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Radical Scepticism, How-Possible Questions and Modest Transcendental Arguments

Ju Wang

School of Philosophy, Fudan University, Shanghai, China

ABSTRACT
According to radical scepticism, knowledge of the external world is impossible. Transcendental arguments are supposed to be anti-sceptical, but can they provide a satisfying response to radical scepticism? Especially, when radical scepticism is cast as posing a how-possible question, there is a concern that transcendental arguments are neither sufficient nor necessary for answering such question. In light of this worry, I argue that we can take a modest transcendental argument as a stepping stone for a diagnostic anti-sceptical proposal, and I use a Wittgensteinian modest transcendental argument to illustrate my point.

KEYWORDS Sceptical paradox; Wittgenstein; hinge commitments; how-possible questions; diagnosis

1. Introduction
Transcendental arguments are supposed to be anti-sceptical, but can transcendental arguments provide a satisfying response to radical scepticism? In what follows, I take radical scepticism to amount to the thesis that our knowledge of the external world is impossible. Following Pritchard (2015, 15), I present the sceptical paradox as follows:1

The Sceptical Paradox

(1) One cannot know that one is not a brain in a vat (BIV).
(2) If one knows that one is reading a book, then one is in a position to know that one is not a BIV.
(3) One knows that one is reading a book.

Each claim in the paradox looks prima facie plausible, but they are jointly incompatible. For (1), if one were a BIV, then one would have subjectively indistinguishable experience from one's ordinary experience, therefore one cannot discriminate the two scenarios. The second claim is licenced by the closure principle, which says that one's knowledge can be extended via competent
deduction. The third claim is an example of everyday knowledge we think we have. Formulated this way, the sceptical paradox doesn’t involve any suspicious claim, at least at first sight; rather it hinges on nothing more than platitudes that we find intuitive. That is to say, by our own epistemic standards, we have no reason to reject any claim, but holding them together will land us in a predicament. Therefore, in order to get rid of this paradox, at least one claim in this paradox needs to be rejected. However, there are two approaches to solving this paradox. We can provide an obstacle-override response. To be specific, we can admit that the difficulty involved in this paradox is genuine and we must revise our intuition such that we can find a way out of the predicament. Alternatively, we can provide an obstacle-dissolving response. This strategy takes the difficulty involved in the paradox to be spurious. That is to say, there are some problematic assumptions disguising as pre-theoretic intuitions. Therefore, it is unnecessary to revise our intuition in order to deal with the sceptical challenge. Instead, we only need to reveal the problematic assumptions behind the paradox and thereby scepticism will disappear. Crucially, an obstacle-dissolving response involves a diagnosis as to why we are lead into such a predicament. With such a diagnosis in play, we get intellectual relief. For, we can be shown that what cause the predicament are some faulty theories rather than our innocent epistemic platitudes. And if our default epistemic status is innocent, any theoretical revision is therefore unnecessary. With this strategical concern in mind, a diagnostic obstacle-dissolving approach to resolving radical scepticism, so long as it is viable, would be preferable.

Transcendental arguments, as presented by Stern (1999, 2–4), have the following features:

A: That one thing X is a necessary condition for the possibility of something else Y, so that the latter cannot obtain without the former.

B: The nature of the subject matter Y is to be experience, language, belief and intentionality.

C: X is to have some anti-sceptical effect.

With these three features in mind, we can roughly sketch how transcendental arguments work. A transcendental argument starts from a premise Y which the sceptic will accept, and then via a priori reasoning we arrive at a conclusion about some necessary conditions for (the possibility of) Y, namely X. That is to say, Y cannot obtain unless X is satisfied. Therefore, if we grant the existence of Y in the first place, we must be rationally committed to the existence of X. Note that the anti-sceptical effect of X is special, for the sceptic has no plausible way to reject it. On the one hand, she is committed to the premise Y, so she cannot challenge the premise in the first place; on the other hand, if she were to follow the argument, she would be rationally committed to the conclusion, because Y is impossible unless X obtains. Suppose the sceptic denies the conclusion, she will be accused of not the falsity of her claim, but rather the inconsistency
of her position and the unintelligibility of her claim. In this sense, scepticism is labelled as self-defeating and therefore simply cannot get off the ground.\textsuperscript{5}

