

Strawson on Liberal Naturalism, Hume and Wittgenstein: An Appraisal

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[T]he attempt to combat [skeptical] doubts by rational argument [is] misguided: for we are dealing here with the presuppositions, the framework, of all human thought and enquiry.

Strawson (1998a: 17)

0. Introduction

In his *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* Strawson argues that Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* proposes a form of naturalism similar to that advanced by Hume. As it turns out, it is quite difficult to pinpoint exactly what kind of naturalism that is, and consequently, to determine whether Hume and Wittgenstein are as close as Strawson suggests. In this chapter, I revisit this issue in its various intricacies and argue that there are substantial differences between Hume and Wittgenstein, and that Wittgenstein was not a naturalist in any of the senses of “naturalism” individuated by Strawson.

1. Strawson, Hume, and “hard” v. “liberal” naturalism

According to Strawson, there are two types of naturalism: “hard” (or “reductive”) naturalism and “liberal” (or “catholic”) naturalism. The former, which he attributes to Quine, aims at reducing epistemology to an empirical science that studies how, starting from the meager input of experience, we arrive at beliefs (and possibly knowledge) about the world, *without considering the skeptical challenge*. The latter, in contrast, arises in response to the skeptical challenge and is characterized as an *indirect strategy that does not produce arguments against skepticism*, but rather neutralizes or at least contains its effects. In this respect liberal naturalism

contrasts with direct strategies for responding to skepticism, such as Descartes's argument from divine goodness, Kant's transcendental strategy, Moore's common sense-based strategy, and Carnap's conventionalist strategy.

As Strawson writes:

The correct way with the professional skeptical doubt is not to attempt to rebut it with argument, but to point out that it is *idle, unreal, a pretense; and then the rebutting arguments will appear as equally idle*; ... there is no such thing as the reasons for which we hold those beliefs [e.g. the belief in the existence of an external world]. (Strawson 1985: 21; my italics)

According to Strawson, liberal naturalism was advanced for the first time by Hume. In the *Treatise on Human Nature*, Hume claims that there are no rational arguments in favor of the belief in the existence of the external world. Since Hume famously wants to find an answer to the question about how we acquire such a belief, it seems that there can be no answer to that question that appeals to the exercise of reason and the senses alone.

Strawson, interestingly, does not go into the details of Hume's attempt to *explain how* the belief that there is an external world is acquired through the exercise of our mental faculties, particularly through the operations of imagination. In my view, therein lies the first sketch of "hard" naturalism, that is, an example of an account that seeks to reconstruct the psychological mechanisms that *causally bring about* our belief in the existence of an external world.¹

Sure enough, Hume and Quine have in mind two entirely different notions of psychology; still, they are both trying to account for how that belief arises in us. Notice, moreover, that, contrary to Quine who defers to professional psychologists on that front, Hume provides his own empirical theory, albeit based on an outdated conception of psychology.

¹ See, in particular, *Treatise I*, iv, 2 "Of skepticism with regard to the senses".

To put it provocatively, as I read him, Hume is the most important “naturalized epistemologist” of the modern era. Of course, unlike Quine, he takes skepticism seriously. Indeed, the aim of hard naturalism to explain how the belief in the existence of an external world comes about is what remains once the hope of rationally justifying that belief is thwarted. Thus, contrary to what Strawson seems to claim, Hume is not really—or just (as we will see shortly)—a liberal naturalist but also a “hard” one.

Indeed, Strawson seems to recognize this powerful strand in Hume’s thought (1985: 14), which would make him a “hard” naturalist, but then leaves it on one side to consider only what he takes to be the liberal naturalist strand in Hume. Thus, he writes:

According to Hume the naturalist, skeptical doubts are not to be met by argument. They are simply to be neglected (except, perhaps, in so far as they supply a harmless amusement, a mild diversion to the intellect). They are to be neglected because they are *idle*; powerless against the force of nature, of our naturally implanted disposition to belief. (1985: 14)

This, however, seems to me at least a partial travesty of Hume’s serious engagement with skepticism. More specifically, Hume’s skepticism consists in showing how there is *no rational justification* for the belief in the existence of the external world, a belief that we have acquired through complex psychological mechanisms involving the exercise of some of our mental faculties, particularly imagination.

It is this form of skepticism, which we might call “skepticism of reason”, as opposed to a pervasive, all-encompassing kind of skepticism that would affect, and possibly annihilate, our everyday practices and talk, that leads Strawson to consider Hume a “liberal” naturalist. Although there is no *rational* explanation of how we acquire the belief in the existence of the external world, such a belief is *inescapable* for us. We cannot help believing in the existence of physical objects and cannot help proceeding on that basis in our everyday actions and

interactions. According to Hume, on Strawson's interpretation, it is Nature that imposes such a belief on us, and for that reason (that is, because of its inevitability) it cannot be shaken by skeptical doubts. Thus, a skeptic is right in pointing out that any attempt to rationally ground the belief in the existence of the external world is bound to fail, but they cannot for that reason deprive us of that belief which Nature imposes on us. Psychological compulsion is stronger than rational evaluation and, because of that, we hold on to our belief in the existence of an external world, even if rational reflection would lead us to withhold it.

Skepticism is thus confined to the sphere of rational reflection and has no power to shake our everyday deeds and convictions. It does not annihilate our belief in the existence of an external world—no matter how rationally ungrounded it is—or our living as we do—that is, taking it for granted that there are myriad physical objects with which we constantly interact. In this practical sense, liberal naturalism renders skepticism “idle” or “ineffective”. Yet skepticism remains inescapable and unanswerable, from a rational point of view. It's just that it doesn't reach all the way down to threaten our way of living and our ordinary beliefs.

Notice, however, that this is not to say that, no matter how rationally ungrounded they are at the level of rational/philosophical reflection, in ordinary life, the belief in the existence of physical objects in general, as well as beliefs that specific physical objects exist, are justified. Thus, liberal naturalism should not be modeled after contemporary contextualism *à la* DeRose (1995), say. It's just that the two spheres of rational/philosophical reflection and of ordinary life are sufficiently insulated from one another not to create (too much of) a tension *in our overall life*.

