Why Wittgenstein Doesn't Refute Skepticism

Porque Wittgenstein não refuta o ceticismo

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ABSTRACT

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein formulates several criticisms against skepticism about our knowledge of the external world. My goal is to show that Wittgenstein does not here offer a convincing answer to the skeptical problem. First, I will present a strong version of the problem, understanding it as a paradoxical argument. In the second part, I will introduce and raise problems for two pragmatic responses against skepticism that appear in *On Certainty*. Finally, I will present some of Wittgenstein's logical criticisms against skepticism, which may initially be considered strong, because they seem to refute some skeptical assumptions. They concern Wittgenstein's ideas that it is logically impossible to doubt and to be mistaken about Moorean propositions, and that these propositions don't have a truth-value. But even these, I intend to show, do not really challenge skepticism, for they are not well grounded.

RESUMO

Em *Da certeza*, Wittgenstein formula várias críticas contra o ceticismo em relação ao nosso conhecimento do mundo externo. Meu objetivo é mostrar que Wittgenstein não oferece aqui uma resposta convincente ao problema cético. Em primeiro lugar, apresentarei uma versão forte do problema, entendendo-o como um argumento paradoxal. Na segunda parte, vou introduzir e levantar problemas para duas respostas pragmáticas contra o ceticismo que aparecem em *Da certeza*. Finalmente, apresentarei algumas das críticas lógicas de Wittgenstein contra o ceticismo, que inicialmente podem ser consideradas fortes, porque parecem refutar alguns pressupostos céticos. Elas dizem respeito às idéias de Wittgenstein de que é logicamente impossível duvidar e confundir-se com as proposições mooreanas, e que essas proposições não têm valor verdadeiro. Pretendo mostrar, entretanto, que elas tampouco desafiam realmente o ceticismo, pois não estão bem fundamentadas.

KEY WORDS

Wittgenstein; Skepticism; External World; Knowledge; Doubt.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Wittgenstein; Ceticismo; Mundo Exterior; Conhecimento; Dúvida.

In notes published posthumously as *On Certainty* (OC), Wittgenstein formulates several criticisms against skepticism about our knowledge of the existence of the external world. Commentators sometimes disagree as to how to describe Wittgenstein's way out of skepticism, whether he refutes, dissolves, or demystifies skepticism, or even shows it to be aberrant.[1] In any case, it seems that the prevailing idea among commentators is that Wittgenstein offers a way out of the skeptical problem, or at least a good way to deal with it. But what one normally finds in the scholarship is an attempt to show how Wittgenstein attacks skepticism, without considering the skeptical point of view separately and properly.[2] The most common consequence of this attitude is to declare Wittgenstein's victory against an opponent that has not been properly represented.

My goal here is to show that, contrary to what many seem to think, Wittgenstein does not offer a good way out of the skeptical problem of our knowledge of the external world in *On Certainty*. I'm not going to try to assess the claim that Wittgenstein dissolves or demystifies skepticism, because these notions have not been clearly set out. Instead, I want to investigate whether Wittgenstein can be said to have a strong response to a strongly constructed skeptical argument. In order to do that, I will first present a strong version of the skeptical problem. I will understand it as a paradoxical argument, which proposes an intellectual challenge. With this characterization of the problem in mind, I will try to show that some observations against skepticism in *On Certainty* are clearly weak, but others can, in a way, be considered strong. I take it that we can read several kinds of responses against skepticism in *On Certainty*. In this paper I'm going to focus on two broad types of response that are normally not dealt with by the commentators. In the second part of this paper, I will introduce and raise problems for two responses that I consider weak, one that says that skeptical doubt is absent from everyday life and another that says that it is practically impossible to doubt Moorean propositions. I will argue that these responses do not attack anything presupposed by the skeptical problem

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1   Moyal-Sharrock, for instance, says that "Wittgenstein's epistemological recategorization also resulted in the more generally recognized achievement of the third Wittgenstein: his demystification of skepticism" (Moyal-Sharrock, 2004a, p. 3). Elsewhere, she says: "this is precisely what Wittgenstein does in *On Certainty*: he dissolves the problem of doubt-scepticism" (Moyal-Sharrock, 2004b, p. 163). According to Stroll, "to have diagnosed why scepticism is not merely false but aberrant is one of Wittgenstein's greatest achievements" (Stroll, 2005, p. 45).

2   This kind of approach can be found, for example, in Moyal-Sharrock (2004a and 2004b) and Stroll (1994 and 2005). Exceptions are Wright (1986 and 1991) and Pritchard (2005). Wright formulates the skeptical problem in a strong manner and takes Wittgenstein to be going in the right direction against it. But his goal is not purely exegetical; rather, he uses some of the ideas present in *On Certainty* to offer his own elaborated response to the skeptical argument. Pritchard (2005) also portrays skepticism in a strong way, but he thinks that what he calls an epistemic reading of *On Certainty*, such as the one he believes Wright offers, cannot give an appropriate response to the strong skeptical problem; it gives at most, according to him, a pragmatic response. He leaves open, however, the possibility that a semantic reading would offer a better response. The type of response against skepticism that I think is the most promising is neither epistemic nor semantic, but (in Wittgenstein's peculiar sense) logical. But I'll try to show, in the final section of the paper, that even Wittgenstein's supposedly logical observations against skepticism are not effective against a strong version of skepticism.

portrayed in the first section. In the third and last part of the paper, I will introduce other criticisms against skepticism that may initially be considered strong, because they seem to deny some skeptical assumptions. They concern Wittgenstein's ideas that it is logically impossible to doubt and to be mistaken about Moorean propositions, and that Moorean propositions don't have a truth-value. The latter observation is very frequently ignored by commentators. But even these, I intend to show, do not refute skepticism.[3]

1. How to understand skepticism

To assess whether or not Wittgenstein successfully attacks skepticism, we must have an idea of the problem to be faced. What really matters is whether his criticisms are sufficient to undermine a strong version of the problem. It has become common in recent years to conceive the skeptical problem of the external world as an argument that poses an intellectual challenge, in particular, one that has a paradoxical character, because although its premises seem reasonable, its conclusion is unacceptable. This is the characterization I will adopt here. This version does not appeal to commonly made and easily refutable assumptions about skepticism, such as that accepting it requires doubting everything and changing our practices. What interests me, then, is to evaluate whether Wittgenstein's observations are strong enough to undermine this sort of argument[4]:

> (1) If I know I have hands, then I know that there is not an evil genius.
> (2) I do not know that there is not an evil genius.
>   So, by modus tollens,
> (3) I do not know that I have hands.

