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PUTNAM AND WITTGENSTEIN ON RADICAL SCEPTICISM

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ABSTRACT. When philosophers consider Hilary Putnam's contribution to the topic of radical scepticism, they usually think of his famous content externalist argument about brains-in-a-vat. Putnam also made more general forays into this debate, however, not least by bringing to bear a kind of occasion-sensitivity about meaning that he derives from the work of Stanley Cavell, and which has its roots in the work of Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin. It is argued that this meaning-centred approach offers only a partial handle on the problem of radical scepticism, and that it needs to be supplemented with a further idea that we also get from Wittgenstein. This is the distinctive thesis about the structure of rational evaluation, which has the notion of a hinge commitment at its heart, that is found in his final notebooks (published as *On Certainty*). While Putnam never considers this anti-sceptical aspect of Wittgenstein's thought in any detail, it is maintained that embracing it would be in the spirit of Putnam's general Cavellian approach to radical scepticism.

KEYWORDS: Cavell, Stanley; Hinge Commitments; Occasion Sensitivity; Putnam, Hilary; Radical Scepticism; Wittgenstein.

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

When one thinks of Hilary Putnam's contribution to the topic of radical scepticism, what first comes to mind is Putnam's influential content externalism argument concerning brains-in-a-vat.¹ Significant though this contribution is, however, there is in fact a great deal more to Putnam's thinking when it came to this philosophical topic. This is fortunate, as while his brain-in-a-vat argument is undoubtedly philosophically important, there are good reasons for thinking that even if it is successful it wouldn't be able to completely undermine radical scepticism.² Putnam's overarching response to this problem is to appeal to a highly context-sensitive treatment of meaning that can underpin a critique of the meaningfulness of radical sceptical doubts. This is the 'occasion sensitivity' approach to radical scepticism that Putnam finds in the work of Stanley Cavell, who in turn derives it from the later Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin. My focus here will be to put this aspect of Putnam's approach to radical scepticism centre-stage.³ I will be suggesting that attempting to fully diagnose the sceptical problematic by appealing only to meaning in this way misses out something important. Relatedly, I will also maintain that Putnam fails to fully appreciate the manner in which Cavell's response to radical scepticism goes beyond merely appealing to claims about meaning. In order to motivate these points, I will argue that resolving the problem of radical scepticism requires not just the Wittgenstein (1953) of the *Philosophical Investigations* but also the Wittgenstein (1969) of his final notebooks, published as *On Certainty*. These later remarks about the arational certainty that necessarily underlies the structure of rational evaluations are crucial to diagnosing the radical sceptical problematic, where this diagnosis significantly extends an account that simply appeals to the meaninglessness of sceptical doubts. Moreover, I will be claiming that Cavell's treatment of radical scepticism, which is Putnam's main inspiration, is essentially allied to such a diagnostic account.

2. PUTNAM ON RADICAL SCEPTICISM AND OCCASION-SENSITIVITY

Putnam's overarching response to the problem radical scepticism involves showing that the radical sceptic is making moves that are simply meaningless. To this end, Putnam enlists the occasion-sensitivity account of meaning. This is the idea that the context-sensitivity of meaning should not be understood merely in terms of how particular utterances should be used in certain conditions (as

when an indexical utterance can express a different proposition depending on, say, who utters it), but rather the more radical proposal that as regards our utterances in general the content expressed—and whether, indeed, a determinate content is expressed at all—can be dependent on the relevant circumstances in which the utterance is made.⁴ Putnam offers an example from Charles Travis (2001) to illustrate this point:

“I have an ornamental tree in my garden with bronze colored leaves. Suppose that a prankster paints the leaves green. Depending on who says it and to whom and why, the sentence “The tree has green leaves,” said with my tree in mind, may be *true, false, or indeterminate!* (Putnam 2012, 516, *italics in original*)

The point is that one cannot tell in advance whether even this relatively mundane utterance is true, false, or indeterminate without knowing about the conditions under which it was uttered, with all three options being otherwise available. In particular, it is not enough to make an utterance intelligible that one strings together familiar words to make a sentence that in some context of utterance would be intelligible. After all, in the context in which it is actually uttered, the kind of conditions that would make the utterance intelligible might be absent. Putnam (2012, 517) gives an example of this by discussing how a statement like ‘At the stroke of midnight, the coach turned into a pumpkin’ could make perfect sense when uttered as part of the telling of a fairy tale and yet fail to be intelligible at all if uttered outside of this fictional setting.

