

On Wittgenstein's "Refutation of Idealism"

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April 27, 2008

Abstract

In this essay I examine Wittgenstein's epistemological views as interpreted by Michael Williams in his paper 'Wittgenstein's Refutation of Idealism' Williams [2004]. Williams' interpretation of Wittgenstein draws upon the first sixty-five sections of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (see Wittgenstein [1969]) along with section ninety, and presents what Williams calls a 'reconstruction of a particular argument' (p. 76). The argument is against epistemological scepticism. Williams' Wittgenstein's argument divides into three phases. The key claim that Wittgenstein tries to establish is that sceptical doubts are nonsensical. I argue that none of Wittgenstein's arguments are persuasive.

1 Wittgenstein's Target in *On Certainty*

One might think the target of the argument that Williams reconstructs is "idealism" - the key would be in the title. However, Wittgenstein's primary target is epistemological scepticism.

Sadly we are never told by Williams what "idealism" means. It seems also that like Wittgenstein Williams has merely conflated idealism with epistemological scepticism (at least terminologically), which, without further comment, is highly misleading. Two famous idealist philosophers, with quite different views, Kant and Berkeley, were both motivated by a desire to avoid the scepticism they found in their predecessors. Hence, for these philosophers idealism cannot be conflated with scepticism (see Berkeley [1948-1957] and Kant [1781/1787/2003]). Of course it is a further question whether their brands of idealism, or any brand, *leads* to scepticism, even if it wasn't intended to. But if this is the basis for interchanging "idealism" and "scepticism" then it is careless to let it go by without comment.

Let's henceforth ignore these issues and take Cartesian scepticism to be among Wittgenstein's targets in *On Certainty*. This is what Williams does, despite the misleading title of his paper. Williams suggests that Wittgenstein's target is 'external world scepticism in its most general form' (pp.

76-77). More specifically the target is 'Cartesian scepticism' which uses 'hypotheses wildly at variance with our ordinary beliefs but which seem extraordinarily difficult to rule out' (p. 77). Williams goes on

The paradigm Cartesian problem is Descartes' problem of our knowledge of the external world; and the paradigm sceptical hypothesis is that our experience is controlled by an Evil Deceiver, so that the external world, as we ordinarily conceive it, does not exist. In particular there are no physical objects. If the external world is the physical world, there is no external world. (ibid)

Such reflections are usually thought to be at the aid of a sceptical argument of some kind which (at least) puts pressure on the idea that we have the kinds of knowledge that we think we have. It might help to get the target clear if we look briefly at some such argument (Williams doesn't do this, but I take it to be in keeping with how he understands the target). For instance, one might argue for Cartesian scepticism like this:

1. If one knows some empirical truth E, then one knows that there is an external world (since E entails that there is an external world, and let's assume one knows it does)
2. One doesn't know that there is an external world (since one doesn't know the Cartesian hypothesis that calls the external world's existence into question to be false)
3. Therefore, one doesn't know E

No doubt this is not the only way of construing Cartesian scepticism (by which I mean the kind of sceptical argument that Descartes might be taken to offer in the First Meditation, Descartes [1641/1993]), and no doubt it is a highly questionable piece of reasoning in any case. But for now we can note that it's core is something like: if one can't rule out the sceptical hypothesis then one doesn't know what one takes oneself to know. Given that sceptical hypotheses are designed so as they can't be ruled out (i.e. so as one can't know them to be false), scepticism looms. In this sense it is clear how a device designed to doubt the existence of the external world (i.e. the evil demon hypothesis) is involved in an argument to a sceptical conclusion.

I take it that insofar as Wittgenstein is concerned with sceptical arguments he is concerned with this specific device, the sceptical hypothesis. However, there is a complication to do with the way Wittgenstein deals with this scepticism. The complication is that in approaching scepticism G.E. Moore's *response* to scepticism becomes Wittgenstein's target too (Moore [1939]). Wittgenstein picks on something common to both the sceptic and

Moore, something they both accept and in denying what they both accept Wittgenstein is targeting both positions. In the next section I turn to what Williams takes to be the first of three phases in Wittgenstein's argument. In that section, we'll see what it is in common between Moore and the sceptic that Wittgenstein wants to reject.

2 The Problem Phase

The so called "problem phase" involves Wittgenstein's consideration of the sceptical problem and G.E. Moore's response to the problem. But Williams wants us to resist the temptation to think that Wittgenstein uses the problem phase to *refute* or deal with the sceptic. The purpose of the problem phase is to identify something problematic, the refutation comes in other stages of the argument.

Before we identify what it is that Wittgenstein finds "problematic" let's briefly consider Moore's response to the sceptic. As Williams says, the 'Cartesian sceptic asks whether we know that there are any physical objects...' Moore's counter is that we can know this, and prove it. The proof, infamously, involves Moore

Holding up his hands in good light (while making certain appropriate gestures), he announces: 'Here is one hand and here is another'. It follows that at least two physical objects are known to exist. (Williams, p. 78)

On the face of it, this seems OK if the question is "are there physical objects?", it answers "yes" by giving an example manifest to anyone who would bother to look. What about the question "do you know that there are physical objects?" One can imagine Moore answering this as follows: "yes, I do, since here is a physical object (a hand), and I can see it, and seeing is a way of coming to know." But the question of whether Moore has a *proof* that he knows (or of what he knows) is something more complicated. In one sense the proof is impeccable, consider two versions:

1. There are hands
2. Hands are physical objects
3. Therefore, there are physical objects

The conclusion follows logically from the premises, so in a sense the conclusion is proved true if the premises are true. And similarly with this:

1. I know that there are hands

2. I know that hands are physical objects
3. Therefore, I know that there are physical objects

This seems logically adequate too. But the real question is whether the conclusion in either of these argument is proved to the sceptic's satisfaction, i.e. in the face of a sceptical demand to rule out the sceptical hypothesis. There is often thought to be something dubious about Moore's proof. One way of putting the complaint is as Crispin Wright does in recent work (for instance Wright [2004a]). While the logic of the arguments is not in doubt the idea that one can get a warrant for the conclusion just from reasoning from the premises (or that one can earn knowledge of the conclusion in that way) is ruled out on account of the fact that for one to have a warrant for the first premise requires that one already has some kind of warrant for the conclusion. To try to get to the conclusion through such an argument would therefore beg the question. Wright calls this phenomena "transmission failure", since warrant or knowledge fails to transmit across the premisses to the conclusion in virtue of the warrant for the conclusion being presupposed by one's warrant for the premisses.

