Wittgenstein, Global Scepticism and the Primacy of Practice

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It is sometimes supposed that Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* provides a solution to – or better, a dissolution of – the traditional problem of philosophical scepticism. I will argue here that this is at best a misleading way of seeing things. Wittgenstein has important and interesting things to say about scepticism, but they do not by themselves justify a straightforward dismissal of scepticism in its more philosophically challenging forms. I shall also argue that his anti-sceptical argument depends on a commitment to an essentially Kantian transcendentalism which Wittgenstein is unwilling to do more than hint at, but which needs to be more fully articulated before we can come to a conclusion about the success of his case against scepticism. I shall suggest finally that a detailed articulation of the kind of position which Wittgenstein presupposes can be found in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.

1. Global scepticism

I want to begin by distinguishing ‘local’ and ‘global’ scepticism. The former is a doubt about particular, everyday beliefs – the book is on the table, the cat is on the chair. The latter is a doubt about philosophical beliefs – for instance, that there are (or are not) mind-independent physical objects. G.E. Moore, whose anti-sceptical writings were at least in part the stimulus for the writing of the notes which were published as *On Certainty*, does not make this distinction. However, the Sceptic against whom Moore’s criticisms are aimed initially appears to be a proponent of local scepticism, someone who claims to doubt all sorts of everyday claims which are apparently quite simple and obvious. In response, Moore insists that there are a great many propositions ‘every one of which (in my own opinion) I know, with certainty, to be true’ (1925, 36).
These propositions he describes as ‘obvious truisms’ (ibid.): some of them are matters of common knowledge, some of them descriptions of states of affairs that were transparently obvious to Moore in the situation in which he uttered the propositions. ‘I am at present, as you can all see, in a room and not in the open air; I am standing up and not either sitting or lying down; I have clothes on and am not absolutely naked ...’ (1941, 227). Some of these truisms concern the reality of material objects; that Moore knows them with certainty to be true constitutes in his opinion, a ‘perfectly rigorous’ proof of the existence of an external world (1939, 146). And so, it seems that Moore takes his recital of homely truisms to answer not only the local sceptic who directly doubts the truisms themselves, but also the global sceptic who doubts, not just whether there is a book on the table, but whether there is an external world at all.

Wittgenstein, according to what seems to be the standard reading of On Certainty, responds to the debate between Moore and the (local) Sceptic by claiming that both are abusing language. The sorts of truisms that the Sceptic claims to doubt and Moore claims to know cannot normally be doubted; but for that very reason they cannot be said to be known either. They function rather as assumptions which establish the framework for our thinking (OC 208, 209, 243). When we claim to ‘know’ something, we do so in contexts where there is a point to the claim, that is, in a situation where it might make sense to doubt it (OC 468). But the truisms Moore considers are what we simply take for granted before even starting to consider whether we know or doubt things. Doubting some things presupposes not doubting – not even considering as possibly up for doubt – other things (OC 74, 519, 613). As Marie McGinn puts it, ‘[t]he sceptic’s doubts are misplaced for precisely the same reason that Moore’s knowledge claims are: his doubts misrepresent our relation to propositions that are, in the context, technique-constituting propositions, and treats it as an epistemic relation to empirical judgments’ (1989, 159).

A different criticism of Moore, however, has focused on his assumption that the global sceptic (or the idealist, his other target) can be refuted by pointing to our knowledge of specific empirical facts. Against this it has been argued, quite rightly, I think, that the post-Cartesian global sceptic is not concerned with specific empirical claims, but with the metaphysical question as to whether her experiences give her access to a mind-independent reality. She may be quite happy to agree that Moore has two hands, or that he is showing her his hand, and not his foot. She might even be content to agree that he knows he has two hands, taking ‘knows’ in a modest, everyday contextualist sense. What she would reject, though, is the idea that Moore could then infer from