Indeed, even philosophers, let alone people untouched by philosophy and hence, for Hume, by skepticism, are first and foremost human beings—human animals, if you will—and can do nothing but ignore the outcome of their reflections in their everyday life.²

However, since confining the deliverances of skepticism to the rational/philosophical sphere does not make the beliefs targeted by it justified in the everyday sphere, I have trouble seeing the point of the epigraph to Strawson's book. Namely,

The satirist may laugh, the philosopher may preach; but reason herself will *respect* the prejudices and habits, which have been consecrated by the experience of mankind.—

Gibbon (my italics)

True, reason will leave those prejudices and habits intact, because reason is powerless against nature, but it will not let them live unscrutinized and will indeed see them just for what they are—i.e. “prejudices”, “habits” and not justified beliefs. Therein lies a value judgement, in my view—that is, these beliefs fall short of an epistemic standard they should meet.

In the following, I intend to show (a) how liberal naturalism is not at all a response to Hume's “skepticism of reason”, or even a way to assuage it; and (b) to clarify whether Wittgenstein can be considered a liberal naturalist.³

2. Liberal naturalism is no answer to Humean skepticism

First, it is useful to reconstruct the Humean skeptical argument. Consider the following Moorean argument:

(I) Here is a hand

² The reference to the “animal” will become important in the following.

³ The issue of whether Wittgenstein might be considered a “hard” naturalist doesn't even arise, since he was always opposed to a conception of philosophy according to which philosophy should concern itself, however remotely or second-handedly, with causal explanations, let alone reductionist ones.

- (II) If there is a hand here, the external world exists
- (III) The external world exists

The skeptical idea is that our sensory experience can give us justification for believing (I) only if we are already justified in believing (III). Thus, we cannot prove—and thereby obtain a justification for believing—that the external world exists by starting with our current sensory experience of a specific physical object such as a hand. This kind of Moorean proof would inevitably be circular: it would presuppose having a justification for the conclusion it should provide a justification for.

This problem would afflict any attempted a posteriori justification of (III). Moreover, for Hume, there is no possibility of providing an a priori justification for (III). Thus, (III) is rationally ungrounded. And so is (I), if having a justification for (III) is necessary in order to have one for (I). Indeed, for Hume, even if there were an a priori justification for (III), it could not explain why all human beings – including those ignorant of such a proof – would have that belief.

Therefore, it is no response to Humean skepticism to say that, for us, belief in the existence of the external world is *inevitable* and that this kind of doubt has no hold on us, and is therefore idle—that is, ineffective in practice in our everyday lives. For this is simply to register the conclusion reached by Humean skepticism itself. To repeat, although we do not and cannot have a justification (a priori or a posteriori) for believing that the external world exists, in fact we continue to believe it because that is part of our nature: we are psychologically compelled to do so, even though we have no justification for that belief.⁴

⁴ Recall from §1, given the operations of our mental faculties, notably imagination, we find ourselves saddled with such a belief.

That is, if, as we have seen, the outcome of Humean skepticism is the separation of reason and nature, such that they take two independent paths, taking one path—the one that comes natural to us, which saddles us with that belief—does not mean that we are thereby *confronting* (with argument) skeptical arguments, or showing their “senselessness”, or even *assuaging* (by means of a damage limitation strategy) the outcome of those arguments.

One possible rejoinder—one aimed at *confronting* skepticism by way of redeeming the rationality of our belief in the existence of an external world somewhat congenial to Strawson’s further discussion of liberal naturalism, though not in line with Hume’s own take—might be to argue that the justification for believing that (I) here is a hand, based on our sensory experience, does *not* depend on already having a *justification* for believing (III) that the external world exists, but only on taking it for granted that it exists; that is, on simply *assuming* (III) without already having a justification for it.⁵

⁵ This might be in keeping with some of Strawson’s claims, for he writes: “we have an original, non-rational commitment which sets the bounds within which, or the stage upon which, reason can effectively operate” (1985: 40). And again: “Our commitment on these points [framework propositions] is pre-rational, natural, quite inescapable, and sets, as it were, the natural limits within which, and only within which, the serious operations of reason, whether by way of questioning or of justifying beliefs, can take place” (1985: 54). Based on passages like the ones just mentioned, in Coliva (2015) I classified Strawson as a “moderate” with respect to the structure of justification, meaning that, contrary to “liberals” (such as Pryor 2000), he takes justification to stem from experience together with background assumptions, and, contrary to “conservatives” (or “skeptics”, such as Wright 2004), he does not require the latter to be justified in their turn. The point that differentiates Strawson and Hume is that Strawson seems to think that ordinary empirical beliefs are justified, based on assuming a-rational background ones. For Hume, in contrast, if there is no justification for the latter, there cannot be justification for the

However, even this answer turns out to be unsatisfactory because nothing can give us a justification for believing the conclusion of an argument that starts from premises justified only to the extent that that same conclusion must be taken for granted. Even this kind of bootstrapping argument would thus be affected by a form of epistemic circularity and could not produce a justification for believing its conclusion.

Indeed, as those familiar with the literature on the topic will have readily recognized, Moore's argument, on the former interpretation, would be affected by the type of failure of transmission of warrant first presented by Crispin Wright (1985); while on the latter interpretation, it would be affected by the type of transmission failure that, according to Coliva (2015, chapter 3), underlies many philosophical attempts to ground our belief in the existence of the external world, other minds, etc.

So, to repeat, if the Humean skeptical argument shows that belief in the existence of the external world is a rationally ungrounded presupposition, liberal naturalism, in Strawson's Humean version, can hardly be seen as a response to skepticism.

One might protest that I have been unfair to Strawson's characterization of liberal naturalism. For liberal naturalism is an *indirect* strategy against skepticism—that is, one which deliberately refuses to produce arguments against skepticism—and limits itself to containing its effects. It's a "damage limitation" strategy, as one might say. It limits the damage of skepticism by confining it to the realm of reason, such that its effects do not percolate all the way down into our lives. Thus, as real as skeptical doubts are in the sphere of reason, they are "unreal", "idle", or even a "pretense" in the sphere of everyday life.

former either. Still, Strawson is not entirely clear on this point, since he is not openly affirming that background ordinary empirical beliefs are *epistemically* justified. See also fn. 6.