There is lots to be said of this kind of complaint against Moore and the notion of transmission failure generally, but it is not our focus here, since Williams takes Wittgenstein to have a quite different complaint.

We have reached the point of identifying what Wittgenstein finds problematic that is shared by both Moore *and* the sceptic: Wittgenstein's focus, when considering the dispute, is the sceptical hypothesis. Not that Wittgenstein formulates a specific hypothesis for the sake of argument, but he gets to the heart of what's at issue in the use of such hypotheses, namely, *doubt*. *Whatever* the hypothesis is, if it is to serve the sceptic's needs, it is a device for doubt of the kind that brings the existence of, say, physical objects into question. In considering the dispute between Moore and the Sceptic Wittgenstein questions whether such sceptical doubt even makes sense. Moore and the sceptic both assume it does, and hence come into conflict, but that it does is something Wittgenstein wants to question (see OC 2).

So what is Wittgenstein's answer to his own question of whether sceptical doubts makes sense? Here is Williams:

Wittgenstein never wavers in his conviction that they do not: the sceptic's doubts are wholly illusory. This is another reason why they cannot be met with a proof. If the scruples of the sceptic or idealist are incoherent, then so are the reassurances of the realist. No proof is possible because there is nothing to prove. This means that a response to scepticism cannot be dialectical: that is, it cannot take the form of showing that the sceptic is

wrong, proving what he doubts. Rather it must be diagnostic and therapeutic. It must identify the conceptual misunderstanding that gives rise to the illusion of sceptical doubt; and it must explain why the sceptic fails to see the illusion for what it is (p. 79).

Before commenting on the passage, let's note, to be clear, that what Wittgenstein finds problematic is that sceptical doubts make sense. Hence, the purpose of the problem phase is to argue that sceptical doubts don't make sense. But, importantly, *that* isn't his refutation of scepticism - as noted above. Williams urges that once the problem phase is complete, there is further work that Wittgenstein does. We'll return to this, but for now, let's just dwell a bit on the passage above. This is a key passage, below I'll offer some comments.

1. It is not immediately obvious how a doubt about a proposition P failing to make sense entails that, or is a reason for, proof of P or affirmation of P failing to make sense. This is a key point, since Williams takes Wittgenstein to be identifying a problem for both the sceptic *and* Moore. But it's just not clear why 'if the scruples of the sceptic... are incoherent, then so are the reassurances of the realist [i.e. Moore]'. I guess it would follow if P is a proposition that lacks a sense, then, surely, it's embeddings in contexts would inherit that lack of sense/meaning. But so far we have only been told that *doubts* don't make sense in a particular area, not *propositions*.

Below we will see that Wittgenstein gives reasons why sceptical doubts don't make sense. My criticisms of these will be that (a) the reasons are no good, and (b) even if they were it's just not clear why they entail that Moore's affirmations too don't make sense. It is clear that Moore took the sceptic's doubts to make sense, and so, if Wittgenstein is right, he was wrong in that. *But*, without further argument it wouldn't follow that he was wrong in taking the respective knowledge claims to make sense.

2. It is unclear why from the fact that doubts and proofs don't make sense that a response to scepticism can't be dialectical. It follows only if a dialectical response is defined in the restricted sense that Williams prefers, as requiring a *proof* that the sceptic is wrong. But if a dialectical response is conceived of as merely *showing the sceptic to be wrong* then the availability of such a response isn't ruled out *a priori* on the grounds that the sceptic's doubts don't make sense: in a way that fact would *be* to show the sceptic is wrong. It's not clear what the distinguishing feature of a "dialectical" response is, or whether this really matters.

3. On a related point even if a dialectical response (in Williams' terms) can't be given, it doesn't follow that one must give either a diagnostic or a therapeutic response (or both), whatever those kinds of responses amount to. The reason is simple, it doesn't follow that *any* response must be given. It might be philosophically desirable that some kind of response is given,

but that's different.

Even if one has committed to give *a* response, and even if it can't be "dialectical", why does it have to be therapeutic and/or diagnostic? What justifies this restriction of the logical space? Philosophers don't have to be doctors or therapists (thank goodness), perhaps there are other non-medical procedures currently available to philosophers, or perhaps they could be invented. Here is one suggestion, not that I wish to endorse it, but just to demonstrate how the logical space might be thought more expansive. The sceptic raises worries, they are ultimately confused as Wittgenstein would have us believe, but instead of putting on the stethoscope and shackling these poor fellows into straight jackets let's just give up on the whole conceptual framework that has given rise to these illnesses. Let's invent new concepts with which we can theorise about what we have been calling "knowledge". Who cares about the illusions and why the sceptic fails to see the illusory nature of his doubts, let's just move on.

Is this dialectical in Williams' sense? No, it doesn't try to "prove" the sceptic wrong. It's not therapeutic or diagnostic either since it just doesn't get involved in such medico-philosophical practices. It, it seems to me, is a kind of "eliminativism", or what one might call a "productive" response: the response is just to produce something better from which we can hope to reach a less incoherent understanding of the aspects of our lives that we have been trying and failing to conceptualize (no doubt those obsessed with the medical metaphors might like to label this the "prescriptive" response).

4. Even if Williams' is right to restrict the logical space to dialectical/diagnostic/therapeutic, it's still not that helpful, since when we face up to the prospect of offering diagnosis and giving therapy it's not like our debate about how to respond to the sceptic has come to some kind of peace. To appreciate this all one has to do is appreciate some people in the real medical world prefer surgery over medicine (but what kind? Liquid or tablet? Or perhaps injection?) and then there are those who prefer herbal remedies. There will still be a dispute - after the diagnosis - between the Wittgensteinian therapists, and philosophers in what we might call the "Prince Charles" camp who advocate an alternative cure, and other varieties beyond that.

