

# Moore's *Proof*, liberals and conservatives—is there a (Wittgensteinian) third way?\*

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In the last few years there has been a resurgence of interest in Moore's *Proof* of the existence of an external world, which is now often rendered as follows:<sup>1</sup>

- (I) Here's a hand
  - (II) If there is a hand here, there is an external world
- Therefore
- (III) There is an external world

The contemporary debate has been mostly triggered by Crispin Wright's influential—conservative—“Facts and certainty” and further fostered by Jim Pryor's recent—liberal—“What's wrong with Moore's argument?”.<sup>2</sup> This debate is worth surveying with care because—so I shall contend—it will help us see that, in fact, it allows for an important view that, so far, hasn't been explicitly considered. The critical survey will be the task of the next two sections, while, in the remaining

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<sup>1</sup> It should be kept in mind that this is not Moore's original *Proof* and also that the *Proof* was not intended as an anti-sceptical argument, but, rather as an anti-idealist one (see Moore [1942]). I present, discuss and criticise the original version of the *Proof* in my [2003, 2004]. In the latter paper [2004: 402-404], I also discuss why, despite Moore's own intentions, his *Proof*—as was presented in his 1939 paper—can be read as an anti-sceptical argument.

<sup>2</sup> Wright [1985] and Pryor [2004], but see also Wright [2002], [2004a] and Pryor [2000]. The labels “conservative” and “liberal” are now standard for their respective positions as well as “sceptic” and “dogmatist”. Wright, however, shares with a sceptic only the assumption that warrant for (III) is needed in order to have warrant for (I), but he doesn't endorse the view that this should lead to scepticism, viz. to the view that no warrant for (III) can be provided at all. Hence, the label “sceptic”, when applied to his view, may be misleading; “conservative” might be better. There will be more about Wright's overall position in the following (see §3.1).

two, I shall outline the third view, enlarge on its consequences with respect to scepticism about the external world, and discuss its bearing on Moore's *Proof*. Let me stress from the start that this is a programmatic exploration of such an alternative position, which will have to be further developed in subsequent work.<sup>3</sup> Be that as it may, as will become apparent, the third view will be Wittgensteinian in spirit and in the *Appendix* I will briefly compare it with Wittgenstein's (more or less) official line in *On Certainty*.<sup>4</sup>

### 1. The contemporary debate

As is familiar, Wright's view is that the *Proof* fails because it is *epistemically circular*.<sup>5</sup> According to him, perceptual experience can provide a (defeasible) warrant for the first premise—which Wright doesn't call into question—only in a conducive informational setting including, in particular, the thesis that there is an external material world, broadly manifest in ordinary sense experience. So Moore's warrant for premise (I) depends, in Wright's conservative view, on his *already* having a warrant for the conclusion, since it is only in the context of such anterior information that he justifiably takes his sense experience as a warrant for "Here's a hand". The *Proof* accordingly, though valid and proceeding from premises that there is no (non-sceptical) reason to deny are known, fails to be rationally persuasive—it can't produce a *first* warrant for believing its conclusion.

Jim Pryor has contested this. He agrees that *reason to doubt* (III) would *defeat* the warrant supplied by perceptual experience for (I). But he thinks that one could have a—to be sure, defeasible—perceptual warrant for (I) just by taking one's current sense experience at face value, without the need for any prior and independent warrant for (III), provided one doesn't already have any such doubt. Hence, the *Proof*, in his view, is not epistemically circular. What is true, he suggests, is that it is *dialectically ineffective*: specifically, that it fails in the dialectical setting in which it is presented, since a sceptic *will* already doubt its conclusion—that is, on his view, believe it is (likely) false—and, hence, will refuse to regard one's current experience as a warrant for (I).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Some attempts in this direction are contained in my [2008b, d, e].

<sup>4</sup> As is familiar, there is no consensus on what exactly Wittgenstein's position in *On Certainty* was. For an overview of various possible readings of it, see Moyal-Sharrock and Brenner [2005].

<sup>5</sup> A number of recent publications testify to the interest this debate is enjoying. Just to mention a few prominent examples, besides a number of papers written by Wright, Davies and Pryor, which gave rise to, and developed the debate, see Beebe [2001], Peacocke [2004: 112-5], Schiffer [2004], Brown [2005], Silins [2005], White [2006], as well as Wright [2007] and Pryor [2008].

<sup>6</sup> It is contentious that a sceptic would deem (III) false—a sceptic is no idealist. Rather, he would regard it as unwarrantable. But, for present purposes, we can omit this qualification. I explore this in more depth in my [2008b].

But then, since, by the sceptic's lights, there is no warrant for (I) in the first place,<sup>7</sup> there is no warrant to be transmitted from the premises to the conclusion of the argument either, which, therefore, will fail to establish that conclusion—at least, to a sceptic's satisfaction.

Let us now turn to consider who, between Wright—the conservative—and Pryor—the liberal—, has the better of their epistemological dispute: is antecedent warrant for (III) a necessary part of the stage-setting for the evidential value of sense-experience for any proposition like (I) or is it sufficient merely to lack reason to doubt (III)?

## 2. The Wright-Pryor dispute: is anyone right?

Most of those who have tended to side with Pryor—philosophers such as Martin Davies, Christopher Peacocke and Tyler Burge<sup>8</sup>—, are impressed by the fact that it wouldn't be truthful to our ordinary epistemic practice to think that only those who can produce a warrant for a belief in the existence of the external world could have (perceptual) warrant for an empirical belief such as (I). After all—they seem to think—many would agree (though not Moore and Pryor) that practically nobody, apart from perhaps some trained and resourceful epistemologist, *could* produce a warrant for the belief in the existence of the external world. Still, we readily acknowledge that both we and our fellow human beings have empirical beliefs which are perceptually justified. Moreover we gladly admit that children, who may well lack the conceptual repertoire necessary even to entertain the belief that there is an external world, regularly arrive at perceptually justified empirical beliefs.

The trouble with this sort of consideration is that it mistakes the project in which Pryor and Wright are—at least primarily—engaged. These philosophers aren't principally interested in reconstructing our actual epistemic practices.<sup>9</sup> Rather, their project is *normative*:<sup>10</sup> what they aim to understand are the warrants, if any, that are needed in order for a belief to be, not justified by the lights of our actual epistemic practice, whatever that may be, but genuinely epistemically

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<sup>7</sup> Or, while continuing to exist “in the abstract space of warrants” (Davies [2007: 17]), it is rationally unavailable to him, given his collateral beliefs. I discuss this point in more detail in my [2008b]. For present purposes this won't make any difference.

<sup>8</sup> Davies [2004: 226-30, 234-5], Peacocke [2004: 178]. Burge [1993: 458-9; 2003: 264] has offered considerations which support the impression that he too would favour Pryor's position over Wright's, although he himself isn't—obviously—taking issue with either.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Wright [2004a: 204-5] and Pryor [2005: 181-2]. In conversation, however, Jim Pryor has pointed out to me that, although his project remains normative, he is also interested in giving a correct description of our actual epistemic practice.

<sup>10</sup> Of course also Davies, Peacocke and Burge are engaged in normative projects. So, really, it shouldn't be a consideration that Pryor's proposal would be more truthful to our epistemic practice. At most, if it turned out to be correct from a normative point of view, its descriptive adequacy would be a plus.

appropriate in the “abstract space of justification or warrants”<sup>11</sup>, as it were. Hence, it doesn’t matter whether we don’t actually require subjects to be able to produce a warrant for a belief such as (III), in order to credit them with a warrant for a belief of the kind of (I). The question, rather, is whether, in general, a warrant for (III) is *necessary* for there being a warrant for (I) or the myriad other propositions which we do indeed habitually take to be perceptually justified.

Before attending to the task of assessing the Wright-Pryor dispute, however, it is important to be explicit about what can be taken to be their common ground. First they both conceive of warrant along *internalist* lines. That is to say, not as something whose obtaining is merely due to favourable external conditions which may be totally unknown to us, but, rather, as something whose obtaining is internally certifiable in such a way that a (suitably conceptually endowed) subject can appeal to it to *redeem* or *claim* one’s warrant for the belief in question. Secondly, it is important to keep in mind that Wright and Pryor both allow that it is metaphysically possible, though maybe not nomologically so, that a subject’s sense experience be indistinguishable from a first-personal point of view whatever its causal origin might be.<sup>12</sup>

Let me add one last point in the way of clarification of the positions in play here.<sup>13</sup> There is a possible ambiguity in saying—as Pryor maintains—that one can take one’s experience at face value as a warrant for “Here is hand” as long as one has no reason to doubt that there is an external world. For this may be taken to mean either as long as, lacking reasons to doubt, the assumption that there is an external world (although it might be implicit) is (still) in place; or else, as long as no assumption is made and, in particular, as long as there is no reason to think that it might be false that there is an external world. Thus, on the one hand, there is the view according to which one’s experience can be a warrant for “Here is a hand” only if, while lacking reasons to doubt, the assumption that there is an external world is in place. On the other hand, there is the view according to which one’s experience can be such a warrant even when no assumption about the existence of an external world is in place, and when, in particular, there are no reasons to think it might be false.<sup>14</sup> Now, not only do I think that this second reading is what Pryor actually maintains, but, in

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<sup>11</sup> See fn. 7. This twist of phrase is due to Davies [2007: 17]. It is in fact equivalent to talk in terms of propositional as opposed to doxastic warrants.

