such requests. Because they are inescapable, it would be misguided to ask for, but also to offer, a justification of certain beliefs, ways of talking, acting, or reacting.

Strawson's first reference to Hume and the inescapability thesis that can be found in his writings is in his 1958 reply to Wesley Salmon's critique of his discussion of induction in his *Introduction to Logical Theory*. In chapter 9 of that book, Strawson considers the question of the justification of induction. This question, he writes, takes the form of "a request for proof that induction is a *reasonable* or *rational* procedure, that we have *good grounds* for placing reliance upon it" (1952: 256, original emphasis). This question can be understood in two ways. It can mean—and this is how it is usually understood—"Is it reasonable, or rational, to form beliefs by induction?", to which Strawson gives an answer based on an analysis of our concept of rationality: "To ask whether it is reasonable to place reliance on inductive procedures is like asking whether it is reasonable to proportion the degree of one's convictions to the strength of the evidence. Doing this is what 'being reasonable' *means* in such a context." (Ibid.: 257, original emphasis) The question of whether it is reasonable, or rational, to rely on induction is like the question whether the law is legal. Since the law defines what is legal, it makes no sense to ask to whether it is

itself legal and, in a similar way, asking whether inductive reasoning is rational does not make any sense.

There is, however, another way of understanding the question of the rationality of induction, namely: “Are all conclusions, arrived at inductively, justified?” (ibid.). This question is perfectly intelligible and legitimate, but the answer to it is easy and uninteresting: some conclusions arrived at inductively are justified, but others are not, and this depends on the quality of the evidence from which one is reasoning.

Wesley Salmon, commenting on this argument, argued that, if true, it would imply that inductive beliefs are “conventional”, that is, that our basic canons of induction are a matter of arbitrary choice and that there is no way of showing that they are a better method of acquiring knowledge than another (Salmon 1957). In his response to this critique, Strawson mentions, and endorses, Hume’s view that inductive reasoning is “natural” and not conventional. Our “basic canons” of inductive reasoning are not chosen. This is a matter concerning which we have no choice at all. Whether or not this constitutes a satisfactory answer to Salmon’s critique need not concern us here.[1] What matters is Strawson’s describing this inescapability of our basic canons of induction as the solution to the problem of induction: “if it is said that there is a problem of induction, and that Hume posed it, it must be added that he solved it” (Strawson 1958: 21). This sentence is potentially puzzling, since Strawson seems to be suggesting that there might be a problem of induction, and that the answer to it lies in the inescapable character of our commitment to inductive reasoning. This is not, however, how this sentence should be understood. Responding to Putnam, who had quoted this remark, Strawson explains that it was meant ironically. There is no such problem and “Hume rightly … dismissed the idea of such a problem altogether” (Strawson 1998: 289). Strawson gives no explanation of what he

[1] For a discussion of Strawson and Salmon, see (Hutcheson 1985).

takes to be Hume's grounds for dismissing the problem. He does, however, mention Hume, induction, and the inescapability thesis in a later paper, namely "Freedom and Resentment".

In that paper, Strawson argues that the thesis of determinism—which he says he does not understand clearly—is irrelevant to the legitimacy of our practice of holding others morally responsible and, in particular, to the legitimacy of the range of attitudes—what he calls the "reactive attitudes"—that presuppose our attributions of moral responsibility. He argues in favour of this thesis by examining the kinds of considerations that justify the suspension of these attitudes. These considerations are of two kinds. Those of the first kind are *excusing* considerations. We do not normally blame a person for causing harm when they did so inadvertently—for example, they were pushed—or when they did not intend the harm—either because they had not realised it was harmful, and this not through negligence, or because they acted under duress. The second kind of considerations concern a person's ability to take part in normal human interactions. Agents who are "psychologically abnormal", or "morally undeveloped", like very young children, (Strawson 1962/2008: 9) have no understanding of the moral significance of their actions and are therefore not suitable candidates for blame. They can, of course, be blamed or punished, but in that case the blame or punishment lacks the dimension of moral address that it has in the case of fully developed moral agents, that is, in the case of agents who have an understanding of the fact that what they did was bad.

This argument is intended to show that our practice of holding others responsible, and the kinds of considerations we implicitly or explicitly take to be relevant to our blaming someone or not, do not involve any reference to the presence or absence of indeterministic free will. The truth or falsity of determinism does not bear on the legitimacy of our practice, so there is no need to refute determinism or, in the absence of such a refutation,

there is no need to find an alternative justification of the practice—for example a consequentialist one.

But Strawson wants to say more than that, and this is where the inescapability thesis comes into play. He wants to reject the question whether it is rational to praise and blame people altogether. It is not only that our practice does not involve the kind of problematic commitment that makes some philosophers feel that a justification is needed. Strawson claims that, because it is inescapable, *under no circumstances* could a justificatory question about our practice seriously arise:

> Inside the general structure or web of human attitudes and feelings of which I have been speaking, there is endless room for modification, redirection, criticism, and justification. But questions of justification are internal to the structure or relate to modifications internal to it. The existence of the general framework of attitudes itself is something we are given with the fact of human society. As a whole, it neither calls for, nor permits, an external 'rational' justification. (Ibid.: 25)

Again:

> Finally, to the further question whether it would not be *rational*, given a general theoretical conviction of the truth of determinism, so to change our world that in it all these attitude were wholly suspended, I must answer, as before, that one who presses this question has wholly failed to grasp the import of the preceding answer, the nature of the human commitment that is here involved: it is *useless* to ask whether it would not be rational for us to do what it is not in our nature to (be able to) do. To this I must add, as before, that if there were, say, for a moment open to us the possibility of such a godlike choice, the rationality of making or refusing it would be determined by quite other considerations than the truth or falsity of the general theoretical doctrine in question. The latter would be simply irrelevant; and this becomes ironically clear when we remember that for those convinced that the truth of determinism nevertheless really would make the one choice rational, there has always been the insuperable difficulty of explaining in intelligible terms how its falsity would make the opposite choice rational. (Ibid.: 19-20)

This passage contains two different arguments. The second one concerns rationality. Strawson is making a point against philosophers who believe that engaging in a practice is rational only if that practice does not rest on a theoretical commitment which reflexion reveals to be indefensible. Strawson's rejoinder to these philosophers is that whether or not to engage in a certain practice is a practical question and that the rationality of

engaging in a practice ought to be assessed not only in the light of the correctness of its theoretical commitments: “we could choose rationally only in the light of an assessment of the gains and losses to human life, its enrichment or impoverishment” (ibid.: 14).

The first argument, which is of interest to us here, relies on the notion of inescapable commitment. According to Strawson, asking whether it is rational to preserve our practice of praising and blaming others is “useless” when we have no choice in the matter. Inescapable commitments “neither call for, nor permit, an external ‘rational’ justification”, and this is why there is also no problem of induction. In a footnote to the passage I quoted from page 25, Strawson writes:

> Compare the question of the justification of induction. The human commitment to inductive belief-formation is original, natural, non-rational (not *ir*rational), in no way something we choose or could give up. Yet rational criticism and reflection can refine standards and their application, supply ‘rules for judging of cause and effect’. Ever since the facts were made clear by Hume, people have been resisting acceptance of them. (Ibid.: 28n7, original emphasis)

Supposing that Strawson had not modified his interpretation of Hume between 1958 and 1962, one can understand the conclusion of his response to Salmon as meaning that Hume did not think that there was a problem of induction because our commitment to inductive reasoning is inescapable and, as such, neither calls for, nor permits a justification. This thesis, it is important to notice, is significantly different from Strawson’s linguistic argument in the *Introduction to Logical Theory*, and the difference between the two arguments mirrors the one present in “Freedom and Resentment”: to an argument targeted at a specific request for a justification, Strawson adds an argument from inescapability, which is supposed to show all such requests are out of place.

This dual anti-sceptical strategy is also present in *Skepticism and Naturalism*, for example in the discussion of moral scepticism in the second chapter. Strawson introduces this form of scepticism by drawing a distinction between two kinds of “standpoints”. Our

natural standpoint is “engaged”, it is the one that we occupy in most of our interactions with other human beings. From that standpoint, “human behavior appears as the proper object of all those personal and moral reactions, judgments and attitudes to which, as social beings, we are naturally prone; or, to put the same point differently, human actions and human agents appear as the bearers of objective moral properties” (Strawson 1985: 35). But we can, and sometimes do, occupy another standpoint, which Strawson calls the “purely objective” standpoint. This is the standpoint that we occupy whenever we approach human beings and their behaviour as something that is to be observed and explained rather than engaged with. From that standpoint, Strawson says, the notion of “proper objects” of our reactions and of “objective moral properties” has no meaning. “All there is … is human behavior and human reactions to human behavior” (Ibid.: 37). Strawson urges that this objective standpoint is not one that we can durably occupy, relying, once again, on the notion of inescapable commitment:

> Where Nature thus determines us, we have an original non-rational commitment which sets the bounds within which, or the stage upon which, reason can effectively operate, and within which the question of the rationality or irrationality, justification or lack of justification, of this or that particular judgment or belief can come up. … We are naturally social beings; and given with our natural commitment to social existence is a natural commitment to that whole web or structure of human personal and moral attitudes, feelings, and judgments of which I spoke. Our natural disposition to such attitudes and judgments is naturally secured against arguments suggesting that they are in principle unwarranted or unjustified. (Ibid.: 39)

However, most of the chapter is devoted to what Strawson calls the “relativizing move”. Against the temptation to ask: “From which standpoint do we see things as they really are?” he argues that “we can recognize, in our conception of the real, a reasonable relativity to standpoints that we do know and can occupy” (Ibid.: 38). Here again, Strawson offers an argument purporting to show that some specific form of scepticism is illegitimate. It is because they operate with a univocal understanding of what it is to be real that some philosophers describe morality as an illusion or that they try to defend it

by introducing, for example, a "special faculty of intuition of non-natural qualities" (SN 41). Once the common assumption of the sceptic and their opponent is uncovered, *one* motive for seeking a justification of morality disappears. This argument is accompanied by a reference to the inescapability of our commitment which is supposed to block *any* request for a justification.

As I shall show in the next sections, Strawson does not rely on such a dual anti-sceptical strategy when discussing the existence of body. His response to this form of scepticism relies entirely on Hume's inescapability thesis.

