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Wittgenstein on knowledge: a critique

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Abstract My goal here is to assess whether Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical conception of a descriptive philosophy is in accordance with his philosophical practice. I argue that Wittgenstein doesn't really limit himself to description when he criticizes Moore's use of the verb "to know". In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein argues that Moore's claims of knowledge (such as "I know I have two hands") are at odds with the everyday use of the verb "to know", because, among other things, they don't allow the possibility of justification. That is, Wittgenstein considers that proper, everyday claims of knowledge require the possibility of justification. What I try to show is that this idea cannot be derived from the mere observation and description of knowledge claims in ordinary language. I conclude that Wittgenstein's treatment of the verb "to know" constitutes an inconsistency between his metaphilosophical posture and his philosophical practice.

Keywords Knowledge · Metaphilosophy · Wittgenstein · Moore

1 Wittgenstein and philosophy

Wittgenstein is well known for his ideas about the role of philosophy. Many metaphilosophical remarks can be extracted from his works, especially the *Philosophical Investigations* (2005). He supports, for instance, the idea that philosophical problems are not deep problems, but actually result from grammatical confusions and are comparable to diseases. For him, traditional philosophical problems arise from the misuse of language. Wittgenstein thinks that it is not the job of philosophy to formulate theories

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or systems. These ideas, and Wittgenstein's other views on the role of philosophy, are some of his most penetrating and enduring. Indeed, Wittgenstein's metaphilosophy has recently seen something of a resurgence, as evidenced by Paul Horwich's recent book-length treatment (2012). Horwich uses some of Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical ideas to criticize some traditional problems of philosophy, in a systematic way. Here, however, I am going to focus not on Wittgenstein's diagnosis of the problems of traditional philosophy, but on Wittgenstein himself: comparing his ideas about what philosophy should be with his actual practice. Wittgenstein states several times that philosophy should be purely *descriptive*. To cite only a few passages:

> And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. (PI, § 109)
> Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it.
> For it cannot give it any foundation either.
> It leaves everything as it is. (PI, § 124)
> Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. —Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us. (PI, § 126)

In these and other passages, Wittgenstein expresses the idea that description of the ordinary use of certain words or expressions will help to show traditional philosophers that their use of language does not follow the rules of common usage—that when they speak, language "goes on holiday".[1] My goal here is to assess whether Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical conception of a descriptive philosophy is in accordance with his philosophical practice. That is, I intend to evaluate whether Wittgenstein really limits himself to description when he proposes to show that there is a problematic use of a certain term in philosophy. This is a problem that is often overlooked by commentators, who generally interpret Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical observations as not only an ideal to aspire to, but also an objective description of his own philosophical practice, and therefore tend not to assign him any doctrine or philosophical thesis. It is worth mentioning the assessment by Baker and Hacker, among the most respected of Wittgenstein's scholars:[2]

> The great philosophical systems of the past rested on presuppositions. (…) Wittgenstein, by contrast, now offers a conception of philosophy which does

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[1] PI, § 38. Another interesting, little known metaphor used by Wittgenstein about the philosophers' use of language: "The language used by philosophers is already deformed, as though by shoes that are too tight." (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 47).

[2] Many other examples could be given. Here I mention one more: "I would rather say that the later Wittgenstein's position is really no philosophical position at all. Almost everything he is doing is in the service of reaching *complete* clarity on various specific points, and not in the service of developing a new philosophical position" (Stenlund 2002, p. 04).

not rest on any such questionable presupposition. (Baker and Hacker 2005, p. 276)[3]

However, as we know, authors are frequently not the best interpreters of their own work. Thus, although Wittgenstein claims that it is not the role of philosophy to create theories, or to endorse controversial theses or assumptions, but only to describe the actual uses of words, this does not imply that he did not develop theories or endorse theses or assumptions, and that he actually only stuck to descriptions. That could be his intention, but unless he fulfilled it, it is of little interest to us. We should analyze his philosophical practice without assuming beforehand that it agrees with his goals.

