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On Doubt

“I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again ‘I know that that’s a tree,’ pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: ‘This fellow isn’t insane. We are only doing philosophy.’” – Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* §467

Abstract: What does it mean for a proposition to be doubtful for a person? The purpose of this paper is to develop an account of propositional doubt. In an attempt to answer this question, I will first distinguish between doubt and skepticism, as suggested by Wittgenstein’s discussion of hinge propositions in On Certainty. I will also distinguish between psychological and propositional certainty and doubt on this view, and begin to sketch my own account, along with desiderata for an account of doubt. Next I will examine the relationship between certainty and doubt by considering Firth’s map of certainty. Finally, I will draw upon the account of certainty presented in Klein (1998) to present my own account. The account I end up with is one which incorporates the notion that in order for a proposition to be doubtful for a person, that person must have some evidence against it.

1. Descartes and Common Sense

In his famous *Meditations*, Descartes undertook a spring cleaning from which philosophy has yet to fully recover. He sought to rid himself of every belief he held which might be in doubt. He targets the empirical foundations upon which beliefs about the external world rest, and used that foundation as a shovel with which to toss them into the fire. In the centuries since epistemologists have sought to separate baby from bathwater. But the demon which Descartes summoned from the fire persists, in the form of what is often termed “the skeptical argument.” The argument has been variously stated, but usually takes the form of three statements which are together paradoxical:

1. We are able to know ordinary propositions (e.g. “I have a hand.”).
2. If we are able to know ordinary propositions, then we are able to know that we are not in a skeptical scenario (e.g. a brain in a vat).
3. We are unable to know that we are not in a skeptical scenario.

The three statements are obviously incompatible. Something has to give; and as many epistemologists are professionally if not personally invested in the possibility of knowledge, it had better be one of the latter two premises. Unfortunately, the principle underlying the second premise, that knowledge is closed under known entailment, is highly intuitive, and difficult to part with. And the third premise, by the very nature of the skeptical scenarios constructed, cannot merely be rejected out of hand.

Yet that is the exact method of GE Moore’s reply. Moore’s response to this problem, known as “common-sensism,”[[1]](#footnote-1) is laid out in his lecture “Proof of the External World”. His proof is quite simple: a gesture with one of his hands to the other, and the statement “Here is one hand.” (Moore, 166) The argument loses something in the written telling, for the gesture and presence of the hands are themselves the proof. This is not as underhandedly question-begging as it seems at first, according to Moore, for “In asserting the premise I was asserting much more than I was asserting in asserting the conclusion.”[[2]](#footnote-2) (Moore, 166) Though it has inspired much thought, Moore’s assertion-as-argument is not taken to be a convincing rebuttal to the skeptical argument. Nor should it be. Though Moore muddies the water by claiming he knows that he has a hand, his argument is in truth more metaphysical than epistemological. He sets out to prove the existence of the external world. However successful Moore might be in proving such an existence, his argument cannot get us all the way to knowledge of it.[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. Wittgensteinian Hinges

Among the conversation inspired by Moore is a collection of notes by Wittgenstein, compiled and published under the title *On Certainty*. Moore does claim to know that he has a hand. He takes it as a certainty – “You might as well suggest that I do not know that I am now standing up and talking - that perhaps after all I'm not, and that it's not quite certain that I am!” (Moore 166-7) Here an important distinction must be made. Moore undeniably exhibits psychological certainty that he has a hand. On that matter, the attitude he has towards the proposition of his handedness, he is surely an authority, and can be taken at his word. What is at question is whether this proposition is certain for him; that is, whether it possesses propositional certainty. If it does not, then he cannot be justified in his assertion. But what it means for a proposition to be certain for a person is far from clear.

Wittgenstein takes a semantics-based, contextualist approach. Moore’s assertion that he knows he has a hand cannot by itself tell us that he does know, but only that he believes he knows (OC §137). What Wittgenstein gleans from Moore’s argument, however, is that certain empirical propositions require no argument, within a certain context. These propositions, variously known as ‘hinge propositions’ or ‘bedrock propositions,’ require no independent motivation. Rather, they serve as the foundations of our belief systems. They “stand fast” for us. They are the hinges on which our beliefs turn.[[4]](#footnote-4) Hinge propositions act as assumptions which provide the grounds for empirical investigation.

