Annalisa Coliva

Moore and Wittgenstein: Scepticism, Certainty and Common Sense. Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Pp. xiv +248. ISBN: 978-0-230-58063-3.

Annalisa Coliva has three main aims in the present book. The first is to provide a textual exegesis of Moore's essays "A Defence of Common Sense" and "Proof of an External World," and, more extensively, of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, offering an interpretation she argues is preferable to competitors. The second, which is closely connected to the first, is to explain the role both of these philosophers have had historically in influencing and shaping some central philosophical questions and theories of the past century. The third is to offer suggestions as to how some Wittgensteinian insights can be applied to contemporary concerns in epistemology and philosophy of language.

The book succeeds in its interpretive/historical task. Offering a new interpretation of the above works makes the book "a properly historical work, conceived as a form of rational reconstruction, whose validity, however, can only be tested against textual evidence" (3). To bring a properly historical outlook to twentieth-century analytic philosophy is a welcome, and quite novel, approach. Coliva says she tries to keep distinct her "activity as a historian and [her] work as philosopher" (4), but it is her suggestions of how insights from these philosophers can be applied to contemporary debates that I find most intriguing and most contentious.

Coliva argues convincingly that Moore's epistemology and response to scepticism is best understood as "proto externalist." She canvasses a number of critiques of Moore's response to scepticism (Malcolm, Clarke, Stroud, and Wright) and argues that their criticisms largely result from a failure to recognize that Moore distinguishes between "knowledge and the conditions of obtainment, on the one hand, and what he sees as the challenge raised by scepticism, on the other: namely the challenge of *proving* to know what one legitimately takes oneself to know" (28). In Moore's famous proof of the external world he argues from the premise that he knows he has hands to the conclusion that he knows there is an external world. Those who find his proof unconvincing think that he cannot use his "knowledge" of having hands as a premise unless he can prove that the conditions of obtainment hold; they claim that *knowledge* can only be appropriately applied to a given proposition if one can rationally redeem one's claim to knowledge: "Most of his contemporaries, and in particular Wittgenstein, were firmly rooted in an internalist conception of knowledge and, accordingly, thought that Moore was altogether missing the point" (54).

While Wittgenstein found Moore's response to scepticism thoroughly unconvincing, he did think he had pointed to something important in recognizing a set of propositions that seems immune from doubt and for which grounds for knowing them seem absent. Some examples of these "hinge propositions" are "The Earth has existed for a very long time," "There are physical objects," and "Here is a hand" said while one looks at one's hand. Despite the limitations of Moore's response to scepticism, Coliva says that "it is obvious that he had the great merit of individuating a series of propositions ... that go well beyond the ones traditionally investigated in epistemology, for which it is a genuine challenge to understand whether we bear an epistemic relation to them" (54). Trying to understand and articulate our relationship (epistemic or otherwise) to these propositions is of central interest to Wittgenstein in *On Certainty.*

In presenting her own interpretation of *On Certainty*, which she says is a variant of the "framework" reading, Coliva distinguishes it from three other prominent interpretations, the "naturalist," the "therapeutic," and the "epistemic" readings (8). The framework theory emphasizes that these "hinges are rules which, as such, can't be subject to epistemic appraisal" (8). What I take as essential and distinctive to her reading is that she argues that, to understand Wittgenstein's view, one must take seriously the normative character of these propositions. They articulate the norms which govern our epistemic practices; "they are not just meaning constitutive rules, but also, and in fact in most cases, rules of evidential significance" (10). On her view, they are genuine propositions with a role to play, just not the same role as empirical propositions. Coliva argues that this view better answers certain puzzles and questions that arise in interpreting *On Certainty.* Two of these questions are: How should we best understand his response to scepticism? Why characterize our relationship to these propositions as one of certainty?