A little more seriously, it would be nice to have the following questions answered: (a) why the distinctions between different kinds of responses to scepticism hold up (i.e. why we should accept the distinctions), (b) why we should respond in one way rather than another, (c) what the extent of the different kinds of responses are once we have already admitted a few species and finally (d) why, having accepted distinctions, even for arguments sake, they are useful in our philosophical endeavours.

Let's return now to Wittgenstein's finding sceptical doubts nonsensical. The questions we need to answer are as follows: (a) Why don't they make

sense? Is Wittgenstein right about this? (b) Why is it that their not making sense enjoins that doing things like proving what the sceptic doubts is also nonsensical?

3 Are Sceptical Doubts are Nonsensical?

3.1 Argument (A)

Williams says 'the first [reason that sceptical doubts are nonsensical] is that ordinary doubts are essentially linked to the possibility of their being resolved...' (p. 79). He takes this to be what Wittgenstein means in OC 3, which reads

If e.g. someone says 'I don't know if there's a hand here' he might be told 'Look closer'. - This possibility of satisfying oneself is part of the language-game. Is one of it's essential features.

Is this an argument? I don't think so. It is a statement that the possibility of satisfying oneself either way when a doubt is raised, is essential to a language game involving doubt. But why is it essential? Is this supposed to be obvious?

If the sceptic's doubts make sense, and are such that there is no possibility of overcoming them (i.e. of deciding the truth in question), then surely the sceptical game is one in which such a possibility can't be essential to the very practice of doubting. Wittgenstein can't, at this point, say that the sceptic's doubts don't make sense, that is what we are trying to establish, all he can say is "but the possibility of satisfying oneself is essential to doubting, hence this sceptical "doubt" is not a real doubt". But what's the argument for that?

Williams makes the qualification that Wittgenstein's point applies to "ordinary" doubts, this is odd since the passage deals with a rather strange doubt about whether there's a hand here (presumably, "here" in a Moorean hand-proving situation). But even if Wittgenstein's point is that *ordinarily* the possibility of doubt requires the possibility of the resolution of doubt it is unclear why this might be taken to show that sceptical doubts are not "possible" (or meaningful). Sceptical doubts are *extra-ordinary*, but are they thereby not really doubts? If they are not, then why not? The sceptic can reply that even if it's true in the ordinary case that doubt requires the possibility of resolution that is not sufficient to show that there are not special, deep, theoretical doubts that are nonetheless still doubts. (I'll return to this below since Williams is well aware of such responses).

Further pressure can be put on the claim that even in the ordinary case doubt requires the possibility of resolution. It's not clear what an "ordinary case" would be anyway, and it's not clear what would count as a resolution. Here is an example. Many people believe in the existence of God,

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many believe in the non-existence of God, many *doubt* the existence of God. If the scope of "ordinary" was defined in quantitative terms it might just be that doubting the existence of God is rather ordinary. But then it is a very difficult question to see how this - whether God exists - can be decided. Maybe it can be decided, but this depends on what the criteria for resolution would be. Strict criteria would have it that it just can't be decided - *strictly* - whether there is a God. This would therefore be a case of ordinary doubt without the possibility of resolution, hence Wittgenstein is just wrong about the essential features of the language game. But perhaps the doubt here is not ordinary? Who knows, we are not told what ordinary is (that's part of my complaint). Or perhaps there is the possibility of resolution, perhaps it is sufficient to resolve the issue by invoking scientific evidence. But, again, *who knows*, we are not told what resolution is (that's the other part of my complaint).

My conclusion is that the point about the possibility of resolution being a condition of the possibility of doubt is just not argued for and is in any case contentious for various reasons.

3.2 Argument (B)

The next argument draws upon OC 4 which says:

[W]hat 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.

And Williams' comment on this is:

[D]oubts do not arise as easily as the sceptic is apt to imagine... The sceptic often argues as if the bare possibility of falsehood were a ground for doubt. But that is not at all how we normally proceed. (p. 79).

The argument seems to be something like this:

1. Meaningful doubt requires grounds
2. Sceptical doubt doesn't have grounds
3. Therefore, Sceptical doubt is not meaningful (i.e. is nonsensical)

I want to make some extensive comments on this argument which I take to be unsound. Before I attempt to show why, some preliminary points. First it is not clear what "grounds" is supposed to mean, which is a shame since it is a central notion in this argument and one of those tricky notions that

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means different things to different philosophers. Second, it must be noted, once again, that the sceptic will want to deny the move from "how we normally" proceed to a conclusion about the meaning of sceptical doubts. But these issues aside, let's evaluate the argument.

Reply (1): The first reply that I would like to make on behalf of the sceptic is that premise (2) is false, and there are grounds for sceptical doubt. By grounds I mean reasons that can be given by the sceptic himself or a third party for the doubt. This reply admits Wittgenstein's criteria of meaningful doubt, but argues that the sceptical doubt satisfies that criteria.

So what might the sceptic offer (or have offered on his behalf) as grounds for his doubt? The sceptic can draw upon something Wittgenstein dismisses, namely, the bare possibility, or imaginability of the sceptical hypothesis being true. For instance the possibility of not having a brain, the sceptic will argue, is coherent, and thinking (or imagining) that one is (or could be) brainless could therefore be the ground of one's doubt that one has a brain.

The possibility that I don't have a brain is not the best example for the sceptic since it is not obviously a sceptical hypothesis. That one doesn't have a brain doesn't, without further assumption, entail that one is say, a zombie, or lacks a mind. Let's examine the sceptical strategy, then, by questioning the possibility of doubting that there is an external world. The question is, is it a coherent doubt? The sceptic will argue that it is, and in the face of Wittgenstein's requirement on meaningful doubt will argue that the ground of the doubt is the possibility that he is being deceived by an evil demon (in other words the "bare possibility of falsehood" of ordinary beliefs which the sceptical hypothesis makes salient).