That Moore has a hand stands fast for him, in that, if he were to doubt it, he could not then motivate any further beliefs. Wittgenstein claims that propositions such as “I have a hand” cannot be mistaken, a mistake being (I take it) an error in investigation. There cannot be an error in investigation because for these propositions there is no investigation[[5]](#footnote-5); one does not check to see if one has a hand, or if one’s name is as one thinks it is, or if 2+2=4, before giving a reply. These propositions are certain. They are part of a picture of the world which is “the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.” (OC §94) Without this picture, no empirical investigation is possible. “If you tried to doubt everything you would not get so far as doubting anything. The game of doubting presupposes certainty.” (OC §115)

1. Skepticism and Doubt

Here I would like to draw another distinction. That is between doubt and skepticism. Hinge propositions provide the grounds for investigation, but are not themselves subject to investigation in regular contexts. Not only are they not subject to it, they cannot be. If I were to doubt I had a hand, with all the evidence I have now of my handedness, I would have no means of ascertaining whether I do: “If I were to have any doubt of [my having a hand], then I don’t know why I should trust my eyes.” (OC §125) Investigation ends.

The focus here is on the role these propositions play. But not all hinge propositions are necessarily so. “…Yet this is right: the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing.” (OC §98) In a normal context, the proposition “I have a hand” is taken as part of the bedrock of investigation. But the skeptical argument changes the context. By introducing the possibility of one’s being in a skeptical scenario (e.g. a brain in a vat), the skeptic can claim to shift the context so as to strip ordinary propositions of their certain status.

Wittgenstein produces the threads of a response, which forms the heart of the distinction I would like to draw. The skeptical argument merely introduces the possibility of a skeptical scenario. There is no actual evidence in its favor. As Wittgenstein puts it: “Everything that I have seen or heard gives me the conviction that no man has ever been far from the earth. Nothing in my picture of the world speaks in favor of the opposite.” (OC §93) Everything speaks for my handedness, nothing against. It is possible that the earth only sprang into being five minutes ago, in such a state as to produce a false perception of history. But “[w]hat we call historical evidence points to the existence of the earth a long time before my birth; -- the opposite hypothesis has *nothing* on its side.” (OC §190, emphasis his)

This is of course not an argument against the skeptic. Our imaginary foe seeks to undermine the possibility of knowledge. They do not need to show that we are wrong; only that if we were, we would not be able to tell. However, it does allow us to distinguish between skepticism and doubt. Doubt has grounds; skepticism does not. This is what allows hinge propositions to “stand fast,” to be certain. There are no grounds for doubting them. At the same time, they are not immune to skepticism. The mere possibility that we might have the same evidence and be wrong is enough for the skeptic’s argument. But this would not be an error of investigation. It would not be a mistake.

Hinge propositions are those which must be taken as certain in order for investigation to proceed. That I have a hand; that the world has existed for a long time; that my name is E.P.; if I were to doubt these beliefs, I could not justify any beliefs whatsoever. These propositions must be immune to doubt if investigation is to proceed. I would like to suggest, in line (I think) with Wittgenstein, that these propositions are susceptible to skepticism, but not to doubt.

This by itself is a purely pragmatic argument, and not one I expect the skeptic to accept. What provides epistemic motivation is the lack of evidence against ordinary empirical propositions. The skeptic and the ordinary doubter have different aims. Skepticism targets the capacity for knowledge. Doubt targets specific propositions. It is not simply that the skeptic need not offer grounds. They cannot. Any grounds that they might offer would undermine their position. Their very point is that we cannot have knowledge of the external world. As any evidence that I am actually in a skeptical scenario would have to be grounded in the external world, they can offer none. Offering grounds against my handedness, for example, such as my having just been in a horrible car crash, shifts the context from a skeptical one to that of normal investigation. My having hands then loses its status both as a hinge proposition and as a target of skepticism, and becomes rather a target of doubt. The true distinction I can draw here, then, is this: doubt admits grounds, and skepticism does not. Whether doubt requires grounds remains to be shown.