2 The issue of consistency

There are at least two examples of approaches similar to mine, which try to evaluate whether Wittgenstein's philosophical practice is consistent with his metaphilosophical remarks; one reaches a positive and the other a negative conclusion. The first comes from Crispin Wright, who, in the appendix to *Rails to Infinity* (2001), recognizes the problem of integrating Wittgenstein's philosophy and metaphilosophy.[4] Wright tries to save Wittgenstein by showing that his treatment of the problems of following a rule and of assigning psychological states to others are in agreement with his idea of a purely descriptive philosophy. The other approach is by John W. Cook (2006), who, analyzing Wittgenstein's treatment of the problem of other minds concludes, contrary to Wright, that Wittgenstein's philosophical practice is inconsistent with his metaphilosophy. Cook proposes to show that Wittgenstein does not merely describe the ordinary use of words, but still uses some metaphysical notions, and therefore he does not practice what he preaches.

Of course, one cannot, in a single article, hope to undertake a full discussion of whether Wittgenstein's stated metaphilosophy coheres with his own philosophical work. But we can look at, as it were, a test case. I intend, then, to pursue an approach similar to that of Wright and Cook, taking one example of Wittgenstein's philosophical practice, and to evaluate whether it is consistent with his view that philosophy should be merely descriptive. In the examples mentioned above, Wittgenstein's practice of philosophy is investigated in the light of the *Philosophical Investigations*. What I do is to discuss some of his practice in *On Certainty* (1972), which is a text that has recently

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[3] Even when they work separately, Baker and Hacker never consider that there may be in the philosophy of Wittgenstein anything contrary to his metaphilosophical observations. The chapter "Wittgenstein's later Conception of Philosophy", from *Insight and Illusion* by Hacker (1972) is a perfect example of his view that Wittgenstein never develops theories. Baker, in the essays collected on *Wittgenstein's Method*, makes the same point, and argues that Wittgenstein adopts a purely therapeutic attitude toward philosophical problems. According to him: "Wittgenstein's therapy is, as it were, a kind of homoeopathy. Conscious analogies and comparisons are useful tools for curing diseases of the intellect, whereas unconscious ones generate insoluble problems by exercising an imperceptible tyranny over our thinking" (Baker 2004, p. 34).

[4] "I think it's fair to say that a real integration of Wittgenstein's official conception of philosophy with his own practice is something which has so far eluded even the best commentary. But we are at least in position to identify two quite striking instances, each a fundamental problem, where Wittgenstein's procedures may be made out to accord pretty well with his official conception of the way philosophical problems arise and how they may be treated." (Wright, p. 439)

received a lot of attention, but not with respect to Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical observations. The example taken from *On Certainty* concerns some of his observations against Moore's use of the verb "to know". Wittgenstein often claims that philosophers tend to use words not with their ordinary meanings, and this is what he claims about Moore. By discussing his questionable observation that Moore's knowledge claims are at odds with the everyday use of the verb "to know", I intend to show that Wittgenstein does not, in this case, act according to his own precept. That is, Wittgenstein's own use of the verb "to know", in his philosophizing, does not reflect a mere description of the ordinary use of this verb.

Among other things, the result I present may be useful to the current debate about whether there is a third Wittgenstein–whether Wittgenstein's later writings, posterior to *Philosophical Investigations*, constitute a new phase of his thought.[5] This is because I intend to show that there is an inconsistency between Wittgenstein's philosophical practice in *On Certainty*, and his metaphilosophical considerations in *Philosophical Investigations*. It will then be up to the interpreters of Wittgenstein to decide how to deal with that. They might (and I don't intend the list to be exhaustive): (1) Deny it, and somehow show that there actually is no inconsistency. (2) Accept that there is an inconsistency, but ascribe it to an oversight on Wittgenstein's part. (3) Accept the inconsistency, but find that it is purposeful, that Wittgenstein did not intend to follow the same metaphilosophy from the *Philosophical Investigations* and then, perhaps, argue for a third Wittgenstein.[6] (4) Argue that the inconsistency is inevitable, because philosophy cannot be purely descriptive; any attempt to criticize the use of a term by a traditional philosopher is going to involve certain presuppositions, and therefore won't be a mere objective description. I prefer the final option, but I won't argue for it here.[7]

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[5] This idea was suggested by Stroll (1994), who sees *On Certainty* as Wittgenstein's third masterpiece, but its main supporter is Moyal-Sharrock (2004a, b), who coined the term "third Wittgenstein". Other examples can be found in Moyal-Sharrock (2004b).