With transcendental arguments so presented, it seems that they can play a significant role in arguing against radical scepticism. However, this is a demanding task, for we have witnessed various objections to transcendental arguments. In particular, Stroud (1968) famously argues against ambitious transcendental arguments.\textsuperscript{6} Ambitious transcendental arguments are arguments that aim to establish a non-psychological fact from an undisputed psychological fact via a claim of the form ‘X is a necessary condition for (the possibility of) Y’. In light of his objection, some transcendentalists tend to advance transcendental arguments modestly.\textsuperscript{7}

Modest transcendental arguments are arguments that involve a necessity claim between only psychological facts. That is, instead of arguing that X is a necessary condition for (the possibility of) Y, modest transcendentalists merely argue that our commitment to X is a necessary condition for (the possibility of) Y. Hence, whether X is true is not what modest transcendentalists should bother about. However, even the modest variant faces objections to the extent that we are left wondering what the epistemological significance of adopting modest transcendental arguments is and whether modest transcendental arguments can contribute to one’s anti-sceptical proposal.\textsuperscript{8} In this paper, I will consider Cassam’s objection. To anticipate, I will argue that modest transcendental arguments are stepping stones for diagnostic anti-sceptical proposals.

Here is my plan: in section 2, I discuss Cassam’s objection to the idea that transcendental arguments can answer how-possible questions; in section 3, I propose an alternative understanding of the role of (modest) transcendental arguments in anti-scepticism; after that I provide an example to illustrate my proposal in section 4; I have some concluding remarks in section 5.

2. Cassam’s objection

Cassam (2007) develops a Multi-Level Response (hereafter MLR for short) to answer how-possible questions, and he argues that transcendental arguments are not suitable for answering how-possible questions.\textsuperscript{9} In this part, I will examine his argument against transcendental arguments.

What are how-possible questions? How-possible questions are usually put this way: ‘how is X possible?’ However, even though there is a similar form in posing how-possible questions, I think there are different types of how-possible questions. Imagine in a snooker match, John Higgins lost to a player who plays snooker for the first time. A snooker fan Ross would ask ‘how is that possible?’ This situation seems impossible because John Higgins is a top snooker player, and how could he lose his match against someone who is totally new to the sport? What is impossible in this situation is not the result, for it has been the case; rather it is that a satisfying explanation of this result seems impossible.
After all, there are obstacles that a potential explanation needs to counter. For instance, how can a top player in snooker play so badly that he loses to a novice? Therefore, a response to this snooker how-possible question needs to solve this obstacle.

In contrast, there is a different kind of how-possible question. Imagine someone says that the best runner can finish a 100m sprint in less than 9 seconds. Given that current world record is 9.58 seconds and that a slight improvement in 100m sprint (0.1s) is very difficult, we would ask how it is possible. In this case, we also find obstacles: a big gap between our current world record and the target, and the difficulty in running much faster than our current highest running speed. In order to answer this how-possible question, one needs to explain how we can tackle these problems and how we can make it happen.

In order not to confuse these two types of how-possible questions, I will call them type A how-possible questions and type B how-possible questions respectively. Both types of how-possible question are obstacles-dependent, for we ask how-possible questions when there appears to be obstacles to the existence of X. That is to say, if there is no perceived obstacle, a how-possible question simply does not arise. However, type A how-possible questions and type B how-possible questions are different.

As to type A how-possible questions (such as the snooker match case), there is a clear implication that the asker of ‘How is X possible?’ has no doubt about the existence of X. What is at issue is how the obstacles to X are overcome or dissipated so that a seemingly impossible task X becomes factual. The point of an answer is not to dispel any doubt about the existence of x (though it will be helpful). Rather, the point is to show how we deal with the obstacles to the existence of X. A satisfactory answer to type A how-possible questions will not establish something new but secure what we already have, and what we can expect from such an answer is only an explanation of how X remains possible when facing several seemingly insuperable obstacles. For type B how-possible questions (such as the 100m sprint case), the questioner of ‘How is X possible?’ has doubt about the existence of X. An answer is expected to address such doubts, and the main point of the answer is to put such doubt to rest by telling us how we can make X happen (this will inevitably involve an explanation of how the obstacles can be overcome/dissolved). Therefore, a satisfying answer to type B how-possible questions will help establish something new.