## 2. Scepticism about the Existence of Body

The first point that needs to be stressed when discussing Strawson on scepticism is that he conceives of sceptical problems as challenges. Such challenges should be distinguished from sceptical *theses*, that is, pronouncements to the effect that some commonly held belief is unjustified or untrue. Such pronouncements can be of one of two kinds. Strictly speaking, scepticism is a denial of knowledge, and a first type of sceptical thesis is of the form: "The evidence available to us is insufficient to establish that *p*." But the term "scepticism" is sometimes used in a different sense—for example in expressions such as "moral scepticism" or "free will scepticism"—to refer to a stronger thesis, namely a thesis of the form: "The evidence available to us warrants the conclusion that our belief that *p* is false". A sceptical challenge, on the other hand, is not a thesis but a question, one concerning the justificatory status of a belief, and which, if answered in the negative, should lead one to endorse a sceptical thesis. Sceptical challenges are of the form: "Given the evidence available to us, is it possible to justify our belief that *p*?".

In the case of the existence of body, the challenge is to justify our belief in the existence of physical objects. There is, however, an ambiguity concerning Strawson's understanding of the challenge, as it is unclear whether he takes the challenge to be Cartesian or Humean. Hume's argument in "Scepticism with regard to the senses" (T 1.4.2) starts by attributing to us a "Vulgar" view of perception: we take our senses to be presenting us with mind-independent objects. But, the argument goes, the "slightest philosophy" reveals that this opinion is false, and that our senses only present us with sense-impressions. The sceptical worry is then whether we can ever go beyond these impressions, that is, whether the beliefs we have about a mind-independent world can be justified on the basis of what appears to us. Descartes did share with Hume a view of perception as involving some form of mediation, however, this idea does not play any role in the formulation of his sceptical problem, which only requires that one can conceive of a sceptical scenario in which one's subjective experience is identical to the one that one would have in a non-sceptical scenario. The Cartesian challenge puts the existence of objects in question by challenging us to show that we are in a perceptual state as opposed to a state in which one merely seems to be perceiving, while the Humean challenge starts with the assumption that we are in a perceptual state and, given a certain account of perception, leads to the question whether the objects of perception have any external counterparts. The two kinds of scepticism are different. While Descartes's appeal to God's benevolence is a potential answer to his own sceptical problem as well as to Hume's, an answer to Hume's challenge would not constitute an answer to Descartes's one. It might be possible to answer Hume's challenge, either by showing that it rests on an erroneous account of perception or by showing that our sense-perceptions are caused by material objects, but this would leave the question open whether we are in a perceptual state or not.

This ambiguity is not unique to Strawson. Bertrand Russell, in his *Problems of Philosophy*, introduces the question of the existence of matter with Cartesian considerations—in particular the hypothesis of a deceitful demon—but, by the end of his discussion, his phrasing of the problem has become Humean:

> Of course it is not by argument that we originally come by our belief in an independent external world. We find this belief ready in ourselves as soon as we begin to reflect: it is what may be called an *instinctive* belief. We should never have been led to question this belief but for the fact that, at any rate in the case of sight, it seems as if the sense-datum itself were instinctively believed to be the independent object, whereas argument shows that the object cannot be identical with the sense-datum. This discovery, however—which is not at all paradoxical in the case of taste and smell and sound, and only slightly so in the case of touch—leaves undiminished our instinctive belief that there *are* objects *corresponding* to our sense-data. (Russell 1912/2001: 11)

Such a confusion is also present in Stroud's *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (1984). It is present in his claim that the Cartesian predicament implies the existence of a "veil of sensory experiences" that we cannot penetrate (Stroud 1984: 33), and more systematically in the choice of authors that he discusses in the book. He examines and criticises Austin's ordinary language analysis of knowledge claims, Carnap's distinction between internal and external questions, Moore's hand waving, Strawson's transcendental argument, and Quine's naturalised epistemology. However, of all these, only Austin was discussing Cartesian scepticism. Moore was not concerned with scepticism but with idealism. In "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology", Carnap was not concerned with scepticism either but with ontology.[2] Quine did discuss scepticism, although Hume's but not Descartes's. Finally, when he discusses transcendental arguments in his 1968 paper, Stroud focuses, not on arguments targeting Cartesian scepticism, but on Strawson's argument against scepticism about the continuous

[2] On this point, see (Alspector-Kelly 2002).

existence of objects in the first chapter of *Individuals* and on Sidney Shoemaker's argument against scepticism about other minds.

Mentioning Stroud in the present context is relevant because Strawson starts his discussion of the existence of body by reviewing the same arguments as Stroud—with the exception of Austin. Strawson not only quotes Stroud—he refers to (Stroud 1968) and (Stroud 1979)—but also endorses his negative assessment of these arguments. Since Stroud, despite his occasional confusion of Humean and Cartesian scepticism, is concerned with the latter, it is therefore likely that, despite his use of a Humean phrase—"scepticism about the existence of body"—Strawson shares the same concern.

What he concludes from his review of anti-sceptical arguments is that they are "unsuccessful" or "miss the point" (SN 3). Moore and Quine miss the point because the former dogmatically affirms that bodies exist, while the latter simply substitutes a scientific question—how do we come to form a belief in bodies on the basis of our sensory input—for the philosophical one, which does not show that the latter is illegitimate. Carnap and transcendental arguments, on the other hand, do not miss the point but are unsuccessful because they fail to establish that scepticism is meaningless—Carnap—or that it presupposes what it questions—transcendental arguments. As for Strawson, the sceptical challenge is not meaningless, it is perfectly intelligible, and this claim provides the starting point of his "naturalistic" answer to it.

## 3. The Naturalistic Answer to Scepticism about Body

Scepticism concerning the existence of body is perfectly intelligible, however, the correct answer to it is not to meet the challenge by providing a justification of our belief, but to

“pass it by” (SN 3). This answer, which Strawson calls “naturalistic” is attributed to Hume and Wittgenstein and summarised in the following passage:

> [Hume and Wittgenstein] have in common the view that our “beliefs” in the existence of body and, to speak roughly, in the general reliability of induction are not grounded beliefs and at the same time not open to serious doubt. They are, one might say, outside our critical and rational competence in the sense that they define, or help to define, the area in which that competence is exercised. To attempt to confront the professional skeptical doubt with arguments in support of these beliefs is to show a total misunderstanding of the role they actually play in our belief-systems. The correct way with the professional skeptic is not to attempt to rebut it with argument, but to point out that it is idle, unreal, a pretense; and then the rebutting arguments will appear as equally idle; the reasons produced in those arguments to justify induction or belief in the existence of body are not, and do not become, *our* reasons for these beliefs; there is no such thing as *the reasons for which we hold* these beliefs. We simply cannot help accepting them as defining the areas within which the questions come up of what beliefs we should rationally hold on such-and-such a matter. (SN 19-20)

This passage seems to contain two lines of argument. First, Strawson speaks of the “role” that the belief in the existence of body plays. It “defines” or “helps define” the “area” in which our “rational competence” is exercised and appreciating that role should lead one to realise that our rational competence cannot be exercised on it. As I shall argue in the next section, however, this is not an argument that Strawson endorses.

Secondly, and this is Strawson’s actual argument, it is idle to give reasons for our belief in body because “there is no such thing as the reasons for which we hold” it, and no justification could become “*our*” reason for holding it. I examine this argument in the section after next.

In the remainder of this section, I want to emphasise the ambiguity that results from Strawson’s references to Hume and Wittgenstein.

What generates ambiguities in Strawson’s text is that he never fully clarifies whether he understands certain phrases in Humean or Wittgensteinian terms. Two particularly ambiguous notions are groundlessness and indubitability. While it is true that both philosophers would describe at least some of our beliefs as groundless but not seriously

open to doubt, their understanding of this claim is radically different. For Hume, groundlessness is to be understood as a *lack* which is uncovered by the failure to find a justification. For Wittgenstein, on the other hand, there is no such lack. When he speaks of groundlessness, he does not have in mind beliefs that are held on insufficient evidence, although he would certainly acknowledge that such beliefs exist. What he means by "groundlessness" is that some beliefs of ours are so certain that nothing that could be said in their favour is more certain than they are, and therefore cannot play the role of a reason for them.

When it comes to the fact that some beliefs are not open to serious doubt, a similar ambiguity is present. Hume conceives of it in purely psychological terms. No one seriously believes that scepticism is true—although they might say so—and "whoever has taken the pains to refute the cavils of this *total* scepticism, has really disputed without an antagonist, and endeavour'd by arguments to establish a faculty, which nature has antecedently implanted in the mind, and render'd unavoidable" (T 1.4.1.7; SBN 183, original emphasis). For Wittgenstein, however, indubitability is a matter of reasons. Some beliefs—although he would put the point in terms of propositions—are beyond doubt because there could no reasons to doubt them.

As shall become clear in the next two sections, Strawson stands ultimately closer to Hume than to Wittgenstein.

## 4. Framework Beliefs

In the previous section, I said that Strawson seemed to have two arguments against scepticism about body. Here, I consider the first one and argue that Strawson does not

endorse it.

This argument rests on the idea that the belief in the existence of body belongs to the "framework" of all enquiry. Strawson attributes this idea to Hume (SN 18) but its source is Wittgenstein. Strawson quotes numerous remarks from *On Certainty* and summarises them in the following passage:

> [Wittgenstein] distinguishes … between those propositions, or actual or potential elements in our belief-systems, which we treat as subject to empirical confirmation or falsification, which we consciously incorporate in our belief-system (when we do) for this or that *reason* or on the basis of this or that *experience*, or which we actually treat as matter for inquiry or doubt—and, on the other hand, those elements of our belief-system which have a quite different character, alluded to by the figures of scaffolding, framework, background, substratum, etc. (SN 16)

The key idea that Strawson borrows from Wittgenstein is that of a distinction between propositions that are open to question and propositions which constitute the framework within which questions are raised and discussed. Framework propositions, as he puts it, "define, or help to define, the area in which [our rational competence] is exercised" (SN 19), and it is because they play that role that we can ignore the sceptical challenge that targets them.

What, however, is a "framework belief"? The notion of framework is not a precise one. One meaning of the term is that of "theoretical framework". A Marxist framework of analysis, for example, is a set of assumptions about which aspects of social reality are causes—forces and relations of production—about which ones are effects—culture—and about how these causal relations work. In this sense, a framework is a working hypothesis which shapes one's enquiries by determining how things should be conceptualised—for example, how people should be categorised—for the Marxist, the only relevant category being class—what questions one should ask, what counts as a good question, and what kind of evidence one should look for when trying to answer them. A Marxist will try to prove, say, that slavery was abolished for economic reasons rather than for moral reasons

and, if contrary evidence is found to this claim, he will try to show that the moral discourse had an impact only because the changes it recommended favoured the interests of the bourgeoisie.