<sup>12</sup> It has to be stressed that this isn’t necessarily a fall-back into seduction by the “highest common factor”, denounced by McDowell [1982] (although in conversation Jim Pryor has manifested his sympathies with such a view). Even if disjunctivism about perceptual experience were true and seeing and hallucinating were two, mutually exclusive mental states, it would remain that it is metaphysically possible that a subject could not be able to tell which one he is in. This point is convincingly argued for in Wright [2002: 344-5].

<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Jim Pryor for pressing me on the need of making the following explicit.

<sup>14</sup> Talk of assumptions should not immediately lead one to think of a subject’s mental attitude. There may be assumptions which are needed to have certain warrants—think of the role of axioms in formal theories, or of certain

effect, for reasons which will become apparent in the following,<sup>15</sup> I think that this is what he *has* to maintain, in order for his account of Moore's *Proof*'s failure to be at least *prima facie* plausible.

So, granting this assumption, let's consider—if indeed it is intelligible—the case of a genuinely *open-minded* subject, who neither believes nor disbelieves that there is an external world, not even implicitly or tacitly. Now, there is a major difficulty in seeing how, as Pryor believes, his occurrent experience as of a hand in front of him can give him an *immediate* warrant to believe (I) just so long as he has no reason to doubt (III). For, if Pryor is right, this warrant, even if defeasible, must be such that, once he has it, it gives him justification for “Here is a hand” and allows him to discard beliefs which are incompatible with it, such as (I\*) “My current experience as of a hand is envatted experience”. But Pryor agrees that it is metaphysically possible that one's experience be subjectively indistinguishable whether produced by a meddling scientist in a scenario of handless envatment or by normal perception of external things. So, how can such an experience immediately—that is, independently of any other assumption—give one a warrant for (I) and also disconfirm (I\*)? Furthermore, assuming closure, how could having an experience which would be subjectively indistinguishable from one occurring in a scenario of brain envatment disconfirm that very hypothesis?<sup>16</sup>

As mentioned, another assumption in common between Wright and Pryor is that warrant is conceived along internalist lines, as something we can use to *claim* (if appropriately conceptually endowed and defeasibly as it may be) that the belief it warrants is true. So, now, consider again an open-minded subject. Since, according to Pryor, no view on (III) is needed in order to have a perceptual warrant for (I) when one's experience takes a certain course, it would seem, at least

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background assumptions in scientific ones—even when we are merely dealing with “the abstract space of warrants”. There will be more about this in the following. As to whether talk of “reasons to doubt” involves a psychological attitude in its turn, it depends on whether we are dealing with “the abstract space of reasons” or with doxastic reasons. Here, I'm not specifically talking about either, but it should be kept in mind that Pryor deals with both and since he thinks that there are no non-doxastic reasons to doubt about the existence of an external world, he mostly concentrates on doxastic ones. In that case, one's propositional warrant for (I) would not be defeated, but simply unavailable to the subject, given his collateral beliefs. See Pryor [2004: 362-368]. I discuss this issue in more depth in my [2008b].

<sup>15</sup> See §5 and fn. 48.

<sup>16</sup> Here is an analogous thought. Suppose that there can be cleverly disguised mules that look just like zebras. Now, how could one's experience *as such* give one an immediate warrant for “Here is a zebra” rather than for “Here is a cleverly disguised mule”? If we are inclined to think that it can, it is simply because we are already implicitly assuming that the experience we are having is caused by zebras rather than by cleverly disguised mules. Similarly, assuming closure, how could that experience just by itself disconfirm the very hypothesis that we are surrounded by cleverly disguised mules? Wright doesn't have a similar problem because, on his view, in the case of Moore's *Proof*, we in fact have an entitlement for (III). Hence, we are entitled to discard the possibility of uncongenial scenarios and are therefore entitled warrantably to believe (I) on the basis of our current sense experience.

*prima facie*, that his model would allow for a situation in which such a subject, who attentively thinks about the matter (and considers a hand a physical object), could profess open-mindedness with respect to (III) (as well as with respect to other propositions such as (III\*) “My sense organs are now working properly”), while fully understanding its content, and yet, on the basis of his current experience, also claim to have warrant for (I). But I think we would regard it epistemically inappropriate for a subject to claim “I have no view about whether there is an external world (or about whether my sense organs are now working properly), but nonetheless I am (or take myself to be) warranted, on the basis of the experience I am currently having, to believe that here is a hand”. To stress, the point isn’t that such a subject would *continue* to remain open-minded about the existence of an external world. Indeed, by running the *Proof*, he would, according to Pryor, acquire a warrant to believe that there is an external world (or that his sense organs are working properly). Rather, the point is that *before* running the *Proof*, on Pryor’s view, he could find himself in the situation just described: one of overt open-mindedness with respect (III) (or III\*) and yet of internally certified warrantedness of (I).<sup>17</sup>

There is a lot more to say.<sup>18</sup> But I think these considerations suggest that Pryor may well be wrong in maintaining that it suffices, in order to have a perceptual warrant for (I), merely that one’s experience assumes a certain course in conditions where there are *no reasons to doubt* (in the sense we have specified) that there is an external world. Against that, I want to set the idea that it is only in a context in which it is *positively assumed*, no doubt most of the time *implicitly*, that a subject’s experience is produced in what one takes to be the ordinary way, by causal interaction with a world populated by physical objects, that one can rationally claim, or grant, the having of perceptual warrant for a proposition like (I). Pryor’s conception of the conditions which are required to accompany the experience is *too* liberal, for, to repeat, on that conception it would seem enough in order to acquire a warrant to believe (I) simply to have a certain kind of perceptual experience, while having no view on (III). The next question to ask is: if Pryor is wrong, does it *ipso facto* follow that Wright’s conservative view isn’t?

### 3. A third way?

To suggest that the evidential value of experience depends on (tacit) acceptance that there is an external world does not appear to force us to admit, with Wright, that a *warrant* for the belief in the existence of the external world is needed in order to have a (perceptual) warrant for (I). It seems that there may be an intermediate position: if merely *assuming* a thesis, implicitly as it may be, is not equivalent to having (or to assuming one has) a warrant for it, then the erroneousness of Pryor’s

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<sup>17</sup> See also Wright [2007: 34, 39].

<sup>18</sup> For further reasons to complain with Pryor’s position, see Wright [2007].

position doesn't entail the rightness of Wright's. The problem, however, is that of properly characterising such an intermediate view, since a number of possibilities are open.

Before attending this task, I wish to clarify what I take to be a constraint on any appropriate characterisation of the third way; namely, that it should be suited to meet the sceptical challenge. Let me briefly say what, in this context, this challenge amounts to. I think that we can distinguish two kinds of scepticism.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, there is Cartesian scepticism, which, by raising the hypothesis that we may be dreaming right now (or, equivalently, that we might be brains in a vat), asks us to provide warrants for any *specific* empirical belief we may have. Since, on that hypothesis, our experiences would be subjectively indistinguishable from what they actually are, notwithstanding their different causal origin, a Cartesian sceptic would then conclude that, in fact, we have no such warrant.<sup>20</sup> Since this would be true for each and every empirical belief we may have, a Cartesian sceptic can then generalise and claim that we have no warrant for our *general* belief in the existence of the external world.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, however, there is another kind of scepticism, elicited from the work of Hume and typified, ironically, by Moore's *Proof*, as Wright reads it. Such a kind of scepticism doesn't traffic in dreams, demons and brains in a vat. Rather, it asks us to provide a warrant for the general belief in the existence of the external world, *taken as such*. It is important to emphasise here that the kind of warrant a sceptic asks us to provide is *epistemic*. By this, I mean that the possession of such a warrant, for a given belief, should give one a justification to believe in the *truth* of what is warranted thereby. To meet this challenge, however, it seems that all we can do is to derive a warrant for (III)—the belief that the class of physical objects isn't empty—from our *perceptual* warrant for a belief about one of its instances, like (I)—the belief that here's a hand. But, according to a Humean sceptic (as well as Wright), such a perceptual warrant is only possible in a context where (III) is assumed. (III), however, can *rationally* be assumed—both according to the sceptic and Wright—only if we have a *warrant* for it. But we can have no such an independent warrant for (III). Hence, the Humean sceptic concludes that *no* warrant for (III) can be provided at all.<sup>22</sup>

The constraint I want to impose on what would count as a suitable characterisation of the third way is that it be somehow capable of confronting the Humean sceptical challenge. But, as we

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<sup>19</sup> Wright [2004a: 167-175] and my [2008a].

<sup>20</sup> Or, alternatively, if warrant is conceived in an externalist fashion, that we may have such a warrant if conditions are favourable, but that we have no way of *claiming*—that is, of rationally reassuring ourselves—that we have it, for nothing in our subjective experience allows us to discard the hypothesis that it may be produced by a dream. For an in-depth treatment of this issue see Wright [2004] and my [2008a].

<sup>21</sup> Or again (cf. previous footnote), that we can't *claim* such a warrant.