In epistemology, we ask various how-possible questions. For instance, we ask how knowledge of the external world is possible (HPek for short). We ask HPek because there are apparent obstacles to the existence of knowledge of the external world. Obstacles can be found in the closure-based sceptical argument or the underdetermination-based sceptical argument. For instance, one obstacle is that in order to justify our everyday beliefs, we are required to rule out the sceptical hypothesis. But we cannot know the denial of the sceptical hypothesis, therefore our knowledge of the external world seems impossible.
Interestingly, the sceptical challenge can be construed as posing a how-possible question (HPek) to us. However, HPek is construed as a type A how possible question. To see why, let us recall our discussion of the sceptical paradox. Radical scepticism trades on nothing more than platitudes, so it is paradoxical that by our own epistemological standards we don’t have knowledge of the external world. This result shows that we try to give a philosophical explanation as to why we have knowledge of the external world, but this explanation is problematic because it arrives at a paradox. In this case, pre-theoretically we take ourselves to have knowledge of the external world, but our philosophical explanation fails to account for the legitimacy of this pre-theoretical commitment. Therefore, we don’t question whether knowledge about the external world is possible, what we are asking is how it is possible. For type A how-possible questions, what is at issue is not whether x is possible (it is actual), rather it is how x is possible given apparent obstacles. So, we can see the close relationship between type A how-possible questions and radical scepticism. Accordingly, any satisfactory response to the sceptical challenge would also be a good response to HPek. What is an appropriate response to HPek then?

According to Cassam (2007, 10), a Multiple-Levels Response (MLR) to how-possible questions consists of three levels. Level 1 recognizes a means which makes the kind of knowledge in question possible, and Level 2 is the obstacle-removing level, at which all obstacles regarding the acquisition of knowledge in question are overcome or dissipated. At the final Level, some enabling conditions for the means to achieve the cognitive end are identified. At means level, a means is identified to illustrate how a specific kind of knowledge is usually achieved. While at obstacle-moving level, the alleged difficulty is dealt with in order to secure the possibility of the knowledge in question. At level three, enabling conditions are revealed to make knowledge which is merely not impossible at Level 2 into possible.

I don’t intend to question whether MLR can provide a good response to how-possible questions. Rather, my focus is on whether Cassam is right in claiming that transcendental arguments fail to answer how-possible questions. Can transcendental arguments respond to HPek then? Cassam holds that transcendental arguments do not answer how-possible questions at all. In general, he puts his objection as follows:

[I]t’s still not plausible that such [transcendental] arguments are either necessary or sufficient for the purposes of answering questions like (HPek). They aren’t sufficient because they don’t identify means of knowing or overcome obstacles to knowing by those means. They aren’t necessary because we can explain how knowledge is possible by identifying ways or means of knowing that aren’t necessary conditions. (Cassam 2007, 61–62)

Core to his argument against transcendental arguments is the distinction between means and necessary conditions. Cassam (2007, 52) appeals to his
London-Paris travel case to distinguish means from necessary conditions in answering a how possible question. Imagine one asks ‘how it is possible to travel from London to Paris in less than three hours’, you might answer ‘by taking a plane or catching the Eurostar’. In this context, the answer is appropriate and sufficient in that it indeed specifies one way to make this travel possible. Or we can put it this way, one means that meets all the requirements is picked out in this actual world. And it also makes sense that if one gives an answer by appealing to some necessary conditions for this travel, say ‘Paris and London are two different places’, then apparently the questioner would find the answer very odd. For, even though the answer might not be wrong, it is too general to be relevant in the context. Therefore, the very obstacle involved in this context remains unresolved. It seems that what underlies the exchange is the idea that a good answer to a how-possible question is to identify a means to achieve that end rather than offer necessary conditions.

From this case, Cassam takes it to be a central weakness that transcendental arguments only offer necessary conditions to how possible questions, and this is why the response provided by transcendental arguments is insufficient. In general, there is a *generality* problem for transcendental arguments. According to Cassam (2007, 64–65), the identification of necessary conditions for empirical knowledge, must display the right level of generality. That is to say, transcendental arguments must stop at the right level. If it uncovers some logically necessary conditions for empirical knowledge, such as truth, belief, then it would be excessively general and cannot properly capture necessary conditions for empirical knowledge. This is because even if we have belief or truth, we are still far from having empirical knowledge. Also, recall the structure of a modest transcendental argument, the conclusion X is said to be indispensable for the premise Y to be possible. However, it seems that we are only being told that X must be possible, but we are none the wiser as to the best way of overcoming or dissipating apparent obstacles so that X becomes possible.

Also, since the identification of a specific means would suffice to answer a how-possible question, our uncovering of the necessary conditions will be unnecessary, and this is why transcendental arguments are unnecessary for answering how-possible questions. For example, to know an empirical proposition that P, such as that the mug is chipped, one can see that the mug is chipped or feel that the mug is chipped or hear from someone that the mug is chipped. None of these ways is a necessary condition for empirical knowledge, but any of them would be sufficient to answer a how-possible question. Note that by identifying these means of acquiring empirical knowledge, one must also overcome/dissipate relevant obstacles (level 2) and specify enabling conditions for a specific means (level 3). For without these two parts, identifying a means of knowing would be insufficient for answering a how-possible question.