A Reply on Behalf of Wittgenstein: Wittgenstein might reply that he has *distinguished* grounds for doubt from such things as just imagining such and such. So Wittgenstein will say: "just imagining that I might be deceived by an evil demon is not itself a *ground* for doubting that which entails its falsity (i.e. a ground for doubting the existence of the external world). Hence, the "doubt" that there is an external world on its basis is not meaningful (on the assumption that grounds for doubt are a condition of meaningful doubting)."

Further Considerations: Wittgenstein has not, however, *argued* for the distinction, he has just stated it. But to be fair to Wittgenstein imagining something to be false is distinct from having a positive evidential indicator that something is false, and perhaps this can give substance to Wittgenstein's distinction. For instance: John imagines that it is false that the sun will come out on Tuesday, and John thereby doubts that the sun will come out on Tuesday. But Mary sees a weather report saying that the sun won't come out on Tuesday, and thereby doubts that the sun will come out on Tuesday. We might use these examples to say that John doesn't have grounds for doubt, and Mary does. The conclusion that Wittgenstein would draw is

that John doesn't meaningfully doubt anything, whereas Mary does.

But isn't it counter-intuitive that John's putative doubt is meaningless? Perhaps, but intuitions will vary as they always do in philosophy. In support of the view that John's doubts are real doubts, we might argue that to say that John has no grounds in this situation is a mischaracterisation. We might say that both John and Mary have grounds, i.e. reasons, for doubting that the sun will come out on Tuesday, it's just that John's grounds are quite weak, not as good as Mary's grounds which have stronger evidential force. This would be quite anti-Wittgensteinian since we could then argue that just as John can have grounds on the basis of mere imagination, so can the sceptic.

One might question John, for instance, one might ask "why do you doubt that the sun will come out?", and he will reply "because it is possible that it won't, and I can imagine it not coming out, so I will suspend judgement". I'm inclined to think we will find something strange about John's reasoning, we will perhaps argue that he is too cautious, or even careless, but will we say that his doubt is *meaningless*? Aren't we still inclined to think that John is - however badly - *giving reasons*, he is *reasoning*, it is therefore meaningful, despite the fact that his reasons are bad.

In response to this Wittgenstein might say: "John's putative "grounds" are not reasons at all, since imagining that the sun will not come out doesn't constitute evidence *either way* as to the behaviour of the weather. It might be "treated as" a reason in a conversation, but it is *no reason at all*. It is not a "weak" reason, implying that it's evidential force is weaker than, say, Mary's reason, it just lacks evidential force altogether".

This reply on behalf of Wittgenstein seems correct, it does seem that for one to have an *epistemic* reason what one cites as that epistemic reason will have to have some evidential weight. And it seems false that "P *could* be false" carries any evidential weight with respect to the truth or falsity of P in the actual world. Nonetheless, one might still think that John's doubt *is* meaningful despite having no epistemic reason for it. Moreover, one might think that John's doubt is meaningful despite being doxastically *irresponsible*. I take it that this kind of reply is the stronger one on behalf of the sceptic, and I turn to it now.

Reply (2): The reply I am about to give to Wittgenstein's argument claims that premise (1) of that argument is false, if by "grounds" Wittgenstein means epistemic reasons. That is to say, it's not true that if one meaningfully doubts P then one must have an epistemic reason (or there must *be* an epistemic reason) for doubting P. To show this I think it is enough to consider cases of putative doubt where there are no - at least no obvious - grounds (epistemic reasons) for doubt, yet we seem to have meaningful doubt. Consider what I'll refer to as "the afflicted people". For instance, the depressed person who doubts that good things will happen. Or the excessively happy do-gooder who doubts that bad things will happen (strictly

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these afflicted people might just be disposed to doubt certain propositions if confronted with them; for instance, the depressed person might be disposed to doubt that the tablets will work, just as a symptom of her state of mind). It is not clear that the afflicted people have grounds *qua* reasons for doubt, it is just that doubt arises as a symptom of their mental lives/condition.

A Reply on Behalf of Wittgenstein: Wittgenstein might reply that these afflicted individuals have grounds, or at least the third person spectator does, just not good ones. This involves saying that their reasons for doubting are their current states of mind. Hence if asked "why you doubt the tablets will work", the honest answer will be "because I'm depressed". Perhaps it would be the third person explaining the depressed person's doubt by appeal to this ground, but the point remains that we don't have a case of doubt without grounds.

This, however, it seems to me, invokes the *cause* of the doubt not it's *epistemic reason*.

One might be tempted to reply that Wittgenstein doesn't have to restrict his argument so that "ground" means "epistemic reason", and hence we still haven't been given a case in which we have doubt without a ground (broadly construed). One might say, "a cause is a "ground" in a sense, it is, after all, that to which one can appeal in an explanation of a certain phenomena. It also gives rise to the phenomena and in that sense "grounds it". Hence, that there is doubt only where there are grounds hasn't been refuted."

However, this reply is not available to Wittgenstein. If we liberalize "ground" to this extent then short of denying that the *sceptic's* doubt - or putative doubts - have a *cause* or *explanation* - which is absurd - Wittgenstein would have to admit that the sceptic has a "ground" too. And Wittgenstein's whole point is that sceptical doubts don't have grounds! So it seems that the best version of Wittgenstein's argument relies on what we might call an *intellectualisation of doubt*. It restricts meaningful doubt to that which has an epistemic reason. But this is a dubious criterion on meaningful doubt when we notice that there is meaningful doubt that is not grounded as such.

I am not proposing that sceptical doubt is to be assimilated to the doubts that pervade the lives of the individuals afflicted by excessive happiness and depression, rather the point is that Wittgenstein would need to show why it is a criterion on the meaningfulness of sceptical doubt, but not other doubt, that one has an epistemic reason for it. This challenge need not even admit that sceptical doubt is persuasive, or that we should feel compelled to address it, it's just to say that *for all Wittgenstein has said* it is *meaningful*.