One can immediately see how such an idea might have application to the problem of radical scepticism. For one thing, insofar as the sceptic employs theoretical terms that are divorced from our ordinary usage, then this approach offers a standing challenge to show that anything contentful is actually being expressed at all. Such a line will be familiar from the later Wittgenstein, who maintained that certain “philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*.” (Wittgenstein 1953, §38, *italics in original*) Appealing to occasion-sensitivity can also help to respond to formulations of radical scepticism that, on the face of it at least, aren’t using theoretical terms at all, but merely our ordinary terminology. This is because the philosophical employment of an everyday expression, outside of the ordinary context that would provide such an expression its usual meaning, can be just as much a matter of ‘language going on holiday’ as when a theoretical term is used without clear criteria for how it is to be understood. In general, it is not enough to present a genuine philosophical problem that one employs words that one ordinarily understands in such a way as to convey the problem. For it might nonetheless remain that there is insufficient context for the utterance to enable us to make any sense of what is being said.

With this point in mind, Putnam's overarching response to the problem of radical scepticism is to treat the relevant sceptical utterances as simply unintelligible. Putnam's takes a broadly 'relevant alternatives' line of a kind that one finds in Austin (1961), whereby we understand knowledge claims in terms of the range of error-possibilities that one is, in that context of utterance, able to rule-out. To use one of Austin's (1961, 149) examples, in claiming to know that the bird before one is a goldfinch one is ordinarily representing oneself as being able to exclude such error-possibilities as that it isn't another kind of bird that might plausibly be in the vicinity, such as a woodpecker. While the exact range of the error-possibilities can be dependent on the context of one's utterance, Austin's point is that one cannot simply insist, as the radical sceptic does, that one should be able to rule out every error-possibility. Here is Austin:

“Enough is enough: it doesn't mean everything. Enough means enough to show that (within reason, and for present intents and purposes) it “can't” be anything else, there is no room for an alternative, competing, description of it. It does not mean, e.g., enough to show it isn't a *stuffed* goldfinch.”
(Austin 1946, 156, *italics in original*)

Taking this line, we can resist the radical sceptical demand that one should consider far-fetched error-possibilities that we wouldn't ordinarily consider, such as that one is a brain-in-a-vat being 'fed' deceptive experiences. On this model, such demands are strictly meaningless, since they offend against our ordinary usage when it comes to terms like 'knowledge' and the purpose that those terms are put to in our rational practices (e.g., of making claims to know).

Here is Putnam fully embracing this sort of approach to radical scepticism:

“[...] as we actually use the word “know,” a statement of the form “X knows that so-and-so” does not claim that either X or the speaker (who may be a third person) is in a position to defuse every conceivable “doubt” (or “possibility of error”).

Here is a relevant example:

1. I know that the color of my house is “off-white.”
2. I know the (obvious) implication: if some pranksters painted my house blue this morning, then the color of my house is now blue and not off-white.
3. But I do not know that some pranksters did not paint my house blue this morning (I have been at the office all day)—and, by the way, I also do not “not know” that some prankster did not paint my house blue this morning—in the absence of some legitimate reason for doubt, one can only say that the question does not arise.” (Putnam 2012, 520)

Putnam's idea is that if we attend to our ordinary usage of our epistemic terms, then we can resist the radical sceptical demand that we need to be able to exclude (i.e., know to be false) far-off error-possibilities by treating such demands as effectively meaningless, given that they offend against the meaning of the relevant terms as determined by our actual epistemic practice.

Notice too that in this passage it is clear that Putnam regards this approach as resulting in the denial of the closure principle for knowledge (even if this is not something that Putnam himself flags). In its most plausible form, this principle holds that if one knows one proposition and competently deduces a second proposition from it, thereby forming a belief on this basis in the second proposition (and while retaining one's knowledge of the first proposition throughout), then one knows that second proposition.⁵ In contrast, Putnam is allowing that one might be able to know something about the colour of one's house, know that this entails the rejection of a far-fetched error-possibility (such that one could competently deduce the denial of that alternative if one wishes), and yet be unable to know the entailed proposition (in this case that one's house hasn't been painted blue this morning by pranksters). He is thus committed to the rejection of this principle. This is significant because such a principle is highly compelling. We will come back to this point.