A framework, understood in this sense, specifies how a certain range of phenomena is to be approached, but it does not include the phenomena itself. Not that certain frameworks do not include certain assumptions about what kinds of entities exist—a Christian framework includes a belief that God, angels, and demons exist—but the things that are conceptualised or explained in terms of the framework seem to have a different status. The fact that someone did a certain action has a different status from the putative fact that they were misled by the devil or that they acted out of class interest. In other words, there is something *theoretical* about frameworks. They consist of assumptions and hypotheses and, for this reason, they differ from the data which they are supposed to help one understand.

Understanding Strawson's notion of framework in a similar way yields conclusions that he would be unwilling to accept. For, if a framework is a set of assumptions in terms of which we conceptualise and explain a data, then our belief in bodies must, as a part of the framework, be an assumption in terms of which a data is explained, this data being subjective experience. This position would be very much like that of Ayer or Quine: bodies are theoretical posits in terms of which we interpret our experience. However, this is a position that Strawson forcefully rejected in "Perception and its Objects" (1979) as well as in his review of Ayer's *The Problem of Knowledge*:

> "One way of expressing" his conclusion would be to say "that in referring as we do to physical objects, we are elaborating a theory with respect to the evidence of our sense" … If this is in other respects a *good* way of expressing Ayer's conclusion, then surely that conclusion must be perverse. It is possible to think of circumstances in which one who says "There is a cigarette-case on the table" … might not unreasonably be said to be advancing a theory, or a part of a theory. But these circumstances do not include the case in which he can plainly see it there. (Strawson 1957: 308-9).

Since this understanding of the notion of framework does not fit well with Strawson's other views, one needs to find an alternative understanding of it.

At the very end of the first chapter of *Skepticism and Naturalism*, Strawson speaks of the "general framework of beliefs to which we are inescapably committed" (SN 29). Among these beliefs are our belief in body, our belief in the reality of the past, and our "practice" (sic) of inductive belief-formation. Given these examples, it is plausible to understand Strawson's notion of a "framework" as referring to a set of beliefs which form the background of all human thinking about the world.

This suggestion seems coherent with the claim that framework beliefs "define, or help to define, the area in which [our rational competence] is exercised" (SN 19). When we exercise our rational competence, we examine reasons for or against certain claims. And to define the area in which we exercise this competence is to define what counts as a reason for or against a certain type of claim.

Now, this notion of framework could be used in an argument against scepticism. However, this argument would probably be transcendental one. If framework beliefs form the background of all thinking, then the sceptic could not ask his question without presupposing the truth of what he is questioning, since questioning our framework beliefs is an exercise of our rational competence, and as such presupposes a commitment to them.

The problem with this argument is that it is inconsistent with Strawson's endorsement of Barry Stroud's negative assessment of transcendental arguments. He cannot be saying that framework beliefs are outside our critical and rational competence because they define the area in which that competence is exercised. In a reply to Hilary Putnam's comments on *Skepticism and Naturalism*, he explicitly rejects such an argument.

> There is a much stronger ground [for dismissing scepticism], associated … with Wittgenstein … to the effect that what is at issue here is not really one belief among others that we might form, and hence come to question, but something that is part of the framework or background of all argument, all thought, all asserting or questioning. It is

> internal to the structure of all thinking, so that the attempt to question it, which is tantamount to an attempt to reject our conceptual scheme in its entirety, leaves us without the resources for any coherent thought at all.
>
> Well, that is strong indeed. But perhaps a thought too strong. (Strawson 1998: 291)

Ultimately, it is likely that Strawson did not intend to use the notion of framework in an argument and that he was merely making a descriptive remark about the role of certain beliefs. If this interpretation is correct, then his case against scepticism rests entirely on his second argument, to which I now turn.

## 5. Serious and Idle Requests

Strawson's naturalistic response to scepticism consists in the following argument. Where we have a natural inescapable belief, the reasons that one may give for such a belief "are not, and do not become, *our* reasons for these beliefs; there is no such thing as *the reasons for which we hold* these beliefs". But, it is idle to give reasons for a belief if these reasons cannot become *our* reasons—the reasons for which we hold it. Since our belief in body is natural and inescapable, it follows that it is idle to give reasons for it. Since it is idle to give reasons for it, it is also idle to request reasons for it.

The first step in assessing this argument is to clarify when a belief is held for a reason and when it is not. A belief is held for a reason when it is held on the basis of evidence. For example, I believe that there is a pig somewhere nearby because I can see pig-like marks on the ground, buckets of pig-food, or I can hear pig noises. This belief of mine is held for a reason. However, if the pig comes out and I see it, the belief is no longer held for a reason because I just see the pig (Austin 1962: 115-6). What one hears, smells, or feels, but also what one remembers, one does not believe on the basis of evidence or of reasons, although one may want to speak, with Anthony Kenny, of things being "evident

to the senses" or "evident to memory", and one may be able to provide evidence to another if challenged.[3]

A second way in which a belief may not be based on reasons is that characteristic of some beliefs discussed by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*, beliefs which are so certain that, although everything speaks for them, they are not held on the basis of any of these things. Strawson endorses this idea in *Analysis and Metaphysics*:

> One could even say, of many propositions, that the more securely fixed they are in one's belief system, the less appropriate it is to ask what one's reasons are for believing them. What are my reasons now for thinking that my elder daughter's name is Julia, that the French for rabbit is 'lapin', or that Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo? Of course, I am not denying that I could produce or find reasons in support of these convictions if they were challenged. But it is not on the basis of such reasons that I now accept these propositions. I should like to say: there are things I know *too well* to have current reasons for believing them, too well to believe them *for reasons*. (Strawson 1992: 93-4)

This paragraph is important because it introduces a distinction between the reasons for which a belief is held—or on which it is based—and those by which it could be defended. While it is inappropriate to ask for the former when one's belief is not based on reasons, it may not be inappropriate to ask for the latter. Suppose that I met Hilary Clinton last time she gave a talk at the Oxford Union. This is not something that I believe on the basis of reasons, I just remember it. Someone may nonetheless ask me to defend this statement, which I could do by producing a photograph that was taken on that occasion. In this case, I give that person a reason to believe that what I say is true, although I myself do not believe this for a reason. Similarly, like Strawson, I believe that the French word for rabbit is "lapin". This is not something that I believe for a reason, I just know it. However, if someone asked me to prove that this is true, I could direct them to a dictionary.

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[3] Kenny also mentions beliefs that are "evident to reason", for example mathematical propositions such as "1+1=2" (Kenny 1992: chapter 1). A similar position is defended by (McGinn 2012).

Our belief in body is not based on reasons, but not in the same way as these two types of beliefs. Recall that Strawson is considering Cartesian scepticism. This form of scepticism challenges us to show that we are not in a bad epistemic scenario, for example, that we are not being deceived by a *malin génie*. That we are not so deceived is neither something that we see—it is not "evident to the sense", like the presence of the pig—nor is it something that we know too well to believe it for a reason.

It is not only that our belief in body is not held on the basis of reasons, it is also such that it could not be held for a reason. In the case of the pig that I see or that I saw, my belief in its existence is not based on reasons but it could have been so had I formed it not by seeing the animal but by inferring its presence from some evidence. And, although I might not hold it on the basis of reasons, there might be another person who does so. Similarly, some of the things I know too well to believe them for a reason could have been believed for a reason by myself, or are believed for a reason by someone else. Our belief in body is not like that. It is not a belief that is sometimes held for a reason and sometimes not. It is, to a certain extent, like breathing. We do not breathe for a reason. There might be a reason *why* we breathe, that is, an explanation of why nature has made us this way. But there is no such thing as the reason *for which* we breathe. We have not argued ourselves into breathing, and if we came up with a reason for doing it, this would not become our reason for doing it, that is, we would not breathe *on the basis* of this reason. In a similar fashion, we have not argued ourselves into believing that there are bodies and, if we discovered a reason for holding the belief, we would not, after this discovery, believe in bodies on the basis of this reason.

Now, Strawson's response to the sceptic rests on the idea that giving reasons when these reasons could not become our reasons is idle, not serious. What he means by this is that, where a belief could be held for a reason by someone, there is a point in looking for

reasons for it. And there is a point because these reasons could make a difference to what someone believes. Strawson is explicit about this when he speaks of "the serious operations of reason, whether by way of questioning or of justifying beliefs ... ('Serious' = 'actually making a difference.')" (SN 52). And the kind of difference to belief that he has in mind is quite specific. When we examine reasons for or against a given belief, the conclusion that we reach usually makes a difference at the level of that belief: we endorse it, or retain it, or give it up.

Strawson's argument that it is idle to ask for, and to provide, reasons for our belief in body can therefore be reconstructed in the following way. The examination of reasons for or against a given claim is serious when they make a difference to whether we endorse this claim or not. What results from such a serious examination is that a failure to find good reasons for the claim results in our rejecting it, while finding good reasons for it results in our endorsing it. In the latter case, our endorsement is based on those reasons which have survived scrutiny. In other words, those apparently good reasons become what Strawson calls "*our* reasons" for endorsing the claim. The possessive article "our" might not be the best one because, as explained above, one sometimes examines reasons for or against a belief that some people do not hold on the basis of reasons. It would therefore be better to rephrase Strawson's point using a different possessive: examining reasons for or against a given belief is serious when these reasons could become *someone's* reasons for holding this belief. Given that our belief in body could not be held on the basis of reasons by anyone, it would be idle to try to find reasons for it, and it is therefore idle to ask for such reasons as the Cartesian sceptic does. His request can therefore be bypassed on the ground that it is idle.

One problem with this argument is that Strawson's understanding of what makes the request for reasons serious is too narrow. According to him, the only point of examining

reasons for a belief is to make a difference to what someone believes. More precisely, a request for reasons is serious only when the reasons can make a difference to whether someone holds the belief the justification of which is at stake. But there are cases in which the availability of reasons for holding a belief does not make a difference to anyone's holding this belief, while at the same time making a difference to someone's holding some other belief. Consider the following example. In *Principia Mathematica*, Russell and Whitehead offered a proof that 1+1=2. The aim of this proof was not to show that this proposition was true. The purpose of Russell and Whitehead was to illustrate and defend a logicist approach to mathematics, that is, the view that mathematical concepts and theorems are reducible to logical ones. The success or failure of this proof would not make a difference to whether or not one believes that 1+1=2, and, to that extent, it would be idle in Strawson's sense. However, it would make a difference to whether or not one believes that logicism is true, and this difference seems serious enough to warrant the claim that Russell and Whitehead's endeavour was not idle.