Let's think through the dialectical situation one more time. On reflection, liberal naturalism assumes the skeptic's point, i.e. that belief in the existence of the external world cannot be justified—that is, rationally grounded—and therefore, if knowledge is justified true belief or, at the very least, justification is necessary for knowledge, the existence of an external world isn't knowledgeable. Thus, we neither know nor are justified in believing that there is an external world *in general*, and we neither know nor are justified in believing that there are *specific* physical objects. Nevertheless, the liberal naturalist insists that we cannot help but entertain the belief in the existence of an external world, due to our inbuilt psychological mechanisms, and, similarly, we cannot help believing that we are surrounded by specific physical objects, and we cannot help acting and living on that basis.⁶

The human condition, in this picture, appears to be a fragmented one: we cannot help believing what we know we do not and cannot have a justification for. I personally find very little consolation in this thought. True, we do not end up being paralyzed in our everyday business by the outcomes of rational reflection; nonetheless, there is a high price to pay: none of our beliefs about physical objects, either the general one in the existence of an external world, or specific ones about objects in our surroundings, are justified. So, in everyday life

⁶ At least, this seems to me to be the only form of liberal naturalism we can elicit from Hume (see also fn. 5). Such a liberal naturalist is *not* saying that specific empirical beliefs are *justified* based on general, unjustified/unjustifiable assumptions. Notice, moreover, that even though Strawson (1985: 15) says that “our inescapable natural commitment is to a general frame of belief and to a general style ... of belief formation. But *within* that frame and style, the requirement of Reason, that our beliefs should form a consistent and coherent system may be given full play”, he is not saying that those beliefs will then be *epistemically* justified. As noticed in fn. 5, Strawson's position on this point is not clear.

either we mistakenly think we are justified after all—and are therefore massively mistaken—or we must delude ourselves into thinking that we are justified.⁷

The problem gets worse once we consider the matter from a philosophical point of view. That is, if it is really the case that skepticism is irrefutable and that we do not have any rational justification to believe that there is an external world and to believe that there are specific physical objects in our surroundings, then going on as we do, regardless, seems just *careless*;⁸ it's a rather unphilosophical turning of the back. That is, we—philosophers—have lost our innocence. We have fallen from Eden, as it were, and we *do know* that those beliefs are unjustified, unlike non-philosophers, and we cannot restore our innocence, in our everyday lives, simply by noticing that skeptical doubts, as irrefutable as they are, do not have a bearing on everyday life. Even if, ultimately, we concurred with Strawson that we should “neglect” (1985: 14) philosophical skepticism, we should give a philosophically sound motivation for doing so—that is, one that does not appeal merely to psychological compulsion.

⁷ Note that as is standard in epistemology, I am here assuming that if a belief is not epistemically justified—either evidentially or non-evidentially—then it is unjustified and therefore lacking or deficient from an epistemic point of view. Now, my own position, developed in Coliva (2015), is that if a proposition plays a hinge-like role with respect to a basic epistemic practice, constitutive of epistemic rationality—like “There are physical objects” with respect to the basic practice of forming, assessing and withdrawing from ordinary empirical beliefs based on the deliverances of one’s senses—then it is rationally held even if it is not justified. Yet, constitutivism is neither Strawson’s nor Hume’s position.

⁸ Compare Hume: “As the sceptical doubt arises naturally from a profound and intense reflection on those subjects, it always encreases, the farther we carry our reflections, whether in opposition or conformity to it. *Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy.*” (*Treatise* I, iv, 2: 144, my italics).

Thus, liberal naturalism does not seem to afford either a direct or an indirect response to Humean skepticism—after all, it leaves open the conflict between reason and praxis or, if you will, between philosophy and common sense revealed by the Humean skeptic. Indeed, liberal naturalism describes the position we find ourselves in once we have allowed the skeptic to develop their argument. And I think Hume never intended to say that (liberal) naturalism—not his term, of course—was in any way a *response* to skepticism. Rather, Hume felt that (liberal) naturalism described one side (and one side only) of the human condition: we can be in the grip of, and paralyzed by, irresolvable skeptical doubts only briefly. That is, only as long as we engage in philosophy. For these doubts have no hold on our lives outside the study. Still, that does not mean they are rationally resolved or even assuaged just by leaving the study and neglecting them. The human condition that philosophy reveals is, at bottom, a deeply compromised one: we cannot help believing what we end up knowing we cannot rationally redeem. And we—philosophers, at least—have to live with that disquieting thought.

Thus, an answer to skepticism cannot appeal to liberal naturalism, that is, to the inevitability of our most fundamental beliefs. The fact that they are inevitable, for those who are touched by philosophy as well as for those who aren't, provides no vantage point from which to respond. On the contrary, when used philosophically, as a palliative to the anxiety of reason, it can only generate the impression of an unphilosophical turning of the back, which, moreover, doesn't allow us to go back to an age of innocence in which we—philosophers—can in good faith take ourselves to have justifiable beliefs about the existence of an external world and of specific physical objects.

I therefore concur with Ernest Sosa's judgement that "what we cannot help believing is one thing, what is epistemically acceptable for us to believe is quite another" (1998: 367) and that liberal naturalism (which Sosa calls "epistemological naturalism") is not a satisfactory strategy against skepticism.

Interestingly, in his reply to Sosa, Strawson admitted as much and wrote: “It is not merely a matter of dismissing the demand for a justification of one’s belief in a proposition on the ground that one can’t help believing it. That would be weak indeed” (1998b: 370). He then went on to suggest that his position, which he thinks aligns with Hume’s and Wittgenstein’s, is that “the demand for justification is really *senseless*” (1998b: 370, my italics). For “There is an external world” and other hinge or framework propositions constitute “the boundary conditions of the exercise of our critical and rational competence” (1998b: 371). And in *Skepticism and Naturalism* he claims:

The non-reductive naturalist’s point is that there can only be a *lack* where there is a *need*. Questions of justification arise in plenty *within* the general framework of attitudes in question; but the existence of the general framework itself neither calls for nor permits an external reaction justification. (Strawson 1985: 43)

Yet, it is doubtful that the skeptical demand for a justification can be shown to be “senseless” simply by insisting on its idleness and on the psychological inescapability of our belief in the existence of an external world.

