

# Common Sense as Evidence: Against Revisionary Ontology and Skepticism<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Kelly  
Princeton University

0. How far might philosophy succeed in undermining our ordinary, common sense views about what there is or what we know?

Some philosophers suggest: *not very far*. Thus, according to David Lewis

One comes to philosophy already endowed with a stock of opinions. It is not the business of philosophy either to undermine or justify these preexisting opinions to any great extent, but only to try to discover ways of expanding them into an orderly system (1973: 88).

Compare Kit Fine:

In this age of post-Moorean modesty, many of us are inclined to doubt that philosophy is in possession of arguments that might genuinely serve to undermine what we ordinarily believe. It may perhaps be conceded that the arguments of the skeptic appear to be utterly compelling; but the Mooreans among us will hold that the very plausibility of our ordinary beliefs is reason enough for supposing that there *must* be something wrong in the skeptic's arguments, even if we are unable to say what it is. In so far then, as the pretensions of philosophy to provide a world view rest upon its claims to be in possession of the epistemological high ground, those pretensions had

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of an ongoing, if somewhat slow-moving, campaign on behalf of common sense; an initial foray was Kelly (2005). While the general lines of thought advanced here have been under development for some time, the recent work of Timothy Williamson (especially Williamson 2007) has been a significant influence, a fact which will be apparent to anyone familiar with that work. In addition to the several footnotes in the text, I want to explicitly acknowledge the extent of that influence while adding the disclaimer that I have no particular reason to think that he would be sympathetic to some of the more far-reaching purposes to which I put shared views here.

For helpful feedback on earlier versions of the paper, I am grateful to Ted Sider, Paul Benacerraf, John Collins, Elizabeth Harman, Martin Lin, Sarah McGrath, Jill North, Bas van Fraassen, and participants in a Spring 2008 graduate seminar at Princeton that I co-taught with van Fraassen.

better be given up (2001:2).

Many others are less modest about the possibilities for philosophy. Thus, van Inwagen (1990) and Merricks (2003) champion metaphysical theories from which it follows that the world contains no inanimate macroscopic objects: no tables or chairs, no mountains or islands. Dorr (2002), Horgan and Potrc (2000), and Unger (1979a,b,c) embrace the same conclusions but hold, more radically still, that there are no human beings either. Turning from metaphysics to epistemology, Unger (1975) maintains that we know literally nothing at all. If any such theory is correct, then the answer to the question posed above is: *very far indeed*.<sup>2</sup>

The question at issue is not the psychological one of how far philosophy might succeed in leading us to actually abandon our ordinary views about what there is or what we know. Perhaps given certain facts about my psychology, there are some common sense convictions that I would simply never give up no matter how powerful the arguments against them are. Rather, the question is how far philosophy might succeed in making it *rational* to abandon our ordinary common sense views. Even if there is no psychological possibility of our abandoning certain views, this does not, I assume, suffice to show that those views could not be rationally undermined by philosophy.

Once the psychological question has been set carefully to one side, why so much as suspect that there are any substantial limits here, at least in principle? Consider two reasons for dismissing out of hand the suggestion that philosophy is limited in its ability to overturn common sense.

First, what passes for ‘common sense’ is not something which stays fixed. It is a commonplace that things which are utterly taken for granted by people in one historical

---

<sup>2</sup> Not all of the aforementioned philosophers would accept the suggestion that their views are radically revisionary with respect to pre-philosophical thought. Notably, van Inwagen (1990) argues provocatively that, despite denying the existence of tables and chairs, his views are consistent with what we ordinarily believe. (See especially Section 10, ‘Why the Proposed Answer to the Special Composition Question, Radical Though It Is, Does Not Contradict Our Ordinary Beliefs’. On this point, contrast Merricks (2003, 162-168)).  
MORE TO COME HERE

epoch or cultural milieu—the very kinds of things which ‘everyone knows’—are widely taken to be false by people in others. (Stock examples include beliefs about the shape of the earth and about the relative intelligence of members of different races.) But if today’s common sense is tomorrow’s outmoded dogma, isn’t the suggestion that philosophy is limited in its ability to overturn common sense one which can be taken seriously only by someone with an insufficiently historical sensibility?

However, while we should not underestimate the extent to which what passes for common sense changes, we should not overestimate the extent to which it does either. Consider the kinds of propositions with which G.E. Moore is concerned in his ‘A Defence of Common Sense’—for example, the proposition that a significant number of people have lived on the surface of the earth. Or consider the most extreme consequences of the most radically revisionary theories in contemporary metaphysics and epistemology, such as those enumerated above. Whatever their ultimate epistemic status, the convictions targeted by such theories are hardly local dogmas. Even if much of what passes for common sense is relative to time and place, there is, it seems, a Hard Core that is not relative in this way.

Consider a second reason for dismissing out of hand the suggestion that philosophy is limited in its ability to overturn common sense: the extent to which natural science has apparently succeeded in doing so. Again, it is a commonplace that certain natural sciences—notably, modern physics—have overturned some of our most fundamental pre-scientific convictions about the nature of reality. (Here I simply assume that our best scientific theories should be interpreted realistically; if some other interpretation is assumed, then so much the worse for the objection.) We do not suppose that folk physics stands fast in the face of the Special Theory of Relativity. But if science can undermine our pre-theoretical, common sense views in extremely radical ways, what reason is there to think that systematic theorizing in philosophical ontology and epistemology cannot do the same?

In fact, the impressive ability of the natural sciences to undermine fundamental common sense convictions is weak evidence that philosophy occupies a similar position.

As a comparative matter, common sense *is* more vulnerable to being undermined by science than by philosophy.<sup>3</sup> The Special Theory of Relativity, revisionary consequences and all, deserves more credence than even the most sophisticated systematic theories in contemporary ontology. Among other salient facts, the Special Theory of Relativity is generally accepted by the relevant scientific authorities, while as a rule no systematic ontological theory commands anything approaching such acceptance among those with the best claim to possessing the relevant kind of philosophical expertise. More generally, it is reasonable for us to think that the epistemic conditions which prevail in the most progressive and advanced sciences are superior to those which prevail in contemporary metaphysics and epistemology.<sup>4</sup> Thus, common sense is more vulnerable to being overturned by theories which emerge from those sciences than by systematic theories in metaphysics and epistemology, for the simple reason that the former typically deserve greater credence than the latter.

We need not rest much weight on this last consideration, however. For there is, I think, a deeper and more interesting reason why science is better positioned to challenge common sense, a reason which does not depend on what are perhaps relatively contingent facts about the current conditions prevailing in philosophy and the natural sciences. Consider a Williamsonian world: a possible world in which We Do Better.<sup>5</sup> In this world, the intellectual standards that are generally observed in the philosophical community greatly exceed those that are generally observed in our own. Claims and counterclaims are invariably articulated with the utmost precision and clarity; the phenomenon of

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Anil Gupta (2006) and William Lycan (2001). According to Gupta, ‘Any theory that would wage war against commonsense had better come loaded with some powerful ammunition. Philosophy is incapable of providing such ammunition. Empirical sciences are a better source’ (p.178). According to Lycan, ‘Science can correct common sense; metaphysics and philosophical ‘intuition’ can only throw spitballs’ (p.41).

<sup>4</sup> Much of the case for this is laid out in clear and compelling form by Kornblith (2008).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Timothy Williamson, ‘Must Do Better’. The heuristic device of the Williamsonian world was suggested by Alex Byrne.

philosophers ‘talking past one another’ is an unfamiliar one. As a rule, arguments are put forward in maximally rigorous form. Authors devote painstaking care to the task of making explicit any relevant background assumptions that their readers might not share. As a result of these and other practices, the philosophical community regularly achieves a kind of consensus which in our world is attained only by mathematics and certain natural sciences. In time, it becomes reasonable to think of philosophy as a genuinely and straightforwardly progressive discipline, one which achieves stable and lasting results that can be safely taken for granted and built upon by later philosophers.

Even in this possible world, there are, I think, principled reasons to suppose that common sense has more to fear from science than from philosophy. Consider first the tools with which the philosopher might challenge common sense. First, she might offer arguments which target various common sense beliefs. More constructively, she might offer a systematic theory, together with reasons for accepting that theory, which entail that the relevant propositions are false. However, how it is rational for us to respond to a given argument or theory is not something which is entirely independent of what we believe. As Moore and many since have emphasized, the more credible the proposition targeted by a given argument, the less credible it is that the argument is sound. Even in what would seem to be the best case for the revisionary-minded philosopher—a case in which she presents us with a transparently valid argument which proceeds from premises that we accept—there is no guarantee of success, for it might be that the rational response to the argument (or at least, a rational response to the argument) is to relinquish belief in the conjunction of the argument’s premises, now that we see where they lead.