"I have hands" is just one example of a proposition whose truth depends on the existence of the external world, and could be replaced by any other proposition about the external world that seems absolutely certain, such as "I live on planet

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[3] One common interpretation of some remarks in *On Certainty* is that Wittgenstein denies the meaningfulness of the skeptical argument. So the skeptic assumes it makes sense to take skeptical hypotheses as possible falsifiers of everyday propositions, and also that it makes sense to claim not to know those propositions. Wittgenstein, on the contrary, in the spirit of his "meaning is use" motto, would be saying that the skeptical argument is meaningless because there is no context of use for it. There is no context in which people take skeptical hypotheses into consideration, nor contexts in which they claim not to know ordinary propositions. I think there are passages in *On Certainty* where Wittgenstein seems to be taking this kind of approach, but I'm not going to deal with it here, first because it would make this paper much longer, but also because I don't think it is an anti-skeptical strategy worth pursuing. Suffice to say that this reason for considering the skeptical argument meaningless is highly questionable, because it presupposes a clear distinction between ordinary and philosophical uses of language, and a preference for the first. Since there are contexts of philosophical discussion in which the skeptical argument is taken seriously and considered meaningful, it could be asked what grounds the decision to take ordinary contexts as the standard for meaningfulness. And it cannot be said that it is a purely descriptive stance that shows that, as some Wittgensteinians would like to say, for a purely descriptive stance should include in the description the philosophical use of language.

[4] The skeptical argument has been similarly formulated in a number of places, such as Wright (1991), Pritchard (2005) and Nozick (1981).

Earth" or "I have a human body". I will call propositions of this type Moorean proposition, in reference to Moore's "A Defence of Common Sense". Here Moore lists a series of truisms such as these, which he claims to know with absolute certainty. The skeptical argument could also be formulated by means of other usual skeptical hypotheses, such as the dream hypothesis or the hypothesis that I am a brain in a vat receiving stimuli from a neuroscientist. The evil genius, as imagined by Descartes, would have the power to make me believe in everything that is false. Any of these hypotheses could function as part of the premises of the skeptical argument, whose conclusion is intended to show that we do not know most of what we ordinarily take ourselves to know.

An interesting aspect of the skeptical argument is that, in order for its conclusion to be true, no skeptical hypothesis needs to be true. What the first premise of the argument says is that to know Moorean propositions, I need to know that the skeptical hypotheses are false, because the truth of any skeptical hypothesis is incompatible with my knowledge of Moorean propositions. For, as long as I do not know that there is not an evil genius, even if it does not exist, the epistemic status of my beliefs will be affected. That is, in order for me to know that I have hands, for example, it is not enough that the hypothesis of the evil genius is false and that my belief is true. If I recognize that the existence of an evil genius would make my belief false, then, in order for me to know that I have hands, I must know that there is not an evil genius. If I do not know that I am not being deceived by an evil genius, then I do not know whether my belief in the existence of my hands is true. If this possibility remains open, even if in fact there is not an evil genius, I will not have knowledge that I have hands, although I may still have a true belief. As Stroud says, "as soon as we see that a certain possibility is incompatible with our knowing such-and-such, it is suggested, we immediately recognize that it is a possibility that must be known not to obtain if we are to know the such-and-such in question" (Stroud, 1984, p. 27).

So, for me to know that I have hands it is not sufficient, although it is necessary, that my belief is true, and therefore that none of the skeptical hypotheses is the case. Not only must the skeptical hypotheses be false, but I must know that they are false, in order to know that my belief is true.

But of course, the problem is that I don't seem to be able to *rule out* the existence of an evil genius. Perhaps nothing indicates that it exists, but nothing indicates either that it cannot exist. I may consider the suggestion that there is an evil genius strange, but I'm not able to determine that it is false. Crispin Wright, who formulates the argument using the dream hypothesis, says that what supports the second skeptical premise is the fact that "I cannot acquire sufficient reason to believe that I am not dreaming at t by any empirical procedure" (Wright, 1986, p. 55). That is, there is nothing that is given in my present experience that excludes the possibility that it is part of a dream, or that it is the creation of an evil genius. All my current experience is compatible with the experience I would have if everything has been created by an

evil genius. Therefore, nothing that is given in my experience is sufficient to determine whether or not there is an evil genius. So I seem to have no choice but to accept the second premise of the argument, according to which I don't know that there is not an evil genius. And if I do not know that the skeptical scenarios are false, I have no knowledge of Moorean propositions such as "I have hands".

Still, the conclusion of the argument seems unacceptable. After all, before considering the skeptical scenarios, we accept the Moorean propositions as obviously true, as objects of certain knowledge. But once we recognize that some of the skeptical hypotheses may be true, and hence that there may be no external world, it seems necessary to conclude that we don't have knowledge of these propositions. If we accept that we must know the skeptical hypotheses to be false in order to have knowledge of Moorean propositions, and that in fact we do not know that they are false, we are forced to accept the skeptical conclusion that our beliefs about the external world do not amount to knowledge. While this conclusion may be contrary to our intuitions about knowledge, it appears necessary if we accept the plausible skeptical premises.