I arrive at this distinction between skepticism and doubt through Wittgenstein, but it is not necessarily tied to contextualism. Even if one rejects the notion that the skeptic shifts the context of investigation, or that requirements for certainty depend upon context, I believe that my distinction still stands. Skepticism seeks to undermine all knowledge, and neither brings nor requires evidential basis. ‘Ordinary’ doubt (and, I would like to argue, ‘ordinary’ doubtfulness as well) targets specific propositions, and admits grounds related to those propositions. For the remainder of this paper, I will set skepticism aside, and focus on doubt in this latter, ordinary sense.

1. Psychological and Propositional Certainty and Doubt

I have begun to sketch a picture of doubt. Before proceeding, I would like to elaborate further on Wittgenstein’s picture of certainty, in order to then draw from it his conception of doubt.

There is a second distinction that is relevant here, which is the aforementioned difference between psychological certainty and propositional certainty. Psychological certainty is an attitude that a person has towards their belief, while propositional certainty is, as Klein (1998) puts it, “a property of propositions” relative to persons. Klein (1998) claims that Wittgenstein “blurs the distinction” between the two. This charge is only a little unfair. Wittgenstein does attempt to distinguish between what he terms subjective and objective certainty. Subjective certainty (i.e. psychological certainty) is the expression of “complete conviction, the total absence of doubt…” (OC §194) A proposition is objectively certain “[w]hen a mistake is not possible.” (Ibid.) Following the previous reading of mistake, Wittgenstein seems to be saying here that a proposition is certain if it is not possible for it to be the result of an error in investigation. Do all hinge propositions fit this picture?

According to Wittgenstein, at least some hinge propositions are such that one is incapable of doubting them:

247. What would it be like to doubt now whether I have two hands? Why can’t I imagine it at all? What would I believe if I didn’t believe that? So far I have no system at all within which this doubt might exist.

This seems intuitively correct. Allowing room for differing intuitions, I cannot bring myself to truly doubt my handedness. It does seem certain in a way that other empirical propositions do not, regardless of my warrant for them. I have no grounds for doubt.

Wittgenstein takes this category to be quite broad:

273. But when does one say of something that it is certain?

For there can be dispute whether something is certain; I mean, when something is objectively certain.

There are countless general empirical propositions that count as certain for us.

274. One such is that if someone’s arm is cut off it will not grow again. Another, if someone’s head is cut off he is dead and will never live again.

Experience can be said to teach us these propositions. However, it does not teach us them in isolation: rather, it teaches us a host of interdependent propositions. If they were isolated I might perhaps doubt them, for I have no experience relating to them.

Are these propositions such that they cannot be the result of an error in investigation? I can easily imagine possible worlds where they are not the case, as I can easily imagine situations where I do not have hands (although I do not like to). Indeed one example of which Wittgenstein makes great use, that no man could ever go to the moon, is not true. But currently experience provides no grounds for doubting the others. And it is true that I make decisions based on my certainty of them, and that if I were to doubt them, I would have to doubt all beliefs produced by induction or my own perceptions. Investigation could not begin.

This is not enough. While lacking grounds for doubt may be a necessary condition for a proposition to be certain, it cannot be the whole picture. Wittgenstein asks “Well, if everything speaks for a hypothesis and nothing against it—is it then certainly true?” (OC §191) The answer seems clearly to be that this is insufficient. One can easily imagine a proposition with very weak and tenuous evidence for it and none against. Many historical theories could serve. Surely we would not want to say that such a proposition is certain. There must be some evidential threshold.

Moreover, my inability to doubt some propositions cannot ground propositional certainty. One can just as easily imagine a person without the capacity to doubt whatsoever, perhaps a young and gullible child. It cannot be the case that the child’s lack of experience and capacity makes more propositions certain for them than are certain for someone older and more jaded. If Wittgenstein’s account is to be one of propositional certainty, what makes a proposition certain must be a property of that proposition in relation to a person, and not merely a property of the person themself.