<sup>22</sup> Or, alternatively (cf. the two previous footnotes), that we can't claim such a warrant.

know at least since Strawson's work on scepticism,<sup>23</sup> there can be *direct* and *indirect* responses to scepticism. A direct response would be one in which we try to meet the sceptical challenge head-on and try to provide an *epistemic* warrant for (III)—that is, a warrant that, no matter whether perceptual or otherwise, would give one a justification to believe that (III) is *true*. An indirect response, in contrast, would be *diagnostic*, but it could take at least two forms: it could either try to show that the sceptic's challenge is, after all, meaningless, incoherent or self-refuting;<sup>24</sup> or else, it could try and provide a strategy of “damage limitation”,<sup>25</sup> that is, a strategy which, while granting the good-standing of the sceptical challenge, and, furthermore, that no epistemic warrants for (III) can be provided, would show that the allegedly disastrous consequences of such a concession wouldn't follow.

What are these consequences? I think we can safely call them “*postmodernist*”:<sup>26</sup> not so much that our shared practices of formation of empirical belief are somehow up in the air, in danger of annihilation by the sceptical challenge—or put a little less figuratively, that *in fact we have no* epistemic warrants, of an ordinary perceptual kind, for our everyday empirical beliefs. Rather, that whatever these practices may be and whatever purposes they may accomplish, our acceptance of their *foundations* isn't *rationally grounded*, for we don't have, nor can we have, an epistemic warrant for them. Thus, our taking for granted that there is an external world wouldn't be grounded in reasons and evidence, but in “something animal”—something *brute* and not *rational*—like an ingrained psychological mechanism, or, perhaps, a “form of life”.<sup>27</sup>

Alternatively, the consequences of the concession that our acceptance of presuppositions such as (III) isn't epistemically warranted may be considered to be this: we take it for granted that there is an external world because this is the “hinge” of our practice of forming, assessing and withdrawing from empirical beliefs on the basis of empirical evidence. Such a practice, in its turn,

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<sup>23</sup> Strawson [1985: 3]. Ironically, Strawson seems to think that naturalism can be a response to scepticism, when in fact it is simply the result of having given in to it.

<sup>24</sup> Putnam, Davidson and perhaps Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* could be taken as examples of one version or other of this kind of indirect response to scepticism.

<sup>25</sup> Wright [2004a: 206].

<sup>26</sup> I hereby take the liberty to appropriate a label used many times by Crispin Wright at least in conversation.

<sup>27</sup> Or, to use an expression dear to Simon Blackburn, albeit allegedly first used by the Queen after Princess Diana's death, such takings-for-granted would be the result of “dark forces at work, of which we know nothing” (Blackburn [2005: xv, 66]). Hume can be taken as maintaining the naturalist view that our belief in the existence of the external world is something we have in virtue of our psychological constitution. Wittgenstein, according to Strawson's reading of *On Certainty*, in contrast, can be taken as the supporter of a different kind of naturalism, according to which such a belief is something we have in virtue of belonging to a certain form of life. There will be more on Wittgenstein's alleged naturalism in the *Appendix*.



is something we find it *useful* or *convenient* to have, given our various purposes in life. After all, it does serve us reasonably well. So, taking for granted one of its presuppositions, such as that there is an external world, is something we do only *practically rationally*—that is to say, in virtue of the expected utility of having the practice of which (III) is a presupposition. Much contemporary thought, mostly influenced by Nietzsche and Weber, would indeed embrace such a view.

Just to anticipate a little, in the following, I will sketch a strategy for making out the third way, which would be one of “damage limitation”. In particular, I will try to maintain that our acceptance of (III) is epistemically unwarrantable yet rational and, moreover, rational by the very lights of epistemic rationality itself.<sup>28</sup>

With this in mind, let us briefly consider how an externalist characterisation of the third way would fare. According to such a position, we should say that, as long as the assumption is merely *true*—that there is indeed an external world, interacting with one’s sense organs in much the way one normally supposes—, one is warranted in taking one’s experience at face value to support beliefs such as (I). So the warranting potential of experience depends on what one takes for granted and on whether what one takes for granted is true—what kind of world one actually lives in.

The externalist interpretation, however, is problematical when taken in connection with scepticism, for at least the following reason. If the externalist proposal is somehow put at the service of Moore’s *Proof*, in order to provide a direct response to scepticism, it wouldn’t turn that *Proof* into a cogent argument. For reflect: the perceptual warrant we would have and claim for (I) and which would transmit to (III) would be conditional upon relying on (III)’s truth, with no particular warrant or justification for doing so. Yet, one can’t produce and claim a first warrant for a conclusion when warrant for it would in fact depend on already assuming that very piece of information.<sup>29</sup>

It appears, then, that the third view will best be developed within the broad family of internalist positions: as long as one merely *takes it for granted*, *trusts*, or *accepts* that there is an external world, one will be rationally entitled to take one’s perceptual experience at face value as a warrant for one’s empirical beliefs. Characteristically, the notion of taking for granted (or of

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<sup>28</sup> If this sounds oxymoronic, wait until §3.2.

<sup>29</sup> There will be more on this in §5. Notice, moreover, that if things were otherwise, a whole host of long-lasting philosophical problems—such as the existence of other minds, the existence of the past and the thesis of the uniformity of nature—could easily be solved: it would be enough merely to design logically valid arguments the warrantedness of whose premises depended on the truth of their conclusions. For instance, (I) Here is a person in pain; (II) If there is a person in pain here, then other minds exist; therefore, (III) Other minds exist. It is worth stressing that this is not what Moore is doing, at least not overtly. For Moore, contrary to the kind of externalist I’m thinking of here, does not hold that (III) is true and thus safely assumed, and that that, in turn, allows one to have and claim warrant for (I) (nor does Pryor, for that matter).

trusting or accepting) is construed as an attitude of acceptance of a proposition which does not depend on evidence, nor implies its truth:<sup>30</sup> if we take P for granted (or, equivalently, we trust in it or assume it), then we *act* as if P were true, although we have no evidence for it—nor, in the relevant case, can we acquire any—, and even if P might in fact be false—but, notice, that in the relevant case, we can acquire no evidence that P might be false either. This attitude, however, will be regarded by the third way as grounding the possibility of acquiring evidence for (or against) other (empirical) propositions. The suggestion, then, will be that some propositions have to be taken for granted in order for other propositions to be empirically warranted (or disconfirmed). In particular, a proposition such as (III) has to be taken for granted in order for a proposition of the kind of (I) to be perceptually warranted (or disconfirmed by empirical evidence).<sup>31</sup>

It is worth stressing that construing acceptance as an attitude towards a proposition does not mean to say that subjects should explicitly entertain and assent to the proposition in question, or that they should at least have the conceptual resources necessary simply to entertain it. Rather, they could be seen as *implicitly* (yet positively) assuming a given proposition in virtue of being immersed in a practice, which has that acceptance as a precondition of its rational intelligibility. To illustrate: my dialling a certain international code to call my best friend when I am abroad can be seen as rational only on the assumption that I am taking for granted that she is in that other country, even if I am not explicitly considering that presupposition, let alone assenting to it. Indeed, even a child who, for the same purpose, dialled that code, while (perhaps) even lacking the conceptual repertoire necessary to entertain that presupposition, could be granted with its acceptance, because he could be seen as taking part in a communal practice whose rational intelligibility rests on such an assumption.<sup>32</sup>

So, the notion of acceptance I am working with is admittedly psychologically very thin, but I think this is the best I can offer in order to bring what I take to be the right theoretical model to bear on—or, at any rate, in line with—real-life situations. Were one to find this proposal unsatisfactory, one could simply hold on to the idea that on the third way, the architecture of the abstract space of

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<sup>30</sup> See Wright [2004a: 175-178, 183] and fn. 36.

<sup>31</sup> As opposed to what Davies [2004: 230] maintains and which elicits his scepticism with respect to such a third way. He writes, in the course of developing his idea of a negative entitlement, which I will not discuss here: “Switching to the negative notion of entitlement, we could add that the thinker is entitled not to bother about, nor even to consider, that his perceptual apparatus might not be operating properly. But we must not slide from this to the idea that, since the thinker does not doubt that his perceptual apparatus is working properly, he *assumes* this. For the thinker need not be capable of adopting any attitudes towards that proposition”. Notice, however, that Davies supports his notion of negative entitlement on the basis of considerations of psychological adequacy. This kind of consideration, however, isn’t immediately relevant to the normative enterprise at issue in this kind of debate.

<sup>32</sup> In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein often points in this direction too. See for instance OC §§148, 174, 360.

warrants is such that in order for experience to be a warrant for specific empirical beliefs, certain assumptions have to be in place—that is, they must be accepted, as it were, by an ideal epistemic subject.

Granting this, however, the salient problem with the proposal is to make it suitable to confront the sceptical challenge. After all, as we saw, the sceptic need not contest that there are certain things we take for granted and that the existence of an external world is just one of those. Indeed, he may even claim, with Hume, that this is precisely what scepticism—correctly understood—leads us to see: that our ordinary empirical inquiries aren't *rationaly grounded*, for we don't have, nor can we have, a warrant for them. If the third way is to do better, it needs to be made out that “animal trusting” is not merely all that is available when reasons and justifications fail, but that attitudes of trusting somehow underwrite the very possibility of empirically justified belief. Thus, the only way in which trusting, or taking for granted, could be of avail in this connection, would depend on the possibility of redeeming its rationality, contrary appearances notwithstanding.