[6] For my part, I believe that the metaphilosophical observations, i.e., the observations on the nature and role of philosophy, that Wittgenstein presents in the *Philosophical Investigations*, are still valid in *On Certainty*. This can be considered controversial, and would perhaps be denied by the advocates of the "third Wittgenstein". I believe, though, that the idea of a third Wittgenstein is very problematic, not only because, in general, it's not clear what criteria should be observed in order to separate different phases of the thought of an author, but also because the differences between the *Investigations* and the subsequent writings are not as salient, for example, as the differences between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*. In *On Certainty*, there is not an explicit rejection of what was said in the *Investigations*, as we find in the *Investigations* concerning the *Tractatus*. Nothing indicates that Wittgenstein has changed his way of conceiving philosophical problems. This is why I don't see any reason to think that the metaphilosophical remarks from the *Investigations* shouldn't apply to *On Certainty*.

[7] I will only say that the idea of a purely descriptive philosophy, like the one that Wittgenstein advocates, seems to me a contradiction in terms. Any metaphilosophical position seems to involve or assume a philosophical position, no matter what opinion one is trying to maintain: that one should suspend judgment about metaphysical issues, that philosophical problems and statements are meaningless, or, the issue being discussed here, that philosophy should be merely descriptive. It seems necessary to accept that any attempt to assess philosophy, if not itself philosophical, is at least a theoretical stance. So when Wittgenstein holds that philosophy should describe only the ordinary uses of words or expressions, he is taking a theoretical stance and going beyond description, for he assumes that only the ordinary use is to be taken as the proper use. Genuinely non-theoretical attitudes toward philosophy do not involve metaphilosophical *arguments*. The proposal for a critique of philosophy from an external point of view, it seems to me, is a project doomed to failure.

My point is just that, once shown that there actually is an inconsistency, Wittgenstein's followers should have something to say about it.

3 Wittgenstein's observations on the verb "to know"

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein has two main targets: the skeptic, who questions our knowledge of the existence of the external world, and G. E. Moore (2006), who, in his paper "Proof of an External World", responds to the problem of the external world by presenting an alleged proof of the existence of external objects. Although the two targets are not systematically separated in the text,[8] here I am going to focus only on Wittgenstein's comments about Moore's claims of knowledge, and not on his observations about the skeptic's denial of knowledge.

Roughly, Moore believes he can prove the existence of external objects if he can prove the existence of any two particular objects. By raising his two hands and saying "here is one hand and here is another", he believes he has proven the existence of two different objects, and therefore the existence of external objects. Moore takes his proof to be rigorous, because, among other reasons,[9] he thinks he knows its premises, that is, he thinks he knows that "here is a hand" and that "here is another hand" (Moore 2006, p. 166). Ever since his article "A Defence of Common Sense", Moore claimed that there were propositions that he knew with certainty to be true, even recognizing that, in some cases, he could not prove this. This is the case with the propositions "here is a hand" and "here is another hand", or, to simplify, "I have two hands". Although Moore insists that he knows this last proposition, he admits he cannot prove its truth.[10]

One of the main criticisms that Wittgenstein directs against Moore concerns precisely the epistemic status assigned to propositions of the type "I have two hands". In an oft-cited passage, he asserts that "'knowledge' and 'certainty' belong to different *categories*" (OC, § 308). The propositions that Moore famously claims to know, such as "I have two hands", "The Earth existed long before my birth", etc., are, according to Wittgenstein, certainties and not knowledge.[11] Wittgenstein believes, therefore, that Moore makes a category mistake by claiming to have knowledge of such certainties, and consequently misuses the verb "to know".

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[8] This happens, in part, because *On Certainty* was not a text prepared for publication, but mainly, I believe, because Wittgenstein considers that both the skeptic and Moore commit the same basic mistake, which is to think that knowledge can be an attribute of objective certainties.

[9] According to Moore, a rigorous proof must satisfy three conditions: (1) the premise(s) should be different from the conclusion; (2) the conclusion should follow from the premise(s); (3) the premise(s) must be known. The first two are incontrovertibly met in his proof. Here I only call attention to the third, because it is the one that interests Wittgenstein.

[10] "I can know things, which I cannot prove; and among things which I certainly did know, even if (as I think) I could not prove them, were the premises of my two proofs." (Moore, "Proof", p. 170)

[11] Wittgenstein sometimes calls them "objective certainties", as opposed to "subjective certainties". Unlike subjective certainties, objective certainties are convictions shared by the majority of people, and, because they function as the basis for our thinking, they are normally not reflected upon and are unjustifiable. But I don't believe this distinction to be relevant for the purposes of this paper. My focus here is going to be only on the alleged failure of Moore's propositions to qualify as knowledge.