This style of response to radical scepticism is particularly evident in Putnam's (2001) discussion of Barry Stroud's sympathetic treatment of scepticism. Stroud is concerned to show how radical sceptical doubts are intelligible and that, in particular, the radical sceptic is not merely using familiar epistemic language in a way that is completely disconnected from our normal usage. To give one of Stroud's (1984) examples, consider a scepticism about whether there are any physicians in New York that proceeded by understanding a 'physician' to be anyone who can cure every conceivable illness in two minutes. Such scepticism would certainly establish its conclusion that there are no 'physicians' in New York, but at the expense of it being completely irrelevant, given that we do not understand physicians in this manner (and have been given no reason to revise our understanding in this direction). The same goes for radical scepticism if it merely uses our epistemic terminology in exacting ways that are disconnected from our ordinary epistemic practices.

What Stroud attempts to show, however, is that there is a way of thinking about radical scepticism that avoids this very error. We can give a charitable summary of Stroud's approach in this respect as follows. There are epistemic principles employed in our ordinary epistemic practices, albeit in a fashion whereby they do not generate scepticism-friendly conclusions. One can imagine entirely ordinary scenarios, however, in which subjects employ these principles in a fashion that does generate scepticism-friendly conclusions, and when this happens the sceptical doubts raised will appear entirely intelligible. For example, Stroud offers a case where one had claimed that someone would be at the party but this knowledge claim is met by this response from a 'boorish host':

“But do you really know he’ll be here? After all, how do you know he won’t be struck down by a meteorite on the way over? You don’t know he won’t be.” (Stroud 1984, 61)

Stroud grants that such a challenge to one’s knowledge would be considered ‘unfair and inappropriate’ in any ordinary epistemic context, as we simply do not normally demand that people are able to rule-out such far-fetched possibilities. And yet, social conventions aside, the challenge is at least intelligible. Stroud also concedes that this error-possibility cannot be excluded, given that one doesn’t have any evidence that bears upon it either way. Moreover, Stroud argues that although this demand is not one that we would usually consider relevant to whether or not one has knowledge, it does respect epistemic principles that seem to be in play in our ordinary epistemic practices, such that one should be able to rule-out scenarios that are incompatible with one’s knowledge of the target proposition.

On this latter point, although Stroud does not express the issue this way, we can illustrate what he has in mind by appealing to the closure principle for knowledge that we noted above is highly intuitive.⁶ The credibility of such a principle seems to reflect the fact that it is rooted in our ordinary epistemic practices. Since we only usually consider a restricted range of error-possibilities in normal contexts of inquiry, this principle doesn’t generally lend itself to radical sceptical conclusions. In particular, where the error-possibilities considered are local, then the entailed propositions that we competently deduce from our knowledge will tend to be such that one is in a position to know them (or, at least, where one isn’t in such a position, then it’s no longer plausible that one retains one’s knowledge of the entailing proposition). To use Austin’s example, in knowing that the bird before me is a goldfinch, I can use the closure principle to come to know that, say, it’s not an eagle, where closure doesn’t create any difficulties precisely because the evidence I have for the former claim is also (in the normal case anyway) evidence for the latter claim. The problem emerges, however, once we start to consider the kinds of error-possibilities that are normally not considered relevant, such as the error-possibility concerning the meteorite that the boorish host raises. Using the closure principle, it seems that if one knows the target claim, then one also knows the denial of this error-possibility. Conversely, if one grants that one doesn’t know the latter, then it follows that one doesn’t know the former.

Putting these thoughts together, Stroud’s claim is that there can be ordinary epistemic contexts where people raise challenges which, while inappropriate by normal lights, are nonetheless perfectly intelligible. These challenges cannot be met. Moreover, by appealing to epistemic principles that seem rooted in our ordinary epistemic practices, our inability to meet these challenges generates

sceptical conclusions. With this general schema in play, we can see how radical sceptical challenges can be entered in ways that would be intelligible to us even though they depart from our ordinary epistemic practices in significant ways. All we need to do is imagine a variant of the ‘boorish host’ example where the error-possibility raised is a radical sceptical scenario. Stroud’s claim is that so construed the radical sceptic isn’t like someone who is sceptical about the existence of physicians in New York by defining ‘physician’ in an implausibly restrictive way. Instead, what the radical sceptic is doing is taking our ordinary epistemic practices and showing how they can be employed in ways that generate radical sceptical conclusions. That we don’t extract such conclusions in normal contexts of inquiry thus starts to look like a mere convention. In particular, there doesn’t seem to be any in principle reason why we couldn’t consider radical sceptical error-possibilities and then discover, by employment of our ordinary epistemic principles, that one doesn’t know very much (even if, ordinarily, we are not inclined to do any such thing).