### 3.1 Wright's entitlements?

Wright's most recent work seems to go in this direction too: according to Wright, we can face the sceptical challenge and win if we broaden the class of warrants to countenance both evidential—that is, perceptual—and *non-evidential* warrants. In the relevant class of cases, in Wright's view, while no evidential warrant would (or could) be available, a non-evidential one would (perhaps<sup>33</sup>) be attainable. Hence, when it comes to a belief such as (III) we may have a non-evidential warrant—that is, an *entitlement*, in Wright's terminology—to trust such a presupposition, and in the context of such rational trust, thereby rationally take our specific experiences to support particular empirical beliefs.

Now, I don't wish to discuss Wright's proposal in detail, but some things are worth noticing. If Wright's non-evidential warrants were supposed to be genuinely *epistemic* warrants—that is, warrants that, though non-perceptual, would certify (albeit defeasibly) that what they warrant is in fact the case—I don't think they would have been vindicated by Wright's various strategies for redeeming them—entitlements of cognitive project, of substance, etc. For, as connoisseurs of Wright's most recent work will know, his entitlements make only for the *rational permissibility*, given certain practices and conceptual schemes we *need* or *want* to hold on to,<sup>34</sup> of accepting their

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<sup>33</sup> Wright [2004a: 200-3, 203 in particular] himself acknowledges that his way of redeeming the rationality of “There is an external world”, by means of what he calls “entitlement of substance”, is not watertight. I discuss the details of this kind of entitlement in my [2007].

<sup>34</sup> Wright [2004a: 192]: “If a cognitive project is indispensable, or anyway sufficiently valuable to us, (...) we are entitled to (...) [its] presuppositions without specific evidence in their favour”.

presuppositions. The thought is that if we want or need to hold on to them, then we have no other option *but to accept*<sup>35</sup> their presuppositions. But the fact that a story can be told as to why accepting (III) is rational, if we need or want to hold on to a conceptual scheme where physical objects are countenanced, doesn't *eo ipso* give us anything that would certify that (III) is indeed the case. So, I think that Wright has given us no epistemic warrant, properly so regarded, for accepting (III). Hence, if Wright's recent work is intended as a way of filling out the details of a *conservative* and *direct* response to scepticism—one according to which non-evidential, still entirely epistemic warrants for (III) are provided—, I think it is not successful.

But I think Wright is aware of this.<sup>36</sup> So I deem he is actually trying to do something different, namely to stick to the structural project of the conservative view—which is that of providing a warrant for propositions like (III)—, while in fact offering a warrant other than epistemic—that is, a rational entitlement—which is different from a genuine epistemic warrant, both because it is not evidential and because it does not bear on the truth of what is warranted thereby. If so, Wright's strategy would be *structurally conservative* but, in effect, an *indirect response to scepticism*, as it would merely try to limit the damage of the sceptical considerations.<sup>37</sup> To repeat, this would mean that while Wright thinks that warrant for (III) can be provided, it would not be a warrant which would give one reason to think that (III) is true. Rather, it would be a warrant, which would make it rationally permissible to assume (III) and, in light of that assumption, rationally permissible to go on acquiring the usual perceptual warrants for empirical beliefs such as (I), that we take our perceptual experiences to provide us with.

This, in fact, helps us see the structural difference between his project and mine. On one possible interpretation of Wright's position, he thinks that acceptances can be rational just in case

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<sup>35</sup> See Wright [2004a: 189]: “one *cannot* but take certain things for granted”.

<sup>36</sup> See Wright [2004a: 206] where he actually says: “In general, it has to be recognised that the unified strategy [viz. his strategy of response to scepticism both of Cartesian and Humean kind by means of the appeal to rational entitlements] can at most deliver a *sceptical solution* (...). Sceptical solutions concede the thrust of the sceptical arguments they respond to (...). The unified strategy likewise concedes the basic point of the sceptical arguments to which it reacts, namely that we do indeed have no claim to know, in any sense involving possession of evidence for their likely truth, that certain cornerstones of what we take to be procedures yielding knowledge and justified belief hold good”.

<sup>37</sup> Let me register at this point that there might be worries about the nature of the rational entitlements Wright is producing. Some theorists, in particular, (Jenkins [2007] and Pritchard [2005]) have claimed that pointing out that accepting presuppositions such as (III) is simply something we can't but do if we need or want to engage in certain epistemic practices, seems to suggest that accepting them is rational in virtue of the utility those practices have in our life, or the purposes they serve. Hence, the kind of rational entitlement provided for them would be merely *practical*. If this were the case, then Wright's strategy wouldn't supply a counter to the “postmodernist” implications of the Humean sceptical challenge, for, as we saw, one form those implications could take is precisely that we are merely practically warranted in accepting presuppositions such as (III).

we can provide a rational entitlement for them—that, as we saw, he thinks of as some kind of warrant, albeit different from a genuinely epistemic warrant, evidential or otherwise and hence as something that, once you have it, justifies your acceptance of, in our case, (III). This may seem rather intuitive. After all, it is conceived on the model of what makes our ordinary empirical beliefs rational; namely, the fact that we have warrants for them, only, in this latter case, genuine epistemic warrants of a perceptual kind. But, first, it is notable and relevant to our present purposes, that Wright’s apparent concession that we need a *warrant* for (III)—albeit neither an evidential nor an epistemic one—thereby, in turn, attaining a position in which we can acquire perceptual warrant for ordinary empirical beliefs such as (I), seems to go against the spirit of the third way I am trying to canvass. For the latter’s distinctive contention, if it can be sustained, is precisely that *no warrant* for such takings-for-granted is required before they can be rational.

Secondly, I think there are other ways, different from being variously warranted, in which an acceptance can be rational: if, for instance, that acceptance is itself *constitutive of rationality*. Think, for example, of accepting the pattern of inference which constitutes *modus ponens*. What one might easily end up saying is that accepting Q, given the previous acceptance of P and “If P, then Q”—when one is considering that general scheme of inference and not one of its specific instantiations—is part of what *constitutes* being rational. There is no need to think that accepting it is rational only if we can discover some kind of warrant for it. Now, suppose you meet someone who tells you, “Look! We accept Q, given our acceptance of P and of “If P then Q”. This, however, is a brute acceptance, which cannot be warranted, hence it is not rational”. Suppose we were to respond by saying “True, that’s what we do. But to do that is part of what being rational actually *consists in*. So, that acceptance *is* rational after all, even if we have no warrant for it”. Now, if we were right about that, I think we would have responded to our opponent. This, however, doesn’t mean that we would have produced or discovered any kind of warrant that makes that acceptance rational. For to point out some kind of *conceptual* or *grammatical connection* between our acting in a certain way, like accepting Q (given our acceptance of P and “If P then Q”), and being rational is not to provide anything like a *warrant* for that acceptance, capable of turning it into something rational. Rather, to point that out, is simply to register that warrants and justifications have come to an end, yet our actions, like accepting Q (given our acceptance of P and of “If P then Q”), are what *determines*, in a given context, what being rational consists in. So, they are not rational *in virtue of something else*, whatever that something else might be—an evidential warrant or Wright’s rational entitlements. Rather, they themselves constitute or determine what being rational consists in.

Let me try to clarify the proposal by contrasting it with Wright’s. One could (I think correctly) put this alternative view by saying that its central contention is that there are acceptances

that are rational *in virtue of* being constitutive of (our notion of) rationality. One could then go on to say that, if this is the case, what the alternative proposal makes out is a warrant for them—although not an evidential one—and that it is the presence of such a warrant that turns what would otherwise be *a*-rational acceptances into rational ones. If this were true, then the present proposal would differ from Wright’s only in detail—in the way in which, in effect, it makes out an entitlement in the relevant case—not in structure.

But now consider the following “in virtue of which” kind of explanation: we could say that the liquid in the bottle sitting on the table is water in virtue of its being H<sub>2</sub>O. Now, obviously, when we say this we don’t mean to say that there is *something else*—H<sub>2</sub>O—which attaches to the liquid in the bottle and *turns* it into water. Rather, what we mean to say is merely that being H<sub>2</sub>O is what being water *consists in*. Similarly, by simply saying that an acceptance is rational in virtue of its being constitutive of rationality one is not thereby committed to saying that there is something—its being constitutive of rationality—over and above the acceptance itself, which turns it into a rational one. All one would in fact be saying is what being a rational acceptance *consists in*.

Furthermore, it is important to note that by *explaining* that the liquid in the bottle is water in virtue of its being H<sub>2</sub>O, one isn’t providing any warrant for the *fact* that that liquid is water, but only, at most, for one’s *claim* that it is. Similarly, I think there is actually no reason to hold that by giving an account of why a certain acceptance is rational one would have provided a warrant for the *acceptance* itself. Rather, all one would have provided is, at most, a warrant for *claiming* that the acceptance is a rational one.

Actually I think that this last point doesn’t apply just to the explanation of the rationality of certain acceptances I have proposed and will further develop in the following, but to Wright’s as well. In particular, since by simply accounting for why a given acceptance is rational—either following Wright’s suggestions or mine—we wouldn’t thereby produce a warrant for it, but we would simply provide ourselves with a warrant to *claim* that it is, I actually suspect that his notion of entitlement—conceived of as a kind of warrant that has always been present at *first-order*, alongside with acceptances, thereby making them rational, and which he has had the merit of discovering (or of making out) for all of us, so that we can now actually claim it, thus redeeming it at second-order—is entirely spurious. If the analogy with the explanation of why something is water is correct, we can now see that while Wright may have given us a warrant for our *claim* that certain acceptances are rational, he has certainly not discovered warrants that have been there all along, accompanying our *acceptances* and making them rational. So, in effect, entitlements would be the product of a *projection error*: the error of projecting what constitutes a warrant to *claim* that a given acceptance is rational (i.e. the explanation we may offer of why that acceptance is rational), back

onto the level of first-order warrants for that very *acceptance*, which, if it existed at all, would (allegedly) be capable of turning that otherwise a-rational acceptance into a rational one.