To sum up, for Cassam, transcendental arguments are neither sufficient nor necessary for answering how-possible questions. And if our goal is to
answer how-possible questions, transcendental arguments would not be an ideal option.

3. Reconsider modest transcendental arguments

After reviewing Cassam’s view on transcendental arguments and how-possible questions, I will give two remarks in this part. To be specific, (1) I agree with Cassam that transcendental arguments fail to answer how possible questions, but I contend that this is so because transcendental arguments aim to quiet rather than answer how-possible questions; (2) Further, I argue that modest transcendental arguments are a stepping stone for a diagnostic anti-sceptical proposal. In particular, modest transcendental arguments reveal our commitments and undermine the sceptical challenge.

A key assumption in Cassam’s view is that the sceptical challenge is a how-possible question, and since transcendental arguments are anti-sceptical, they need to address the how-possible question. I have shown that we can interpret the sceptical challenge as a type A how-possible question. But, when it comes to how to be anti-sceptical, there are basically two options. One can prove that the sceptical conclusion is wrong and establish that our knowledge of the external world is possible. Alternatively, one can undermine reasons that are adduced by the sceptics to render our knowledge of the external world impossible. Further, as the sceptic is posing a paradox, we find that the obstacle is posed by some deeply seated assumptions held by us. For the former approach, in order to show that knowledge of the external world is possible, one has to spell out by what means this kind of knowledge is achieved. This condition is necessary because even if it is wrong that P is impossible, it does not amount to that P is possible. At least, if the argument that P is impossible is wrong, then we are only assured that a certain obstacle should not stand in the way to the existence of P. But if we lack a means to achieve P, the possibility of P will remain very dim.

As to the latter approach, the focus is to undermine challenges to the possibility of knowledge of the external world. This approach has the core idea that if the sceptical challenge (or the how-possible question) is ill-formed, then what is essential is to find out what is wrong with this way of thinking. It might be useful to figure out an actual way of achieving the knowledge in question, but this way of response would be disadvantageous in two aspects.

First, when we identify a specific means of knowing, one needs to first argue for its validity against the sceptical challenge. The reason is that if this way of knowing, say our visual perception, has been called into doubt, our reliance upon it would be dialectically inappropriate. After all, we are using a method that the sceptic finds problematic to achieve knowledge, this response to the sceptic would be circular. Even if this means of knowing has not been called into doubt, say epistemic seeing, we would still wonder whether we have the
proposed means of knowing and whether this is a way of knowing actually used by everyday subjects. Accordingly, a lot of work needs to be done in order to justify a specific means of knowing.

Second, if we are dealing with an ill-formed question, what can be better than exposing the faulty assumptions that lead us into the predicament? Type A questions are interesting in that we have a positive answer to the question whether X is possible, but when facing some apparent difficulties, we cannot explain how X is possible. And our inability to explain may further drive us to doubt whether X is indeed possible. Accordingly, if these difficulties are illusory, why should we opt for doing extra work to reiterate that we have knowledge of the external world, rather than just expel the illusion and bring our knowledge of the external world back to its default position? Crucially, since a how-possible question is asked pointedly, if there is no obstacle in the first place, there is simply no how-possible question waiting to be answered. Motivated by this idea, transcendentalists can even intend not to answer a how-possible question, what they could do is to quiet our eagerness to answer a how-possible question, especially when this question is raised badly. After all, to answer a bad question is pointless and time-wasting. It is wrong to raise a bad question, and it is further wrong to take this bad question seriously and try to answer it. I think this is the primary reason why transcendental arguments fail to answer a how-possible question. Cassam is right in submitting that merely specifying necessary conditions is not sufficient for answering how-possible questions, and that by identifying a means to achieving knowledge would suffice for answering how-possible questions. However, their failures to answer how-possible questions do not imply that they have nothing to do with a how-possible question. Importantly, they prevent us from going further in the wrong direction.

Then, what can transcendental arguments do to quiet an ill-formed how-possible question? I think this task can be fulfilled in two steps. First, we need transcendental arguments to reveal our fundamental theoretical commitments. Second, we use the fundamental commitment to undermine the sceptical reasoning. If the undermining move is successful, then we manage to demonstrate why certain putative obstacles are not genuine and therefore our worry about it is misplaced.