Several authors, such as Stroud, Wright and Pritchard, propose that we should take the skeptical problem to be an intellectual challenge of this kind. This has implications for how we should *not* regard the skeptical problem. Unlike what the common expression "skeptical doubt" suggests, we should not take skepticism to be a doctrine that requires its followers to doubt Moorean propositions in everyday life or to behave in a bizarre way. Descartes himself acknowledges that "no sane person has ever seriously doubted these things [that there really is a world, that human beings have bodies and so on]" (Descartes, 1641/1986, p. 11). The skeptical conclusion, according to Stroud, is that "we can know nothing of how it [the world around us] is, no matter what convictions, beliefs, or opinions we continue, perhaps *inevitably*, to hold about it" (Stroud, 1984, p. 32, my emphasis). So we should not conceive the skeptic as someone who must be persuaded that he knows Moorean propositions. As Wright says, "there are no real such opponents. That generations of philosophers have felt impelled to grapple with skeptical arguments is not attributable to a courtesy due to an historically distinguished sponsorship but to the fact that these arguments are *paradoxes*: seemingly valid derivations from seemingly well supported premises of utterly unacceptable consequences" (Wright, 1991, p. 89). Finally, in the same spirit, Pritchard says that "the sceptic is, properly understood, not an adversary at all, but simply our intellectual conscience who is highlighting the inconsistency of our beliefs about knowledge" (Pritchard, 2005, p. 192).

In short, for the skeptical argument to be valid, it is not necessary to assume that we should no longer believe in Moorean propositions. If it requires us to doubt anything, it is the *epistemic* status of our beliefs in these propositions. It also does not ask us, as noted by Stroud (cf. 1984, p. 66), to change the way we ordinarily

claim to know things. We need not start claiming not to know things we used to claim to know before, as we need not start taking the skeptical hypotheses into consideration in everyday contexts. The argument need not provoke a change in our linguistic practices. From an everyday point of view, everything remains the same. What we realize after considering the skeptical argument is that a plausible requirement, viz. that in order to know something we need to be able to rule out the situations that would falsify it, together with the considerations that skeptical hypotheses falsify Moorean propositions and that we do not know them to be false, lead us to the paradoxical conclusion that in fact we do not know all the things we ordinarily take ourselves to know.

2. Wittgenstein against skepticism: weak criticisms

With this characterization of skepticism in mind, I will take it that any strong attack against the skeptical argument should be directed either against one of its premises, or against something they presuppose. *On Certainty* is a particularly difficult book to interpret, because it is basically a set of unrevised notes published posthumously. I will try to show that it is reasonable to classify some of Wittgenstein's criticisms against skepticism in two broad types: the weak and the strong ones.[5] In this part of the paper, I intend to show that two criticisms that Wittgenstein formulates against skepticism in *On Certainty* can be regarded as weak, because they do not attack any skeptical premise, nor any of its assumptions.[6] In the third part of the paper, I will discuss some stronger criticisms.

As I said in the previous section, although skepticism and doubt are concepts usually taken to be inseparable, it is possible and desirable to deal with the skeptical problem without assuming any doubt that causes a change in our beliefs and actions. However, perhaps precisely because of the constant association between skepticism and doubt, in several passages of *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein attacks the doubt purportedly required by the skeptical problem. There are at least two lines of argument which attack skepticism in this way: (1) The observation of the absence of skeptical doubt and (2) The observation of the practical impossibility of skeptical doubt.

Let's deal with number (1) first. In several passages, Wittgenstein draws attention to the fact that, when he acts, he acts without having certain doubts. He says that

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[5]   In general, the commentators either focus on Wittgenstein's stronger observations against skepticism, or attribute a stronger force to the criticisms I take to be weak. I believe it is important to deal with both types, and highlight their differences, if only to expose what was Wittgenstein's conception of skepticism and to make clear what is wrong with it. I don't claim my treatment to be exhaustive. Other kinds of responses against skepticism can be found in the book (cf. n. 3), but I'm not going to pursue them here.

[6]   It is important to note that in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein has two targets: skepticism and Moore, who took himself to have presented a definitive answer to the skeptical problem. Both criticisms appear linked in the text, but here I'm going to focus on his criticism of skepticism.

he acts with *complete* certainty (OC, §174), without raising doubts about the existence of things around him. For instance, he simply acts without "satisfy[ing] myself that I have two feet when I want to get up from a chair" (OC, §148). Wittgenstein also points out that he doesn't doubt the existence of external objects, the regularity of the events in the world, and the reliability of his memory:

> If I make an experiment I do not doubt the existence of the apparatus before my eyes. I have plenty of doubts, but not *that*. If I do a calculation I believe, without any doubts, that the figures on the paper aren't switching of their own accord, and I also trust my memory the whole time, and trust it without any reservation (OC, §337).

His intention seems to be to show the absence of any of the alleged skeptical doubts in everyday life. When scientists, for instance, make experiments, they accept without doubt a number of things, including the existence of the instruments being used. If they were to doubt the existence of external objects, the regularity of the world and the reliability of their memory, they wouldn't be able to carry out the experiment. But this observation does not affect skepticism. Skeptical doubts on these topics are epistemological and not practical. That is, they ask whether we can *know* that there are physical objects, whether we can *know* that future events will occur in accordance with past events, and whether we can *know* that memory can be trusted. These questions needn't imply any change in our way of acting. For this reason, to attack skepticism, it is irrelevant to say that we act without having certain doubts. Skepticism is not denying that.