So, to summarise this perhaps intricate discussion: I have claimed that (i) there aren't and there need not be any warrants, of any kind whatever, to make certain *acceptances* rational, insofar as the latter are themselves constitutive of rationality; and (ii) that when we point that out, or indeed provide ourselves with a warrant to believe that those acceptances are rational, perhaps along the lines explored by Wright in his discussion of rational entitlements, we don't provide anything like a warrant for those otherwise a-rational acceptances, which would make them rational. Rather, we simply provide ourselves with a warrant to *claim* that those acceptances, which have always been rational independently of any justification we may have to maintain they are, are indeed so.

There is obviously a lot more to be said, which would deserve a separate treatment.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, I hope that, whether or not I have succeeded in casting some doubt on the legitimacy of Wright's notion of entitlement, what we have just seen is enough to clarify the structural differences between his project and mine: Wright thinks that in order for our acceptances to be rational, we must provide warrant for them. That warrant can't be evidential, hence it must be something else—a rational entitlement—which, moreover, does not give one a justification to believe that what it warrants is true, but simply makes it rationally permissible to take a certain assumption for granted. In contrast, I think acceptances may be rational—and, moreover, as I will argue, rational from the point of view of epistemic rationality itself—even if no warrant—evidential or otherwise—can be provided for them, so long as it can be claimed that such acceptances are constitutive of (epistemic) rationality.

Going back to the third way, I think something broadly analogous to what we have observed about accepting the conclusion of *modus ponens* can in fact be said about our acceptance of (III). If so, that acceptance will be *rational*, even if we have no warrant for it. Furthermore, the story we will tell in order to bring out its rationality could be used to counter the potentially “postmodernist” implications of the sceptical challenge, without thereby producing or discovering any first-order warrant—that is, any extra “something in virtue of which” our acceptance of (III) would be rational.

### 3.2 *The epistemically rational permissibility of assuming (III)*

So, now, let me turn to the attempt to redeem the rationality of accepting (III), even if no epistemic warrant for it, evidential or otherwise, can be provided. I think that in order to meet this challenge we should ponder further on the role a presupposition such as (III) plays for us. What accepting (III) allows us to do, first and foremost, is to have the *basic* epistemic practice of forming, assessing and

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<sup>38</sup> For some other objections to Wright's notion of entitlement, especially to “entitlement of substance” as he calls it, see my [2007].

withdrawing from empirical beliefs on the basis of perceptual evidence pro or against those beliefs. To say that this epistemic practice is *basic* means to say that it is *presupposed* by all other practices of formation of empirical beliefs. So, for instance, we can arrive at beliefs about the material world around us also through the aid of instruments. But, clearly, we would have to rely on the fact that our senses, empowered, for example, by the use of a telescope, actually put us in contact with physical objects whose distance makes them invisible, or only partially visible, to the naked eye.

In this connection, the case of a religious believer that accepts what he takes to be the word of God as revealed in the Bible, and who, like Cardinal Bellarmine, may (allegedly) refuse to look into the telescope and to trust his senses to form beliefs about the planets, is often discussed as a case of acceptance of a different epistemic practice of formation of empirical beliefs. While it is discussible whether it is indeed such a *different* epistemic practice,<sup>39</sup> it remains that it wouldn't be *basic*. For in order to accept that the planets aren't made of the same substance that constitutes mountains and lakes, on the basis of the Holy Scriptures, one needs to *read* the Bible (or whatever other source of information is supposed to ground that belief), as well as understand what it means. Hence, one needs to trust that one's senses put one directly in contact with physical objects such as token Bibles, their written pages, etc., that then provide the evidence on which one's peculiar views on the nature of the skies are formed.

Similar considerations can be put forward also for those practices of formation of empirical belief which most of us would deem totally irrational, like consulting horoscopes or making divinations. For they would presuppose trust in the fact that our senses put us in touch with physical objects: after all, we would obtain the relevant information by *looking* at stars, planets, at the interiors of animals and so on. Hence, even in these cases we would need to form empirical beliefs on the basis of the deliverances of our senses, from which we would then infer, according to some (bizarre) theory, that it is going to rain soon, or that we are going to have a productive year, or a miserable one.

To say that our practice of forming empirical beliefs on the basis of our perceptual experience is basic then entails that it is presupposed by all other procedures of formation of empirical beliefs we have and, in this sense, that it is *central* to our form of life. Whether it is also *universal*, or even *necessary*, is another matter. I think it can be maintained that it is universal in the sense that it is shared by all human beings in virtue of the kind of creatures we are. But perhaps we

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<sup>39</sup> See for instance Boghossian [2006: 104]. According to Boghossian, Cardinal Bellarmine would in fact use his senses to form ordinary beliefs about the sun, the stars and the planets, but, trusting the Bible, he would then refuse to use his senses (empowered by the telescope) to form beliefs about their physical nature. This, according to Boghossian wouldn't mean that Bellarmine holds on to a different epistemic practice, but only that he thinks, contrary to most of us, that what the Bible says about the nature of the skies is true.



might imagine beings different from us that have no senses whatever but are somehow able to have intellectual knowledge of objects around them.<sup>40</sup> So maybe this practice is not necessary. Be that as it may, in order to defend the rationality of accepting its presuppositions we don't need to assume (or to prove) its necessity.

What is crucial to realise, however, is that the basic epistemic practice of forming, assessing and withdrawing from empirical beliefs on the basis of perceptual evidence, of which (III) is constitutive, is not just one practice we have—no matter how central it is to our overall system of formation of empirical beliefs. Rather, it is the very practice that contributes to the individuation of what we take *epistemic rationality* to be. To be epistemically rational simply *is* to be able to form, assess and withdraw from empirical beliefs on the basis of one's perceptual evidence. Since there wouldn't be any epistemic rationality if we did not trust in the existence of an external world, it is constitutive of epistemic rationality, as we ordinarily understand it, that we accept what in effect enables it, such as the existence of an external world.

A short detour is necessary at this point. If idealists or phenomenologists feel outraged at the idea of epistemic rationality depending on assuming (III), they should realise that this is merely what *our* notion of epistemic rationality is like:<sup>41</sup> we do indeed think that perceptual experience can certify the truth of the fact that there is a hand—taken as an object existing independently of our minds—where we seem to see it. If we are serious about the fact that it is a metaphysical possibility that experiences be indistinguishable with respect to their causal origin, then that may be so only if, as we have seen, the assumption that there is an external world is in place. Hence, if such theorists were to insist on the possibility of epistemic rationality independently of assuming (III), they would have to concede that they are indeed using or talking about a *different* notion of epistemic rationality. One, in particular, in which perceptual evidence doesn't really speak to the truth of empirical beliefs, but, rather, to the coherence between our sense impressions over time. So, they would be *revisionists* both with respect to our conceptual scheme, since no mind-independent objects would be countenanced, and with respect to our notion of epistemic rationality. Luckily, however, we are dealing with Humean scepticism, which isn't revisionary of our concepts (and

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<sup>40</sup> I am not going to inquire any further whether this possibility is really conceivable and coherent. At least *prima facie*, it seems so.

<sup>41</sup> Of course this is not an empirical claim. The view I am putting forward is precisely that acceptance of (III) is constitutive of epistemic rationality. I can't argue for this here, but I have done it elsewhere. See Coliva [2008e] where I actually maintain the even stronger claim that phenomenologists and idealists would not be able to deliver a coherent notion of epistemic rationality even by their own standards, i.e. even if experiences were not taken to bear on the existence of mind-independent objects, but on the existence of "objects" understood along idealists' and phenomenologists' favoured lines.

practices), as it leaves everything as it is, while simply pointing out that our most basic assumptions, such as (III) aren't warranted, and that, therefore, aren't rationally held.

So what I would like to suggest, by analogy with the case of accepting (the conclusion of) *modus ponens* we reviewed in the previous section, is that to say that the acceptance of (III) is *constitutive* of epistemic rationality makes it *rational* in its turn and, moreover, rational—that is *rationally permissible*—by the very lights of *epistemic rationality itself*. Thus, the thought is that although we have no epistemic warrant—evidential or otherwise—for a proposition like (III), accepting it can be seen as, nevertheless, fully *epistemically rationally permissible*, and not merely practically so, just because such an acceptance is indeed constitutive of our very notion of epistemic rationality.