But what is it that supports Wittgenstein's idea that certainty and knowledge belong to different categories, and therefore that a proposition like "I know I have two hands" is a category mistake? We find the answer to this question in his remarks about claims of knowledge, one of which is that knowledge has some specific requirements not shared by certainties. Wittgenstein suggests that, in order for us to properly claim to know something, at least one condition must be met: it must be possible to answer the question "how do you know it?".[12] According to him,

> If someone believes something, we needn't always be able to answer the question "why he believes it"; but if he knows something, then the question "how does he know?" must be capable of being answered. (OC, § 550)
> If Moore says he knows the earth existed etc., (…) has he also got the right *ground* for his conviction? For if not, then after all he doesn't *know*. (OC, § 91)
> One says 'I know' when one is ready to give compelling grounds. 'I know' relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth. (OC, § 243)

If someone claims to know something without it being possible to justify it, the expression "I know" is being misused; it cannot be taken as knowledge, but only as a simple belief or certainty, because knowledge requires the possibility of justification.[13] Wittgenstein believes that Moore's use of "I know that P" doesn't fulfill the condition of P being justifiable. According to him, Moore doesn't have the right ground for his knowledge claims, and therefore cannot be said to know the things he claims to know. In the next section we will see why Wittgenstein thinks that Moore cannot justify his knowledge claims.

First, though, it is important to bear in mind that Wittgenstein's idea that knowledge requires the possibility of justification derives, supposedly, from his observation of claims of knowledge in ordinary speech. Wittgenstein says, for instance, that the way to decide whether something is knowledge or not is by observing what we *do* with a statement of the type "I *know* that P" (cf. OC, § 230) and that he "would like to reserve the expression 'I know' for the cases in which it is used in normal linguistic exchange." (OC, § 260). This suggests that Wittgenstein is not interested in presenting

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[12] Another requirement is that a mistake should always be possible whenever one claims to know something. This is why the expression "I thought I knew" makes sense, since claiming to know something does not guarantee the thing to be an undisputable fact (OC, § 12). Wittgenstein thinks that Moore's claims of knowledge also fail to fulfill this requirement. Roughly, we cannot be mistaken about them because they are the background that has to be accepted in order for mistakes to be possible. But because it would be necessary to recall some skeptical arguments, which would make this paper much longer, I'm not going to deal with this alleged condition for knowledge and the supposed failure of Moore's propositions to meet it.

[13] In fact, Wittgenstein seems to be committed not only to the idea that Moore misuses the expression "I know", but also to a stronger claim: that Moore's claims of knowledge are meaningless. In this article I'm only focusing on Wittgenstein's remarks that Moore's claims of knowledge cannot be justified, but Wittgenstein raises several other issues against this type of knowledge claim, such as that it cannot be proven wrong (we cannot be mistaken about them) (cf. OC § 12, § 32, § 178), and that they don't seem to be part of any appropriate ordinary context, for they involve a "philosophical intention"(cf. OC, § 350, § 352, §§ 406–7, § 433). I believe that all those problems, taken as a whole, led him to consider them meaningless. The lack of sense of certain claims of knowledge is suggested in a few passages (OC, § 10, § 432, § 504). Since, however, I'm not approaching all the alleged problems with Moore's claims of knowledge in this paper, I prefer to refer to them as being, in the eyes of Wittgenstein, misuses of the verb "to know".

a precise and idealized conception of knowledge. Accordingly, if he intends to stick to the observation and description of the uses of everyday knowledge claims, we would expect him to point out that the verb "to know" is used in many different, but perhaps similar, ways (following his idea of family resemblance), but that there is no single universal definition covering all its uses.[14]

I think, however, that this is not what we find in *On Certainty*, and that Wittgenstein's conceptions both of justification and knowledge are not as purely descriptive as he might have thought. In the next section, I shall make some remarks about Wittgenstein's notion of justification, and, in Sect. 3.2, I return to the topic of knowledge, and the requirement of the possibility of justification. In this way, I hope to show that, in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein's philosophical practice is not merely descriptive.