Thus, while this strategy is more promising than liberal naturalism, it remains an underdeveloped suggestion in Strawson’s essay. We will review it in connection with Wittgenstein’s own responses to Humean skepticism in the following (§3.2.4).

3. Wittgenstein v. liberal naturalism

According to Strawson, Wittgenstein is a liberal naturalist because (a) like Hume, he distinguishes between propositions that can be questioned and propositions that cannot be questioned on pain of giving up all of our ordinary epistemic practices; and (b) he argues that our belief in basic propositions—or “hinges”—is neither justified nor unjustified, but is, as it were, “something animal” (OC 359). It is true that Strawson observes that “there are, of course,

differences between Hume and Wittgenstein” (1985: 15). For example, we do not find in Wittgenstein a repetition of Hume’s explicit appeal to nature. Another difference is that while Hume is only preoccupied with very general propositions such as “There is an external world”, and basic methods of belief formation such as induction, Wittgenstein lists myriad propositions, such as “Nobody has ever been to the Moon”, “Cats don’t grow on trees”, “My name is LW”, etc. as hinges.⁹ Nevertheless, argues Strawson, “the similarities, and even the echoes, are stronger than the differences” (1985: 15).

While Strawson’s reading of Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* has undoubtedly had the merit of bringing to contemporary philosophers’ attention the relevance of that work for general epistemology and external world skepticism, I will show that there is no reason to minimize the differences between Hume’s and Wittgenstein’s positions.

Moreover, I will claim that, upon careful reading, Wittgenstein does not seem to be satisfied with liberal naturalism, i.e., the position according to which, although we have no rational justification for our belief in the existence of the external world, we cannot help but entertain that belief, meaning skeptical doubts turn out to be idle. Even less would he be

⁹ Sosa finds Strawson’s naturalist defense of the legitimacy of these local hinge propositions even weaker than in the case of “There is an external world”, for “the mere fact that some retail belief cannot be budged by reason might indicate only that it is pathological and not necessarily that it is acceptable and justified in the absence of argument” (1998: 368). Strawson, in his reply to Sosa, claims that it was “injudicious of him [i.e. of Wittgenstein] to associate ... these [propositions] with those framework or boundary” propositions, such as “There is an external world”, or “There are other minds” (1998b: 371; cf. 1985: 18). For, unlike the latter, the former propositions can be doubted and supported by evidence and argument. Sosa, in turn, interestingly notes that “those beliefs may also be claimed plausibly to be of a sort known too well to be based on argument” (1998: 368). I develop these suggestive remarks by drawing a distinction between de jure and de facto hinges in Coliva (2023a and forthcoming).

satisfied with the suggestion that our ordinary empirical beliefs aren't justified, yet we proceed as if they were because doing so comes naturally to us.

Furthermore, he differs from the liberal naturalist because he *does* propose arguments against Humean (and other forms of) skepticism. I am not interested in evaluating these arguments,¹⁰ but they clearly indicate a dissatisfaction with leaving things where the liberal naturalist leaves them. Furthermore, they should have been considered on merit, by Strawson, if he did indeed find them unsatisfactory. Rather, Strawson did not engage with them and simply insisted on the passages he interpreted as supporting a form of liberal naturalism, thus ending up giving a one-sided and potentially misleading interpretation of *On Certainty*.

Moreover, contrary to a liberal naturalist, who, according to Strawson, takes skepticism to be intelligible, yet idle, Wittgenstein's arguments are all meant to establish a stronger conclusion—that is, that skepticism is utterly nonsensical.¹¹

3.1. Wittgenstein v. Hume

First, we must note that, according to Wittgenstein, contrary to Hume, at the foundation of our system of knowledge we don't find a few general propositions like "The external world exists", or "There are other minds". On the contrary, there are many propositions of the form of empirical propositions (OC 401-2) —that is, propositions about physical objects, animals, and people; for example, "My name is AC", "Nobody has ever been on the Moon", "Cats don't grow on trees", "I have (a) hand(s)", "The earth has existed for a long time", etc. Strawson notices that too (1985: 19) but thinks it is ultimately irrelevant. With respect to "general skeptical questions" (1985: 20) Yet it is not. For, as we shall see, for Wittgenstein a proposition

¹⁰ I have done so elsewhere, e.g. in Coliva (2010, 2015, 2022).

¹¹ Strawson acknowledges that much in his reply to Sosa but considers it a mistake or an exaggeration on Wittgenstein's part (1998b: 370).

like “There is an external world” (or its negation) is nonsense and it is therefore equally nonsensical to affirm that one knows it or that one doesn’t (OC 35-37).

Secondly, it is true that Wittgenstein states that he wants to regard our certainty “as something animal” (OC 359) or even as “a form of life” (O 358), but it is also the case that he strongly qualifies the latter statement by saying that “that is very badly expressed and probably badly thought as well” (OC 358) and that he qualifies the former by saying that he wants to consider certainty “*as it were, as something animal*” (my italics).

Indeed, if we read the famous passages in OC 358-361 in context, it is not at all clear that Wittgenstein’s definitive view is that certainty belongs, for him, to the animal/natural order. Let’s go through them, to appreciate the misgivings he has with respect to the appeal to the “animal”.

358. 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.*)

359. But that means I want to conceive it as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; *as it were*, as something animal.

360. I know that this is my foot. I could not accept any experience as proof to the contrary.—That may be an exclamation; but what follows from it? At least that I shall act with a certainty that knows no doubt, in accordance with my belief.