Another similar observation that Wittgenstein makes is that not only him, but any reasonable person believes, for instance, having two hands (OC, §252). The so-called "reasonable person", mentioned a few times throughout the text, can be understood as the opposite of the insane person, who actually doubts Moorean propositions. He says that "the reasonable man *does not* have certain doubts" (OC, §220), and "any 'reasonable' person behaves like *this*" (OC, §254). That is, Wittgenstein is calling our attention to the absence of skeptical doubt in everyday life by normal, reasonable people. I will come back to this topic below. For now, suffice to say that there is no incompatibility between accepting the skeptical challenge and being a reasonable person. In other words, we need not assume that to be consistent, a skeptic philosopher should exhibit weird behavior, like checking that his feet remain there before getting up. That doubts about Moorean propositions are absent for reasonable people does not show that skepticism is false. Again, if there is any doubt being suggested by the skeptical argument, it concerns the epistemic status of the beliefs on Moorean propositions, and not their degree of subjective certainty.

Moreover, in several passages, Wittgenstein talks about the fact that we do not teach children to doubt Moorean propositions. Again, his goal seems to be to show that our practices are not aligned with what is supposedly demanded by skepticism.

What we teach children is a reflection of what we adults consider important, and is also a reflection of our own behavior. Certain doubts, such as those about the existence of material objects, are absent and irrelevant in most situations. They just do not appear in our practices. Therefore, they are not passed on to future generations. He says, for example:

> We teach a child "that is your hand", not "that is perhaps (or "probably") your hand". That is how a child learns the innumerable language-games that are concerned with his hand. An investigation or question, 'whether this is really a hand' never occurs to him (OC, §374). When a child learns language it learns at the same time what is to be investigated and what not. When it learns that there is a cupboard in the room, it isn't taught to doubt whether what it sees later on is still a cupboard or only a kind of stage set (OC, §472).

Again, Wittgenstein's intention seems to be to show that the actions observed in the world, the way we actually behave, do not support the supposed requirements of the skeptical argument, but instead show, in a way, the absurdity of skepticism. It is as if, in the spirit of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein was saying "do not think, look", trying to point out with these observations the discrepancy between philosophical reflections and our practice in the world. That's because, according to what Wittgenstein seems to believe, skepticism requires us to have some doubts about the existence of external objects that are clearly absent in our lives.

But again, the skeptical argument does not intend to describe how we act. It would only be possible to use the discrepancy between skepticism and practice to refute skepticism if it were committed to describing our practices. Wittgenstein's observations on the absence of skeptical doubt in everyday life are correct, but irrelevant to skepticism. That is, he is right in saying that we don't have certain doubts in everyday life, that reasonable people believe in Moorean propositions and that children are not taught to doubt these propositions. But these observations won't work to undermine skepticism. So Wittgenstein's remarks on the absence of doubt in everyday life do not affect the skeptical argument formulated in the first section.

But in addition to observing that the skeptical doubt *does not* appear in practice, Wittgenstein also argues that it *could not* appear. That is, he argues for the practical impossibility of skeptical doubts. This is the second sort of weak criticism against skepticism I mentioned above. Let's look at some passages:

> Might I not believe the contrary after all [of the earth having existed long before my birthday]? But the question is: What would the practical effects of this belief be? (OC, §89). What would it be like to doubt now whether I have two hands? Why can't I imagine it at all? What would I believe if I didn't believe that? So far I have no system at all within which this doubt might exist (OC, §247). If I ask someone "what colour do you see at the moment?", in order, that is, to learn what colour is there at the moment, I cannot at the same time question whether the person I ask understands English, whether he wants to take me in, whether my own memory is not leaving me in the lurch

as to the names of colours, and so on (OC, §345). Imagine a language-game "When I call you, come in through the door". In any ordinary case, a doubt whether there really is a door there will be impossible (OC, §391).

One way of reading these passages is taking Wittgenstein as highlighting the impossibility of doubting Moorean propositions in everyday life, because of the unacceptable consequences, and impossible demands, that these doubts would have if they were exercised in everyday life.[7] That is, he seems to conclude that skeptical doubt is impossible because, if exercised in practice, it would have devastating effects. If I doubted the existence of my hands, I wouldn't know what to believe anymore. If I decided to question everything, not excluding anything from the scope of doubt, I would no longer be able to carry on simple conversations, because I would have to doubt the meanings of the words I uttered. If I were always in doubt about the existence of external objects, I would not be able to perform common everyday tasks, like opening a door, or playing a game of chess (cf. OC, §346). In short, everyday tasks would be impractical. In fact, one could not survive. We need to accept certain things without doubt in order to be able to act in everyday life. Hence the practical impossibility of skeptical doubt.

Several commentators seem to think that Wittgenstein shows the absurdity of skepticism because he makes explicit its practical impossibility. Stroll, for instance, thinks that the skeptic who doubted everything would be someone whose behavior is senseless:

> Wittgenstein's sceptic is an individual who raises doubts that the average person would never conceive of. […] His worries are obsessive and non-terminating. […] All of us grow up in a community and our behaviour is determined to be sensible or not by its conformity to the rules of such an assemblage. The obsessive sceptic is not behaving according to such procedures; and this is why his behaviour is senseless (Stroll, 2005, p. 45).

Wright, although not accepting Stroll's naive view of an obsessive skeptic, seems to endorse Wittgenstein's idea that skeptical doubt would be impossible in everyday life because it is not clear what it would be like to adopt it. According to him,

> It is seriously unclear what it could be to suspend these beliefs, or hold others contrary to them. What might be the scheme of beliefs and goals of a rational subject who doubted the existence of matter? How, from a viewpoint within our scheme, might he be expected to behave? (Wright, 1986, p. 90).