This difference seems serious enough because logicism contributes to elucidating the nature of mathematics and of mathematical knowledge: if it is true, there is no need to postulate a world of mathematical entities and to wonder about how we can get knowledge of it. And the project of elucidating the nature of mathematics and of mathematical knowledge is one which has been, and still is, regarded by many philosophers as a serious one.

This last point needs to be stressed. It is an interesting feature of Strawson's criterion of idleness and seriousness that it does not involve any reference to the subject matter of the belief for which a reason is requested. We do, however, tend to draw a distinction between serious topics, on which it is important to have an opinion, and topics on which it is less important, or not important at all, to have an opinion. Questions which concern

the former are serious, while questions which concern the latter are idle. There is, however, no established criterion of what counts as a serious topic, and therefore of what counts as a serious question. This is a matter in which much depends on one's interests, but also one's needs or obligations. For example, the captain of a ship is under an obligation to know the state of his vessel, and therefore by implication—according to the common view of the relationship between knowledge and belief—to have accurate beliefs about it.

Like in the case of 1+1=2, in the case of our belief in body, the reasons that one could find to support the belief would make no difference to our holding the belief, but they would make another difference. For if there were good reasons to believe that bodies exist, then this fact would be a reason to believe that the sceptic can be rebutted. To the extent that the project of rebutting the sceptic has been considered a serious one, this difference seems serious enough to make the quest for such reasons serious although, again, there is no established criterion of what counts as a serious philosophical problem.

The fact that there is no such criterion makes it questionable that one ought to rely on considerations of seriousness when trying to argue in favour of setting a question aside. For, as long as a question is real, that is, as long as it is a well formulated question, it seems that it can be an object of legitimate interest. A better argument for bypassing a question would therefore be one which shows that the question is not a legitimate one, that it does not arise at all, for example because it rests on some confusion or on some false assumption. This is precisely the type of argument that Strawson offers, in conjunction with an argument from inescapability, when he discusses the sceptical challenges I reviewed in the first section. In the case of Cartesian scepticism, however, he rejects all attempts at showing that the challenge is illegitimate.

None of this implies that one could not reject attempts at proving the existence of body as "idle". However, such an attempt should rely on a different understanding of idleness. The traditional reason why it is felt that we might need a proof that bodies exist is that, unless we have a such a proof, we don't know any of the everyday empirical truths that we take ourselves to know. If it could be shown that the unavailability of such a proof would not have this consequence, then requests for such a proof would indeed be "idle". This is the position that I examine in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 6 – IDLE SCEPTICISM?

I want to start this last chapter by briefly indicating what I take to be the main lessons to be drawn from the previous chapters. The first lesson is that Strawson's comparison between Hume's claim that our belief in body is groundless and inescapable and Wittgenstein's conception of propositions that are beyond doubt and justification is unconvincing, because of the profound differences between the two philosophers' positions.

Secondly, when Wittgenstein and Hume discuss the existence of body, they do not discuss the form of scepticism that Strawson concerns himself with, namely Cartesian scepticism. Wittgenstein discusses what he calls "idealism", and Hume discusses a form of scepticism that arises from a certain account of perception—one on which the objects of perception are mental items which form a "veil of perception". Cartesian scepticism, however, makes no assumptions concerning perception. Rather, it is a challenge to show that one is in a perceptual state rather than in some phenomenologically indistinguishable state such as dreaming or being connected to a computer simulation.

Finally, the response to Cartesian scepticism that Strawson attributes to Hume and Wittgenstein and that he himself endorses fails. This response consists in claiming that, because our belief in body is natural and inescapable, it is idle to ask whether there are bodies or to attempt to prove that there are. My objection to this argument was that the mere fact that we are bound to believe that bodies exist is not a sufficient reason for setting the question aside. For altering our beliefs is not the only valid purpose of inquiry. A successful proof that this question is idle would require showing that asking and

answering it cannot serve any serious purpose, and this is the type of position that I examine in this chapter.

My focus is on a line of argument that can be arrived at by elaborating on remarks by Hume and Wittgenstein. Both philosophers draw a distinction between what could be called "everyday empirical questions" and the "further" question whether bodies exist, and they consider that the answer to the latter is of no relevance to answering the former. Although they do not discuss Cartesian scepticism, the distinction they draw can be directly applied to it. The further question that the sceptic asks concerns the status, or the nature, of the world which presents itself to us in experience. Empirical questions, on the other hand, are settled by relying on ordinary procedures such as looking, touching, or tasting, or more sophisticated ways of collecting and assessing evidence. The world that I experience may ultimately be a computer simulation, I can nonetheless smell, touch, and pick flowers in a field, and it is these facts that are relevant to settling the question whether some flower exists, not the existence of flowers outside the simulation.

This type of answer to Cartesian scepticism is what David Chalmers has labelled "veridicalist" (Chalmers 2018). It has been offered by a variety of authors, including Chalmers himself, but also Hilary Putnam and O. K. Bouwsma. After introducing the argument for Cartesian scepticism and explaining how veridicalists respond to it, I examine two types of objections to it. The first is semantic: a person in a Cartesian scenario can only be free of error if he is not operating with concepts which refer to something beyond his subjective experience and, the objection goes, the veridicalist has not shown that this is the case. I argue that the veridicalist can accommodate this point by arguing that it is merely verbal. Strictly speaking, the person in a Cartesian scenario ought not to speak in terms of physical objects, but the facts that he states in these terms are ones that he gets right.

The second type of objection that I consider consists in identifying everyday empirical beliefs which are not about physical objects and which would be false if one were in a Cartesian scenario. I consider the case of causal beliefs and argue that the veridicalist could accept the claim that they are false in Cartesian scenarios, yet minimise the import of this type of falsity by arguing that it makes no practical difference.

There are, however, empirical beliefs which would be false if one were in a Cartesian scenario and the falsity of which could not be so minimised. This is the case for beliefs about other people if one is in a solipsistic scenario. We consider that the value of our existence depends at least partly on our having meaningful interactions with other people. More generally, we aspire to be in touch with certain aspects of reality that we deem to be valuable. However, in certain sceptical scenarios, we would not be in touch with them, and one's inability to rule out that one is in one of these scenarios implies that one does not know whether one's life is as valuable as it seems to be. For this reason, the veridicalist attempt at minimising the import of Cartesian hypotheses fails. One's inability to rule out that one is in such a scenario is not a mere theoretical problem. And, if there is an argument showing that it is idle to prove that Cartesian hypotheses are false, it is not one that relies on veridicalist considerations.

## 1. Cartesian Scepticism and Answers to It

The Cartesian sceptical argument rests on two premises. First, we cannot know that some sceptical hypothesis is false, where this hypothesis is a *global* sceptical hypothesis concerning the cause, or source, of our sensory experience. Examples of such hypotheses are that these experiences are produced by a *malin génie*, or that one is a brain in vat

connected to a computer simulation. Secondly, if we cannot know that hypotheses of this type are false, we cannot know that everyday empirical propositions such as "I have two hands" or "Paris is the capital of France" are true.

These hypotheses are "global" in the sense that they threaten *all* empirical knowledge at once. They differ from local hypotheses which threaten our knowledge of more restricted classes of empirical propositions. A typical example of a local sceptical hypothesis is Fred Drestke's example of a painted mule (Dretske 1970). Imagine that you are at a zoo, standing in front of a cage. The sign says that the animal is a zebra, and it plainly looks like one. However, isn't it possible that it is actually a mule disguised as a zebra? And if you do not know that the animal is not a disguised mule, do you know that it is a zebra? Hypotheses of this kind can be designed for numerous empirical claims or sets of empirical claims, and constitute a challenge to our knowledge that seems as radical as the global Cartesian challenge. In this chapter, however, I limit myself to the latter.

The second premise of the Cartesian sceptical argument is the proposition that "If I do not know that I am not in a sceptical scenario, then I do not know that I have two hands". This premise rests on a principle and an assumption. The principle is the principle that knowledge is closed under known entailment. According to it, if one knows that some proposition *p* is true and one knows that *p* entails some other proposition *q*, then one is in a position to know that *q* is true. All that one needs to do is to deduce *q* from *p*. Conversely, if one knows that *p* entails *q* and that one does not know that *q* is true, then one can deduce that one does not know that *p* is true.

One gets the second premise by applying the closure principle to the case in which *p* is an everyday empirical proposition—usually, "I have two hands"—and *q* the denial of sceptical hypotheses. And the application of the principle to this case requires that there

is an entailment relation between the two propositions. This is the assumption on which the second premise rests.

On this reconstruction, the Cartesian argument has the following structure:

(P1) I do not know that I am not in a sceptical scenario;

(P2) If I do not know that I am not sceptical scenario, I do not know that I have two hands;

(C) I do not know that I have two hands.

Given this reconstruction, there are at least three ways of challenging the argument. First, one may choose to challenge the first premise by arguing that we do know that we are not in a sceptical scenario. This answer can be motivated through various arguments. Most commonly, it is defended by Moore-style arguments, on which we can know this on the basis of perceptual experience. However, Descartes' own answer to scepticism is of this type too. We can know that that we are not in a sceptical scenario because we can know—either a priori, or by discovering the idea of God present in our mind—that there is a God, that this God is benevolent, and that one form this benevolence takes is his ensuring that we are not massively deluded.

Secondly, one may choose to challenge the second premise, and there are at least two ways of doing so. This premise rests on the principle that knowledge is closed under known entailment and on the assumption that everyday empirical propositions entail the denial of sceptical hypotheses. It is, therefore, possible to challenge the second premise by challenging either the principle or the assumption. The rejection of closure has been advocated, among others, by Fred Dretske (Dretske 2005), and it rests on the idea that the conditions for knowledge are not conditions that we must know to be fulfilled in order to

have knowledge. If I am a brain in a vat and have a visual experience of a jar being filled with cookies, I don't know that there are cookies in the jar. If, on the other hand, I am not envatted and have this experience because I am seeing the jar and the cookies in it, then I know that there are cookies in the jar. I do not need to meet the stronger requirement that I know that I am not envatted.