I agree with Putnam that there is something seriously amiss with Stroud’s line of argument, but I don’t think Putnam has properly diagnosed the error here. His reply is to simply insist that we do not understand the kind of radical doubt that is being raised. Here is how he replies to the case concerning the boorish host, for example:

“[...] what Wittgenstein teaches us [...] is that neither “Stroud knows that John will be struck by a meteorite on his way to the party” nor “Stroud does not know that John will be struck by a meteorite on the way to the party” has a unique truth-evaluable content that automatically accompanies it (like a shadow) every time it is uttered. Here and now, if you ask “Hilary, do you know or not know that Jim will not be struck down by a meteorite tomorrow”, I would not say either “I know” or “I do not know”; I would say “What do you mean?” If it is “not true” that “I know that John will not be struck down by a meteorite tomorrow”, that is because, uttered here and now, with no specified context other than the empty context of “it’s a logical possibility”, “I know that John will not be struck down by a meteorite tomorrow” isn’t merely something that is “not true”, it is something that hasn’t been given a determinate content (or a determinate context, for that matter). By assuming that the negation of the knowledge claim “Stroud knows that John will not be struck down by a meteorite on his way to the party” is true, Stroud has assumed that that knowledge claim has a truth-evaluable content, and this is precisely the move in the conjuring trick that gives the game away to the skeptic.” (Putnam 2001, 8-9)

On this point, however, Stroud seems to me to be on firmer ground than Putnam. Let’s put to one side the unfortunate fact that both parties are discussing knowledge of a future event (as that brings in noise that isn’t relevant to our concerns), and so treat the target claims as whether one knows that John has made it to the party and hence that one knows he wasn’t struck down by lightning. Is it really so clear that the latter proposition fails to pick out a determinate content? Indeed, the demand that if one knows the former proposition one should be in a position to know the latter proposition

too doesn't seem at all incredible, even if we grant (as we should) that it would not ordinarily arise that we would demand such a thing.

Putnam's way of dealing with the problem of radical scepticism thus starts to look rather flat-footed, as if the idea is merely to insist on the primacy of our ordinary practices and claim that any dialectical move that is in tension with those ordinary practices is necessarily off-limits. But that would be an empty victory over the radical sceptic, given that *of course* we count as having knowledge by the lights of our ordinary practices. It is thus trivially the case that radical scepticism is false if these are the rules of the game. And yet radical scepticism certainly doesn't seem obviously false in this way.

3. PUTNAM, WITTGENSTEIN AND CAVELL

Putnam's flat-footed treatment of radical scepticism is especially odd given that he sprinkles his discussions of radical scepticism with high praise for the work of Cavell. And yet there is nothing remotely flat-footed about Cavell's response to radical scepticism, as Putnam acknowledges. For one thing, Cavell doesn't think that sceptical doubts are simply meaningless. Indeed, one of the abiding themes in his work is how one can become bewitched by sceptical trains of thought and so be led to sceptical conclusions. Moreover, this occurs in ways that need have nothing to do with philosophy in any formal sense. Consider, for example, Cavell's discussion of Shakespeare's Othello, who is led to a kind of radical doubt where no evidence could ever be good enough to settle his doubts about Desdemona that torment him.⁷ As Putnam nicely puts the point, "if Othello's [*doubting*] is a pathology, it is an exaggerated form of, so to speak, a normal pathology." (Putnam 2006, 128) Cavell's concern with radical scepticism is thus not so much as to refute it by treating it as meaningless as to understand why it can seem so intelligible and compelling.

Another key difference between Cavell's treatment of radical scepticism and that offered by an ordinary language philosopher like Austin (1961) is that it does not rest merely on claims about meaning but also includes a powerful diagnostic story about where the radical sceptic goes awry. This is the idea, found in the later Wittgenstein's thought, that the category of knowledge is only applicable *within* one's worldview and cannot be applied to the worldview as a whole. Consider these famous remarks:

“[...] the truth of skepticism, or what I might call the moral of skepticism [*ist* ...] that the human creature’s basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing.” (Cavell 1979, 241)⁸

As Cavell makes clear in this passage, the idea of making sense of our conception of the world as a whole in terms of knowledge, as we might be tempted to aspire to do in the context of a philosophical investigation, is simply incoherent. This is why Cavell argues that the appropriate attitude to adopt to our thinking about the world as a whole is one of acknowledgement rather than knowledge.⁹

I think Putnam may misunderstand Cavell’s thinking in this regard, since he seems to think that the Cavellian line on radical scepticism consists simply in an appeal to an occasion-sensitivity account of meaning, albeit one that is more flexible in what it counts as intelligible than that offered by Austin (1961). In contrast, the Wittgensteinian line that Cavell is giving expression to, while no doubt essentially allied to the relevant claims about meaning, is not simply reducible to them.