So in a stronger way of reading these passages, Wittgenstein would be saying not (just) that changing our beliefs would have devastating practical consequences, but

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[7] Some interpreters might prefer to read these passages not as merely pragmatic responses, but as part of Wittgenstein's logical objections against skepticism. I place them here because, in my reading, they are not as strong as the logical criticisms I will consider in part 3, but also because I think they seem to assume that adopting skepticism would require some practical changes, and the formation of new beliefs.

that it's actually impossible to change our beliefs at will, because having skeptical doubts would require a new belief system, which we don't have at our disposal. But still, this seems to presuppose a view of skepticism not as a paradoxical intellectual challenge, but to some degree a practical challenge that would demand the revision of our belief system. Wright's passage is curious because, in the same paper, he supports precisely the idea argued for in the first section of this paper, that the skeptical problem should be seen as a paradox. But if skepticism is seen as a paradox, it is irrelevant to consider which other beliefs we would adopt if we were to abandon ours. The skeptical argument does not ask us to abandon our belief system and form a new one. We are not required to believe that there is no external world, and adapt our other beliefs accordingly. Even if it's true that we are forced to stick to our belief system, because we have no other rational alternative, and no idea how to form a new one, that doesn't mean it cannot be intellectually challenged. From a skeptical point of view, it is then irrelevant that it is supposedly impossible to doubt Moorean propositions in everyday life, either because these doubts would have devastating consequences, or because they would require us to formulate a new belief system, which is supposedly impossible.

In other passages, Wittgenstein suggests another reason for the impossibility of the skeptical doubt in everyday life, related to the one concerning the absence of skeptical doubts by reasonable people. He also says   that reasonable people *cannot* have certain doubts:

> Can I believe for one moment that I have ever been in the stratosphere? No. […] There cannot be any doubt about it for me as a reasonable person (OC, §§218-219). I cannot at present imagine a reasonable doubt as to the existence of the earth during the last 100 years (OC, §261).

What the above comments suggest is that skeptical doubt is impossible for a reasonable person. That seems to be, in a way, a conceptual observation. If you are a reasonable person, you cannot have certain doubts, because being reasonable involves not having certain doubts (cf. §220, §252, §254). Similarly, a reasonable doubt about the existence of material objects, for example, is impossible, because a doubt of this type in ordinary life would be unreasonable. Anyone who actually ceased to believe Moorean propositions such as "I am a human being" would certainly not be considered reasonable. Wittgenstein suggests that this behavior would be a sign of madness or mental disturbance, not of a mistake or doubt. According to him,

> If my friend were to imagine one day that he had been living for a long time past in such and such a place, etc. etc., I should not call this a *mistake*, but rather a mental disturbance, perhaps a transient one (OC, §71) If 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 (OC, §155).

According to Wittgenstein, the difference between a mistake and a mental disturbance, or the difference there is between treating something as a mistake or as a mental disturbance (OC, §73) would be that, unlike the case of mental disturbance, when someone makes a mistake, it is possible to understand where it comes from, given what the person already knows (OC, §74). Also, when someone makes a mistake and says something false, it is possible to show why it was a mistake and how her claim is incompatible with the rest of our beliefs. As Wittgenstein says, "in order to make a mistake, a man must already judge in conformity with mankind" (OC, §156). But if someone says with conviction something like "the planet Earth does not exist", contradicting something that we all believe, according to Wittgenstein, we would not treat this as a mistake, nor call it such, because apparently that person does not share with us the background necessary to understand what we understand. In cases like this, I would not know what to say to this person to convince her that what she says is not correct, and so the natural reaction would be consider her mentally disturbed. Similarly, if someone were to doubt Moorean propositions in everyday life, we would not call this a behavior of doubt. What we normally call "doubt" can at least in principle be solved (cf. OC, §3). But apparently nothing could be said to solve the doubts of someone who were not certain of the existence of her hands, looking at them from all angles with an investigative air. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to call this a mental disturbance than a doubt (OC, §154, §255).

This criticism of Wittgenstein involves an observation on how the words "mistake" and "doubt" are used in ordinary life. Against a skeptic who says that we can be mistaken about Moorean propositions, or that we can doubt them, Wittgenstein says that this is impossible because no mistake or doubt of this kind can appear in practice; if it were to appear, it would not be called a "mistake" or a "doubt", but a sign of madness. But none of this is incompatible with the skeptical argument, as I have set it out. Indeed, a skeptical philosopher can fully agree with Wittgenstein and accept that there cannot be a reasonable doubt in practice about the existence of external objects. He can also accept that someone who actually believed the negation of Moorean propositions would be described as crazy, and her behavior would not be called a behavior of "doubting", or a "mistake". The observation that if I were to manifest doubt about the existence of my hands in practice I would not be considered a reasonable person and my behavior would not be legitimately called a behavior of doubting doesn't affect skepticism. What the conclusion of the skeptical argument says is that, because of my ignorance of the falsity of the skeptical scenarios, I don't really know Moorean propositions. Again, the conclusion of the argument does not say that I should doubt Moorean propositions in everyday life. It also does not say that I should call "reasonable doubt" the behavior of someone who actually doubted Moorean propositions. The argument assumes that I can be mistaken about Moorean propositions, but it doesn't say that I should start acting

as if I were. So none of these observations about how we would or would not label the behavior of someone who, as it were, lived his skepticism, really affects the skeptical argument. Skepticism, as formulated in the first section, is not supposed to be lived. It requires only the acceptance that we can be mistaken about Moorean propositions, and therefore that we do not know them. And to refute that, it won't do to say that the manifestation of reasonable doubt or of a mistake about Moorean propositions is practically impossible.

Thus, Wittgenstein's remarks considered so far do not attack the intellectual challenge posed by the skeptical problem presented in the first section. They show no error either in the premises of the argument or in any of its assumptions. However, some parts of *On Certainty* can be interpreted as going against what may be considered assumptions of the argument. In the next section, I will deal with criticisms of this type. My aim is to show that even these are not strong enough to refute skepticism, because they still assume that skepticism is a challenge to our practices (in this case, epistemic practices).

