Meaning and Conversational Impropriety in Sceptical Contexts

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Abstract

According to 'disjunctivist neo-Mooreanism' – a position Pritchard develops in a recent book – it is possible to know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses, even though it is conversationally inappropriate to claim such knowledge. In a recent paper, on the other hand, Pritchard expounds an 'überhinge' strategy, according to which one cannot know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, as 'hinge' propositions are necessarily groundless. In the present paper I argue that neither strategy is entirely successful. For if a proposition can be known, it can also be claimed to be known. If the latter is not possible, this is not because certain propositions are either 'intrinsically' conversationally inappropriate (as Pritchard claims in his book), or else 'rationally groundless' (as Pritchard claims in his paper), but rather that we are dealing with something that merely presents us with the *appearance* of being an epistemic claim.

Disjunctivist neo-Mooreanism; radical scepticism; closure principle; hinge propositions; Pritchard; Wittgenstein.

I Introduction

Radical scepticism continues to confound contemporary epistemology, and 'closure'-based sceptical arguments are currently all the rage. They run as follows:

(BIV1) If I know I have two hands, then I know I'm not a brain-in-a-vat (BIV)[1] [2].

(BIV2) I don't know I'm not a BIV.

(BIV3) I don't know I have two hands.

In other words, if knowledge is 'closed' under known entailment, it seems that I must first be able to rule out that I am a BIV before I am entitled to any knowledge claims. But can I know that I am not one? In a recent book[3], Duncan Pritchard claims that we can, for, according to 'disjunctivist neo-Mooreanism', it is possible to know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses, even though it is conversationally inappropriate to claim such knowledge. So, on this account, we can endorse both the 'closure principle' and have anti-sceptical knowledge, but we cannot *say* that we do.

Pritchard takes an altogether different anti-sceptical line in a recent paper (2014), 'Entitlement and the Groundlessness of Our Believing', where he argues that because the denials of sceptical hypotheses function as what he calls 'überhinges', we *cannot* know them. For 'hinge propositions' are not like ordinary beliefs and cannot be acquired according to normal belief-forming mechanisms, such as competent deduction from known propositions.

While 'disjunctivist neo-Mooreanism' takes its inspiration from the work of John McDowell, Pritchard's 'Entitlement' paper is indebted to Wittgenstein's *On Certainty,* where Pritchard claims to find the idea that commitment to the denials of sceptical hypotheses is necessarily groundless. Although Pritchard is to be commended for taking *On Certainty* seriously and giving it a run for its money, I will argue that his

[1] (BIV1) relies on the closure (K) principle for knowledge: 'If S knows that p, and S competently deduces from p that q thereby coming to believe that q on this basis while retaining her knowledge that p, then S knows that q.')
[2] (BIV) is shorthand for being the victim of any radical sceptical scenario.
[3] *Epistemological Disjunctivism* (2012).

account is ultimately not successful. I will show that since, in sceptical contexts, 'I know I have two hands' does not mean what it does in ordinary contexts, it is in fact impossible to get a 'closure-based' sceptical argument off the ground at all. If I am right, an appeal to 'conversational impropriety' as a way of explaining the 'oddness' of anti-sceptical claims while retaining 'closure', becomes entirely unnecessary. For if a proposition can be known, it can also be claimed to be known. If the latter is not possible, this is not because certain propositions (e.g. claims to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses) are either 'intrinsically' conversationally inappropriate (as Pritchard claims in his book), or else 'rationally groundless' (as Pritchard claims in his 'Entitlement' paper), but rather that we are dealing with something that merely presents us with the *appearance* of being an epistemic claim. The alternative account that I offer will doubtless strike some readers as controversial, but it comes with the advantage of being able to undermine an argument that has bedevilled contemporary epistemology for decades. This should give one a *prima facie* reason to take it seriously.

II 'Disjunctivist Neo-Mooreanism'

It is a central thesis of what Pritchard calls 'epistemological disjunctivism' (henceforth ED) – a conception developed from the writings of John McDowell (Pritchard 2012: 7) – that in the 'good case' perceptual reasons are both factive and reflectively accessible to the agent:

Epistemological Disjunctivism: The Core Thesis

In paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge an agent, *S*, has perceptual knowledge that φ in virtue of being in possession of rational support, *R*, for her belief that φ which is both *factive* (i.e., *R*'s obtaining entails φ) and *reflectively accessible* to *S*[4].

In other words, if the environment is 'epistemically friendly', and nothing is interfering with one's perceptual capacities, seeing that p provides factive epistemic support for the belief that p, while in the corresponding 'bad case', where the environment is 'epistemically unfriendly' and one only seems to see that p, one does not have factive epistemic support for one's belief [5].

This conception, if correct, has important anti-sceptical consequences. For according to ED, if one is in the good+ case, seeing that one has two hands entails knowing that one has two hands, which means that, given 'closure', this also entails that one knows that one is not a BIV. So it seems that, if one is in the good+ case, ED provides one with a refutation of radical scepticism.