Analogous points apply in the case of a novel theory. Even if each of the propositions which make up the theory is highly plausible on its face, the overall credibility of the theory depends on the credibility of its consequences. By the time we reach the point of considering theories which entail that there are no people—or even, more modestly, that there are no planes, trains, or automobiles—it is at least somewhat difficult to see how appreciating such consequences does not drag the overall credibility of the theory below the relevant threshold. It is, at the very least, not completely clear how a change in our

view of the world as radical as the kind envisaged might be rational, given that at the end of the day the philosopher can only present us with arguments and theories, and how it is rational for us to respond to those arguments and theories is not something which is wholly independent of our beliefs.

In contrast, there is a much more straightforward mechanism by which a scientific theory that seems surely false by our present lights can nevertheless come to be rationally accepted: namely, by making surprising predictions that are independently verified. Here the standard Bayesian framework is illuminating. Even if one's current credence in some scientific hypothesis is arbitrarily close to zero, its conditional probability on such-and-such an observation might be quite high. (One is simply extremely confident that the relevant observation will not be made.) When, contrary to all expectations, the relevant observation *is* made—a fact which can be ascertained in the absence of any prior commitment to or even sympathy for the theory—the theory is dramatically confirmed. Such is the great epistemic value of successful predictions that are surprising relative to one's prior view of the world. In such cases, it is experience which prompts a dramatic and radical change in one's views. Moreover, and crucially, it is a radical change which can be represented and understood as rational from the perspective of one's prior beliefs.

The general remarks about philosophy and empirical science offered in the previous three paragraphs are relative banalities. In the present context, I take their cumulative upshot to be the following: there is simply no mechanism analogous to successful prediction by which a speculative theory in philosophical ontology or epistemology which is extremely unlikely on one's current beliefs can be dramatically confirmed. (It is not, after all, as though van Inwagen's account of composition, from which it follows that there are no chairs, would be dramatically confirmed by our waking up tomorrow and finding ourselves with not enough places to sit.) It is a familiar fact that experience bears much less directly on systematic theories in speculative ontology and epistemology than on theories in the empirical sciences (to the extent that experience is taken to be relevant to the former at all). While this ensures that theories in speculative ontology and epistemology are relatively invulnerable to being disconfirmed by observation, it also

ensures that they are largely cut off from being confirmed by observation. This last disadvantage is especially significant in cases in which the philosophical theories in question are extremely unlikely to be true relative to our original beliefs. For it ensures that such theories cannot bootstrap their way into rational acceptance *via* the paradigmatic route taken by many currently accepted scientific theories which were once extremely unlikely relative to our view of the world. For this reason, the extent to which science succeeds in overturning common sense is an unreliable measure of the extent to which philosophy is able to do so.

‘In general, common sense is more vulnerable to being undermined by science than by philosophy’—does such a claim betray commitment to a view about the distinction between science and philosophy which is untenable in our broadly Quinean, post-positivist era? No such commitment is incurred. Let it be conceded that philosophy is continuous with empirical science, that the boundary between the two is vague when not a matter of convention, and that there are numerous issues with respect to which the question ‘Is that a philosophical or scientific issue?’ is not a good one either to ask or to attempt to answer. All of that is consistent with the plain fact that some philosophical theories are not science. The metaphysical systems of the British Idealists which Moore opposed on behalf of common sense are paradigms of things that are philosophy and not science. The same is true of the metaphysical theories of a van Inwagen, a Merricks, or a Horgan, and the kinds of considerations and arguments offered by radical skeptics from Sextus Empiricus to Unger.

Among philosophers who would describe themselves as following some particular method, that of ‘reflective equilibrium’ (Goodman 1955, Rawls 1972) would perhaps be at least as popular a choice as any other. According to the method of reflective equilibrium, justification consists in achieving a stable coherence in one’s overall view, a coherence achieved through a process of mutual adjustment among considered judgments

at different levels of generality. Harman, one of the most persistent<sup>6</sup> and epistemologically sophisticated defenders of the method, offers the following characterization:

We correct our considered intuitions about particular cases by making them more coherent with our considered general principles and we correct our general principles by making them more coherent with our judgments about particular cases. We make progress by adjusting our views to each other, pursuing the ideal of reaching a set of particular opinions and general views that are in complete accord with each other. The method is conservative in that we start with our present views and try to make the least change that will best promote the coherence of our whole view (2004: 416).

Critics, however, have frequently taken the apparently conservative character of the method as a good reason to reject it.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, the method of reflective equilibrium is, at worst, *conservative* and not *reactionary*. The method allows, indeed dictates, changes in one's current views (at least, provided that one's views are not already in perfect reflective equilibrium). Moreover, in particular cases, the changes dictated might constitute non-accidental improvements in the accuracy of one's overall view. Thus, inaccurate judgments about particular cases can be brought closer to the truth *via* the normative pull exerted by more accurate judgments about general principles; conversely, inaccurate judgments about principles can be improved *via* the normative pull of accurate judgments about cases. Of course, if one's initial views are sufficiently off the mark, then pursuing reflective equilibrium is unlikely to result in an overall view with impressive accuracy. In particular, if *both* one's judgments about particular cases and about principles are sufficiently far from the truth, then there is no reason to suppose that successfully achieving reflective equilibrium from

---

<sup>6</sup> See Harman (1986, 1994, 1999, 2003, 2004). But for some recent co-authored doubts, see Harman and Kulkarni (2007:13-19)

<sup>7</sup> See, among many others, Singer (1974), Stich (1983), and Copp (1985). A recent attempt to defend the use of reflective equilibrium in moral and political philosophy against the charge that the method is overly conservative is Scanlon (2002); see especially pages 145-151.

such a misguided starting point will be worth much. But what if the truth is in fact radically different from what we ordinarily think? Hence the ‘conservatism’ worry, that privileging one’s pre-philosophical beliefs in the way that seems to be recommended by the method of reflective equilibrium would preclude one from arriving at the truth in a case in which those beliefs are sufficiently wide of the mark.

I myself do not advocate the method of reflective equilibrium. On the picture of philosophical method that I draw upon below, paradigmatic evidence for or against some philosophical theory consists, not of our considered judgments or intuitions, but rather pieces of knowledge that we possess. As we will see, this account is less susceptible to the charge that it is unduly conservative. Yet even as applied to the method of reflective equilibrium, the charge of conservatism must be put with extreme care if it is not to miss the mark entirely. The charge cannot simply be that, if our pre-philosophical beliefs are sufficiently mistaken, then even perfect application of the method of reflective equilibrium will fail to lead us to the truth. That much is correct, but it is dubious that any plausible philosophical methodology lacks the feature in question. Indeed, we should be positively suspicious of any account of philosophical method which is advertised to us as lacking that feature. The discovery of deep truths in metaphysics and epistemology, we can safely assume, is no mean feat even in relatively favorable circumstances. A case in which our pre-philosophical beliefs about what there is or what we know are in fact radically in error is a case in which we are maximally ill-positioned to find such truths. It is a one in which we sit down to play the exceedingly difficult games of metaphysics and epistemology having been dealt a particularly bad hand. If these are indeed our circumstances, it would be a mistake to assume that an adequate philosophical method ought to provide us with a rational path out of the darkness and into the light.

To make things more concrete, suppose that those revisionary metaphysicians who claim that the world contains no inanimate macroscopic objects are in fact correct. It is tempting to assume that, if the revisionary metaphysicians are correct, then there must be some way for us to *discover* that they are correct *via* sufficient philosophical reflection—where such discovery would involve our rationally traversing some path that leads from

where we are now to the surprising truth. But to the extent that a change in view inspired by philosophy is a reasonable one, it can be represented as the product of reasoning, reasoning which proceeds from premises. (In contrast, a rational change in view about my present surroundings might not be the product of reasoning but rather direct observation.) In order for such a philosophy-inspired change in view to be reasonable, it is of course not enough that the premises from which the reasoning proceeds are in fact true, what is required is that they are reasonably believed to be true. In a case in which the deep truths of metaphysics and epistemology are radically inconsistent with our pre-philosophical beliefs, there is no reason to suppose that even an ideally conducted philosophical inquiry would provide some way of getting from Here to There.

Certainly, we do not hold our best scientific methods to the analogous standard. That is, we would reject the suggestion that it is a condition of adequacy on some empirical method that it provide a way of rationally arriving at truths about its target domain even in the worst cases for its application. In a world in which the empirical evidence which we have to go on is consistently misleading or unrepresentative—either because of the malevolent chicanery of an evil demon, or through simple long-run bad luck—the impeccable application of our best scientific methods will not only fail to deliver the truth but will lead us further and further astray. We do not think that this is a good objection to those methods. Moreover, if we did fall into thinking of it as a condition of adequacy on a scientific procedure that it lead us to the truth even in various worst case scenarios, this would inevitably lead us to a badly distorted conception of scientific method. Similarly, by insisting that an adequate philosophical method would allow us to rationally arrive at the truth even when applied in various worst case scenarios, we risk distorting our conception of philosophical method.