Finally, one may offer what David Chalmers calls a "veridicalist answer to scepticism" by challenging the assumption on which the second premise rests, that is, one may argue that everyday empirical propositions such as "I have two hands" do not entail "I am not in a sceptical scenario" (Chalmers 2018). This is the type of position that I consider in the present chapter.

## 2. The Veridicalist Answer to Scepticism

Veridicalism is the position according to which a subject in a sceptical scenario has many true everyday empirical beliefs, because the truth of these beliefs does not depend on whether or not one is in such a scenario. Even if one is, say, a brain in a vat, one's belief that one has two hands is still true. If one is mistaken about something, it is about the *ultimate nature* of these hands, and of the world that is presented to one in experience. Cartesian hypotheses are not sceptical, that is, one's inability to rule them out does not imply that one lacks empirical knowledge. Rather, they are metaphysical hypotheses. For example, if the world one is presented with in experience is a simulated world, physical phenomena are, as David Chalmers puts it, "grounded in a deeper level of computational physics" (Chalmers 2018: 231).

This type of answer to scepticism is rarely discussed but it has been defended by a few authors, including David Chalmers (Chalmers 2010; 2018), O. K. Bouwsma (Bouwsma 1949), and, perhaps surprisingly, by St Augustine in Book III of *Against Academicians*:

> "How do you know that the world exists", replies the Academic, "if the senses are deceptive?" Your arguments were never able to disown the power of our senses to the extent of clearly establishing that nothing seems to be so to us. Nor have you ever ventured to try to do so. However, you've energetically committed yourself to persuading us that something seems so and yet can be otherwise.
> Therefore, I call the whole that contains and sustains us, whatever it is, the 'world'—the whole, I say, that appears before my eyes, which I perceive to include the heavens and the earth (or the quasi-heavens and quasi-earth).
> If you say nothing seems to be so to me, I'll never be in error. It is the man who recklessly approves what seems so to him who is in error. … If you deny that what seems so to me is the world, then you're making a fuss about a name, since I said I call this 'world'.
> You'll ask me: "Is what you see the world even if you're asleep?" It has already been said that I call 'world' whatever seems to me to be such. (Augustine 1995: 74)

A form of veridicalism is also present in Hilary Putnam's discussion of brains in vats (Putnam 1981: chapter 1) and has been attributed to Donald Davidson by Richard Rorty (Rorty 2011). Finally, as I have argued in chapters 3 and 4, Hume has a veridicalist answer to scepticism and one can be arrived at by elaborating on some of Wittgenstein's remarks on idealism in *On Certainty*.

These authors motivate their endorsement of veridicalism by offering different types of considerations which fall into four categories. First, one may defend it through first-order considerations about Cartesian scenarios. This is the strategy adopted by David Chalmers (Chalmers 2010). He examines the brain-in-a-vat scenario and describes it in a way that stresses the fact that the simulated world to which the brain is connected is a simulated *world*. It is a mind-independent world which has certain objective features, for example a certain geography, which the envatted person can get right or wrong. Chalmers also stresses a second feature of the scenario, namely the fact that this person's beliefs are about the simulated world, not about the real one. When he says "There is a tree in front of me", the envatted person means that there is a simulated tree in front of his

simulated body. Similarly, when he says that he is in New York, he means that his physical location in the simulation is New York. What makes these statements true is how things are in the simulation, not how they are outside it. The fact that the brain is handless and floating in a vat in, say, London rather than New York, is irrelevant to the truth of its empirical beliefs.

A second way of defending veridicalism is the one that I offered in chapter 3 by elaborating on Wittgenstein's remarks on idealism. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein draws attention to the nature of the idealist's position. When an idealist doubts, or denies, that I have two hands, he is not making an empirical claim, that is, he is not suggesting that my hands have been amputated or lost in an accident, or that I was born with a deformity. Rather, he is making a claim about the nature of reality—my hands are not mind-independent physical objects. I argued that the same point could be made about a Cartesian sceptic. When he doubts, say, that his car keys are in the kitchen, he is not suggesting that they are in some other room of the house. His suggestion is that it seems as if there were a car, a house, a kitchen, etc. but that actually none of these exist, that they are unreal, or illusory. However, in making this claim, the sceptic is not denying that there is a difference, within this illusory reality, between what is the case and what seems to be the case.

This point is made by O. K. Bouwsma (Bouwsma 1949), who imagines a conversation between an evil genius and Tom, a young man that the former is trying to deceive. In order to reveal to Tom that there is no external world, the genius engages in a conversation with him. He points at some flowers and says: “These flowers are not real”, to which Tom replies by picking them and comparing them with their reflection in the mirror. The flowers in the reflection are not real, he says, but those that he holds are: he can touch them, smell them, or offer them to someone. The genius then draws a distinction between

what he calls "thin illusions"—the reflection of the flowers—and "thick illusions"—Tom's real flowers—but, as Tom points out, this does not show that his flowers are unreal. He and the genius acknowledge the existence of the same distinctions between Tom's flowers, their reflection, and flowers in the real world. They merely disagree on the words they use to mark these distinctions. Tom uses "real" to mark a distinction *within* his world, while the genius uses it to mark a distinction between Tom's world, of which he is the author, and what we would call the "real world". But, since Tom's beliefs about what there is involve the first notion of reality and not the second one, these beliefs are true, and this is something that the genius, and the sceptic, ought to agree with. Since this argument is not explicitly offered by Wittgenstein, in what follows I shall speak of Bouwsma's argument.

One may also endorse veridicalism as the result of a prior commitment to a certain view of meaning and reference. An example of this position is Hilary Putnam (Putnam 1981). In *Reason, Truth, and History*, he endorses a form of semantic externalism, which is the view that the meaning and reference of words is partly determined by the speaker's environment. The version of this position that Putnam defends is a causal theory of reference on which we cannot refer to an object or a kind of object unless we have had a certain sort of causal interaction with it, or instances of it. He uses this theory in an argument purporting to show that Cartesian scepticism is self-refuting, that is, he wants to show that, if one is a brain in a vat, one cannot think, or say, that one is a brain in a vat. An envatted brain, he argues, has had no causal interactions with brains in the real world and vats in the real world. It can therefore not use the words "brain" and "vat" to say something about its predicament. In the course of making this argument, Putnam considers what a brain in a vat could mean when it says "There is a tree in front of me". He mentions three possibilities:

> On some theories that we shall discuss it might refer to trees in the image, or to the electronic impulses that cause tree experiences, or to the features of the program that are responsible for those electronic impulses. These theories are not ruled out by what was just said, for there is a close causal connection between the use of the word 'tree' in vat-English and the presence of trees in the image, the presence of electronic impulses of a certain kind, and the presence of certain features in the machine's program. On these theories the brain is right, not wrong in thinking 'There is a tree in front of me.' Given what 'tree' refers to in vat-English and what 'in front of' refers to, assuming one of these theories is correct, then the truth conditions for 'There is a tree in front of me' when it occurs in vat-English are simply that a tree in the image be 'in front of' the 'me' in question in the image or, perhaps, that the kind of electronic impulse that normally produces this experience be coming from the automatic machinery, or, perhaps, that the feature of the machinery that is supposed to produce the 'tree in front of one' experience be operating. And these truth conditions are certainly fulfilled. (Putnam 1981: 14) [1]

Semantic externalism is not the only account of meaning that has veridicalist implications. In particular, phenomenalism, that is, the view that empirical propositions ought to be analysed in terms of propositions about one's actual and potential sense-experience, also implies that a subject in a Cartesian scenario will have many true empirical beliefs. There is, however, a difference between semantic externalism and phenomenalism concerning the meaning of words in Cartesian scenarios. For a phenomenalist, the word "tree" has the same meaning in the real world and in Cartesian scenarios, while it has different meanings for a semantic externalist. Nonetheless, the two positions have the same implication, namely, that a person in a Cartesian scenario has many true everyday empirical beliefs.

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[1] Putnam does not pick one the three possible referents that he mentions as the actual one. Richard Rorty, who interprets Davidson as making a similar argument, suggest that the correct interpretation of sentences in "vat-English" is as sentences about the computer programme:

> That brain too is reacting to features of its environment. But its environment is the computer's data bank. The only way you can translate the noises it makes is to correlate them with the bits of data that the computer is feeding in. So the noises that sound like 'It's Tuesday the 7th of October 2003, and I am eating tofu' must mean something like 'Now I am hooked up to sector 43762 of the hard drive'. For most of the envatted brain's beliefs, like most of ours, must be true. It is not as easy to delude a brain as the evil scientist thinks. (Rorty 2011: 4)

Although Davidson was a semantic externalist and did rely on this position to offer an anti-sceptical argument, his position was not that attributed to him by Rorty. For a recent discussion of Davidson's argument from semantic externalism, see (Pritchard 2013).

This last, phenomenalistic, route to veridicalism is the one advocated by Hume. Hume does not explicitly endorse phenomenalism, but his argument for veridicalism commits him to it. This argument is not made within the context of a discussion of Cartesian scepticism. The problem which concerns him is one which arises from his theory of perception. He argues that we only ever perceive sense-impressions, and this position gives rise to the double worry that there might be nothing beyond one's own mind and that, if there is something, we have no knowledge of it. Hume argues, in "Of the impressions of the senses and memory", that we ought to set this problem aside. First, we cannot answer it: "As to those *impressions*, which arise from the *senses*, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and 'twill always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produc'd by the creative power of the mind, or are deriv'd from the author of our being" (T 1.3.5.2; SBN 84). Secondly, this question is irrelevant to the truth of our empirical propositions: "Nor is such a question any way material to our present purpose. We may draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions, whether they be true or false; whether they represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses" (ibid.).

In this passage, Hume is giving the following argument. You have just discovered that you do not know anything beyond the contents of your own mind and you find this disquieting. But consider this: before making this discovery, although you were unaware of it, you were relying only on these contents, and everything was going well for you. You have occasionally been wrong about some things, but many of your empirical beliefs have been true so far, and you have successfully acted on the basis of these beliefs. So the present discovery is irrelevant to how you should think and act. Keep going as before, that is, reason from your sense-impressions, and do not worry about where these impressions come from.

