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## Pyrrhonian and Naturalistic Themes in the Final Writings of Wittgenstein

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**PYRRHONIAN AND NATURALISTIC THEMES IN THE FINAL WRITINGS OF  
WITTGENSTEIN**

A Dissertation Presented

by

INDRANI BHATTACHARJEE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2011

Philosophy

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## **DEDICATION**

To my parents

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Hilary Kornblith, for his patient advice and guidance through the years. I am also grateful to Jay Garfield, whose generous help proved indispensable at all stages of this project, and to Lynne Baker, whose encouragement and helpful suggestions have made this a better project than it might have been. Thanks to Banu Subramaniam, my fourth committee member, for kindnesses too numerous to mention.

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## ABSTRACT

PYRRHONIAN AND NATURALISTIC THEMES IN THE FINAL WRITINGS OF  
WITTGENSTEIN

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The following inquiry pursues two interlinked aims. The first is to understand Wittgenstein's idea of non-foundational certainty in the context of a reading of *On Certainty* that emphasizes its Pyrrhonian elements. The second is to read Wittgenstein's remarks on idealism/radical skepticism in *On Certainty* in parallel with the discussion of rule-following in *Philosophical Investigations* in order to demonstrate an underlying similarity of philosophical concerns and methods. I argue that for the later Wittgenstein, what is held certain in a given context of inquiry or action is a locally transcendental condition of the inquiry or action in question. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein's analysis of the difference between knowledge and certainty forms the basis of his critique of both Moore's "Proof" and radical skepticism. This critique takes the shape of rejection of a presupposition shared by both parties, and utilizes what I identify as a Pyrrhonian-style argument against opposed dogmatic views. Wittgenstein's method in this text involves describing epistemic language-games. I demonstrate that this is consistent with the

rejection of epistemological theorizing, arguing that a Wittgensteinian “picture” is not a theory, but an impressionistic description that accomplishes two things: (i) throwing into relief problems with dogmatic theories and their presuppositions, and (ii) describing the provenance of linguistic and epistemic practices in terms of norms grounded in convention. Convention, in turn, is not arbitrary, but grounded in the biological and social natures of human beings—in what Wittgenstein calls forms of life.

Thus there is a kind of naturalism in the work of the later Wittgenstein. It is a naturalism that comes neatly dovetailed with Pyrrhonism—a combination of strategies traceable to Hume’s work in the *Treatise*. I read Hume as someone who develops the Pyrrhonian method to include philosophy done “in a careless manner,” and argue that Wittgenstein adopts a similar method in his later works. Finally, I explain the deference to convention in the work of both Hume and Wittgenstein by reference to a passage in Sextus’ *Outlines*, on which I provide a gloss in the final chapter of this work.



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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Two Texts and an Orientation

This thesis is primarily concerned with making sense of the epistemological position of the later Wittgenstein, as expressed in his final unpublished work, *On Certainty*. It is also concerned with making sense of the philosophical methodology of the later Wittgenstein in two works, namely, *On Certainty* and *Philosophical Investigations*. Epistemological concerns loom large in the former work, where Wittgenstein expresses views about knowledge and the nature of certainty complex enough to merit an interpretive story on their own. It is important to note, however, that these views do not appear out of nowhere: they have a firm basis in a view about the justification of practices that is advanced in *Philosophical Investigations*.<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein's interest in epistemology is the upshot of his interest in practices generally speaking, where by 'practices' I mean what he might call "moves in language-games," i.e., speech-acts that either serve to assert something or fulfill some other recognizable purpose in our lives.

The editors of *On Certainty*, G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright explain that Wittgenstein was deeply appreciative of Moore's paper "A Defence of Common Sense"; we learn that Wittgenstein's focus of interest was Moore's claim to know the propositions expressed by certain sentences that he included as examples in his classic

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<sup>1</sup>Hereafter in this work: the *Investigations*.

papers on knowledge and certainty.<sup>2</sup> Some of these sentences are: ‘I am a human being,’ ‘I have two hands,’ and ‘The earth existed for a long time before my birth.’ Moore claims to know these propositions with certainty. Norman Malcolm, who discussed the significance of Moore’s claims with Wittgenstein during the latter’s visit to Ithaca a few years before his death, thought that Moore misdescribes the situation when he asserts that he *knows* these propositions.<sup>3</sup> This is a recognizably Wittgensteinian hunch, but we are not going to be concerned with what Malcolm meant, but rather with how Wittgenstein construed the same point and where, so to speak, he went with it.

The Moore sentences remain as a core around which the reflections contained in *On Certainty* are built. But, as might be expected, the text is a lot more complex than a reflection on these sentences alone. It is true that Wittgenstein returns to Moore’s epistemological concerns over and over again in the text, but he does so from different directions, and for different reasons. In any case, it emerges soon enough—long before the first part (i.e., Sections 1-65) is through—that he is engaged in an enquiry of a fundamental kind into the meaning of certainty and the ground of epistemic practices generally.<sup>4</sup> His project resembles Moore’s in so far as he, too, is interested in making

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<sup>2</sup>The editors mention “Proof of the External World” and “A Defence of Common Sense.” Some examples used in *On Certainty* resemble some to be met with in Moore’s paper “Certainty.”

<sup>3</sup>The best-known source of Malcolm’s views on Moore is his essay, “Moore and Ordinary Language,” in Malcolm (1952).

<sup>4</sup>The method of thinking and writing that I have just described is familiar from the *Investigations*. The Preface to that work contains the following well-known caveat: “The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination. —And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For this compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction. —The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of

sense of the concepts of knowledge and certainty, but it is underpinned by motivations and commitments—and by these I mean commitments to method, because I truly cannot find theoretical commitments in this work—of a rather non-Moorean, and patently Wittgensteinian variety.

What I have just rehearsed is the straightforward story that any interpreter would tell. But interpreters of Wittgenstein are legion, and there are great divergences of opinion across camps. Moreover, given that *On Certainty* is not a book that Wittgenstein himself put together, just about every interpreter, beginning with the editors themselves, sees something in the text that another does not (or cannot, on point of principle). To borrow a pithy metaphor from the Jaina philosophers of ancient India, the interpretation of *On Certainty* makes a classic case of the nine blind men trying to figure out an elephant using their extant senses: one thinks that the pachyderm is “all ears” while another cannot get past the trunk. However, each one is convinced that he has the correct theory of elephant. Here, for example, is Stroll:

The second general point is that most of the earlier literature [on *On Certainty*] has the character of reworked doctoral theses. These works not only suffer from the usual defects of dissertations. They also tend to be dominated, as I have mentioned, by a treatment of *On Certainty* that sees its main ideas as an extension of those in the *Investigations*... A corrective is needed that represents

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sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and involved journeyings. The same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions, and new sketches made, etc.” Wittgenstein might have been talking about *On Certainty*, a set of remarks that he did not have time to organize into a book.

both mature scholarship and the recognition that *On Certainty* is a highly original work, in many ways quite different from the *Investigations*. In particular, the highly therapeutic thrust of the *Investigations* is much diminished in *On Certainty*. Wittgenstein is himself caught up in relatively straightforward, classical philosophical concerns about the nature of certainty and its relationship to human knowledge (Stroll 1994, 7).

In other words, I ought to spare myself the effort. This *is* a doctoral thesis (and it is not even reworked), and I suppose I do think of *On Certainty* as “an extension of the ideas in the *Investigations*” in some sense. Those who are influenced by Stroll’s reading think of it as the work of “the Third Wittgenstein,” but I am not convinced that it is different enough in spirit and orientation from the *Investigations* to merit an authorial persona all its own. Furthermore, according to the members of this school of thought, the author of *On Certainty* is an epistemological foundationalist, albeit of a unique sort. I disagree; the foundational metaphors in the text are discarded almost as soon as they are introduced, and in some cases are turned on their heads.<sup>5</sup> In sum, while I can’t get past the universally damning “What’s your elephant?” challenge any more than Stroll can, I shall, in the spirit of the Jainas, give you my reading with the caveat “perhaps this is how things are.” I do not claim to do more, but it would be a shame to do any less. As far as

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<sup>5</sup>Remark 248 of *On Certainty* reads: “I have arrived at the rock-bottom of my convictions. And one can almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house.” I interpret this remark in Chapter 2. See also the anti-foundationalist readings by Mounce and Michael Williams in Moyal-Sharrock (2005), and Pritchard (2001).

the *Investigations* having a “highly therapeutic thrust” is concerned, on at least one influential reading, i.e., that of Kripke, this is just false.<sup>6</sup>

However these things stand, we must address the worry mentioned a paragraph ago, namely, that what we are dealing with isn’t a text. Stroll makes a convincing argument to the effect that in spite of appearances, *On Certainty* is in fact a text: it stands together as a cohesive set of epistemological (and I would add *meta-epistemological*) reflections. I agree with Stroll on that point. To be precise, I proceed on the assumption that what I am dealing with as an interpreter is a cohesive and basically consistent text and that indeed it is a Wittgensteinian text that has a lot in common with the *Investigations*, including the feature of being characterized by the opposing tendencies of doing philosophy and not doing it (in a specific sense, to be explained later in these pages).

The epistemological reflections of a thinker who has been hailed by some as the greatest twentieth century philosopher in the Analytic tradition are no doubt a matter of considerable interest. Hence they have received attention several times in the past.<sup>7</sup> The present work is not an attempt to replicate the efforts of those who have tried to figure out every aspect of *On Certainty* or argued that it is an internally consistent text, etc. In the first substantive chapter (Chapter 2), I give an overview of some of the most important themes in the book, but I do this as stage-setting for a two-part argument, namely, that

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<sup>6</sup>See *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Kripke 1982; hereafter in this work: *WRPL*). Admittedly, this would be a bit of a “rogue” reading that I do not intend to pursue. End of elephant metaphor.

<sup>7</sup>Some book-length treatments are M. McGinn (1989), Morawetz (1978), Moyal-Sharrock (2004), Rhees (2003), and Stroll (1994). The list of contemporary thinkers who have been influenced by this work includes, but is not limited to Dretske, Fogelin, Pritchard, C. Wright, and Michael Williams.

(i) like most other pronouncements of the later Wittgenstein, the remarks collected in this book have a Pyrrhonian thrust; and

(ii) among other things, the treatment of epistemic practices in *On Certainty* exemplifies the minimalistic philosophical naturalism that I attribute to Wittgenstein.

By calling Wittgenstein's work 'Pyrrhonian' I mean to draw attention to certain methodological parallels between Wittgenstein and any thinker that I describe as being a Pyrrhonist: this includes the original Pyrrhonists of the ancient world as exemplified by Sextus Empiricus, and (despite protestations to the contrary,) David Hume.<sup>8</sup> In the current work, I draw upon both Hume and Sextus in order to understand the point of some of Wittgenstein's polemic and his general approach to philosophy both in *On Certainty* and *Philosophical Investigations*. I shall fully explain what I mean by the appellation 'Pyrrhonian' a little later in this study. For now, it will suffice to identify it as a philosophical attitude—an attitude characterized by a tendency to be deeply and consistently critical (or "skeptical") of explanations in philosophy without relinquishing what one might call the Socratic zeal for analysis.

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<sup>8</sup>There is a story about how Wittgenstein did not enjoy the prospect of reading Hume, apparently because he already knew what Hume had to say and that (therefore?) it was "a torture" to read him (e.g., see *WRPL*, 63). From such anecdotal evidence, I find it hard to deduce that Wittgenstein had never read Hume. Presumably Wittgenstein could not have found it a torture to read Hume unless he had tried to do so. So I shall make the (fair) assumption that he did read Hume to the extent necessary for him to deduce whatever else Hume had to say.



For Wittgenstein, as for the other Pyrrhonists in their rather different ways, this tendency is consistent with naturalistic explanation of a certain sort. Hume is known for his naturalism, i.e., for his preference for explaining aspects of what he calls “human nature” in non-metaphysical terms. This takes the form of speculation concerning the sort of cognitive processes we must execute in order to negotiate our environment using the concepts of causality, identity and material body. Historically, Hume’s novel account of our beliefs about material objects and causes in terms of custom or (roughly) habits of the mind sharply undermined the traditional preoccupation with metaphysical speculation concerning the objects of these beliefs. Moreover, as Kant saw clearly, it also helped to shift intellectual focus from the metaphysical to the mundane—to the cognitive and pragmatic capacities of human beings.

A similar anti-metaphysical temper informs the work of Sextus Empiricus, who supplemented his diatribes against “dogmatic” rivals with the four-fold criterion for the conduct of life. This is supposed to be the formula by which the skeptic lives his life in a world about which he has no greater reason to believe that, say, it has the property X rather than non-X.<sup>9</sup> The four-fold criterion consists in “guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise” (Sextus 2000, 9). The “naturalism” here lies in what one might think of as a base-level

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<sup>9</sup>By “the skeptic” Sextus meant the Pyrrhonist. There were other skeptics in the ancient world, e.g., Sextus’ arch rivals, the Academic skeptics. But for Sextus these thinkers were negative dogmatists: while they did not espouse positive theories as did, say, the Stoics, they dogmatically adhered to their skeptical conclusions. Consider for example the view attributed to Arcesilaus that nothing can be known with certainty either through the senses or by the mind (Thorsrud 2004). Sextus claims to abjure dogmatism in this respect as well and to live “without beliefs.” Whether this is actually possible to do is grist for the specialists’ mill. See Burnyeat and Frede (1998) for different perspectives on this question.

description of a kind of human life and its cognitive practices that does not make reference to questionable metaphysical principles of any kind, including the existence of the gods or objective moral values.

I see Wittgenstein as being naturalistically inclined in a similar sense. He is quick to find problems with such philosophical claims as “meaning consists in possessing a mental formula that makes sense of, or makes possible the production of an utterance *e*,” or “knowledge consists in the possession of internally accessible evidence.” This is not to suggest that he is averse to thinking about how people mean or know things; indeed, these questions are of the greatest philosophical importance to him. It is just that he is not convinced by theories of meaning or knowledge, and by that I mean absolutely any theory of meaning or knowledge that purports to explain the phenomena that it deals with in terms of some kind of mental content. I have just sketched in the barest outline Wittgenstein’s (in)famous skepticism concerning “privacy” of any kind.

This negative attitude is supplemented by a method of doing philosophy that Wittgenstein calls “perspicuous representation of language-games.” This involves giving rough explanations of normative (i.e., linguistic, or epistemic) practices against a careful background map of their contextual features. These explanations (or “pictures” as he calls them) are neither complete nor terribly surprising, and this is because they are partially or wholly intended to serve a therapeutic function, as I shall explain. But they highlight the mundane over the intellectualist—the conventional structure over the speculative inner model. That this is both a worthwhile and interesting approach to the philosophical issues and that it is what Wittgenstein is concerned with is shown in the pages that follow.

## 1.2 Outline of the Dissertation

In Chapter 2, I make heuristic use of Kripke’s idea that Wittgenstein provides a “skeptical solution” to the problem of semantic skepticism in the *Investigations* by applying it to the problem of external world skepticism in *On Certainty*. On Kripke’s reading of Wittgenstein, the latter espouses the view that there is no fact of the matter to our meaning anything by a term—specifically, that there is no private mental fact that determines my meaning the same thing by a term on successive occasions of its use. This is presented as a skeptical problem that Wittgenstein discovered. *PI* §201 is thought to present this skeptical issue and sketch a solution to it.<sup>10</sup> This solution is what Kripke describes as a “skeptical solution”—one that admits the skeptical charge while denying that it undermines the conventions that justify one’s practice of meaning something by an utterance.

I present a nuanced reading of Kripke’s story in order to establish that Wittgenstein’s “skepticism” about meaning is but a superficial expression of his Pyrrhonism. The point is made by way of an analogy with Wittgenstein’s very precise pronouncement upon the disagreement between Moore and the metaphysical idealist (and epistemic nihilist) in *On Certainty*. Kripke’s Humean spin on what he identifies as the real Private Language Argument in the *Investigations* is read as pointing to an agreement

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<sup>10</sup> I follow the convention of referring to numbered remarks or sections from all of Wittgenstein’s works that facilitate this method of citation, using an abbreviation for the work cited (*OC* for *On Certainty*, *TLP* for *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, etc). There are further conventions associated with citing the *Investigations*: part 1 of this work is composed of longish numbered passages, which are referred to using a section-marker (e.g., *PI* §631), whereas the passages in part 2 are referred to using page numbers (e.g., *PI* p. 166). Citations from *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* include part and section numbers, e.g., *RFM* V.16.

in the method of envisioning philosophical stalemates between two thinkers who are quite unlike in many other respects.<sup>11</sup> In this way, I explain the sense in which I take both Hume and Wittgenstein to be Pyrrhonists.

Chapter 2 also deals with several important conceptual issues that arise for the first time in *On Certainty*, one of which concerns what are called framework (or “hinge”) beliefs. In *OC* 341, Wittgenstein introduces the metaphor of the hinge, which he rather loosely identifies as the propositions upon which our questions and doubts depend or “turn” (*OC* 341). A survey of the literature will reveal that one cannot talk about the content of *On Certainty* without nailing down this key (hinge?) metaphor: the flavor of one’s interpretation of the text depends upon how one renders “hinge propositions.” Therefore I deal with this issue in some detail.

In Chapter 3, I delve deeper into Hume’s Pyrrhonism. The rationale for this is twofold. Since there is a camp of Hume-interpreters who take him to be something of a Pyrrhonist, and since I am no expert on the subject, it is imperative that I clarify the sense in which I regard Hume as a Pyrrhonist. To do this, I give a Pyrrhonian reading of

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<sup>11</sup>It has been argued by scholars of Hume and Wittgenstein alike that there is something seriously wrong with the Humean analogy developed by Kripke in *WRPL*. Consider the claim that “it is impossible for Wittgenstein to have been a skeptic of the Humean variety; since such skepticism presupposes realism; and, whatever Wittgenstein is, and isn’t, he is not a realist of the requisite variety” (Mannison 1975, 140). The analogy that I draw between Hume and Wittgenstein is not dependent upon some thesis about similarities in their theoretical commitments, although it may be that my reading of *Hume* rules out a straightforward realist interpretation of his philosophy. (I do not additionally hold that Wittgenstein is an anti-realist or quasi-realist, etc.) However that may be, in Chapter 2 I am concerned to show what Kripke gets right rather than what he gets wrong when he compares Wittgenstein to Hume.

Hume’s examination of the ordinary belief in “material body” in the *Treatise*.<sup>12</sup> My second reason for dealing with the example of Hume’s treatment of the belief in bodies is particularly helpful to underline the point made in Chapter 2 about the similarity of his approach to philosophical disagreements to that of Wittgenstein. Furthermore, what Hume has to say about the belief in bodies finds a resonant echo in *On Certainty*: a seemingly throw-away remark in *T* 1.4.2; SB 187—that “’tis vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?*”—and Hume’s musings following that remark clearly suggest that for him, the belief in physical objects is a “hinge.”<sup>13</sup> If it is true that Wittgenstein never actually read Hume on this topic, this is a remarkable coincidence. However, given a Pyrrhonian framework for interpreting both thinkers on this point, the coincidence is perfectly explicable.

Chapter 4 focuses on certain key passages in the *Investigations* in order to determine Wittgenstein’s view of normativity. In this chapter I extend my Pyrrhonian reading of the *Investigations* and limn its positive aspects. I introduce Wittgenstein’s notion of forms of life as a quasi-explanatory concept in a story that answers the question “What is the source of linguistic norms?” i.e., what makes moves in language correct or incorrect? Wittgenstein’s view of linguistic norms is that linguistic norms are grounded in convention—rather than in mental rules that guide our speech-acts in some way—and that conventions in turn fit into forms of life, i.e., into our practices as they are

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<sup>12</sup>A *Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects* (Hume 2008; hereinafter, *Treatise*.) When citing the *Treatise*, I use the established convention of referring to Book, chapter and section numbers, followed by the page number from the Selby-Bigge edition.

<sup>13</sup>Compare *OC* 35, where the claim “A is a physical object’ is deemed as “nonsense.” We will return to the nonsensical aspect of hinges in Chapter 2, below.

determined by our biological equipment as human beings and socially acquired competencies, the most fundamental of which is language.

The duality of nature and nurture appears here in the form of the distinction between first and second natures, with second nature serving to develop and extend the basic repertoire of species-specific capacities that comprises first or biological nature. In this chapter I introduce reflections upon Wittgenstein's philosophical method generally. This is necessitated by my emphasis upon his Pyrrhonism: if Wittgenstein really is a Pyrrhonist, then he had better not be caught formulating theories. But on the other hand, I find in his work a definite view about normativity (I call this view norm externalism) and regard him as a naturalist of some kind (I suggest that Wittgenstein is a "social naturalist"). I reconcile these seemingly irreconcilable claims by explaining the difference between a picture and a theory, and by attributing to Wittgenstein an alternative picture of norms that also happens to fulfill the aims of philosophical therapy.

Chapter 5 reinforces the analogy between the *Investigations* and *On Certainty* with which I am concerned in this work. The analogy is between Wittgenstein's treatment of linguistic norms on the one hand, and epistemic norms on the other. This constitutes my reason for disagreeing with the "Third Wittgenstein" line of interpretation and the basis of my attribution of Pyrrhonism to Wittgenstein. I frame Wittgenstein's inquiry into linguistic and epistemic norms in the shape of transcendental questions (namely, "How is meaning (or: knowing) possible?") and tell a story that revisits occasions in the history of philosophy when a naturalistic project was combined with the asking of transcendental questions. This final chapter also contains reflections upon some of the knottier interpretive and conceptual issues thrown up by Wittgenstein's remarks about his

philosophical method in the later works. I conclude by rehearsing for a second time Wittgenstein's complex Pyrrhonian response to Moore in *On Certainty* and his analysis of justification and doubt, this time against the background of what the preceding pages reveal about the later Wittgenstein's philosophical intentions.

## CHAPTER 2

### A READING OF *ON CERTAINTY*

“It’s awful, Mr. Holmes, simply awful! I wonder my hair isn’t grey. Godfrey Staunton—you’ve heard of him, of course? He’s simply the hinge that the whole team turns on... No, Mr. Holmes, we are done unless you can help me to find Godfrey Staunton.”  
- Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Missing Three-Quarter”

#### 2.1. Introducing *On Certainty*.

In this chapter I show that Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* articulates a clear, consistent and important view about the structure of reasons for beliefs that holds up well against possible objections. Secondly, I explain that in this text Wittgenstein offers a descriptive account of extant epistemic practices rather than an argument for the possibility of knowledge in the face of skeptical attack. I explain how and in what sense this constitutes an answer to the challenge of radical (or Cartesian) skepticism. Wittgenstein’s position vis-à-vis the skeptic about the possibility of knowledge of the mind-external world (i.e., the radical skeptic) is significantly different from that of G. E. Moore, whom we shall regard as the paradigmatic anti-skeptic in what follows.<sup>1</sup>

I should say straight off that nothing I will say here is necessarily what Wittgenstein himself would have said about knowledge, certainty or the nature of

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<sup>1</sup> The possibility that *On Certainty* is an incomplete work, parts of which might have been discarded or suppressed by its author, give one pause. That Wittgenstein would have discarded great chunks of the text is something that can probably be said about everything he wrote since the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (hereafter in this work, *Tractatus*), and certainly about everything that he did not publish during his lifetime. *On Certainty* is all “first-draft material” arranged into numbered passages by its editors. Even so, it contains everything Wittgenstein wrote about Moore’s claim to know various propositions with certainty, and, as the editors explain, Wittgenstein marked off these passages in his notebooks as a separate topic (*OC*, p. vi). I shall accept these as reasons to assume that it is a bona-fide Wittgensteinian text.



justification. The interpretation that I defend here stands together as a coherent epistemological view, albeit one that is aimed at having a “therapeutic” effect on epistemologists who think about some of the issues involved in a confused manner. Wittgenstein is not *just* practicing philosophical therapy in this work—any more than he is just practicing philosophical therapy in the *Investigations*. To be precise, in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein is applying the results of his inquiry into semantic questions broached in the *Investigations* to epistemological issues.

### 2.1.1 Wittgenstein on Moore’s Refutation of Idealism

The epistemological views articulated in *On Certainty*, including the account of “hinge propositions” alluded to in Chapter 1, constitute a middle position between the epistemic nihilism of an idealistic world-view, and Moore’s “commonsensical” opposition to the skeptical possibility. Idealism is a broad metaphysical position sometimes contrasted with realism, or the view that there exist real, apprehensible objects in the world and have real, apprehensible properties. Idealists argue that reality is mind-dependent; on one formulation, namely subjective idealism, reality consists of minds and their ideas. We need not go into the many strains or varieties of realism and idealism and positions in between. The metaphysical view of the idealists does not concern us directly, although it is the focus of Moore’s papers.<sup>2</sup> Moore argues both that mind-external objects exist and that we have knowledge of their existence. The thrust of the latter claim is anti-skeptical, and that is why we are interested in it. In comparison to Moore, the idealist is an epistemic nihilist; that is, she contends that we cannot have knowledge of mind-external things.

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 1, footnote 2.

I shall drop the reference to idealism, and refer to the idealist as either the radical (or Cartesian) skeptic or the epistemic nihilist. This isn't exactly kosher, but will prove harmless, given our purposes. I shall also take Moore to be concerned with what is called the problem of the external world, i.e., the question of whether we have empirical knowledge. As mentioned above, I shall argue that Wittgenstein's take on the problem of the external world is Pyrrhonian: in one sense it constitutes a middle ground between the two views and in another sense it is off the plane of discourse altogether, since it involves rejection of a fundamental presupposition of the debate between Moore and the epistemic nihilist.