It must be stressed that, on my view, the notion of epistemic rationality is not given absolutely, but always within a system or practice—that is, the system or practice in which we produce evidential warrants in favour or against empirical propositions. In order for that system or practice to be possible, it must be assumed that there is an external world, given the preconditions on which we have agreed, at least for the sake of argument, namely that perceptual experiences could be subjectively indistinguishable no matter what their causal origin might be, that we are working with an internalist notion of warrant, that the only “good” warrants in town are evidential ones and that such warrants can't be provided for propositions like (III) along the lines indicated by Moore's *Proof*. Now, clearly, that assumption isn't *irrational* for it isn't made *against* any evidential warrant we may have—as we have repeatedly pointed out, any evidential warrant would depend for its existence on making such an assumption, in turn. Nor does it necessarily have to be seen as *a-rational*, like something brute and instinctive we simply do, as a consequence of our psychological constitution or of our upbringing within a community of beings who share a certain form of life. Nor does it have to be considered rational only by the lights of practical rationality. Rather, it can be seen as part of epistemic rationality, even if it is not warrantable, as it is constitutive of it: not making that assumption would deprive us of the system or practice within which that notion has a home, and, consequently, of that very notion too, in such a way that we could no longer impugn the rational legitimacy of that assumption. For, in order to have our notion of epistemic rational legitimacy at all, that assumption has to be in place. Therefore, that assumption is indeed *part* of our system or practice of going about forming, assessing and withdrawing from empirical beliefs on the basis of warrants, for it is its condition of possibility. Yet, clearly, it is not just like any other element *within* that system or practice, for warrants for or against it cannot in fact be given. Still, it does not fall *outside* it either; rather, it is part of it, as it were, at its *limit*, because it makes that

system or practice possible. This is why it can be seen as epistemically rationally permissible in its turn, even if it is unwarrantable.

Hence, to sum up, I am maintaining that our notion of epistemic rationality is in fact *wider* than may have been realised. In particular, it extends not only to perceptually warranted empirical beliefs, but also to the acceptance of those presuppositions that make the acquisition of those warrants possible in the first place. Let me emphasise again that to say that an acceptance is epistemically rationally permissible if it is constitutive of epistemic rationality is not intended to provide a (non-evidential) warrant for it, that is to say, something else in virtue of which it turns out to be rational, but only to point out an aspect of what its being epistemically rationally permissible *consists in*.

#### **4. The third way and scepticism**

If what I have just said is along the right lines, where does it leave us with respect to scepticism? I think that we can agree with Wright that the (Humean) sceptic's mistake consists in making an erroneous inference from a true observation when he moves from the absence of epistemic warrants for propositions like (III) to the conclusion that taking them for granted is not rational, or only practically so.<sup>42</sup> Still, although I agree with Wright's general diagnosis, I think the reason why the (Humean) sceptic goes astray is not that he has too narrow a conception of *warrant* and that, after all, we have some kind of warrant for (III)—albeit different from genuinely epistemic, perceptual warrant—, which makes its acceptance rational. On the contrary, I am quite convinced that warrants, in this area, are just what a sceptic takes them to be—that is, the normal, evidential warrants that bear on the truth of what is warranted by their means.<sup>43</sup> Hence, a Humean sceptic's mistake doesn't depend on too narrow a conception of warrant, but, rather, on too narrow a conception of our very notion of *epistemic rationality*. For, if the third way is right, epistemic rationality extends also to the acceptance of those presuppositions, such as (III), which are constitutive of it. To notice this is to give ourselves the means—in effect a rational warrant—to *affirm*, contrary to scepticism, that accepting these presuppositions is rational after all.

However, if it is right that epistemic rationality extends also to the acceptance of presuppositions such as (III), then it is indeed ironic that the philosophical figure, who is usually

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<sup>42</sup> Actually Wright only points out the erroneous inference from the absence of empirical warrants for (III) to the conclusion that accepting it is not rational. But we saw before that the “postmodernist” implications of the Humean sceptical challenge could take the form of exposing the merely practical rationality of accepting (III).

<sup>43</sup> I can't develop the point here, but I suspect that also other forms of entitlement, namely those recently developed by Burge [2003a], Peacocke [2004] and Davies [2004], may turn out to be problematical when taken in the context of the sceptical challenge, as I have described it.

considered the champion of epistemic rationality, can actually survive only on the basis of a misconception of that notion! But this is an irony which can easily be explained: scepticism challenges “epistemological realism”—the view, as I understand it,<sup>44</sup> according to which even our most basic acceptances, such as (III), can be grounded in evidence. Rightly finding that view untenable, a sceptic seems to give way to a form of “epistemological irrealism”—the view according to which those acceptances aren’t rationally grounded at all, or are simply practically so. What I think is true, in contrast, and brought out by the third way, is that neither epistemological realism nor epistemological irrealism accurately describe our epistemic situation. For that situation is in fact a form of “epistemological *internal* realism”, or even of “epistemological *anti-realism*”: from *within* our *actual* epistemic practice, to accept that there is an external world, even if no warrants for doing so are attainable, is what enables the deployment of what we take epistemic rationality to be and, for that very reason, is itself rationally permissible and, furthermore, epistemically so.

### **5. The bearing of the third way on Moore’s *Proof***

In order to assess the bearing of the third way on Moore’s *Proof* it is necessary to consider what a proof, in general, is and should accomplish.<sup>45</sup> On reflection, it is quite clear that a proof should provide one with a warrant to believe its conclusion, so that if one didn’t have that before, one would acquire it; or else, if one had it already, one could reinforce it.<sup>46</sup> It should also be clear that proofs are arguments we design and put forward in order to be able to *claim* the rational legitimacy of our belief in their conclusions. So proofs are procedures which produce warrants for their conclusions thereby giving one the possibility to appeal to them to *claim* that one’s belief in them is warranted.

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<sup>44</sup> I am using this label differently from Michael Williams [1996], according to whom “epistemological realism” is the view that even independently of contextual factors, there *is* a fact of the matter as to what kind of justification a belief requires; and, in particular, that our beliefs about the external world must always be justified *by sensory experience* if they are to amount to knowledge. This is not the place for a detailed discussion of Williams’ views, but notice that, on my notion of epistemological realism, its denial isn’t *ipso facto* an endorsement of *epistemological contextualism*—the view that Williams favours—; and that I am willing to grant that only perceptual evidential grounds can turn empirical beliefs into knowledge.

<sup>45</sup> This very issue has been prominent in Davies’ recent writings. See, in particular, Davies [2004] and [2007]. For a discussion and criticism, see my [2008b].

<sup>46</sup> Hence, in general, a proof doesn’t necessarily depend on being open-minded with respect to its conclusion, no matter how one construes the notion of open-mindedness. Davies [2004: 240] construes it as an attitude of either open disbelief in it, or as the attitude of considering that the conclusion “may very well be false”. In my [2008b] I cast doubt on the legitimacy of this understanding of the notion of open-mindedness. It seems to me that open-mindedness should more naturally be taken to involve having no attitude with respect to the truth and warrantedness of a given belief.

If so, it is fundamental, in order for a proof to be cogent, that warrant for its conclusion be not prerequisite for having warrant for its premises. Flouting this requirement would indeed give rise to the kind of transmission failure made familiar by Wright's writings on the topic. Furthermore, it would clearly make the proof unavailable as a means to reassure ourselves of the rational legitimacy of our belief in its conclusion. For we could then claim to have warrant for its premises, which should transmit to the conclusion, only by already being in a position to claim that we have a warrant to believe the latter.

Now I agree with Wright's view that there is something epistemically wrong with Moore's *Proof*. The point is to see whether our diagnoses will converge or not, given that we conceive differently of the structure of empirical warrants. To repeat, while Wright thinks that antecedent warrant for (III) is necessary to have warrant for (I), I think that merely assuming (III) is enough to that effect. That is to say, it is only in a context where (III) is assumed (however implicitly that might be) that one's sense experience will constitute a warrant for a belief such as (I).

Let me approach this final issue in a slightly indirect way. As we saw in section 3, an externalist construal of the third way would try and provide warrant for the belief in the existence of an external world by saying that given that we are in the favourable circumstance of being suitably causally interactive with a world populated by physical objects, we do have a perceptual warrant for "Here is a hand", when we seem to see a hand in front of us, which would then transmit to (III), across the entailment. But, obviously, the proof of (III) allegedly provided by Moore's argument would then be conditional upon correctly relying on (III)'s truth, which is exactly what the *Proof* should have provided warrant for. That is to say, the proof of "There is an external world" would remain conditional upon assuming what was to be proved to no less a degree than if that conclusion itself had figured among the premises.

Now two things are worth noticing. First that, like in any formal proof, the conclusion cannot figure among the premises used to prove it. For, otherwise, the proof would obviously be circular and hence would not provide any warrant to believe its conclusion.<sup>47</sup> To see clearly that this would be the case, consider that, on this picture, relying on (III)'s truth is what rationally allows us, given a certain course of experience, to enter the other premises (in fact (I), which, by rational reflection, allows us to enter (II)) in the proof and therefore get to the conclusion (III). So, in effect, the *Proof* would proceed as if it had the following structure:

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<sup>47</sup> In logic one could prove a proposition from itself but, obviously, this would not give one any (new) warrant to believe it. Since we are here dealing with the power of proofs to generate warrants to believe their conclusion and claim them, we can discard this case as irrelevant to our present purposes.

Q  
 Q→P  
 -----  
 P

Secondly, consider a context in which one may want to propound the *Proof* so conceived to *claim* that one's belief in (III) is warranted. What one would end up saying is that *given that* (III) is true, then one has warrant for (I) and that that warrant transmits to (III). But, clearly, one's argument would remain conditional upon correctly considering (III) true and the obvious question to raise would be with what right one can do so. This, however, is a question that cannot be answered by Moore's *Proof* itself, which can only get started, on this picture, by relying on (III)'s truth. Lacking such an answer, the externalist construal of Moore's *Proof* could do nothing to give one the means to claim a first warrant to believe its conclusion.