Coliva argues that Wittgestein's collection of remarks on the use of " I know" as well as the remarks on our use of "doubt" reveal what is misleading about Moore's claim to *know* those hinge propositions, as well as what is wrong with the sceptic's claims to doubt them. For both knowledge and doubting require *grounds.* For a reader unfamiliar with *On Certainty*, this clear textual exegesis provides a good introduction to why, for Wittgenstein, knowledge is not appropriately applied to propositions beyond doubt. Coliva's discussion of how Wittgenstein "assembles reminders" of the way concepts are ordinarily employed to dispel philosophical confusions does not, however, depart substantially from a standard reading. She also succumbs to what seems an almost irresistible tendency in explicating Wittgenstein to a kind of over-quoting. When one engages with Wittgenstein's text, his words can feel like poetry, such

that paraphrases and summaries seem not to do them justice. This leaves the reader with the same task she would have in reading the primary text.

Coliva's reading is most subtle and novel in her understanding of the status of the hinge propositions and how recognizing this status offers a response to scepticism. What is important, she claims, is that some judgments we make, in certain contexts, are unlike ordinary empirical judgments subject to testing and verification. A judgment like "Here is a hand" in the circumstances of Moore's proof instead "belongs to the logic of our epistemic practices because it must stand fast if we want to test other things ... Its staying put, or standing fast, is what enables the possibility of really acquiring empirical evidence" (82). Coliva likens these propositions to Kant's synthetic *a priori* judgments, judgments that "have a normative and therefore a priori status" (82). But which propositions play this role is, for Wittgenstein, "entirely determined by practice" (83).

With this understanding, we can turn to how, according to Coliva, Wittgenstein responds to the sceptic. She disagrees with those who think that Wittgenstein diagnoses the sceptic's doubts as being nonsensical, akin to a string of words without any meaning, and questions those who argue that ultimately he finds the sceptic's questions meaningful and answerable by showing that we are *epistemically* justified in believing these propositions. She distinguishes between two kinds of scepticism, "Cartesian" and Humean," and views the latter as more powerful and threatening. Wittgenstein's response to Humean scepticism, Coliva argues, is that it is nonsensical because it is *irrational.*

A Cartesian sceptic, modeled on considerations put forth in Descartes's First Meditation, forms a hypothesis (like the fact that one may be dreaming or a brain in a vat). Our sensory experience in such a sceptical scenario would be qualitatively indistinguishable from experience if there were, in fact, an external world. Given that we cannot eliminate this possibility, we cannot know that our senses are reliable and so cannot claim to know anything on the basis of such experience, including the fact that there is an external world. While Coliva argues that one can find "the linguistic argument against Caretsian scepticism" in Wittgenstein's text, what interests her more, because it is more specific to Wittgenstein and because it makes use of the special status of hinge propositions, is what she calls "the transcendental argument against Humean scepticism" (129). This kind of scepticism does not employ sceptical scenarios to destabilize our claims to knowledge. Instead, it points out that our empirical, evidential warrants (like induction, perception, testimony) all rest on certain assumptions that cannot be rationally grounded in a non-circular way so that "at the bottom of all our practices there are ungrounded assumptions which can't rationally be held" (129). If beliefs dependent on such assumptions cease to be rationally held given the groundlessness of their support, then we

are led to the radical conclusion that no belief is any more justified than another.

Wittgenstein agrees that our practices rest on "ungrounded presuppositions of all our going about gathering perceptual evidence for, or against, empirical propositions" (131–132). But even if we cannot claim to *know* propositions like "Our senses don't always deceive us," neither can they be called into question because our practices of questioning and doubting themselves depend on taking them for granted: "Once more in a Kantian fashion, we may say that their being taken for granted is a *condition of possibility* of all our perceptual investigations" (132). The idea of epistemic rationality cannot be employed at all without these presuppositions in place and so these presuppositions cannot be epistemically assessed the way ordinary empirical propositions can.

While Coliva is not engaging in Hume exegesis, she does refer to Hume's views to distinguish Wittgenstein's position from his and to show what is misguided in the "naturalist" reading, discussed most extensively by Peter Strawson. A careful reading of Hume's view reveals that it is much closer to Wittgenstein's than Coliva suggests. Both think that our belief- and knowledge-related practices take place within a system that itself cannot be evidentially supported, but that nonetheless cannot be abandoned. Coliva would say that the difference lies in the way each characterizes the attitude towards these ungrounded presuppositions. According to Coliva, Wittgenstein is not primarily interested in a kind of "animal non-propositional certainty"; it is not simply that we instinctually or habitually behave in ways that are immune to doubt. Even though the attitude towards these propositions is "thoroughly *non-epistemic*" (174), it is still a propositional attitude since it has "propositions— albeit of a normative kind—as its objects" (174). Coliva characterizes the attitude as one of "acceptance." Acceptance of norms, she says, is a "pragmatic acceptance as opposed to an epistemic one" (176). Hume's view can be similarly characterized.