Before moving on to other accounts of certainty, one more question needs consideration. Are grounds a necessary condition for a proposition to be doubtful? It seems that grounds are necessary for psychological doubt. There are four classes of propositions here. The first are those which I have only evidence for, and none against. I have no grounds, and indeed find it impossible, to doubt that I have hands, or that a person dies when their head is cut off. I am equally incapable of doubting the second class of propositions, those which I have no evidence for or against, such as “Genghis Khan’s favorite color was red.” I can and do doubt propositions of the third class, those which I have only evidence against, such as “2+2=5,” or “Alexander Hamilton was the third President of the United States.” The latter is psychologically doubtful to me in a way that the former are not.

There are some propositions which fit in none of the aforementioned categories. Those are the propositions which I have some evidence for, some against. For example, the proposition “I locked my door this morning” has as evidence in its favor that I remember locking my door this morning. It has against it my tendency to sometimes forget to lock my door while believing that I have. An adequate account of doubtfulness must determine whether all propositions of this type are doubtful, and if not, how to distinguish between which are and which aren’t.

Is propositional doubtfulness the same? In order to determine so we will need a more concrete conception of propositional doubt. However, I would like to suggest that, whatever account we end up with, it should align with our intuitions about psychological doubt. “I have a hand” should be a paradigmatic case of a proposition which is propositionally certain for me. “I locked my door this morning” should be a paradigmatic case of a proposition which is propositionally doubtful for me.

Note here that I have left out the second class of propositions, those which I have no evidence for or against. I have no evidential relationship with these propositions. They are neither psychologically certain for me nor psychologically doubtful for me. Accounts of propositional certainty and doubt should reflect this. Whatever account we end up with, it must involve some evidential threshold, and must allow for some propositions to be neither certain nor doubtful for a person.

A consequence of this view is that a conception of certainty along these lines cannot merely be the absence of grounds for doubt. Neither can a conception of propositional doubt merely be the absence of propositional certainty. Obviously we must have an account of one which does not make reference to the other, in order to avoid circularity. But both together must leave room for propositions to fit neither.

1. Other Conceptions of Certainty and Doubt

In his excellent paper “The Anatomy of Certainty”, Roderick Firth provides a map laying out three classes of uses of the word ‘certain’, which may overlap. They are:

1. truth-evaluating uses,
2. warrant-evaluating uses, and
3. testability-evaluating uses. (Firth, 7)

I will go through Firth’s illustrations of the first two uses in turn in order to further develop my own accounts of certainty and doubt.

To illustrate the truth-evaluating use, Firth draws on C. I. Lewis’s assertion that “the judgments we make about our own present sense experience ‘cannot be mistaken.’” (Firth, 7-8) Firth himself is somewhat unclear on what this is supposed to mean, and so it is difficult to say whether Lewis uses this in the same sense as Wittgenstein as meaning “an error in investigation.” He certainly takes it to apply to a much narrower class of propositions, only those which are the results of “present sense experience.” Wittgenstein includes among his hinge propositions the proposition that “the earth has been around a long time.” This is obviously not a judgment of present sense experience, so their uses must differ.

According to Firth, Lewis’s use of ‘certain’ as entailing that “A cannot be mistaken at t in believing S,” where S is a judgment made by A at t, entails the truth of S. This is what makes Lewis’s use truth-evaluating. This will be so of any account of certainty which “accept[s] the two maxims, ‘Certainty entails knowledge’ and ‘Knowledge entails truth.’” (Firth, 8) The second maxim is uncontroversial and tangential to this paper. The first is not, and bears further discussion.

What is the relationship between knowledge and certainty? On the reading of Wittgenstein given here, it cannot be the case that certainty entails knowledge. Wittgenstein counted it as objectively certain for himself that no man could go to the moon. At the time, he had no grounds to doubt it. Nevertheless, he could not have known it, since it is false. Any contextualist account of certainty cannot be using a truth-evaluating sense of certainty, since truth does not vary with context.