361. *But I might also say: It has been revealed to me by God that it is so. God has taught me that this is my foot. And therefore if anything happened that seemed to conflict with this knowledge I should have to regard that as deception.* (my italics)

Wittgenstein’s formulations are clearly very guarded and do not wholeheartedly support the appeal to the “animal”. In my view, OC 361 is key here, for no matter where our certainty comes from—either from our animal nature (359), or from a form of life (358), or even from

God (361)—in our actions we will proceed “with a certainty that knows no doubt”. If the origin of this certainty, which often (not always) manifests itself in action is irrelevant, then it is difficult to attribute to Wittgenstein a form of liberal *naturalism*. That is, he is in fact quite uncommitted about the source of that certainty. On this score, Strawson at one place emphasizes Wittgenstein’s appeal to our animal nature (1985: 16) and at another he claims that “Wittgenstein does not speak, as Hume does, of one exclusive source, viz. Nature, for these *préjugés*” (1985: 20). Later, he qualifies Wittgenstein’s form of naturalism as “social” (1985: 25). Still, no matter whether “social”, or “animal”, or “psychological”, there is very little in OC to take Wittgenstein to be a *naturalist* in the first place. For Wittgenstein’s point is a *normative*, not a naturalist one, as the end of OC 361 makes clear: we hold fast to certain propositions of the form of empirical ones (yet with a different role within our language and linguistic practices) such that if putative evidence against them came up, we would either dismiss it or explain it away and would not revise those propositions. Just as we do with “ $3+2=5$ ”: if putatively contrary evidence came up, we would ignore it or explain it away and would not revise that arithmetical proposition.¹² Indeed, for Wittgenstein, this is part of the “logic” (341) or the “method” (151) of our investigations. That is, as we shall see in §3.2.4, it is *constitutive* of them.

3.2. Wittgenstein’s arguments against the intelligibility of skepticism

Contrary to liberal naturalism, which, according to Strawson, holds that “the correct way with the professional skeptical doubt is not to attempt to rebut it with argument, but to point out that it is idle, unreal, a pretense; and then the rebutting arguments will appear as equally idle” (1985: 21), Wittgenstein puts forward several *arguments* against both Cartesian and Humean

¹² See Coliva (2020) for the import of Wittgenstein’s analogy between hinges and Moore’s truisms, on the one hand, and elementary arithmetical statements, on the other.

skepticism. Furthermore, several of these arguments aim to show that skepticism, in any of its varieties, is *nonsense*, not just idle—that is, ineffectual in everyday life. Again, this is important with respect to an evaluation of Strawson’s reading of Wittgenstein because (1) liberal naturalism in general is presented as an alternative not just to direct strategies against skepticism which aim to answer it on its own terms (roughly, by showing that, contrary to skepticism, we know/justifiably believe what skepticism denies we know/ justifiably believe), but also to those indirect strategies that aim to show that skepticism is unintelligible or self-defeating (such as Carnap’s, according to Strawson (1985: 11)). Furthermore, (2) by deeming Wittgenstein a liberal naturalist, Strawson considers him opposed to these latter strategies and takes him to “represent skeptical arguments and rational counter-arguments as equally idle—*not senseless, but idle*—since what we have here are original, natural, inescapable commitments which we neither choose nor could give up” (1985: 29, my italics).¹³

I will review Wittgenstein’s arguments to further support the anti-(liberal) naturalist reading of *On Certainty* I recommend here and in my various writings on the topic (Coliva 2010, 2015, 2022).

3.2.1. Wittgenstein on ordinary v. philosophical doubts

Wittgenstein’s account of doubt goes through the following stages. First, a survey of ordinary uses of “doubt” is provided. Second, it is shown how the philosophical use of “doubt” departs from the ordinary one. Third, because of that, philosophical doubts are deemed nonsensical. Of course, while the first two stages are thoroughly descriptive, the conclusion drawn by Wittgenstein rests on the claim that meaning is use *in ordinary linguistic contexts*. Hence, there

¹³ Or he would have to consider arguments for the senselessness of sceptical doubts an aberration on Wittgenstein’s part.

is nothing like a legitimate philosophical context of use of “doubt”, which, regardless of the rules that govern ordinary employments of that word, can produce sense.

Let us now review the above-mentioned stages of Wittgenstein’s critique in more detail. First off, for Wittgenstein, ordinary doubts manifest themselves only in certain circumstances and are accompanied by characteristic behavior (OC 120, 154, 255, 524-525). In contrast, philosophical doubts contravene all this: they are raised in what appear to be normal, even ideal circumstances; are not accompanied by any characteristic behavior; and do not have consequences in practice.

Secondly, “[o]ne doubts on specific grounds” (OC 458). A friend tells me “I know that Mark is at home” and I reply, “I doubt it, because I’ve called him several times and had no reply”. Of course, my reasons remain defeasible and don’t guarantee that I am right and my interlocutor wrong. Mark could have been in the shower and thus may have failed to hear the telephone ring. Yet, in the case of, e.g., Moore’s proof, what grounds could there be to doubt that what Moore holds up in front of himself is his hand? My senses testify to it. Thus, if I had that doubt in those circumstances, where perceptual conditions are optimal and I am cognitively lucid, I should in fact have to doubt the deliverances of my eyesight, or that I am cognitively lucid. Hence, I should have to doubt that those are in fact optimal conditions. But that runs contrary to the nature of the case. If I did nevertheless doubt it, that would show that I am affected by some mental disturbance. Once more, the skeptical doubt, which is raised irrespective of the usual criteria that govern the language-game with “doubt” is, in Wittgenstein’s opinion, nonsensical. For, to repeat, it is his view that philosophy is not a further and independent language-game where our ordinary language can go “on holiday”. Rather, it often depends on a misuse of our ordinary language—of the only language we have—which produces an *appearance* or an *illusion* of sense.

Thirdly, a doubt about the *existence* of a physical object is possible, for Wittgenstein, only within a specific kind of language-game. Consider the following situation. One might say “Perhaps this planet doesn’t exist and the light-phenomenon arises in some other way” (OC 56); or else, one might claim that a given historical figure, like Homer, never existed. These are perfectly legitimate doubts, which characterize the methodology of scientific and historical investigations. Yet, in order to find out whether a given planet exists or a historical figure existed, as well as to doubt it, we can’t call into question the existence of the instruments that give us the evidence on the basis of which we formulate our hypotheses and doubts; nor can we doubt the fact that the earth has existed for a very long time, if we still want to be able to use a source as evidence for or against a given historical hypothesis. We can thus see that our doubts about the existence of physical objects and people are subject to *methodological restrictions*, which guarantee the very possibility of raising those doubts. For, otherwise, we would no longer know what could speak for or against a given hypothesis. Wholesale doubts about the existence of all physical objects, or about the long existence of the Earth, would destroy the possibility of raising rationally motivated doubts. For any evidence for empirical doubts like the ones just mentioned is predicated on taking for granted the existence of physical objects or the long existence of the Earth (OC 231).