This application of transcendental arguments presupposes that transcendental arguments can be diagnostic. One might think that transcendental arguments are ambitious because they are used to refute the sceptic directly, and the sceptic is refuted by proving that the sceptical thesis is wrong. However, this way of understanding transcendental arguments faces major problems. Also, not all transcendental arguments are ambitious, so there is a possibility that a transcendental argument can be construed modestly so that its goal is not to prove the falsity of a sceptical claim. Rather, it aims to establish our theoretical commitment, given certain assumptions we already have. Regarding the diagnostic feature of transcendental argument, Stern (1999, 5) writes:
Namely, of demonstrating the artificiality of the constraints within which the sceptic is working, and which he has inherited from the epistemological tradition of which he is part. In overturning scepticism, therefore, a transcendental argument properly conceived is not meant to establish some truth that otherwise we would not be sure of, but (more negatively) to undercut the ‘large piece of philosophizing’ on which the sceptical position is built, but which the sceptic leaves unquestioned.

As Stern says, transcendental arguments undercut assumptions that underpin the sceptical reasoning. In particular, the sceptical reasoning is displayed in the sceptical paradox. However, notice that in the sceptical paradox, all claims are said to be intuitive and the sceptic does not put forward any special claim. What they do is to display three intuitive but incompatible claims that we endorse. With this point in mind, I think we need to use modest transcendental argument in a different way. Crucially, there isn’t a specific sceptical claim for a modest transcendental argument to argue against. Thereby, we would miss the point if we aim to challenge the sceptical position. Unfortunately, this is a popular view about how transcendental arguments work. Recall the anti-sceptical character of transcendental arguments. The core idea is to show an inconsistency between one’s endorsement of a well-accepted premise and one’s rejection of a conclusion, because the conclusion is a necessary condition for the possibility of the premise. In general, if such an inconsistency is found to reside in a philosophical position, then this position would be implausible. However, since the sceptic trades on nothing more than our own claims, this way of showing inconsistency would not be helpful. After all, it only deepens our worry about our epistemic status. What is further required is to find out where we go amiss and why we are lead into the sceptical paradox. With this requirement in mind, it would be wise not to expect a modest transcendental argument to do all anti-sceptical work. Instead, we should integrate it into a diagnostic anti-sceptical proposal.

How to do this? I think this task can be achieved in three steps: first, we assume that all claims in the sceptical paradox are equally plausible, so rejecting any of them would be implausible. Second, we identify some assumptions that underlie the paradox. For instance, that we have content-ful beliefs, we have meaningful language or that we can epistemically evaluate our beliefs. By doing this, we go further back and see whether scepticism ensues before we encounter the paradox. Third, we use the assumption to be the premise of a modest transcendental argument and then find its necessary conditions. When the three steps are finished, we proceed to check whether the necessary condition is inconsistent with any claim in the paradox. If so, the initial plausibility of a certain claim will be undermined by this process. For at least we have good reasons to take this claim as less plausible when compared with other claims in the paradox. After that, we can reject one claim and escape from the paradox. However, in the worst case, if there is no inconsistency after our analysis, we
would lack reasons to reject any single claim, and therefore the paradox will remain insuperable.

4. An example

In what follows, I will give an example to illustrate my proposed account of modest transcendental argument. This example is primarily illuminated by Wittgenstein and Pritchard (2015).

Recall Stroud’s central claim that modest transcendental arguments establish indispensable beliefs, and indispensable beliefs enjoy a special status: they are invulnerable. I think we can develop this idea by further specifying in what sense a belief is indispensable. In particular, I propose methodological indispensability. As I have noticed that a belief is always indispensable relative to a certain premise X that we have granted, I roughly put methodological indispensability as follows:

Methodological indispensability:

A belief that P is methodologically indispensable (relative to X) if the practice that underlies our endorsing X essentially requires that we believe that P.15

Regarding methodological indispensability, we can take it to be practice-based indispensability. I suggest that we take our endorsement of X as a product of a practice. For convenience, we plug in the premise that we have beliefs. This premise is arguably the result of our epistemic practice. Our epistemic practice consists of attributing beliefs, forming beliefs, withholding beliefs, suspension of judgement, etc.

In our epistemic practices, we attribute beliefs to ourselves and others, so the claim that we have beliefs becomes undeniable to us. And if the belief that P is methodologically necessary for our epistemic practice, then we must believe that P for the purpose of retaining our epistemic practice and the undeniable premise that we have beliefs.