In sum I have argued that premise (2) is dubious at first glance, but with further reflection it might defended by saying that mere imagination cannot furnish proper epistemic reasons for doubt. However, given that

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premise (1) of Wittgenstein's argument is flawed, owing to Wittgenstein's mistaken intellectualisation of doubt, Wittgenstein's argument is unsound, hence argument (B) shouldn't persuade us that sceptical doubt is meaningless.

3.3 **Argument (C)**

Above it was noted that Wittgenstein takes it that because doubting certain propositions doesn't make sense, affirming them (or proving them) doesn't either. It is difficult to see how this would follow from the arguments above (were they sound). Williams, however, picks up on a related strand which he claims makes the link between the sceptic's attempted doubt and Moore's attempted proof. This is the strand which broadens the scope of Wittgenstein's target to include Moore as well as the sceptic. Again, as with what I've called arguments (A) and (B), this argument, argument (C), argues that sceptical doubts are unintelligible, but in addition, that Moore's response is *thereby* unintelligible too. Here is William's version of the argument:

To express a doubt about a claim is to suggest that the speaker may have made some kind of mistake. If I cannot say what mistake - if I cannot specify how he might have gone wrong - then no intelligible doubt has been expressed. [...] Just as entering a doubt implies the possibility of saying what mistake might have been made, so entering a knowledge claim implies the possibility of saying how one knows. This will often mean being able to give appropriate grounds or evidence. Thus, an expression of doubt, implying the possibility of a mistake, can be met with an explanation of how one knows, an explanation that will show that no mistake was in fact made. The symmetry in the intelligibility requirements for doubting and knowledge claiming - the need to be able to say what mistake might have been made or how one knows - makes plain why the (in principle) possibility of resolving doubts (by explaining how one knows) is built into the language-game as one of its essential features (p. 81).

In this passage there are at least three key thoughts, but it's not clear how it's all supposed to come together. I take each in turn.

1. For A's doubt about B's claim to be intelligible then it must be possible for A to say how B is mistaken. Unfortunately we are given no argument for this. But it doesn't seem to be true. A racist, X might doubt the word of Y as a matter of instinct, since Y is a member of the race to which X directs his racism. In this case there is no reason other than racism why X has the doubt he does, and there is no *mistake* that X would cite that Y has

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made. But it's not clear that there is no doubt! Or - what surely is the same thing - an "unintelligible" doubt.

Perhaps if X tried to make his doubt a *good* or *appropriate* doubt X would cite - *ad hoc* - a mistake of Y's. Or make one up. But *must* X do this for his doubt to count as good?

But perhaps this doesn't appreciate the modality of the claim. One might reply that the doubt is only intelligible since it is - whether he does it or not - *possible* for X to pick out a mistake. But is this true? If we have the intuition that X has an intelligible doubt towards Y's claim why does that entail that it is possible that X might - counterfactually - pick out a mistake, or at least try to? There seems to be such a thing as a *stupid* doubt - like a racist doubt - it seems that we can explain this in terms of prejudice, and taking a negative stance to some claim as a matter of instinct. We need an *argument* for why the explanation of this putatively intelligible doubt is incomplete for lack of mention of the possibility of citing a mistake.

2. Claiming knowledge requires that one be in a position to say how one knows, say, by giving evidence. This claim - although it also goes by without argument - is less contentious, but still not obviously true. It might be that if one makes a claim to knowledge there will be an expectation that they explain themselves. This is, no doubt, related to the plausible thought that, for most cases, if one does know then there is a way that one came to know, that is, a route by which one came to know. So perhaps if one claims to know then one would be expected to articulate something of this, if, indeed, one's claim is correct. But we need to be careful, do we have here a condition on the very *intelligibility* of knowledge claims? It's not at all clear that we do, and there is no argument that we do. We might think someone highly irresponsible - epistemically - if they failed to make good, say when challenged, on a knowledge claim. Do we find them *unintelligible* for that failing? It's not clear that we do.

3. There is a "symmetry" in the intelligibility requirements for claiming knowledge and doubting. William's elucidation of this symmetry is that "an expression of doubt, implying the possibility of a mistake, can be met with an explanation of how one knows, an explanation that will show that no mistake was in fact made." I'm not sure why we have a "symmetry" here, we certainly have a connection. But so what? What use is this? It's not clear how this helps us get to the view that Wittgenstein/Williams promised, namely that because the sceptic's doubt that P is unintelligible so is a claim to know that P.

Perhaps a further passage from Williams will help on this point, he says (interpreting Wittgenstein, for instance OC 10-11):

The use of 'I know' is specialised because it is linked with doubting. But as the earlier remarks on doubting revealed, Moore's propositions are normally not doubted at all. Moore has there-

fore failed to enter his knowledge claims in a suitable situation. They may seem to be intelligible but in truth they are nonsense (p. 80).

We can put aside the disagreement with Williams/Wittgenstein on the intelligibility of doubt, the suggestion now, however, is - it seems to me - that knowledge claims are only intelligible in those contexts or situations where doubt is intelligible. Williams, then, takes Wittgenstein to be arguing for something like this:

1. Doubting Moorean propositions (i.e. "there are physical objects", "there is an external world") is unintelligible
2. If doubting that P is unintelligible then so is claiming to know that P
3. Therefore, Moore's claims to know are unintelligible

The quick response to this argument is again to note - drawing upon what has been said above - that the first premise is highly dubious. We have been given no good reason for taking doubt to be unintelligible when it comes to Moorean propositions, since we have been given no reason to accept the conditions on the intelligibility of doubt offered.

But even if we grant premise (1) what reason have we been given for premise (2)? The two passages from Williams quoted in this section don't give us clear reasons. In the first passage I'm not sure if a reason is being given, and in the second passage the premise is stated not argued for.

Wittgensteinian criteria aside, the closest thing I can think of that comes to an expression of doubt that is "unintelligible" is if I were to say "I doubt that I am thinking now". Doubt being a species of thought, this seems to be self-refuting (we can pretend that it is therefore unintelligible, but that's not necessarily true!). But is it also, thereby, unintelligible to claim to know that I am thinking? Wittgenstein seems committed to thinking that this is unintelligible, don't we need an argument for this view? What about "I know that I am writing this philosophy essay, I know, therefore, that I am thinking now, since writing this essay requires thought"?