So, what exactly that I am attributing to Wittgenstein when I claim that he has a Pyrrhonian response to the problem of the external world? To answer this question we would need to make a brief digression. On certain influential readings of Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Hallie 1985; Mates 1996; Striker 1996) the way, or *agōgē*, of a Pyrrhonian skeptic was to seek a moderate position between two dogmatic philosophical positions. According to the story told by Sextus, the Pyrrhonist is someone who, perturbed by incompatible views about the world—e.g., the opposing claims that there are pores in the skin of my hand and that there aren't—inquires into the truth of the matter at hand. Her aim is psychological: she wants to rid herself of the initial feeling of disturbance. Careful inquiry into the question reveals that both claims are equally well-grounded in evidence.

The views surveyed are from her perspective dogmatic in that they are categorical claims to which the Pyrrhonist finds impossible to assent in view of the opposing evidence. Frustrated in her search for a criterion of truth, or at least a criterion that would

help her to decide conclusively in favor of one of the claims, the Pyrrhonist adopts a somewhat radical measure to get past the pull of the disturbing oppositional views: she suspends judgment on the question, and by doing so, achieves tranquility (*ataraxia*) with respect to it. The suspension of judgment (*epochē*) is triggered by arguments that show that the problem as posed in terms of the pair of opposing claims is incoherent, and that it does not make sense to speak of knowing either that p, or that not-p. Thus, the Pyrrhonian skeptic's suspension of judgment is not a "cop-out" tactic; it is the principled assumption of a middle course through opposing dogmatic positions.

I shall presently show that in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein resists both the epistemic nihilism of the radical skeptic, and the anti-skeptical view that we see Moore defending in "Proof of an External World" because he questions the significance of the terms in which the problem is presented by both parties. The dialectical situation involves an impasse or *aporia*: first of all, there isn't a knock-down argument against either the skeptic or the die-hard believer in the external world, and secondly, from Wittgenstein's perspective, it is not yet clear what the disputants are quarreling about.<sup>3</sup>

Wittgenstein's *epochē* on the question appears to have more interesting effects than *ataraxia*, so let us side-step the latter issue for the time being. Note that hereafter in this work, I will sometimes speak of Wittgenstein's position as Pyrrhonism or, where appropriate, skepticism, thereby marking its resemblance to the ancient Pyrrhonian position represented by Sextus and reclaiming an older use of the word 'skepticism.'

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<sup>3</sup> This description nearly corresponds to Wittgenstein's own account of what a philosophical problem is like. He says in *PI* §123 that a philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about."

Cartesian or radical skepticism will be clearly and consistently distinguished from this variety of skepticism.

Let us begin with an outline of the opposing claims to which Wittgenstein responds. The radical skeptic argues that we cannot know any of ordinary propositions that we take for granted, such as the proposition that I am now seated at my desk or (to take Moore's example) that I have two hands. This is because we do not know the falsity of a skeptical hypothesis—such as the hypothesis that I am a brain-in-a-vat with computer-generated experiences (BIV), or a victim of Descartes' Evil Demon, etc. This is the basic skeptical/epistemic nihilist argument:

(S)

S1. If I know that I have two hands, then I know that I am not a BIV.

S2. I don't know that I am not a BIV.

Therefore,

SC. I don't know that I have two hands.

We note that S1 incorporates the requirement proposed in Descartes' First Meditation that in order to know anything, one needs to be certain of it, and one cannot be certain of anything unless it is immune to skeptical possibilities.<sup>4</sup> It would seem that if we grant the truth of these premises, it is impossible not to grant the conclusion. Moreover, both S1 and S2 seem to be true.

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<sup>4</sup> This will seem less crazy if we recall that Descartes was working with a model of mathematical certainty, according to which knowledge consisted of demonstrable truths. As we shall see, Wittgenstein rejects the notion of *certain knowledge*.

Moore would claim in reply that this argument gets things backwards. According to Moore, the denial of SC has the status of an assumption, from whose truth he derives the denial of S2. So the reasoning goes that I do know that I am now seated at my desk, typing these pages. But if I know that, then surely I know that there are objects corresponding to my experiences as of them; I know that bodies exist; places (such as my room in the town of K—) exist, and so on. Given how many true beliefs I have about my current knowledge situation, I know further that I am not the victim of some massive delusion at this moment. A paraphrase of Moore's "refutation of idealism" might go thus:

(M)

M1. I know that I have two hands.

M2. If I know that I have two hands, then I know that I am not a BIV.

Therefore,

MC. I know that I am not a BIV.

We should read M1 as the claim that I am *certain* of my hands' existence. The rationale for M1 is that Moore is certain that his hands exist, and that because he is certain that his hands exist, he knows that they do. (Moore famously gestured with his hands before an audience when delivering his paper to demonstrate the truth of this premise.) But if M1 is true, and we grant the truth of the (Cartesian) premise M2, then MC cannot be false. In this argument Moore trades a *modus ponens* for the epistemic nihilist's *modus tollens*, this being the move that generates the impasse mentioned above. In the literature, this

particular impasse is presented as the attempt to find a solution to a *skeptical paradox*, represented as the joint incompatibility of the following claims.

1. I know ordinary propositions.
2. I do not know the denials of skeptical hypotheses.
3. If I don't know the denials of skeptical hypotheses, then I do not know ordinary propositions (Pritchard 2002, 217).

Claims 1 and 2 cannot be true together: how can I be said to know that there is a world of objects while not knowing that I am not a brain-in-a-vat? The epistemic nihilist assumes the truth of 2 and 3, and derives from them the denial of 1, whereas Moore assumes the truth of 1 and the contrapositive of 3, and derives from them the denial of 2.

Moore claims to have pulled off a refutation of radical skepticism. But the argument cannot be entirely successful. Indeed, it is hard to believe that the conclusion is true, and so something *must* go wrong in Moore's argument. Do we really know the denials of skeptical hypotheses?<sup>5</sup> As Wittgenstein points out, it is hard to reply in the affirmative simply because it seems that we are not *justified* in rejecting them. The issue turns on a certain idea of justification that is compelling, if tiresome: the Cartesian baseline requirement is that what qualifies as knowledge be "skeptical-proof," i.e., that it not be undermined by defeaters that we cannot reasonably reject. This requirement seems

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<sup>5</sup> Those who claim both that we possess knowledge of ordinary propositions, and that our knowledge of everyday propositions entails our knowledge of the denials of skeptical hypotheses, would reply in the affirmative (Pritchard 2005, 67 ff). Yet it seems that people who think thus would have to produce good reason for their claims—a challenge that they acknowledge and attempt to meet. Such self-described Neo-Mooreans will be ignored in my interpretive story.

to get something right about the nature of knowledge and justification. It says that knowledge is not compatible with skeptical doubt—this seems correct. Returning to Moore’s Proof (i.e., the anti-idealist argument presented in “Proof of An External World”), my knowledge or justified belief that I have two hands does not underwrite the belief that I am not a BIV, unfortunately. So I don’t really *know* that I am not a BIV.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, we may feel disposed to buy Moore’s Proof simply because the only other option is to accept the skeptical conclusion (SC, above). This is where Wittgenstein presents us with a new set of considerations. Concentrating on the terms of the debate between Moore and the epistemic nihilist, he finds a problem with a basic presupposition that both Moore and the skeptic appear to share. This presupposition may be expressed in terms of the following biconditional.

C. I know that p if and only if I am certain that p

C expresses the Cartesian constraint on empirical knowledge. This presupposition is shared by Moore and the epistemic nihilist. Moore affirms both that he knows that p and that he is certain that p, whereas the epistemic nihilist denies both those things. Despite what appears to be fundamental disagreement, both affirm the biconditional, which Wittgenstein argues is even more fundamental. Wittgenstein rejects C, i.e., for him both “If I know that p then I am certain that p” and “If I am certain that p then I know that p”

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<sup>6</sup> E.g., C. Wright (2002), among others, explains the problem with Moore’s Proof as being one of “transmission failure,” i.e., of the warrant for believing the premise (“I have one hand”) not “transmitting” or getting carried over to the conclusion (“There is one external object”). Thus one requires additional evidence for believing the conclusion. This is but one of several stabs made over the years at explaining what exactly is wrong with (or unconvincing about) Moore’s argument.

are false. This is because he is not convinced that we are obliged to assent to C, or even that it makes sense, for reasons that we will discuss below.<sup>7</sup> The initial remarks of *On Certainty* come together as a strongly motivated view about the structure of epistemological reasoning once we see that Wittgenstein is rejecting on principle a pair of opposed dogmatic perspectives on the problem of the external world. Thus Wittgenstein positions himself off the plane of the discourse when he rejects the presupposition that Moore and the epistemic nihilist, each in their own way, acknowledges.

Wittgenstein rejects C as *unintelligible* (OC 2, 4, 10, 35ff).<sup>8</sup> I will explain this claim in due course. But it may be helpful to get a sense of the *kind* of unintelligibility that we are talking about. In OC 467, Wittgenstein imagines that he is sitting with a philosopher in the garden who says again and again, “I *know* that that’s a tree” while pointing to a tree nearby. Wittgenstein explains to the puzzled passer-by: “This fellow isn’t insane. We are only doing philosophy.” At OC 347 he declares that he cannot

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<sup>7</sup> I borrow the template of this argument from Garfield (2002), who argues that there is a basic pattern to Pyrrhonian arguments from Sextus to Wittgenstein. He also applies this template to the arguments of ancient Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophers of the Madhyamaka persuasion.

<sup>8</sup> This move of Wittgenstein’s is reminiscent of the denial of the closure principle for knowledge by such epistemologists as Dretske and Nozick. The principle of closure for knowledge says that knowledge is closed under known entailment: if one knows, e.g., that one has hands, one knows also the proposition entailed by the proposition that one has hands, namely, that one is not a victim of skeptical hypotheses. For Dretske’s modal strategy for denying closure, see Dretske (1970).

But Wittgenstein is not directly concerned with the closure principle: the denial of closure is a good distance away from his therapeutic concerns. He agrees with neither the epistemic nihilist nor Moore, and, as arguments (S) and (M) above demonstrate, both the epistemic nihilist and Moore advocate the closure principle. Now, while Dretske’s claim that closure is not necessary for ordinary knowledge possession has (to my ear) a subtle Wittgensteinian ring (i.e., in that Dretske resists the line of epistemological reasoning that leads to embracing closure), his next constructive step of explaining how closure fails and developing a sensitivity condition for knowledge, is not one Wittgenstein would have contemplated taking.



understand the sentence ‘I know that that’s a tree.’ He explains: “[When I think of this sentence, it] is as if I could not focus my mind on any meaning. Simply because I don’t look for the focus where the meaning is. As soon as I think of an everyday use of the sentence instead of a philosophical one, its meaning becomes clear and ordinary.” In these passages, as in several others throughout *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein finds problems with the philosophical use of the expression ‘I know.’ He is similarly intrigued by Moore’s use of that expression in M1; he thinks that Moore gives it a charge that it does not have in ordinary use (*OC* 6, 19, 37). As Wittgenstein will argue, despite its clarity and utterly convincing tone, Moore’s argument contains a confusion of categories.

Wittgenstein’s point, unlike Wright’s,<sup>9</sup> is not that Moore’s argument is not cogent, but that it produces—again, contrary to what is immediately apparent—a confused philosophical assertion out of a misappropriation of ordinary language. As deeper diagnosis reveals, this has repercussions on Moore’s epistemology. Following his critique of Moore along these lines, Wittgenstein presents what he would call a different “picture” of the nature of knowledge and justification to top off his completed diagnosis. One might describe this as the game-plan in the extant text of *On Certainty*.

### 2.1.2. *Moore By Way of Kripke*

I am going to briefly step away from Moore and the epistemic nihilist in order to set up my second set of remarks on Wittgenstein’s response to the problem of the external world. I will do so by talking about Kripke’s interpretive strategy for the rule-following passages in the *Investigations*.

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<sup>9</sup> See footnote 6, above.

In *WRPL*, Kripke argues that the passages in the *Investigations* following *PI* §198 present a skeptical problem that Wittgenstein discovered and came to solve in a peculiar way. The skeptical issue in question is meaning or semantic skepticism. A skeptic about meaning is someone who is not convinced that there is something in virtue of which we mean what we do by our words. She doubts the existence of Fregean senses, or for that matter, internal (mental) rules governing our understanding and use of words, and so forth. When presenting his account of Wittgenstein's treatment of semantic skepticism, Kripke distinguishes straight solutions to skeptical problems from *skeptical* solutions to them. Moore's Proof is an instance of a straight solution. Basically, giving a straight solution involves making an argument that purports to refute skepticism of some variety. A skeptical solution involves granting that the skeptic's negative point cannot be answered, and arguing that "our ordinary practice or belief is justified because... it need not require the justification that the skeptic has shown to be untenable" (*WRPL*, 66). Kripke understands Wittgenstein's account of what are generally called "the rule-following considerations" to constitute a skeptical solution to semantic skepticism.

Assuming that there is a set of philosophical concerns and a philosophical style characteristic of the later Wittgenstein, it can be argued that his account of certainty and hinge propositions in *On Certainty* constitutes a skeptical solution to radical skepticism. Note that I do this for the purposes of deepening our understanding of Wittgenstein's position vis-à-vis epistemic nihilism; I do not intend to claim that Wittgenstein actually gives a skeptical solution to anything. I have sympathy with the Humean interpretive template that Kripke uses, but my gloss on Wittgenstein's strategy in the rule-following

passages is somewhat different from Kripke's. I believe that both Wittgenstein and Hume are Pyrrhonists, and that is probably not the sort of skeptic Kripke had in mind.

With those caveats in place, let us consider "Kripkenstein's" treatment of semantic skepticism. The specific form in which this view appears in *WRPL* is this: the semantic skeptic claims that a speaker can find or offer no justification for meaning something in particular by an expression *e* on a given instance that the skeptic cannot undermine. There is no fact of the matter about her that distinguishes between her meaning one particular thing rather than another by *e*. This conclusion is arrived at the end of an argument culled from the *Investigations* that eliminates every candidate mental fact in terms of which one may be said to mean anything by *e*. By *PI* §201, Wittgenstein is thought to have argued on behalf of the semantic skeptic "not merely... that introspection shows that the alleged 'qualitative' state of understanding is a chimera, but also that it is logically impossible (or at least that there is considerable logical difficulty) for there to be a state of 'meaning addition by "plus"' at all" (*WRPL*, 51-51).

This claim is developed into what Kripke calls a *paradox of rule-following*, according to which we cannot coherently speak of tailoring one's use of a term to a rule or norm of use, because just about any course of action can be made to accord (or conflict) with the rule.<sup>10</sup> The upshot is that "there [is] neither accord nor conflict here." As Kripke puts the matter, "There can be no such thing as meaning anything by any word. Each new application we make is a leap in the dark; any present intention could be interpreted so as to accord with anything we may choose to do. So there can be neither

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<sup>10</sup> What follows is a brief sketch of the arguments involved. I dig deeper into the paradox of rule-following, and the closely connected regress argument in Chapter 4 of this work.

accord nor conflict. This is what Wittgenstein said in §201” (*WRPL*, 55). A rule is not transparent; it must be interpreted. A move in chess *could* be played in a very non-standard way—e.g., by yelling and stamping one’s feet (*PI* §200)—if one interpreted certain rules of chess in the relevant way. However, playing the move in this non-standard way could also be made to conflict with the rules in question, just in case there were a rule prohibiting the interpretation that permits non-standard play.

For the rule-following metaphor to explain meaning, one must posit meta-rules that constitute the meaning of the original rules, and meta-meta-rules to determine the meanings of those. So, on pain of admitting a regress of interpretations, one must conclude that rule-following behavior does not involve interpreting rules. On Kripke’s reading, Wittgenstein avoids all of these problems by arguing that what makes an instance of “rule-following behavior” (i.e., some piece of norm-governed activity, such as giving an order or claiming that you know who knocked off Charlie) correct is *not an interpretation*, since that would involve cognition of the rule *and* the meta-rule(s), which is clearly impossible, given cognitive and computational limitations. Instead, on this reading, Wittgenstein argues that correctness consists only in accord between the instance of behavior and communal norms of correctness. For example, there had better be a context for your order, and your order had better be recognizable as an order to do x, or, you had better be able to marshal evidence to nail the Syndicate for Charlie’s murder, for if you can’t make good your claim, it will be dismissed as wild (*and* the boys from the Syndicate will pay you a visit).

Wittgenstein makes this point when he says that it is impossible to obey a rule “privately.” If it were possible to do so, then “thinking one was obeying a rule would be

the same thing as obeying it” (*PI* §202). Moreover, in *RFM* VI.41, he categorically denies that the radically solitary individual (generally called “Crusoe” in the literature) follows a rule when executing a regular sequence of marks on the walls of his cave. In explanation he says, “Only in the practice of a language can a word have meaning.” E.g., your being able to marshal evidence against the Syndicate manifests your understanding of the rules of the relevant epistemic game, where “understanding the rules” is not different from manifesting such understanding. Wittgenstein holds that your ability to act correctly is constitutive of your understanding what you are doing when you act correctly.<sup>11</sup> Here, we need to cash out “understanding” as “mastery of a technique,” going by *PI* §199.

What we have here is a non-intellectualist account of “rule-following.” To obey a rule is to heed it without necessarily *apprehending* it; it is to act in conformity with a public norm. This means that the *normative* aspect of one’s behavior, i.e., its aptness and significance, is *explained* by the external norm. While the *causal explanation* of your behavior involves psychological and social determinants, these are *irrelevant* to its normative dimension. This is not to suggest that behaving in a norm-governed way does not involve thinking, interpreting or grasping something; acting in norm-governed ways certainly has mental concomitants. But that which makes something an order or assertion is not private to the agent. This is true of absolutely all behavior, including our most habitual and mindless actions. Moreover, our most mindful actions are also what they are because of the context in which they are performed.

Suppose you are playing chess with a computer. The rules of chess and strategic considerations explain why what you do constitutes making moves in chess, or making

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<sup>11</sup> This is sometimes called the Manifestation Argument. Meredith Williams (1999, 295) attributes the term to C. Wright.

good moves. This is true of both agents (i.e., you, and the computer as understood from the intentional stance) despite vast differences in the causal explanations of how each one comes to instantiate that norm-governed set of descriptions. The playing of chess, or solitaire for that matter, requires the context of the institution of the game. As Wittgenstein says in a much-interpreted “Humean” passage, “It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood; and so on.—To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, institutions)” (*PI* §199). Whether one is speaking in the agora, or swearing in the privacy of one’s room, in so far as one’s behavior is an instance of “rule-following,” it has significance through a pre-established convention. Without entering into the interpretive quagmire surrounding the first part of this remark, we may note that a customary activity is by definition one that gets repeated.

Here we have enough for a Pyrrhonian gloss on this view. On Kripke’s story, the semantic skeptic can undermine any justification that the speaker might offer in support of her using an expression *e* in a particular way—any justification, that is, that involves the interpretation of a rule. But surely there must be *something* in virtue of which she means anything by an assertion of *e*. This way of stating the problem brings into view two diametrically opposed philosophical options: one could be either a skeptic/nihilist or a realist about meaning.

Kripkenstein’s skeptical resolution of the paradox is accomplished in two steps. First, he denies that the skeptical paradox at hand can be solved from within any framework that presupposes that meaningful sentences must correspond to facts of some kind. Here, by ‘facts’ we mean facts in some metaphysically salient sense, e.g., mental

facts. Secondly, he denies that our ordinary linguistic practices require the justification that the semantic nihilist claims they lack.

Let us examine the second step more closely. Essentially, an assertion is significant within a context if it constitutes what Wittgenstein might call a correct move within the relevant language-game. A language-game is any norm-governed activity involving the use of language that serves some recognizable purpose in the lives of those who participate in it. The only requirement for participation in it is the ability to “play” it, i.e., the ability to produce and respond to the utterances or written signs allowed by the practices it comprises.

Now, to the question “what is the meaning of the expression *e*?” Kripkenstein answers: look at how it is used. In particular, find out “first, ‘[u]nder what conditions may this form of words be appropriately asserted (or denied)?’; second, given an answer to the first question, ‘[w]hat is the role, and the utility, in our lives of our practice of asserting (or denying) the form of words under these conditions?’” (*WRPL*, 73). To the question “what justifies our use of an expression in a given context?”<sup>12</sup> the short answer is: conformance with the communal norm. A longer, more careful answer would have to

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<sup>12</sup> Note that formulating Wittgenstein’s concerns in the form of a skeptical problem forces this question upon Kripkenstein. There are critics of Kripke’s reading who find this aspect of his story to be completely wrong. “Since Kripke takes the Paradox of Interpretation to give rise to a genuine sceptical problem, he of course gives the sceptical solution an epistemological slant. Yet it is precisely the locating of the solution in the domain of knowledge that distorts Wittgenstein’s account” (Me Williams, 1999, 164).

Williams is mistaken about this. It would be mad of Kripke to locate the question of linguistic normativity (i.e., the question of what makes my use of an expression correct or incorrect) “in the domain of knowledge.” He uses an epistemological argument to make a metaphysical point about meaning, and he is able to do this precisely because according to the view that he presents, to use a term meaningfully is to know what it means. And as we have seen, to know what a term means is to manifest one’s understanding in correct linguistic behavior.

mention “cases where a use of language properly has no independent justification other than the speaker’s inclination to speak thus on that occasion (e.g. saying that one is in pain)” (*WRPL*, 74, footnote 63). Kripke has in mind *PI* §289, where Wittgenstein gives the example of pain-reports mentioned by Kripke, followed by the remark that “to use a word without a justification does not mean to use it without right.”<sup>13</sup> The notion of acting without justification is introduced in *PI* §211, where Wittgenstein is considering the question of reasons for acting in a norm-governed way. We may be able to cite some reasons, he admits, but then at one point we run out of reasons.

... Well, how do I know [how to continue a numerical pattern by myself]?—If that means “Have I reasons?” the answer is: my reasons will soon give out. And then I shall act without reasons.

When someone whom I am afraid of orders me to continue [a numerical] series, I act quickly, with perfect certainty, and the lack of reasons does not trouble me. (*PI* §§ 211-12)

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<sup>13</sup> Footnote 63 of *WRPL* records Kripke’s misgivings about Anscombe’s translation of “*zu Unrecht*” as “without right”; his preferred translation is “wrongfully.” I recognize that he is objecting to an inconsistency in her translation of the same expression in different places. Nonetheless, it is useful to point out that the talk of “rights” assumes prominence in *On Certainty*: at *OC* 520, Wittgenstein speaks quite emphatically about Moore having “every right to say” (*gutes Recht zu sagen*) that he knows there is a tree in front of him. Again, this is Anscombe’s translation, but it seems sound. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein points out that the form of words that Moore rightfully uses (‘I know, etc.’) is perfectly acceptable, but that he seems to overlook that claiming to know is consistent with being mistaken (e.g., see *OC* 21, 53). So, knowing that p is not a matter of being certain that p.



A number of important ideas emerge in these remarks. Anticipating things somewhat, when I “act without reasons,” I follow my nature. This is a point that Sextus would applaud. I develop the “inclination” to cry out in pain when the occasion demands as a result of acculturation into the social practice of expressing pain in this way. This initial training also accounts for my ability to respond promptly to an order without consulting an internal reason that would tell me how to act. My behavior is marked by certainty, because I know *how* to respond to the order. The same considerations carry over to the epistemic case. As Wittgenstein says in *OC* 148, “Why do I not satisfy myself that I have two feet when I want to get up from a chair? There is no why. I simply don’t. This is how I act.”

My point in this section is that it is helpful to read “Wittgenstein’s refutation of idealism” in *On Certainty* using Kripke’s “skeptical solution” model. Wittgenstein’s strategy in this text involves critical engagement with both the radical skeptic and Moore, and rejection of the terms of the debate between them. If we read Wittgenstein’s response as offering a skeptical solution to radical skepticism, he appears to be making the following two claims: (a) there is no justification for the claims of ordinary knowers that the radical skeptic cannot undermine by invoking one of her skeptical hypotheses, but (b) ordinary epistemic practices do not require the justification that the radical skeptic claims we can never have.

To establish (a), he argues that radical skepticism cannot be answered from within an evidentialist framework, within which one is said to possess knowledge of a proposition just in case one can marshal evidence for one’s belief in that proposition. This is because nothing that one might cite as evidence in support of Moore’s claim that

he has two hands is more firmly established than what he claims (*OC* 1, 111, 243, 245, 250), and it is this fact about the proposition that accounts for Moore's certainty with respect to it. More importantly, it accounts for the special "framework" status of Moore's belief that he has two hands in his body of empirical beliefs. Moore is not obliged to provide justification for his belief that he has two hands, and nor can he, in an important sense, possess such justification (i.e., in the sense of possessing or being able to "access" adequate supporting evidence) since *nothing* is more certain than the belief itself. In fact, none of us possesses reasons, and certainly cannot cite reasons, for taking it for granted that we have two hands each; we just do so because the belief that we have two hands has a special, normative status within our system of beliefs.