I’ve argued elsewhere that we can bring the Cavellian position on radical scepticism into sharp relief by considering the main line of argument in Wittgenstein’s final notebooks, published as *On Certainty* (a work that Cavell, like Putnam, barely engaged with himself).¹⁰ While Wittgenstein does make claims about meaning in these notebooks, not least in terms of a trenchant critique of the meaningfulness of the philosophical claims that Moore makes about physical objects and an ‘external’ world,¹¹ his main focus is on our most commonsense certainties, claims that seem to be clearly intelligible. Examples include such claims as that (in normal circumstances) one has hands (e.g., OC, §1), what one’s name is (OC, §425), and the language that one is speaking (OC, §158). Wittgenstein notes the visceral certainty we have in these articles of commonsense, such that nothing would ordinarily count against them. Indeed, we would normally regard doubt of such commonsense certainties as being merely performative, as when a philosopher claims to be undertaking their radical doubt but their subsequent behaviour reveals their continued certainty. In fact, if the doubt were real, and not merely performative, then Wittgenstein suggests that we would treat this as a sign of a serious mental disturbance. (OC, §§71-75)

The reason why Wittgenstein thinks that it would be incoherent to doubt our most commonsense certainties is not that such doubt would be meaningless, however. Instead, Wittgenstein is arguing for a more dramatic thesis regarding the necessity of one having a prior, visceral, certainty that permeates one’s worldview in order for one to even be such as to occupy the

space of reasons at all. Wittgenstein argues that this overarching certainty is required in order to acquire a worldview at all. As he puts it:

“The child learns by believing the adult. Doubt comes after belief.” (OC, §160)

That is, the rational practice of doubt presupposes that the worldview, and the certainty that infuses it, is already in place; there is no route to the acquisition of a worldview by being globally circumspect of what one is taught. Since this overarching certainty must already be in place in order to undertake rational evaluations, so it cannot be itself rational. It is instead arational: “primitive”, “animal.” (OC, §§475 & 359) It is a certainty that is primarily manifested in one’s actions rather than one’s thoughts (especially since one may never formulate this certainty as an occurrent thought at all).¹² Moreover, this certainty must remain thereafter. Our rational practices only function within the framework that this certainty provides; there is thus no coherent sense in which we can rationally evaluate one’s worldview as a whole. Radical sceptical doubts are thus incoherent, but so too are *anti*-sceptical attempts at rationally validating of one’s worldview as whole. Our certainty in the worldview is neither reasonable nor unreasonable, but simply there “like our life.” (OC, §559) This certainty is thus the ‘hinge’ on which all rational evaluation occurs, to use one of Wittgenstein’s metaphors. (OC, §341)

Wittgenstein’s interest in our ordinary commonsense certainties arises from how they are effectively manifestations of this overarching hinge certainty in the worldview.¹³ This is because to doubt such claims would be to call one’s worldview as a whole into question, and that is precisely what is precluded by the overarching hinge certainty. Doubting these commonsense certainties is thus not a regular local doubt but rather a kind of radical doubt in disguise that would “drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos.” (OC, §613) This is the sense in which these commonsense certainties are also hinge commitments, in virtue of the relationship they bear to the overarching hinge certainty.

This line of argument has a number of consequences, the most important of which is that it is in the very nature of any rational practice that it precludes fully general rational evaluations. Consider Stroud again. There the thought was that although we do not normally undertake fully general rational evaluations, this is merely a convention on our part and there is in fact no in principle barrier to us extending the scope of rational evaluation indefinitely to take in radical sceptical concerns. In contrast, Wittgenstein is suggesting that the local nature of our ordinary rational evaluations reflects a logical limitation on rational evaluation, such that the very idea of

rationally evaluating all of one's commitments is incoherent. That undermines the attempted universal rational evaluations of both the radical sceptic and the traditional anti-sceptic.