What follows from methodological indispensability is methodological invulnerability. A belief enjoys methodological invulnerability in the sense that we could not discover that p is false consistently with our engaging in the practice within which we could possibly discover its falsity. Put in another way, we can only determine whether p is false by engaging in our epistemic practice. However, believing that p is methodologically indispensable to our epistemic practice in the first place, so we cannot stop believing that P while engaging in the epistemic practice. Therefore, to discover that p is false while relying on our epistemic practice is inconsistent. And p, because of its methodological necessity,16 is (methodologically) invulnerable to our rational evaluation.
We find this line of thinking in Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1969):

That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend upon the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (OC, §§341–3)

In this quotation, Wittgenstein is offering a conception of the structure of reasons. On this picture, our rational evaluations can take place only if some propositions are exempt from doubt. These propositions are what Wittgenstein calls ‘hinge propositions.’ This view is strongly supported by reflecting on our everyday epistemic practices of giving reasons. In our everyday epistemic evaluations, we adduce reasons for our beliefs and doubts. Our reasons can provide rational support only if they are more certain than those they are supposed to support, otherwise we tend to be more suspicious of the reasons. However, giving reasons must come to an end, or otherwise there would be an infinite regress. The end of our rational support is something undoubted, i.e. hinge propositions. They must be there in order for our epistemic evaluations to take place. In this sense we are committed to hinge propositions, or call them hinge commitments.

And the requirement that an evaluation context have hinge propositions is non-negotiable. It is not the case that some rational evaluations rest upon hinge commitments and some do not. Rather, without hinge commitments, our epistemic evaluations just cannot happen. As is stressed by Wittgenstein, this is the logic of our rational evaluation. I suggest we interpret this point as saying that in order for our rational evaluation to take place, hinge commitments are methodologically indispensable. We can illustrate this point by taking our rational evaluation as an epistemic practice, and then since this epistemic practice essentially requires hinge propositions, hinge propositions become methodological necessity for this practice.

One might think that our hinge commitments will naturally become indispensable beliefs, but I think this is too quick. In order to find out a proper candidate, among all hinge commitments, that enjoys methodological indispensability, it is helpful to look at Pritchard (2015, 94–97)’s discussion on different kinds of hinge commitments. In particular, he contends that hinge commitments include the über hinge commitment, personal hinge commitment and *anti-sceptical* hinge commitment. The über hinge commitment is that one is not radically or fundamentally mistaken in one's beliefs. It is obvious that the über hinge commitment is quite general, but it can be made more specific via our
personal hinge commitment. Or, we can say that personal hinge commitment can codify the über hinge commitment. For example, I can codify my über hinge commitment by having a personal hinge commitment that I have two hands. In this sense, personal hinge commitment manifests one's über hinge commitment in a certain context. Crucially, there is a major difference between personal hinge commitment and the über hinge commitment. One's personal hinge commitment may change with the contexts. In context A, that I have two hands is my personal hinge commitment. But imagine a new context B, I have undergone a serious car accident and I was told by a doctor that I had lost both hands. In this case, the evaluation context B is quite different from the context A. The proposition that I have hands is my personal hinge commitment in context A, but not in B. I am not saying that I don't have a personal hinge commitment in context B, what I am saying is that the proposition in question is no longer my personal hinge commitment. This case suggests that a proposition might be (or be the content of) a personal hinge commitment in one context, but it might not work as a personal hinge commitment in another context. Therefore, it is not the case that one proposition will always be personal hinge proposition. However, one's über hinge commitment will remain unchanged. To deny one's über hinge commitment amounts to taking oneself as unintelligible and irrational. For if it is the case that I am radically or fundamentally mistaken in my beliefs, why should I believe that I have a belief? After all, if most of the beliefs I attribute to myself and others would be false, my epistemic practice of attributing beliefs must be fundamentally problematic and therefore needs to be abandoned. If someone were to believe that there are no beliefs, both non-sceptics and sceptics would find her unintelligible.\textsuperscript{17}

As to anti-sceptical hinge commitment, it is one's negative attitude to a sceptical hypothesis, such as that I am radically deceived by an evil demon. In everyday contexts, one will not think of the sceptical possibilities because they are far-fetched, but one could be made aware of them by introducing them in a different context (such as in a philosophical context). We may find that anti-sceptical hinge commitment is specific because it exhibits a negative attitude to a sceptical hypothesis, but one will not possess such a kind of commitment unless one is in a context where the sceptical challenge is standing out. Understood this way, one's personal hinge commitment is a positive way to codify one's über hinge commitment while one's anti-sceptical hinge commitment works in a negative way to codify one's über hinge commitment. Both ways of codification manifest one's über hinge commitment.