1. Consider two philosophers, the first a revisionary metaphysician, the second a radical skeptic. The revisionary metaphysician champions an ontological view from which it follows that the world contains no inanimate macroscopic objects. For his part,

the skeptic champions an epistemological view from which it follows that we know nothing about the external world.

In response to the revisionary metaphysician, the **Moorean** might say the following:

As you yourself admit, it is a consequence of your theory that there are no wooden tables, twenty dollar bills, or tropical islands. But in fact, there are such things. Therefore, your theory is false.

And similarly, in response to the skeptic:

As you yourself admit, it is a consequence of your theory that we do not know whether it has ever rained in New Jersey, whether cows are sometimes slaughtered for food, or whether people sometimes die of cancer. But in fact, we do know these things. Therefore, your theory is false.

Of course, in responding to a particular theory in this way, the Moorean is not thereby committed to claiming that the theory in question is devoid of philosophical interest. Indeed, he might very well be of the opinion that there are important insights to be gained from carefully studying it. But the Moorean will insist that, with respect to what would seem to be the crucial question of whether the theory is true or false, he has already said all that needs saying. To go beyond this by attempting to provide additional reasons for thinking that the theory is false, or reasons which meet some further condition, is at best to engage in a kind of methodological supererogation. At worst, it is simply piling on.

What, if anything, is wrong with these Moorean responses?

Of the many philosophers who would agree that there is something wrong, let us distinguish two groups. On the one hand, there are the revisionary metaphysicians and the skeptics, philosophers who actually hold the views that the Moorean so unceremoniously dismisses. I take it that such a philosopher has something quite straightforward to say about what is wrong with a Moorean response to her theory: namely, that when the Moorean responds in his characteristic way, he speaks falsely. That is, a philosopher who holds a substantive ontological view according to which *there are no wooden tables* will think that, when the Moorean cites this as a false consequence of the theory, it is the Moorean who is guilty of asserting what is false.

A second group of philosophers who take a dim view of such Moorean responses consists of those whom I will call **Moderates**. Moderates are so-called because they have something in common with both the Moorean and those who espouse the theories that the Moorean targets. On the one hand, the Moderate resembles the Moorean in that she too believes both that there are wooden tables, and that this something that we know. Moreover, inasmuch as the Moderate, like all parties to the dispute, acknowledges that these putative facts are inconsistent with the philosophical theories in question, the Moderate will presumably agree, again with the Moorean, that the philosophical theories are themselves false.

On the other hand, the Moderate will agree with the revisionary metaphysician and the skeptic that there is something deeply inadequate or objectionable about the Moorean dismissal of their theories. So, for example, the Moderate will hold that it is illegitimate for the Moorean to simply treat the fact that some metaphysical theory entails that there are no wooden tables as a good reason for rejecting that theory. Of course, inasmuch as at the end of the day the Moderate will agree that there are wooden tables, the problem with the Moorean response cannot be that in offering that response the Moorean says something that is false. Still, the Moderate will insist that the Moorean is mistaken in holding that we can justifiably conclude that the philosophical theory is false by reasoning in his characteristic way. We might then put the difference between the revisionary metaphysician and the Moderate as follows: while both maintain that the Moorean response is inadequate, the Moderate holds that the response is *procedurally* inadequate, while the revisionary metaphysician holds that it is *substantively* inadequate. Of course, the revisionary metaphysician might very well hold that, in addition to being substantively inadequate, the Moorean response is objectionable on purely procedural grounds as well. But the Moderate will hold that the response is procedurally, although not substantively, inadequate.

In terms of sheer numbers, perhaps relatively few philosophers hold metaphysical or epistemological views from which it follows that there are no wooden tables, or that there are none so far as we know. But many would hold that there is something deeply

objectionable about dismissing such theories on Moorean grounds. Indeed, perhaps most philosophers—or at least, a significant plurality—are best classified as Moderates. As someone with broadly Moorean sympathies, I am interested in how we should understand the dialectic between the Moorean and those who hold radically revisionary theories in metaphysics and epistemology. But for the most part, my concern in what follows will be with the dialectic between the Moorean and the Moderate. My primary aim will be to put as much pressure as possible on the Moderate by suggesting that there is a certain methodological tension in agreeing with the Moorean in matters of substance while condemning his procedure.

2. What then is wrong with the Moorean, according to the Moderate? Traditionally, perhaps the most common charge against the Moorean is that he is guilty of *begging the question*.<sup>8</sup> Here I want to begin by taking up a closely related charge, but one which

---

<sup>8</sup> On begging the question, see, e.g., Sinnott-Armstrong (1999). Recently, there has been a strong resurgence of interest in Moore's response to the skeptic. In particular, the status of his famed 'proof of an external world'—'Here is one hand; Here is another; Therefore, the external world exists'—has been vigorously debated. (For a sampling, see Wright (2002, 2003, 2004), Davies (2000, 2003, 2004), and Pryor (2004), as well as the relevant essays in Nuccetelli and Seay (2008).) Even when this debate is not explicitly conducted in terms of whether Moore's argument 'begs the question' but rather whether it exhibits 'transmission-failure', it is clear that traditional concerns involving the former are often central to what is at issue.

My own view is that questions about the status of Moore's proof and questions about the status of the Moorean response under consideration here are distinct. In particular, one might consistently maintain both that

- (i) Moore's 'proof of an external world' fails as such, inasmuch as it could not deliver the knowledge that there is an external world to someone who previously lacked that knowledge, and
- (ii) the kind of Moorean reasoning under consideration here *can* deliver knowledge that some revisionary metaphysical theory is false.

Indeed, I am inclined to think that this combination of views is where the truth lies.

seems to me to be in some respects even more fundamental: namely, that in proceeding in his characteristic way, the Moorean is guilty of *dogmatism*.<sup>9</sup>

The Moorean treats the fact that a novel philosophical theory is inconsistent with certain of his pre-philosophical, common sense opinions as a sufficient condition for rejecting that theory. Isn't this a practice which can accurately be described as dogmatic? Indeed, one might think that the kind of dogmatism which the Moorean seems to manifest is antithetical to the ideal of philosophical inquiry itself. Socrates inaugurated the Western philosophical tradition when he championed a compelling ideal of open-minded intellectual inquiry. Above all else, what is required is a willingness to 'follow the argument where it leads'. One must be open to the possibility that inquiry will lead to conclusions that appear strange or even absurd when judged from the perspective of the opinions which one held at the beginning of the inquiry. The crucial first step to engaging in any such inquiry, Socrates held, was to appreciate the extent of one's own ignorance; in order to have any chance of discovering the truth, one must recognize (or at least, be open to the possibility that) one does not possess the truth already.

Of course, a broadly similar theme was forcefully articulated by Descartes at the outset of modern philosophy. Consider the picture of philosophical inquiry presented in the *Meditations*. In order to engage in such inquiry properly, the meditator must consciously and actively distance himself from his pre-philosophical opinions. After all, many of these opinions have the status of mere prejudices, having been uncritically

---

<sup>9</sup> In what follows, I will employ the term 'dogmatism' and its cognates so that they function as terms of negative epistemic appraisal. Thus, to call someone a dogmatist in my sense is *ipso facto* to criticize that person. I believe that this is a common usage in contemporary Western culture, but it is not the only one. (For example, 'dogmatic' does not function as a term of criticism as it used by either the Catholic Church or James Pryor (2000)).

inherited in one's youth.<sup>10</sup> It is only when such pre-philosophical opinions have been, if not literally discarded, at least *bracketed*, that philosophical inquiry can be responsibly conducted. Once an opinion has been independently substantiated in the course of the inquiry, it can be employed as a basis for further reasoning; prior to such substantiation, however, it would be illegitimate to allow that opinion to influence the conclusions which one reaches. To do otherwise would be to allow the inquiry to be biased or tainted from the outset. From such a vantage point, the Moorean's readiness to dismiss philosophical theories on the basis of their inconsistency with his common sense opinions seems positively *unphilosophical*—which, in the present context, I take to be equivalent to the charge that the Moorean is a dogmatist.

How might the Moorean answer this charge? I believe that the Moorean response to the skeptic and the revisionary metaphysician is best understood as a particularly radical

---

<sup>10</sup> 'Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations...' (AT VII 17, the opening words of the First Meditation.)

Compare the following passage from the *Discourse on Method*:

But regarding the opinions to which I had hitherto given credence, I thought that I could do not do better than undertake to get rid of them, all at one go, in order to replace them afterwards with better ones, or with the same ones once I had squared them with the standards of reason. I firmly believe that in this way I would succeed in conducting my life much better than if I built only upon old foundations and relied only upon principles that I had accepted in my youth without ever examining whether they were true (AT VI 13-14).

rejection of the broadly Cartesian<sup>11</sup> picture of philosophical inquiry sketched above, together with an alternative account of how such inquiry should proceed. To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that anyone who presses the charge of dogmatism against the Moorean is herself committed to some particular conception of how philosophical inquiry should be conducted. However, for heuristic purposes, it will be helpful to begin by examining how the Moorean might attempt to parry the charge when it is made by a proponent of Cartesian philosophical inquiry; we will then consider how that defense might be extended when the same charge is made from other quarters.