3.1 Wittgenstein's conception of justification

Let us accept for a moment that all proper knowledge claims require the possibility of justification. If that is the case, the following question arises: what counts as an appropriate justification? Again against Moore, Wittgenstein points out a feature of justification:

> [I]f what he believes is of such a kind that the grounds that he can give are no surer than his assertion, then he *cannot* say that he knows what he believes. (OC, § 243, my emphasis)

Wittgenstein says, in this and other passages (cf. OC § 01, § 250, § 307), that the justification to be presented for a belief or proposition must be more certain than what is being justified. So if Moore claims to know that he has two hands, he should be able to justify this belief by giving reasons that are more certain than it, that is, more certain than his belief that he has two hands. However, according to Wittgenstein, there is nothing more certain than a belief like "I have two hands", so it is not possible to justify it, and therefore Moore cannot claim to know it.

A natural suggestion would be that we can justify a belief like "I know I have two hands" by appeal to sense-perception. That is, we could say that we know we have hands because we see and feel our hands. Wittgenstein however, explicitly rules out this idea. According to him, I cannot say that I know I have two hands *because* I now see my two hands, since the sight of my hands is not more certain than the proposition "I have two hands", and therefore it does not support that claim of knowledge: "experience is not the ground for our game of judging" (OC § 131; cf. OC § 245, § 250). Thus, although a proposition like "I have two hands" actually expresses something about which almost all of us are certain, it could not be considered something that we know,

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[14] This idea is, for instance, formulated in the *Blue Book*: "Take another example: Socrates' question "What is knowledge?" (…) We should reply: "There is no one exact usage of the word 'knowledge'; but we can make up several such usages, which will more or less agree with the ways the word is actually used"" (Wittgenstein 1965, p. 26).

because it is not justifiable by anything more certain than it.[15] Certainty, according to Wittgenstein, does not require the possibility of justification, but knowledge does.

However, it's not clear how one can determine whether a belief is more certain or more evident than another, so that the former can count as a justification for the latter. Nor is it clear why Wittgenstein thinks that the sight of his hands is not more certain than the proposition "I have two hands." Wittgenstein makes these points without further explanation. But if we remember that he supports the idea that one should not develop theories, that nothing is hidden and that philosophy should only describe, it would be natural to think that he comes to these opinions about justification based on the observation of our linguistic practices.

But if we only observe our practices of justification, without any assumptions about how they should work, we'll see that they are not as limited as Wittgenstein seems to be suggesting. A clear example, which goes against Wittgenstein's remarks, is precisely justification based on sense-perception. We often appeal to empirical data to justify opinions, even when the data is perhaps no more certain than the opinion we are trying to justify. If we were asked, in ordinary life, "how do you know you have two hands?" or, "how do you know that there is a tree?", it is natural to think of answers like "because I feel my hands!" or "because I can see the tree!". In answer to questions like these, we wouldn't expect anyone, except philosophers, to say: "I'm sorry, but this is not something I can know, because there's nothing I can appeal to that is more certain than it and that could possibly justify it". On the contrary, people often think they can know things like that, either based on some justification of this kind, or with no justification at all (as we'll see in the next section).

In fact, if our goal is merely to describe what is presented as a justification in ordinary life, we should be able to count the appeal to the senses, in situations like that, as a possible type of justification. So, Wittgenstein's requirements seem to contradict our common-sense conception of justification, because he excludes a subject's sensory experiences as a possible ground for an alleged case of knowledge. Of course we can always, from a critical, not merely descriptive point of view, question the quality of this type of justification - but it seems undeniable that we do invoke it.

It is, then, possible to question, even using our ordinary understanding of "know", Wittgenstein's idea that Moorean propositions are unknowable because they are unjustifiable. Depending on the notion of justification that one adopts, those propositions can be considered justifiable, for instance, by appeal to the evidence of the senses. And if that's the case, Wittgenstein cannot argue against Moore's proof that its premise "I have two hands" cannot possibly qualify as knowledge because it cannot be justified, at least not if he intends to merely describe our justificatory practices. If we, in fact, present and accept in ordinary speech justifications that, from Wittgenstein's point of view, are not more certain than what one is trying to justify, and Wittgenstein condemns them as inadequate, clearly he is not just *describing* how justifications occur in

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[15] That does not mean that Wittgenstein would agree with the conclusion of a skeptical argument, according to which we lack knowledge about the external world. For Wittgenstein, the skeptical conclusion is meaningless (as is also Moore's reaction to it) because it makes a category error: it assumes that it is possible to attribute or deny knowledge to a basic certainty.

ordinary language. Wittgenstein must be committed to a normative view about how justification should work, despite his stated metaphilosophical views.