The conclusions of this section are that (a) we have made no progress with "intelligibility" constraints on doubt or knowledge claims. We also have no clear proposal for why Moorean claims to know are unintelligible *because* the sceptic's doubts of such claims are. Indeed, thus far in this essay we have no clear reason why the sceptic's doubts are unintelligible at all!

4 Diagnosis?

As Williams understands Dr. Wittgenstein's argument, after identifying a problem it is a "diagnosis" that is required. The picture is not that there is

a sceptical problem which needs diagnosis, but rather, there is something problematic in scepticism that needs diagnosis. The problem phase was directed at elucidating that problematic something, and arguing that it is problematic. But the verdict thus far is that this has been unsuccessful, and so it is hard to feel compelled to consider a diagnosis.

At one point Williams seems quite aware of some of the pressure that will be put on Wittgenstein during his problem phase. Williams notes that in the problem phase

The most that has been shown is that such judgements [Moorean propositions] are not *ordinarily* treated as either supportable by evidence or open to question. However - and Wittgenstein is well aware of this reply - our indulgent attitude is merely a reflection of practical exigencies. We have to take lots of things for granted if we are to get on with life. But in the context of philosophical reflection, where practical considerations are set aside, we can put ourselves into an epistemic relation with the most banal everyday certainties. Indeed, we can come to appreciate that we always stand in such a relation, even though for practical purposes we may ignore the epistemic demands that this relation imposes (p. 83).

The first thing to note here is that what is said seems somewhat at odds with what has gone before. We have, it is true, encountered reflections on what is "ordinarily" the case, we were, nonetheless, quite straightforwardly told that sceptical doubts and Moorean assertions are *nonsense*. We are now being told that all the problem phase tried to argue was that "such judgements are not ordinarily treated as either supportable by evidence or open to question". But where has all of the talk of doubts being "nonsense" or "unintelligible" gone? This is perplexing.

Here is my suggestion as to what's going on. Williams wants the sceptic to have a particular reply to the problem phase. This fits in with Williams' overall desire, owing to his careful interpretation of Wittgenstein, that Wittgenstein shouldn't be taken to refute the sceptic in the problem phase (This is part of Williams project that there is something wrong with the reading of Wittgenstein offered by Marie McGinn, see McGinn [1989]). Given this, the sceptic is allowed to reply, to the problem phase: "Ordinary and less peculiar doubts aside, sceptical doubt is real, if impractical, it arises in the context of philosophical reflection".

This reply would be no good if in the problem phase Wittgenstein had simply argued that sceptical doubt was nonsense, not just "unordinary".

But it would be quite careless to make out as if it Wittgenstein's problem phase had this point - merely that sceptical doubts are peculiar - all along (not to mention inconsistent with the language of the first part of William's

own paper!). That sceptical doubts are peculiar should be obvious to anyone. It is clear from what Williams has said, and what Wittgenstein says, however, that in the first passages of *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein takes sceptical doubts and Moorean assertions to be nonsense as well as peculiar.

Perhaps, then, Williams' point was just that, when properly considered, what Wittgenstein is doing in the problem phase is arguing that by *ordinary criteria* for doubt, sceptical expressions of doubt would not count as real doubts (they are, by that criteria, "nonsense"). Then the sceptic's reply would be that there is such thing as sceptical doubt all the same, it just goes beyond the ordinary criteria that governs ordinary doubts. This seems like a fair resolution of our tension. However, it should be noted that even if we understand this as the point of Wittgenstein's problem phase the arguments against that phase given above still stand, since part of the argumentative strategy picked on Wittgenstein's criteria for doubt, and it doesn't matter whether these are "ordinary criteria" or not.

We can now question the cogency of Wittgenstein's so called "diagnostic phase". I want to do two things in the remainder of this section. I will (a) criticize Wittgenstein's main argument, and (b) put pressure on the idea that we have really moved into a different "phase" of the overall refutation. As I see it, there is nothing distinctive about the so called "diagnostic phase" that marks it out as being a different phase. This isn't a criticism of William's interpretation, but a criticism of his reconstruction of Wittgenstein. I'll deal with the point about the phase first, but in doing so some key features of Wittgenstein's argument will be revealed.

As noted the sceptic replies - to the worries that her doubts are nonsensical - that they do make sense after all since we have been given no reason why ordinary criteria apply to distinctively philosophical doubts. Wittgenstein has us imagine the sceptic asking "What right have I not to doubt the existence of my hands?" (OC 24). The sceptic is, clearly, putting aside practical concerns and moving us into the context of philosophical reflection. To this Wittgenstein replies: "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." (ibid).

This, we are told, is the beginning of Wittgenstein's "diagnostic phase", but the question is still the same as in the "problem phase", namely, "does sceptical doubt make sense?" This is part of my argument for why we haven't moved into a new phase, the question is the same. Before we get to the second part of my argument, let's see how Williams interprets the beginnings of Wittgenstein's diagnostic phase. Wittgenstein, we are told, is not trying to refute the sceptic,

Instead, he suggests that we ask what a sceptical doubt would amount to, warning us not to assume that we already know. His

intent is clear: the peculiar character of philosophical doubt is not a refutation of scepticism, but it is an invitation to pursue a diagnostic enquiry. If a doubt about existence only works in a language-game, and if the game of philosophical reflection is distinct from that of ordinary doubting, we are entitled to ask how the philosophical game is to be carried on (p. 84).

The point seems to be that if the sceptic is allowed to reply to the problem phase that philosophical doubt is special, we then have an invitation to "diagnosis", and what this means, broadly, is that we are to ask questions about how the philosophical "game" of doubting goes on. But a good deal of this was done in the problem phase, it's just not clear that we have a distinct phase.