In contrast to the proponent of Cartesian philosophical inquiry, the Moorean should be understood as someone with an alternative view about the proper starting points for philosophical inquiry, a view closer to those associated with such twentieth century philosophers as C.S. Peirce and W.V. Quine. In particular, the Moorean will insist that before beginning philosophical inquiry, we already possess a significant amount of relevant knowledge, and that we are entitled to utilize and draw upon this knowledge in the course of our philosophical theorizing. Thus, the Moorean will insist that before engaging in ontology, we already know a great deal about what exists and what does not, and that we are entitled to bring such knowledge to bear in constructing and evaluating ontological theories. Similarly, the Moorean will insist that, before engaging in epistemology, we already know a great deal about what is known and what is not, and that we are entitled to bring such higher-order knowledge to bear in constructing and evaluating epistemological theories.

Indeed, the Moorean should go further than this and insist on the following point: when one engages in philosophical inquiry, not only is one *entitled* to bring to bear any relevant knowledge which one already possesses, but one is *obligated* to do so, on pain of

---

<sup>11</sup> In writing of a “broadly Cartesian picture of philosophical inquiry” (rather than, e.g. “Descartes’ picture of philosophical inquiry”, I mean to distance myself from the suggestion that the methodology in question was Descartes’ own, either in theory or in practice, as opposed to one which is naturally suggested by certain famous passages in prominent Cartesian texts. The stronger attribution is one which I lack the scholarly competence to make.

irrationality. As a general matter, when one knows something that bears on a question that one is concerned to answer, it is not rational to simply decline to take that information into account in arriving at a view. But what holds for questions in general holds also for the special cases of questions in ontology and in epistemology. Thus, for the Moorean, the Cartesian model of philosophical inquiry is not some kind of intellectual ideal which we should strive to approximate as best we can; on the contrary, treating the Cartesian model as a normative ideal is a recipe for irrationality.

Of course, ever since Descartes wrote, it has been fashionable for later and lesser philosophers to accuse him of making some large scale mistake (or at least, of encouraging others to make some large scale mistake by the example of his own practice, even if he did not commit the mistake himself) that sets modern philosophy off on the wrong foot. Too often, it is left unclear exactly what sin Descartes is supposed to have committed, or encourages us to commit. Since I am a philosopher who satisfies the aforementioned description, I want to be quite clear about what I think is wrong with a Cartesian model of philosophical inquiry. My suggestion is this: if one adopts a Cartesian model of philosophical inquiry as a normative ideal, one will be led to violate a fundamental norm of theoretical rationality, viz. *the requirement of total evidence*.

What is the requirement of total evidence? While there are subtle issues about how exactly the relevant principle should be formulated, the basic idea is simple and straightforward: to the extent that what it is reasonable for one to believe depends on the evidence which one possesses, what is relevant is one's total evidence, as opposed to some proper subset of one's total evidence.<sup>12</sup> Thus, imagine that Holmes is attempting to determine the identity of the person who committed a certain crime. As a result of his investigative efforts to this point, he has uncovered a number of facts that bear on the question. Some of this evidence points to Colonel Mustard, some points to Professor

---

<sup>12</sup>Notice that the formulation in the text does not entail the controversial view that what it is reasonable to believe is entirely determined by one's total evidence ('Evidentialism', in the terminology of proponents Conee and Feldman 2004). Perhaps other factors are also relevant. A classic discussion of the requirement of total evidence is Hempel (1960). I discuss some of the aforementioned subtleties of formulation in my (forthcoming a).

Plum, some to the Reverend Green. According to the requirement of total evidence, in arriving at a view about who committed the crime, it is rationally incumbent upon Holmes to take into account all of this evidence, as opposed to some proper subset of it. Perhaps the evidence possessed by Holmes which suggests that Mustard committed the crime is substantial enough that it has the following property: if Holmes possessed only this evidence, he would be fully justified in concluding that Mustard did it on that basis. Still, it does not follow that Holmes is justified in concluding that Mustard committed the crime as things stand. For it might be unreasonable to so conclude, once all of the evidence that Holmes possesses is taken into account.

The requirement of total evidence is not itself controversial. Rather, controversy enters when it is applied in conjunction with a substantive view about what counts as evidence.<sup>13</sup> According to Williamson (2000), one's total evidence consists of all and only those propositions that one knows. That is

**KNOWLEDGE:** E is a part of S's evidence if and only if E is a proposition that S knows.

This account, like all others that have been proposed, is controversial. Among other things, it is inconsistent with the venerable and still popular idea that at least some of one's evidence consists of experiences that one undergoes.<sup>14</sup> Let us work with the much weaker, although still non-trivial idea that one's knowing that some proposition is true is a sufficient (even if not necessary) condition for the inclusion of that proposition among one's total evidence. That is

**KNOWLEDGE\*:** If E is a proposition that S knows, then E is a part of S's evidence.

---

<sup>13</sup> For critical overviews of some of the relevant issues, see Kelly (2006) and (forthcoming b).

<sup>14</sup> For discussion of this issue, see Williamson (2000:197-199) and Kelly (2006).

Although not wholly uncontroversial, KNOWLEDGE\* would be accepted by many, including many who would balk at accepting the significantly stronger KNOWLEDGE.<sup>15</sup>

When KNOWLEDGE\* is taken in conjunction with the requirement of total evidence, the upshot is the following:

If one knows something that is relevant to a question that one is attempting to answer, one should take that information into account in arriving at a view.

I believe that this claim is true. Indeed, I believe that it borders on the platitudinous. Although we will consider a challenge below, its initial plausibility is surely enough to justify examining where it leads when applied to the present case.

How does following a Cartesian model of philosophical inquiry tend to lead to violations of the requirement of total evidence? Suppose that, at the outset of inquiry, one sets aside or brackets one's pre-philosophical, common sense opinions, perhaps on the grounds that many of these opinions have the status of mere prejudices. I take this to mean, at a minimum, that one's pre-philosophical opinions will not be allowed to influence what conclusions one draws upon philosophical reflection, at least until they receive independent substantiation in the course of that inquiry. However, if some of one's pre-philosophical opinions have the status of knowledge, then they should be taken

---

<sup>15</sup> Notice that, on the assumption that knowing entails justifiably believing, KNOWLEDGE\* would be accepted by a philosopher who holds any of the following theses:

If S justifiably believes that E, then E is part of S's evidence.

If S has justification for the belief that E, then E is part of S's evidence (regardless of whether S actually believes E or not).

If S believes that E, then E is part of S's evidence.

Moreover, KNOWLEDGE\* is perfectly consistent with the decidedly un-Williamsonian views that one's evidence includes one's experiences and/or other items that are not themselves propositions.

into account from the get-go. To decline to do so is tantamount to deliberately ignoring relevant evidence. The same holds for somewhat more modest proposals associated with Descartes, e.g., that one should set aside all of one's pre-philosophical beliefs except for those which are *completely certain and indubitable* or those which *do not admit of the slightest doubt*<sup>16</sup>. If some of one's pre-philosophical opinions have the status of knowledge but are not completely certain and indubitable in Descartes' sense, then following a norm of 'take into account only those opinions which are completely certain and indubitable', will lead one to ignore those propositions. On the assumption that known propositions qualify as evidence, consistently following such a norm will lead one to ignore relevant evidence. Compare: perhaps Holmes' total evidence makes it reasonable for him to conclude that Plum committed the crime, inasmuch as various things that he knows strongly suggest this conclusion. However, once all of the propositions that are not completely certain and indubitable have been bracketed, there is no guarantee that what remains will still support this conclusion; perhaps the evidential rump suggests that Mustard or Green committed the crime instead. If Holmes concludes that Green committed the murder because that is what is most likely relative to the set of propositions that are completely certain and indubitable, he is guilty of violating the requirement of total evidence.

Descartes feared that giving substantial weight to one's common sense, pre-philosophical opinions would lead to a stifling intellectual conservatism. As noted above, many critics of the method of reflective equilibrium reject it for exactly this reason. The Cartesian concern is that opinions which have the status of prejudices would in effect be given veto power over novel theories. Does the present picture pave the way for this? The objection behind the question would perhaps be telling against an account on which any pre-philosophical opinion that one holds is included among one's total evidence.

---

<sup>16</sup> 'Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false' (AT VII 18); 'Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false' (AT VII 24).

However, the present suggestion is not that any pre-philosophical opinion that one holds is part of one's total evidence; rather, the suggestion is that any pre-philosophical opinion that one knows is included. Mere prejudices are not knowledge. While it would indeed be dogmatic to reject a philosophical theory because it is inconsistent with some prejudice that one holds, this has no tendency to show that it is dogmatic to reject a philosophical theory because it is inconsistent with something that one knows. Of course, in particular cases, it might be arbitrarily difficult to determine whether one genuinely knows or is in the grip of some prejudice. For someone sufficiently in the grip of a prejudice, it might feel, from the inside, just as though he knows—a familiar and unfortunate fact. Although undeniable, it is a poor reason to conclude that someone who rejects a theory on the basis of its inconsistency with genuine knowledge is dogmatic in the same way that someone who rejects the theory on the basis of its inconsistency with his prejudices is.