Lastly, “the game of doubting itself presupposes certainty” (OC 115). Hence, in Wittgenstein’s view, certainty precedes doubt and makes it possible. For we must know the meaning of the words we use to express our doubts, if we really want to doubt something. And yet, “If I don’t know *that* [e.g. that *this* is my hand], how do I know if my words mean what I believe they mean?” (OC 506). That is, if, in optimal conditions, I doubted that this object that I hold up in front of myself is my hand, it would then be doubtful that I knew the meaning of that word. As Wittgenstein writes, “The meaning of

a word is what an explanation of its meaning explains” (PI, 560). In many cases, our knowledge of the meaning of a word is displayed in the ability to explain it. But if I doubted that this is in fact my hand, how could I still ostensibly explain the meaning of that word by pointing at it? I could, at most, give some sort of verbal definition, which, however, I would be unable to apply to its worldly referent. Thus, I would then be unable to use it, thereby showing that I don’t really know its meaning. Yet, if one didn’t know the meaning of the words one is using, what sense would one’s words make? And what sense would one’s doubt make? Once more, it would not be a real doubt but a mere appearance or illusion of doubt. The absence of uncertainty or doubt in the circumstances that surround philosophical doubts is therefore constitutive of one’s knowledge of the meaning of the words one is using, which, in its turn, is a necessary condition—in fact a presupposition—for raising any meaningful doubt.

Moreover, the absence of doubt is constitutive of the possibility of acquiring a language and of learning how to raise meaningful doubts, as Wittgenstein repeatedly remarks in OC (cf. OC 310, 315).

By marshalling all these observations regarding our language and epistemic practices, then, Wittgenstein is making the point that philosophical doubts conform to none of the criteria that govern ordinary ones. They are raised in perfectly standard, even ideal, cognitive and environmental circumstances; they have no consequence in practice and aren’t accompanied by the typical behavior of doubt; they are neither based on grounds, nor are they raised within specific language-games in which, by taking for granted what they try to call in doubt, we could ascertain the existence of specific physical objects; and they are raised in circumstances in which, if a doubt was seriously raised, it would also be doubtful that the words used therein would still have a meaning, or that subjects were cognitively well-functioning or sane. Hence, for Wittgenstein, philosophical doubts are merely illusions of doubt. In fact, they seem

meaningful only because we project meaning onto them from the ordinary circumstances in which doubts and talk of doubt make sense. Yet, they are senseless. This, however, is not so for Strawson, who doesn't deny that skeptical doubts are meaningful and simply denies that they have any consequence in practice.

3.2.2. Wittgenstein v. idealism

Wittgenstein, moreover, proposes no less than three strategies for addressing skepticism (broadly construed). The first one is against idealism—that is, the philosophical position that denies that there are mind-independent physical objects. As always in Wittgenstein, this does not take the form of maintaining the opposite—realist—view. Rather, it consists in deeming the whole realist/idealist dispute meaningless once the status of “There are physical objects” is properly appreciated. Wittgenstein writes:

But can't it be imagined that there should be no physical objects? I don't know. And yet 'There are physical objects' is nonsense. Is it supposed to be an empirical proposition? —And is *this* an empirical proposition: 'There seem to be physical objects?' (OC 35)

'A is a physical object' is a piece of instruction which we give only to someone who doesn't yet understand either what 'A' means, or what 'physical object' means. Thus it is an instruction about the use of words, and 'physical object' is a logical concept. (Like colour, quantity, ...) And that is why no such proposition as: 'There are physical objects' can be formulated. Yet we encounter such unsuccessful shots at every turn. (OC 36)

Now, according to Wittgenstein, “physical object” is a logical—categorical—concept, like “color” or “quantity”. When we say that something is a physical object, we are thereby imparting a linguistic instruction. Hence, “*this* (said while pointing to an object) is a physical

object” plays a grammatical, not an empirical or descriptive role. That is, we are not thereby affirming that the object has certain properties. Rather, we are giving a piece of linguistic instruction concerning the use of ‘A’. In particular, we are instructing the interlocutor about which inferences containing ‘A’ are allowed or forbidden. For instance, that it is *ceteris paribus* legitimate to infer that that object is still in a drawer even if no one sees it, while it is not legitimate to infer that it might have vanished out of its own accord (OC 134, 214).

Thus, Wittgenstein tells us that “There are physical objects” is nonsense (*Unsinn*), at least if it is meant to be an empirical proposition. To take it as such means to disregard its grammatical role.¹⁴ Hence, we can’t take ourselves to have *proved* the existence of physical objects—as mind-independent entities—just by noticing that the expression “physical object” is used in our language and is taken to license certain inferences while forbidding others.

Yet, is pointing *this* out “an adequate answer to the scepticism of the idealist, or the assurances of a realist”? (OC 37). “For them after all it is not nonsense” (OC 37). Wittgenstein responds: “It would, however, be an answer to say: this assertion, or its opposite is a misfiring attempt to express what can’t be expressed like that” (OC 37). What, then, are the realist and the idealist trying, misleadingly, to express? As to the realist, Wittgenstein’s answer is:

So one might grant that Moore was right, if he is interpreted like this: a proposition saying that there is a physical object may have the same logical status as one saying that here is a red patch. (OC 53)

¹⁴ On the different treatment of “A is a physical object” and “There are physical objects” in OC, see Coliva (2023b).

Hence a realist like Moore is right to point out that we aren't objectively certain just about propositions regarding sense data, or arithmetic (OC 447-8, 455, 651-5, cf. 656-76),¹⁵ but also about propositions regarding what we categorize as physical objects, such as hands, tables, and chairs in circumstances like those paradigmatically exemplified by Moore's proof. Yet, such certainty is a function of the *role* these propositions play *in our language-games and epistemic practices* and isn't itself based on epistemic grounds.

An idealist, however, is right to insist that we haven't thereby proved the mind-independent existence of objects. Yet, they fail to notice that "There are physical objects" is (at most) a grammatical statement, not an empirical one. If so, neither its assertion nor its negation can be taken to state a deep metaphysical truth. Hence, "There aren't physical objects", and its opposite, are nonsense, if interpreted in the metaphysical way in which both the realist and the idealist tend to interpret them—that is, as stating a deep empirical fact about the structure of reality.