With the taxonomy of hinge commitments in mind, it seems that the über hinge commitment is fundamental. It is fundamental primarily because it is not context-variable. To say that it is context-variable means that it would change with the contexts. Therefore, the über hinge commitment is valid in all contexts. It must be in place for any epistemic evaluation to take place, so any context in which the über hinge commitment is not presupposed will be
unintelligible. And it is this feature that makes it suitable for an indispensable belief. For even though personal hinge propositions and anti-sceptical hinge propositions are undoubted and inevitable in a context or a set of contexts, there is still a possibility that they might stop being hinge propositions in some contexts. Accordingly, personal hinge propositions and anti-sceptical hinge propositions will be locally indispensable, while the über hinge proposition will be globally indispensable. Note that this point is consistent with the local nature of epistemic evaluation, for what I am now contending is that any local evaluation system must have the über hinge proposition in place. However, to think that there could be a non-local evaluation context that will have the über hinge proposition in place is inconsistent. After all, a universal evaluation requires that even the über hinge proposition be under evaluation.

In what follows, I will present a Wittgensteinian modest transcendental argument:

P1: We can epistemically evaluate a belief.

P2: In order to make any epistemic evaluation possible, one must have the über hinge commitment in the first place, i.e. one must be committed to the claim that one is not radically or fundamentally mistaken in one's beliefs.

C: Hence, one must be committed to the claim that one is not radically or fundamentally mistaken in one's beliefs.

Some clarifications are in order. First, the premise P1 is a psychological fact. But it emphasizes the practice-based feature of beliefs. That is to say, we take beliefs to be the product of belief attribution, and belief attribution is one form of our epistemic practice. Therefore, it implies that if our epistemic practice cannot be retained, we could not have beliefs. The fact that we can epistemically evaluate a belief is what the sceptic cannot deny. For were she to deny this, her claim that our belief regarding the external world is not justified would not be possible. After all, we could think of radical scepticism as demonstrating a negative result of an epistemic evaluation. According to this evaluation, we cannot have knowledge because our rational evaluation shows that our beliefs are far from being justified (for instance, one cannot rule out that one is not in the sceptical hypothesis). Therefore, if we are epistemically rational and responsible, we cannot ignore the sceptical verdict. Therefore, to accept that we can conduct epistemic evaluations of our beliefs is a necessary step for the sceptic to pose a challenge. Thus, we surely have a premise that a modest transcendental argument could deploy.

Regarding P2, it reflects Wittgenstein's view on hinge commitment and epistemic evaluation. In order for any epistemic evaluation to be possible, it is methodologically required that one must have the über hinge commitment (that one is not radically or fundamentally mistaken in one's beliefs). Since any typical transcendental argument will involve a necessity claim, does our Wittgensteinian modest transcendental argument meet this requirement? P2
says that the über hinge commitment is necessary for any epistemic evaluation to take place, and since our beliefs can only be attributed via a form of epistemic evaluation, we can conclude that the über hinge commitment is necessary for our having beliefs at all. Our über hinge commitment is necessary for our epistemic evaluation, that is to say, our über hinge commitment acquires its indispensability relative to the premise that we have beliefs. As I have noted earlier, I take indispensability in this case as methodological indispensability.

For C, it is a theoretical commitment rather than a non-psychological fact, which is in accordance with the spirit of a modest transcendental argument. One may wonder why the conclusion is not a belief. Note that when we talk about belief, it is knowledge-apt belief that is of primary interest to epistemologists. A knowledge-apt belief aims at truth. That is to say, we should bear a belief attitude towards a true proposition and we should not bear such an attitude if the proposition is false. It follows that if one has no reason for thinking a proposition true, then one should not bear the knowledge-apt belief attitude towards the proposition. Obviously, the truth of a hinge proposition is in principle unaccountable. For nothing can speak in favour of or against its truth. Therefore Pritchard (2015, 90) stresses that one cannot believe hinge propositions. For this reason, our attitude towards the hinge proposition is commitment rather than belief.