Per (b), Wittgenstein denies that our ordinary claims to know require skeptic-proof justification. Our knowledge claims and attributions are licensed (or not) by the norms governing epistemic contexts framed by beliefs that "stand fast for us" (*OC* 116, 144) i.e., by beliefs that are certain, unquestioned and taken for granted. This means, first, that knowledge is necessarily context-bound. Secondly, we are claiming that making such an assertion as "X knows that p" involves reference to the mind-external norms relevant to a given context. The Kripkean formulation of this claim would be that in the absence of skeptic-proof evidential justification for our beliefs, there is no way to determine the appropriateness of such an assertion except by reference to the communal norms that sanction claims to know. I will develop this claim in what follows.

When Moore says "I know that p" it does not follow that he knows that p, because all he really means is that he is certain that p is true. It is striking that in his Proof, Moore

claims to know something no one would think of denying (*OC* 93).<sup>14</sup> Knowledge is a publicly checkable affair, and is therefore *objective* (*OC* 194, 245, 440). Being certain isn't the same as knowing, as Moore knows well.

Wittgenstein's account articulates an epistemic principle: where any evidence is necessarily less secure than what one claims to know, justification is impossible, and so, since knowledge is *justified* true belief, one cannot in fact be said to know. In the latter sort of case, where what is claimed to be known is instead a *hinge*: 'I know' is an idle wheel turning nothing; it might express one's confidence with respect to the hinge, but does not prove that one knows. These are but preliminary points in Wittgenstein's diagnosis of Moore's argument. His response to both Moore and the skeptic is revealed through an analysis of the epistemic expressions involved. We will turn to it immediately.

## 2.2 Hinge propositions

Let us reflect briefly on the "skeptical solution" that we sketched a paragraph ago. Something does not seem right. We have made the point that talk of doubt, or the possibility of error, presupposes a practice of epistemic evaluation of judgments in which both error and correctness are encountered. That's all very well, but surely Wittgenstein does not mean to suggest that it is not *open* to the radical skeptic to doubt any proposition she chooses, including that I have two hands (*OC* 24)? Surely, she would insist, the belief that I have two hands is not a framework belief in the *philosophical* context? After all,

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<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein uses the term 'subjective certainty' for the certainty that I manifest when my speech-act or action "shows" a hinge. On "showing," see 2.2.1. Moore's subjective certainty about his hands is beside the point; what he is articulating is an objective certainty (*OC* 440)—something that stands fast for *us* and not Moore alone. Objective certainty must not be confused with knowledge, which by definition is objective (for Wittgenstein). See below.

this is what one is querying when doing philosophy.<sup>15</sup> Wittgenstein concedes the point. “Just as one who has a just censure of a picture to make will often at first offer the censure where it does not belong, and an *investigation* is needed in order to find the right point of attack for the critic” (*OC* 37). In other words, to adequately answer the critic, we require a more penetrating analysis of the problem.

The first step is to map out Wittgenstein’s notion of a hinge proposition.<sup>16</sup> In the next subsection, I discuss hinge propositions in more detail, and explain the sense in which they are not capable of being articulated. Next I apply the distinction between hinge propositions and non-hinge propositions to the distinction between knowledge and certainty. I conclude this section by enumerating some hinge propositions and determining places for them in the “system” that Wittgenstein has in mind.

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<sup>15</sup> As Fogelin puts it, in questioning the existence of my hands I am simply raising the level of scrutiny involved, by conversationally implying (in Grice’s sense) that the possibility that I might be a BIV is relevant in this context. According to Grice, exchanges in language (conversations) are governed by conversational maxims. One of these disallows false assertions; the other disallows assertions backed by sufficient evidence. When one asserts that there are black swans in Australia, one makes the conversational implicature that one believes that there are black swans in Australia.

When Abena complains that Kwasi has hidden her doll, she is implying, though not asserting, that she has evidence for this crime. (If she doesn’t, she will have to be taught that her accusation “isn’t okay,” and that she can’t go asserting things that carry false implicatures.) A conversational implicature may be “canceled” by explicitly denying it. Fogelin makes use of this idea to create a conversational maxim that applies to varying levels of scrutiny. One can raise levels of scrutiny by making explicit certain normally irrelevant possibilities (e.g., by saying things like “I know this sounds far-fetched, but...”). See Fogelin (1994), 198-99.

<sup>16</sup> In what follows, I use of the term ‘hinge proposition’ to refer to the objects of framework/hinge beliefs. Since, on Wittgenstein’s view, we are objectively certain of hinge propositions, I will also use the term ‘certainty’ (plural: ‘certainties’) where appropriate. A word on the term ‘framework belief’ is in order: strictly speaking, it is not done to call certainties beliefs at all. One commentator goes through ‘nonpropositional belief,’ (via Malcolm and Marcus), ‘belief-in,’ ‘foundational trust,’ and ‘ur-trust’ (via Hertzberg) before settling on her original characterization, namely, *hinge belief* (Moyal-Sharrock 2004b, 187-198). Nothing I say in this work hangs on this issue, so I shall stick to ‘hinge proposition’ and where necessary, ‘framework belief’.

### 2.2.1. Hinges and Sayability

At the heart of what we have called the skeptical solution in *On Certainty* is Wittgenstein's characterization of beliefs that stand fast for us. These would be the framework beliefs mentioned above. I said two paragraphs ago that Wittgenstein does not think that our ordinary claims to know are vulnerable to the skeptic's attack. This claim would stick only if it could be shown that the framework beliefs that set up the contexts in which one makes ordinary knowledge claims are themselves not in need of justification. To Wittgenstein's way of thinking, giving and asking for reasons in the ordinary course of things, either in the study/laboratory or outside it takes place within these contexts.

Let me begin by listing Wittgenstein's claims regarding hinge propositions, and show how they fit together with the skeptical solution outlined above. Framework beliefs are certain ubiquitous items of what Wittgenstein calls "our system." By "our system" he means the large network of epistemic language-games that provide the contexts in which ordinary reflective human beings make claims and counter-claims, raise doubts and objections, consult, accept and reject the opinions of experts, etc.

Hinge propositions function as the constitutive rules of language-games. Our commitment to them is implicated in our other beliefs and actions—e.g., the child's act of drinking milk implicates her belief in its existence. Hinge propositions are "in *deed* not doubted" (*OC* 342), i.e., not doubted in practice. They form "the matter-of-course foundation" for our inquiries (*OC* 167)—they are foundational *only* in the sense that our confidence with respect to them does not stand in need of evidential support. On the other hand, being the constitutive rules of language-games, they "belong to the grammar" or

logical description of language-games. (Hence Wittgenstein sometimes speaks of them as “grammatical” or “logical” propositions.<sup>17</sup>) This feature gives hinge propositions a non-optional character, which means that we cannot simply decide to doubt them. As Wittgenstein says, “Moore does not *know* what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as also for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our *method* of doubt and enquiry” (OC 151).

As explained above, no evidence that you might cite in support of a framework belief can be more certain than that belief itself. That is what makes something a framework belief, and why framework beliefs are in general not *justified*. Wittgenstein describes the firmness of framework beliefs in the following terms: “The child learns to believe a host of things. I.e. it learns to act according to these beliefs. 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). There are two things to be said on this matter. First, given the deeply entrenched character of hinge propositions, and hence Wittgenstein says that to doubt one of our certainties would be to doubt most of our beliefs together (OC 103, 232, 370, 419, 490, and 613). Thus, by default, doubting a hinge proposition is not an available move in the ordinary language-game of doubting or asserting propositions.

Secondly, this does not mean that we are stuck with all framework beliefs that we have ever acquired. The idea isn’t that we may never doubt a certainty, but that doing so

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<sup>17</sup> OC 56c: “[E]verything descriptive of a language-game is part of logic.”

OC 57: “Now might not ‘I know, I am not surmising, that here is my hand’ be conceived as a proposition of grammar?”

would require some sort of an upheaval in our system of beliefs.<sup>18</sup> One can explain this by clarifying the “axis metaphor” that *OC* 144 (quoted above) hints at, and *OC* 152 states. A hinge proposition is the stable axis around which ordinary epistemic activity occurs. One doubts, accepts or rejects propositions on the periphery of the system of propositions believed, while the axis remains immobile. But an axis is not a permanent fixture: the epistemic community might come upon pragmatic reasons for giving up certain hinges. This would happen when the structure of beliefs built around their axis collapses, on account of new empirical discoveries, and the pragmatic cost of retaining the hinges in question is deemed too high. For example, after Magellen's circumnavigation of the earth, the progressive, post-Enlightenment epistemic community came to reject the hinge that the earth is a flat disc.

It is important to note that framework beliefs do not serve as foundations for the other beliefs in the system. My proof-text here is *OC* 248, according to which the body of beliefs “carries” the scaffolding of its structure with it.<sup>19</sup> The non-framework beliefs in the system are not justified by them, and nor is truth of the hinges presupposed by anything within the context. Wittgenstein uses foundationalist language here; the first

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<sup>18</sup> It would be fair to read this as an oblique swipe at the comfy circumstances of Descartes' Meditator. Methodological doubt is certainly intelligible: we understand how one might go from doubting the deliverance of the senses to doubting mathematical propositions and everything else in between. But it is still a philosophers' fantasy. It is also *weird* in a sense that philosophical training can erase from one's memory. It presents (and reinforces) what Wittgenstein might call a weird “picture” of how doubt works.

One might object that the issue of the relationship of philosophical skepticism to ordinary doubting is more complex I am letting on (Fogelin 1994, 198-203), but I think that the present Wittgensteinian point holds. There is a running critique of skepticisms of various kinds throughout *On Certainty* and the *Investigations*, parts of which I comment upon in these pages. But the project as a whole is much larger than I can undertake here.

<sup>19</sup> Wittgenstein uses the term “foundation-walls”. The “scaffolding” metaphor familiar from the *Tractatus* (perhaps most prominently, *TLP* 6.142) recurs in *On Certainty* at *OC* 211, but it has a subtly different application here.

part of *OC* 248 says “I have arrived at the rock-bottom of my convictions”—an echo of the spade-turning bedrock metaphor of *PI* §217. But per *OC* 110, the rock-bottom of my convictions is “not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting.”

There are a couple of important things to note here. *First*, the hinge does not need to be true in order for me to believe other things in the light of it. Framework beliefs are not foundations in this sense. My commitment to the relevant hinge is an enabling condition of my having the beliefs that I do in that particular context. In other words, the hinge is a *locally transcendental condition* of my believing something within that system. Consider *OC* 144 again: the child acquires hinges in an unsystematic way; she learns from books (fairy tales included<sup>20</sup>) and teachers; she learns, most importantly, through being trained to respond to orders and instructions (*OC* 43, 95, 538). She doesn’t actually learn any hinge propositions, but “inherits” them (*OC* 94-95) or imbibes them along with what she does learn.

*Second*, the bedrock is not a set of propositions, but *a way of acting*. This means our cognitive repertoire is constituted by a set of biological responses and acquired skills.<sup>21</sup> It says further that the bottom-level is ungrounded: “there is no why” to my listening to a song simply because I enjoy it, or to stepping out the door without worrying about falling into an abyss beyond the doorstep. Hinges do not for that reason constitute

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<sup>20</sup> In *OC* 95, Wittgenstein refers to any understanding of the world as a world-picture (*Weltbild*), adding that the propositions that describe it (he is talking about hinges) “might be part of a kind of mythology.” They are part of a mythology not because our world-picture is wrong (i.e., its component propositions are false, although some might be), but because there aren’t definite rules about what hinges can make up our world-picture. A better way to say this would be to point out that we don’t reason through to hinges, but that *they stand fast for us*. In this sense, the hinges we have are non-negotiable for as long as they serve the function of hinges in our system. On “mythology,” see also *PI* 221.

<sup>21</sup> Wittgenstein is not averse to calling them “beliefs” either. See *OC* 253.



the foundation of my body of beliefs; it is more useful to think of them as constituting the *background* that determines what justifies what and what it is to justify something within a given system.

From this last point it follows that framework beliefs are themselves beyond justification. A different way of putting this point would be that since hinge propositions belong to the logical description of language-games, it does not make sense to speak of either doubting or believing them. In fact, framework beliefs are not up for querying or affirmation; they “lie beyond the route traveled by enquiry (*OC* 88)” and are “removed from the traffic... shunted onto an unused siding” (*OC* 210). Note that if framework beliefs cannot be justified, they cannot be known to be true.

Notice further that hinge propositions bear some relation to empirical propositions within a system of beliefs, even if they do not provide evidential grounds for them. Michael Williams (2004b, 257) describes this relation in terms of material-inferential connections: hinges are logically implied by the ways in which we do and do not ask questions; they are held in place by our ordinary doubts and claims to know. Within contexts in which they are taken for granted, framework beliefs are pragmatically justified (“justified *in deed*”) by the true beliefs in the system.

I would like to clarify my use of the term ‘transcendental’ above. Meredith Williams makes the following remarks about Wittgenstein’s view of grammar in the *Investigations*. “Grammar... for Wittgenstein is immanent in our practices, not the transcendental condition of our practices. It is not independent of our lived practices. These practices just are de facto agreements in action and judgment (Me Williams 1999, 177).” Williams is referring to the *PI* 241 here, one of the “form of life” passages in the

*Investigations*.<sup>22</sup> I think Williams means to say that *knowledge* of grammar (here, knowledge of the framework beliefs of one's current epistemic context) is not a condition of making a move in a communal practice, for in doing so we proceed without justification. So far I see no problem in saying that the grammatical description of the language-games I engage in contains propositions that act as enabling conditions for my moves within them.

I agree with Williams' claim that for Wittgenstein, the grammatical features of language-games are manifested in practice; this is consistent with taking the view that hinges are locally transcendental conditions of filing claims and doubts within epistemic language-games. To be fair to Williams, her target is the "autonomy of grammar" thesis championed by Baker and Hacker. It will not prove necessary to discuss that thesis here, but it should be clear that my reading does not regard the grammar of language-games as somehow floating free of the practices allowed within them.

The next point to note about hinge propositions is that they *can* be queried, as the Magellen example above illustrates. The transcendental conditions of some subset of beliefs can be brought into the foreground, and set over against other background transcendental conditions. This is to make the Heideggerian point that we can never rid ourselves of some set of hinges or other: knowledge is necessarily context-bound for Wittgenstein. Hinge propositions cease to function as hinges just in case they are made explicit in a context other than the one(s) they help to frame.

Wittgenstein also holds that our certainty with respect to hinge propositions cannot be articulated in terms of claims to *know*. To adopt terminology familiar from the

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<sup>22</sup> I discuss the concept of forms of life in subsections 4.1.2, 4.1.4 and all through the first half of chapter 5. For now I shall ignore the matter.

*Tractatus*, what is certain is not sayable. Thus our certainties can *only* be “shown” through our ordinary epistemic activities. They are also manifested in actions, e.g., in regularly going up a flight of stairs to reach the study that I am certain exists on the second floor (*OC* 431). Moore’s claim that he knows he has two hands is a “misfiring attempt” to state (say) something that does not bear saying.<sup>23</sup> ‘I know that’ does not make sense as an operator on hinge propositions, as we will see in the next subsection.

On Wittgenstein’s view, then, Moore is certain that he has two hands not because he possesses lots of evidence in support of his claim, but because of the axial role of the hinge in question. That Moore has two hands is not a proposition that he knows. The evidence that he might have for the belief that he has two hands—evidence that is less secure than the belief itself—is fundamentally different from the evidence for his belief that Saturn exists (*OC* 20); on the current view, no amount of evidence for the former belief is sufficient to establish it. *Neither* of these beliefs, however, proves that the external world exists. Finally, nor does Moore’s certainty about the matter prove that he knows that his hands exist.

Wittgenstein explains Moore’s misuse of the expression ‘I know’ in a number of ways. Here is one of them. Suppose I said to someone, “I know that that’s a tree,” meaning to assure them of its truth. My intention would be to assure her somehow; I would be telling her, “that is a tree; you can absolutely rely on it; there is no doubt about it.’ And a philosopher [Wittgenstein adds] could only use the statement to show that this form of speech is actually used. But if his use of it is not to be merely an observation

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<sup>23</sup> That it is a misfiring attempt is not easy to see, since, to use another one of Wittgenstein’s metaphors, what we are looking at is too close to the eye. This last metaphor is presented in *PI* §129. See *OC* 501 and the discussion immediately preceding it.

about English grammar, he must give the circumstances in which this expression functions” (*OC* 432). One may try to convince someone that the object before her is a tree in case she is delusional, but in normal circumstances, saying “That is a tree” or “I know that is a tree” does not serve to convince anyone. Similarly, Wittgenstein would say of the radical skeptic that she raises a doubt that cannot be raised except in circumstances that *she* is not dealing with (i.e., making sure that I have hands is something I would do after extracting myself from the wreckage of a car).

This apparently mild criticism acquires great force when seen in light of the skeptical solution. Wittgenstein is assuming a social context for epistemic activity and evaluation. (Remember that, going by Kripke’s argument, it is impossible to justify beliefs evidentially. The radical skeptical point is conceded in the first part of the skeptical solution.) This means that such moves in epistemic language-games as raising doubts and making claims are bound by social norms. When you raise a doubt, you already take the existence of the social world for granted. As I will argue more fully in later chapters, the transcendental condition of doubting is commitment to social norms governing the raising of doubts. In other words, doubting a claim and rejecting it are themselves social practices, like getting married or speaking a language. This is why the radical skeptic cannot raise doubts without presupposing the things that she wants to reject, and why, in Wittgenstein’s view, radical skepticism is self-undermining.

Now we can answer the question raised on behalf of the radical skeptic at the beginning of this section: what are Wittgenstein’s reasons for claiming that the radical skeptic cannot doubt an ordinary everyday proposition like the proposition that I have two hands? It is not open to the radical skeptic to doubt the claim that I have two hands,

or that there is a tree at seven o'clock because the limits to skeptical doubt are held in place by the conventions governing our shared social world. The skeptic cannot *actually* assume a "view from nowhere" from which to look in (or down) at this world. Not even the practice of philosophy can permit such an escape. Thus the proposition that I have two hands retains its status as a hinge in the context of philosophical inquiry.

### 2.2.2 Distinguishing Knowledge and Certainty

Wittgenstein has a highly unorthodox, non-Cartesian understanding of certainty, which derives from his view about the relation of justification to meaning. Let us unpack the claim that hinges "stand fast" in virtue of their place in our system. As we have seen, we can think of framework beliefs as foundations that are not somehow self-evidencing, or otherwise already justified. I have also explained why they are not foundational in the sense of serving as the ground for other beliefs by providing ultimate justifiers for them. What makes them secure, or certain, is the fact that they cannot, on pain of completely undermining the language-games they frame, be given up. Hinges are "unmoving foundation[s] of... *language-games*" (OC 403); retiring a hinge would cause the language-game to become extinct or to undergo fundamental changes.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The issue is intimately related to the issue of conceptual change. Michael Williams (2004a) rightly highlights the importance of *OC* 61-63 and *OC* 65, which draw together the concerns of the first part of the text with Wittgenstein's preoccupation with meaning. Commenting on these passages, Williams writes, "Our language-games change as our conception of the world changes... *With such changes go changes in the normative epistemic structure of our games*: the doubts that we recognize as reasonable (or even intelligible), what we may or must not take for granted, and so on" (95; italics added).

I find Williams' take congenial, because, as I will argue in chapter 5, epistemic norms are not necessarily rational, and this is to be expected, given that it is *custom* and not reason that determines what language-games get played. That we choose to pursue certain epistemic language-games that are dominated by rational norms is itself an upshot

It is useful to compare the metaphor of the foundation-walls with the axis metaphor dealt with above. While hinges qua axial beliefs are immobile relative to the beliefs that move around them, hinges qua certainties are also dependent on those framed by them. Hinges are sometimes best understood as constituting the axis, and at other times, as foundation-walls that are susceptible to changes in epistemic status depending on the epistemic health of the body of beliefs they frame. Under special circumstances, these foundation-walls might well be demolished. Consider again the disappearance of the proposition that the earth is a flat disc as a hinge framing our various beliefs concerning, e.g., differential climates, traveling across the surface of the earth, etc.

It is clear from the discussion above that hinges are not justifiers for other beliefs in the system in the way that properly foundational beliefs are thought to be: they do not provide evidential grounds for other beliefs. In fact, sometimes we are hard put to account for rational grounds for treating something as a hinge: as Wittgenstein says, they might have been disputed once, but have, “perhaps, for unthinkable ages... belonged to the scaffolding of our thoughts” (*OC* 210-11).

But on the other hand, hinges are indispensable to framing our talk of all manner of different things that we might properly claim to know, or doubt. Note that intelligibility within a discursive context is intimately related to knowability within the context. Back in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein made the enigmatic claim that the limits of his language mean the limits of his world (*TLP* 5.6). This remark has been interpreted as an expression of Wittgenstein’s transcendental idealism (B. Williams 1981; A. Moore 1985). We might describe the early Wittgenstein’s transcendental idealism as the view

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of custom. Apropos of conceptual change, see also the remarks dealing with the river metaphor, namely, *OC* 96, 97 and 99.

that my experiences of the objects and events in the world are articulated in the language that I understand, and that the limits of my experience coincide with those imposed by my language. As *TLP* 5.61 says, “Logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits. So we cannot say in logic, ‘The world has this in it, and this, but not that.’ For that would appear to presuppose that we were excluding certain possibilities, and this cannot be the case, since it would require that logic should go beyond the limits of the world; for only in that way could it view those limits from the other side as well.” The idea that there is no possibility of representing the world from outside the logic of my language is transformed in the later philosophy into the idea that it is impossible for a linguistic move not to have significance in a socially instituted language.

In the *Tractatus* the limits of “my” world were limned by basic propositions very different from the hinges of *On Certainty*. But the concern that Wittgenstein was expressing there is not *too* remote from his concerns in *On Certainty*. Wittgenstein now speaks of “our” world, which is thought of as cut up into irregular bits, yielding object-domains for the different contexts of inquiry and assertion. Hinge propositions describe the limits of these contexts by remaining in the background as transcendental conditions of assertion and knowledge.

In *On Certainty* we find a considerably revamped notion of “logic”—hinge propositions, qua objects of the framework beliefs of different language-games *are* the propositions of logic. While these propositions of logic do not serve as the evidential ground for the propositions we regard as true, if we did not take them for granted, we

would neither understand the things we do, nor form beliefs and seek to defend them.<sup>25</sup>

Our commitment to hinge propositions *makes possible* the game of adducing evidence for, or justifying beliefs held. Qua background, they give sense to our ordinary epistemic practices.

Given the emphatic contextualism of this view, there remains no theoretical motivation for coming up with a list of hinges underlying all language-games or contexts of inquiry. Since it is more usual to come upon foundationalist accounts of certainty, this might produce in one a sense of unease. One might ask, what could *possibly* be interesting about certainty that is non-universal? It may be interesting to be told that, at bottom, certainty does not have to do with being justified—the reader will recall that hinge propositions are beyond justification altogether.

But why bring up hinge propositions in an argument against the skeptic if they do no justificatory work? To answer this question, we need to understand Wittgenstein's project as being directed at the traditional way of thinking about certainty as having the best kind, or amount of evidence for one's belief. It is not the case that knowledge needs to be evidentially grounded on further, more basic knowledge. According to the alternative “picture” discussed in the later chapters of this work, knowledge is the yield of practices framed by groundless certainties.

In light of these remarks, let us turn once again to the problem with radical skepticism. If the radical skeptic contends, for instance, that I could be mistaken about an

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<sup>25</sup> Let us dispense with the case of assertion by means of a facile example. We could not assert, or understand the sentence “Fyodor craved filial affection” unless, of course, filial affection were known to be a desirable thing but ultimately, unless the proposition that every human being has parents belonged to “the scaffolding of our thoughts.”



axial belief such as that expressed by ‘My name is IB,’ and demands an impossibly high level of justification for it, then she is saying not only that I have a crippling knowledge deficit, but also that I do not know what it is for a proposition to be true or false (OC 515). Basically she implies that I do not know how to play the epistemic game. On the other hand, if she is demanding evidence for a framework belief, she is not better off than me; indeed she is not even successfully challenging my belief. In asking for justification for my belief, she behaves like someone who doesn’t know how to play the language-game of doubting and backing up claims.

Instead of my needing to justify the claim that my name is IB, the radical skeptic needs to ground her doubts on some evidence to the effect that I do not know that my name is IB. When, in the name of producing such evidence, she adduces only the claim that I do not know the denial of skeptical hypotheses, she undermines her own claim to legitimate doubt. After all, the skeptic is relying on various certainties herself. In leveling the charge that I cannot possibly know that my name is IB, she is using words in the way that competent epistemic players do, and her practice implicates a raft of certainties that cannot survive the kind of challenge she herself levels, certainties regarding the nature of epistemic practice, evidence, word meaning, etc.

A closer look at the skeptic’s argument shows that she is misusing words. Here is the argument again:

(S)

S1. If I know that I have two hands, then I know that I am not a BIV.

S2. I don’t know that I am not a BIV.

Therefore,

SC. I don't know that I have two hands.

S2 says that I do not know the denial of some skeptical hypothesis. On Wittgenstein's view, the denials of skeptical hypotheses aren't things that anyone can *know* in any circumstances: they are what have been called "global hinge propositions" (Pritchard 2001, 117). S1 compounds the error: that I have two hands is a "local" hinge, and whatever else "knowing" it might do—such as make possible my knowing that there is oxygen on a Saturnian moon—it does not "prove realism" (OC 59) by eliminating the skeptical possibility. In admitting C (i.e., I know that p if and only if I am certain that p) the radical skeptic has taken on Moore's confusion between knowledge and certainty.