I have a lot of sympathy with Coliva's reading and I agree that Wittgenstein's response to scepticism is not an antecedent, as some have argued, of externalism or contextualism, and that his actual response "is worth considering in the contemporary debate in epistemology" as it offers "reasons why scepticism is ultimately rationally ineffective as well as the reasons why it keeps us in its grip" (148). As long as we think the only propositions we can accept are ones that can be deemed evidentially warranted, we will remain in scepticism's grip. But once we see that our warrant-deeming practices depend on accepting norms that cannot be given empirical support, this reveals that our view of what can be permissibly accepted is too narrow. Coliva suggests that we should consider "embracing a wider conception" of epistemic rationality that includes

these assumptions (148). This is an example, and they occur frequently in the book, of an intriguing but undeveloped suggestion of how Wittgenstein's ideas can be applied to contemporary debates.

In the final chapter, Coliva takes up the most challenging question for this Wittgensteinian response to scepticism: does it commit him to a kind of epistemic relativism? For, even if we accept that, given *our* epistemic practices and *our* system of justification, sceptical doubts cannot defeat our claims to knowledge, it seems the possibility remains that "there could be, either in principle or as a matter of fact, different epistemic systems, none of which would be intrinsically correct; each of them would be, from a metaphysical point of view, as good as any other one, and would certify as (true and) justified different propositions" (188). Coliva argues that Wittgenstein's anti-foundationalism and anti-realism do not commit him to relativism. The case against Wittgenstein as a "*factual* relativist" committed to the view that there are *actual* incompatible, but equally valid, epistemic systems is straightforward. His main point in discussing different cultures is to recognize the commonalities despite the seeming differences; when we critique others or view them as using methods that differ from our own, we still operate within a single system of epistemic rationality.

But even if no community exists with a completely different system or rationality and logic, did Wittgenstein think of this as a legitimate possibility, i.e., was he what Coliva terms a "*virtual* relativist"? Wittgenstein anticipates Davidson's view that the idea of competing conceptual schemes is not coherent because any sense we make of an alternative community will be within our own scheme; understanding them requires translating them in such a way that employs our own concepts. Yet, what has led many commentators to think of Wittgenstein as a relativist is that he repeatedly asks us to imagine radically different kinds of communities. Coliva suggests that all that is left to the idea is a "metaphysical possibility," but "it is a possibility that we can't really conceive of in detail, given the kind of creatures we are" (201). Yet virtual relativism requires being able to *conceive* of these possibilities and so "our world-picture and conceptual scheme may be metaphysically contingent, still they are unavoidable for us and therefore, universal, if only from our point of view" (202).

Again, the suggestion that epistemic anti-realism does not entail epistemic relativism is an idea that can be applied to the contemporary scene. The worry remains that a practice needs to be grounded in something transcendent for it to be legitimate. Why groundlessness need not entail a disturbing arbitrariness is a question that has not gone away. Coliva is concerned with arguing that this is Wittgenstein's view, not with defending it though she seems sympathetic to it. Appeals to unavoidability, however, begin to look very Humean, a response

that she earlier distinguished from Wittgenstein's and that she viewed as less promising.

   Coliva says she conceives of Moore and Wittgenstein as "classics," which is "tantamount to their having had the first word on many issues which, nowadays, we all perceive as philosophically important" (12). She hopes to inspire readers who read their texts to have a sense of their place in a philosophical *tradition,* and also to inspire development of their insights in yet unforeseen directions. Contemporary analytic philosophers have a tendency to view history of philosophy as completely distinct from what they do. Ultimately, what is most important about Coliva's book is that it helps to disrupt this image; it shows how reading classic texts can make us better philosophers.

   Miriam McCormick
University of Richmond
   mmccorm2@richmond.edu