3. Strong criticisms

The premises of the skeptical argument seem to assume that we can be mistaken about Moorean propositions and that it is possible to doubt them at least from a philosophical or theoretical point of view, in the sense that we can question whether we really know that they are true. They also seem to assume that Moorean propositions have a truth-value, that is, that they are either true or false. The idea is that if some skeptical hypothesis is the case, Moorean propositions are false. If they are not, and the world really is like we think it is, then these propositions are true. Certain remarks of Wittgenstein can be read as counterpoints to these ideas, and can therefore be taken as stronger observations against skepticism. As I intend to show below, Wittgenstein denies the logical possibility of doubt and of us being mistaken about Moorean propositions, and probably for this reason, he also denies that they have truth-value.[8]

In the previous section, I presented one of Wittgenstein's arguments against skepticism that I consider weak, regarding the practical impossibility of mistake or doubt

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[8]   Another anti-skeptical strategy Wittgenstein takes in *On Certainty*, which is probably the most discussed in the literature, concerns his denial that Moorean propositions can be objects of knowledge. According to him, for a proposition to be knowable, it must be possible to justify it with something more certain than it (cf. OC, §1, §243, §250, §307). Moorean propositions, however, are not justifiable by anything more certain than them, because they are already what is more certain. Therefore, knowledge would not be a category that applies to them. They would be simply groundless. We couldn't either claim to know them, like Moore, or claim not to know them, like the skeptic. Against this idea, I agree with Pritchard (2005). I don't see why the observation that they cannot be justified should lead to the conclusion that knowledge doesn't apply to them, and not to the very skeptical idea that, precisely because we cannot justify them, we cannot know them. In short, it seems to me an arbitrary way out of skepticism to stipulate that knowledge is not a category that can be applied to Moorean propositions, instead of saying that we lack knowledge of them. But I won't deal with this objection against skepticism in this paper, since I want to focus on some less discussed ones.

about Moorean propositions. But Wittgenstein develops in *On Certainty* another kind of argument against skepticism, which is stronger because it says that the mistake or doubt about Moore's propositions must be *logically* excluded (cf. OC, §51, §155, §194, §454).[9] So Moore's propositions cannot be subject to skeptical doubt, not only because this doubt would have unacceptable practical consequences, or because it would require us to revise our belief system, but also because, in order for there to be what we ordinarily call doubt, it is necessary for certain propositions to be exempt from doubt (cf. OC, §88, §341, §450, §625). Similarly, in order for someone to make a mistake, there must be propositions about which one cannot be mistaken. Mistakes and doubts only exist, according to Wittgenstein, because there are propositions that we cannot doubt and about which we cannot be mistaken. Wittgenstein's idea is that these propositions form the background that guarantees the possibility of our language games, including those of doubt and of mistake. That is, in order for our claims of doubt and admissions or attributions of a mistake to exist and be meaningful, there must be certain propositions which are not themselves doubted and about which we cannot be mistaken. The idea that Moore's propositions cannot be subject to doubt, and that we cannot be mistaken about them, leads Wittgenstein to assign them a special logical role (cf. OC, §136), calling them logical or grammatical propositions. According to him, "my convictions do form a system, a structure" (OC, §102), which is characterized, among other things, by not being doubted and, above all, by being beyond the possibility of falsification.

The distinction between empirical propositions and logical or grammatical propositions (also called "hinge propositions" in the literature) is one of the central themes of *On Certainty*. Empirical propositions, as their name suggests, can have their truth-value discovered after empirical verification. Grammatical propositions, on the contrary, function like rules of a game (cf. OC, §95, §494), which are neither true nor false. Just like rules that tell us what we need to accept before we can play a game, they describe what needs to be accepted so that there can be language games. Another distinction that Wittgenstein makes is between a hypothesis and a world-picture (OC, §167). A hypothesis (as an empirical proposition) is something that can be tested and then proven true or false. A world-picture, however, is the condition for us to judge something as true or false. It is not itself tested or questioned. My world-picture, as Wittgenstein says, "is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false" (OC, §94). Wittgenstein seems to think that the world-picture itself is neither true nor false: "I have a world-picture. Is it true or false? Above all it is the substratum of all my enquiring and asserting" (§162).

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[9] Other commentators insist that Wittgenstein's point against the possibility of skeptical doubt is logical, such as Wright (1991, p. 104) and Williams (1991, p. 14). I agree that this is a central aspect of Wittgenstein's anti-skeptical strategy but, as I tried to show in the previous section, it is not the only one. Besides, I believe their approach don't take into consideration the problems that I'm going to raise against this allegedly logical attack against skepticism.

Also, "if the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true*, nor yet false" (§205). The propositions describing this world-picture, which are precisely the Moorean propositions, would also be neither true nor false, since the very world-picture they describe is not true or false.[10]

Wittgenstein's idea that Moorean propositions are grammatical propositions that are neither true nor false is original because, at first glance, propositions like "I have two hands" or "I have never been in another galaxy", seem to be empirical. This is because they have the same form of other propositions that are in fact empirical, such as "I have two cats" or "I have never been to Argentina", which can be verified or tested, and which are informative and can be true or false. But, as Wittgenstein observes, "not everything that has the form of an empirical proposition *is* one" (OC, §308). Grammatical or logical propositions, as their name suggests, reflect the grammar or logic of our language, the rules that underlie our linguistic uses, which must be accepted for language games to be possible. So contrary to appearances, they are not indubitable truths, because according to Wittgenstein they don't really have a truth-value.