Of course, things would be otherwise if it were *impossible* for us to identify genuine instances of knowledge from the inside, or if we were so inept at doing so that successful identifications were rare occurrences. But there is no reason to suppose that either of these situations is ours. Our eminent fallibility in identifying genuine instances of knowledge from the inside (in particular, we sometimes falsely believe that we know) is not a good reason to suppose that such identifications are either impossible or rare. I know that you know cows are sometimes slaughtered for food, and if I know this about you then I am surely in a position to know the same about myself. At any rate, this is the kind of thing which would be denied only by someone who was *already* committed to a fairly radical form of skepticism. That is: only someone who is already committed to a fairly radical form of skepticism, prior to engaging in philosophy, should find the Cartesian starting point an attractive one for conducting metaphysical and epistemological inquiry.

Incidentally, here we can note one very special case in which Cartesian inquiry is, at least arguably, an appropriate methodology. Suppose that one came to the theory of knowledge with literally no prior knowledge of what is known and what is not known.

(That is, suppose that one lacked any higher order knowledge.) Or suppose—what is perhaps more difficult to imagine—one came to ontology with no knowledge of what exists and what does not exist. In these cases, the Cartesian procedure is arguably appropriate, perhaps even uniquely appropriate. Of course, we should not expect someone who literally knows nothing about what is known and what is not to make much progress in theorizing about knowledge. It is only because we already know (that is, know prior to engaging in philosophical reflection) a great deal about what is known and what is not, that we have much hope for making genuine progress in the theory of knowledge. Similarly, whatever hope we have for making genuine progress in ontology would seem to be contingent on our coming to the philosophical table knowing quite a bit about what there is and what there isn't. In short, the prospects for making genuine progress in metaphysics and epistemology depend on our not occupying the very position in which Cartesian philosophical inquiry might be an appropriate methodology.

Here then are two opposite ways of falling into unreasonableness. First, one might overestimate one's knowledge: one takes oneself to know things that one does not in fact know. When one overestimates one's own knowledge, one will tend to rule out theories which should not be ruled out: one rules out some theory on the grounds that it is inconsistent with something that one knows, but it is false that one knows anything with which the theory is inconsistent. This phenomenon is an utterly familiar one; it is the characteristic error of the dogmatist. It is this phenomenon, I take it, with which Socrates and Descartes were justifiably concerned, and the concern underwrites some of their most distinctive methodological emphases.

Alternatively, one might underestimate one's knowledge. In terms of sheer relative frequency, the error of underestimating what one knows is undoubtedly committed far less often than the error of overestimating what one knows. Large numbers of books have been written by psychology professors carefully documenting our tendency to systematically overestimate our knowledge in various domains;<sup>17</sup> in marked contrast, no

---

<sup>17</sup> An engaging overview of much of this literature is Gilovich (1991).

such books have been written about the opposite tendency. Indeed, it might very well be that, apart from unusually diffident individuals, the most common contexts in which people significantly underestimate the extent of their knowledge are explicitly philosophical ones.<sup>18</sup>

It is neither surprising nor unjustifiable that philosophers have been more concerned with our propensity to overestimate our knowledge than with the possibility that we will underestimate it. After all, not only is the former error committed with far greater frequency, but it is also the characteristic error of the dogmatist, and on some accounts the struggle against dogmatism is the very *raison d'être* of the philosophical enterprise.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, notwithstanding the scant attention that it has received from philosophers, underestimating what one knows is a genuine error. Moreover, it too is an error which, on those occasions when it is committed, tends to issue in unreasonableness. If one underestimates what one knows, one will tend to draw unreasonable conclusions in virtue of ignoring or not giving due weight to relevant facts of which one is aware. One knows something that is relevant to the inquiry in which one is engaged, but one proceeds as

---

<sup>18</sup>Apposite here is the fact, frequently remarked upon by those who teach beginning students of philosophy, that such students often exhibit great enthusiasm for disowning any knowledge at all when presented with even quite crude skeptical considerations. Of course, a certain variety of contextualist about knowledge—one who holds that it is relatively easy to raise the ordinary standards for knowing—will see this phenomenon as a supporting datum.

<sup>19</sup>Notice also that the venerable ‘KK principle’—according to which knowing that *p* entails knowing that one knows that *p*—would seem to rule out the very possibility of underestimating one’s knowledge altogether, on conceptual grounds. This principle—enshrined as an axiom of epistemic logic in Hintikka (1962)—is currently out of favor, and rightly so in my judgment. Nevertheless, historically speaking, a significant number of philosophers have found something intuitive about it. Note that the KK principle is quite close to the conclusion that it is impossible to genuinely underestimate one’s knowledge: if one knows that *p* is true, then one knows that one knows that *p* is true, and thus (presumably) does not falsely believe that one does not know that *p*, nor even lack the true belief that one knows that *p*. This is false but not obviously so. The closest analogous principle that would rule out the possibility of overestimating one’s knowledge would perhaps be this: if one believes that that one knows that *p*, then one knows that *p*. This principle, of course, has no appeal at all.

though one does not; one is thus at risk of drawing conclusions that one would not draw if one took into account all of the relevant information that one possesses. This is the characteristic error of the philosopher who engages in Cartesian inquiry about knowledge, or about what there is, when she possesses some relevant knowledge about what there is, or what we know, before philosophical inquiry begins.

Of course, as noted above, the Moderate who accuses the Moorean of dogmatism need not accept a Cartesian picture of philosophical inquiry. Still, the Moorean will press the point against the Moderate: once the Cartesian picture has been safely set aside, and any pretense of conducting philosophical inquiry in a way uninfluenced by pre-philosophical opinion has been explicitly disavowed, why shouldn't we treat the fact that *there are wooden tables* as a good reason to reject those theories with which it is inconsistent? On the face of it, the Moderate would not seem to be in a strong position to resist the suggestion. After all, she too believes that there are wooden tables, and that we know that there are. (Again, contrast the apparently dialectically stronger position of someone who would deny these things on the basis of accepting some revisionary philosophical theory.) Given this, how can the Moderate criticize the Moorean for appealing to what is in fact common ground between them? Indeed, why doesn't the Moderate's refusal to follow the Moorean amount to a violation of the requirement of total evidence *by the Moderate's own lights*?

Some possibilities:

**First Response: Common Sense Counts for Something, But Not For As Much as the Moorean Thinks.** The Moderate might claim that while the Moorean is correct in holding that the fact that a theory entails *there are no wooden tables* counts against that theory, the Moorean's mistake is to hold that it counts *decisively* against that theory. According to this line of thought, while the consequence in question is a non-negligible cost of the theory, that cost is not necessarily prohibitive; rather, it needs to be weighed as one consideration among others which bear on the ultimate acceptability of the theory. (Indeed, the revisionary metaphysician might very well say the same thing.) Especially in view of our acknowledged propensity to overestimate what we know, it would be

unwise to treat this consequence as a sufficient reason to dismiss the theory. Notoriously, arbitrarily high subjective confidence is no guarantee of truth; even here, it is at least possible that we are wrong. And if we are wrong about the existence of wooden tables, then a theory which is incompatible with their existence might be true. In short, the Moderate might claim that the Moorean's mistake is to treat what is in fact merely disconfirming evidence as though it were falsifying evidence.

While this reply seems sensible enough, the significance of the concession should not be underestimated. Again, the envisaged Moderate allows that inconsistency with the existence of wooden tables is a non-negligible cost of the theory but denies that this cost is prohibitive. However, it is not as though the Moorean case hangs on some particular proposition or small number of propositions, as opposed to countless others with which the theory is also inconsistent. (In this respect, contrast a theory which entails that there are no inanimate macroscopic objects with another theory which idiosyncratically entails the falsity of some particular common sense belief but otherwise leaves our ordinary view of things more or less unmolested.) If the Moderate concedes that *there are wooden tables* is evidence against the theory, he should also be prepared to concede that countless other propositions which enjoy similar epistemic standing will also count as evidence against it. In short, once it is allowed that this proposition counts as non-negligible evidence against the revisionary metaphysical theory, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the theory is massively disconfirmed when the countless other propositions of common sense which both the Moorean and the Moderate will take to have similar status are taken into account.

The Moderate might object to this simple line of thought on the grounds that it betrays a naïve understanding of the marginal value of further evidence. It is a truism of confirmation theory that the probative value of a given body of evidence depends on its diversity. Thus, 'All emeralds a green' is better confirmed by a sample of emeralds that have been found in wide variety of circumstances than by a sample of equal size which is made up entirely of emeralds excavated from the same mine. Similarly, how strongly a body of unfavorable evidence *disconfirms* a given theory often depends on its diversity.

