

# Wittgenstein's Wager: On [Absolute]

## Certainty

Noah Greenstein

May 9, 2022

### 1

We have all made mistakes. Some much worse than others. We should have known better, but failed to do so.

This suggests that mistakes have an epistemic dimension in that there was something to be known, even though we did not know it at the time. If we had, then we would never have made the decision — made the mistake — we did. Furthermore, we pay for our mistakes. Be it remorse, money, heartache, *et cetera*, there is a cost associated with making a mistake.

We can analyze this knowledge-cost relation of mistakes by comparing it to Ramsey's thesis on beliefs, that degree of belief can be estimated by how a person would bet on its outcome (Ramsey, 1926/1960, p. 182). That is, imagine a person believes it more than twice as likely than not to rain tomorrow. They might give you two to one odds to bet against them, that it will be a clear day.

While we can represent our beliefs with these potential wagers, the difference with knowledge is that we have already placed our bets. If I claim to know directions to a place, but I do not and you get lost thanks to my bad advice, I will lose your trust. You will no longer believe my directions, and perhaps even start to doubt other things I say I know. By claiming to know, I staked my reputation as a guarantor. When it turned out I was mistaken, my reputation suffered. Knowledge, then, implies a prior commitment: when we know something, we are invested in its truth, and can lose this investment if we are mistaken. Knowledge is to prior investment as belief is to future speculation.

As mentioned above, some mistakes are worse than others, carrying a correspondingly large cost. Since this cost is determined in relation to our knowledge and commitments, how large can it get?

Imagine asking, along with Wittgenstein (1969) in *On Certainty* §660, "How could I be making a mistake about my name...?" Most of us have had the same

given name our entire lives. We had it during our childhood and throughout our education. It is on official government documents and represents us professionally. It gets used with every new person we meet and across the entire world via the internet.

Now look at your hands and imagine that you have an extra finger. Moreover, it is not only you, but everyone has an extra finger on their hands. People tell you that this is just how humans are and have always been: we are born that way. How could you have made such a mistake, miscounted your fingers as a child, never noticing other people's hands, being oblivious to such basic biology every time you picked something up, typed, or ate some food?

It isn't so much that our names<sup>1</sup> or how many fingers we have are fundamental facts of the universe; they could easily have been otherwise. However, they held consistent throughout every other experience in our lives and were integrated into those experiences. Every meaningful day or occasion, and all the mundane ones, likely involved both our names and hands. To be mistaken about these sorts of

---

<sup>1</sup>I do not doubt that people sometimes cannot recall their name, perhaps as a result of a stroke. However, we usually take this as a sign of mental illness or other trauma, that is, a loss of rationality. Though it may not be a complete loss, examples of this sort lend credence to the thesis that such knowledge has a serious cost associated with it but is not the result of a mistake. My thanks to a referee for raising this issue.

things would imply we were confused during every such instance, compounding the size of the error over the course of our lives. It would be, therefore, grounds to discredit our entire personal history. If we were so mistaken, there would be nothing left, not even rational thought. As Wittgenstein says, "...Here a doubt would seem to drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos," (Wittgenstein, 1969, §613).

We can represent this idea as a wager between knowledge and skepticism, similar to Pascal's Wager. There are four options, broken into two sets of cases: either hands exist or they do not, and we can either claim knowledge or skepticism of them. If hands do *not* exist, then we will have some small benefit for being accurate in our claim of knowledge or skepticism. Likewise if hands *do* exist and we claim knowledge of them, then we gain that finite benefit. But if hands do exist and we are skeptical of them, then the situation is different. Instead of a finite benefit or loss, the loss is *infinite*, as this doubt would take everything else down with it. See Table 1, 'The Epistemic Wager' below.

The result of these sorts of decision matrices is that the infinite option dominates all the finite ones. The danger represented by the infinite negative of skepticism about hands means we have to avoid it at all cost, as the finite benefits will never be sufficient to counter it. This immediately pushes us off the bottom row,

	<b>Hands Exist</b>	<b>Hands Do Not Exist</b>
<b>Knowledge</b>	finite +	finite –
<b>Skepticism</b>	<i>infinite –</i>	finite +

Table 1: The Epistemic Wager

into to the top row: knowledge of hands. Hence our only rational option is to claim knowledge of hands.<sup>2</sup>

This argument can be re-run for any number of everyday, ‘Moorean’ facts,<sup>3</sup> allowing us to identify a stock of core knowledge. Our bodies, the name you’ve used your whole life, sky, sunshine, rain, *et cetera*.