But perhaps this is too quick: one might think that ED only works as a way of blocking scepticism if one already knows that one is in the good case. Since everyone agrees, however, that BIV-generated experiences are phenomenologically indistinguishable from ordinary experiences, this demand seems impossible to fulfil. Pritchard has a response to what he calls the 'distinguishability' problem: if one endorses ED, an absence of the relevant discriminatory capacities allowing one perceptually to distinguish BIV from non-BIV experiences, is not of itself sufficient to undermine knowledge. For, if one is in the good + case, one's epistemic support will be

[4] (Pritchard 2012: 13).

[5] But see Pritchard's taxonomy of 'good' and 'bad' cases (Prichard 2012: 29), which allows him to reject the 'entailment thesis': 'if one sees that p, then one knows that p'. On Pritchard's account, seeing that p only entails knowing that p in 'good+' cases, i.e. in situations that are both 'subjectively' as well as 'objectively' epistemically good (cases where one's perceptual capacities are functioning normally and there is nothing present in the environment – such as, e.g., 'barn facades' – that 'intervenes' to prevent veridical perception).

factive, whether or not one can actually distinguish the good+ case from a phenomenologically indistinguishable error-possibility[6].

This still leaves the question of whether, if ED is correct, one can just argue for anti-sceptical knowledge directly. For if one indeed knows that one has two hands in virtue of possessing a factive reason in support of this proposition, there cannot be anything wrong with deducing, and hence coming to know, that one is not a BIV. But this seems problematic given that 'there appears to be something conversationally very odd about asserting that one knows the denial of a specific radical sceptical hypothesis' (Pritchard 2012: 115). In other words, even if one is willing to grant the neo-Moorean that one can indeed know that one is not a BIV, an explanation is needed for why explicit claims to know that one is not one sound so conversationally inappropriate (*ibid.*).

Pritchard in effect goes on to argue that, in the absence of possessing the relevant discriminatory capacities (that would allow one to distinguish BIV from non-BIV scenarios), being in possession of a reflectively accessible *factive* reason in support of the proposition that one is not a BIV is sufficient to rule out the unmotivated error-possibility that one is one – where an 'unmotivated error-possibility' is one for which there is no evidence – but at the same time renders *claims* to know inappropriate, since such claims conversationally imply that one can distinguish the proposition claimed to be known from the relevant error-possibility (Pritchard 2012: 147-9). Given, however, that it is impossible to do this in the radical sceptical case – since one precisely lacks

[6] Consequently, an epistemological disjunctivist would not accept the following argument (Pritchard 2008: 294):
(P1) In the 'bad' case, the supporting reasons for one's perceptual beliefs can only consist of the way the world appears to one. (Premise)
(P2) The 'good' and 'bad' cases are phenomenologically indistinguishable. (Premise)
(C1) So, the supporting reasons for one's perceptual beliefs in the 'good' case can be no better than in the bad case. (From P2)
(C2) So, the supporting reasons for one's perceptual beliefs can only consist of the way the world appears to one. (From (P1), (C1))
For (C1) does not follow from (P2) unless one accepts the following thesis (Pritchard 2012: 39):
The only facts that *S* can know by reflection alone in a good+ case are facts that *S*'s physical duplicate in a corresponding bad case can also know by reflection alone. Since epistemological disjunctivists explicitly reject this thesis, the argument fails to go through.

reflectively accessible discriminating grounds that would enable one to distinguish BIV from non-BIV scenarios – it is illegitimate to claim knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses, even though, if one is in the good+ case, such knowledge is in fact possessed. Hence, the oddness of the claim 'Look, I can't tell that I'm not a handless BIV, but I *know* that I've got two hands' (Pritchard 2012: 149) is merely apparent, since if made by the epistemological disjunctivist neo-Moorean, this claim turns out to be perfectly true (*ibid.*).

III Pritchard's *On Certainty*

In 'Entitlement and the Groundlessness of Our Believing' Pritchard (2014) claims that in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein presents an account of the structure of reasons such that the rational support that we can offer for our beliefs necessarily presupposes 'hinge commitments' which cannot themselves ever be rationally supported (2014: 205). That is to say, the rational grounds that can be adduced in favour of our beliefs must be 'local' (rather than, say, 'global') – i.e. they depend on 'hinge propositions' that don't themselves admit of further justification. While it might seem that Wittgenstein's conception of 'hinges' is context-bound and relative to the person in question, Pritchard believes that anyone's heterogeneous class of personal hinge commitments in the end reduces to only one 'überhinge': the proposition that one isn't radically and fundamentally mistaken in all of one's beliefs (Pritchard 2014: 204). But having this 'überhinge' commitment also commits one to regarding sceptical hypotheses as false, even though, prior to having been introduced to sceptical scenarios, one will not have formed any views about them (*ibid.*). Consequently, both one's personal hinge commitments – which, according to Pritchard, are simply specific ways of 'codifying' one's 'überhinge' commitment – as well as the 'überhinge' itself, share the same

epistemic characteristic: rational groundlessness (*ibid.*). It is for this reason, Pritchard contends, that there can, for Wittgenstein, be no fully general rational evaluation of our beliefs of the kind the sceptic (or anti-sceptic) requires, since 'it is a truth of "logic" (Wittgenstein 1969, §142) that all rational evaluations presuppose hinge commitments which cannot themselves be rationally discharged' (*ibid.*, 205).