The Moderate might attempt to make use of these uncontroversial facts in the present context. Even if the fact that a theory is inconsistent with some common sense proposition is a non-negligible cost of that theory, it does not follow that inconsistency with similar common sense propositions should be counted as additional non-negligible costs. For example, even if it is allowed that it is a significant cost of a theory that it entails that there are no twenty dollar bills, it would surely be a mistake to count it as a further non-negligible cost that the same theory entails that there are no ten dollar bills. (It is not within the power of the United States Treasury to drag down the credibility of the theory by printing more denominations.) Once the theory has been properly penalized for the former consequence, the latter consequence has little if any tendency to further disconfirm it; it is in effect redundant evidence. Thus, the Moderate will insist that, when the Moorean suggests that the revisionary metaphysical theory is massively disconfirmed by common sense if it is disconfirmed by common sense at all, the Moorean is guilty of failing to discount for the diminishing marginal value of further evidence of the same kind.

This reply assumes, falsely, that the evidence afforded by ‘common sense’ is of some particular *kind* or *type*. But consider just how much of our view of the world is contradicted by a theory according to which there are no inanimate macroscopic objects. The contents of the relevant beliefs concern *extremely* diverse subject matters. Moreover, the routes by which we arrive at these beliefs are themselves extremely diverse: it is not, after all, as though they are all the deliverances of some single faculty, ‘Common Sense’. By any ordinary standards for evidential diversity, the evidence afforded by common sense (assuming, as the Moderate will allow, that many such propositions are known) manifests a great deal of diversity, in virtue of being heterogeneous with respect to both content and origin. (Something which is in practice likely to be missed when the fact that a theory ‘has counterintuitive consequences’ or ‘conflicts with common sense’ is entered as a single cost in the philosophical ledger.) Given that the Moderate is not himself a revisionist about the extent of our knowledge of what there is, it seems that he should

view the revisionary philosophical theory as disconfirmed by a body of evidence which is impressive with respect to its diversity as well as its sheer size.

Undoubtedly, much more could be said about this issue. But let us return to the conflict between the revisionary theory and the particular common sense proposition that there are wooden tables. Again, the envisaged Moderate does not deny that there are wooden tables, or that we know that there are, or that this proposition disconfirms the theory to some extent; what he does deny is that it falsifies the theory. However, it is problematic for the Moderate to treat the proposition that there are wooden tables as genuine evidence which disconfirms yet fails to falsify the revisionary theory given that the two are logically inconsistent. Compare: When I know that a student performed poorly on a particular assignment, it is unproblematic for me to treat this fact as genuine evidence that disconfirms, but fails to falsify, the claim that he is a good student. On the other hand, it is problematic for me to treat the same known fact as genuine evidence that nevertheless fails to falsify the claim that *the student performs well on every assignment*, given the inconsistency between the two. But the case with which we are concerned is analogous to the latter, not the former.

Of course, an account of uncertain evidence (e.g., Jeffrey 1965) will allow a proposition which is logically inconsistent with a theory to count as evidence which disconfirms but does not falsify that theory. Why can't the Moderate simply appeal to such an account in this context? The difficulty is that the Moderate thinks that we *know* that there are wooden tables. Given this, and given the recognized inconsistency between the existence of wooden tables and the revisionary theory, it is obscure why we are not entitled to conclude that the theory is false on that basis. At a minimum, the Moderate would seem committed to denying the attractive and widely-held principle of single

premise closure: roughly, the principle that if one knows that  $p$ , and one recognizes that  $p$  entails  $q$ , then one is in a position to know that  $q$ . Many will find this cost prohibitive.<sup>20</sup>

**Second Response: Even Those Who Know Can Be Dogmatists.** The Moderate might remind the Moorean that, even if one genuinely knows that  $p$ , this does not give one a license to dismiss any considerations which tell against  $p$  which might emerge in the future (Kripke, Harman 1973). Consider the story of the

**FAIR COIN.** You hand me what is in fact a fair coin. For amusement, I flip the coin over and over, keeping careful track of whether it lands ‘heads’ or ‘tails’ on each toss. After  $n$  tosses, the ratio of head to tails is well within the range that one would expect, on the assumption that the coin is fair.

Given that  $n$  is large enough, then (let us assume) I know that the coin is fair. Call this time  $t_1$ .

**FAIR COIN (continued).** Seeking further amusement, I continue flipping the coin. It lands heads on toss  $n+1$ , and on toss  $n+2$ ...and on each of the next  $m$  tosses after time  $t_1$ . It is vastly improbable that a coin that is fair would land heads  $m$  consecutive times. Indeed, given the overall ratio of heads to tails among the  $n+m$  tosses, it is very improbable that the coin is fair. Thus, after the  $m$  tosses, I no longer know that the coin is fair, for it is unreasonable to think that the coin is fair given my evidence.

---

<sup>20</sup> For defenses of closure, see, e.g., Hawthorne (2005), Feldman (1995), and Vogel (1990). For the case against, see especially Dretske (2005a, 2005b).

Notice that here is another juncture at which the revisionary metaphysician seems to occupy a stronger dialectical position than the Moderate. Inasmuch as the revisionary metaphysician thinks that it is false that there are wooden tables, he will *a fortiori* deny that we know that there are; he therefore faces no pressure to give up closure. Moreover, by adopting a Jeffrey-style picture of uncertain evidence, the Moderate can, if he so chooses, unproblematically treat the proposition that there are wooden tables as evidence which disconfirms but fails to falsify his theory. He can thus accommodate the intuition that it is at least *some* evidence against his theory that it entails the nonexistence of wooden tables, while insisting that acceptance of the theory is nevertheless the rational course once all of the relevant evidence is taken into account.

Imagine, however, that back at time  $t_1$ , I engage in the following piece of reasoning. From the known proposition that *the coin is fair*, I validly infer that *any evidence which suggests that the coin is not fair is misleading evidence*. Thus, when I subsequently observe the long run of heads, I dismiss that evidence on the grounds that it must be misleading and confidently retain my belief that the coin is fair.

Uncontroversially, my proceeding in this way is dogmatic and unreasonable. The general moral: even if one genuinely knows, this does not guarantee that one's later dismissal of that which conflicts with one's knowledge is not dogmatic. The Moderate might seize on this moral as grist for his mill. For the Moderate wishes to credit the Moorean (as well as herself) with the knowledge that (e.g.) *there are wooden tables* while nevertheless denying that it is legitimate for the Moorean to simply dismiss revisionary metaphysical theories on the basis of such knowledge. Thus, the Moderate might claim that the dogmatism exhibited by the Moorean on behalf of common sense is akin to the dogmatism that I exhibit in the story of FAIR COIN.

However, the attempted assimilation proceeds too quickly. Consider again my behavior in FAIR COIN. Although it is clear enough that my behavior is unreasonable, it is far from obvious why it is unreasonable. After all, given that I know that the coin is fair at time  $t_1$ , then, by the very plausible closure principle mentioned above,<sup>21</sup> I can also know that any evidence which suggests otherwise is misleading evidence. But if I know that any evidence which suggests otherwise is misleading, why am I not rationally entitled to ignore such evidence when I subsequently encounter it?

This is Saul Kripke's 'dogmatism paradox', a genuine philosophical puzzle.<sup>22</sup> I take the essential solution to the puzzle to have been provided by Harman (1973). In broad

---

<sup>21</sup> Again, the principle in question is that if S knows p, and S recognizes that p entails q, then S is in a position to know q.

<sup>22</sup> Kripke, 'On Two Paradoxes of Knowledge', unpublished lecture delivered to the Cambridge Moral Sciences Club. The first published discussion of the paradox is Harman (1973:148-149).

outline, that solution runs as follows. Even though I know that the coin is fair at time  $t_1$ , once I am exposed to evidence which strongly suggests that the coin is biased towards heads, I no longer know that the coin is fair. And if I no longer know that the coin is fair, then I no longer know that any evidence which suggests otherwise is misleading. So there is no single time at which I both know that the coin is fair and possess the evidence which suggests that it is not. Acquiring the counterevidence undermines my prior knowledge that the coin is fair, and thus, any legitimate basis for inferring that the counterevidence is misleading. If, contrary to fact, I somehow retained my knowledge that the coin is fair even after acquiring the counterevidence, then I *would* be in a position to reasonably conclude that that counterevidence is misleading.