And, to the Cartesian sceptic, Hume would give a similar answer. Even if we are not in a sceptical scenario, he would say, we never have access to anything beyond our sense-impressions, and our empirical beliefs are about them, and them only. So being in such a scenario would have no implications for the truth of these beliefs. These scenarios are nothing but additional hypotheses concerning the source of our sense-impressions, and they are not relevant to our theoretical and practical endeavours.[2]

One may however question whether Hume is a veridicalist. In the passage quoted above, he writes that: "We may draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions, whether they be true or false; whether they represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses". While veridicalists claim that our everyday empirical beliefs are true whether or not we are in a sceptical scenario, Hume seems to be saying that whether or not we are in such a scenario does make a difference to the truth or falsity of our everyday empirical beliefs, but that truth and falsity are actually irrelevant to our theoretical and practical endeavours, probably because the criterion of correctness on which we are, and have always been, implicitly relying is the weaker criterion of rationality—i.e. whether or not our beliefs have been arrived at by making rational inferences from our perceptions.

Although it is certainly possible to interpret Hume in this way, what he says is rather elusive and ambiguous and also permits a veridicalist interpretation. In the passage just quoted, the truth or falsity which Hume claims is irrelevant to our theoretical and practical endeavours is not that of some, or all, of our *beliefs*, but that of our *perceptions*, by which

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[2] Barry Stroud mentions this type of answer at the end of the first chapter of *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*:

> If an imperceptible 'reality', as it is called on this picture, is forever inaccessible to us, what concern can it be of ours? How can something we can have no contact with, something from which we are permanently sealed off, even make sense to us at all? Why should we be distressed by an alleged limitation of our knowledge if it is not even possible for the 'limitation' to be overcome? If it makes no sense to aspire to anything beyond what is possible for us, it will seem that we should give no further thought to this allegedly imperceptible 'reality'. Our sensory experiences, past, present, and future, will then be thought to be all we are or should be concerned with. (Stroud 1984: 34)

Hume means (as the context makes it clear) our *sense-impressions*. One may be tempted to assume that the two go hand in hand, that is, that our everyday empirical beliefs can be true only if some of our sense-impressions are true, but it is not obvious that this is the case. One could also hold the view that it is one thing for sense-impressions to be true—e.g. they are true if they are caused by mind-independent states of affairs which they resemble—and another one for beliefs to be true—e.g. they are true if they conform to the sense-impressions that our subjective experience presents us with. If Hume believed that our everyday empirical beliefs can be true only if some of our sense-impressions are true, he could not have been a veridicalist. However, at least in this passage, he does not tell us how he conceives of the relationship between the truth of our sense-impressions and that of our beliefs. One can therefore legitimately read him as adopting a form of veridicalism, although such an interpretation, like its competitor, will not be based on conclusive evidence.

## 3. Objections to Veridicalism (1): The Semantic Objection

Is veridicalism defensible? In this section and the next two ones, I consider two types of objection to the position.

Recall that veridicalism is the view according to which the truth or falsity of our everyday empirical beliefs is independent of whether or not we are in a Cartesian scenario. It can therefore be refuted by identifying at least one scenario in which the truth of some everyday empirical beliefs is affected by one's being in it. I consider this type of objection in the next two sections.

In the present section, I consider what can be called a "semantic objection" to veridicalism. In order to introduce this objection, I must first clarify the relationship between the arguments I presented in the previous section.

These four arguments fall into two groups. The first two arguments—Chalmers's and Bouwsma's—purport to show that the beliefs of a person in a Cartesian scenario are about the world that is presented to him in subjective experience and that it is the features of this world which determine whether or not these beliefs are true.

The second two arguments—Putnam's and Hume's—focus instead on the concepts these beliefs involve, or the meanings of the words with which they are expressed. When a person in a Cartesian scenario forms the belief that there is a tree in front of him, he forms the belief that what is in front of him is a "tree". For this belief to be true, the concept of "tree" involved cannot be that of a mind-independent physical object. If that were so, the belief would be false. Hume's argument purports to save the truth of the belief by analysing all concepts of objects in terms of subjective experience. When speaking about trees, or chairs, or cars, all we are ever speaking about is features of our present, past, and future subjective experience. Putnam, on the other hand, argues that, since a person in a Cartesian scenario has never had any interaction with a physical object, his concept of "tree" cannot be that of a physical object. From this, it follows that he makes no error in judging that the thing in front of him is a tree.

This semantic step must be added if one wants to defend veridicalism. On its own, the Chalmers-Bouwsma line of argument would merely show that a person in a sceptical scenario correctly identifies certain features of the world that is presented to him in subjective experience while being mistaken about what he has identified. In Bouwsma's story, the world that Tom is being presented with in subjective experience is one in which there is a difference between flowers and their reflection in a mirror. This is a distinction

that Tom is aware of, and he is able to determine whether he is a having a subjective experience of flowers or of a reflection of flowers. Nonetheless, despite getting this right, he will be wrong in speaking of "flowers" if his concept of "flower" is that of a physical object.

What I call the "semantic objection" to veridicalism consists in challenging this semantic claim. In some, or in all, Cartesian scenarios, the person is using words referring to physical objects, and his everyday empirical beliefs are therefore false.

There are at least two objections of this type. The first one takes the form of a critique of the semantic theories of Hume and Putnam. One may argue that neither phenomenalism nor the causal theory of reference are correct, and that it therefore has not been shown that a person in a Cartesian scenario is not referring to anything beyond their subjective experience when they speak of trees or hands.

There is also a second semantic objection, which is an objection to Putnam's position only. Recall that, according to him, the meaning of a word is partly determined by what causal interactions one has entered in. In the scenario that Putnam considers, the envatted person has always been envatted and has therefore never had any causal interaction with the world outside his subjective experience, except with the computer he is wired to. When he speaks of "trees", he is therefore operating with a concept of "tree" which does not refer to trees outside the simulation, and his beliefs about trees are therefore generally true. However, a slight change to the scenario is sufficient to make these beliefs false. For suppose that this person has not always been an envatted brain but was one day abducted and envatted. Since he has had causal interactions with non-simulated trees, his concept of "tree" is that of a non-simulated tree. As a result, the judgments he makes about simulated trees once envatted are systematically false, since he takes them to be non-

simulated ones. Therefore, even if Putnam's theory of reference is correct, there are Cartesian scenarios which do affect the truth of one's empirical beliefs.

While this second objection is conclusive, establishing that the first one is conclusive would require examining the objections that can be addressed to phenomenalism and to Putnam's semantic externalism. This, however, would be beyond the scope of this chapter. The failure of the semantic objection, however, would not necessarily be a problem for the opponent to veridicalism, who can always rely on the arguments I shall discuss in the next two sections. Before turning to these arguments, I want to say a few words about what the veridicalist could say in response to a successful semantic objection.

He could answer, with St Augustine: "You are right, I am wrong to call this a 'car', but the beliefs that I have about this 'quasi-car' are perfectly correct." In doing so, he would be making the same point as Bouwsma. Although the person in a Cartesian scenario may have in front of him a car that is in some sense an illusion, it is a perfectly real car in the sense that one can drive it to a 'quasi-place', fill it with 'quasi-gas', or sell it to a 'quasi-person' for a sum of 'quasi-money'. In other words, the error is a terminological one: strictly speaking, the person in a Cartesian scenario ought not to be using terms which refer to physical objects, but in using these words he is making statements which are true.

His predicament is similar to ours with regard to the phrase "The sun is rising". Strictly speaking, the sun does not rise, since it does not move around the earth. If we were to be more rigorous, we ought to say "The sun is becoming visible as a result of the rotation of the earth". However, it would not be convenient to use this phrase. Because it is more practical, we keep on using an expression which is false. And we allow ourselves to do so because the kind of falsity involved does not affect the correctness of the information conveyed by this expression, namely, that daylight is arriving.

## 4. Objections to Veridicalism (2): Causal Beliefs

Independently of whether or not the semantic objection is successful, the opponent to veridicalism could keep arguing as follows. He could point out that veridicalism seems plausible only because discussions of Cartesian scenarios usually focus on beliefs such as “I have two hands”. There are, however, other types of empirical beliefs which, in at least some Cartesian scenarios, would turn out false.

In particular, he could argue that we believe not only that physical objects exist, but also that they enter into causal relationships. However, there are two potential problems with causal beliefs in Cartesian scenarios, one concerning the metaphysics of causality, and one concerning causal mechanisms.[3]

These two problems can be brought to light through a comparison with occasionalism. Occasionalism is a theological view of causality according to which God is the sole real cause. We believe that, when a billiard ball hits another and this other ball moves, this motion was caused by the first ball. However, the occasionalist says, this belief is false. The first ball hitting the other was not the *real* cause of the motion, but merely the *occasional* cause of it. Malebranche, who endorses this position, explains the notion of an occasional cause in the following terms: “A natural cause is therefore not a real and true cause but only an occasional cause, which determines the Author of nature to act in such and such a manner in such and such a situation” (*The Search after Truth* 448). The central idea is that when a certain type of event occurs, God brings about another type of event. He can do so by what Malebranche calls a “general volition” or by a “particular

[3] These points are made by (Putnam 1981), (Tipton 1992), and (Dreyfus 2003).

volition". When acting by a general volition, God "acts in consequence of general laws that he has established. For example, I say that God acts in me by general volitions when he makes me feel pain when I am pricked [by a pin], because, in consequence of the general and efficacious laws of the union of soul and body that he has established, he makes me suffer pain when my body is ill-disposed" (*Treatise of Nature and Grace* 195). When acting by a particular volition, God does not follow the natural laws that he has established. This is what happens when he performs a miracle.

By occasionalist lights, we are doubly in error when we say that the first billiard ball causes the other one to move. The first mistake that we make concerns the nature of the relation between the two balls. We believe, falsely, that this relation is causal, but it fails to meet the requirement for a relation to be causal. The idea here is that, while there is a lawlike regularity holding between one ball hitting another and this other ball moving, causality requires more than mere lawlike regularity and that this "more" is absent in the case considered.

The second mistake that we make concerns the mechanism, or the process, involved in the relation. We believe that what happens in the world happens in virtue of processes within that world. However, in the world as occasionalists conceive of it, things are strictly speaking inert, they do not cause motion. What actually happens is that at each point in time God takes notice of the position of every single thing, of their past trajectory, and of the relations in which they stand to other things, then moves them according to certain laws of nature. Although there seem to be causal processes operating within the world, this is an illusion, as everything that happens happens in virtue of supernatural processes.

Occasionalism is relevant to the discussion of Cartesian scenarios since what occasionalists say about our world is very similar to what happens in a simulated world

or in the world created by an evil genius. The only difference is that the occasionalist God is replaced by a computer programme, or by an evil genius. One could therefore argue that there are two errors that the person in a Cartesian scenario makes: one metaphysical, the other one concerning the mechanisms involved in causal relations.