Given this modest transcendental argument, we are made aware of the necessary constraint on any rational evaluation of beliefs. Therefore, when we return to the sceptical paradox, claim (2) (if one knows that one is reading a book, then one is in a position to know that one is not a BIV) looks less intuitive. For, it assumes that the proposition that one is not a BIV is knowable and that it is knowable via a competent deduction from an everyday proposition. That is to say, the proposition that one is not a BIV is assumed to be subject to epistemic evaluation. However, as we have shown, we cannot bear belief attitude towards anti-sceptical hinge proposition. Since the proposition that one is not a BIV is not a knowledge-apt belief, it is not in the market for rational knowledge. With this point in mind, one can sense that there are faulty assumptions driving us from the modest transcendental argument to the sceptical paradox. From the Wittgensteinian modest transcendental argument, we realize the local structure of epistemic evaluation, but we are tempted to conduct a universal evaluation in the paradox. In particular, our evaluation in (2) is based on the closure principle, which centres on how we acquire knowledge via logical inference between two propositions. Here comes a conflict: the boundary of logical inference does not coincide with the boundary of epistemic evaluation, even though we rely on logical inference to conduct epistemic evaluation in ordinary cases. If one assumes that the two boundaries coincide, one will be tempted to rationally evaluate anti-sceptical hinge proposition. Fortunately, when this conflict is made obvious, we can reject claim (2) because it is a misuse of our epistemic principle. Thereby, the sceptical challenge disappears and our epistemic status remains innocent.
5. Conclusion

Transcendental arguments are supposed to be anti-sceptical. However, on the one hand, ambitious transcendental arguments are problematic; on the other hand, the sceptical challenge is presented as a paradox, so we further require a diagnosis. In light of these considerations, I argue that we should incorporate a modest transcendental argument into a diagnostic anti-sceptical proposal. In particular, a modest transcendental argument reveals common commitments between us and the sceptic. This step serves as a stepping stone for a theoretical diagnosis as to why the paradox is spurious and why we are lead into the predicament. Once we fulfil the proposal, a satisfying response to the sceptic can be provided.

Notes

1. For proponents of regarding radical scepticism qua paradox, for example, see Stroud (1984), DeRose (1995), Wright (2008) and Pritchard (2015).
2. Following Pritchard (2005, 38), we can formulate the closure principle slightly differently: (CK) For all S, p, q, if S knows that p, and S can competently deduce q from p, then S is in a position to know that q.
3. Here ‘epistemic standards’ do not refer to ordinary epistemic standards according to which there is a relatively low requirement on knowledge evaluation. Rather, epistemic standards involve epistemic principles and concepts that are intuitively endorsed by us, such as the closure principle, and the idea that perceptual knowledge requires perceptual discrimination (hence one cannot distinguish subjectively indistinguishable sceptical scenarios from everyday scenarios).
4. For similar distinctions, see Cassam (2007, 2) and Pritchard (2015, 16).
5. For this understanding, see Stern 1999; Davidson 1999.
6. Roughly put, Stroud argues that ambitious transcendental arguments are either superfluous in that they must trade on verificationism or idealism to bridge the gap between a psychological fact and a non-psychological fact, and therefore the anti-sceptical work is done primarily by verificationism or idealism; or, given that they don't establish a non-psychological conclusion, they are disappointing because they fail to answer the sceptic.
7. A transcendentalist is a proponent of a transcendental argument. For prominent proponents of modest transcendental arguments, see Stroud 1999; Stern 2007.
8. One crucial objection to modest transcendental arguments is whether we are epistemically justified in believing the conclusions of those arguments: see e.g. Brueckner 1986; Vahid 2011.
9. He doesn't distinguish two kinds of transcendental arguments, so I think he intends to apply his objection to both kinds.
10. The term ‘obstacle-dependent’ is used by Cassam (2007, 3).
11. There is a shared view that these two arguments are the most important sceptical arguments. For more discussion, see Brueckner 1994; Pritchard 2005; Wang 2014.
12. See a similar point in Pritchard 2009.
13. Cassam (2007, 51) attributes the view that by means of transcendental arguments is the best way to answer how-possible question to Hatfield (1990) and Collins (1999).

14. Note that Cassam (2007, 52) maintains that transcendental arguments might have a legitimate role in epistemology, but not in answering how-possible questions.

15. Also, see earlier discussions of methodological indispensability in Stern (2000, 81) and Ranalli (2013, 140).

16. P has methodological necessity in the sense that P is methodologically necessary for our epistemic practice.

17. Here sceptics would be limited to those who share the premise that we have beliefs. Note that in the sceptical paradox, the sceptic grants that we have beliefs. What she denies is that our beliefs constitute knowledge.

18. This inference includes the assumption that belief is a necessary condition of knowledge.

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