Let us grant that I am certain that my name is IB. Given the categorial distinction we have just drawn, my *certainty* has nothing to do with my *knowing* that I am not a BIV. It is not as though I am certain of one *because* I am certain of the other, or vice-versa; hinges aren't inferentially related to other beliefs, or to one another.<sup>26</sup> So, I am certain that my name is IB, *and* that I am not a BIV. On a Sellarsian note, the radical skeptic's argument is spun around a form of words conventionally used in giving and asking for reasons. It relies on the hinges that make possible such activities. And precisely for that reason it is self-undermining.

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<sup>26</sup> The use of the closure principle for knowledge is the skeptic's best move, as Dretske eventually showed. But notice that Dretske is interested in a straight solution to radical skepticism, as is revealed in his modal representation of the epistemic situation.

### 2.2.3. *Rational Thought, Common Sense and Special Contexts of Inquiry*

I will now enumerate the various categories of hinge propositions mentioned in OC. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, and it is certainly possible to divide up the categories differently.<sup>27</sup> The following classification will work for our purposes.

First off, Wittgenstein lists propositions that are immediately certain to one: here is a hand (*OC* 1), there a chair (*OC* 7); there lies a sick man (*OC* 10). One is certain of one's internal states, e.g., when pain occurs, one is certain that one is in pain (*OC* 178). One is also immediately certain of such things as one's name (*OC* 328), gender (*OC* 79), recent activities (*OC* 659), current location (*OC* 553), immediate possessions (*OC* 387) and place of residence (*OC* 67). Then there are things that one is certain of on account of one's circumstances in life: I am certain, for instance, that I have never been in Buenos Aires (*OC* 269, 333, 419). If I had been there, I would have known, since I have mused over the fact that I have never been south of the Equator, and I know that Buenos Aires is south of the Equator. On the other hand, it is likely that I have visited a suburb of New Delhi, since I have driven through and around New Delhi countless times. The possibility of my being mistaken about the latter keeps it from being something that I am certain of.

There are also things that I take for granted on account of being a creature endowed with common sense: I am certain that I have a body (*OC* 244), that cats do not grow on trees (*OC* 282), and that barring times that I have flown, I have always spent my life in close proximity to the earth (*OC* 93). One knows also that people have parents (*OC* 211), and that one had great grandparents (*OC* 159). Being a creature endowed with

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<sup>27</sup> An exhaustive categorization of hinge propositions can be found in Moyal-Sharrock (2004b).

common sense also involves being certain of the more mundane facts about the natural world: that the sun is not a hole in the vault of heaven (*OC* 104), that people's heads contain brains and not sawdust (*OC* 4, 281) and that if someone's arm is cut off, it will not grow back again (*OC* 274).

A person with common sense is also not likely to presume that tables, or their own bodies vanish from time to time (*OC* 119, 101), or that the figures they are calculating with on a tablet tend to change of their own accord (*OC* 338). Such a person also relies upon rough generalizations about the relative heights of middle-sized objects, such as mountains and buildings they have seen (*OC* 233). In fact, such people also rely on their memories all the time (*OC* 338, 346). Further, they take for granted that the various things that make life in the world possible, for instance, they expect that the letter they have dropped off in the mailbox will reach its destination (*OC* 337). They also expect most of their words to mean what they take them to mean (*OC* 369), and also expect that people of whom they ask what something is called know the language in which the question is put (*OC* 345).

Not every certainty that we rely upon as creatures with common sense is required to be a person capable of rational thought. We might roughly divide up the various hinge propositions in *On Certainty* on the following basis: some form the very basis of rational thought, others do not. Among the latter, we come across propositions that one needs to rely upon in order to be counted as operating with some modicum of common sense, and propositions that frame special contexts of inquiry. The propositions that 2 times 2 is 4 (*OC* 10), that the earth has existed through various historical events (*OC* 183), and that the earth is a ball floating free in space (*OC* 146) would count among these. When

engaging in inquiry within these special contexts (such as arithmetic, history, geography and astronomy), our ability to play the relevant games is heavily reliant on various certainties such as the existence of laboratory apparatuses (*OC* 163) and figures on a piece of paper (*OC* 338), and the certainty that water set over a fire will eventually boil and not freeze (*OC* 338).

Now, it may be that we are certain that people do not travel to the moon every night, or that God does not exist, or whatever, but there are people who might be convinced of the contrary. There is nothing paradoxical about being certain with respect to a possibly false proposition. But more importantly, there is nothing weird about people adhering to false beliefs in spite of there being good reasons to believe in their negation instead. Hence it is that people might believe that people can make rain (*OC* 92), that Jesus had only a mother, or that under certain circumstances, a wafer undergoes transubstantiation (*OC* 239). Just because they hold these beliefs, we would not regard them as being irrational: they can certainly talk to one another about these arcane matters, and they can have some sort of a conversation with us as well.

One might think of these three broad categories of hinges as involving varying degrees of constraints on that which is to be taken for granted. We could say that hinges that frame rational discourse are at the “loose” end of the spectrum, whereas hinges that frame special kinds of inquiry are at the opposite end, with hinges that frame common sense discourse lying somewhere in the middle. This is probably not very well put, but it will do for the purposes at hand. All we need just now is an intuitive understanding of the relative firmness of the frameworks required to engage in language-games at the levels of merely rational discourse, common sense discourse, and specialized talk.

## 2.3 Foundations, Webs and the Question of Wittgenstein's Epistemology

### 2.3.1 *Foundationalism versus the Groundlessness of Belief*

“How am I able to obey a rule?”—if this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my following the rule in the way I do. If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do.” (Remember that we sometimes demand definitions for the sake not of their content, but of their form. Our requirement is an architectural one; the definition a kind of ornamental coping that supports nothing.) (*PI* §211)

This is the famous bedrock passage from the *Investigations*. We have been reading it in a non-foundationalist way because I don't think any other reading is possible. To clarify my stance on this passage, my enthusiasm for the Kripkean reading does not lead me to think that saying “This is what I do” is akin to accepting defeat or an expression of what Pritchard in a different context calls epistemic *angst*. My saying “This is what I do” does not signal my frustration at not being able to justify what I do (e.g., how I add numbers or speak English or invariably “sing catches” tunelessly), and having to settle for conformity with the merely communal norm.

On this issue, Meredith Williams writes, “Wittgenstein's answer to the Paradox is not a sceptical throwing up of hands with ‘But this is what I do,’ but an appeal to the social embeddedness of rules. What provides the background structure within which rules can ‘guide’ the individual is social practice. Through the practice of the community, constraints are imposed upon the individual through the process of learning, and space is

made for distinguishing correct and incorrect behavior of the individual” (1999, 185). I agree with this reading and with Williams’ understanding of the term ‘I’ in *PI* §211 as referring to the individual, i.e., any competent speaker at all, who speaks on authority as a representative (“master”) of a communal practice. The fundamentally social character of the linguistic/epistemic context is relevant here, since the right to say “I know that [insert here a certainty]” is derived from participation in communal life.

A second important element in this passage is the parenthetical remark about the ornamental coping. Saying “This is what I do” is not to offer a reason for what I do. Let’s say that I ask E why it is that she executes a *modus ponens* just so. She might answer: “Why, that’s how it’s done. Look; given  $p \rightarrow q$ , and  $p$ , you can’t *not* infer  $q$ .” She might add something about it being a basic inferential routine, or say how it makes logical sense to do it like that, etc. But none of this gives me a reason that explains what she does. Her showing me again merely manifests understanding of a norm of action by conforming to it. The norm doesn’t do much; it certainly doesn’t provide a reason for me (or E) to act some way.

This has bearing on the idea of the groundlessness of a body of beliefs. A hinge does not enter into justificatory activities, nor is it possible to justify it. What is certain is not so in virtue of having a lot of supporting evidence. Stroll (1994, 47-48) seems to hold the opposite view. But this is a mistake, as a closer look at the following passages shows.

If everything speaks for a hypothesis and nothing against it, is it objectively certain? One can call it that. But does it necessarily agree with the world of facts? At the very best it shows us what ‘agreement’ means. (*OC* 203)

What prevents me from supposing that this table either vanishes or alters its shape and colour when no one is observing it, and then when someone looks at it again changes back to its old condition?—“But who is going to suppose such a thing!”—one would feel like saying. (*OC* 214)

Here we see that the idea of ‘agreement with reality’ does not have any clear application. (*OC* 215)

I can best describe these as coherentist claims with a Wittgensteinian twist. The reason why one would not suppose that the table vanishes when no one is looking at it is that the certainty that it stays put is rendered constant (axial) by everything that we believe about physical objects. So the certainty in question *is* foundational in a manner of speaking, only, it does not ground the edifice of beliefs by providing evidential support. The result of getting rid of such a foundation isn’t subsidence, but chaos, or “nonsense”: “The fact that I use ‘hand’ and all the other words in my sentence without a second thought, indeed that I were to stand before the abyss if I wanted so much as to doubt their meaning—shews that absence of doubt belongs to the essence of the language-game, that the question ‘How do I know...’ drags out the language-game, or else does away with it” (*OC* 370).<sup>28</sup> What holds together my body of beliefs (or “our body of beliefs”; it doesn’t matter which) is what in the *Investigations* was called “agreement in judgments.” This agreement in what is relevant, correct or true is itself forged by our practical concerns as social creatures. So our beliefs “cohere” in the sense of offering one another mutual

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<sup>28</sup> See also *OC* 419, 492 and 613.



support, at least enough to sustain rational agreement, and to order our doubts and beliefs in specific ways.<sup>29</sup>

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein uses the disagreement between Moore and the radical skeptic to reflect about matters of broader epistemological interest. Pointing out that the structure of justification is other than what it is assumed to be plays an important role in his diagnosis of radical skepticism. Secondly, the account of hinges provides a solution to the problem of justificational regress, something to which foundationalists are found to respond imperfectly.

Justificational regress is generated as soon as one attempts to satisfy the requirement of justification for knowledge. When I make my grounds for a belief explicit, I enter a knowledge claim that, it may be argued, in turn requires justification. That further justifying claim also requires grounds for belief in *it*, and so on. The foundationalist posits basic or foundational beliefs to stop the justificational regress. She is then required to establish that such ultimate justifiers are somehow self-justified, or that they are able to do without justification altogether. Wittgenstein is able to combat justificational regress without positing basic beliefs of any kind. His regress stoppers are framework beliefs, which do not work like the foundationalist's ultimate justifiers.

The reasons we offer in support of our beliefs do not actually go down to bedrock-level, since, in practice, reasons run out quickly, and a long list of reasons is rendered otiose by the fact that justificational work takes place against the backdrop of shared hinges. Hinges, as we know, justify nothing. Neither are they justified by things

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<sup>29</sup>“(My) doubts form a system (*OC* 126b).” There are things I may doubt and things that I may not, depending (and here I shall lapse momentarily into pseudo social-contract-speak) on the “clauses” of the agreement.

we may believe: that the table continues to exist while I go for a stroll isn't something I believe on account of believing anything else. They are also not self-justifying. Rather, they are implicated in all that we say, believe and do.

Their groundlessness also makes them immune to doubt (barring the sort that plunges the language-game into chaos). This is because just as they cannot be known no matter how great the number of reasons we think up in support of them, they cannot be doubted because there aren't appropriate grounds for doubting hinge propositions. "But what about such a proposition as 'I know I have a brain'? Can I doubt it? Grounds for *doubt* are lacking! Everything speaks in its favor and nothing against it. Nevertheless it is imaginable that my skull should turn out empty when operated upon" (OC 4). Notice that the fact that "everything speaks in its favor" does not mean that everything justifies it, but that, in a very mundane sense, it is mad to ask that question, or to strive to prove an affirmative answer. The question "Do I know that I have a brain?" is as equally groundless as the claim to know that I have two hands. Questions, too, need to be grounded in reasons. Consider the question "Do you know that you have ten coins in your pocket?" This is answerable in a way that the previous question isn't. This is because it is possible to make sure whether one has ten coins in one's pocket, which presupposes that it is possible to be mistaken in the belief that one has ten coins in one's pocket. And, as Wittgenstein says, the question "Do I know that I have a brain?" is completely groundless. It isn't a logically well-formed question at all, in Wittgenstein's sense. It merely *masquerades* as a question. For this reason it is arbitrary to doubt hinge propositions (Pritchard 2001, 101; Pritchard 2005, 198).

These claims about hinge propositions help to outline a novel view of the structure of reasons and justification. Pritchard argues in one of his earlier writings on Wittgenstein that the project of defeating the skeptical challenge or formulating epistemological views is not ruled out by what most interpreters take to be Wittgenstein's primary intention in *On Certainty*, namely, the description and examination of epistemic language-games and of terms of epistemic appraisal (Pritchard 2001, 112). Pritchard sees Wittgenstein as being externalistically-inclined in his epistemology (118),<sup>30</sup> but rightly refrains from ascribing a definite position to him. Moyal-Sharrock considers reading him as a "foundherentist", invoking Kornblith's view that while justificatory trees might have a foundational structure, it is simply not true that beliefs are justified independently of their relations to other beliefs (2004b, 79).

I will speak later of the problems of pinning theses on to Wittgenstein, but for now I do want to note that there is a definite epistemological orientation to *On Certainty*. Wittgenstein's externalism is unmistakable, as is his coherentism, but these do not amount to a fully worked-out epistemological view. The reasons for this go deeper than coyness, love of paradox or irony: my view is that Wittgenstein is a Pyrrhonist, and what this means for our current purposes is that it would be wrong to go looking for theses in this text. As for the "orientation" that I mention above, it is the result of Wittgenstein's taking a certain approach to *describing* epistemic phenomena that successfully preserves its independence from such opposed dogmatic philosophical views as foundationalism and coherentism.

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<sup>30</sup> I discuss Wittgenstein's externalism in Chapters 4 and 5.

The sense of what I have just said will not be clear until after our discussion in Chapters 4 and 5, but consider this a promissory note that I will make good later. Since I have resorted to filing promissory notes, here is another one: many of the considerations advanced in *On Certainty* follow from meta-epistemological reflections about epistemic norms as they are reflected in different kinds of epistemic activities. The resultant claims are tightly consistent with his claims about linguistic norms in the *Investigations*.

I shall conclude this chapter with a critique of the foundationalist reading of Wittgenstein by such authors as Stroll and Moyal-Sharrock. In a sense, perhaps my critique shall remain incomplete until I am done defending my claims in this work, but I think the foregoing provides enough material to initiate the project. Here are some of the reasons offered for reading foundationalism into the remarks of *On Certainty*.

(1)

[According to Wittgenstein,] knowledge belongs to the language-game, and certitude does not. The base and the mansion resting on it are completely different. This is what Wittgenstein means when he says that knowledge and certainty belong to different categories... And it is his rejection of the thesis of homogenous foundations, that to a great extent separates him from [the Western philosophical] tradition. (Stroll 1994, 145-46)

In what specific respect is the base different from what it supports? Moyal-Sharrock says that hinges are “nonpropositional and nonepistemic.” (‘Hinge propositions’ is really a misnomer; we are talking about foundational ways of acting and takings-for-granted.)

And how might a nonepistemic base support something? The answer is that we are not talking about a traditional foundationalist structure. The categorial difference between knowledge and certainty should not be lost sight of. She says: “Traditionally, philosophers have crucially distorted the nature of our basic beliefs: by putting them into sentences, they thought they were dealing with propositions. So Wittgenstein adopts the picture but effects the correction” (Moyal-Sharrock 2004b, 78). To prove that hinge beliefs are foundational, Moyal-Sharrock lists various items from the text.

(2)

How does someone judge which is his right hand and which is his left hand? How do I know that my judgment will agree with someone else’s? How do I know that this colour is blue? If I don’t trust *myself* here, why should I trust anyone else’s judgment? Is there a why? Must I not begin to trust somewhere? That is to say: somewhere I must begin with not doubting; and that is not, so to speak, hasty but excusable, it is part of judging. (Moyal-Sharrock 2004b, 195)

In the following excerpt, Moyal-Sharrock distances herself from those who lump together foundationalism with a transcendental theory about the bounds of sense. She claims that the Therapeutes (New Wittgensteinians and others who favor a therapeutic approach to Wittgenstein’s philosophy) are guilty of this charge.

(3)

Wittgenstein is a foundationalist, which does not make him into a Platonist, or an empirical foundationalist. And he has, what Therapeutes protest against his having: a thick notion of grammar—so thick that in fact it includes, as we have seen, a *universal* grammar (though of course not in the chomskyan sense). The slide from foundations to metaphysical or generative grammars need not be made... To say that some of our bounds of sense (or rules of grammar) are universal or immutable is not *ipso facto* to say that they express metaphysical truths... We need not give up foundations altogether to acquire pluralism, and acknowledging pluralism need not leave us suspended in a Rortian universe of unrooted conversations and discourses. Wittgenstein's foundationalism is neither ahistorical nor decontextualized: it is a *human-bound* foundationalism. (Ibid., 172-73)

Apropos of (3), I find the running together of “universal and immutable” with “non-decontextualized” quite bewildering. True, some hinges have universal scope: these would have to do with our sharing a biological nature across cultural specifics. But that gives us a variety of hinges—all that is needed to puncture the foundationalist program. I assume we are talking here of epistemic foundations, that, for Wittgenstein, are also semantic foundations. As Michael Williams (2005, 50-51) reminds us, foundationalism presupposes that the foundations of knowledge are universal. If we are talking about context-specific basic propositions, then we are not talking about foundations, period.

Stroll's claim that Wittgenstein rejects "the thesis of homogenous foundations" is exactly right, but that is exactly what is non-foundationalist about Wittgenstein's view.

Not only does the notion of a multiplicity of foundations across contexts not make good conceptual sense, it is completely unmotivated. For example, the items under (2) do not prove that hinges are foundations by a long shot. We have touched upon nearly each of those considerations above, and not discovered their foundationalist implications. The question "Must I not begin to trust somewhere?" is explicated by pointing to Wittgenstein's account of acquisition of hinges: the child learns by trusting her instructors; doubting behavior does not—cannot—arise until she has mastered a good many language-games relating to the material learned.

Thus, neither this, nor any of the other considerations advanced under (2) establish foundationalism. Notice also that there are no inferential relations between the initial (and usually continued) certainty and whatever moves in language-games one makes, nor can we conceive of the latter being somehow non-inferentially justified by the former: the reader will recall that hinges do absolutely no justificatory work. Perhaps Stroll and Moyal-Sharrock would say that this is precisely the point: note how Wittgenstein revels in upside-down foundational metaphors. This is unhelpful. Nothing in that claim forces the conclusion that Wittgenstein adopts the view these metaphors illustrate. If there are additional premises here, I do not see them. (2) does not help to establish the desired conclusion, and it is a fair sample of the evidence marshaled by Moyal-Sharrock for her claim that "Wittgenstein adopts the [foundationalist] picture but effects the correction."

Stroll claims in (1) that the fact that on Wittgenstein's view, the superstructure of knowledge is held up by certitudes makes his view foundationalist. This goes a little deeper than (2) but not much. On the foundationalist view, basic beliefs are indeed different in character from non-basic ones. Thus the belief that I form from it appearing to me that there is a speckled hen in the yard might be grounded in the perceptual experience of it appearing to me that there is a speckled hen in the yard. The basic "belief" here (a mental state, really) is not entertained as a result of forming other beliefs, which is what determines its basic status. But hinges do not have this property. It will be recalled that they are swallowed whole, as it were, with non-hinge beliefs: if you have certain beliefs, the associated hinges come along for free. This demonstrates their embeddedness in the system of beliefs, not their autonomy vis-à-vis non-basic beliefs.

Since there appears to be no independent motivation for the claim that Wittgenstein has a foundationalist epistemology, I strongly suspect that it is the fear of being "left suspended in a universe of unrooted discourses" that causes Moyal-Sharrock to force the ideas contained in *On Certainty* into the foundationalist straitjacket. But that specter does not arise for the view of discourse (or life, for that matter) sketched in this work. If metaphor be excused, the alternative to growing roots isn't floating any which way; only a misunderstanding of Wittgenstein's views on normativity can raise this worry. As I will show in later chapters, Wittgenstein did not need foundationalism to save the day. As for transcendental arguments in Wittgenstein, there indeed are some, as I will argue in Chapter 5.



### 2.3.2. Concluding Remarks

In the pages above, I have (i) given a Pyrrhonian reading of Wittgenstein's reflections on the dialectic between Moore and the skeptic; (ii) utilized the Kripkean model for making sense of Wittgenstein's response to radical skepticism; (iii) presented a summary account of hinge propositions and commented briefly on their peculiar epistemic status within the system of beliefs and (iv) outlined the categorial distinction between knowledge and certainty. What is most relevant to later chapters is the claim that Wittgenstein gives a new and important account of the structure of reasons and justification from the unorthodox, but hardly novel, perspective of a Pyrrhonian philosopher.

I will now take the first step towards proving my claim that there are strong Pyrrhonian features in his thinking: the dual-pronged diagnosis of radical skepticism and Moore's argument as opposing dogmatic views is but an example of his generally Pyrrhonian philosophical method. In Chapter 3, I shall place Wittgenstein's manner of philosophizing in a historical context by discussing the relationship between Wittgenstein's views in *On Certainty* and Hume's account of the genesis of our belief in material bodies. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, there are enormous similarities between the methods and views of the two philosophers: I see Hume and Wittgenstein as modern exponents and interpreters of the Pyrrhonian tradition in philosophy. Essentially I link the conventionalism of Wittgenstein to that of Sextus by way of Hume's development and extensive use of the idea of custom. A caveat: the analogy with Hume will stay with us until the end of this work. Chapter 3 is therefore to be read as a prelude to what follows.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**HUME ON THE ORDINARY BELIEF IN EXTERNAL THINGS**

**3.1 A Global Humean Hinge**

In this chapter, I will make a detour through Hume's attempt to account for the ordinary (or "vulgar") belief in external objects in order to reinforce and develop some methodological points made in the previous chapter. I will first present Hume's view, and then go on to interpret a section of the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1.4.2) as an example of a naturalistic project conducted within a Pyrrhonian framework. The aim of this exercise is to develop an analogy between the views of Hume and Wittgenstein on the status of the belief in the external world, and thereby to shed an oblique light on the subject-matter of the previous chapter, namely, Wittgenstein's view of our unreflective commitment to a world of external things.

The project of *T* 1.4.2<sup>1</sup> is to determine how we come to have a belief in the existence of the external world: Hume is interested in the source of this belief in the human mind. We find this naturalistically oriented inquiry to be framed by a rather relaxed attitude towards the truth-value of the belief in question: At the beginning of the section, Hume declares: "We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* but 'tis vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings" (SB 187). From his argument in this section of the *Treatise*, it emerges that the belief in external objects is for Hume a

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<sup>1</sup> All citations from the *Treatise* in this chapter, unless otherwise noted, are from this section. So I shall use the SB numbers only to identify the passages.

transcendental condition of *all* epistemic practices. In Wittgensteinian terms, he seems to accord to the belief in the external world the status of a certainty or hinge.

Hume has been variously interpreted as a naturalist and as a Pyrrhonist.<sup>2</sup> For our present purposes, we do not require a final, unequivocal answer to the question of whether Hume was primarily a Pyrrhonist or a naturalist. I hold that Hume has a Pyrrhonian take on the universal belief in the existence of the external world—i.e, he takes the belief to be unquestionable given its fundamental importance for our practices. I will show that his naturalistic inquiry into the provenance of this belief is consistent with this stance.

### *3.1.1 A Reading of Treatise 1.4.2*

The focus of Hume's investigations in the *Treatise* is the study of human nature—something characterized by both animal traits and moral inclinations and principles. The metaphysical and epistemological questions that he answers along the way are in the service of this end. *T* 1.4.2 has the title “Of Scepticism with Regard to the Senses.” Hume's argument here is that the senses or reason are not responsible for our belief in material bodies, and that the correct source of this belief is the faculty of imagination. As we have noted above, Hume makes it clear that he will not deal with the metaphysical question concerning the existence of bodies. His inquiry into human nature is directly concerned with the causal origins of various beliefs, reasons and passions. In the course of his inquiry into the belief in the external world, he comes up with the skeptical result

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<sup>2</sup> Celebrated naturalist readings include Kemp Smith [1941] 2005, Stroud 1977, and more recently, Broughton 2003. For Pyrrhonian readings, see Baxter 2006 and 2008, Garfield 2002 and Garrett 2004. Kemp Smith's reading is credited with having begun the interpretive debate on whether or not Hume is a Pyrrhonian philosopher. E.g., see 543-46 of his (2005).

that there are no good *reasons* for having such a belief, since neither the senses nor reason provide the evidential basis for it.

But even so, the belief in question does arise, going on to provide the indispensable presupposition of all our practices. Given the relationship between this belief and the practices turning on it, it would seem that a complete picture of what Hume calls human nature would emerge only after one is done accounting for a belief as salient and constant as the belief in external objects.