Now, I think something broadly analogous to what we have just seen would happen on the kind of reconstruction of the structure of Moore's *Proof* the third way would command. For, on the third way, the warrant for its first premise would depend on *assuming* (III). To repeat, it is only in a context in which (III) is taken for granted (as implicitly as it may be and even if no commitment to (III)'s truth is undertaken) that one's current sense experience can be taken to bear on the truth of (I) rather than on that of, for instance, "My current experience as of a hand is envatted experience" (on the assumption that such an experience could be subjectively indistinguishable, its different causal origin notwithstanding). If so, the proof of (III) would be conditional upon assuming exactly what was to be proved. Again, this would make the *Proof* immediately circular, for the reasons just reviewed. For assuming (III), even without committing to its truth, is what would rationally allow us to enter the other premises and get to the conclusion in something like the following way (where square brackets are used to indicate that P is entered without committing to its truth):

[P]  
 Q  
 Q→P  
 -----  
 P

What we should ask, then, is what would happen if, when conceived in the way recommended by the third view, we run the *Proof* to *claim* our warrant for (III). What we would end up saying is that *assuming* that there is an external world, one would be entitled to take one's experience as of a hand as a (defeasible) warrant for (I), which would then transmit to (III) across the entailment. But the obvious question to ask is, once more, with what right one could be assuming (III). This, however,

is a question which cannot be answered by Moore's *Proof* itself, since the latter can be run only if that assumption is already made. That is why, I think, Moore's *Proof* would prove, once more, unable to provide a *first* warrant to *claim* that accepting its conclusion is the rational thing to do. For, again, we could claim warrant for (I) and hence for (III), on this diagnosis, only by being already warranted in claiming that assuming (III) is rationally legitimate.

One could then wonder whether Moore's *Proof* could be used at least to *reinforce* the rational legitimacy of assuming (III) allowed by the third way (or the non-evidential kind of warrant that, on Wright's story, one would have for it). Now, on the third way, it is constitutive of rationality to accept that there is an external world broadly manifest in sense experience. Hence, it is rational to take it that one's sense experience as of a hand is, *ceteris paribus*, sensory awareness of a hand. Thus, by running the *Proof*, it is rational to take it that we have experience of the external world and, therefore, warrantedly believe that there is one. So, there would be some kind of enhancement, for we would move from the mere *rational permissibility of assuming* that there is an external world to *the rational permissibility of warrantedly believing (III)*. Still, by running the *Proof*, we wouldn't get any unconditional guarantee of the truth of our belief in the existence of an external world.

One further question is whether Moore's *Proof* can be used to reinforce one's previous warrant to *claim* that assuming (III) is rational. If what I have just maintained is correct, then the *Proof* allows one to pass from the possibility of claiming an a priori warrant for the rational legitimacy of assuming (III), to the possibility of claiming the rational legitimacy of holding that our belief in the existence of an external world is evidentially warranted.

I conclude, therefore, that Moore's *Proof* cannot give one any first warrant to believe (III) or to claim that accepting it is rational. As we may put it, Moore's *Proof* is epistemically *inert*, when first warrants are concerned: if you don't already assume its conclusion, it cannot give you reasons to believe it, nor can it give you reasons to *claim* that assuming that conclusion is rationally legitimate, if you don't already have an independent warrant to think that it is. Still the *Proof* allows one somewhat to reinforce both the rational legitimacy of *assuming* (III) and the a priori warrant one has to claim it, by allowing one to pass from those to the rationality of holding that one's *belief* in the existence of an external world is *evidentially warranted* and to the possibility of claiming it.

Now, it should be clear that there are obvious analogies between Wright's diagnosis of Moore's *Proof*'s failure and mine. But couldn't it perhaps be the case that we have in fact hit upon *two different species* of transmission failure? In general, as we have seen, transmission failure occurs when a proof or, more generally, an argument cannot generate any first warrant one may have to believe its conclusion in such a way that one could appeal to it to reassure oneself of the

rational legitimacy of holding that conclusion. This, on Wright's view, occurs if and only if *warrant* for the conclusion is presupposed in order to have warrant for the premises and, correspondingly, when claiming the latter would depend on already being in a position to claim the former. By contrast, on the third way, transmission failure would occur when the structure of warrants is different—when warrant for the premises merely presupposes the *assumption* of the conclusion. Of course, when the vindication of one's warrant for the conclusion is concerned, the two views would return a similar verdict on why Moore's *Proof* fails, for they would both say that claiming that one has warrant to believe its premises presupposes being able to claim that one's acceptance of its conclusion is indeed rational. But, again, the ways they go about motivating the rationality of that acceptance are substantially different: in Wright's case, on his understanding of the matter, it is necessary to exhibit the special kind of warrant that has always accompanied that acceptance, whether we were able to recognise it or not, thus redeeming it at, as it were, second order. In my case, in contrast, one has to provide an independent a priori argument and, therefore, produce an a priori warrant to claim that those otherwise warrant-free assumptions are indeed rationally made.

Obviously a lot more should be said to defend the view that these are really two different species of the same kind of phenomenon which may generically be called "transmission failure". For instance, it should be further investigated whether other non-contentious examples of either, but in particular of the second kind of it I am tentatively putting forward, could be provided. So let me end with a somewhat provisional note by saying that on the third way the *Proof* wouldn't fail because, as Wright has it, it can't produce a—as it were—first warrant to believe its conclusion, since one should already have a *warrant* to accept (III) in order to be perceptually warranted in believing its premise. Nor would it fail only when taken in a certain dialectical—sceptical—context, as Pryor maintains.<sup>48</sup> Rather, it would fail because, as a matter of fact, it would exhibit an even deeper and more basic kind of circularity than the one exposed by Wright—namely, that which is brought about by flouting the requirement that the conclusion of a proof shouldn't be relied on, as implicitly and unwarrantedly as that might be, in order to have warrant for its premises.

We can thus visualise the various diagnoses of Moore's *Proof*'s failure as follows:

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<sup>48</sup> Notice that the two different verdicts elicited by Pryor's model and mine on the reasons as to why Moore's *Proof* fails clearly testify to the difference of our respective overall positions. In particular, when in section 2 I said that on his view having no reasons to doubt that there is an external world must mean, in effect, having no view about it, my reason for saying so was that otherwise he could not maintain that the *Proof* is epistemically in good standing and merely dialectically faulty. For, as we can now see, if having no reasons to doubt were taken to mean (implicitly) positively assuming, Moore's *Proof* would turn out to be epistemically circular, although in a sense different from Wright's. The point can also be put in the form of a dilemma: either Pryor holds on to his diagnosis of Moore's *Proof*'s failure, in which case having no reasons to doubt must mean having no view; or else, if having no reasons to doubt is, on his view, equivalent to (implicitly) positively assuming, he would have to give up his account of the *Proof*'s failure.



<p><b>Conservatives</b>  <i>W(III)</i>  W(I) Here's a hand  ↓ (II) If here's a hand,  ↓ there is an external world  W(III) There is an external world</p>	<p><b>Liberals</b>  <i>No doubt(III)</i>  W(I) Here's a hand  ↓ (II) If here's a hand,  ↓ there is an external world  W(III) There is an external world</p>	<p><b>The third way</b>  <i>Assuming (III)</i>  W(I) Here's a hand  ↓ (II) If here's a hand,  ↓ there is an external world  W(III) There is an external world</p>
<p><b>Circularity:</b> W(III) is already needed to have W(I)  <b>Transmission failure I</b></p>	<p><b>No circularity.</b> But a sceptic would doubt (III), hence would regard (I) as unwarranted.  <b>Dialectical ineffectiveness</b></p>	<p><b>Circularity:</b> (III) must be assumed in order to have W(I).  <b>Transmission failure II</b></p>

As emphasised there is a lot more to say about this second notion of transmission failure, or indeed about transmission failure *tout court*. For our present purposes, however, there is no need to expound on it now.<sup>49</sup> My only aim in this paper has been to sketch a view that, I hope, will repay closer scrutiny and investigation. For, if it can be sustained, it offers the prospect of giving an alternative characterisation of a number of issues which are prominent in epistemology and which are raised by Wright's work and by the work of those who, like Pryor, have engaged with it. Namely, the topics of the structure of empirical warrants, of the epistemic cogency of proofs in general and of Moore's *Proof* in particular, as well as the issue of offering a diagnosis of why scepticism about the existence of an external world is untenable.

## Appendix

### The third way and Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*

Here I would like briefly to compare the third way I have canvassed with some of the remarks in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*. As is familiar, there is an interpretative line that goes back to Strawson,<sup>50</sup> according to which Wittgenstein was in fact maintaining a form of *naturalism*. Passages like §§204, 358 and 359<sup>51</sup> are usually taken as suggesting that, according to Wittgenstein, trusting in

<sup>49</sup> I do so in my [2008d].

<sup>50</sup> Strawson [1985].

<sup>51</sup> "Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game". (OC §204)

"Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life. (That is very badly expressed and probably badly thought as well)". (OC §358)

"But that means I want to conceive of it as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were as something animal". (OC §359)

the presuppositions of our language games is something we simply do, as part of our “form of life”, and should thus be seen—equivalently, it would seem—“as something animal”.<sup>52</sup>

I don’t think we can be content with such a position if it is meant to be some kind of response to scepticism: as we saw, a sceptic could simply acknowledge and in fact insist that it is the very point of sceptical arguments to show that at the foundations of our epistemic practices there are presuppositions—like (III)—that we simply assume—let it be because of some kind of ingrained, animal “instinct”, perhaps due to our overall psychological constitution, as Hume would have it, or because of our having been brought up within a certain community, which shares that psychological make up, as well as a lot of practices and, more generally, “language games”. But it seems to me quite clear that the whole point of *On Certainty* is to resist scepticism (and to criticise Moore as well).<sup>53</sup> So, if what we were given was in fact a form of naturalism, then little would have been done to combat scepticism.