Granted, there will be edge cases, and there is no defining characteristic that easily identifies which facts count as such. Still, we can look to how the above argument is run for a general sense of where to start. The rug of rationality is pulled out from under us, so to speak, when a certain fact is so integrated into the

---

<sup>2</sup>Similar to Pascal’s Wager, the Epistemic Wager has the result that we should merely claim knowledge, but cannot force us to actually believe our claim. The sting here is diminished, though, as this is sufficient to block claims of skepticism, and the wager would count as evidence in itself that the claim should be believed.

<sup>3</sup>‘Moorean facts’ are so called as they are typical of examples G.E. Moore used in his “Proof of an External World” and “A Defense of Common Sense”, both in Moore (1993).

rest of our lives that its failure would signal the failure of everything else. Facts get this way by being part of so many of our experiences. Every new experience that, say, includes your hands, compounds upon every other experience involving hands, increasing their epistemic certitude. After a whole life where most experiences involved hands, at least peripherally, having a doubt about their existence doesn't make sense. Things of this sort, that are integrated into our lives via being *compounded* by experience after experience, are then candidates for inclusion into our core knowledge.

Insofar as compounded everyday experiences are the sorts of things that everyone has and anyone over a few years of age will have basic agreement about, these facts are universal. We can look to our experience to find them, and check that they fulfill the conditions of the Epistemic Wager.<sup>4</sup> We now, therefore, have a set of incontrovertible facts that constitute our core knowledge.

## 2

**Is it really infinitely bad?** I imagine that an intrepid skeptic might wish to take the wager — to forsake such knowledge as their name — in order to test whether

---

<sup>4</sup>Note that these facts being subject to the Epistemic Wager is a mark of their status as core knowledge; the wager is descriptive of them, it is not a knowledge test in itself.

the loss is truly infinite. But consider that we learn our names along with our basic vocabulary and grammar. So if we are mistaken about our names, we are just as mistaken about our fundamental linguistics. Let's assume that independent of the entire history of our words and thoughts, and how to use them, there is still some rationality. With what, though, would a question be formulated? Without a basic vocabulary we are caught in a skepticism induced aphasia. Perhaps such an epistemological quietism is skeptically virtuous, but if skeptics are muzzled in the process, I am happy to grant them their silence.

**What if people lack imagination?** It isn't just edge cases that might be confused for knowledge, but our own misappraisal of the Epistemic Wager that could lead us astray. If we have over-relied on certain concepts, say religious, political, or philosophical ideologies, then, due to our own shortsightedness, we won't be able to imagine life without them. We then would have an epistemology skewed by ideas that should not be counted as knowledge. As shortsightedness and lack of imagination always seem easier to spot in others, and only in hindsight for ourselves, this presents a significant worry in our ability to identify knowledge.

Since there is no cure for hubris, the only defense available is a healthy dose of epistemic humility: "I can't be making a mistake,—but some day, rightly or

wrongly, I may think I realize that I was not competent to judge” (Wittgenstein, 1969, §645). We should therefore be conservative in what we call knowledge, or at least ‘core knowledge’, and be careful when straying too far from this epistemology’s everyday roots.

**What of Descartes’ Demon, drugs, or dreams?** Still, might we all not really be speaking, or not really be reading, as our entire world could be some dream, Matrix or grand illusion? Could we all already be fooled by Descartes’ Evil Genius, and so universally aphasic, no one ever having really spoken their own name or read a word on a page?

The understanding of reality described here is through being able to think, speak, read, and act in the everyday world, to live here, whatever that may be. A skeptical fantasy is a scenario that circumvents any claim that these things exist, and declares itself real.

But in what sense does the skeptical fantasy claim to be *real* or *true*? If the skeptic is using “reality” as above, then that which is real or true is that which has passed the Epistemic Wager, that which cannot be rationally doubted: hands, your own name, *et cetera*. So, if they have agreed to use the definition of knowledge given, then the skeptic has *already conceded* that they cannot be skeptical about



cases of knowledge presented.

Else skeptics are using *real* in some alien way, having severed any connection to the everyday world, foregoing any sense of common reality: reality has nothing to do with integration into our lives. But if this is so, then they are asking us to treat our definition of reality as unreality. Of course they are free to have their own account of reality, but then they have merely presented an alternate reality — a fiction — and have not presented a skeptical hypothesis at all. No one treats *Harry Potter* as a threat to knowledge. Unless a skeptic can undermine the above, given sense of knowledge, they have not achieved their goal.