Hume thinks that we have a pre-theoretical commitment to the existence of mind-independent objects, and do not possess a way to undermine this commitment by philosophical argumentation. “Nature,” says he, “has not left this to [our] choice, and has doubtless esteem’d it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations” (SB 187). He admits readily that we “cannot... maintain [the] veracity” of the belief that there are mind-independent objects on empiricist principles. But however that may be, it is a belief that we cannot help having, and it is interesting to ask how we come to have it. Thus we find him turning his back upon the question of whether or not the world contains objects, and conducting a pre-Kantian *transcendental* inquiry into what makes us capable of having beliefs in material things. His answer involves a naturalistic story (summarized below) that incorporates the notion of custom or convention. The world of material bodies is already a shared world: when you leave the key to the front door under the doormat for my benefit, this “manifests” (in Wittgensteinian terms, again) or implicates a shared belief in the mind-external world.

The section of the *Treatise* on which we are focusing is not straightforward, and has generated a range of interpretations (J. Wright 1983, 38-84; Baier 1991, 101-121;

Loeb, 2002, 142-147, 177-193). I will proceed by telling a basic story which will be independent of how we unravel some of the more detailed interpretive knots.

The first moment of the dialectic is the rejection of the senses as the source of the belief in bodies, or as Hume puts it, as the source of “the notion of the *continu’d* existence of their objects,” the *objects of sense* not being the same as external bodies. The notion of body appears to involve the notion of the *continued* presence of the objects of the respective senses. But the senses cannot account for the latter notion, because they cannot convey the continued presence of their objects when they are not in fact present to the senses. Secondly, they do not provide us with the “opinion” of a *distinct*, or independent existence, for they “convey to us nothing but a single perception” (SB 189). In other words, the senses deliver not the standalone body that we take ourselves to perceive, but a mere impression, which cannot, on the strength of the senses alone give us any idea of the existence of the sense-independent entity of which it is an impression.

Hume argues here that the senses give us no reason to believe that material objects exist externally to us. The senses cannot convey what Hume calls the “double existence” of body and the sensory impressions thereof: the thought that the sensory impressions convey a body is dependent upon our positing a causal connection between these impressions and something independent of the senses, and that is something that the senses are not capable of doing without the help of some other faculty, given that all the senses convey are impressions.

Moreover, any idea of the externality of sensory objects would have to arise from a comparison, by means of the senses, to “ourselves”, and this does not seem possible (SB 190). In other words, the senses cannot deliver a principled distinction between

impressions *of an object* and passions and emotions of the mind, given that sensations, emotions and passions are all “on the same footing,” i.e., impressions of the mind, and therefore mind-internal. Thus, as Hume sees it, if sensory objects are presented as distinct from our impressions as of them, this is possible only through “a kind of fallacy and illusion”: all that is present before the mind is dependent upon it for its existence. “Every thing that enters the mind,” he adds, “being in *reality* as the perception, ’tis impossible anything shou’d to *feeling* appear different” (SB 190). What is “a perception” must appear to be one as well; otherwise we stand to be deceived in things of which we are “most intimately conscious.”

John P. Wright (1983, 45-46) explains that in arguing from the objects of sense (which, for Hume are mind-dependent perceptions) to their appearances, rather than the other way around, Hume undermines the common-sense view about the objects of experience. The common-sense view is that the immediate object of experience is mind-independent. The experiment wherein pressing the eyeball produces double-images of things (SB 210) along with others mentioned in the same context is intended as evidence against this direct realist view. The upshot of these experiments is that what we perceive is really dependent upon our mind/brain. It follows that when the organism ceases to be in the relevant perceptual state (by moving the head, or shutting the eyes), the perception is lost for good. This is why Hume talks of perceptions of the same object as being interrupted and non-identical with themselves. But if the deliverance of the senses cannot amount to more than interrupted perceptions, we cannot account for our idea of external body on their basis.

Next, Hume considers whether we can derive the idea of external body from reason, or faculty of understanding. Philosophy has shown, he thinks, that “every thing, which appears to the mind, is nothing but a perception, and is interrupted, and dependent on the mind” (SB 193), and thus the idea that things perceived have a “distinct, continu’d existence” cannot arise from the understanding, but must be due to a different faculty. Also, since the vulgar confound perception and external object, they cannot infer that our perceptions are caused by independent objects: all they have got to go on are the perceptions, and there is no perceptible causal connection between those and something independent that could ground the relevant inference (SB 193, 212).

Hume’s skeptical position concerning the senses is that our belief in external objects does not arise from information conveyed by the senses or by the operation of reason. On the other hand, he declares that the existence of body is something that “*we must take for granted in all our reasonings.*” In the section of the *Treatise* under discussion, Hume is trying to determine the obscure origin of a belief—or at least an apparent belief—which seems to be fundamental to all our epistemic practices, and without which we would have no recognizable knowledge or human life. He is intrigued by the firmness of this belief, which is not grounded in the deliverances of either the senses or reason—and hence which, by all accounts, is not justified, and yet underpins all other justification. The most significant philosophical claim in this discussion concerns the basic character of this belief; what makes it basic is that we must take its object for granted in all our reasoning.

There is a Pyrrhonian element in play here. Unlike the subjective idealist, Hume does not question the belief in a mind-independent world because it lacks justification;

nor does he seek to justify it somehow through a Moore-type argument on behalf of “the vulgar.” Instead, it appears to him to be presupposed in “*all our reasonings.*” This general stance demands our attention. Note its similarity... Wittgenstein, who positions himself quite self-consciously at a distance from both the radical skeptic/idealist and Moore, and does so by identifying beliefs that we take for granted as the basis of our reasoning. Wittgenstein has a good deal more to say than does Hume about the epistemic status of the belief in external objects. But the similarity in their approach to the nature of the belief in external objects is striking.

Hume begins accounting for the belief in body by trying to identify the features of those of our impressions to which we ascribe external existence. The purpose of this investigation is to discover what causes us to attribute to these impressions the notion of distinct and continuing existents (SB 194). Hume mentions two features of perceptions, or impressions to which continued existence is attributed; he calls them “constancy” and “coherence” respectively. The *imagination* uses principles that accord these features to our perceptions. The belief in the externality of certain impressions consists in nothing more than constancy and coherence together.

I will now briefly explain what Hume means by ‘constancy’ and ‘coherence.’ In this discussion I emphasize that Hume ascribes to principles of the imagination the task of supporting the edifice of the belief in external bodies, and, like Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*, foregoes epistemic justification in the ordinary sense for *this* belief, despite giving it a central role in our epistemic practices.



Take coherence first. Hume notes that what we call *objects* preserve coherence through change.<sup>3</sup> For example, although the wood-fire to which Hume returns after an hour's absence looks considerably different, he is accustomed to seeing such alterations over time in other instances (SB 195). As John P. Wright (1983, 63) puts it, external objects "change in regular and predictable ways, and their impressions occur in regular sequences" whether or not one observes them continuously. There are interesting interpretive questions about the role of coherence in our coming to regard certain of our impressions as being those of external objects, but they are outside the scope of the present project.

With regard to coherence, Hume says that we tend to infer the existence of external objects by means of using what looks a lot like causal reasoning. To take the example in the text, Hume is seated facing the fire when he hears the sound as of a door moving on its hinges. A porter walks in, carrying a letter from a friend, who tells of being two hundred leagues away. Hume infers a number of things from the situation: the door, which he has heard, but not at that moment observed, must exist; the stairs that the porter ascended on his way to Hume's chamber must also exist, as must the postal system and ferries that brought the friend's letter to its destination.

None of this is terribly surprising to Hume, who has on past occasions seen doors open with a characteristic sound, and so forth. However, he observes that "tho' this conclusion from the coherence of appearances may seem to be of the same nature with our reasonings concerning causes and effects; as being deriv'd from custom, and

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<sup>3</sup> The passions, he argues, cannot be ascribed external existence, because they do not cohere (i.e., "have a mutual connexion with and dependence on each other") whenever not perceived (SB 195).

regulated by past experience... they are at bottom considerably different from each other... this inference arises from the understanding, and from custom in an indirect and oblique manner” (SB 197). The function of the imagination that is responsible for causal inferences on the basis of past observations is called *custom*. Custom is said to be “extended” when we use coherence to infer the existence of external objects.

The matter is very elliptically stated, and it is difficult to see Hume’s point that inferring the existence of external objects on the basis of coherence of impressions is somehow different from regular causal inference. I will follow Loeb in trying to making sense of Hume’s text on this point. The cause of the noise from the opening door is not observed at the time of making the inference from the noise to the door opening. Loeb (2002, 182) explains that the inference to the existence of the moving door helps us to ascribe a greater degree of regularity to objects than they have been observed to have. The inference to the unobserved door presupposes the belief that there is a *perfect* regularity about the causal connection in question, even though that regularity has not been continually observed. There is no observed constant conjunction of cause (the door moving) and effect (noise as of a door moving): there have been numerous past occasions when Hume has not observed the particular causal nexus due to a turning of the head, or a shutting of the eyes, and yet gone on to conclude that a door must have moved on its hinges (SB 197-198). Thus occasions of inference through coherence frequently arise against the background of gaps in the observations of causal conjunction. The belief that the noise was produced by a door moving presupposes the belief in bodies via the belief in unperceived objects (Loeb 2002, 184).

Finally, and crucially, custom cooperates with a principle of the imagination in our coming to conclude the unobserved effect. Hume declares that “the imagination, when set into any train of thinking, is apt to continue, even when its object fails it, and like a galley put in motion by the oars, carries on its course without any new impulse” (SB 198). This metaphor of the galley is marshaled in order to fill in the gaps in the observation of the causal conjunction in question. As Loeb (2002, 186) puts it, “The essential content of the cooperation of the galley with custom is that the imagination supposes the continued existence of objects, insofar as this is compatible with what has been observed, in the service of the belief that the actual degree of uniformity or regularity among objects exceeds that of the gappy regularities that have been observed.”

Hume’s observation that the inference to the continued existence of the moving door arises from custom in an oblique manner is explained by Loeb in the following way. When one is talking of “gappy regularities”—regularities that are inferred against a background of intermittent observations of causal conjunctions—one’s inference to the (unobserved) object is an effect of custom in cooperation with the galley. As against this, causal regularities that hold against a background of observed constant conjunctions are inferred from custom alone. Ideally, the occasion for the inference in the latter case provides the sole exception to the observed causal conjunction (Ibid., 189).

This isn’t as clear as one would wish. Matters are complicated by the fact that Hume appears to find “the galley” inadequate to the task of supporting “so vast an edifice, as in that of the continu’d existence of all external bodies” (SB 198-199); prompting some commentators, such as John P. Wright, to write the principle off as being *ad hoc* (1983, 64). Wright points to the terms in which Hume broaches the subject of

constancy: “Those mountains, and houses and trees, which lie at present under my eye, have always appear’d to me in the same order; and when I lose sight of them by shutting my eyes or turning my head, I soon find them return upon me without the least alteration. My bed and table, my books and papers, present themselves in the same uniform manner and change not upon account of any interruption in my seeing or perceiving them” (SB 194-5).

The repeatability of impressions of a certain kind, and their immunity to interruption in observation are what make up the constancy of what we regard as external objects. Hume argues that when there is a break in the temporal series of impressions of something relatively unchanging, such as the sun or the ocean, we are inclined to regard the impressions before and after the break as the same. He talks about “disguising” the interruption or removing it “by supposing that these interrupted perceptions are connected by a real existence, of which we are insensible” (SB 199). He then proceeds to give a “system” that explains how we come to believe in the continued existence of things despite breaks in our observations of them.

The first part of this system is what Hume calls the principle of individuation, which is the invariableness and uninterruptedness of an object through time (SB 201). The idea is that when we call an object the same as itself, we refer to its distinct temporal phases as being welded together by means of identity, which is, in the end, a fiction of the imagination. Impressions of an unchanging object at different points of time are in fact similar, and not identical, since a break in its observation causes the perceptual object at the prior instant to be completely annihilated, according to Hume. Everything is a succession of perceptions, from this point of view. Depending on how one conceives of

an object in time—as either persisting without variation or interruption, or as an object-series existing at different moments of time—one conceives of it as unitary, or as a multiplicity. Seeing the object as identical with itself involves just this availability of the two conceptions (SB 201): e.g., of one and the same unitary object or of one and the same multiplicity.

The second part of the system explains why we are inclined to attribute identity to constant impressions—to “resembling perceptions, notwithstanding their interruption” (SB 202). Here the reader is referred back to an earlier section, where she is asked to entertain a story about the flow of nervous fluids between contiguous brain-traces made by resembling ideas. Hume adds that there is a general rule that we have a disposition to confound resembling ideas (SB 203). This leads us to regard interrupted (but otherwise constant) perceptions as identical.

The third part of the system accounts for the propensity produced by the ascription of identity to like ideas to “unite... broken appearances by a continu’d existence.” The story so far is that while what we regard as the same object appears to the senses as distinct individuals, the “smooth passage of the imagination along the ideas of the resembling perceptions makes us ascribe to them a perfect identity” (SB 205). There is what Hume calls a “contradiction,” meaning by that term a conflict between the verdicts delivered by the senses and the imagination; this is resolved by means of a “propension” to account for the interrupted perceptions with the fiction of continued existence (SB 208).

Now, we do not just “feign” that there are external objects; we fully believe in them. Hume tries to account for our *belief* in external objects in terms of the “force and

vivacity of conception” that is supposed to arise from the natural propensity to ascribe continued existence to certain of our impressions. This forms the fourth member of his explanatory account of how we come to believe in the existence of external objects.

According to Hume, belief is nothing but “a lively idea related to or associated with a present impression” (SB 96), or more generally “the vivacity of an idea” (SB 208). Our memories apprise us of a very large number of perceptions that resemble each other and do so despite interruptions in our observation of them. Their resemblance produces the propensity to regard the perceptions as identical, and a further propensity to regard them as continued existences “in order to justify this identity, and avoid the contradiction, in which the interrupted appearance of these perceptions seems necessarily to involve us” (SB 208-9). The propensity to ascribe identity (and continued existence) involves lively impressions in the memory, causing a “vivacity” to be bestowed on the fiction of the continued object. It is this in which a belief in the existence of the object consists (SB 209).

To better appreciate the mental state Hume attributes to us in order to account for the ordinary attitude to external objects it is useful to compare beliefs with what Hume marks out as *feigned* notions. A belief causes us to act or arouses passions in us: in general, the belief that one is being attacked causes actions and passions that cannot be caused by merely imagining that one is being attacked. One can, of course, hide from an imaginary assailant, but when one believes that one is faced with an assailant, one possesses a live impression—in other words, an impression that has a role to play in one’s cognitive economy—that *causes* one to hide. For Wittgenstein, believing in this sense would correspond to not doubting *in deed* (OC 342). The burnt child lacks the

option to doubt that fire can burn, given the lively impressions in her memory. As Wittgenstein might say further, our *lives* show that we believe in external objects—just as the manifestation of dread in the child’s behavior shows that she believes fire can burn.<sup>4</sup>

Hume ends the section with an account of the philosophical system of double existence, which he marks as “the monstrous offspring of two principles, which are contrary to each other[.]” These are the principle of the imagination that leads us to suppose that resembling perceptions amount to continued existences, and the principle of reason that informs us that they are really interrupted and non-identical. In order to accommodate both principles, the philosophers have come up with “a new fiction.”

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<sup>4</sup> I should note here Stroud’s view that Hume *fails* to mark a difference between “feigning” and believing. Stroud claims that in section 1.4.2 of the *Treatise*, Hume seems to blur the difference between explaining how we come to acquire the belief in continued and distinct existence, and explaining how we come about the ideas of which the belief is composed. He wants to tell a story about how we come to have the belief in continued and distinct existence without first explaining whence we acquire the idea of such existence. Hume proceeds to talk about how we resolve a certain conflict in the mind by *supposing* that our perceptions continue to exist unperceived, etc, as if the idea of continued existence were antecedently present in the mind, although, clearly, this is not his intention.

As Stroud remarks, “We know that a belief requires an idea of what is believed to be true. How, if at all, is it possible to ‘feign’ or ‘suppose’ something of which one has no idea? In the absence of an answer Hume has done little towards explaining the origin of the idea of continued existence. His ‘explanation’ amounts to nothing more than the claim that we get the idea of the continued existence of bodies by feigning or supposing the existence of bodies that continue to exist when unperceived... Not only is that no explanation, it does not help Hume establish the dominance of the imagination over the understanding” (1977, 108-09).

Whatever the shortcomings of Hume’s causal account, it seems to me (and Stroud would agree) that a difference between feigning and believing is very much intended, that is, if the belief in the existence of bodies is to be natural and irresistible. Therefore, we need to charitably interpret the fourth member of Hume’s system, namely, the account of how the belief in continued existence comes to have vivacity, since this is where the distinction between feigning and believing is made out. I owe the details of this interpretation of Hume’s account of belief to Garfield (personal communication), who adopts it from Baier.

according to which impressions are thought to be interrupted while the objects they represent are thought to be continued existences. Hume holds that this double existence is “feigned,” not really believed, as the philosopher is able to appreciate the grip of the imagination upon our conception of objects (SB 215). In contrast to the philosophical fiction of double existence, the vulgar idea of continued existence is a non-complex lively idea strongly associated with an impression; it is not mediated by reason in any way. At least that is the intended conclusion of Hume’s argument (see footnote 4, above).

This accounts as well for the propensity of philosophers to entertain the matter of external existence in the way that “the vulgar” do, whenever they are not involved in philosophical speculation. It shows that the belief of the vulgar has a certain preeminence: it is one we return to in our lives over and over again. In this connection, it is important also to note Baxter’s remark that philosophers come to hold a doctrine of double existence on the basis of experiments that presuppose the existence of publicly observable organs of sense (Baxter 2008, 14).

So this is how the argument in *T* 1.4.2 goes. The senses give us but interrupted impressions of things, and from this sensory information the belief in continued, mind-external existents cannot come about. The imagination, using the principles of constancy and coherence (plus or minus the “galley” principle of its functioning), in cooperation with the nervous fluids flowing between contiguous brain-traces formed by resembling impressions (i.e., impressions having contents that tend to be repeated over time), naturally takes the resembling impressions to be those of a continuous entity. This customary association of contiguous impressions with the idea of a continuous existence primes the organism to associate a “lively idea” with the impressions repeated in



experience. On the other hand, philosophical reflection produces an uneasy compromise of this natural and vulgar belief in material bodies with what reason tells us are similar discrete impressions. So, on the one hand we find Hume standing squarely behind the doctrine of “double existence.”

Nature is obstinate, and will not quit the field, however strongly attack'd by reason; and at the same time reason is so clear on this point [i.e., the point that our resembling perceptions are interrupted and non-identical], that there is no possibility of disguising her. Not being able to reconcile these two enemies, we endeavour to set ourselves at ease as much as possible, by successively granting to each whatever it demands, and by feigning a double existence. (SB 215)

On the other hand, he clearly recognizes the strength of our natural impulses, and observes that sometimes our natural belief in the existence of external objects can stop the flow of “our most profound reflections.”<sup>5</sup> The natural belief has a clear advantage over the deliberate philosophical fiction of a double existence.

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<sup>5</sup> Comparison of the ordinary conception of things with philosophically profound notions forms the basis of Wittgenstein's philosophical project. As he says in the “Early Investigations” §111 (113), “We bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use. (The man who said one can't step into the same river said something false; one can step twice into the same river. —And sometimes an object ceases to exist when I stop looking at it, and sometimes it doesn't. —And sometimes we know which colour the other sees, if he looks at this object, and sometimes we don't.) And this is how the solution of all philosophical difficulties looks.” This passage is quoted by Stern (1995, 174) from a preparatory set of drafts for *Philosophical Investigations*, dating back to 1930-31.)

Thus tho' we clearly perceive the dependence and interruption of our perceptions, we stop short in our career, and never upon that account reject the notion of an independent and continu'd existence. That opinion has taken such deep root in the imagination, that 'tis impossible ever to eradicate it, nor will any strain'd metaphysical conviction of the dependence of our perceptions be sufficient for that purpose. (SB 214)

Moreover, the philosophical system as well is dependent upon the imagination for its doctrine. Among other things, the idea that the objects of perception resemble the perceptions is not something that we can come by using reason alone. This is over and above what Hume takes to be the impossibility of inferring the existence of external objects from the existence of perceptions. The idea that objects resemble perceptions is to be explained by a "quality" of the imagination, namely, "*that it borrows all its ideas from some precedent perception*" (SB 216).

### 3.1.2 Some Analogies

I have presented Hume's argument in *T* 1.4.2 with the aim of demonstrating a prototype for the transcendental-cum-naturalistic story that we find in Wittgenstein. Hume's account covers all the bases of the sort of view I have ascribed to Wittgenstein in the previous chapter, and provides a faculty psychological explanation to boot. As I read him, Hume is saying something about what it would take for us, as individual epistemic subjects and as social beings who agree in their fundamental cognitive attitudes, to have beliefs about mind-external, physical objects. His answer comprises a naturalistic story about the genesis of this belief. Like Wittgenstein, he doesn't think it reasonable to

question or affirm the existence of a mind-external world. Incidentally, Hume is the most prominent post-Cartesian thinker to assume a casual attitude towards the question of the external world. We have seen that he does so by effectively by-passing it in favor of a *different* question altogether.

Section 1.4.2 of Hume's *Treatise* anticipates Wittgenstein's so-called "refutation of idealism"<sup>6</sup> in its rejection of the Cartesian problem of knowledge, and its measured enthusiasm for realism. Both of these are Pyrrhonian features of the account. At this point, I should make it clear that I will understand Hume's view about the *epistemic status* of the belief in the external world through a Wittgensteinian lens, given that (a) Hume himself does not say much about it, and that (b) both Hume and Wittgenstein hold that while the ordinary belief in the existence of objects is *unjustified*, it is *presupposed* in all our practical pursuits.

We now pick up the discussion where the previous chapter left off. Moore, it will be recalled, responds to the skeptic regarding the existence of the external world by arguing that we in fact *know* that external objects exist *since we have good reasons to believe that they do*: you and I both see that my hands exist; therefore we know that my hands exist. This is a position diametrically opposed to that of the epistemic nihilist, who denies that we have any knowledge of the existence of external objects. Recall as well that Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* positions himself against both Moore and the skeptic by denying a presupposition common to both, namely, that one knows the existence of

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<sup>6</sup> The term is Michael Williams' (2004a). "Refutation" is an overstatement, I think, but it does involve a rejection of the skeptical problematic. Pritchard (2005) calls it a pragmatic argument against the radical skeptic that is not comparable to epistemological anti-skepticism. It's not "the Real McCoy," as it were. But he agrees that it gives an account of reasons that is unlike anything else in traditional epistemology and is basically externalist in spirit.

external objects just in case one can rule out skeptical possibilities. Wittgenstein rejects the idea expressed by this biconditional on the grounds that it is unintelligible. It is unintelligible because it suggests that justification is required for a belief that underlies the very practice of giving justifications: on Wittgenstein's analysis, the sentence 'I know that my hands exist' does not express a genuine knowledge claim, but at best an expression of certainty. In the previous chapter, we took all these features of Wittgenstein's argument to be expressions of his Pyrrhonism.<sup>7</sup>

Hume's attitude to the vulgar belief in the external world is grounded on the denial of the same shared presupposition. According to him, the vulgar belief in a continued and distinct existence, which the philosophers also adopt, is the natural and irresistible response to an internal conflict between the faculties of reason and imagination. This belief is not justified (since we cannot infer from interrupted perceptions to continued existences), or indeed justifiable (since it is not the sort of belief that we adopt because it is strongly supported by reasons). Nonetheless, it does not follow from its lack of justification that we are capable of discarding it or that it would be *reasonable* to do so. We return to it after every foray into philosophy. Without it, we

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<sup>7</sup> On Mates' reading of Sextus, "Every categorical assertion... not only by the Dogmatists but even by the common man, creates an *aporia*, an intellectual thicket, through which the Skeptic sees no path. In all such cases he finds himself at a loss (*aporei*); he is unable to decide (*krinein*) one way or the other; he lacks a criterion (*kritēriōn*), that is, a basis for deciding, and for the most part this lack is due to the fact that the Dogmatists' theories, definitions and concepts lack consistency. And so, being at a loss, he withholds assent (*epechei*) from all categorical assertions" (Mates 1996, 30-31).

In the previous chapter I maintained that at the basis of the Pyrrhonist's *aporia* is the unintelligibility (and fundamental error) of the presupposition common to a pair of dogmatic claims. The inability to see a way through the *aporia* was understood as the inability to negotiate the inquiry framed in terms of the problematic presupposition.

would be unable to go about our lives or engage in inquiry. This is how Hume puts the point in *T* 1.4.1:

Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel; nor can we any more forbear viewing certain objects in a stronger and fuller light, upon account of their customary connexion with a present impression, than we can hinder ourselves from thinking as long as we are awake, or seeing the surrounding bodies, when we turn our eyes towards them in broad sun-shine. Whoever has taken the pains to refute the cavils of this *total* scepticism, has really disputed without an antagonist, and endeavour'd by arguments to establish a faculty, which nature has antecedently implanted in the mind, and render'd unavoidable.