Furthermore, the key argument of the diagnostic phase is that sceptical doubt and Moorean assertion is *nonsense*. But this was the point of the problem phase! In this "diagnostic phase", admittedly, the argument is a new one, but it's not clear what it is about the argument that marks it out as belonging to a different argumentative phase. This completes my argument regarding the "phases", now let's move onto more substantive questions. The focus of the "diagnostic phase" is the nature of the putative "philosophical doubt". Williams says

The absolutely crucial feature of philosophical doubt... involves taking seriously the possibility that no physical objects exist. If there is a genuine possibility here, we can see why the idealist [sceptic] wants to know what right I have not to doubt the existence of my hands... [But] is it really possible that no physical objects exist? Well, can't we imagine that no such objects exist, and doesn't this show that their non-existence is possible? This is the key question addressed in the diagnostic phase of Wittgenstein's argument... (pp. 85-86).

Williams takes Wittgenstein's reply to the key question to be found in OC 35-36 which Williams interprets as follows:

We have identified the proximate source of the illusion of doubt behind everyday doubt [that is, "philosophical doubt" which is distinct from everyday doubt]. The idealist or sceptic wants to treat 'There are physical objects' as an empirical or factual statement. he wants to treat it as a hypothesis. It is neither... 'There are physical objects' is neither true nor false because it is nonsense. And it is nonsense because 'physical object' is not the concept of a kind of object, like 'unicorn' or 'planet'. 'Physical object' is a piece of logical or semantic vocabulary, thus unsuitable for formulating the empirical hypothesis the sceptic or idealist would like to express. (p.86)

In the problem phase we were told that sceptical doubts such as doubts about the existence of physical objects were nonsense, above it was argued that arguments for this are unpersuasive. In that phase Wittgenstein also argued that Moore's assertions were nonsense, again, the conclusion was that it was not clear why. But now we have a new suggestion, which is represented in the passage above. Now we have the view that the very proposition "there are physical objects" is nonsense. If this can be established then it would follow that doubts *and* assertions of it are nonsense.

But what we have in the passage above isn't an argument, just a statement of an obscure view. What does it mean to say that "physical object" is "semantic" or "logical"? It seems perfectly clear that "there are physical objects" makes sense, and is true. What reason have we for abandoning this common sense view? Williams goes on:

We do not have a general-purpose concept of 'object' that swings free of our ability to refer to objects in the course of playing particular language-games. Rather our understanding of 'objects' is implicit in our mastery of singular reference. In other words, 'objects' are what singular terms pick out. Central to our mastery of singular reference are practices of identification and re-identification: we know what an object is when we know what does and does not count as the same object. These practices of identification and re-identification sort 'objects' into broad categories. The criteria for being the same chair as the one I saw at the auction yesterday are different from those for being the same shade of grey as the one on the walls of my office. Someone familiar with particular practices of identifying and re-identifying can be taught to recognize these broad logical divisions ('physical object', 'colour', 'quantity'), and this can short circuit the teaching of future words. This is why no such proposition as 'There are physical objects' can be formulated. At most it could mean 'We talk about tables, chairs, dogs, cats, etc.'. This is not at all what the realist intends to assert or the idealist [sceptic] deny. (p. 86).

I'm not entirely sure I understand the argument here, so I don't intend my critical remarks to be conclusive.

(1) What is clear is the assertion that "physical objects" is not a referring expression, and this is justified by an alternative descriptive of how the expression does function. The suggestion is that it is a "logical" concept. It's not clear what this amounts to but it does entail that "physical objects" can't go into a meaningful subject-predicate sentence. But one might wonder if this really addresses the sceptic's worry given that we have allowed the sceptic to be operating in a philosophical, or sceptical context. Given

certain assumptions in the philosophy of language - not, I might add, out of keeping with Wittgenstein's own - might the sceptic not argue that the use which "physical objects" is put to in the sceptical context is a use in which it has a referring role, referring as it does to those objects (chairs, tables, and so on) that we characterise with the predicate "physical"? The point is, even if the description of "physical objects" as logical is correct, what rules out divergent and genuinely contentful uses owing to practices - such as philosophical discussion - that are familiar, and which could facilitate genuine mastery of a referring expression? It's not clear what speaks against this in the above passage.

(2) is it even correct to describe "physical objects" as playing a logical role? Well that depends on what it means, and I'm not sure I know that. The analogy with "colour" and "quantity" is not entirely helpful, things are coloured, there are quantities of things, and objects are physical (perhaps *all* objects are). But if we can say these things intelligibly - and perhaps Wittgenstein thinks we can't - why can we not say "the objects we call "physical" might not exist"?

(3) Even if it is true that "there are physical objects" is nonsense, the point is quite restricted, applying, as it does, only to "physical object" talk. But is this not just to criticise scepticism according to a specific *formulation* of it? Or - to make a slightly different point - is this not just to criticise one variety of scepticism? The point of these questions, if they are answered in the affirmative, is to note the narrow scope of this engagement with the sceptic.

Let's summarise this section. The first stumbling block to entering the "diagnostic phase" was that Williams seemed to offer an inconsistent characterisation of the "problem phase", that is, a characterisation at odds with what he previously said about the problem phase. However that worry was overcome when we characterised the problem phase as involving the argument that by ordinary criteria sceptical doubt is nonsensical (an argument, it was noted, not immune to the counter-arguments I gave above). Understanding the problem phase as making that point allowed us to hear the sceptics reply that her doubts were meaningful despite failing to meet ordinary criteria. It is in replying to this, Williams tells us, that Wittgenstein enters the diagnostic phase. However, I argued that the concern and argumentative strategy of this latter phase doesn't differ in any obvious way from the problem phase, hence, making the division into "phases" appear quite dubious. The philosophical point was that Wittgenstein's argument that "there are physical objects" is nonsense is problematic.

5 Therapy?

If I am correct and the problem/diagnostic phases of Wittgenstein's refutation are flawed, then it seems we are no further than the sceptical argument and Moore's counter-argument. Hence, it might seem pointless, without further debate, to consider what Williams calls Wittgenstein's "therapeutic phase".