Therefore the skeptic fails in their ambition: either they under-reach and preserve knowledge, or over-reach and lose any claim to our reality.<sup>5</sup>

**Has too much been ruled out?** Only the basic fundamentals, like the rudimentary linguistics or biology mentioned above, count as knowledge so described. Most of our schooling and all modern research, regardless of discipline, would not qualify. As so much of what we consider knowledge fails under this epistemology, it could be seen as too minimal, and perhaps even backwards-facing.

This is a fair criticism. The goal here was not to give a full epistemology, but to establish a new understanding of core knowledge, a secure basis from which to

---

<sup>5</sup>The arguments made here were inspired by Bouwsma (1949).

build. Extending this sort of integrationist perspective is a goal for future work, with an eye to finding new applications and establishing connections to other epistemologies.

That said, Wittgenstein's discussion at the end of *On Certainty* (1969) seems to go beyond just core facts, to core experiences. He says

675. If someone believes that he has flown from America to England in the last few days, then, I believe, he cannot be making a *mistake*.

And just the same if someone says that he is at this moment sitting at a table writing.

676. "But even if in such cases I can't be mistaken, isn't it possible that I am drugged?" If I am and if the drug has taken my consciousness, then I am not now really talking and thinking. I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming. Someone who, dreaming, says "I am dreaming", even if he speaks audibly in doing so, is no more right than if he said in his dream "it is raining", while it was in fact raining. Even if his dream were actually connected with the noise of the rain.

These passages indicate that basic things like traveling or sitting at one's desk

or listening to the rain are not the sort of things we can be mistaken about.<sup>6</sup> This perspective makes sense in light of the above support of Moorean facts as these are the *situations* in which Moorean facts take place. We have traveled from place to place and sat at our desk innumerable times, and they are often involved in many other experiences, just like when we are using our hands and names. So, if we include the experiences that surround unmistakable Moorean facts — working at our desks, daily social interactions, moving ourselves around, *et cetera* — then the locus of this epistemology is a small picture of daily life. While still minimal, including these everyday experiences provides this epistemology a much fuller and more rounded set of phenomena from which to draw.

**One more justificatory log on Gettier’s fire?** One of the benefits of this approach is that it is Gettier-resistant. Moorean facts are inherently stand-alone, and do not obviously permit formal logical reflection. “Here is a hand or Brown is in Barcelona” is not a Moorean fact. But even if logical reflection is allowed, say between multiple Moorean facts, the usual Gettier examples would not qualify as such facts: “Jones owns a Ford,” or “The person who will get the job has 10 coins in their pocket,” are not Moorean facts.

---

<sup>6</sup>This is not to deny that we can do all these things in a dream, but that we can distinguish between being sober and awake while doing them, and then not.

A more complicated example might be of a barn-inspector who has spent their whole life inspecting barns, and hence knows what barns look like. Could they be fooled by a barn facade? Of course, but not on closer inspection. The doubt could only exist at a distance, and seeing something off in the distance is clearly something we can be mistaken about. If anything, this, that ‘we can mistake things at a distance’ is a Moorean fact; a single instance of seeing something off in the distance would never qualify as a candidate for the Epistemic Wager. Granted, this only answers a single objection, and more counter-examples will have to be taken on a case by case basis.

The goal of this paper was to provide an account of core knowledge that could serve as the basis for a wider epistemology. To that end, the Epistemic Wager was given to distinguish instances of core knowledge and the idea of compounded everyday experience used to seek out and understand why this knowledge is core knowledge. While the theory is minimal, common objections can be handled, and a picture of the kind of everyday epistemology that will emerge was described.

Acknowledgement: Written in memoriam of Jaakko Hintikka.

## References

Bouwsma, Oets Kolk. 1949. Descartes' Evil Genius. *The Philosophical Review*, 58(2), 141–151.

Moore, George Edward. 1993. *G. E. Moore: Selected Writings*. Routledge.

Ramsey, Frank Plumpton. 1926/1960. Truth and Probability. *Pages 156–198 of: Braithwaite, R.B. (ed), The Foundations of Mathematics and other Logical Essays*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1969. *On Certainty*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.  
G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (eds), Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (trans).