Again, Wittgenstein's argument points to the alleged special logical role played by Moorean propositions within the grammar of our language. Moorean propositions must be exempt from doubt so that doubt can exist, since "doubt itself rests only on what is beyond doubt" (OC, §519). But they also, more generally, must be out of the scope of doubt in order for thinking, judging, questioning, and any other language game to be possible:

> About certain empirical propositions no doubt can exist if making judgments is to be possible at all (OC, §308). The *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn (OC, §341). It belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted (OC, §342). Certain propositions seem to underlie all questions and all thinking (OC, §415). So is this it: I must recognize certain authorities in order to make judgements at all? (OC, §493). A language-game is only possible if one trusts something (OC, §509).

But besides having a system of propositions that is beyond doubt, for us to be able to think, to judge something as true or false, to ask questions, to claim to know or to doubt something, etc., the propositions that form that system must also not be falsifiable. Note that it is not only that people should accept a system of Moorean

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[10] In some initial paragraphs, Wittgenstein seems to accept that Moorean propositions are true. He says, for example, that "the *truth* of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference" (OC, §83). However, the prevailing idea in the text is that they are neither true nor false. The best way to interpret §83 seems to be that we can call them "true" if we like, but only in a diluted sense of "true", meaning only that they are the unmoving foundation of our language games (OC, §403). So they are not to be taken as true in the usual sense, as corresponding to how the world is (OC, §191, §199).

propositions *as if* they could not be false, so that they can think, judge, etc. Wittgenstein's idea seems to be that these propositions *cannot* in fact be false. Besides saying, as we've seen, that Moorean propositions describe our world picture, which is neither true nor false, Wittgenstein says things like:

> Are a lot of our statements *incapable* of falsehood? For that is what we want to say (OC, §436). I am inclined to say: "That *cannot* be false." That is interesting; but what consequences has it? (OC, §437). This statement ["That's a house"] appeared to me fundamental; if it is false, what are 'true' or 'false' any more?! (OC, §514). If my name is *not* L. W., how can I rely on what is meant by "true" and "false"? (OC, §515).

So Moore's propositions *cannot* be false because, if they were false, we would not know, for instance, how to assign truth or falsity to empirical propositions. We would not be able to judge things as true or false, in part because the meanings of "true" and "false" would cease to be clear. That would presumably damage our capacity to think and judge.

So my world-picture is something that needs to be accepted without doubt because otherwise thinking wouldn't be possible. It is neither true nor false, because it is the substrate against which we distinguish between true and false (OC, §94, §162). And, more strongly, Moorean propositions cannot be false, because if they were false, the meanings of "true" and "false" would be unclear. "True" and "false" mean what they do in part because certain things *cannot* be false.

The fact that we think, judge, etc., shows that there are propositions that have to be accepted, and Wittgenstein claims that these propositions must be unfalsifiable (and unverifiable, since they are also the basis for the game of verification to work). In short, Moore's propositions function as objective certainties[11] that have no truth-value, and as such they cannot be false, for they guarantee the very meaning and possibility of assigning truth or falsity to other propositions.

We can thus infer from what's been said that Wittgenstein would consider false the skeptical assumption according to which Moorean propositions may be false. According to him, taking into account our belief system, and precisely to ensure its validity, we should admit that propositions such as Moore's are neither true nor false. Also, we presumably cannot doubt or be mistaken about something that is neither true nor false. Thus, he would also take to be false skeptical assumptions that we can be mistaken about Moorean propositions and that we can at least in principle doubt our knowledge of them. Wittgenstein seems to think that the fact that there are all sorts of language games shows that some propositions must be beyond the scope of doubt. Once we grant that these propositions are logically beyond doubt and mistake, that they are the foundation for thought, and that they in

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[11] As opposed to subjective certainties. According to Wittgenstein, objective certainties play a special logical role, whereas "subjective certainties" refers to the psychological state of certainty (cf. OC, §194).

fact are like rules that have no truth-value, we can accept that Wittgenstein offers a way out of the skeptical problem. "There is an external world" is no longer a proposition that could be subject to doubt, and we cannot be mistaken about it either, since it has no truth-value, and cannot be false. Once it is shown that these skeptical assumptions are false, we no longer need to worry about the possible nonexistence of the external world, as suggested by skepticism.

The problem is that Wittgenstein does not really show that these skeptical assumptions are false. In his argument, he assumes that in order for thinking, judging, etc., to exist, there must be propositions that are logically exempted from doubt. He also assumes that these propositions must be in fact neither true nor false. Since we think and judge, there are propositions that must not be doubted, and since these propositions only describe the background against which we think, doubt, judge something true or false, etc. (let's call all these "epistemic practices"), they have no truth-value and cannot be false. And if so, presumably no skeptical scenario can be the case, because if it were, Moorean propositions would have a truth-value: they would be false. But it is not really clear either that Moorean propositions must have no truth-value, or that they must be logically exempt from mistake and doubt, for there to be epistemic practices.

Even if it is true that Moorean propositions must be exempt from doubt for us to be able to think and judge, it is not clear they should in fact have no truth-value, for us to be able to judge other propositions to be true or false. Nor is it clear that they should be incapable of being false in order for "true" and "false" to preserve their meaning. That is, it is not clear that for our epistemic practices to work, Moorean propositions must be incapable of falsehood. Skepticism seems to show precisely that this is not a legitimate requirement. Skeptical scenarios such as the evil genius *show* that these propositions can be false with almost everything remaining the same, without any change being necessary in the way we think and judge in everyday life. It is precisely for this reason that our experience does not allow us to decide whether or not there is an evil genius: it is compatible with both scenarios. Everything remains as it is for me, even if there is an evil genius and everything I believe is false. Also, there is no need to assume, with Wittgenstein, that the meanings of "true" and "false" would be unclear in case everything we believe to be true is in fact false. We would just be *wrong* about the truth-value we believe our most basic beliefs to have (that there is an external world and so on). In case we learned that we are in fact in a skeptical scenario, there would be no need to assume a change in the meanings of "true" and "false"; though there would probably be a change in which propositions we take to be true and which we take to be false. That is, we might wish to revise our attribution of truth and falsity to propositions, if we wanted to be consistent with our knowledge that we are in a skeptical scenario. But it is unclear why Wittgenstein assumes that the meanings of "true" and "false" would change. And even assuming with Wittgenstein that the meanings of "true" and "

false" would have to be revised if Moorean propositions were false, that still doesn't show that Moorean propositions don't have a truth-value. The most it shows is that we might have to reexamine the meanings of some words.