However, I can't resist picking up on a strand that I find inadequate in this phase. The purpose of the "therapeutic" phase is to identify the source of confusion - that is, the confusion involved in thinking that the proposition "there are physical objects" and other sceptical doubts are meaningful. Once this has been identified one can then relieve oneself of the confusion (at least, so the therapists hope!). Strictly, and Williams admits this, what is involved is a mixture of on-going diagnosis and therapy. It's not obvious from what Williams says why therapy is needed. But here is a suggestion: therapy is needed, along with the previous phases, because a proper refutation of scepticism, for medico-philosophers like Wittgenstein, is like a cure for some illness.

So what is the source of confusion? Williams offers the following (again, he is interpreting Wittgenstein)

The reason why sceptic and idealist think that 'There are physical objects' is a hypothesis is that they are convinced that experiential knowledge - knowledge of coloured patches or 'sense-data' - is epistemologically prior to knowledge of physical objects. In fact, in their view, experiential knowledge is epistemologically basic: knowledge of sense data is distinctive in its immediacy, certainty and immunity from error... With this doctrine in place, judgements about physical objects look to be inferential... Commitment to the existence of physical objects looks like an empirical hypothesis: a particular explanation of the origin of our sense-data...(p. 90)

One might wonder whether this is the best understanding of scepticism, some have argued that Cartesian scepticism doesn't rely on a particular problematic conception of experience (for instance, Wright [2004b]). But that aside, the more contentious point, I believe, comes in Wittgenstein's suggestion (as understood by Williams) as to how we are to avoid this confusion - how to effect the cure!

According to Williams Wittgenstein thinks that the above confused conception of mind and its associated conception of experience as epistemologically basic, involves taking knowledge to be a mental state. Moore, too, is guilty of buying into this confusion, and, Williams tells us, this is what Wittgenstein means when he remarks that "Moore's view really

comes down to this: the concept "know" is analogous to the concepts 'believe', 'surmise', 'doubt', 'be convinced' in that the statement 'I know...' can't be a mistake..." (OC 21).

The solution Williams takes Wittgenstein to be offering is that we resist thinking of knowledge as a mental state. Williams says (and cf. OC 90)

If one thinks of knowledge as a mental state, thus as subjective, while recognizing 'know' is factive, one will suppose that a subjective or inner state can ensure that certain facts really do obtain. But how can a subjective state guarantee objective facts? It cannot... [T]he idea of knowledge as a 'mental state'... is perhaps the sceptic's [and Moore's] most dangerous illusion. (pp. 93-94).

But what is the alternative to viewing knowledge as a mental state?

Knowing is not a matter of a claimant's mental state but of his (or his claim's) epistemic status... There is nothing subjective about it (p. 93).

One criticism is that we shouldn't feel compelled to reject the sense-data view and its commitment to knowledge as a mental state since we can, as above, resist the view that "there are physical objects" is nonsensical.

A further point, however, is that although rejecting the view that knowledge is a mental state might be one way of dispensing with the sense-data view, we shouldn't think that taking knowledge to be a mental state entails that view. It is only if we have a dubious conception of mental states that we might think that.

Williams asks "how can a subjective state guarantee objective facts?" and replies that "it cannot". But why should we view mental states as wholly subjective? Recent work in the philosophy of mind/epistemology warns us against this (see Snowdon [1980/1], McDowell [1998] Williamson [2000]). It is not implausible to take knowledge that P as the mental state which has the fact that P as a constituent. That is, we might take (factive) mental states to be relations to, or acquaintance with facts. We might be led into thinking that we can't view mental states as such if we view the "mental" as wholly subjective and essentially separate from the "physical" or "external" world, but why should we think that?

So it seems that even if Williams/Wittgenstein are right in taking some kind of sense-data conception of experience as the route sceptical problems, it doesn't follow that in giving up on that we must give up on knowledge as a mental state, only that we must give up on knowledge as a mental state of a problematic kind. If Wittgenstein is the psycho-therapist, then this alternative suggestion might be viewed as a kind of acupuncture.

If Williams' Wittgenstein wants to rule out the more externalist view of mental states too, then he will have to do either of at least two things (there might be other options): either (1) show that the alternative Wittgensteinian conception of knowledge is superior, even if the externalist view is not incoherent. Or (2) show that the externalist view is ultimately incoherent due to a commitment to the coherence of an incoherent proposition, like "there are physical objects", this is in effect a version of the strategy used against the sense-data view.

Regarding (1) this is clearly a matter of some debate. However, one should raise an eyebrow to the fact that in offering an alternative conception of knowledge (as *not* a mental state), the Williams/Wittgenstein view just *avoids* the problematic conception of mind. It avoids it by taking knowledge out of the mind and leaving it open that the conception of the mental involved in the sense-data conception is coherent. (But of course cf. the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein [2001]).

Wittgenstein might reply that the conception of mind entails that "there are physical objects" is meaningful, but it's not, so the conception of mind is reduced to absurdity. However, if what I have said above is correct, this wouldn't be absurd at all. Furthermore, although there is a connection between the sense-data view and treating "there are physical objects" as a meaningful hypothesis, it's not clear why the latter is *entailed* by the former.

Regarding (2) I take this to be hopeless, not because the externalist wouldn't want to commit to the coherence of "there are physical objects", but because, as argued above, committing to that is not - for all Wittgenstein has said - problematic.

6 Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that Williams' Wittgenstein hasn't given a persuasive argument for the view that sceptical doubts, Moorean assertions, and propositions such as "there are physical objects" are nonsense. Furthermore, it has been argued that in the therapeutic stage Williams' Wittgenstein makes contentious and unnecessary moves in the philosophy of knowledge *qua* mental state in avoiding confusions he finds in the sceptic's and Moore's overall positions.

I have also criticised Williams overall reconstruction of Wittgenstein's argument, but not it's interpretation.

What hasn't been commented on is how (or whether) we should deal with scepticism, or with Moore, given that Williams' Wittgenstein's approach isn't persuasive. But that is not to say that some of the answer doesn't lie in Wittgenstein's work, after all, only the first portion of *On Certainty* was considered, and in particular the notion of a "hinge-proposition"

hasn't been considered.

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