How good are these objections? The first one starts with the observation that, in the world that is presented to one in a Cartesian scenario, the only reality that corresponds to the appearance of causation is lawlike regularity. In order to show that a person in such a scenario would be making a metaphysical error, one must show that this person conceives of causality as involving more than such regularities. This point is rather delicate to establish, and this is the first weakness of the objection.

The second problem with this objection is that, even if it could be shown that the person in a Cartesian scenario is wrong about the metaphysics of causation, the veridicalist could answer that this type of metaphysical error is of little or no consequence. He could point out that when we usually say that some causal claim “A causes B” is false what we mean is that the relation between A and B is such that acting on A is not the right way of bringing B about, or of preventing B from happening. But this kind of falsity is very different from the one involved in a metaphysical error. Supposing that Hume is right about the nature of causation and that our ordinary conception of causality is that of a relation which involves more than mere regularities, all our causal judgments would be false. For example, it would be false that heating water up to a hundred degrees causes it to boil. However, this would not mean that it is false in the previous sense, that is, this would not mean that I should perform some other action if I want to boil water or prevent it from boiling. What it would mean is that, although acting on the temperature of water is the right way of making it boil or not boil, the relation between this action and the boiling is not causal. While the previous type of error is “factual”, this second,

metaphysical, type of error is linguistic, or conceptual, as it does not concern the facts but the legitimacy of using words such as “cause”, “effect”, and their cognates to describe certain facts. The veridicalist could use this point to argue that, if the metaphysical objection is correct, the person in a Cartesian scenario has causal beliefs which are, strictly speaking, false, but that the error this person makes is merely verbal. And, like in his response to the semantic objection, he could add that, although this person ought not to speak in causal terms, there is little or no harm in him doing so, as the error involved is not one that affects the correctness of the judgments which are formulated using these terms.

The second objection about causality cannot be answered in that way since it concerns a factual error. Consider, for example, my feeling pain upon hitting my knee against a table. If I am an envatted brain, the moment I bump into the table, the computer programme sends electric impulses to stimulate the pain centre in my brain, thereby causing me to feel pain. I am mistaken about the mechanism involved in my feeling pain, as I believe, erroneously, that my nervous system (in the image) causes the sensation to occur.

The veridicalist can answer this objection by arguing that this type of error makes no practical difference. This is the strategy adopted by Putnam. In his discussion of brains in vats, he considers in passing the situation in which two envatted persons are having a conversation. These persons falsely believe that their simulated mouths and ears play a role in their hearing what the other says and in their causing the other to hear their words. Nonetheless, Putnam comments: “From a certain point of view, it doesn’t even matter that ‘the whole world’ is a collective hallucination; for you do, after all, really hear my words when I speak to you, even if the mechanism isn’t what we suppose it to be” (Putnam 1981: 7).

Putnam does not explain what point of view he has in mind, although one may assume that it is the practical point of view. Our having these false beliefs does not prevent us from making the right predictions and bringing about certain states of affairs—for example, communicating successfully with other envatted people. The world that one is presented with in subjective experience in a Cartesian scenario is such that what matters for the purpose of action is apparent causal processes. My virtual mouth plays no actual role in my communicating my thoughts, and my virtual ears do not play any role in my having auditory experiences. Nonetheless, I would communicate no thoughts if I did not open my virtual mouth, and I would not hear anything if my virtual ears were perforated.

Wrapping up, in this section, I introduced the idea that one could refute veridicalism by finding empirical beliefs which would be false if one were in a Cartesian scenario. The example that I considered here was that of causal beliefs, and I argued that a veridicalist could accept the objection and yet find ways of minimising its import. In a Cartesian scenario, he could say, one's causal beliefs are strictly speaking false and yet this would make little or no difference, in particular no practical difference. There are, however, other empirical beliefs which would be false in some Cartesian scenarios and the falsity of which could not be so minimised. I examine such beliefs in the next section.

## 5. Objections to Veridicalism (3): Other People and Value

The two types of belief I want to consider in this section are beliefs about other people, or other conscious subjects more generally, and beliefs about value. I examine the former first.

In a discussion of Bouwsma's argument, Charles Tipton stresses one aspect of the story that Bouwsma tells, namely the presence in Tom's world of his sweetheart Milly (Tipton 1992). Tom believes not only that Milly exists, but also that she is a conscious being, that is, that she has thoughts and feelings, in particular feelings for him. But, Tipton argues, this belief is false, as Tom's predicament is solipsistic. Milly behaves as if she were conscious, but she is not.

Of course, not all Cartesian scenarios are solipsistic. For example, Putnam's version of the brain-in-a-vat scenario is one in which every person in the simulation is a brain in a vat. However, those scenarios that are solipsistic raise a special difficulty for the veridicalist. As long as one leaves people out of the picture, he can always take in the objections that are made to him and respond that the everyday empirical beliefs of a person in Cartesian scenario, although strictly false, are not false in a way that really matters.

This type of answer is not available to him in the case of other conscious subjects. He cannot say that solipsistic scenarios raise a problem that is merely verbal. Neither can he answer that being in such a scenario makes no practical difference. Of course, it does not make a practical difference, but it makes a substantial difference at the level of what could be called "value". One of the things which contribute to the value of our existence is the personal relationships that we enter into. In particular, our contributing to other people's happiness is central to the judgment we pass on the value of our life. But, if other people

are not really people, if they are mere simulacra that do not feel anything, then our life has far less value than we think it has.[4][5]

A similar problem arises with regard to other empirical beliefs. This problem can be made conspicuous by considering a scenario of recent envatment. In this scenario, the person has many false beliefs. For example, he believes that he is in his house while he actually is in a simulation of his house. From the practical perspective, this error makes no difference because the two houses are exactly the same: they have the same number of rooms, the staircase has the same number of steps, etc. But suppose the recently envatted person goes to the museum to see a painting by Leonardo da Vinci or by Van Gogh. The painting that he will have in front of him will be a mere replica and, as a result, his experience will not have the same value.

It is difficult to explain why exactly the two experiences—the experience of standing in front of a replica and that of standing in front of the real painting—are different in value. But we do have the intuition that some objects of experience are endowed with value, that the experience of encountering them or interacting with them in the appropriate way has a corresponding value, and that an experience that is subjectively indistinguishable from this one, but does not involve the actual encounter, would not have the same value. This is the case for some objects of aesthetic value, but also of sentimental

[4] This is Stroud's response to veridicalism at the end of the first chapter of *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Stroud 1984: 37-8). Bertrand Russell is also said to have used this point against Carnap's deflationism about ontology. Visiting Chicago, he gave a seminar which Carnap attended. Against the latter's view that the question of the reality of the external world is merely a question about what language is most convenient, Russell humorously asked the question whether Carnap's wife was truly "out there" or should be regarded merely as a useful construction within Carnap's experience (Carnap 1995: 10-11).

[5] It must be emphasised that I am not saying that scepticism about other minds necessarily follows from scepticism about the existence of body. This is not true in the case of Humean scepticism about the existence of body, that is, scepticism which results from a view of perception on which the objects of perception are mental items. Berkeley, who espoused such a view of perception and cast doubt on the existence of body, nonetheless argued that his position did not commit him to solipsism and offered a proof of the existence of other minds in support of his claim. In the case of Cartesian scepticism, scepticism about other minds depends on the type of scenario one is considering. Some scenarios are solipsistic—e.g. a lonely envatted brain—while others are not—e.g. the scenario in which every simulated person is an envatted brain.

value—for example, the place where we grew up—and for objects and places that bear some relation to persons of historical importance—for example, Napoleon's hat, books signed by famous writers, etc.

This intuition is similar to the one discussed by Nozick in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Nozick 1974: 42-7). He imagines a machine which could give one any experience that one desires and argues that we would not plug into it for life. The purpose of his argument is to show, against certain forms of hedonism, that how we feel is not the only thing that matters to us. Nozick mentions three things that matter to us and which would be absent if one plugged into the machine. First, we want to *do* certain things and not simply having the feeling of doing them. Secondly, we want to *be* a certain way. By this, Nozick means that we want to be a certain person, we want to be able to tell a story about how the circumstances have shaped us and about how we have reacted to these circumstances. If one plugs into the machine, he argues, one is not a person in this sense since one does not really react to the circumstances, nor have these circumstances any genuine influence on one. Finally, we want to be in touch with reality, that is, we want our happiness to be rooted in something real, and not to be the product of an evasion from reality.

The intuition I have been discussing is similar to Nozick's third aspiration. His point is slightly different, since it concerns being in touch with reality in general while mine concerns being in touch with certain specific aspects of reality. Nonetheless, the two points are substantially the same. We aspire to be in touch with certain things, and we would not be in touch with it if we plugged into his machine, or if we were in certain Cartesian scenarios.

One could attempt an additional comparison between Cartesian scenarios and Nozick's thought experiment, although this time with the first and second ones. I want to be doing certain things and to be a certain way, but these aspirations would be frustrated

if I plugged into Nozick's machine. Would these aspirations be frustrated if I were in a Cartesian sceptical scenario? The answer is positive in the case of the dreaming scenario: if I am dreaming then I merely have the feeling that I am acting, and I am not "being a certain way" in Nozick's sense. However, this does not seem to be the case in other scenarios. In an envatment scenario, there is an objective virtual world, in which I perform actions—virtual actions but actions nonetheless—and I genuinely react to my (virtual) circumstances, shaping them and being shaped by them.

One may, however, worry that another aspiration of ours would be frustrated, namely our aspiration to what could be called "self-efficacy": we want our actions to be *our* actions, in the sense that we want that they be performed by *us*. One may argue that, in sceptical scenarios, this aspiration is frustrated. For example, in a brain in a vat scenario, whatever one does, one does only in virtue of the computer programme simulating the relevant changes in the position of one's virtual limbs and one's virtual environment. One might react to this the way Putnam does: "From a certain point of view, it doesn't even matter that 'the whole world' is a collective hallucination; for you do, after all, really hear my words when I speak to you, even if the mechanism isn't what we suppose it to be". However, one might argue that Putnam's attempt at minimising the difference that being envatted makes relies on a narrow focus on the effects of one's actions. True, Putnam tells us, the envatted brain is not really moving his lips nor using his vocal chords, but his friend, who is also an envatted brain (in Putnam's scenario) can hear: the result is the same, so the error about mechanism is of little or no significance. However, someone making the point about self-efficacy and lack thereof in sceptical scenarios could respond to Putnam that which mechanism is involved *is* important because the end result is not the only thing that matters to us. In particular, one of the things which matter is *how* the end result is brought about and, from this perspective, there is a significant difference

between what goes on in at least certain sceptical scenarios and what goes on in the real world because only in the latter is our aspiration to self-efficacy satisfied.