Given my above distinction between skepticism and doubt, this avenue is closed to me as well. If certainty entails knowledge, then in order for a proposition to be certain for a person, it must be immune to skepticism. Knowledge must be possible for this kind of certainty to get started. Clearly, in order for my distinction to remain intact, I cannot use ‘certain’ in this truth-evaluating sense.

Just as I have distinguished between two forms of ‘doubt’ (skepticism and ordinary doubt), I will now distinguish between two forms of certainty. The first I will term, following Klein (1981), “absolute certainty.” It is this form of certainty which is the target of skepticism, and which is meant in the truth-tracking use. Absolute certainty may entail knowledge, or just be knowledge.[[6]](#footnote-6) I am concerned with what we may call ‘ordinary certainty’, or certainty simpliciter. This aligns with my earlier distinction. Skepticism aims to undermine the possibility of knowledge, or absolute certainty. Doubt aims to deprive specific propositions of their certain status. Wittgensteinian hinge propositions, I suggested earlier, are immune to doubt but not to skepticism. These propositions are certain in the ordinary but not in the absolute sense.

The second kind of use of ‘certain’ is the warrant-evaluating use. A use is warrant-evaluating if it meets two requirements. First, that it allows us to deduce from S being certain for A at t that “S, made by A at t, has a certain specified degree of warrant (credibility, justification) for A at t.” (Firth, 9) Second, “the degree of warrant is identified by reference to a logically independent standard—a standard that is not defined either by reference to the warrant that S has for A at t or by reference to the warrant that not-S has for A at t.” (Ibid.) This use makes no requirement on the truth of the proposition, and so does not necessarily tie certainty to knowledge (although warrant-evaluating and truth-evaluating uses are not mutually exclusive). This use can therefore figure in to a conception of ordinary certainty.

I have already stated that certainty must involve some evidential threshold. It is not enough for a proposition to lack grounds for doubt. A proposition may be unwarranted for a person, or only weakly warranted. I do not want to say that such propositions are certain. Klein (1998) cites Unger’s statement that ‘certainty’ is “an absolute term. It does not come in degrees.” (Klein, 266) Whatever the evidential threshold is, it must be uniform across propositions, although not necessarily across people.

As Firth explains, there are many different ways of cashing out the level of warrant required, depending on what logically independent standard is used. In line with the absoluteness of certainty,[[7]](#footnote-7) most accounts take it to be some “maximum” level of warrant. (Firth, 10) Since the aim of this paper is to produce an account of propositional doubt, I do not wish to take too strong a stand on the exact standard of warrant needed for a proposition to be certain. The correct standard for ordinary certainty cannot be so high as to be unobtainable, but must be high enough to prevent certainty in undeserving cases. It must be as warranted as any proposition can be for that believer, to avoid degrees of certainty. And it must prevent the possibility of two incompatible propositions being certain for the same believer.

In endorsing a warrant requirement for certainty, I depart from Wittgenstein. According to Wittgenstein, hinge propositions admit no grounds. Consider §250:

250. My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it. That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it.

Moore’s argument fails precisely because his conclusion is certain. No evidence more certain could be produced in its favor.

I think this is too strong. The certainty of my handedness does not require me to lack nor prevent me from having evidence for it. Surely my current sense perception of handedness counts as evidence in its favor. Perhaps he means that the act of checking necessarily shifts the context, so that the proposition becomes suspect. But this reading of Wittgenstein would have the consequence that as soon as I think about my handedness, it is no longer certain for me, as I cannot think of it without gathering evidence in its favor. (Try separating thinking about your having a hand from your sensation of having a hand.) This is clearly absurd. Evidence in favor of a proposition makes it more likely to be certain, not less.