Furthermore, it is true that Wittgenstein writes about trusting in the presuppositions of our language games as something “animal” and as belonging to “a form of life”. But it shouldn’t be overlooked that at §358 he also adds “this is very badly expressed and probably badly thought as well”. I don’t know whether Wittgenstein was dissatisfied with his own way of putting things because he was somehow aware of the sceptical (or “sceptical friendly”) implications of the “naturalistic passages” in *On Certainty*; but, whether or not that was his motivation, the point is that it should have been.<sup>54</sup>

The third way I have maintained would in fact remedy the seeming sceptical outcome of Wittgenstein’s allegedly official line. For it is true, as Wittgenstein has it, that we neither have nor can have epistemic warrants for the “hinges” of our “language games”. Still, in contrast with the radical, “postmodernist” outcome of the sceptical considerations, the third way makes for the possibility that these acceptances are rational after all. So, as we saw, the sceptic would continue to win as far as lack of epistemic warrants for them is concerned, but he wouldn’t be justified in claiming that our accepting them lies *outside* the scope of epistemic rationality. For, if the third way is on the right track, such an acceptance would lie only, as it were, at the *limit* of epistemic rationality, not outside it. The sceptic’s mistake, therefore, would consist in not seeing the width of our notion of rationality, thereby declaring irrational what is merely epistemically unwarrantable (as

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But see also OC §§144, 148, 196, 232, 402.

<sup>52</sup> I don’t actually think that these two twists of phrase are equivalent: a form of life includes cultural as well as natural elements; or else, in McDowell’s [1994] terminology: elements which belong to our “second nature” as well as to our first, merely animal one.

<sup>53</sup> See my [2003].

<sup>54</sup> For an anti-naturalist reading of Wittgenstein, see Marconi [1987: 127-8] and Wright [2004b].

well as irrefutable) and indeed necessary in order to have the notions of epistemic rationality and warrant he wants to make use of.

Interestingly, at various points in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein prefigures what I take to be the gist of the third way. He writes:

It belongs to the *logic* (italics mine) of our scientific investigations that certain things are *indeed* not doubted. (OC §342)

Everything descriptive of a language-game is part of *logic*. (OC §56, italics mine)

[S]omewhere I must begin with not-doubting; and that is not, so to speak, hasty but excusable: it is *part* of judging. (OC §150, italics mine)

The “hinges”, among which “There is an external world” would figure, can thus be seen as part of “logic” and, in this sense, their acceptance is rational. Despite the fact that, as is well-known, for Wittgenstein they aren’t elements *within* the language games in which reasons for and against empirical propositions are produced, and therefore reasons for or against them can’t be produced either, they are still part of “what is descriptive of a language game” and hence of “logic”. So they do *not* lie *outside* it. Thus, it seems that if they still belong to “logic” but aren’t within the language game, unlike ordinary empirical propositions, they can only lie at, as it were, its *limit*.

Of course, “logic” is here safely replaceable by “grammar”—in the typically Wittgensteinian sense of the term—and we know that Wittgenstein wanted to regard these “hinge” propositions as somewhat like empirical propositions (OC §§401-2) which, however, have lost—or have never played, so far—that role (OC §§96, 97), for they are not subject to verification and control, unlike genuine empirical propositions. Rather, on his view, they play a different role—viz. that of founding *rules* of all our language games (OC §95). Rules, we might say, of *evidential significance*—that is, of what our sense experience is going to bear on—rather than rules which simply allow or exclude some conceptual combinations, like “patience is played by one person alone” or “an object can’t be red and black all over at one and the same time”.<sup>55</sup>

This is not the place to dwell further on this aspect of Wittgenstein’s thought. What I would like to stress, however, is that there is some textual evidence (though no doubt contradicted at other places) that for Wittgenstein too their acceptance—the acceptance, that is, of what he considered as propositions about objects (OC §402), which played the role of rules and not of genuine empirical propositions—was indeed rational, and not merely something brute and instinctive; or else, merely

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<sup>55</sup> I am grateful to Crispin Wright for suggesting this difference to me.

the product of our upbringing within a certain form of life. The third way I have canvassed capitalises on these hints.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the third way defends the rationality of accepting (III) by appealing to the conceptual or *grammatical* link between that acceptance and our notion of epistemic rationality—an appeal that would be in keeping with the later Wittgenstein’s way of dissolving so-called “philosophical problems”, and, in particular, with his rule-following considerations, at least according to some interpretations of those passages.<sup>56</sup>

Another point of comparison between Wittgenstein’s remarks in *On Certainty* and the third way concerns the allegedly *relativistic* implications of his thought many scholars have thought they discerned.<sup>57</sup> This is a very delicate issue, whose proper treatment will have to be deferred to another occasion.<sup>58</sup> Here, however, I would just like to table some considerations. According to relativist interpretations of his thought, Wittgenstein would maintain that if we somehow needed or wanted to change our “language games”, we would be at liberty to do so, thus abandoning their presuppositions. But we could only do so—the train of thought continues—if nothing forced us to hold on to them, come what may; and if nothing so forces us, it is because these presuppositions are neither true, nor false;<sup>59</sup> neither warranted, nor unwarranted;<sup>60</sup> neither rational, nor irrational.<sup>61</sup> They stay put only as long as we need or want to engage in the practices they are constitutive of. Perhaps the circumstances in which we would be willing to give them up are far-fetched, yet it is only if we viewed the presuppositions of our language games as lying outside the domain of warrant, rationality and truth-assessibility that we could have such room for manoeuvre.

There is something right and something wrong here: what is right, I think, is that we don’t, nor can we have perceptual warrants for such presuppositions and, thus, nothing which would bear on their truth. This, in turn, also helps us see why, for Wittgenstein, properly speaking, they are

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<sup>56</sup> Most notably, Backer and Hacker [1984].

<sup>57</sup> Prominent examples are Rorty [1979: 317] and, more recently, Boghossian [2006: 69-80]. For present purposes I am passing over the important fact that Wittgenstein might have been quite inclined to relativism regarding the presuppositions of what I shall call, collectively, “non-basic” language games (see his example of physics *vs.* consulting oracles, OC §§609-612, but also OC §§132, 336, 671) but much more cautious about those of our most basic language games, such as our practice of holding, assessing and withdrawing from empirical beliefs on the basis of perceptual evidence, of which (III) is an example. However, what I will be saying primarily concerns these basic presuppositions.

<sup>58</sup> I actually develop this theme in my [2008c]. The most sustained analysis of Wittgenstein’s relativism can be found in Marconi [1987: ch. 7].

<sup>59</sup> OC §205, but contrast with OC §206.

<sup>60</sup> OC §359 (but see also OC §§307, 599).

<sup>61</sup> OC §559, but notice that the English translation obscures this point because it renders the German “*vernünftig*” “*unvernünftig*” with “reasonable” and “unreasonable”, respectively. This is not a mistake, but a choice of words that makes it less clear that Wittgenstein is here talking about rationality and not mere reasonableness.

neither true nor false: since we can't have warrants either for or against them, we can't *claim* they are either true or false. Yet, to think that they may be true or false, independently of our possibility of acquiring evidence for or against them, would simply mean to hold on to a realist conception of truth that, arguably, the later Wittgenstein was distancing himself from. What is wrong is to think that, as a consequence of their being unwarranted (and unwarrantable), these presuppositions aren't rationally held, if the third way is somehow right; and also that our accepting them is merely conventional or motivated simply by practical considerations.

Still, to say that presuppositions such as (III) are rationally held doesn't commit one to saying that the hinges can't be changed at all. If "something *really* unheard of"<sup>62</sup> were to happen—that is, if, for some reason, we could no longer be the epistemic creatures we in fact are—then of course the presuppositions of our present (basic) epistemic practice, which is itself constitutive of epistemic rationality, may no longer be in place. It is a matter of some controversy whether Wittgenstein thought that these radical changes, which would result in totally different systems of justification and, consequently, in totally different notions of rationality, were really conceivable, or were just remote metaphysical possibilities, actually beyond our real understanding.<sup>63</sup> Be that as it may, the fact that epistemic practices might be totally different from what they are now, and hence that there might be a totally different notion of rationality, shows merely that neither the former nor the latter are metaphysically grounded. Holding this form of anti-foundationalism, however, seems still a long way short from thinking that there actually *are* radically different systems of justification, which are all *equally legitimate*. If so, there is little room for maintaining that Wittgenstein was a relativist.<sup>64</sup> Rather, it appears that, at most, he was merely an anti-foundationalist.

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<sup>62</sup> OC §513 (italics mine), and that may well be impossible to conceive given our present form of life.

<sup>63</sup> Stroud [1965] denies it, Marconi [1987] doesn't. In my [2008c] I side with Stroud.

<sup>64</sup> Marconi [1987: 122-33] argues that Wittgenstein was a "virtual" relativist. I take issue with that in my [2008c, e].

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