Now one might think that this conception of reasons issues a standing invitation to scepticism, especially if it should turn out that, on this view, one must reject the highly plausible 'closure (KR) principle'[7]:

The Closure (KR) Principle

If *S* has rationally supported knowledge that *p*, and *S* competently deduces from *p* that *q*, thereby coming to believe that *q* on this basis while retaining her rationally supported knowledge that *p*, then *S* also has rationally supported knowledge that *q*[8].

The reason for this is that if the rational support that one can offer in favour of an ordinary belief can never give one rational support for thinking that the 'überhinge' proposition is true – a consequence that would seem to contravene the 'closure (KR) principle' – then one could make a case for thinking that none of one's ordinary beliefs are rationally supported either. For, unless one rejects closure (K) along with the closure (KR) principle, if one has no rational grounds for thinking that one is not radically and fundamentally mistaken in all one's beliefs, then one has no rational grounds for holding any ordinary belief to be true.

The way out of this, Pritchard argues, is to recognize that commitment to the 'überhinge' is non-optional, and specifically not to be construed as an ordinary belief at all (*ibid.*, 208). If this is true, then the 'closure (KR) principle' is not, in fact,

[7] In the draft of this paper, Pritchard called this principle the 'Transmission Principle'. 'KR' stands for rationally grounded knowledge.
[8] Pritchard (2014: 208).

contravened, since it is simply not possible to acquire a belief in an 'überhinge' through competent deduction or via any other sort of belief-forming mechanism. Given that commitment to the 'überhinge' is necessarily immune to rational considerations, it is best not thought of as a 'belief' at all, even though it does share some salient characteristics with belief, notably, full commitment to the target proposition (*ibid.*, 202). Furthermore, the 'überhinge' commitment is one we are bound to have anyway (*ibid.*, 208), and hence we cannot be said to acquire it via competent deduction from other beliefs.

Pritchard deals with the 'closure (K) principle', which he formulates as follows, in a similar way:

The Closure (K) Principle

If *S* knows that *p*, and *S* competently deduces from *p* that *q*, thereby coming to believe that *q* on this basis while retaining her knowledge that *p*, then *S* knows that *q*[9].

If, as Pritchard has already argued, one cannot acquire a belief in a hinge proposition on the basis of a belief-forming process like competent deduction, let alone base one's beliefs on the evidential outcome of such a process, one can fail to know the propositions that express one's hinge commitments and still not contravene the closure principle (*ibid.*, 209). Furthermore, since commitment to the 'überhinge' is rationally required if one is to avoid cognitive paralysis, one is, for this reason, rationally 'entitled' to this proposition (*ibid.*, 210).

IV A Critique of Pritchard's Conception(s)

[9] (Pritchard 2014: 209).

If one tries to put these two conceptions together, the following picture emerges[10]. According to disjunctivist neo-Mooreanism, one can know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses, even though it is conversationally inappropriate to *say* that one knows them. On Pritchard's 'Entitlement' conception, on the other hand, one *cannot* know that 'überhinge' propositions (such as the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses) are true, since these, strictly speaking, aren't beliefs and cannot be acquired according to belief-forming mechanisms. What are we to make of this?

There seem to be two main problems here. The first is disjunctivist *neo-Mooreanism*, i.e. Pritchard's attempt to turn McDowell's disjunctivism into a direct answer to radical scepticism by making use of the notion of conversational impropriety. The second is that Pritchard fails to distinguish between a 'logical' and an 'epistemic' sense of 'I know'. These two problems are connected, and jointly give rise to the tension in Pritchard's account. In what follows, I will argue that once we have made the relevant distinctions, we will come to realize that there is no 'closure-based' sceptical argument at all, and hence that appeals to conversational impropriety or to 'entitlement' are superfluous.

IV.1

As we have already seen in section II, Pritchard believes that if we accept epistemological disjunctivism, then the claim, 'Look, I can't tell that I'm not a handless BIV, but I *know* that I've got two hands' (Pritchard 2012: 149), while conversationally inappropriate, is nevertheless perfectly true. So the question immediately arises why, if the claim *is* perfectly true, we cannot *say* that it is. Given that Pritchard has argued that

[10] In his most recent book, *Epistemic Angst* (2015), Pritchard argues that these two different approaches can be integrated by distinguishing between closure-based and 'underdetermination-based' radical scepticism. He goes on to claim that while epistemological disjunctivism can answer an 'underdetermination'-based sceptical argument, it would be 'epistemically immodest' to claim that it can also answer a 'closure (RK)'-based form of radical scepticism. For a detailed discussion of this conception, see my 2016.

one need not always be able to *tell* – i.e. be able perceptually to discriminate – whether a particular error-possibility obtains in order to be in possession of knowledge that it does not, it seems that, despite *sounding* odd, there is actually nothing wrong with the anti-sceptic's claim. Furthermore, given that the radical sceptical error-possibility is *in principle* unperceivable, no one ought to expect that anti-sceptical claims can be made on the basis of perceptual discriminatory evidence. For, after all, there can, in principle, be no perceptual discriminatory evidence for sceptical claims either – which is why Pritchard calls them 'unmotivated' error-possibilities in the first place – but no one thinks that this conversationally implies that no sceptical error-possibilities can ever be raised. Consequently, it's unclear why saying that one knows that one is not a BIV – asserted on the strength of one's factive reason in the good+ case – should generate the conversational implicature that one is able perceptually to discriminate BIV from non-BIV scenarios. But if it doesn't, then, *pace* Pritchard, the disjunctivist neo-Moorean ought to be entitled to his anti-sceptical claim.