Crucially, however, this treatment of radical scepticism does not proceed by simply claiming that sceptical doubts (and their traditional anti-sceptical counterparts) are meaningless. Indeed, where those doubts proceed by focussing on our everyday commonsense certainties, it does seem that Stroud is right in claiming that we can understand what is being proposed. The point is rather that such doubts are incoherent: knowledge simply doesn't work like that (and could never work like that). In particular, while it is true that we lack knowledge of our hinge commitments, including the overarching hinge certainty in our worldview, this does not indicate a cognitive limitation on our parts. It is not as if these are facts of which we are ignorant, for example.¹⁴ On the Wittgensteinian picture, our hinge commitments are simply not in the market for knowledge, and hence our failure to know them is no more an indication of a cognitive limitation on our parts than our inability to conceive of a circle-square is an indication of an imaginative failure.¹⁵

Although, as previously noted, Cavell didn't ever fully engage with *On Certainty*, this sort of diagnostic line on radical scepticism is very much in keeping with his approach to the problem. The idea is not to show that sceptical doubts are simply meaningless, as often they can present themselves, at least initially, in intelligible ways. Moreover, simply stating that sceptical doubts are meaningless doesn't in itself provide us with the understanding of the sceptical problem that we seek. In itself, that merely highlights that our ordinary practices do not normally generate sceptical lines of inquiry, which is hardly news (even the radical sceptic would concede that). What we need to grasp is the reason why radical doubt is incoherent, and that is where this diagnostic story comes into play. In Cavellian terms, it is the idea that our relationship to the world as a whole cannot be one of knowledge. As we can see from our discussion of *On Certainty*, the explanation for this is that rational evaluation is by its nature such that it hinges on an arational certainty in one's worldview. Crucially, a diagnostic story of this kind is compatible with allowing for the meaningfulness of, for example, our hinge commitments and even the intelligibility of sceptical questioning about our hinge commitments (even if it shows that such questioning cannot amount to genuine doubt).

4. PUTNAM AND STROUD, *REDUX*

My suggestion is that Putnam should follow his instincts when it comes to embracing the Cavellian line on radical scepticism and not rest his anti-scepticism on an occasion-sensitivity about meaning alone.¹⁶ Indeed, when he is writing about Cavell directly, then he seems aware that there is much more to say about the radical sceptical problem than simply that it trades on meaningless claims.¹⁷ Accordingly, he would likely have been amenable to being nudged in this general direction.

Let me conclude by putting some flesh on this proposal by reconsidering Putnam's response to Stroud. What should Putnam have said instead? I think a good place to start in this regard is with Putnam's rejection of the closure principle. Recall that Putnam argues that in ordinary conditions one will know a proposition such as that one's door is white but be unable to know that a certain range of alternatives don't obtain. To use his example, one will ordinarily not know that some prankster did not paint one's house blue this morning. Since one knows full well that the former entails the latter (and one can make a competent deduction on this basis), closure has to go.

But why is Putnam so emphatic that he doesn't know this entailed proposition? I take it that he is unconcerned by this lack of knowledge because he thinks that any doubt that proceeded by appealing to such a far-fetched error-possibility is necessarily meaningless. But that sort of line doesn't look very appealing, as we have seen. Stroud seems right that one can coherently extend the range of doubt to make error-possibilities salient that one might not ordinarily consider. The appropriate response to this Stroudian move, however, is not to concede that one lacks knowledge that the alternative doesn't obtain and thereby deny the closure principle, but rather to argue that one is in a position to know the entailed proposition. Indeed, it is Putnam who seems to be revising our ordinary epistemic practices in this regard, for wouldn't we ordinarily think that one could straightforwardly know that one's door hasn't been painted blue by pranksters? Putnam seems to think that in order to know such a thing one must have made special checks to ascertain that this is the case, but in terms of our ordinary notion of knowledge this is not required. Moreover, it is not as if evidence for this belief is lacking, as one has all sorts of evidence at one's disposal to support this claim, given what one knows about one's neighborhood, the likelihood of such pranks occurring, the likelihood that one would be informed if such a prank took place, and so on. There simply is no need to deny closure in response to issues of this kind.¹⁸

Applied to Stroud's case of the boorish host, the corresponding line is that one is ordinarily in a position to know that this error-possibility has not obtained. It's true that one hasn't made

special checks in this regard, but that's not a general requirement of one's knowledge anyway. Moreover, as with the painted door example, it is not as if one lacks evidence that bears on the kind of error-possibility that the host is raising. Indeed, we often have lots of excellent grounds to dismiss such far-fetched error-possibilities, and thereby know that they are false. They thus do not present a challenge to closure.