One virtue of Harman's analysis is that it accounts for cases in which one *is* rationally entitled to dismiss counterevidence as misleading on the grounds that it is inconsistent with what one knows. Consider, for example, the following

**TRUE STORY.** I live with my family at 76 Alexander Street. On a fairly regular basis, we receive mail for a person named 'Frederick Jacobs' at this address; none of us has ever met a person with that name. This mail provides genuine evidence that someone named Frederick Jacobs lives at 76 Alexander St. (Consider: when a passerby on the street, curious about who lives at this address, opens our mailbox and finds mail addressed to Jacobs, this increases the credibility of the relevant proposition for the passerby.) Nevertheless, on the basis of my knowledge that only members of my family live at 76 Alexander St. and that Jacobs is not a member of my family, I reasonably conclude that this evidence is misleading and dismiss it without further ado.<sup>23</sup>

Why isn't my behavior in TRUE STORY dogmatic, given that the seemingly parallel behavior that I exhibit in FAIR COIN is dogmatic? Answer: because even after I acquire the evidence which suggests that Jacobs lives at 76 Alexander St., I still know that Jacobs does not live there. And, given that I know that Jacobs does not live at 76 Alexander St.,

---

<sup>23</sup> Although all of the details of the example are non-fictional, the inspiration for using them in this way is due to Crispin Wright (2004).

I am in a position to reasonably conclude that any evidence which suggests that he does is misleading.

Thus, the phenomenon associated with Kripke's dogmatism paradox turns out to be much less useful for the Moderate's purposes than might have initially appeared. Again, the Moderate wants to credit the Moorean—and himself—with knowledge of such common sense propositions as *there are wooden tables* but deny that this provides a legitimate basis for concluding that revisionary metaphysical theories inconsistent with such propositions are false. The kinds of cases discussed in connection with the dogmatism paradox seem to perfectly illustrate the possibility of manifesting dogmatism on behalf of genuine knowledge (as opposed to mere prejudice, unjustified belief, etc.). However, upon closer inspection, the cases in question do *not* provide examples in which someone who genuinely knows is guilty of dogmatism. Rather, the cases are yet further examples in which someone who fails to know behaves dogmatically on behalf of what she fails to know—a behavior which the Moorean, no less than the Moderate, is free to condemn. So long as the Moderate grants that we know that there are wooden tables, it is obscure why it would be impermissible to reason from that piece of knowledge to the falsity of the revisionary theory.

The next response speaks to this issue directly.

**Third Response: Appealing to Common Sense is Dialectically Inappropriate.**

Even if one genuinely knows that *p*, there might nevertheless be contexts in which it would be inappropriate to cite *p* as evidence. To borrow a trivial example from Williamson (2000): in a context in which the truth of *p* is up for discussion—imagine that participants in a conversation are actively offering and assessing evidence for and against *p*--it would be inappropriate to cite *p* itself as evidence, even if one happens to know that *p* is true. The Moderate might claim that when the Moorean offers *there are wooden tables* and other common sense propositions as decisive evidence against the revisionary metaphysical theory in a context in which the truth of that theory is under discussion, he makes the same mistake as someone who offers *p* as conclusive evidence in favor of *p* in a context in which the truth of *p* is what is at issue.

Such a thought has considerable plausibility. Recall the Moorean's original response to the revisionary metaphysician:

As you yourself admit, it is a consequence of your theory that there are no wooden tables, twenty dollar bills, or tropical islands. But in fact, there are such things. Therefore, your theory is false.

Undoubtedly, one of the things that makes this response seem so unsatisfying and improper is that it is explicitly addressed to the revisionary metaphysician. Surely it is inappropriate to cite these consequences as sufficient reason to reject the theory to the revisionary metaphysician himself, for he is well aware of the consequences yet holds the theory still. Here the familiar concern that the Moorean is begging the question enters most directly. Of course, unlike the revisionary metaphysician, the Moderate will agree that the relevant consequences are false: that there are wooden tables is common ground between the Moderate and the Moorean, in a way that it is not common ground between either of them and the revisionary metaphysician. Can the Moorean appeal to the common sense propositions as evidence in conversations with the Moderate, so long as those conversations take place behind the revisionary metaphysician's back? But the Moderate might claim that the literal presence—or even existence—of the revisionary metaphysician is immaterial. Rather, the Moderate might claim that the dialectical impropriety of citing the common sense propositions against a hypothetical proponent of the revisionary theory entails straightaway that those propositions provide an insufficient basis for rejecting the theory itself.

In making this last claim, the Moderate assumes the truth of the *dialectical conception of evidence* (cf. Williamson 2007 ch.8). According to the dialectical conception of evidence, one possesses genuine evidence against some theory only if one possesses evidence that it would be appropriate to offer as such in the context of dialectical engagement with a proponent of that theory. However, we have good reasons to reject the dialectical conception of evidence. One can have good evidence that some claim is true (or false) even if one has no potentially persuasive evidence, or evidence that it would be dialectically appropriate to cite as such. As Williamson emphasizes, acceptance

of the dialectical conception of evidence would immediately hand a cheap and sweeping victory to the crudest and least sophisticated of skeptics. Thus, against a skeptic who simply insisted without argument that nothing is evidence for anything else, anything that one might offer as evidence would fail to qualify as such when judged by the dialectical standard. If meeting the dialectical standard was necessary for something to count as genuine evidence, one would have no genuine evidence at all when in the presence of such a skeptic. But surely this is incorrect. One can have genuine evidence, i.e., evidence which tends to justify one's beliefs, even when one has no evidence that it would be dialectically appropriate to offer.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, even though it would be dialectically inappropriate to cite the relevant common sense propositions to the revisionary metaphysician, it does not follow that they do not provide the Moorean--or the Moderate--with decisive evidence against the revisionary metaphysician's theory. Indeed, given that the Moorean and the Moderate know the relevant propositions, they would be positively remiss if they failed to take them into account in making up their own minds about the revisionary metaphysician's theory.

Still, there is at least this much to be said against the Moorean response: it *is* a dialectically inappropriate response to the revisionary metaphysician. In particular, given that it is clear that the Moorean considerations have no chance of persuading the revisionary metaphysician, the appropriate course when dialectically engaged with such a person is to seek new considerations which might inspire conviction rather than simply reciting the Moorean considerations. (Again, the mistake committed by the envisaged Moderate is to suppose that it follows from this that the Moorean considerations do not themselves provide sufficient grounds for rejecting the revisionary theory.) What should we make of this?

Consider two cases. In the first case, a proponent of a theory with various radically revisionary consequences presents the theory in a public lecture; the revisionary consequences are enumerated on a handout distributed in advance of the lecture, in a

---

<sup>24</sup> On the dangers of not recognizing the distinction in question, see also Pryor (2004)

section entitled ‘Some Surprising Consequences of My Theory’. The dialectical effect of this is to preempt certain objections, or at least, to limit what can be claimed for them in the way of decisiveness. If, in the question-and-answer session immediately following the talk, a member of the audience said ‘Here are some decisive reasons for thinking that your theory is false’—and proceeded to assert the negations of propositions drawn from the list, her behavior would be considered not only rude but also in gross violation of the norms which govern the relevant practice. Of course, it would be respectable for the questioner to offer *reasons* for retaining belief in the common sense propositions in the face of the theory. But in that case, the common sense propositions have already ceased to function as evidence: one is expected to argue *to* the common sense propositions rather than *from* them.

In the second case, the proponent of the theory is initially unaware of the radically revisionary consequences of his theory (suppose that they are unobvious). Rather, the consequences are first pointed out by a member of the audience in the question-and-answer session. The questioner claims that the considerations which she has brought to general attention suffice to refute the theory on offer; many of those present agree with her assessment, although (unsurprisingly) the speaker does not. Here there is no suggestion that the norms of dialectical combat have been violated. Indeed, the questioner would seem to have engaged in the relevant practice in an exemplary manner.

Whatever the exact content of the relevant norms, it is at least somewhat curious that a practice governed by them should be thought to be a good way of arriving at the truth. (Things would be much more straightforward if the real point of the practice was, say, convincing the speaker that he is wrong. In that case, it would obviously be pointless to treat consequences that the speaker either embraces or is prepared to live with as noteworthy objections. By helpfully including the list entitled ‘Some Surprising Consequences of My Theory’, the theorist considerably prevents us from wasting our time by identifying in advance considerations which will bring us no further towards our goal.) Compare another context in which evidence and arguments are highly valued, yet apparently relevant evidence is routinely set aside in accordance with well-established

norms: formal legal proceedings. Legal rules of evidence impose restrictions on the admissibility of relevant evidence. Despite the ostensible importance of their arriving at a true view about the issue before the court, jurors are not supposed to reach a verdict on the basis of all of the relevant evidence which could in principle be made available to them, but rather on the basis of some subset of that evidence viz. that subset which satisfies the relevant standards of admissibility. Here, however, it is understood that the underlying rationales for such rules are typically *non-epistemic*. That is, the ultimate rationale for setting aside apparently relevant evidence usually derives from the system's interest in promoting or protecting values other than truth or knowledge about the case at hand.<sup>25</sup> Thus, genuine evidence that the defendant is guilty which has been seized by illegal means might be declared inadmissible so as not to reward past or encourage future illegal behavior on the part of the police. If the only value in view was that of determining whether the suspect was innocent or guilty, it would be unreasonable to set this evidence aside. It is much more difficult to justify setting aside what seems to be plainly relevant evidence when one's overriding concern is to figure out what to believe, or, more generally, when one is in a context in which non-truth-related concerns figure less prominently.