The reason why Pritchard nevertheless believes that the disjunctivist neo-Moorean's claim is conversationally inappropriate is that he continues to treat radical sceptical error-possibilities as generating the same conversational implicatures as cleverly disguised mule scenarios (where someone raises the motivated error-possibility that the zebra before one in the zoo enclosure might be a cleverly disguised mule), even though Pritchard himself recognizes that there is a difference in *kind* between the radical sceptical scenario and the cleverly disguised mule hypothesis:

> When it comes to radical sceptical error-possibilities, unlike 'local' error-possibilities (e.g., the 'cleverly disguised mule' hypothesis), the problem with regard to being able perceptually to discriminate the target scenarios moves from being one of degree to being one of in kind. If Zula[11] had been better trained, for example, then she could have

[11] The name of the agent in question.

> been in an epistemic position such that she could perceptually discriminate between zebras and cleverly disguised mules. But there is no sense at all in which Zula could enhance her discriminative powers such that she could perceptually discriminate between a normal scenario and a radical sceptical scenario (Pritchard 2012: 148).

But, if so, one might legitimately wonder why, if the radical sceptical scenario is indeed different in kind to the cleverly disguised mule hypothesis, this should not also make a difference to the kind of conversational implicature generated by the radical sceptical case. So, while one might agree with Pritchard that an explicit knowledge claim might be out of place when a motivated error-possibility has been raised in the 'zebra' case, it is far from clear why the same conversational inappropriateness should attach to the radical sceptical scenario. That is to say, given that Zula, as Pritchard himself admits, could legitimately be expected to have had 'better training' when she claims that there is a zebra in front of her as opposed to a cleverly disguised mule, no one could have had 'better training' in the radical sceptical case. Hence, it would make sense to expect that if Zula claims to know that there is a zebra in front of her in contexts where the motivated error-possibility that there is a cleverly disguised mule in front of her has been raised, then she is able perceptually to discriminate between a zebra and a cleverly disguised mule. But the same is simply not true of the radical sceptical scenario. Since, in the latter case, it is logically (and not just contingently) impossible to discriminate between BIV and normal scenarios, it cannot make sense conversationally to expect that claims to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses nevertheless be made on perceptual discriminatory grounds. For this would be like agreeing that it is logically impossible for there to be round squares, but then to demand that explicit claims to know that there are no such things be made on the basis of perceptual discriminatory evidence. This, surely, is incoherent.

Even if one were to let that pass, however, it is not entirely clear what sort of conversational implicature Pritchard has in mind in the first place. If this is supposed to be the Gricean notion, then conversational implicatures are both cancellable and indeterminate[12], neither of which seems to fit Pritchard's account. For example, I might say, 'Jones has nice handwriting, but I don't mean to suggest he's a poor student'. But saying, 'I know I'm not a BIV, but I can't discriminate between a situation in which I am one and one in which I'm not' seems to compound, rather than to remove, the impropriety in question. Furthermore, no determinate claim is implied by my saying that Jones has nice handwriting, only some claim along the lines of his being a poor student. Pritchard's implicature, by contrast, seems quite determinate.

So perhaps Pritchard's implicature is conventional, not conversational. But, if so, then, on the Gricean conception, it would be detachable. In other words, it would be possible to use a different sentence to make the same claim minus the implicature. In a standard example, saying 'Tim is rich but polite' implicates a contrast between being rich and being polite. One can detach this implicature and make the same claim by saying, 'Tim is rich and polite'. There seems to be no other sentence, however, which could express the same thing as 'I know I'm not a BIV', but which would not implicate the problematic claim about discriminatory grounds.

Finally, there seems to be a problem with the very idea of an 'intrinsically' conversationally inappropriate (factual) claim. For how, one might ask, can a proposition both be a *claim* – i.e. something that can coherently be asserted (and, what is more, be *true*) – and yet there never be *any* situation or context where this claim can actually be made?[13] Since if, as Pritchard has argued, denials of sceptical hypotheses aren't even assertible in the best possible case, that is, when we are in possession of

[12] See Grice (1989).

[13] This excludes performative contradictions and versions of Moore's or the liar paradox, which are unassertible due to an inherent tension in the 'claim' itself, or between the content of the 'claim' and the context under which it is asserted. But no such features are in play here. On Pritchard's conception, the denial of a sceptical hypothesis is a straightforward factual claim that is entailed by the relevant perceptual reasons, and so its putative unassertability is not due to paradox.

factive reasons that entail the truth of the proposition claimed to be known, then it seems that there can *never* be a context where the anti-sceptical knowledge claim can be made. But if there is indeed no such context (not even a hypothetical one), then it is hard to see how the relevant string of words can so much as possess a sense[14] and hence qualify as a *claim* at all.