Wittgenstein's point, therefore, is that "There are physical objects" can only make explicit some basic feature of grammar, or, equivalently, of our conceptual scheme, which countenances, within the fundamental fabric of the world, mind-independent objects.

That we do have such a conceptual scheme is shown by our linguistic and epistemic practices. Furthermore, its objective certainty—not truth—which, for Wittgenstein, is always a function of the role certain propositions play in our overall picture of the world,

¹⁵ It is important to keep in mind that the term "logical" in the context of *On Certainty* is generally a synonym of "grammatical" and that what Wittgenstein dubs "objective certainty" (OC 194, 203; as opposed to "subjective certainty" OC 179, 245, 415, 563) isn't an epistemic (even less a psychological) category, but a grammatical one, sometimes expressed by means of the "grammatical" use of "I know" (OC 58).

is manifested by the fact that “the *hypothesis* ... that all the things around us don’t exist ... would be like the hypothesis of our having miscalculated in all our calculations” (OC 55). Yet, according to Wittgenstein, it is not “conceivable that we should be wrong in *every* statement about physical objects; that any we ever make are mistaken” (OC 54). For the very meaning of our words doesn’t depend on there being an agreement just in definitions, but also in judgements (PI 242). Now, it is a fact that we do agree in judging of certain objects, which may not be presently perceived, or that may pre-date our existence, that they exist. That is why the hypothesis that there are no mind-independent physical objects boils down to the hypothesis that we may always have been mistaken. That hypothesis, in its turn, seems to make no sense, for it would deprive the expression “physical object” of its meaning.¹⁶

It is not my aim here to evaluate this argument. Rather, it is worth stressing, against liberal naturalist readings of Wittgenstein, that Wittgenstein tried to confront the skeptical challenge—in one of its possible guises—head on. Moreover, it is important to notice that he is clearly proposing an argument designed to show that idealism is nonsensical, and not just idle, contrary to Strawson’s overall interpretation.

3.2.3. Wittgenstein v. Cartesian skepticism

According to Wittgenstein, doubts can only come after certainty, in the twofold sense of coming chronologically after an attitude of trust, and of presupposing certain propositions which are taken for granted, as they need to stay put in order for rational doubts to be possible. We know, however, that in classical epistemological projects, since Descartes’ *Meditations*, doubt has been considered the source of certainty; and it

¹⁶ See Coliva (2010, chapter 3) for details.

has been thought that only by calling into question *any* opinion could we then determine what is known with certainty. In this way, certainty would come *after* doubt and any *conceivable* doubt would be *legitimate*—that is to say, *intelligible and meaningful*. Furthermore, methodological skepticism was meant to be *global*, because it called everything into question to see if something could survive doubt after all.

Yet, as Wittgenstein put it, “If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything” (OC 115, cf. 450, 519, 625). For, as we saw, the very existence of language and the possibility of learning it depend on a general attitude of trust and on not calling certain things into question. Similarly, doubts are subject to methodological restrictions that depend on the features of specific language-games in which some propositions must stay put. Furthermore, not every *possible* doubt is meaningful for Wittgenstein (cf. OC 302, 392, 606). Only those doubts that are grounded in reasons and make a difference in practice are. These doubts, in their turn, presuppose that something be exempt from doubt.

Now, one might concede that to have our language and our ordinary epistemic practices, doubt must come after certainty. Yet, it may be argued, once language and our ordinary epistemic practices are acquired, one can then raise any kind of doubt, while still using words meaningfully, and thus call into question the very foundations of our ordinary epistemic practices. Alternatively, one might concede that to have a language, doubts are possible only based on taking for granted certain things. Yet, one may claim that philosophical doubts aren't essentially linguistic. They could just occur in one's mind.

In response, it must be kept firmly in mind that for Wittgenstein words never carry their meanings on their sleeves, independently of the circumstances of their use, and that concepts

are inseparable from linguistic usage, for they are the sum of those various uses.¹⁷ Hence, Cartesian global skepticism is strictly speaking nonsensical for Wittgenstein, for it is based on putting the cart before the horse: certainty does not come after doubt but before it, as it allows us to acquire language and those epistemic practices that need to stay put to raise meaningful doubts at all. Appearances to the contrary are in fact a product of a mistaken conception of meaning, as well as of philosophy and, possibly, of the idea that thought could be independent of language and of its applications. Global skepticism is self-undermining to the point of becoming nonsense. It is neither rational—that is, supported by reasons—nor meaningful.

Furthermore, Wittgenstein considers one of the classic Cartesian skeptical scenarios, namely the hypothesis of dreaming, and, unsurprisingly, deems it nonsensical as well:

I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming. Someone who, dreaming, says “I am dreaming”, even if he speaks audibly in doing so, is no more right than if he said in his dream “it is raining”, while it was in fact raining. Even if his dream were actually connected with the noise of the rain. (OC 676)

The argument “I may be dreaming” is senseless for this reason: if I am dreaming, this remark is being dreamed as well—and indeed it is also being dreamed that these words have any meaning. (OC 383)

Thus, according to Wittgenstein, even the hypothesis “I am dreaming now” is nonsensical because those words (either spoken or entertained silently in one’s mind) could never be used to (truthfully) describe one’s current state. If I were dreaming, I would also be dreaming that I was making an assertion or a judgement. At most, the

¹⁷ See Coliva (2021) for a way to support this claim. Not to mention the fact that the private language argument in *Philosophical Investigations* is often taken to show the impossibility of concepts without a public language.

words occurring in the dream (or even spoken out loud while dreaming) might be taken to refer to the *dream* I am having of dreaming, not to my present state of dreaming. If I was awake, in contrast, they would say something false, and we could appeal to various, entirely ordinary criteria, to ascertain that we are not in fact dreaming. Thus, “I am dreaming” cannot be used to describe a state of affairs, whether real or simply dreamt of.

Once more, it is not my aim to evaluate this argument here, but only to marshal evidence against Strawson’s claim that Wittgenstein, as a liberal naturalist, refused to produce arguments against skepticism; and that he merely pointed out its idleness, not its being self-undermining to the point of becoming nonsensical.