The real challenge to closure comes not from these unusual error-possibilities that lie outside of the scope of ordinary inquiry, but rather the wholesale error-possibilities employed by the radical sceptic. This latter class of error-possibilities are different in kind from the former in that they call one's beliefs as a whole into question. This is the sense in which they challenge one's worldview. Whereas it is usually relatively straightforward to summon evidence in support of rejecting the regular far-fetched error-possibilities, this is not the case when it comes to radical sceptical hypotheses for the simple reason that by calling everything into question they also thereby challenge one's evidential base. When it comes to these challenges, the charge of meaningless has much more grip, though it is important even here to be in possession of a diagnostic story about why they are meaningless. The problem they face, as we have seen in our discussion of Wittgenstein (and Cavell), is that they are attempts to do something that cannot coherently be done, which is to rationally evaluate one's worldview as whole.

Does this mean that one should deny closure in such cases, albeit in a fashion that is restricted to only these kinds of cases? Some have taken this route,¹⁹ but I think even this is too concessive. Recall that closure is formulated, as it must be if it is to be plausible, diachronically as a competent deduction whereby one acquires a belief in the entailed proposition via the competent deduction in play. Given our discussion of the visceral arational certainty that is associated with our hinge commitments, however, then the idea that one can acquire a belief in one's hinge commitments via a paradigmatic rational process like competent deduction is highly suspect.

Indeed, as I've argued elsewhere, we would be wise in this regard to differentiate between our folk notion of belief—which is notoriously permissive in terms of the kind of propositional attitude that it picks out—and the more specific kind of belief that is relevant to epistemology (*K-appt belief*).²⁰ The latter is that propositional attitude that is constituent part of knowledge and it bears certain important conceptual connections to truth and reasons. For example, a necessary condition for *K-appt belief* is that one cannot *K-appt believe* a proposition where one is aware that one has no rational basis for the truth of that proposition. This condition on *K-appt belief* is significant, as clearly one's visceral hinge certainty can survive the recognition that one's hinge commitments are

groundless. The crux of the matter is that while our hinge commitments may be beliefs in the folk sense of the term, they are not beliefs in the K-apt sense. But since it is clearly K-apt belief that is at issue in our formulation of the closure principle, then this principle is simply inapplicable to competent deductions involving our hinge commitments, as one cannot form a K-apt belief in these propositions (much less on this rational basis).²¹

In any case, whether one ultimately defends closure via this route or rejects it, the point is that the diagnostic story regarding radical scepticism that Wittgenstein offers provides us with a much more compelling way of dealing with the sceptical problematic than simply appealing to the meaninglessness of radical sceptical doubts. In particular, it gives us the resources to explain why radical scepticism can be charged with incoherence while also seeming to make dialectical moves that we find intelligible (indeed, at times, compelling). Cavell is sensitive to such points, which is why he doesn't simply dismiss radical scepticism on semantic grounds. My contention is that Putnam should have more closely followed his philosophical hero in this regard.²²

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NOTES

¹ See, especially, Putnam (1981, ch. 1).

² In short, the reason for this is that the argument shows, at most, the incoherence of certain formulations of the brain-in-a-vat sceptical hypothesis where the subject is completely cut-off from any language community (this is why Putnam's formulation has supercomputers creating the experiences for the subjects). But the radical sceptic only needs one radical sceptical hypothesis to work for her argument to go through and it is arguably inessential to the brain-in-a-vat sceptical hypothesis that the subject is isolated from other language users in this way (e.g., she might have been raised in a language community and only recently envatted). For some key discussions of Putnam's brain-in-a-vat argument, see Brueckner (1986), Ebbs (1992; 2001), Gallois (1992), and Wright (1992). For a helpful survey of some of the issues in this regard, see Brueckner (2012). See also Pritchard & Ranalli (2016).

³ For a more general overview of Putnam's various responses to radical scepticism, see Pritchard (2022c).

⁴ As occasion-sensitivity is usually these days understood—e.g., in the work of Travis (1989; 2001; 2005; 2006; 2008), for example, who is the most prominent contemporary exponent of the view—what goes here for utterances also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to what is expressed by our unuttered thoughts, beliefs, and so forth.

⁵ This is essentially the formulation of the closure principle put forward by Williamson (2000, 117) and Hawthorne (2005, 29).