Hume makes these remarks in the context of a criticism of the ancient Pyrrhonists. His final swipe at them is deeply significant. He says,

My intention, then in displaying so carefully the arguments of that fantastic sect, is only to make the reader sensible of the truth of my hypothesis, *that all our reasonings concerning causes and effects are deriv'd from nothing but custom; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures.* (*T* 1.4.1; SB 183-84)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kemp Smith takes this to be one of the best proofs of Hume's (highly nuanced) opposition to Pyrrhonism. Thanks to our broad understanding of the term 'Pyrrhonism' as the philosophical attitude that makes possible the sort of argument that Wittgenstein

On this account, the belief in the external world is a *reasonable*, though not a *reasoned* belief. Hume claims that we lack reasons to support the ordinary belief in material bodies: once we assume the philosophical perspective, we appear unable to establish our belief in their existence. Thus, philosophizing about perception leads us to “sceptical doubt, both with respect to reason and the senses” (SB 218).<sup>9</sup> But the belief in external objects is not grounded in reasons; it is a belief that we hold whether we can justify it or not—a belief without which I couldn’t engage in justification *or doubting* of other beliefs that I hold. Hence it is reasonable to proceed on the assumption that there are mind-external objects, for the alternative is to come “unhinged.” Note that this is not a reason for presupposing the existence of external objects: Nature has not, as Hume would say, left this choice to me. Hume’s idea that skeptical doubts do not persist outside the study—that nature prevails over our philosophical convictions—is of a piece with his implicit view of the *epistemic status* of the belief in material bodies.

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makes in *OC* 1-65, we can continue to adhere to the view that the “hypothesis” that Hume is referring to in the quoted passage serves to modify the Pyrrhonian philosophical technique for the better.

<sup>9</sup> The unreasoned character of belief in external objects does not imply that the belief in the existence of external objects is false or has merely instrumental value. According to Hume, the belief in bodies provides the transcendental condition of *all* our beliefs and practices, and so it is indispensable. (Compare this with my comments on the Schematism in Chapter 5.) For Wittgenstein, of course, it is a mistake to conceive of such a belief as being either true or false.

## 3.2 A Further Historical Connection

### 3.2.1 *The Pyrrhonist's Epochē Again*

It is known that the ancient Pyrrhonists distinguished between assenting to a view on account of being persuaded by reasons in its favor and assenting to a view because of how matters appeared to one. The story goes that the Pyrrhonist originally sought after truth, but in the course of her quest, found that it was possible to counter any view thought to be true on the strength of its evidential support with a contrary view. Thus, while one might be persuaded that honey is sweet, on the basis of the evidence of one's senses, one might equally be persuaded that it is not sweet, on the basis of further sensory evidence, viz., that of a sick person.

The propositions towards which one might have a cognitive attitude of belief present themselves as being equipollent, or equal in terms of evidential weight. Under the circumstances, one has no *reason* to affirm either that honey is sweet, or that it is not. (This of course has no bearing on my “not doubting *in deed*” that honey is sweet: a Pyrrhonist might marvel at the dogmatists' claims about the real nature of honey while stirring some into her tea.) As a response to this sort of dilemma, the Pyrrhonists suspended judgment on the matter in question, and by a stroke of luck, this attitude of suspension resulted in what they called *ataraxia*—freedom from the pull towards either one of the opposed views.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Against Fogelin's account of (Neo-)Pyrrhonian methodology, Striker (2004) points out that the ancient skeptic accepted suspension of judgment not quite as their epistemic fate, but as a happy psychological effect of their inability to dispute an epistemological impasse. The Neo-Pyrrhonian would suspend judgment on a matter on

It is important to understand the sense in which a Pyrrhonian skeptic suspends judgment. It is not as if she throws up her hands in despair, owing to an inability to endorse either one of the equipollent claims. The Pyrrhonist resists the urge to assent to either view. The Pyrrhonist does not assert either that honey is sweet or that it is not, because doing so would involve buying into the assumption that honey has a distinctive nature.

We see a similar attitude in both Hume and Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein did not assert either that we have knowledge of external objects or that we do not, not because he resisted taking a theoretical stance for reasons unknown, but because (as we have said before) he rejected the presupposition that our belief in external objects is correct if and only if it is undefeated by skeptical possibilities. Hume can be read as rejecting the same presupposition in the present section of the *Treatise*. His view of the belief in external objects places him at equal distance from someone who holds that this belief is unjustified, and that we cannot have knowledge of the external world, and someone who equally dogmatically holds that the belief is justified, and that we have knowledge of material bodies and their attributes.

We have noted already that, like Wittgenstein, Hume does not argue that because the belief in external objects cannot be justified, we ought to suspend judgment on the question of its correctness or reasonableness. “The whimsical condition of mankind” is that nature causes us to believe in the existence of external objects: one is not allowed the

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epistemological grounds. Not that anything I say here demands a decision on this matter, but it *seems* to me in view of the “trace” transcendental idealism of Wittgenstein’s later work that he comes down on the Pyrrhonian side of the divide. See for instance *PI* §§108-28. This would mean that Wittgenstein’s infamous “quietism” is really a bad name for a Pyrrhonian trait.



luxury of withholding assent to the view simply because neither claim in the dogmatic pair seems persuasive. One is, in the course of living one's life, *required* to give assent to the view that external objects exist. To use the traditional example, it isn't as though one can fail to appreciate that one might be hit by an oncoming chariot, or be moved to take the necessary precautions. (Again, one cannot doubt *in deed* the possibility of being hit by speeding cars on the highway.) Indeed, the Pyrrhonian skeptics claimed that they assented to views that appearances *forced* them to have.

So, a Pyrrhonist pays heed to the appearance as of oncoming traffic on the street, and acts in the way that non-Pyrrhonists do. Or, as Hume would say, her belief in external bodies possesses enough "vivacity" to ground action. The Pyrrhonist gives her assent like everyone else, but with this important difference: she refuses to ground her practices involving external objects on a dogmatic view about their existence.

"Suspending judgment" (or withholding assent) in the Pyrrhonian way really amounts to suspending the activity of proving either one of the opposed dogmatic claims.<sup>11</sup>

The point just made finds a resonance with Wittgenstein, who, through various explicit remarks and metaphors, talks about the limits of proof. We have already spoken of the metaphor of the bedrock at which one's spade is turned (*PI* §217). There Wittgenstein says that when we can give no further reasons for following a rule in a certain way, we are forced to appeal to our practice of following the rule in that way. As he puts it, at bedrock-level, in place of offering justification we indicate that "this is simply what I do."<sup>12</sup> When, at the beginning of *T* 1.4.2, Hume remarks that the belief in

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<sup>11</sup> I borrow this account of the Pyrrhonian *epochē* from Garfield, 2002, 8-9.

<sup>12</sup> It will be remembered also that the point is made a little differently in *OC* 204. "Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not

bodies “is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings,” he is not proposing to ground our epistemic practices on the metaphysical foundation of mind-independent objects; instead, he is content to make sense of those practices in terms of the vulgar belief in such objects.

Baxter (2008) makes a strong case for Pyrrhonism in Hume. He points out that Hume sees no reason to endorse any view as true, and assents to views forced upon him by the appearances of things. He claims to feel no more than “a *strong* propensity to consider objects strongly in that view, under which they appear [to him]” (SB 265). In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 160, Hume also notes that we are not persuaded by reasons to come to entertain beliefs about various matters, nor are able to counter any misgivings about the absence of such reasons.

To appreciate the latter point better, it will be useful to have in view the context of Hume’s inquiry in this section. For the record, we need to mention the debate over the existence of external objects, with Hume’s predecessor in the empiricist camp, George Berkeley, denying the existence of matter as answering to our perception as of material bodies and their attributes. Berkeley famously advanced arguments that are supposed to show that the world of ordinary physical objects is mind-dependent—composed of ideas, and thus dependent upon our perceiving them for their existence. His immaterialism about ordinary objects was supposed to counter the sorts of skeptical worries generated

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certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part, it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.” In other words, the bedrock is not composed of foundational propositions, but of basic agreed-upon responses and judgments.

by the adherence to the theory of ideas.<sup>13</sup> Closely associated with the debate over the nature and existence of external objects was one about whether our belief in them is rationally justified, presuming that we should act as though there is an external world iff our belief in it is justified. A Berkeleyan would deny that it is; and we have already surveyed Hume's arguments about our inability to establish their existence using reason, or indeed the senses.

As we have seen, Hume does not argue in *T* 1.4.2 is not that, since we are not justified in our belief in their existence, we ought to withhold assent to, e.g., the claim that we have two hands. The “*strong propensity*” to consider objects as we do is independent of the demand for justification of the belief that they are mind-independent, continued and distinct. Therefore, to underscore a claim made above, the suspension of judgment is for Hume the suspension of the demand for justification. Such suspension of judgment does not affect our ordinary commitment to external objects, since the latter is not grounded in reasons.<sup>14</sup>

Hume added to the ancient Pyrrhonian view in allowing that appearances force ideas upon the mind in differing degrees (Baxter, 2008, 9-10). An idea that is felt as being especially vivacious is actually believed, albeit in the sense of being passively

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<sup>13</sup> For example, if one thought (quite inconsistently, for Berkeley) that the so-called primary qualities of things (such as solidity, motion, and figure) inhered in material objects thereby *answering* to our ideas of them, while the various sensory qualities were mind-dependent, it turned out that material bodies were most unlike how we perceived them to be.

<sup>14</sup> Similarly, by means of talking about the categorical distinction between knowledge and certainty, and the inapplicability of the category of knowledge to my belief that I have two hands, Wittgenstein resists the demand for justification of the belief that I have two hands. Again, our ordinary commitment to external objects is not grounded in reasons; nor does it have to be, in order to be certain. See *OC* 150-153, and also *OC* 235, where Wittgenstein claims that our reliance on a hinge is not a consequence of “stupidity or credulity”.

assented to. For our purposes, we can understand ‘passively assenting’ as assenting without an accompanying commitment to the truth of what is being assented to.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.2.2 Concluding Remarks

Let us return to the principal claim I defend in the present section. Hume argues that neither philosophers nor ordinary people can help assuming the existence of mind-independent objects, and *diagnoses* the cause for this. Hume’s emphasis on the ubiquity and significance of the belief in external objects anticipates Wittgenstein’s idea that the supposition that there exist external objects is a hinge or certainty that frames our beliefs

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<sup>15</sup> Baxter also argues that Hume’s Pyrrhonism is somewhat different from the ancient position in that it incorporates an element of Academic skepticism. In opposition to the Pyrrhonists, the Academic skeptics found themselves believing in propositions that were made plausible by the weight of reasons in their favor. Thus they held that it was possible to approximate to the truth when inquiring into some matter. On his part, Hume broadens his Pyrrhonian stance to admit the process of weighing philosophical arguments, and holding on to the views that strike him most strongly. Hume has the notion of a stable opinion: views that are invariant through different times and places, and are founded upon universal principles.

The view that there are external objects, and the philosopher’s view of double existence are both stable in the sense that they hold up against critical scrutiny. Presumably they do this because they are grounded in the natural propensity to ascribe identity and continued existence in the first case, and in a combination of that propensity and good reasons in the second. Baxter sums up Hume’s motives thus: “Like a critic in the arts who tries to distinguish classic works from passing fancies, Hume tries to distinguish the most stable of the views forced upon us by appearances. And so, in yielding to arguments that feel more stable, Hume engages in an analogue to theorizing, but without any attempt to get at the truth behind appearances” (Baxter 2008, 11).

The result of such theorizing is a set of beliefs that the inquirer can be satisfied with, not because they are likely to be true but because they appear to be the fruit of careful reasoning. Baxter points out that with this appeal to stability, Hume is able to help himself to “a surrogate, naturalistic account of normativity and reasonableness” that lead him to, e.g., recommend good principles of induction—principles that yield stable views. Ultimately, stable views are desirable because they promote our natural interests, namely, those of surviving, increasing pleasure and decreasing pain (Ibid., 11-12). I mention this view in order to record that the question of Hume’s Pyrrhonism is a complex and debated matter. Fortunately, here I am concerned only with such Pyrrhonism as can be found in the *Treatise*.

and actions. The philosophers' implicit reliance on the belief that there exist external objects is analogous to the chemist's reliance on the belief that the laboratory apparatuses exist (*OC* 163). On the other hand, the ordinary person's belief in the existence of external objects is *shown* in such actions as unreflectively taking hold of common objects (*OC* 510) and such unremarkable beliefs as the belief that one has two hands.

I wish to remark briefly upon the assimilation of the notion of passive assent to that of belief. The kind of belief we are talking about is independent of the notion of supporting evidence. Neither ordinary folk nor philosophers require (or seek) evidence in order to believe in the existence of external objects, for the reason mentioned in the previous chapter: we simply could not be surer of anything that we might cite in support of our belief in them. This kind of belief is ungrounded without itself being an evidential ground for further beliefs.<sup>16</sup> In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein characterizes such a belief as natural or unreflectively arrived at (*OC* 475), and as "something animal" (*OC* 359) framing our lives as reflective creatures. But there are views that we assent to that cannot be characterized as natural beliefs, e.g., philosophical views. Such views are arrived at post-reflection, and are in certain respects opposed to our natural beliefs. But as noted above, Hume does not regard our assenting to such views as amounting to *having beliefs*, and speaks of philosophical *fictions* instead. (Wittgenstein's talk of philosophical illusions just queers the pitch.)

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<sup>16</sup> John P. Wright (1983) would disagree, as far as Hume is concerned. He seems to think that the common person's belief in external things is actually a premise in the philosophical argument that establishes the doctrine of double existence. This doesn't wash if one considers that the philosophical fiction is achieved by helping oneself to the hinge that external things exist, and running it together with a belief acquired via reflection, namely, that all we can access through the senses are impressions, and not objects. The idea of double existence haphazardly puts together two beliefs having different epistemic statuses.

I have argued here that Hume suspends judgment (in the sense of rejecting the demand for justification) on the question of whether there are mind-independent objects, and poses a different one concerning the causes that “induce us to believe in the existence of body.” This I have identified as a Pyrrhonian attitude of inquiry. It involves doing philosophy in what Hume calls the “careless manner.” The Pyrrhonian philosopher in the Humean avatar philosophizes whenever he finds a philosophical question that he can address in the solitude of his study, at other times opting to keep the company of ordinary people, and acquiescing in their views. He rejects one kind of inquiry—the one that leads in the direction of futile metaphysical speculation—and settles for a question that it may be possible to answer to some extent, given what one knows about “the sciences of man”. Thus Hume’s *naturalism* is not only consistent with his Pyrrhonism, it is part and parcel of it.

The detour through Hume was required in order to set the historical context that allows us to appreciate the method and content of Wittgenstein’s argument against Moore and the radical skeptic. Hume’s account of the acquisition of that belief combined with his remark about its epistemic status provides us with a connecting link between the philosophical approaches of the later Wittgenstein and ancient Pyrrhonism. There is more to Wittgenstein’s Pyrrhonism than what he makes of the ordinary belief in external objects: in the next chapter, we will see how he uses the strategy of withholding assent constructively with regard to the problem of meaning in the *Investigations*, thereby managing to do a lot more than prescribing a therapeutic purge of the various ills of dogmatic theorizing about meaning.

It is certain that the original Pyrrhonists would not have done as much philosophizing as Wittgenstein chose to do, but then the claim isn't that the latter's philosophical style coincides exactly with that of the ancients. Besides, it is possible to apply to Wittgenstein Hume's idea of doing philosophy in a careless manner while still maintaining that there are Pyrrhonian elements in Wittgenstein's thought. The following chapters will shed light on other Humean features of Wittgenstein's thought, namely, Wittgenstein's transcendental approach to understanding cognitive practices, his causal account of the etiology of normativity, and significantly, Wittgenstein's emphasis on communal norms governing epistemic practices.

I have said above that what Hume calls the "vulgar" belief in external objects would count as a reasonable, though not reasoned belief. Let us develop this idea further with Wittgenstein's help. Wittgenstein makes several remarks in *On Certainty* about what it is reasonable to believe and doubt. For example, in virtue of being a reasonable person, he (writing before Gagarin's trip into space) has no doubt that he has not been in the stratosphere. But this is to be expected, since "the reasonable man" does not doubt a certain kind of proposition (*OC* 220). The reasonable person, according to Wittgenstein, does not stop to query a hinge; in fact, if someone were to doubt the propositions she, along with every other reasonable person, regards as certain, we would think her demented (*OC* 155). As part of our initiation into the game of doubting and making assertions, we pick up the norms of reasonable doubt and assertion. Wittgenstein indicates how this works. If a pupil interrupts her lesson with questions about the existence of things and the meanings of words, she would be told (gently, of course!) that her questions do not make a lot sense, and that therefore she ought to do what the teacher

says. Or, if a similarly obstinate pupil doubted the truth of history as well as the certainty that the earth existed a hundred years before, it would become necessary to train her to ask questions that do not express idle doubts (*OC* 310-311).

I have maintained above that the vulgar or ordinary belief in the external world is a hinge in Wittgenstein's sense. Now I add the qualification that it constitutes what Wittgenstein *might* have called a reasonable belief: it is something that serves as a locally transcendental condition of ordinary practices, but does not bear justificatory weight, i.e., is not the sort of thing that grounds further beliefs.



**CHAPTER 4**  
**THE TREATMENT OF NORMATIVITY IN *PHILOSOPHICAL***  
***INVESTIGATIONS***

Wittgenstein's thoughts on normativity, which emerge in the discussion on rule-following in *Philosophical Investigations*, are echoed in many passages of *On Certainty*, in particular, in the passages that deal with the categorial distinction between knowledge and certainty. In view of the centrality of the later Wittgenstein's attitude to normativity, it behooves us to consider Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following in their original context.

But first a word in explanation regarding my choice of words might be in order. I am not avoiding calling something "Wittgenstein's theory of normativity" on account of the all-too-familiar caveat that Wittgenstein does not espouse theories. I am going to stick with the somewhat unwieldy expression "Wittgenstein's attitude to normativity" simply because that is what I take myself to be talking about. The views that I address below are the upshot of a principled decision to de-intellectualize philosophical concerns. In my discussion, I shall highlight the ways in which Wittgenstein's remarks on linguistic and epistemic norms constitute a very different manner of approaching philosophical questions—one that avoids theorizing in favor of clarifying what is at stake, not as preparation for theory, but as an exercise in describing a phenomenon in its context. I will explain this below.

With this caveat, let us consider how questions of normativity emerge in the *Investigations*. In this text Wittgenstein examines the idea that a speaker's grasp of the

meaning of a term is exhibited in her ability to use the term to mean the same thing in every instance of its use and criticizes the view that this ability can be understood as the speaker's having the meaning of the term "in" or "before" her mind in the form of a mental content, or a rule governing the use of the term. To *mean* tiger by the term 'tiger' is to use the term to pick out tigers, and not other sorts of things. Wittgenstein criticizes the assumption that the ability to consistently pick out tigers (and not other things) rests upon an internalized rule of use, and even the view that to mean tiger by the term 'tiger' is simply to have a mental disposition to use the term to pick out tigers, and not other sorts of things.

In this chapter, I will provide a Pyrrhonian reading of Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following in the *Investigations*. As I have stated previously (in Chapter 2), there is a deep analogy between Wittgenstein's treatment of the rule-following picture of meaning and of claims to know understood as indicating that one has adequate evidence for believing something to be the case. Wittgenstein's treatment of semantic and epistemic normativity reveals a variety of naturalism that has similarities with Humean naturalism. In his view, norm-governed behavior—which includes making meaningful utterances and knowledge claims—is made possible by our social natures in much the same way as our making causal inferences is made possible by what Hume calls custom, or the tendency of the mind to slide from events of the same type to their causal antecedents. My goal in this chapter is to marshal support for this claim as well as for my interpretation of the relevant passages in the *Investigations* and *On Certainty*. My thesis in this chapter is that

for Wittgenstein, the normative is grounded in the conventional—in what he has in a few places<sup>1</sup> called *forms of life*.

It might seem that I am about to conflate two competing readings of Wittgenstein’s discussion of rule-following; namely, what in the literature is called a Pyrrhonian, or primarily *therapeutic* reading of Wittgenstein, and a non-Pyrrhonian reading that attributes a theory of normativity to him, in spite of his claims not to espouse theoretical views. I ask the reader to suspend that judgment until the entire Pyrrhonian reading is on the table, since I shall substantiate the Pyrrhonian reading by means of a story about how norms flow from convention, an account that is Pyrrhonian by association (i.e., with the ancient Pyrrhonists as represented by Sextus), even if it seems to be poised tantalizingly on the brink of being a theory.<sup>2</sup>

## 4.1 Preliminary Materials

### 4.1.1 A Humean Analogy

By way of a preface to what follows, I offer the following sketch of what I called Wittgenstein’s attitude to normativity. For Wittgenstein, norm-governed behavior is a matter of participation in convention: to use one of his toy examples involving simple arithmetic, when we work on a series using a rule (such as “add 2 to each successive member in the series”) we go on in the same, rule-governed way (i.e., in a series beginning with 1000, we write: 1002, 1004, 1006...) not in virtue of having mental

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<sup>1</sup> *PI* §§19, 23 241; II, 148 and 192

<sup>2</sup> Such inexact characterizations may well be the best possible characterizations of Wittgenstein’s views on any subject. Stern (2004) appears to think the same.

structures that constrain our doing the same thing as before, but because we have been socialized into a practice.

Using a preliminary, “fast-and-dirty” distinction, one could say that whereas proceeding according to an internalized rule would constitute a reason for proceeding in some manner, habitually obeying a norm does not constitute a reason at all, but a cause of our proceeding in some manner—a cause that essentially involves both social practices and the brute facts about our own psychology as social beings.

While this might not be “breaking news” for someone with more than a nodding acquaintance with the *Investigations*, it will help to emphasize a central feature of this story, namely, that it does not intellectualize rule-following. It is opposed to the picture of rule-following according to which the meaning of a term is a rule that is somehow present to the speaker’s mind, and is what governs her correct use of the term.

Wittgenstein is very suspicious of such a view, and offers an alternative picture that dispenses with internalized rules that one subsequently “follows.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Is this Pyrrhonism or something more akin to Academic skepticism? While I claim no expertise on the precise points of distinction and overlap between Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism, I shall echo here the view of several scholars on the subject that the two schools of ancient skepticism can be distinguished in terms of their readiness to propose intellectualist answers to philosophical questions: the Academics sometimes did propose them, whereas the Pyrrhonists invariably desisted.

For example, consider Carneades’ detailed account of the probable (*pithanon*) as a guide to life not molded by doubtful theories concerning unobservables. Hallie hails Carneades’ contribution as “the most subtle, well-developed empirical logic devised by any of the Sceptics” (Hallie 1985, 24). An example: Rudyard is out walking in a central Indian forest when he finds himself in full view of a tigress with cubs. He can’t fail to act in such a dire situation (Rudyard is in mortal peril and absolutely defenseless, so he must flee). However, he must do so upon his first visual experience of the tigress, which according to Carneades, has the lowest degree of probability. Such an experience leads to belief-formation by virtue of its vivacity and clarity alone; it is unsupported by other corroborating experiences. There are higher degrees of probability associated with other, less vivacious experiences. (Hallie 1985, 23) Compare to this story the Pyrrhonists’

Notice that I have just used the term ‘picture’ without attempting to define or explain it. I shall continue to do so until subsection 4.1.3, where I explain what I take Wittgenstein to mean by this term.

At the heart of Wittgenstein’s understanding of linguistic normativity is the idea that linguistic behavior cannot, in the paradigm case of a linguistically competent agent, be explained by means of an account of rule-following in this internalized sense. Wittgenstein’s positive view is that norm-governed behavior has a fundamentally social dimension to it: there is a social/anthropological story to be told about one’s socialization into a practice, a story without which the behavior in question is unintelligible.

This is not to say that there is no mental component to meaning something by a term, according to Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein not only asserts that the speaker intends to mean something by a term—the intentional relation presupposes mental concomitants to the act of meaning—but also cites several examples of subjective elements to the speaker’s understanding of a term (e.g., grasping its meaning “in a flash” (*PI* §§139, 191, 197), experiencing relief upon doing so (*PI* §179), etc). But more importantly, nothing Wittgenstein says is inconsistent with there being a psychological, or internalist account of meaning something by a word that uses, let’s say, the language of mental representations. But there also has to be an explanation of *why something constitutes*

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Practical Criterion for everyday life. According to Sextus, the skeptic cannot rely on reason to determine her behavior; she allows it to be determined by whatever external influences there happen to be (i.e., “guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise”). The appeal to reason by Carneades, albeit *ex post facto*, to explain action-guidance makes his account intellectualist, whereas the explicit disavowal of reason by Sextus is what makes the Practical Criterion fit for the Pyrrhonist stable. In the next chapter, I shall argue that Wittgenstein’s views on *philosophical* questions bear a distinct family resemblance to Sextus’ Practical Criterion for the conduct of everyday life.

meaning a certain reddish tone by ‘sepia,’ or playing a leg-gance in cricket, or whatever. Wittgenstein argues that this story has got to be necessarily externalist and normative. The internal explanation, whatever it is, cannot begin to explain the normative or semantic character of our behaviour. So while the account of socialization into practices is not an alternative to mentalistic explanation, it is important to demarcate the explanation of the normative from that of the mental mechanics of behavior. And as long as a person’s behavior conforms to a socially accepted norm, or more loosely, does not run afoul of the accepted norm, she is doing the norm-governed thing in question. This point will become clearer below.

Let me explain these thoughts by means of a now famous analogy between Wittgenstein and Hume. In the *Treatise*, Hume writes:

[S]uppose we observe several instances, in which the same objects are always conjoin’d together, we immediately conceive a connexion betwixt them, and begin to draw an inference from one to another. *This multiplicity of resembling instances, therefore, constitutes the very essence of power or connexion, and is the source, from which the idea of it arises...* (T 1.3.14; SB 163; italics added.)