What does this discussion of warrant for certainty suggest for my account of doubt? I have already argued that doubt requires grounds. Propositions of the first class, such as “I have a hand,” are not doubtful for me. Nor are propositions of the second class, such “Genghis Khan’s favorite color was red.” The former is certain; the latter is not. Nevertheless, I have no grounds to doubt either. Third class propositions, such as “2+2=5,” and fourth class propositions, such as “I locked my door this morning,” are doubtful for me given my evidence.

Doubtfulness requires some level of warrant. What does this look like? First, ‘doubtful’ does not seem to be absolute in the same way that ‘certain’ is. That is, some propositions can be more doubtful than others. Propositions of the third class seem more doubtful than propositions of the fourth class. Perhaps all that is saying is that propositions of the third class are less warranted than propositions of the fourth class. But that cannot be all. Propositions of the second class are no more warranted than propositions of the third class; but third class propositions are doubtful, and second class propositions are not.

Are third class propositions doubtful? There is something to note here about one of the examples I have given of a third class proposition, “2+2=5,” which is that it is the negation of a certainty. That is, it is certain for me that “2+2≠5.” Into this category, those for which I have only evidence against, will fall the negation of every proposition which is certain for me. There is a sense of the word ‘doubtful’ in ordinary use, where ‘doubtful’ is taken to mean ‘uncertain’, in which propositions of this type are not doubtful at all. They are certainly false.

I have said before that I would like my account to track intuitions about doubt. Accounting for this intuition, however, leaves us with a picture that is slightly odd. It begins to look like a spectrum. First class propositions, which have only evidence in their favor (and for which that evidence meets the necessary threshold) and are candidates for certainty, lie at one end. Third class propositions, which have only evidence against and are certainly false, lie at the other end.[[8]](#footnote-8) In between are all propositions of the fourth class, such that I have some evidence for and some against.

One consequence of endorsing this view would be that we would require both a minimum and a maximum threshold for warrant for doubtfulness. A minimum threshold must rule out cases of positive certainty, or certain truth. A maximum threshold must rule out cases of negative certainty, or certain falsehood. This leaves us with the somewhat strange notion that in order for a proposition to be doubtful, one must have some evidence in its favor.

A possible benefit of this view is that it excludes second class propositions from doubtfulness. Propositions with no evidential warrant have no place on the evidential spectrum, and are thus excluded from this picture of doubtfulness.

I would like to endorse a modified version of this view. Doubtfulness admits degrees. Rather than certainly false, third class propositions are maximally doubtful. The picture of doubt and certainty as a spectrum remains, but one end is subsumed into the middle. This removes the need for a maximum threshold for doubt, while still allowing for the intuitive difference between third and fourth class propositions.

So what does it mean to have grounds for doubt? Klein (1998) suggests a picture of doubtfulness which is close to what we end up with here. “We can say that a proposition, *p*, is *subjectively doubtful* for *S* if and only if there is some proposition which *S* is not warranted in denying which is such that it lowers the warrant of *p* (even [to] the slightest degree).” (Klein, 267) This account puts a weak minimum threshold on doubt. The grounds for doubt must simply be such that S is not warranted in denying them. They need not be more warranted than the proposition they seek to undermine. The merest hint of controversy is enough to poison certainty.

Subjective doubtfulness is only half of Klein’s picture. The other half is objective doubtfulness: “We can say that a proposition is *objectively doubtful* for *S* if and only if there is some *true* proposition which if added to *S*’s beliefs lowers the warrant of *p* (even to the slightest degree).” (Ibid.) This combines with subjective doubtfulness to form Klein’s conception of certainty: “We can say that a proposition, *p*, is certain for *S* if and only if it is fully warranted and is neither subjectively nor objectively doubtful.” (Ibid.)

I think this picture is close to correct. However, Klein is clearly using ‘certain’ in both the truth-evaluating and the warrant-evaluating senses. These are not incompatible. But the requirement of objective immunity to doubt makes this a picture of absolute certainty. The true proposition “I might be a brain in a vat”[[9]](#footnote-9) when added to my belief system lowers the warrant of all ordinary propositions. I am looking for an account of ordinary certainty, where propositions such as “I have a hand” can be certain for a person. Thus Klein’s picture of objective doubtfulness is too strong for my purposes.