If this is correct, Pritchard faces the following, fatal dilemma: either anti-sceptical claims are genuine claims, in which case there ought to be contexts in which they can (at least in principle) be asserted (and hence there cannot be an 'intrinsically' unassertible, factual, claim), or, because there is never any context in which this can be done, anti-sceptical claims turn out not really to be *claims* at all. Either horn is sufficient to undermine disjunctivist neo-Mooreanism[15].

IV.2

The account that Pritchard offers in his 'Entitlement' paper, presents similar difficulties. Crucially, although he approvingly mentions Wittgenstein's insight that it is a truth of 'logic' that all rational evaluations presuppose hinge commitments that cannot themselves be rationally grounded (Pritchard 2014: 205), Pritchard fails to recognize the full implications of this idea. That is to say, while for Wittgenstein, there is a difference in *kind* between logical or grammatical 'truths' and ordinary, contingent ones, Pritchard, in the end, runs this distinction together. For this reason, he concludes that a commitment to the 'überhinge'[16] that one is not radically and fundamentally mistaken in all of one's beliefs is a commitment to regarding radical sceptical scenarios as false (Pritchard 2014: 204), whereas Wittgenstein, for reasons we will come to shortly,

[14] I am assuming (but cannot argue it here) that context is relevant to meaning ascription.
[15] Of course Pritchard could just drop the claim about conversational impropriety, but were he to do so, disjunctivist neo-Mooreanism, if still in the business of seeking to provide a refutation of radical scepticism, would collapse into 'straight' or 'naïve' neo-Mooreanism, a notion that Pritchard rightly regards as problematic.
[16] The notion of an 'überhinge' is Pritchard's own. It does not occur in *On Certainty*.

believes that radical sceptical hypotheses turn out to be illusions. This is not an exegetical dispute. In other words, although I do think that Pritchard does not read *On Certainty* correctly, this would not matter in the present context, if it did not also lead to philosophical difficulties. I will go on to show that it does.

The reason why Pritchard thinks that our commitment to the 'überhinge' is rationally groundless is that whatever grounds we did cite in favour of it, would already presuppose the truth of this commitment (2014: 205)[17]. In other words, if I were to contend, *à la* Moore, that because I know I have two hands, I know I'm not a BIV, this would not get me very far, since, unless I already have independent grounds for thinking that I am not radically and fundamentally mistaken in all my beliefs, I cannot trust the testimony of my eyes either. In short, we cannot 'bootstrap' our presuppositions (such as the truth of the 'überhinge') into items of knowledge.

Consequently, no fully general evaluation of our whole rational system is possible: 'since all rational evaluation necessarily takes place relative to groundless hinge commitments…the very idea of a fully general rational evaluation – i.e. one which does not presuppose any hinge commitments – is incoherent, whether that evaluation is positive (i.e. anti-sceptical) or negative (i.e. sceptical)' (*ibid.*). Although this seems right[18], Pritchard is not prepared to take on the full scope of this insight. He therefore ends up concluding, *contra* the disjunctivist neo-Moorean position advocated in his book, that we cannot know that we are not BIVs, even though it is rationally incumbent upon us, on pain of cognitive paralysis, to be committed to this proposition nevertheless.

[17] I am not, in this paper, going to discuss the question whether Pritchard's conception of an 'überhinge' as something which is not a belief, but nevertheless something we can have a commitment to, works, since this question does not arise on the alternative account that I will go on to offer. For the time being, however, I will run with Pritchard's notion for the sake of argument.

[18] For the purposes of this paper, I am going to assume that Pritchard has made a good case for the claim that a 'global' evaluation of all of our beliefs taken together is incoherent, as a full treatment of this idea is beyond the scope of this paper. For a defence of the notion see my 2016, Chapter 4.

Despite Pritchard's reassurances that this is not, as it were, a '*faute de mieux*' position, since it is not as if, had we been more careful or thorough in how we acquired rational support for our beliefs, we could have avoided the essential locality of our reasons, this is exactly how his conception ends up striking one – something that Pritchard himself as good as admits: 'For it is one thing to recognise that we *must* have these hinge commitments, and thus that our reasons are by *necessity* essentially local, and quite another to get a reflective grip on how we are to embrace this fact about our epistemic position given that we are now fully aware of it. In short, how are we as reflective rational creatures to live with (our awareness of) the fact that our rational system is limited in this way?' (2014: 210)

The idea that the impossibility of a global evaluation of our entire rational system might constitute an epistemic *limitation*, however, is precisely one that Wittgenstein would reject, as *On Certainty* is in the business of challenging the orthodox assumption that we stand in an epistemological relation to our whole world-picture[19]. Nevertheless, this does not imply, as Pritchard mistakenly seems to assume, that our picture of the world is therefore epistemically groundless, since a *non-epistemic* relation is not the same as a groundless one. For 'groundlessness' is itself an *epistemic*[20] notion. That is to say, it implies that there *could* – or ought to – be grounds, although there are in fact none, whereas what Wittgenstein is trying to say is that there could not so much as be any, and that the absence of grounds is therefore not to be viewed as a lack or as an epistemic shortcoming. In this respect, the absence of grounds is akin to a logical *limit*, and not to a *limitation*. For example, it does not constitute a limitation on human (or divine power) that there is no such thing as constructing 'round squares', say, since the combination of the signs 'round' and 'square' ends up not meaning anything.