⁶ The epistemic principle that Stroud in fact appeals to—what he calls 'Descartes Principle' (Stroud 1984, 29)—is independently implausible, as I have pointed out elsewhere (e.g., Pritchard 2022c, §4). In any case, the general idea that Stroud has in mind is much better illustrated with the closure principle (especially the formulation we are using which is not subject to independent worries about its plausibility).

⁷ See Cavell (1979, part 4; 2003, ch. 3).

⁸ This passage is often misunderstood, particularly the comment about there being a 'truth in scepticism'. For my own take on how we should understand this claim, see Pritchard (2021a). See also Pritchard (*forthcomingb*).

⁹ For example, consider this passage:

“*The Claim of Reason* suggests the moral of skepticism to be, that the existence of the world and others in it is not a matter to be known, but one to be acknowledged.” (Cavell 1988, 109)

One might think that Cavell is echoing the following remark from *On Certainty*:

“Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgment.” (OC, §378)

Cavell (2004, 284) maintains, however, that he developed this approach prior to reading *On Certainty*. See also endnote 10.

¹⁰ Henceforth abbreviated as 'OC'. I discuss Cavell in this regard in Pritchard (2021a; cf. Pritchard *forthcomingb*). There is a very brief engagement with *On Certainty* in Cavell (2004), albeit via discussion of some secondary literature devoted to this work. Interestingly, in this article Cavell reiterates that he hasn't studied Wittgenstein's post-*Philosophical Investigations* writings:

“[...] I have to repeat [...] a confession I make in the Foreword to *The Claim of Reason*. I have not read beyond a few pages in Wittgenstein's work written after the *Philosophical Investigations*.” (Cavell 2004, 284)

¹¹ For further discussion of the idea that Wittgenstein is rejecting the meaningfulness of Moore's philosophical claims in *On Certainty* (especially in the first notebook that makes up this work), see Williams (2004; 2018) and Pritchard (2015, part 2; 2022a).

¹² Wittgenstein approvingly quotes Goethe in this respect:

“In the beginning was the deed.” (OC, §396)

¹³ Elsewhere I have called this overarching hinge certainty the *über hinge commitment*. See, especially, Pritchard (2015, part 2).

¹⁴ That one doesn't count as ignorant of a proposition that is not in the market for knowledge reveals that there is more to ignorance than merely a lack of knowledge. For further discussion of this point, including other cases where ignorance comes apart from lack of knowledge, see Pritchard (2021a; 2021b).

¹⁵ Naturally, this presentation of Wittgenstein's views in this regard is my own—see Pritchard (2015, *passim*) for further defence of these claims. For some of the main alternative readings of *On Certainty*, see Strawson (1985), McGinn (1989), Williams (1991), Stroll (1994), Moyal-Sharrock (2004), Wright (2004), Coliva (2015; 2022), and Schönbaumsfeld (2016). For a recent survey of this literature, see Pritchard (2017).

¹⁶ The flat-footed occasion-sensitivity treatment of radical scepticism, as opposed to the more nuanced line taken by Cavell, is also apparent in Travis's (e.g., 2005) discussion of radical scepticism. For an insightful comparative discussion of Cavell and Travis in this regard, see Bas (2008). Since Putnam is also an admirer of Travis's work—see, especially, Putnam (1999)—it is perhaps unsurprising that he is drawn to both styles of response to the sceptical problematic.

¹⁷ In this regard, see especially Putnam (2006) where he enthusiastically endorses Cavell's serious discussion of sceptical claims (i.e., as opposed to treating them as simply meaningless).

¹⁸ See Pritchard (2010) for a development of this line. As I explain, the kind of concessionary line on closure that we have witnessed in Putnam's work seems to reflect a failure to distinguish between what I term 'favouring' as opposed to 'discriminating' evidence. Very roughly, the latter kind of evidence is what one gains by having made special checks or by having specialized expertise, but often we can know that an alternative hasn't obtained merely by appealing to general background considerations that 'favour' our beliefs over this alternative.

¹⁹ See, for example, Coliva (2014).

²⁰ See, for example, Pritchard (2015, part 2; *forthcoming*). For a useful discussion of the various propositional attitudes that fall under our folk notion of beliefs, see Stevenson (2002).

²¹ For further discussion of this Wittgensteinian defence of the closure principle, see Pritchard (2015, part 2; 2022*b*). For a recent critical response to this line, see Wright (2022).

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