Unfortunately, Klein’s picture of subjective doubtfulness faces the same difficulty for my purposes. S is never warranted in denying the possibility of the skeptical scenario. Thus on this account every ordinary proposition is doubtful for S. What is missing is the requirement of grounds for doubt.

A slight modification of Klein’s account might serve. I offer this: A proposition, *p*, is doubtful for *S* if and only if there is some proposition or body of propositions *q* which *S* is warranted in *accepting* and which is such that it lowers the warrant of *p*. A proposition *p* is maximally doubtful for *S* if and only if there is some proposition or body of propositions *q* which *S* is warranted in accepting and which precludes all warrant for *p*.

A full account of doubt will require a greater discussion of warrant than I have given here. However, I think this account captures the crucial distinction I have made between skepticism and doubt. What poisons my certainty that I locked my door is the possibility that I did not, grounded by my past experience. What poisons my absolute certainty that I have a hand is the possibility that I am a brain in a vat, for which I have no evidence whatsoever.

An advantage of this view is that it easily sorts the four classes of propositions I have identified. First class propositions are not doubtful on this picture, while third and fourth class propositions are. Furthermore, second class propositions, which are doubtful on Klein’s account (I am not warranted in denying any propositions regarding Genghis Khan’s color preferences) are not doubtful on mine (I am not warranted in accepting any propositions regarding Genghis Khan’s color preferences).

One possible objection to my account is that it too easily conflates psychological and propositional doubt, or that its picture of the latter is too influenced by the former. I do think that a picture of doubtfulness should match our intuitions about what is doubtful in an ordinary, non-skeptical context. That this produces a picture of doubtfulness which matches what a reasonable person would reasonably doubt is, I hope, a feature, not a bug.

In this paper I have attempted to produce a satisfactory account of what it means for a proposition to be doubtful for a believer. Though I draw upon Wittgenstein, my account is not tied to contextualism. I have drawn a distinction between skepticism and doubt, and presented an account of doubt to match. In doing so, I hope to have rescued some certainty from the ashes of Descartes’ fireplace.

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1. The irony of a four hundred year gap between the introduction of the skeptical problem and the “common sense” reply depends upon one’s views regarding the commonness of common sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is hardly reassuring, since, as pointed out by Wright (2004), the warrant for the premise “I have a hand” crucially includes the conclusion “There is an external world,” the removal of which results in the collapse of the whole house of cards. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I am influenced in my discussion of Moore by the SEP article “George Edward Moore”, although my thoughts here were developed for the most part independently of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is not to say that they provide foundational justification for beliefs. Wittgenstein seems to be a coherentist on justification. “It is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another *mutual* support.” (OC §142, emphasis his) Hinge propositions are fixed by their place within a system of beliefs, and can lose their hinge status in different contexts. “Bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed, and in that system some things stand unshakeably fast and some are more or less liable to shift. What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it.” (OC §144) On the other hand, he occasionally makes statements which imply a foundationalist view: “To be sure there is justification; but justification comes to an end.” (OC §192) And: “At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not well-founded.” (OC §253) The only thing sure is that he’s not an infinitist. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. My original reading of Wittgenstein was that hinge propositions require no evidence, but can still be evidentially supported. After further consideration of Klein’s interpretation offered in written correspondence and in *Certainty* p.117-9, and Wittgenstein’s statements in OC §250 (quoted later), I believe Klein’s interpretation (that hinge propositions do not admit evidence) is the correct one. I distinguish my own account from Wittgenstein’s in this regard later on. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I remain neutral here on the exact relationship between absolute certainty, knowledge, and skepticism. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In Unger’s sense, not to be confused with absolute certainty. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Not every third class propositions fits this picture. “2+2=5” is the negation of a necessary truth, and thus necessarily false. “Alexander Hamilton was the third President of the United States” is only contingently false. Evidentially speaking, I treat them as the same. But intuitions here may vary. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. By which I mean, if I were a brain in a vat, my evidence would be exactly the same as if I were not envatted. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)