Indeed, it seems that given the norms which govern dialectical inquiry, we should be extremely skeptical of the idea that the conclusions which emerge from such inquiry are likely to be true when participants differ radically in their substantive views. In general, one of the primary attractions of engaging in inquiry with others is the prospect that, by doing so, one will end up with an improved body of evidence on which to base one's own opinions. Suppose that you and I are eager to believe the truth about some question.

---

<sup>25</sup> Usually, but not always. Thus, a judge might set aside a certain piece of evidence which genuinely suggests that the defendant is guilty on the grounds that, given the kind of evidence that it is, jurors are likely to exaggerate its probative force. Here, interestingly, relevant evidence is set aside in order to promote a purely epistemic end: the judge insists that the jurors base their judgments on what is an objectively impoverished body of evidence compared to the one which could be made available to them, on the grounds that are likely to respond unreasonably to the superior body of evidence.

Perhaps each of us knows something relevant that the other does not know. In that case, pooling our evidence provides a way of arriving at a richer body of evidence than either one of us would otherwise have enjoyed. Ideally then, the evidence which we possess after comparing notes would at least approximate the union of the evidence that each of us originally possessed. However, in a case in which you and I come to the dialectical table with radically different views, there will be relatively little common ground from which to proceed. If both of us scrupulously observe the norms suggested by the dialectical conception—for example, ‘Do not treat as evidence anything which the other would not accept as such’—very little will be treated as evidence indeed. The evidence which passes the relevant test will approximate, not the union of the evidence which is originally available to both of us, but rather the intersection of that evidence. But of course, there is no reason to suppose that the view which is best supported by this evidential rump is likely to be true.

In terms of the particular case with which we are concerned: one can, of course, ask what it is reasonable to believe on the propositions that are genuine common ground between the Moorean and the revisionary metaphysician. But neither the Moorean nor the revisionary metaphysician should think that there is any particular reason to think that *that* view is likely to be true. Nor, for that matter, should the Moderate. And it is for this reason that it is a methodological mistake for the Moderate to set aside or even discount the Moorean considerations when he decides what to believe. Not only should the Moderate not condemn the Moorean’s practice, he should adopt it as his own.

## References

- Conee, Earl and Feldman, Richard (2004). *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Davies, Martin (1998). “Externalism, Architecturalism, and Epistemic Warrant”, in Wright, Crispin, Smith, Michael, and Macdonald, Cynthia (eds.), *Knowing Our Own Minds: Essays in Self-Knowledge*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press): 321-361.
- Davies, Martin (2000). “Externalism and Armchair Knowledge”, in Boghossian, Paul and Peacocke, Christopher (eds.), *New Essays on the A Priori* (Oxford: Oxford University Press): 384-414.
- Davies, Martin (2003). “The Problem of Armchair Knowledge”, in Nuccetelli, Susana (ed.) *New Essays on Semantic Externalism and Self-Knowledge*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press): 23-55.
- Davies, Martin (2004). “Epistemic Entitlement, Warrant Transmission, and Easy Knowledge”, *Aristotelian Society Supplement*, 78, pp. 213-245.
- Dorr, Cian (2002). *The Simplicity of Everything*. Princeton University doctoral dissertation.
- Dretske, Fred (2005a). “The Case Against Closure” in Steup and Sosa (eds.) *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers): 13-26.
- Dretske, Fred (2005b): “Reply to Hawthorne” in Steup and Sosa (eds.) *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers): 43-46
- Feldman, Richard (1995). “In Defence of Closure”, *Philosophical Quarterly* 45(181): 487-494
- Fine, Kit (2001). “The Question of Realism”. *The Philosophers’ Imprint* vol.1, no.1.
- Gilovich, Thomas (1991). *How We Know What Isn’t So* (New York: The Free Press).
- Goodman, Nelson (1953). *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Gupta, Anil (2006). *Empiricism and Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Harman, Gilbert (1973). *Thought*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

- Harman, Gilbert (1986). *Change in View*. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press).
- Harman, Gilbert (1994). "Epistemology and the Diet Revolution", in Michaelis Michael and John O'Leary-Hawthorne (eds.), *Philosophy in Mind*. (The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers).
- Harman, Gilbert (1999). *Reasoning, Meaning, and Mind*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Harman, Gilbert (2003). "Skepticism and Foundations", in Steven Luper (ed.) *The Sceptics: Contemporary Essays*. (Ashgate: Aldershot): 1-11.
- Harman, Gilbert (2004). "Three Trends in Moral and Political Philosophy" in *Value Inquiry*, 37.3.
- Harman, Gilbert and Kulkarni, Sanjeev (2007). *Reliable Reasoning: Induction and Statistical Learning Theory* (Cambridge: The MIT Press).
- Hawthorne, John (2005). "The Case for Closure" in Steup and Sosa (eds.) *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers): 26-43.
- Hempel, Carl (1960). 'Inductive Inconsistencies', *Synthese* 12: 439-469. Reprinted in Hempel (1965) *Aspects of Scientific Explanation and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science* (New York: The Free Press).
- Hintikka, Jaakko (1962). *Knowledge and Belief* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- Horgan, Terence and Potrc, M. (2000). "Bobjectivism and Indirect Correspondence" *Facta Philosophica*, 2: 249-70.
- Jeffrey, Richard (1965). *The Logic of Decision* (New York: McGraw-Hill).
- Kelly, Thomas (2005). "Moorean Facts and Belief Revision, or Can the Skeptic Win?" in John Hawthorne (ed.) *Philosophical Perspectives, vol.19: Epistemology* (Blackwell Publishers): 179-209.
- Kelly, Thomas (2006). "Evidence" in Edward Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evidence>.
- Kelly, Thomas (forthcoming a). 'Disagreement, Dogmatism, and Belief Polarization' in *The Journal of Philosophy*.

Kelly, Thomas (forthcoming b). “Evidence: Fundamental Concepts and the Phenomenal Conception”, in Brian Weatherson and Tamar Gendler Szabo, *Philosophy Compass*.

Kornblith, Hilary (2008). “Belief in the Face of Controversy” in Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield (eds.) *Disagreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Kripke, Saul. ‘On Two Paradoxes of Knowledge’, unpublished lecture delivered to the Cambridge Moral Sciences Club.

Kuhn, Thomas (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

Lewis, David (1973). *Counterfactuals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Lycan, William (2001). “Moore against the New Skeptics”. *Philosophical Studies* 103 (1):35-53.

Merricks, Trenton (2001). *Objects and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Moore, G.E. (1925). “A Defence of Common Sense” in J.Muirhead (ed.) *Contemporary British Philosophy* (2<sup>nd</sup> series). (London: George Allen & Unwin).

Nuccetelli, Susan and Seay, Gary (eds.) (2008). *Themes from G.E. Moore: New Essays in Epistemology and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Pryor, James (2000). “The Skeptic and the Dogmatist”, *Nous* 34: 517-549.

Pryor, James (2004). “What’s Wrong With Moore’s Argument?” in *Philosophical Issues* 14.

Rawls, John (1972). *A Theory of Justice*. (Cambridge, MA: Belnap)

Scanlon, Thomas (2002). “Rawls on Justification” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, edited by Samuel Freeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 139-167.

Singer, Peter (1974). “Sidgwick and Reflective Equilibrium” in the *Monist* 58: 490-517.

Stitch, Stephen (1983). *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press).

Unger, Peter (1975). *Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

- Unger, Peter (1979a). "There Are No Ordinary Things", *Synthese* 41: 117-154.  
Reprinted in Unger (2006).
- Unger, Peter (1979b). "I Do Not Exist", in G.F.MacDonald (ed.) *Perception and Identity*  
(London: The MacMillan Press). Reprinted in Unger (2006).
- Unger, Peter (1979c). "Why There Are No People", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy IV*:  
177-222. Reprinted in Unger (2006).
- Unger, Peter (2006). *Philosophical Papers*, vol.2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- van Inwagen, Peter (1990). *Material Beings* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).
- Vogel, Jonathan (1990). "Are There Counterexamples to the Closure Principle?" in Roth  
and Ross (eds.) *Doubting: Contemporary Perspectives on Skepticism* (Norwell:  
Kluwer).
- Williamson, Timothy (2000). *Knowledge and Its Limits*. (Oxford: Oxford University  
Press).
- Williamson, Timothy (2006). "Must Do Better", in Patrick Greenough and Michael  
Lynch (eds.) *Truth and Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp.177-187.
- Williamson, Timothy (2007) *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. (Blackwell, Oxford).
- Wright, Crispin (2002). "(Anti)skeptics simple and subtle: Moore and McDowell"  
*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65: 330-348.
- Wright, Crispin (2004) "Wittgensteinian Certainties", in McManus, Denis (ed.).  
*Wittgenstein and Scepticism* (Oxford: Routledge), pp.22-54.