Although I am mentioning Nozick and his experience machine thought experiment here, I would like to emphasise that I am not doing so because I want to use the argument in which the thought experiment is involved. As explained above, Nozick purports to establish that how we feel is not the only thing that matters to us. The way he does so is by using his thought experiment to draw our attention to the fact that, if we had the choice to plug into the experience machine—into which we are not currently plugged—we would not do so. I do not and I could not use such an argument myself because what the Cartesian sceptic does is challenge us to show that we are not in a sceptical scenario. There is no choice involved: maybe one is in such a scenario or maybe one isn't, but the discussion does not include any reference to the possibility of performing some action by which one could change one's circumstances. One can however wonder whether one would prefer one's predicament to be that of, say, an envatted person or to be what it appears to be. This is what I am doing in the present section. In discussing this point I mention some of the things that I believe we value and I mention Nozick because his own list of the things we value is worth considering. However, I am not using his thought experiment and his argument to establish that those or other things matter to us.

If what I have been saying so far in this section is correct, then certain key aspirations of ours—key in the sense that the value of our existence depends partly on them—would be frustrated if we were in at least some Cartesian scenarios, especially (but not only) in those that are solipsistic. One's inability to rule out that one is in one of these scenarios would then imply that one does not know whether one's life is as valuable as it seems to be. For this reason, the veridicalist attempt at minimising the import of Cartesian hypotheses fails.

However, couldn't the veridicalist try to make his minimising move here again? Couldn't he argue that we could be happy with quasi-people, quasi-value, or quasi-self-efficacy? At least in the case of people, there is a difficulty with this suggestion. Consider a solipsistic envatment scenario. There are two possibilities: either the envatted person has always been envatted, or the person has been recently envatted. Even if the veridicalist succeeded in proving that there would be nothing distressing about the possibility of being in the former, it seems highly unlikely that he could do so about the possibility of being in the latter, because in a recent envatment scenario, one had friends, colleagues, and relatives before being abducted and plugged into a virtual reality in which those people have been replaced by simulations. The possibility of being in such a scenario is a truly distressing possibility and, even if it were the only truly distressing possibility of this kind, this would be sufficient for my purpose, which was to show that, even if veridicalism were correct, we would still have a reason to seriously consider the question whether or not we are in (at least some) Cartesian scenarios.

## 6. Conclusion

Veridicalists purport to show that there is no Cartesian sceptical problem. They argue that, whether or not one is in a Cartesian scenario, one's everyday empirical beliefs will be true all the same. Sceptical hypotheses of the Cartesian kind are not sceptical at all, they are metaphysical. One's inability to rule them out does not imply that one lacks empirical knowledge, it simply implies that one lacks metaphysical knowledge. For example, one's inability to rule out the possibility that one is a brain in a vat does not imply that one does not know that one has hands, it implies that one does not know

whether these hands are simulated ones or not. If one's focus is on acquiring empirical knowledge, it is therefore idle to wonder whether one is in a Cartesian scenario.

I have put forward two possible objections to this thesis and argued that the veridicalist could try to accommodate them in one of two ways: he could argue that the falsity involved makes only a verbal difference, or he could argue that it makes no practical difference. Neither of these strategies is available to him in the case of the last objection. I argued that we aspire to be in touch with certain aspects of reality that we consider to be valuable, and that, in certain sceptical scenarios, we would not be in touch with them. One's inability to rule out that one is in one of these scenarios implies that one does not know whether one's life is as valuable as it seems to be. For this reason, the veridicalist attempt at minimising the import of Cartesian hypotheses fails. One's inability to rule out that one is in such a scenario is not a mere theoretical problem. And, if there is an argument showing that it is idle to prove that Cartesian hypotheses are false, it is not one that relies on veridicalist considerations.

# Conclusion

In the introduction, I announced that one of my aims in this dissertation was to criticise Strawson's comparison between Hume and Wittgenstein and his attribution to them of a "naturalistic" answer to scepticism that he himself endorsed. My critique of this comparison remained, however, implicit throughout the dissertation and I would like to use this conclusion both as an opportunity to take stock and also to consider a possible rejoinder to my critique of Strawson, namely, that, despite the differences that I identify, there are similarities between what Hume, Wittgenstein, and Strawson himself write, which make it legitimate to attribute to them a similar answer to scepticism.

The answer to scepticism that Strawson endorses, and that he attributes to Hume and Wittgenstein, is characterised by the following features. First, the form of scepticism under consideration is what he calls "scepticism about the existence of body", by which he means the challenge to show that physical objects exist. Secondly, the answer itself consists in recommending that one rejects both the sceptic's requests for a justification of our belief in body and attempts at providing such a justification as illegitimate. Thirdly, the reason why the proper attitude towards the sceptical challenge is to reject it as illegitimate is that our belief in body has certain specific features which make the request for a justification inappropriate.

The bulk of my criticism of Strawson's comparison rests on three main points. First, although he, Wittgenstein, and Hume do draw a distinction between beliefs which can be an appropriate object of rational discussion and beliefs that cannot, the features that they attribute to the latter differ. While Hume and Strawson stress their *psychological*

inescapability (Chapters 4 and Chapter 5, section 1), Wittgenstein's insistence is on the fact that doubt with regard to these beliefs is *logically* excluded, in the sense that there could be no reasons to doubt them (Chapter 2, sections 1 and 2). Moreover, while all three philosophers insist on the "groundlessness" of those indubitable beliefs, their conceptions of groundlessness are different. On the one hand, Hume thinks of groundlessness as a lack of evidence (Chapter 4, sections 2 and 3). On the other hand, when Wittgenstein talks about groundlessness, he means that some propositions are too certain to be held for reasons (Chapter 2, section 4), although there is no lack of evidence for such proposition, as everything "speaks for" them. As for Strawson, his construal of groundlessness is original, as he does not say that our belief is body is, like Wittgenstein's groundless propositions, too certain to be believed for reasons. Rather, the belief is groundless in the sense that it could not be believed for reasons (Chapter 5, section 5).

The second point on which my critique of Strawson rests concerns the use that he, Hume, and Wittgenstein make of the notion of groundless indubitable beliefs in their response to scepticism. Strawson argues that, although one can perfectly intelligibly ask for a justification of our groundless inescapable belief in body, such a request is not 'serious' and should therefore be bypassed. According to him, the activity of asking for, and giving, reasons is serious only when the reasons under discussion can become the reasons on the basis of which some belief is held. Since our belief in body is not, and could not be, held by anyone on the basis of reasons, the activity of asking for, and giving, reasons for it is not serious (Chapter 5, section 5). Like Strawson, Hume believes that it makes perfect sense to ask for a justification of our belief in body but his use of the notion of groundless indubitable belief is different. He argues that, although it is impossible to justify our belief in body, we have the right to hold it because it would be painful and useless to try to give up a belief that Nature has implanted in us (Chapter 4, section 5).

As for Wittgenstein, when he uses the notion of groundless indubitable beliefs against scepticism, it is in an argument purporting to show that the request for a justification is inappropriate, that we can have no intelligible conception of what type of justification is being requested, nor of why a justification is requested (Chapter 2, sections 2 and 5).

In the two preceding paragraphs, I was careful not to mention the belief in the existence of body when presenting Wittgenstein's position. My reason for doing so is that, although it is true that, in *On Certainty*, he draws a distinction between propositions which can be an adequate object of rational discussion and propositions which cannot (Chapters 1 and 2), I show in Chapter 3 (sections 1, 2, 3) that he did not use this idea when discussing scepticism about the existence of body. This is my third and main objection to Strawson's attribution of a common naturalistic answer to scepticism about body to Hume and Wittgenstein. When scepticism comes up in *On Certainty*, it takes two forms. The first is what Wittgenstein calls "idealism", which he addresses by pointing out that the proposition "Physical objects exist" is nonsense (Chapter 3 section 3). The second form of scepticism that he considers is the dreaming argument, namely the suggestion that one may be dreaming and therefore falsely believing or asserting that there are bodies, which he counters by pointing out that a dreamer cannot be wrong about anything since one cannot assert nor believe anything while dreaming (Chapter 3 section 2).

Now, one could respond to my critique of Strawson's comparison by arguing that, although the differences that I identify are real, there also are deep similarities between Hume's, Wittgenstein's, and Strawson's positions. One could argue that, although Wittgenstein does not make use of his notion of groundless indubitable beliefs when considering scepticism about the existence of body, one could legitimately use it in that way. Such an answer to scepticism about the existence of body, although it would not be Wittgenstein's own answer, would be Wittgensteinian in spirit, and would bear strong

similarities to Strawson's and Hume's answers. Then, taking into account the differences enumerated when presenting my first two points of disagreement with Strawson, one could examine the respective merits of these three substantially similar positions, asking in particular whether any of them constitutes a satisfying answer to scepticism about body.

This is a perfectly legitimate and potentially fruitful line of enquiry. While I believe that the differences I have identified are real, I do not wish to deny there are also similarities between Hume, Wittgenstein, and Strawson—similarities that I believe it will now be possible to describe with greater precision than before, on the basis of my work. However, I ultimately chose not to pursue this for two related reasons. First, I lacked the space to do so with the appropriate care and thoroughness. And secondly, I discovered a veridicalist line of argument in the writings of Hume and Wittgenstein, which I believed it was important to examine in detail. Given its rather thin exegetical basis, my comparison between the two philosophers as veridicalists may of course be criticised. However, even if my interpretations are ultimately misinterpretations, it seemed to me that the veridicalist proposal raised questions which were almost never raised with regard to scepticism about physical objects, namely: Is this form of scepticism really the challenge to the totality of our empirical knowledge that it is usually presented to be? And would it be any less of a challenge if it threatened only some part of our empirical knowledge? I do not claim to have answered these questions in this dissertation, and they might, ultimately, not constitute a fruitful line of enquiry. After all, sometimes, the reason why a question is never discussed is simply that it is not a good one. However, it did not seem obvious to me that the veridicalist suggestion was incorrect. If it *is* incorrect, this can only be discovered by thinking through arguments for and against it, a task to which I hope to have offered a modest contribution in my last chapter.

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