3.2 Is it always possible to justify ordinary claims of knowledge?

But there is another problem I want to highlight. Even if we accept a narrow understanding of justification like that of Wittgenstein's, it's possible to question whether the very idea of knowledge requiring the possibility of justification is derived from the mere observation and description of knowledge claims in ordinary language. That is, is it true that whenever we ordinarily claim to know something, there is the possibility of justifying it? It is easy to see that this is not the case. In many instances, knowledge claims are used to emphasize the certainty one has about something, even though it cannot be justified. To give just one ordinary example, knowledge claims as expressions of certainty are common among pregnant women, who often claim to know whether they are expecting a boy or a girl, even before taking any tests to determine the baby's sex. They cannot, I am supposing, present any evidence to support their statement. The only answer they can provide to the question "how do you know that?" is something like "I just know it", "I am convinced of it", "I feel it", etc. Of course they can be wrong, but the point is that such claims of knowledge do appear in ordinary life.[16]

Unless Wittgenstein takes the mere claim of certainty as a proper justification for knowledge (something that, as we saw, he would deny), he would have to consider knowledge claims of this type misuses of the verb "to know". That is, if he is correct and the possibility of justifying P (with something that goes beyond mere subjective certainty) is a necessary condition for a proposition of the form "I know that P" to be considered properly used, we should conclude that knowledge claims like the one mentioned reflect a misuse of the verb "to know". But again, if Wittgenstein were merely describing how we ordinarily make knowledge claims, he would have to admit that, in many situations, we do claim to know things without any possible justification.

We often appeal to our feeling of certainty when it comes to explaining why we think we know something, and in many cases there is nothing better that could be presented as justification. A sentence of the form "I know that P", uttered either when there is no possibility of justifying P, or when it is doubtful whether what we can present to support P is an appropriate justification, is far from unusual in ordinary language and so ought to be regarded by Wittgenstein as perfectly meaningful. Now, Moore's reaction to the skeptical problem is of a similar type. It can be illustrated as follows:

Skeptic: How do you know that there is an external world independent of your own perceptions?

Moore: I know there is a hand in front of me. I know there is another hand here. Therefore, there are external objects.

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[16] Other examples could be given. A common case of knowledge claims that in most, if not all, instances are not justifiable seems to be those associated to religious beliefs (e.g., "I know God is looking out for you", "I know death is not the end", etc.). Another would be claims about what seem to be unknowable events in the future ("I know my team is going to win", "I know I'll be rich one day").

Skeptic: How do you know you have two hands?

Moore: Because I can see and feel them. This is something of which I am certain, something I cannot doubt.

Moore's argument is based precisely on common sense; any of us could answer the skeptical argument in a similar way. This type of response is undoubtedly common, although it may, from a critical point of view, be regarded as insufficient. But if Wittgenstein's arguments were in accordance with his ideal to simply describe the way we use the verb "to know", he would not have reasons to condemn Moore's use as improper, or as a misuse of the expression "I know". He ought rather to have said that since Moore's use is typical of ordinary language and common sense, it is praiseworthy. Again, what these examples show is that, if Wittgenstein intends to stick to a merely descriptive approach of how we normally claim to know things, he has no right to say that the possibility of justification is a requirement for all proper, everyday claims of knowledge. What we actually find in several of Wittgenstein's notes are clearly attempts to stipulate the way "I know that P" *should* be used, rather than an impartial description of its actual use in ordinary language. Therefore, his claim that knowledge must be accompanied by the possibility of justification can only be a normative, theoretical conclusion, and so contrary to his own metaphilosophical observations.

It could be objected that Wittgenstein is concerned with describing not just any use, but what is ordinarily considered the *proper* use of the verb "to know", i.e., how "know" is commonly thought to be *correctly* used. Going back to the example above, perhaps most people might consider that the woman doesn't really know what she claims to know because she can't justify her claim, she cannot answer a simple question: "how do you know?". So the idea that it should be possible for people who claim to know something to justify their claim is here said to be internal to our linguistic practices. It could, then, be argued that Wittgenstein is simply describing a norm that is already there: when people cannot justify what they claim to know, they don't really know it, they are misusing the verb "to know" according to ordinary language's own standards. Wittgenstein's idea that knowledge requires the possibility of justification would, in the end, be derived from the description of what we take to be the correct use of "knowledge" or "to know".