[19] 'I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between [what is] true and [what is] false' (*On Certainty* §95-6).

[20] In this respect, Wittgenstein's own remark, which Pritchard has chosen as a motto for his paper, is rather misleading: 'The difficulty is to realise the groundlessness of our believing' (*On Certainty* §166).

Consequently, if it is indeed a 'truth of logic', as Pritchard claims, that all rational evaluations presuppose hinge commitments, and, more specifically, a commitment to the 'überhinge' that I cannot be mistaken in all my beliefs, then this also constitutes a commitment to something whose opposite isn't false, but ultimately just empty. The following remarks from *On Certainty* make this clear:

> If 'I know etc.' is conceived as a grammatical proposition, of course the 'I' cannot be important. And it properly means 'There is no such thing as a doubt in this case' or 'The expression "I do not know" makes no sense in this case'. And of course it follows from this that 'I *know*' makes no sense either.
>
> 'I know' is here a *logical* insight. Only realism can't be proved by means of it (§58-9).

What Wittgenstein is trying to get at here is that saying that '"I do not know" makes no sense in this case' must not be construed as implying a form of ignorance or lack of knowledge (i.e. an epistemic limitation). Consequently, it is not as if, *pace* Pritchard, we groundlessly need to accept the 'hinge' that we know that we have hands, it is rather that we have no clear idea of what it might mean not to 'accept' it. For, if, under normal circumstances where grounds for doubt are absent, I nevertheless 'doubt' that I have hands, I can no longer be certain of the meaning of my words either[21].

In a nutshell, what Wittgenstein wants to show is something quite radical, namely, that we don't stand in an epistemic relation – groundless or otherwise – to 'hinge propositions' at all. Rather, 'their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules' (*On Certainty* §95). In other words, 'hinges' may look like ordinary empirical propositions, but that appearance is deceptive, for they are 'grammatical' or, as McGinn puts it,

[21] 'If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either' (*On Certainty* §114).

'technique-constituting'[22]. That is to say, they provide the necessary 'background' 'against which I distinguish between true and false' (*On Certainty* §94). In this respect, 'hinge propositions' function as what one might call the logical enabling conditions that allow our epistemic practices to operate. Given that Wittgenstein wants to restrict uses of 'to know'[23] to cases where talk of evidence is appropriate, however, and where it is conceivable that, had things been otherwise, one might not have known the relevant proposition, it is inappropriate either to claim or not to claim that one knows that one's got hands. For in order for 'knowing' to make sense, 'doubting' must make sense too.

The concept of 'knowledge', for Wittgenstein, is consequently 'bipolar'. It only makes sense to enter a knowledge-claim into conversation, if there is also the possibility (at least in principle) that, had things been otherwise, I might not have known the thing in question (or vice versa). If, however, a failure to know (or not to know) is ruled out *ab initio* – as in the case of 'hinges' – then 'knowledge-claims' are empty. That is to say, I can only claim to know something, if there is a suitable epistemic gap between what I claim to know to be true, and this actually being so, which, in turn, makes it possible for the concept of evidential warrant to get a proper grip. But in the case of 'hinge' propositions there is no such 'gap' and consequently no 'evidential grounds'. This is why Wittgenstein says that if, in ordinary circumstances, Moore were to pronounce the opposite of those propositions which he declares certain, 'we should not just not share his opinion: we should regard him as demented' (*On Certainty* §155). If this were an 'ordinary' case of not knowing, where one could cite evidence, then one could just not share Moore's opinion.

In other words, 'hinge propositions' are not, *pace* Pritchard, groundlessly held commitments that we are rationally entitled to; rather, they are 'propositions' where

[22] See Marie McGinn (1989).
[23] At least in their straightforwardly epistemic sense (see discussion of the distinction between a 'logical' and an 'epistemic' sense of 'to know' below).

doubt is *logically* excluded[24]. That is to say, they are not even in the market for knowledge (since they must always already be presupposed if questions about what I can know are to have a sense), and consequently cannot be doubted or groundlessly held either. At best, and as Wittgenstein says, what they articulate is a 'logical' (or 'grammatical') insight[25]: 'I know I have two hands', asserted in ordinary circumstances, really means 'there is no such thing as a doubt in this case' – it does not make sense as an anti-sceptical (Moorean) claim.