3.2.4. Wittgenstein v. Humean skepticism

Humean skepticism, contrary to the Cartesian skepticism just considered, does not traffic in far-fetched skeptical scenarios. Rather, it challenges the rationality of our basic assumptions (or beliefs) concerning the existence of physical objects and/or the reliability of our senses.

While, as we saw, there are remarks in OC explicitly addressed to the dreaming hypothesis, the argument against Humean skepticism can only be evinced from those passages where Wittgenstein discusses the fact that our inquiries are all based on presuppositions which can’t sensibly be doubted on pain of annihilating the possibility of raising rational doubts and questions at all (OC 217, 232, 519, 341-344). The interest of this argument is that it is not necessarily connected to semantic theses, even though Wittgenstein no doubt took it to carry over to establish that Humean skepticism, like any other form of skepticism, would be meaningless. It is therefore

more attuned to Strawson's overall propensity to ignore Wittgenstein's arguments aimed at proving skepticism nonsensical on semantic grounds.

Wittgenstein's response has a Kantian flavor, albeit divested of any appeal to a realm of transcendental—necessary and universal—truths we find in Kant. For Wittgenstein remarks that it belongs to the *logic* of our investigations (OC 342, cf. 56, 82, 628) and to the *method* of our inquiries (OC 151, 318) that certain things be indeed exempt from doubt and not called into question. Now, it must be kept in mind that when the later Wittgenstein talks about “logic”, he is most often introducing the idea of a norm. According to his later views, norms, even those of evidential significance and not just those of language (what he calls “grammar”), depend on the *actual* features of our language-games. As he repeatedly stressed, “everything descriptive of a language-game is part of logic” (OC 56, cf. 82, 628). That is, taking those assumptions for granted is a *condition of possibility* of all our empirical investigations. So, once again, contrary to Hume, for Wittgenstein we can derive an “ought” from an “is”: we can derive meaning—that is, rules for the use of a word—from use itself, and we can derive constitutive norms for empirical investigations from our actual epistemic practices.

Thus, since there cannot be reasons to doubt either the existence of physical objects—since everything speaks in favor of this and nothing could speak against it—or of the reliability of our senses—for any reasons we may have depend on relying on them—believing in the existence of physical objects and relying on our senses are not arbitrary and irrational, or even a-rational (as Strawson suggests, see fn. 5). Rather, as I have argued in Coliva (2015), developing Wittgenstein's own position, it is *mandated* by epistemic rationality itself. For it is only by relying on

these assumptions that epistemic reasons can be produced for or against any empirical claim.

This point is not the pragmatic one that we can't raise doubts about the presuppositions of our epistemic investigations because that would be *impractical*, given the usefulness of our practices of forming beliefs on the basis of perceptual and testimonial evidence. Rather, it is a point about the *logic* of any epistemic enquiry, as we have just seen – that is, about what makes it possible for there to be any kind of inquiry (of an empirical nature).

It is a consequence of Wittgenstein's argument as I think it should be read and developed, that, although the conditions of possibility of our practices lie equally beyond doubt and justification, it is a fact that *within* those practices we do produce justifications for specific empirical propositions which, when true, amount to knowledge. Thus, the worrying conclusion reached by Humean skepticism—that we never really have knowledge of ordinary empirical propositions—is blocked. Surely, it is always knowledge *within a system of justification* and therefore by courtesy of some assumptions. Yet it is knowledge, nevertheless. In fact, it shows how knowledge is not absolute, but always delimited and made possible by the kind of epistemic system—with its hinges or basic assumptions—which gives rise to it.

An important selling point of this rationalist, anti-Humean reading of Wittgenstein (*pace* Strawson) is that it does not leave us wondering how epistemic rationality could arise out of a- or pre-rational framework propositions, no matter how natural or inescapable it is for us to hold on to them. To stress: Strawson isn't saying that these presuppositions are rational because they are mandated by epistemic rationality. Rather, he seems to be saying that they stay put and that allows us to engage in epistemic rationality but

they themselves are neither rational nor irrational, or, to put it even more generally, they are not apt for epistemic evaluation.

Once again, it is not my aim to assess this argument—even though I have strong sympathy for it¹⁸—but merely to stress, contrary to Strawson’s liberal naturalist reading, that Wittgenstein did rationally engage with his philosophical opponents and proposed arguments aimed at exposing what he considered to be deeply mistaken views not just about language and the relationship between philosophy and ordinary language, but also about empirical rationality and its groundless presuppositions.

4. Conclusions

Strawson’s liberal naturalism, which, as should be clear by now, is rather a moving target, is surely instructive to the extent that it reminds us that skeptical doubts are unreal, idle, or even a pretense, for they do not make any difference to our *everyday* actions and beliefs about (specific) physical objects (or in general). Still, it falls short of providing philosophers with convincing reasons to legitimately dismiss those doubts. Contrary to Strawson’s recommendations, reasons should be provided to avoid being charged with an unphilosophical turning of the back. Furthermore, at least some of those reasons may be found in Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*.

Contrary to Strawson’s interpretation, they mostly aim at showing that skepticism is self-refuting and nonsensical rather than sensical but idle (that is, ineffective in everyday life). And even when they can be decoupled from semantic considerations, they aim at showing that skepticism is asking for reasons for propositions that need to stay put for reasons to be possible at all, and which are as such constitutive of epistemic rationality,

¹⁸ Coliva (2015, especially chapters 3 and 4) can be seen as an elaboration and defense of it.

rather than a- or pre-rational. Whether or not one finds them convincing, it remains the case that their presence would suffice to show that, contrary to what Strawson claims, Wittgenstein was not a liberal naturalist. Nor should he be developed into one.

Equally, we have seen that there are reasons to resist Strawson's reading of Hume as (just) a liberal naturalist. For he was a skeptic and that led him to embrace hard naturalism with respect to our belief in the existence of an external world—i.e., to give a causal account of how that rationally ungrounded belief comes about.

Finally, I have argued that liberal naturalism raises more problems than it can solve. For it proposes a separation of spheres—between reason and everyday life—that provides neither the means to redeem the rationality of our beliefs within the latter sphere, nor the backbone of a philosophically convincing position regarding our right to dismiss philosophical doubts. Yet, to end on a positive note, Strawson's brilliant essay gives liberal naturalism its best possible shot—one we should all be attending to, whether we decide to embrace liberal naturalism or not.

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