But who, exactly, are "we"? No doubt some other people—the woman's relatives, for instance—would accept that she does know what she claims to know, without any need of justification. "How does she know?", they might say. "She feels it", and that is enough. It seems to me this is also true of Moore's claims of knowledge. Most ordinary people would be inclined to think that his claims are perfectly appropriate, and that he does know what he claims to know, even accepting that he cannot justify it. How, then, can we decide, *based merely on description,* that the correct thing is always to require a justification for the knowledge one claims to have, rather than to be satisfied with claims of knowledge that can only be accompanied by the avowed certainty of the claimant? A purely descriptive account of what people take to be the correct use of the verb "to know" would not meet any definite criteria, for it ought just to note the many different, often conflicting, ways in which people react to knowledge claims (some people, in regard to certain claims of knowledge, may think that the correct thing is to expect no justification; other people might require it). There seems no way

to arrive at a clear rule, such as that which Wittgenstein deploys against Moore, out of mere description of ordinary usage, even if the description is supposed to be of correct uses only, for ordinary usage is conflicting and unclear, and there is no general agreement on what the correct use of "know" is.[17]

4 Final remarks

Although I think that Wittgenstein prescribes how we should use claims of knowledge, rather than describes how we actually use them, I am not trying to argue that he should have stuck to description. Description alone doesn't give us much; by itself, it doesn't give us a clear distinction between correct and incorrect uses of words. I'm also not trying to say that Wittgenstein's prescription, i.e., the idea that knowledge claims require the possibility of justification, is wrongheaded. On the contrary, I think this idea— which is in fact a very traditional way of conceiving knowledge in philosophy—allows him to raise some strong points against Moore's proof, especially his consideration that, without a justification for what Moore claims to know, no one needs to believe him, and that the skeptics needn't be convinced by his proof (cf. OC, § 137, § 389, § 520). So I think Wittgenstein is correct in insisting that good knowledge claims should be justifiable, but not in suggesting that this is a requirement that can be extracted from pure observation of ordinary linguistic practice. As I have tried to show, Wittgenstein is wrong to expect that a descriptive procedure by itself will be sufficient to show what the rules for the correct uses of the verb "to know" are. That does not mean we should simply ignore how claims of knowledge actually appear in ordinary language. This inspection, I believe, is a part of the process enabling us to determine what knowledge is. But it seems to me impossible to specify what the *right* claims of knowledge are without a critical examination—a *normative* look at ordinary language. Otherwise, if we were to restrict ourselves to describing how we actually claim to know things, we would not be able to say when it is the case that someone who claims to know something does *not know* it. The same, I tried to show, goes for justification. We can observe all kinds of justification in ordinary linguistic practices, but we can only separate the good from the bad by adopting a critical, and not merely descriptive, stance. In a purely descriptive approach to language, any claim of knowledge and justification would have to be considered equally valid, provided it fits a common pattern of use, including those made by pregnant women and those made by Moore—and that is clearly not the conclusion Wittgenstein reaches.

In rejecting Moore's claims of knowledge, Wittgenstein implicitly goes beyond a descriptive perspective. Since he establishes conditions for the proper use of the verb

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[17] Also, Wittgenstein seems to suggest that Moore's error was to go beyond the ordinary use of "know". I have tried to argued that this is not the case. But even if Moore were not following any ordinary use, it would still be unclear why ordinary use is to be the standard for correctness. Wittgenstein can't just appeal to ordinary usage and end it there, not while still claiming that his philosophy doesn't rest on any presuppositions. If Moore's use is not to enter the description of correct usage, because it is not an ordinary use, we can still ask what grounded the decision that only ordinary usage should be taken as the standard for correctness. Answering this question will require going beyond description to an explanation of why what ordinary language deems correct *is* correct.

"to know", which end up excluding some of its common uses (including Moore's), we must recognize that Wittgenstein crossed the line between mere description and normativity. If we in fact use "to know" in cases where there is no possible justification, then Wittgenstein does not meet his initial goal to "reserve the expression 'I know' for cases in which it is used in *normal linguistic exchange*" (OC, § 260, my emphasis). Wittgenstein has entered a normative field, no matter what his original intentions were.

The conclusion I come to is that Wittgenstein's treatment of the verb "to know" is inconsistent with his metaphilosophical posture. Although Wittgenstein argued that philosophy must be merely descriptive, some of his philosophical observations about the verb "to know", as I hope to have shown, cannot be taken as mere descriptions. Despite all his attempts to deny it, when he considers the possibility of justification to be necessary for knowledge, Wittgenstein seems to be following a very traditional, *theoretical* way of thinking about knowledge.

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