In order not to get confused between what Wittgenstein calls a 'grammatical' or 'logical' sense of 'I know' and ordinary uses of these terms, I propose to distinguish between a 'logical' and an 'epistemic' sense of 'I know'. For example, an unproblematic – i.e. straightforwardly 'epistemic' – employment of 'I know I have two hands' would be the following. I visit someone in hospital who has been in an accident and his whole body is covered in bandages. In such a case, I might not know whether this person still has hands, for they might have been amputated. If he reassures me by saying 'I know I have hands', then I will take this to imply that he has been able to check (say, by having had the bandages removed by a doctor earlier in the day)[26]. Here the claim 'I know I have hands' makes sense, since we also have a clear idea of what it would be like not to know that one has hands. For example, had one just woken up from an anaesthetic after a serious accident with one's body completely covered in bandages, one would not know that one had hands. In other words, in straightforwardly 'epistemic' cases of 'knowing', there is 'logical space' both for knowing the proposition

[24] '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' (*On Certainty* §341). Compare also §194.

[25] I agree with Peter Hacker that only factual propositions are bipolar for Wittgenstein; grammatical or 'logical' remarks (i.e. the 'necessary truths' of traditional philosophy) are not, since what they inform us about are not empirical facts. Rather, they remind us of features constitutive of the language-game, and, as Wittgenstein says, 'everything descriptive of a language-game is part of logic' (*On Certainty* §55). Consequently, a factual proposition can coherently be asserted *and* denied, whereas the denial of a grammatical or 'logical' remark results in a nonsense (i.e. in something that lacks sense). In this respect, grammatical or 'logical' 'propositions' are quite unlike ordinary empirical (factual) propositions. One can still call them 'truths' or 'propositions' if one so wishes, as long as one keeps in mind that they are distinct from ordinary truths, and much more akin to truisms or articulations of rules.

[26] Cf. *On Certainty* §23.

in question as well as for not doing so (depending on the way things happen to be). Furthermore, if one does know, one is able to offer justification for one's knowledge claim (e.g. having made sure in the relevant way, say by looking).

Neither of these two conditions are fulfilled in the radical sceptical case. If I assert in ordinary circumstances where nothing unusual (such as accidents etc.) has occurred, that I know that I have hands (in order to counter a radical sceptical claim, say), it is unclear what sort of justification I could offer for this. For if the existence of my hands is in doubt, I can hardly rely on the testimony of my eyes to reassure me of their presence. As Wittgenstein says:

> If a blind man were to ask me 'Have you got two hands?' I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don't know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn't I test my *eyes* by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? *What* is to be tested by *what*? (*On Certainty* §125)

In other words, I do not believe that I have hands because I have made sure in the relevant way. For there is no 'relevant way' of making sure here – if the existence of my hands is in doubt, then so is everything else, including the meaning of my words. That is to say, if, in ordinary circumstances where grounds for doubt are absent, I could nevertheless be 'wrong' about having hands, then this would be no ordinary 'mistake', but would rather constitute an 'annihilation of all yardsticks' (*On Certainty* §492). Furthermore, do we really have a clear idea, outside of doing philosophy, what *doubting* that one has hands really amounts to? For what could this possibly mean? That one wouldn't care or flinch if someone tried to chop them off?

At this point the sceptic might perhaps object that we do have a clear idea of what it would be like not to know that one has hands, for, surely, that's just the BIV scenario! That is to say, if I were a BIV, I could not know that I have hands, since,

firstly, I could not know anything, and, secondly, I would not even have hands. Although the latter two claims are true, the objection does not constitute a genuine counter-example to the foregoing argument. Taking the second point first: if I don't have hands (say, because I'm a BIV), and I could (miraculously) come to know this fact, then my claim 'I know I don't have hands' would be perfectly meaningful, and, indeed, not relevantly different from the accident scenario discussed above. If, on the other hand, the BIV scenario is only a fancy way of fleshing out the thought that I might be globally wrong about everything (as it tends to be), then 'I know I have two hands' is no longer a proposition about hands (or other body parts) at all, but rather means something like: 'I know I cannot be globally wrong' or 'I know I'm not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis'. But, if so, we have moved from an 'epistemic' use of 'I know' to what Wittgenstein calls a 'logical' or 'grammatical' one. Consequently, we are not concerned with an ordinary factual claim, but rather with a logical enabling condition: if nothing stands fast for me, the notions of 'truth' and 'falsity' lose their meaning too. It is this fact that the radical sceptic overlooks. He believes that he can call everything into doubt at the same time, but does not realize that the attempt to do so simultaneously deprives his expressions of doubt of a sense: 'If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty' (*On Certainty* §115)[27].

So while any ordinary factual claim can be negated and still make sense, the attempt to negate the 'überhinge' by claiming that 'I know I am mistaken all the time' turns out not to be coherently assertible. But if the negation of a (putatively factual) proposition is incoherent, then so, arguably, is the proposition itself. Hence, 'I know I have two hands' can *look* like an ordinary epistemic claim, but in the radical sceptical

[27] If this is right, then Descartes was wrong to think that it makes sense to call everything into doubt at the same time. This is not a practical limitation (and what Wittgenstein is proposing is consequently not a form of pragmatism). That is to say, it is not that, in actual fact, I just cannot doubt everything (but I might for the sake of 'pure enquiry'), it is rather that a 'doubt' that attempts to doubt 'everything' is *not* a doubt.

context (i.e. in ordinary circumstances where radical sceptical error-possibilities have been raised) either has no clear meaning or else constitutes an articulation of the 'logical truth' that 'there is no such thing as a doubt in this case' (*On Certainty* §58)[28] [29].