There is... nothing new either discover’d or produc’d in any objects by their constant conjunction, and by the uninterrupted resemblance of their relations of succession and contiguity. But ’tis from this resemblance, that the idea of necessity, of power, and of efficacy, are deriv’d. (SB 165)

The italicized sentence in the above quote expresses the thought that causation is nothing more than the pattern of constant conjunction between events in nature (including the mind), and that this, together with the impression of reflection of our own determination to pass from one idea to the other, is the source of our idea of causation. Here, and elsewhere in the *Treatise*, we find the idea that a one-time conjunction of two events does not determine a causal nexus (wherein the cause *necessitates* the effect).

The latter notion has important ramifications for our *knowledge* of causation: as Hume says a little earlier (SB 162), “’Tis not... from any one instance, that we arrive at the idea of cause and effect, of a necessary connexion of power, of force, of energy, and of efficacy.” That is, a mere succession of one event by another is not sufficient to underwrite a causal description; one needs to be able to subsume the two event tokens in question under event types in order to read a causal relation into their conjunction. According to Humean projectivism, seeing causation in nature does not involve an intellectual effort on our part; our minds use principles of association to subsume events under types *customarily*, and to rely on experience to infer causes from effects and vice-versa. Hume points out that a causal event itself does not *contain* some discernible property or properties that we might designate its “efficacy” or “power” to produce precisely the event that succeeds it. As Kripke dramatically puts it, “Even if God were to look at the events, he would discern nothing relating them other than that one succeeds the other” (*WRPL*, 67).

The analogy to the Wittgensteinian view of norm-governed behavior is familiar from Kripke’s work. A summary account of the view would consist of the following two claims.

- (i) Norm-governed behavior is nothing more than a discernable set of behavioral patterns *in the context of a set of social practices*. (A gaming analogy: the act of propelling a ball in the direction of a person holding a bat, in a specific manner, constitutes bowling only if it is done in the context of a cricket game. In other words, without an established practice of playing cricket, no act of throwing a ball at a person holding a bat in a certain way at one end of a 22-yard pitch rigged out with three vertical stumps and two bails would amount to bowling.)
- (ii) *Our* making anything of these patterns has to do with our social natures and socialization into practices. Among other things, for reasons we shall rehearse shortly, it is impossible to explain norm-governed behavior completely by positing semantic structures in the mind/brain.

Kripke stretches the Humean analogy a bit further by talking about “inverted conditionals”. This is how Kripke reasons on behalf of Humeans:

[I]t is important to our concept of causation that we accept some such conditional as: “If events of type *A* cause events of type *B*, and if an event *e* of type *A* occurs, then an event *e'* of type *B* must follow.” So put, it appears that acceptance of the conditional commits us to a belief in a nexus so that, given that the causal connection between event types obtains, the occurrence of the first event *e* necessitates (by fulfilling the antecedent of the conditional), that an event *e'* of type *B* must obtain. Humeans, of course, deny the existence of such a nexus; how



do they read the conditional? Essentially, they concentrate on the assertability conditions of a contrapositive form of the conditional. It is not that any antecedent conditions necessitate that some event  $e'$  must take place; *rather the conditional commits us, whenever we know that an event  $e$  of type  $A$  occurs and is not followed by an event  $e'$  of type  $B$ , to deny that there is a causal connection between the two event types...* Instead of seeing causal connections as primary, from which the observed regularities 'flow,' the Humean instead sees the regularity as primary, and—observing the matter contrapositively—observes that we withdraw a causal hypothesis when the corresponding regularity has a definite counterinstance. (*WRPL* 94; italics added.)

Suppose that you are demonstrating a basic chemical experiment to elementary schoolchildren. The book says that dipping copper into sulphuric acid produces copper sulphate and hydrogen gas. Accordingly, you dip a copper plate in a beaker containing liquid poured from a jar labeled ' $H_2SO_4$ '. To your chagrin, the desired blue crystals do not appear and the children are disappointed. Since you believe that mixing copper with sulphuric acid (event type  $A$ ) causes production of copper sulphate and hydrogen (event type  $B$ ), you accept the conditional  $K$ , below.

$K$ . If events of type  $A$  cause events of type  $B$ , then if an event  $a$  of type  $A$  occurs, an event  $b$  of type  $B$  must follow.

As a Humean, you do not believe that an event of type *A* causally *necessitates* an event of type *B*. You hold that causal necessity in this case is an idea derived from the observed contiguity of instances of *A* and *B* and the resemblance between the conjunctions  $a_1-b_1$ ,  $a_2-b_2$ ,  $a_3-b_3$ , and so on. If you find that an event of the first type occurs and is not followed by an event of the second type as expected, you do not for that reason withdraw the causal hypothesis that if *A* occurs then *B* occurs. In terms of the classroom example above, your unhappy experience does not give you grounds to stop believing the hypothesis that mixing together copper and sulphuric acid produces copper sulphate and hydrogen. You account for the lack of the expected result by citing some plausible cause such as bungling on the part of the laboratory assistant. Similarly, if you are fixing a plumbing problem on the basis of a plausible hypothesis about what went wrong (let's say that high water pressure caused a leak in the joints) and find that in spite of fixing what you think was wrong (by replacing the joints and adjusting water pressure), the problem persists, then surely you do not doubt the causal hypothesis itself (i.e., you do not doubt that high water pressure can cause leaks of the sort you imagined). You look for other causal regularities to explain what happened. To do otherwise would be unreasonable. On the other hand, if you do get a genuine counterinstance to the causal hypothesis in question, you are obliged to deny the conditional. Thus, for example, a critical experiment could prove the falsity of a cherished causal statement.

Now let us move from the case of causal reasoning to that of reasonable assessment of the linguistic behavior of another. Consider the case of a pupil—usually dubbed “The Wayward Child,” but for reasons of economy, a child we shall call Kwasi—who does something quite unexpected when asked to work out a numerical series by

adding 2 to each subsequent member. Applying the extended Humean analogy, we might say that our concept of the rule in question involves accepting the following (roughly formulated) conditional.

S. If Kwasi understands how (or possesses the ability) to complete a numerical series beginning at 1000 using the rule “add 2 to each subsequent member”, he will write “1000, 1002, 1004, 1006, etc.”

We do not read S to mean that if Kwasi has such-and-such mental state, he will write the correct set of numbers. We concentrate instead at the contrapositive of the conditional. E.g., upon checking Kwasi’s work, we find that he has written “1000, 1002, 1004, 1008...” In this context, it would be quite reasonable to wonder if Kwasi knows how to complete the series in question. A less likely scenario, but one that cannot be ruled out altogether, is that Kwasi is being cheeky, or showing uncommon gravity. After such relevant alternatives have been examined and eliminated, and a pattern detected in Kwasi’s responses (let’s say he repeats his mistake, or is adamant that he has done what was asked), it becomes doubtful that Kwasi understands how (or possesses the ability) to do what is being asked of him. His behavior passes as noise, or perhaps truant behavior; it cannot be designated as an instance of the practice in question, although it might very well be a recognizable practice that signifies something else within that context, e.g., a prank.

The Humean moral to draw from the above story is that for any bit of behavior to count as conforming to a rule, we require the background of an antecedently recognized

practice or regularity. The background practice is the necessary condition of something's being a well-formed instance of behavior. Anything that does not make sense with respect to the background, or does not fit into it, fails to qualify.<sup>4</sup> This is what I take Kripke to be saying in such passages as these:

[Wittgenstein's solution to the skeptical paradox of *PI* §201] involves a sceptical interpretation of what is involved in such ordinary assertions as "Jones means addition by '+'." The impossibility of private language emerges as a corollary of his sceptical solution of his own paradox, as does the impossibility of 'private causation' in Hume. It turns out that the sceptical solution does not allow us to speak of a single individual, considered by himself and in isolation, as ever meaning anything. (*WRPL*, 68-69)<sup>5</sup>

Per Kripke's analogy, Wittgensteinians do not read the antecedent of S, above, as necessitating the sort of behavior specified in the consequent. Taking for granted the regularity observed in people's completing such a series in the manner specified, they

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<sup>4</sup> Consider for a moment the following pleasant fantasy. Kwasi is at the batting crease amusing himself by swinging a cricket bat. (Kwasi has never played cricket in his life.) A much-feared bully, who intends to start a game with his cronies, decides to frighten Kwasi with a mean yorker. But Kwasi slashes at the ball with the willow, for he is a plucky youngster with an honor to preserve. He manages to dispatch the ball somehow. Kwasi's timid mates start to cheer, which gets the bully very annoyed. He returns for another run-up. Kwasi realizes he must go on, and scans the growing crowd of boys hoping not to catch sight of familiar faces. To all those present at the pitch, Kwasi seems to be playing cricket. But is he really?

Yes he is, however weird or accidental or unorthodox his way of doing so. If what he does is in conformity with what the inventors of the game were pleased to call the Laws of Cricket, "it's cricket" all right.

<sup>5</sup> For the skeptical paradox and its solution, see chapter 2, and the discussion later in this chapter.

proceed to mark off as irregular instances of behavior that differ from it. The presupposition is that someone who knows how to tackle such a series will not generally behave in a bizarre fashion, although it may be that some instances of behavior appear to conform to an established practice. A Wittgensteinian's acceptance of a conditional resembling S does not commit her to counting any and all appearances of conformance as cases of norm-governed behavior any more than it commits her to requiring that a practice be observed precisely so. She is only required to deny that someone's behavior conforms to a practice in case they behave bizarrely enough on some occasion, or on a sufficient number of occasions (*WRPL*, 95). The analogy with the bad chemistry demonstration and the plumbing scenario described above would be that we are not committed to denying a causal hypothesis unless circumstances are exceptional (e.g., critical experiment) and there is a clear counterinstance to the relevant causal law.

We should add here that our recognizing any given move within a language-game as belonging to it or not, and our differential attitudes to maverick behavior on the one hand and correct norm-governed behavior on the other are dictated by what Hume would call *custom*. Upon countenancing any behavior at all, we take it up and organize it more or less correctly according to criteria that we implicitly agree upon as members of a community. Our judgments that X is being stubborn, that Y does not really know what she claims to know, and that Z is insane for having done such-and-such are all prompted and justified by cues that everyone regards as salient within shared contexts.

Does any of this imply that Wittgenstein trivializing psychological explanation? This is a vexed and deep topic on which I do not intend to say a great deal in this work. What I offer instead is a reading of *PI* §308, where Wittgenstein comments on

psychological explanations. This passage can be read in conjunction with my discussion of Wittgensteinian explanations later in this chapter. I shall preface my reading with a point that I offer an argument for in a later subsection (4.1.3): I do not read in Wittgenstein any particular beef against empirical explanations; what he is suspicious of are what he calls the “pictures” that inform explanatory projects, i.e., the frameworks of understanding that suggest themselves and appear non-negotiable.<sup>6</sup> I quote *PI* §308 in full.

How does the philosophical problem about mental processes and states and about behaviorism arise?—The first step is the one that altogether escapes notice. We talk of processes and states and leave their nature undecided. Sometimes perhaps we shall know more about them—we think. But that is just what commits us to a particular way of looking at the matter. For we have a definite concept of what it means to learn to know a process better. (The decisive move in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought quite innocent.)—And now the analogy which was to make us understand our thoughts falls to pieces. So we have to deny the yet uncomprehended process in the yet unexplored medium. *And now it looks as if we had denied mental processes. And naturally we don't want to deny them.* (Italics added)

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<sup>6</sup> In *PI* §308, Wittgenstein takes on psychological explanations, whereas in his *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, he says interestingly analogous things about explanations in anthropology. E.g., see *PO*, pp. 119, 125.

The “decisive move in the conjuring trick” involves *presupposing that an inner process is necessary for the explanation of rule-governed behavior*, and further assuming that it is a process that is well understood. Wittgenstein’s thought seems to be that the reference to mental phenomena in explaining norm-governed behavior is neither necessary nor sufficient. All of the explanatory burden can be borne by a description of (external) practices, and furthermore, *the specification of inner processes cannot account for normativity*, given that such processes are not really understood. E.g., to explain how we mean things by our words, we might endow internal states with semantic content, but that would leave us with the problem of accounting for the semantic content of internal states. To reiterate: Wittgenstein isn’t saying that there are no mental processes underlying norm-governed behavior; there can certainly be a story about how an agent produces such behavior.<sup>7</sup> But he *is* denying that we can explain norm-governed behavior by giving an account of mental processes.

Through these remarks, I have again emphasized that norm-governed behavior is essentially social. This brings me to a point that I shall make quite generally for now. Society has certain more or less specific expectations of the behavior of those engaged in any given practice. For example, it will not do for the grocer to produce five spring artichokes in response to my request for five red apples. The transactional context imbues the grocer’s actions with meaning. Thus we note that Wittgenstein invokes a transcendental model for understanding norm-governed activity. We hold the

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<sup>7</sup> And by that we mean *any* agent that conforms to the norm. Consider once more the example of a human being playing chess with a computer. The vast difference in what goes on inside their cognitive systems does not undermine the account of their moves as being, say, identical and their strategies good or bad. A *robotic* chess-player is still a chess-player.

transcendental condition of making sense (or knowing, or playing a stroke in cricket) constant and then ask whether the behavior of an agent constitutes a meaningful move in the context. If she does, then she is clearly capable of “playing the game”; if she acts bizarrely, then, usually after several opportunities to get her act right, she is deemed incapable of playing it. In general, then, Wittgenstein’s positive account of norm-governed behavior involves trying to understand the significance of what moves the agent makes within a language-game in light of whether or not it is consistent with expected behavior and the relevant norms. This includes accounting for norm-violations as well, as the example of Kwasi demonstrates.

#### *4.1.2 Forms of Life: A First Pass*

Let us look closer at Wittgenstein’s description of any and all significant human behavior (i.e., any and all moves in language-games) in terms of obedience to norms. On Wittgenstein’s understanding of the matter, all norm-governed behavior is at bottom conventional behavior or behavior constrained by existing practices. It is worth emphasizing that this account of the phenomenon that we have variously called “norm-governed activity (or behavior),” “significant human behavior,” “moves in language-games,” and “conventional behavior” presupposes a distinction between what is conventional and what is merely *arbitrary*. Wittgenstein’s view is that *all moves in language-games are to be understood and evaluated by reference to the norms or conventions governing them*.

To this one might plausibly object that since according to this view there is nothing that grounds conventional behavior—conventional behavior being “bedrock,” etc.—to say that some behavior is conventional is to say that it is arbitrary; what one does



bears no relation to why one does it. But Wittgenstein does not hold the view that conventions float free of the reasons we have for acting in various ways. Conventions are partly constrained by the kinds of creatures we are, or at any rate by the kinds of things about which human beings find themselves to agree. Wittgenstein calls these things *forms of life*. For the sake of convenience (and such precision as may be possible), I shall adopt Baker's understanding of the term since it finds resonance in some things I have said above. She says that "forms of life rest finally on no more than the fact that we agree, find ourselves agreeing, in the ways that we size up and respond to what we encounter: 'My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul'" (Baker 1984, 278; quoting *PI*, p. 152).

That we engage in such practices as responding to a request for red apples by producing precisely such objects, or adding 2 to a series in the normal way has to do with constitutive features of our minds and forms of life. I suggest that this does not make them entirely non-arbitrary; it does not pin down norms to a transcendent framework. Our norm-governed practices *could* conceivably be different from what they are. E.g., we could imagine a form of life in which it is legitimate for the grocer to respond to my request for red apples with spring artichokes or a bicycle. Such a form of life would be "surreal" because it would involve (rather unreasonable) practices of systematically frustrating each other's expectations in commercial transactions. But if one takes seriously the idea that what constitutes the basis of forms of life is *agreement* (per *PI* 241), one realizes quickly enough that surreal alternatives are not genuine options for human beings. As Baker has argued, "Although there is no logical contradiction in supposing our practices to be different from what they are, the alternatives are not really

options for us. We cannot clearly conceive in detail measuring, say, with elastic rods, or adding by two in this fashion: ‘2, 4, 6... , 998, 1000, 1004, 1008’ ‘When we try to trace out the implications [in these different ways] consistently and quite generally,’ Stroud has noted, ‘our understanding of the alleged possibilities diminishes.’ Not everything that is logically possible in the sense of being describable without contradiction is possible for us” (Baker 1984, 279).<sup>8</sup>

It turns out that Wittgenstein has no intention of precisifying such descriptive concepts as *form of life*. It is enough to say that the normative is constrained by forms of life and the kind of creatures we are (e.g., creatures that use communal agreement as a basis for transactions between themselves). Such a foundation might be imprecise, but it is not for that reason flimsy. It rules out as unlikely (though not, as Baker reminds us, logically impossible) practices that lack a role in our lives. It will be remembered that Kripke’s Wittgenstein provides answers to the following two questions: (i) Under what conditions are we allowed to make a given assertion? and (ii) Granted that our language-game permits a certain “move” (assertion) under certain specifiable conditions, what is its role in our lives of such permission? (*WRPL*, 74-75). Kripke speaks of the resulting view as “a picture of language based on assertability conditions or justification conditions.” I am now suggesting that it is forms of life that ultimately determine whether or not a certain practice qualifies as legitimate or reasonable for us by specifying for it a role (or

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<sup>8</sup> The point is related to Wittgenstein’s claims about what might (or: might not) be “reasonable for us.” E.g., *OC* 219-220 reads: “There cannot be any doubt about it for me as a reasonable person.... The reasonable man does not have certain doubts.”

I take the ‘we’ here as referring to reasonable agents who agree that e.g., some calculations are reliable. The crazy person is unreasonably suspicious of all our calculations, treating a certain logical possibility as a probable scenario for us (or for him, at any rate).

not) within some context. Since forms of life make possible the significance of practices, we may think of them as strongly constraining norms without also stripping off their conventional character.

I shall resume these reflections in a later subsection of this chapter (4.2.4). At this point I shall simply flag the claim that Wittgenstein's remarks pertaining to forms of life need to be understood in the context of a genetic account of norms. Wittgenstein gives us this causal/naturalistic story about how norms are grounded in convention. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explain the sense in which Wittgenstein proffers this view without falling into what, in deference to the Therapeutes, one might call "the theory trap". I will show that what is on offer is not a *better* theory of rule-following but *an alternative description of norm-governed behavior that does not amount to a theory*. This is not as surprising as it might seem, since on my reading, Wittgenstein had a decidedly Pyrrhonian philosophical temper, and as the previous chapter would have indicated, I tend to think that it is possible to be both a Pyrrhonist (in the sense of being Pyrrhonistically-inclined) and a naturalist.

Before I explain the differences between theories and what Wittgenstein calls *pictures* and that between the activities of theorizing and what I call *depicting*, I would like to file a promissory note pertaining to my reading of *On Certainty*. In that text, the elements that constitute Wittgenstein's alternative picture of linguistic norms in the *Investigations* translate into an analogous set of ideas about epistemic norms. In that text, the description of epistemic practices indicates how practices of giving and asking for reasons institute non-transcendent norms. These norms are both *locally transcendental*, in that they make possible inquiry and doubt within a given context, and *globally*

*descriptive*, i.e., they lend themselves to a description of the sorts of inquiries that people do undertake. Given this general inventory of epistemic practices, we can further specify how it is that certain epistemic practices (such as science) are superior to others, and state precisely the norms that govern those practices, and the practices that depend on them in some way. Thus we would speak of the ordinary reflective person as being justified in a certain belief (say that a given tree is an elm and not a beech) by her reliance upon the reasons that the experts in the scientific community have for affirming the belief in question. This would involve characterizing justification in a broadly externalist way, i.e. by making reference to the mind-external factors responsible for deeming one's belief true.

We would extend the broadly externalist account of justification to the description of the practices of the experts themselves: we might cite here Hume's example of the mathematician seeking the approval of his colleagues on a proof constructed by him (*T* 1.4.1; SB 180-1). In that case, although the mathematician possesses excellent reasons for believing that the proof is correct, he responds to the requirement that it be checked against the norms used in the community of mathematicians at large for evaluating such proofs. One can further imagine the mathematician using the feedback from fellow experts to improve upon the proof, or to revise it in certain respects. In sum, this process serves to strengthen his reasons, and perhaps provides additional reasons (given limits on the scope of individual expertise) for believing that the proof is correct.

The foregoing ought to suffice as a "teaser" for a Wittgensteinian account of epistemic norms. But we to say some things more about Wittgenstein's approach to normativity generally before we can go on to further details.

#### 4.1.3 First Interlude: A Note on “Pictures” and Depicting

The question of what Wittgenstein means by ‘picture’ is acknowledged as being important, but then, as Kuusela has remarked, commentators typically do little to provide an answer to it.<sup>9</sup> This interpretive knot is intimately related to the problem of making sense of Wittgenstein’s claim that he does not put forth theses in philosophy. If Kripke is to be believed, Wittgenstein is skittish even when it comes to outlining fundamental problems with philosophical positions he doesn’t buy. Kripke suspects that Wittgenstein “cagily” desists from calling a spade a spade when offering up a bona-fide skeptical problem discovered by him (*WRPL*, 70-71). Some (such as Malcolm) evade these difficulties, and use alternative terms to ‘theory’ and ‘thesis’ that are themselves left undefined; others (such as Kripke) use Wittgenstein’s term of choice, namely, ‘picture’ to give their accounts of Wittgenstein’s views, but do so without specifying what distinguishes a picture from a theory (Kuusela 2008, 6). It is imperative, then, that we say something about the sense in which Wittgenstein uses the term ‘picture.’ A salient aim of the following discussion is to shed light on the idea that a picture is something arresting, something on which we are sold before we realize the depth of our commitment to it.

What is relatively clear about Wittgenstein’s use of the term is that he means by it something far less definite and clearly articulated than a theory. It can, however, serve as

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<sup>9</sup> While writing this subsection, I chanced upon Kuusela’s useful discussion of pictures (Kuusela 2008, 35-38), and found that he comments upon each of the points of distinction between picture and theory listed here. Coincidentally, he also picks as an example the Augustinian picture of language, and marshals Wittgenstein’s brief comment on the quote from Augustine in *PI* §1 as evidence for the claim that a picture can form the source of a theory. While I do not see anything to disagree with in Kuusela’s account, I find that my discussion, given its context and purpose in this chapter, involves putting matters somewhat differently, highlighting some things rather than others. Hence I have retained my own discussion of the issue.

the matrix for a philosophical or explanatory theory properly speaking. Take for example “the Augustinian picture of language”. The sketch of this view in *PI* § is quite brief—just enough to give one an idea of how a theory built out of its elements might look. Such a theory would say quite clearly (among other things,) that to know the meaning of a sign is to have grasped the referential relation between a word and the object it names. This much is clear from the interpretation that Wittgenstein appends to the quotation from Augustine. “These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words in language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names. —In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands” (*PI* §1b).

Perhaps it goes without saying that Wittgenstein does not intend to attribute to Augustine a theory of meaning: in the *Confessions*, the passage quoted by Wittgenstein forms part of the brief account (if one might call it that) of Augustine’s childhood. But Wittgenstein does hold up for close consideration the story of language learning that Augustine tells. It is a bland enough story: it does not occur to the casual reader of the *Confessions* to protest to it until one sharpens it to yield clear assertions about meaning and language learning. Because of this relationship between a picture and a theory, a picture is capable of guiding inquiry along a certain direction (Kuusela 2008, 37). As Wittgenstein’s treatment of misguided theories of meaning demonstrates so clearly, determining that a theory is not explanatorily adequate takes (intense) argument. However, showing that it rests on a picture that seems uncontroversial is revealed through *philosophical diagnosis*. I understand philosophical diagnosis to be the first step towards

curing a philosopher of the conviction that some explanatory approach or framework must be correct. Diagnosis does not serve to refute theories; it works on the would-be theorist by revealing her implicit presuppositions.

It would be incorrect to infer on the basis of the foregoing that if we just entertained the right pictures, we would be safe from formulating bad theories.

Wittgenstein suggests that, at least sometimes, we are not given a choice in the matter. As he says, “A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, *for it lay in our language* and language seemed to repeat it to us so inexorably” (*PI* §115, italics added). In explanation, Kuusela (2008, 36) says that a picture “may... [recommend] itself to one—perhaps as a consequence of certain forms of expression that one uses.” Indeed, the hold that a picture has on us is what is responsible for producing philosophical “disquietitudes” (and convictions): “A simile that has been absorbed into the forms of our language produces a false appearance, and this disquiets us. ‘But *this* isn’t how it is!’—we say. ‘Yet *this* is how it has to *be*!’” (*PI* §112).”