As I understand skepticism, it does not simply assume that Moorean propositions can be false. It *shows* this, by presenting possible scenarios that would make these propositions false. It is Wittgenstein who seems to stipulate, not to show, that they cannot be false, on the assumption that epistemic practices could not exist, or would have to be revised, if they were false. That is, Wittgenstein does not show that it is really necessary for these propositions to have no truth-value for our practices of thinking, judging, doubting, etc. to work. And skepticism seems to show precisely that this is not the case, that our epistemic practices could be just like they are if there were no external world.

So skepticism shows that Wittgenstein's requirement that Moorean propositions need to have no truth-value is ill advised. But also ill advised is Wittgenstein's idea that these propositions must *logically* be exempt from doubt and mistake for there to be thinking and judging. For in philosophical contexts, situations in which we consider the skeptical argument, we can doubt whether we know the truth-value of Moorean propositions, precisely because we recognize that there are certain scenarios that would make them false. We can then accept that they can be false and that we can be mistaken about them, without being unable to think or judge. Someone who considers the skeptical argument and agrees that our knowledge about Moorean propositions can be doubted is actually thinking, thinking that the argument is valid, that its conclusion may be true, etc. And if, when I do philosophy, I can conceive possible scenarios which, if true, would make me be mistaken about Moorean propositions, with everything remaining the same, then it is not really *logically* necessary, in the usual sense of the word, that certain propositions are beyond doubt or mistake. Intellectual chaos is not a necessary consequence of doubts or mistakes about our knowledge of the truth-value of Moorean propositions. In the end, Wittgenstein seems to be simply stipulating that Moorean propositions must be logically beyond the scope of mistake and doubt, for skepticism shows us precisely the opposite.

The most that Wittgenstein can say is something much weaker than he probably originally intended, that is, that in *ordinary situations* Moorean propositions must be accepted without doubt, *as if* they could not be false, so one can keep up with the everyday epistemic practices of making judgments, claiming to know things, doubting or justifying something, asking a question, etc. That is, when Wittgenstein says that Moorean propositions must logically be exempt from doubt, the most we can make of it is that, for ordinary epistemic practices to be possible, they must normally be taken for granted, accepted without doubt. Similarly, when he says that they cannot be false, the most we can make of it is that they need, in everyday life, to be

accepted *as if* they could not be false, for our epistemic practices to work. Wittgenstein can say that it is part of the logic, or of the way our *everyday* epistemic practices work, that they rely on a system of propositions that is accepted as being both beyond doubt and as unfalsifiable. But that seems to be just a description of how the epistemic practices usually work in ordinary situations. The philosophical questioning of Moorean propositions just shows that there is no real *logical* necessity in their acceptance without doubt, and that we can be mistaken about them, since they can be false. Therefore, the logical impossibility of doubt, or of falsehood of these propositions that Wittgenstein talks about, can at most be a disguised practical impossibility.

Thus, Wittgenstein shows neither that it is necessary that these propositions have no truth-value, nor that they are logically exempt from doubt and mistake. He shows at most that, in everyday life, to be able to proceed with our epistemic practices, we must accept certain propositions without doubt, as if they could not be false, even if in fact they can be false and can be doubted in philosophical reflections. But that is not at odds with skepticism. The skeptic doesn't doubt Moorean propositions *per se*. He doesn't doubt that he has hands, he doubts that he has *knowledge* about the existence of his hands. That doubt is unchallenged by Wittgenstein's observations. And, as stated earlier, the acceptance of the validity of the skeptical argument need not imply a change in our practices, even epistemic ones. As Stroud notes, skepticism implies the lack of knowledge of Moorean propositions, but not a change, for example, in the way we ordinarily claim to know things, or doubt things, or judge, etc. Knowledge possession and epistemic-linguistic practices are different things. When we consider the skeptical hypotheses, we realize that our knowledge of Moorean propositions may be doubted and that they may be false, and if we accept the argument we conclude that we don't really know these propositions. But we can keep our everyday epistemic practices intact.

Wittgenstein's remarks are certainly interesting and can help us better understand our everyday epistemic practices. But they are not enough to undermine the intellectual challenge that skepticism presents us. Wittgenstein does not refute what I initially said could be called skeptical assumptions, that is, the ideas that Moorean propositions can be false, and that we can be mistaken about them and doubt them on a theoretical level. We may have to accept, in everyday life, that Moorean propositions cannot be false, and it's possible that we ordinarily have to accept them without doubt, otherwise our epistemic practices could not work. But skepticism shows us that these propositions can in principle be doubted, and that we can be mistaken about them, since they can be false. It is possible that they are false, because it is possible that some skeptical scenario is the case. If the world is indeed as I believe it is, if all skeptical hypotheses are false, these propositions are true. In any case, they have a truth-value. As I argued, Wittgenstein is not successful in showing that our epistemic practices prevent the falsity of Moorean propositions. If Moorean propositions have truth-value, it seems reasonable to say that we either know that

they are true, or we don't. And if they can in principle be known, but we, because of the skeptical hypotheses, don't know their truth-value, then we do not know them. They will continue to be unknown until we know that the skeptical hypotheses are false. And so we return to skepticism. The stipulation that certain propositions cannot be doubted and that they don't have truth-value appears to be an *ad hoc* way out of skepticism, which is more like a refusal of the skeptical challenge than a refutation of it.

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