IV.3

If the foregoing is correct, and 'I know I have two hands' is not, in sceptical contexts, a proposition about hands at all, then 'closure'-based sceptical arguments are impossible. For if 'I know I have two hands' means something like 'I know I'm not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis' (or 'I know I can't be wrong all the time'), and we substitute this into the 'closure'-based sceptical argument articulated in the Introduction, we get:

(BIV1) If I know I have two hands (read 'am not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis'), then I know I'm not a BIV.

(BIV2) I don't know I'm not a BIV.

(BIV3) I don't know I have two hands (read 'am not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis').

But since the BIV scenario is really just shorthand for 'am the victim of a sceptical hypothesis', the argument now reads:

[28] The only context where 'I know I have two hands' literally means *I know I have two hands* is in versions of the accident scenario discussed above.

[29] And once the possibility of global falsehood has been ruled out, the most that can threaten us is a 'local' scepticism of the sort, say, that many of my beliefs might be false. In the absence, however, of the acceptability of the thought that I might *always* be wrong and thus never 'in touch' with reality at all, such local scepticisms can, in principle, be overcome. For more on this, see my 2016.

(BIV1) If I know I'm not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis, then I know I'm not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis.

(BIV2) I don't know that I'm not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis.

(BIV3) I don't know that I'm not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis.

And this isn't an argument, but a tautology followed by a bald assertion. So, it seems that there can be no such thing as a 'closure'-based sceptical argument: The appearance that there might be one is generated purely by the confusion that 'I know I have two hands' makes sense as an anti-sceptical claim[30]. If it doesn't, however, then Pritchard's attempt to preserve the 'closure (K)' and 'closure (KR)' principles by arguing that commitment to the 'überhinge' cannot be acquired through competent deduction is unnecessary[31] (even if true). For if there is no 'epistemic' sense of 'to know' in radical sceptical contexts, one cannot even get the first premise, (BIV1), off the ground.

Consequently, *pace* Pritchard, there is no 'genuine sceptical difficulty' concerning the essential locality of our reasons. If it is indeed a 'truth of logic' that no 'global' rational evaluation of all our practices is possible[32], then the thought that one could be wrong about everything all of the time turns out not to be false, but to lack sense (since the opposite of a 'logical truth' is an incoherent notion). But to say this is not, of course, and as Wittgenstein emphasizes, to offer a 'proof' of realism. The problem with both of Pritchard's accounts is that he would like it to be one.

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[30] And in this respect it is irrelevant what phrase you substitute after 'I know'. I.e. if, in sceptical contexts, 'I know I have two hands' is not really a claim about hands at all, then neither would 'I know my cat's name' be a claim about my cat or 'I know that London is the capital of England' be a claim about London. Rather, in each case this would just be a roundabout way of insisting that we cannot be globally wrong. This is what Wittgenstein means when he says that 'I know' does not tolerate metaphysical emphasis (*On Certainty* §482).

[31] For a similar (non-Wittgensteinian) argument, see Luciano Floridi (2012).

[32] And, as previously mentioned, I have assumed, but have not argued in detail here, that Pritchard is right about this (though wrong about its implications).

V Conclusion

If what I have argued in this paper is correct, disjunctivist *neo-Mooreanism* turns out to be impossible. While one could (and perhaps should) accept epistemological disjunctivism on its own, the attempt to turn it into a refutation of radical scepticism fails[33]. Does this imply that we need concede victory to the sceptic? No. For if, as I have argued, there is, in fact, no 'closure-based' sceptical argument, since anti-sceptical 'claims' are either 'logical' (i.e. 'grammatical') 'truths' in disguise, or else incoherent, then the traditional sceptical problem disappears. In other words, if the conception advocated in *On Certainty* can be made palatable[34] – a goal towards which this paper has provided, at best, a first step – then we can retain both the 'closure' principle(s) *and* hang on to our ordinary knowledge claims, which seems like a good result.[35]

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[33] So, for example, in contexts where it makes sense to claim that one knows that one has hands, such as in the accident scenarios described above, one would, if one accepted ED, be in possession of a factive reason (such as seeing that one has hands) that would entail the truth of this proposition. But one could not turn this fact into an anti-sceptical claim à la Moore, for the attempt to do so would result in a radical change of context: one would be moving from an ordinary context, where mundane knowledge claims can be made, to a radical sceptical context, where we are not trying to assert an ordinary state of affairs, but rather the truth of the 'überhinge'. If what I have argued in this paper is right, however, then this is something one cannot do. For it implies that we have moved from an 'epistemic' use of 'I know' to a 'logical' or grammatical one, which means that Moore would not be informing us about a true state of affairs, but would rather be articulating a condition for the meaningfulness of our epistemic practices taken as a whole. Hence, it is not that 'closure' fails, but rather that this principle has no application here.

[34] A project I pursue in my 2016.

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