In light of this feature of pictures, we can reformulate the distinction between pictures and theories with the aid of a Humean principle. Pictures, we might say, are more vivacious and forceful than theories. We don’t *entertain* pictures; *they* hold *us* captive. In general, pictures give us a handle on the phenomena requiring explanation by pushing certain features of it into relief, foregrounding these against other features. E.g., a certain picture of norm-governed linguistic behavior makes it seem obvious that the phenomenon of *meaning* can be explained in terms of mental structures that underlie our ability to mean the same thing over multiple instances of use. The same picture relegates to the background the social character of meaning—something that does not begin to

emerge until we countenance talk of “moves” in “language-games”—until we countenance a very different picture of language.<sup>10</sup>

In a superficially Humean vein, we might say that a theory is to a picture what an idea is to an impression, namely, a significantly less vivacious copy. We might think of it as a two-dimensional photograph that is but a poor representation of the flesh-and-blood item: perhaps it is better amenable to verbalization and argument, but these qualities cannot compensate for the “lively,” impressionistic quality of a picture. The vivacity or liveliness of a picture can be understood in terms of its suggestiveness and ability to engage a thinker by, e.g., causing her to take it on, sometimes quite unconsciously.<sup>11</sup> I am

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<sup>10</sup> In *PI* §144 Wittgenstein says the following about the heuristic uses of a picture: “I wanted to put that picture before him [i.e., the wayward pupil], and his acceptance of the picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* rather than *that* set of pictures. I have changed his way of looking at things.” This is followed by an allusion to the “Indian mathematician”—presumably A. Ramanujan—who would (perhaps in place of a proof) offer an alternative proposition for consideration, urging his audience to *look* at it.

<sup>11</sup> We *can* offer arguments for a picture, but that would be overkill, since we do not require reasons to take on pictures. It would also be unfruitful. Think of the fantasy involving G.E. Moore’s kidnapping by a wild tribe, and his subsequent attempt to convince the king of the tribe that men simply cannot make nightly visits to the moon (see *OC* 262-264, and also *OC* 239, about Moore among the Catholics). This is a circumstance in which Moore’s certainties (hinges) are pitched against those of his interlocutors; not much would be achieved by his insistence that he knows that men do not, or cannot make nightly visits to the moon. What is required is a “conversion,” i.e., an introduction to a different picture.

How might this proceed? Well, Moore would have to talk about the various things that are taken for granted by the community of Britons in the first half of the twentieth century. He would have to describe in some detail various aspects of the life of this community: means of communication and transport, political arrangements, social relations, scientific notions, ethico-religious views, etc. All of this would be presented as a contrast to the “world-picture” of the tribe. The process of conversion would involve the king’s coming to see, among other things, that the picture is basically cohesive. So it is not as though there isn’t any argument or negotiation involved. It is just that any such argument is over this or that element of the picture that one comes to accept. One might possess good reasons to refuse to accept some picture in every detail, etc.



not suggesting that all pictures are irresistible in this way, but only that some pictures are in fact irresistible.

The positive aspect of Wittgenstein's own work involves presenting contrasting pictures. Alternatively, we might say that he oftentimes used a method of *depiction*. One may well develop a theory of meaning or norms out of the alternative picture of norm-governed activity offered by Wittgenstein. But Wittgenstein himself does not do so. What Wittgenstein does not do is assert propositions like "meaning consists in one's speech-act squaring with those of members of one's community." Notice in passing that this is precisely what one ought to expect of a Pyrrhonist. Wittgenstein sees his job as that of diagnosis and therapy. Therapy can include the activity of depicting a phenomenon by giving an extensive description of it, sometimes from many different perspectives. This is what Wittgenstein is doing in giving a "perspicuous representation of language-games." "Our clear and simple language-games are not preparatory studies for a future regimentation of language—as it were first approximations, ignoring friction and air-resistance. The language-games are rather set up as *objects of comparison* which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities" (*PI* §130). Since the picture that Wittgenstein paints is a picture in words, it *looks* like an instance of theorizing when in fact it meticulously avoids "regimenting language" in favor of showing how the phenomena of language and meaning appear in the various contexts of life.

We are now in a position to affirm that Kripkenstein's picture of language based on assertability conditions *is* really a picture consistent with things Wittgenstein says in the *Investigations*; if Kripke means to be speaking on behalf of Wittgenstein—i.e., if

*Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* is something more than a set of heuristics designed to make sense of the *Investigations*—he is right to qualify his account by calling it a picture. As for my own statements about Wittgenstein’s causal/naturalistic account of norms, etc, they, too ascribe to him a descriptive account of norm-governed phenomena—an account of how such phenomena look from a Wittgensteinian perspective.

I conclude this long aside with a couple of questions. What, one might justly ask, is the purpose of comparing pictures if one is not about to espouse a theory associated with the picture one prefers? Second, is it the case, then, that Wittgenstein is held captive by *his* picture of norm-governed behavior? An answer to the first question will help us tackle the second one.

As I have indicated, it may be that sometimes one juxtaposes two pictures in order to bring into relief the limitations of one of them. At other times, one might compare two pictures in order to gain perspicuity, just as one might juxtapose two pieces of printed cloth in order to better appreciate the color and design of each piece. The final aim of this exercise is diagnostic: by entertaining an alternative picture, one looks at a different arrangement of elements of the same phenomenon—the background elements of one picture might be foregrounded in the other—and this enables one to query any implicit presuppositions one might have held. This is no small achievement, since, when doing philosophy it can be confoundingly hard to bring into view “the real foundations of [one’s] enquiry.”

In *PI* §129, Wittgenstein says, “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice

something—because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless *that* fact has some time struck him.—And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.” There is a good chance that someone whose philosophical method involves deliberate invocation of contrasting pictures is unlikely to be led up the garden path by any one of them. But more relevantly, the activity of perspicuous representation involves staying close to the “rough ground,” i.e., to the context of the normative phenomena under scrutiny, and therefore this kind of depiction is as presupposition-free as anything can get. Wittgenstein’s positive proposal in the *Investigations* involves the presupposition that language is intrinsically social. Who would argue with *that*? It is a platitudinous notion that, unlike some other presuppositional claims that Wittgenstein reveals by means of diagnosis, isn’t “hidden because of [its] simplicity and familiarity.” It is not the kind of commitment that we need worry about.<sup>12</sup> So, in answer to the second question, no, Wittgenstein is not in thrall of his alternative picture because it isn’t the sort of picture that “holds us captive” by setting us upon a path of inquiry that we find non-negotiable.

We will have occasion to revisit the concepts of picture and perspicuous representation in the next chapter. For now, I take it that we have a fairly adequate idea of how pictures differ from theories, and some understanding of Wittgenstein’s claims to the

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<sup>12</sup> Here we find ourselves hovering in the neighborhood of the notorious *PI* §128. I remain confounded by the claim that *all* theses in philosophy are such that “it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them.” Perhaps this means that if one did philosophy in the Wittgensteinian way, one would not produce explanations that go beyond the description of language-games. But I do not claim to have cracked *PI* §128; since my argument here does not depend upon it, I shall leave it for consideration in a later work.

effect that he does not espouse theories while seeming to say a great many things of a positive nature on various philosophical matters.

## 4.2 Linguistic Normativity

I shall now point to some passages in the *Investigations* dealing with rule-following, where Wittgenstein makes some characteristic remarks on the norms of meaningfulness and correctness in language-use that serve as evidence for the view that Wittgenstein thinks about the normative in terms of the conventional.

### 4.2.1 *PI* §§198 and 201

These passages address the problems with the account of rule-following that Wittgenstein takes as his target. The first of these problematizes the idea that rules tell us what to do—that they are action-guiding: an intuitively appealing notion on the intellectualist picture wherein one internalizes rules, which possess in some sense, the power to determine one's future practices involving them.

“But how can a rule shew me what I have to do at *this* point? Whatever I do is, on some interpretation, in accord with the rule.”—That is not what we ought to say, but rather: any interpretation still hangs in the air with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning. (*PI* §198a)

This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because any action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if

*any* action can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.

(*PI* §201a)

The second passage expresses the “paradox of interpretation” (hereinafter: Paradox). Meredith Williams argues that it is important to separate the Paradox from the regress of interpretations (hereinafter: Regress), which is the main concern of §198a (Me Williams 1999, 160). Let us follow her lead in treating them independently.

The Regress questions the allegedly inexorable nature of a rule. The latter idea is that the rule “add 2 to each subsequent member in the series”, for example, can only suggest one course of action; there being no alternative “interpretation” but to add 2 to the next member of the series. But not so, says Wittgenstein, and suggests a far-out, but not impossible interpretation of the rule. We could imagine, he says, the wayward pupil (i.e., Kwasi in the retelling of this story above) who continues the series of natural numbers beyond 1000 in the following way: 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012. Wittgenstein explains this with an analogy: “Such a case would present similarities with one in which a person naturally reacted to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction of the line from finger-tip to wrist, not from wrist to finger-tip” (*PI* §185). It is not that the rule allows for various interpretations—in practice, it does not. But then our Kwasi is temporarily standing in for an unreasonable person.<sup>13</sup> He has not yet been initiated into the current practice; we are to imagine that for him the practice in question is wide open: all possible ways of continuing the series (or following the pointing finger) appear to be equally legitimate.

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<sup>13</sup> See footnote 8 and the associated discussion in the text, above.

To sum up Wittgenstein's Regress argument: if we try to make sense of how rules represent the formula by which one means the same thing by successive uses of an expression, then we commit ourselves to the view that an *interpretation* is necessary in order to follow. But since the interpretation of a rule involves the application of a rule of interpretation, a further interpretation is involved, and in this way, a regress is generated. In the context of Wittgenstein's rule-following discussion, a "rule" refers to a mental representation, and as Wittgenstein shows, a mental representation's being present to mind has very little to do with the normativity of meaning.

Wittgenstein ends *PI* §198a with the remark that "Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning." This remark conveys the moral that we should take with a big pinch of salt the idea that interpreting a rule in "the standard way" (in the toy example, adding 2 to the series beyond 1000 in the correct way) involves *responding to the necessity inherent in the rule*, i.e., its ability to guide action in the way that the norms decree.<sup>14</sup> On this view, the norms of correctness are themselves grounded in the necessary character of the rules. Wittgenstein breaks the latter link using the conclusion of the Regress argument: *given* that there is no necessity inherent in rules, they cannot be said to provide reasons for acting one way rather than another.

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<sup>14</sup> On Meredith Williams' reading, the regress argument specifically attacks the idea that *the rule comes before the mind*, uniquely determining all future uses of the rule. (Wittgenstein talks about the act of *meaning* the order "add 2" as somehow producing a blueprint for how one is going to proceed; as if when one means the order, one's mind "flies ahead" and traverses each step in the infinite series *before* one gets around to physically writing down the members of the series (*PI* §188). In *PI* §184 he conveys the same idea by means of a musical analogy: he talks about having in mind a tune that one has just now recalled "*in its entirety*" at the moment of recalling it.) But then a rule shorn of any history or context of use cries out for an interpretation, which interpretation in turn requires an interpretation, and so on.

This brings us directly to the Paradox, whose best-known locus is *PI* §201.<sup>15</sup> *PI* §201a is a notoriously hard passage to parse, with or without the benefit of the remainder of the numbered section.

This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because any action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if *any* action can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.

It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another, as if each one contented us at least for one moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it. What this shews is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not an interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call “obeying the rule” and “going against it” in actual cases.

Here there is an inclination to say: any action according to the rule is an interpretation. But we ought to restrict the term “interpretation” to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another.

The upshot of the *second* paragraph of this section is that the intellectualist view of what it is to follow a rule is fraught with problems: first, the idea that meaning (i.e., the meaning-schema or rule of use) is a mental content generates the Regress such that any

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<sup>15</sup> *PI* §201 speaks of “determining” a course of action, which I take to mean matching behavior with rule; Kripke talks about the Paradox in terms of the possibility of *justifying* one’s behavior with reference to a rule. See *WRPL*, p. 11.

one interpretation of the rule calls for another; second, the rule points to no unique application of the term, putting paid to the thought that the rule contains within it, or somehow generates, the norm of correctness. Talk of determining and justifying actions with reference to a unique and correct interpretation of some rule leads nowhere.

Consider now the first paragraph of *PI* §201: the moral that we ought to draw from the Paradox (i.e., the thought that “no course of action could be determined by a rule, because any action can be made out to accord with the rule”) is that on the intellectualist, rule-following picture, it is not possible to give content to the idea that one’s behavior answers to, or is determined by a rule, because the rule does not transparently dictate a course of action consistent with it. As Kripke has demonstrated, the rule of addition does not determine (or justify) adding any more than it does “quadding,” or computing with the aid of the deviant function defined by him (*WRPL*, 8). The matter is not resolved through interpretation of the rule one way rather than another, because on this picture there is no “internal” principle—no norm—for making this distinction.

From the foregoing it follows that the rule-following account does not provide an insight into the *normativity* of norm-governed behavior. This is what Wittgenstein means when he says that the answer to the Paradox is that on the rule-following account there would be “neither accord nor conflict” between an action and a rule. The whole point of the rule-following account was to explain the normativity of behavior by reference to an internalized rule that determines the right course of action in case it (i.e., the rule) is correct, and the wrong course of action in case it is incorrect. In a nutshell, your action is correct or incorrect according to whether or not you have grasped the unique rule that



will correctly chart your future behavior. But if, as Wittgenstein argues, just about any course of action can be right (or wrong) according to how a rule is *interpreted*, then the notion of an action's conformance to a rule becomes explanatorily idle. As the case of the wayward pupil shows, one can suit one's action to a bizarre interpretation of the rule "add 2 to each subsequent member of the series," and thereby achieve conformance to the rule on one interpretation of it, while failing to conform to the same rule on other possible interpretations. One's action accords *and* conflicts with the rule, which simply means that one's action neither accords nor conflicts with the rule. The constitutive idea that an action must conform to a rule—to the only, unique rule envisaged on this account—in order to be correct does nothing to explain how it is that an action is deemed *correct* in a given context.

The alternative to this understanding of norm-governed behavior is already suggested in *PI* §201b, as we have seen. There is a way of grasping a rule that is not an interpretation; (and here I modify Wittgenstein's words) it is constitutive of "obeying a rule" and "going against it" in actual cases.<sup>16</sup> The consideration of an internally represented rule has led us nowhere. Wittgenstein is now urging a different conception of what it is to "grasp a rule." According to it, one's grasp of a rule is an *ability* that is exhibited in what one does in actual circumstances. As he says in the next remark: "And hence also 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it" (*PI* §202).

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<sup>16</sup> The issue is really *not* whether Kripke overlooks *PI* §201b, as has been urged by some of his critics (e.g., McDowell 1984 and Stern 1995). Kripke doesn't actually quote *PI* §201b, but his account is not inconsistent with it, as I will show in this chapter.

Consider in passing the analogous idea in *On Certainty*: thinking that one knows that p, or *being certain* that one knows that p is not to know that p. Knowing that p has its place in a practice: otherwise thinking that one knows p would be the same thing as knowing that p. There is no “private” knowing *in this sense*: that Moore knows he has two hands needs to be manifested in what he does to establish the claim that he knows; the reference to his subjective certainty is not helpful towards doing *that*.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4.2.2 *Second Interlude: Wittgensteinian Explanations*

Below is a summary of my observations on Wittgenstein’s treatment of normativity.

- (i) The negative part of Wittgenstein’s argument in the *Investigations* involves demonstrating why a theory that accounts for normativity or rule-following in terms of mental structures cannot be explanatorily adequate. By revealing the picture or *presupposition* of such a theory, Wittgenstein provides a diagnosis of its appeal as an explanans.
- (ii) Wittgenstein’s foray into the topic of rule-following is meant to be therapeutic: his reasoning shows that there exists nothing like a problem of explaining norm-governed phenomena on the basis of mental representations of norms. (I will say a little more about this directly.)

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<sup>17</sup> See *OC* 2, 12, 18-19, 59. We know that the issue of knowing that one has two hands is considerably more complicated than what I have sketched here. We shall have occasion to return to it in the next chapter. My purpose here is to describe in outline the analogy between Wittgenstein’s treatment of linguistic and epistemic norms, and to connect an important line of argument in *OC* with *PI* §202.

- (iii) Wittgenstein's positive account of normativity can serve as the background or matrix of a theoretical explanation of the phenomenon,<sup>18</sup> although he himself does not attempt to provide such an explanation. But, as I will argue below, it *is* possible to read Wittgenstein's descriptive story about how normativity and hence meaning are produced in a context of socially instituted practices as an explanation of normative phenomena.

It is important to note that Wittgenstein's arguments against the view that rule-following behavior is determined by internal representations of meaning are designed to show that the view is nonsensical. This demonstration constitutes the therapeutic aspect of Wittgenstein's arguments. But how might we understand the claim that the view in question is nonsensical? Surely we understand the view! Here Wittgenstein's talk of pictures comes to our aid. He argues that the rule-following picture is *presupposed* by a theory designed to solve the problem of normativity by telling a story about how we follow internally represented rules. It is presupposed that this explanatory strategy is basically correct. But this presupposition is unjustified. So, to the extent that a theory of this sort explains a "yet uncomprehended process in the yet unexplored medium" (*PI* §308), it is not a candidate for truth (or verification) or falsity (or falsification) and hence is nonsensical. As we have indicated above, showing that such a theory is nonsensical requires philosophical diagnosis. We now see that diagnosis is followed by

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<sup>18</sup> Bloor (1997) makes use of Wittgenstein's views on rules and institutions to construct such a theory in sociology. However, he does not attempt to mark a difference between Wittgenstein's picture and his own theory.

cure, and that cure involves rejection of the faulty theory along with the false picture that motivates it.

Let us now consider Wittgenstein's own account of normativity. Both the Regress and the Paradox demonstrate that all previous approaches to understanding rule-following behavior are seriously problematic in the same general way. They both illustrate the view that philosophical problems derive from a flawed idea of philosophical explanation. If the problem of explaining normativity is construed as "How can we understand norm-governed behavior on the basis of mental representations of rules?" then we will never get started.<sup>19</sup> Wittgenstein's philosophical method is calculated to undermine this idea of explanation, and to provide a prototype for a different sort of explanation, namely, one involving *description* (what Wittgenstein calls "perspicuous representation") of language-games.

By 'giving an explanation' in the Wittgensteinian sense I mean providing the components of a descriptive picture. Such an explanation would be less well-defined than an explanatory theory or hypothesis, and more or less impressionistic in character. A perspicuous representation of normative behavior gives a big picture understanding of

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<sup>19</sup> Wittgenstein's method of diagnosis reveals the slip from "How can we understand norm-governed behavior?" to "How can we understand norm-governed behavior on the basis of mental representations of rules?" Recall the story about faulty (and unjustified) presuppositions.

It might be objected that the formulation "How can we understand norm-governed behavior?" is loaded in Wittgenstein's favor, for after all, isn't the question *much* simpler, namely, "How do we mean anything by an expression e?" or "In virtue of what do our words mean anything?" Well, to the extent that meaning something is *essentially* making a successful speech-act, my preferred way of putting the question *corrects* the focus of the original question(s). The question "How do we mean anything by an expression e?" primes one to think in terms of the correspondence of mental representations and the objective meaning of a term; the latter variant of the same question primes us to think of some fact in virtue of which we mean things by our words. In each case, appearances to the contrary, we are *led* to a theory by way of a picture that "holds us captive".

normativity; I claim that such an understanding also constitutes an explanation of the phenomenon.

Lest it be thought that Wittgenstein's project of perspicuous representation of language-games is *preliminary to explanation*, we should note directly that it is not; for him, description *replaces* explanation. The following passage from *Zettel* is emphatic on this point.

Here the temptation is overwhelming to say something further, when everything has already been described.—Whence the pressure? What analogy, what wrong interpretation produces it? (Z 133)

Here we come up against a remarkable and characteristic phenomenon in philosophical investigation: the difficulty—I might say—is not that of finding the solution but rather that of recognizing as the solution something that looks as if it were only a preliminary to it. “We have already said everything.— Not anything that follows from this, no, this itself is the solution!”

This is connected, I believe, with our wrongly expecting an explanation, whereas the solution of the difficulty is a description, if we give it the right place in our considerations. If we dwell upon it, and do not try to get beyond it.

The difficulty here is: to stop. (Z 134)

What do Wittgenstein's descriptions explain? With respect to linguistic behavior, we might say that Wittgenstein explains “speaker's understanding.” Naturally, his explanatory agenda is quite different from that of thinkers who seek to understand

speakers' competence in terms of principles of generative syntax or semantics. We have already noted how Wittgenstein's arguments reveal that no amount of theorizing about how knowledge of language is represented in the mind can explain linguistic normativity: the two are separate matters.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, we are not speaking exclusively of elements of performance or *parole*, either. To use Ryle's much-banded-about term, we are talking about a kind of "knowledge how"—an ability, informed by understanding and secured in place by extensive training, to negotiate collectively instituted practices.

A discomfiting feature of Wittgenstein's positive remarks on normativity is that they feel oddly incomplete. The ruling idea is that norm-governed activity is to be understood by reference to conventions. Surely that cannot be all! Surely there is something further in which norm-governed activity consists! It is difficult to accept that the answer is "No." Wittgenstein insists that it doesn't consist in anything beyond fitting into a collectively enforced pattern of established use. That really is all there is to it. As

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<sup>20</sup> I would say that something like an articulation of the theory of syntax in terms of principles and parameters is not fundamentally opposed to Wittgenstein's understanding of the human linguistic ability as grounded in human nature and constituted into second nature by the indispensable process of socialization. Chomskyans, too, talk about the indispensability of the social stimulus for the development of language in the mind, comparing the business of language learning to a pigeon learning to fly: clip its wings at the crucial stage, and your pigeon will never fly. Of course, Chomsky interprets his data in a way that is quite alien to Wittgenstein's way of thinking about language. However, their trajectories of thought never really come close enough to clash: Wittgenstein isn't interested in explaining linguistic competence, whereas Chomsky is.

Wittgenstein *would* oppose Fodor's (1975) attempt to explain semantic competence in terms of mental representation of meaning. This is because Fodor's theory *presupposes* that we can explain grasp of meaning by positing mental structures and then proceeds to give an explanation that involves positing mental structures. Wittgenstein's alternative picture of linguistic norms shows that language is *essentially* a social phenomenon and that therefore meaning cannot be accounted for by talking about things in the head. Neither can it be accounted for by *appending* to a Fodorian account of semantic competence a theory of linguistic performance. Fodor's explanatory project is based on a faulty picture of the phenomenon being explained, and to that extent his theory of content is nonsensical: it is not even a candidate for affirmation or denial.

Fogelin remarks, “For Wittgenstein, the root error of much philosophizing is to press on for reasons where none are to be found” (Fogelin 2009, 29). The felt incompleteness (and apparent banality) of Wittgenstein own answers to philosophical problems is a consequence of his Pyrrhonism. I would caution my reader to refrain from reading into Wittgenstein’s choice not to theorize an imperative or recommendation to follow suit. I think the most we can say is that qua Pyrrhonist, *he* is not interested in going beyond the task of depicting things.

#### 4.2.3 *The Communitarian View*

As we have noted in Chapter 2, Kripke explains *PI* §201 with the help of an ingenious illustration of deviant rule-following. (*WRPL*, 8 ff) Recall that Kripke reads into various texts leading up to *PI* §201 a skeptical problem about meaning. “The... sceptical problem... [is] that anything in my head leaves it undetermined *what* function ‘plus’ (as I use it) denotes (plus or quus [quus being the deviant function]), what ‘green’ denotes (green or grue)” (*WRPL*, 82). Recall also that the skeptical problem emerges when we attempt to understand the ability to use a term to mean the same thing over multiple instances: according to the view that Wittgenstein is attacking, the ability to mean specific things by our words is grounded in inner representations—items that Wittgenstein calls “rules”—that determine their use in every future instance. Kripke correctly notes that such a view was proposed by the author of the *Tractatus*. His summary of the so-called picture theory of meaning is terse but illuminating.

Wittgenstein’s earlier work had taken for granted a natural relation of interpretation between a thought in someone’s mind and the ‘fact’ it ‘depicts’.

The relation was supposed to consist in an isomorphism between one fact (the fact that mental elements are arranged in a certain way) and another (the fact-in-the-world ‘depicted’)... Clearly,... the paradox of the second part of the *Investigations* constitutes a powerful critique of any idea that ‘mental representations’ uniquely correspond to ‘facts’, since it alleges that the components of such ‘mental representations’ do not have interpretations that can be ‘read off’ from them in a unique manner. (*WRPL*, 84-85)

Kripke reads *PI* §201 as expressing the view that it is impossible to explain semantic ability by appealing to an internal rule, because on a model of meaning such as that sketched in the *Tractatus*, it is impossible to provide a principled distinction between correct and incorrect uses of words. He says that there can be no unique interpretation of the internally represented rule, and this is because if a rule is in fact representational in the world (Wittgenstein gives the analogy of a sign-post), it is not devoid of semantic content itself, and this leaves us with the problem of determining how to deploy it.

In principle there could be multiple interpretations of the same rule, as we saw in the case of Kwasi. It would *seem* (if only for a moment) that there isn’t a reason to prefer one interpretation over another, e.g., to prefer the use of the sign-post to point to some destination over an alternative use that makes it point away from that same destination, or, for that matter, celebrate a fictitious place such as Wessex or Shangri-la. Some of these interpretations (i.e., further rules for interpreting the first one) may conflict with one another such that one could both conform to it and go against it. (Now, in my opinion, the point of Wittgenstein’s sign-post example, I think, is to provide a picture that makes the



notion that there could be multiple interpretations of the sign-post seem ludicrous. The reason for this is that creatures like us, who have been trained to respond to illustrations and signs in a certain way, would not read a sign-board in these wildly implausible ways. But let me continue Kripke's argument.) On Kripke's reading, the first sentence of *PI* §201, which says that "no course of action could be determined by a rule, because any action can be made out to accord with the rule," gives expression to a *skeptical* paradox. The idea is that if semantic ability is premised on possessing or otherwise operating on rules that determine use, then, given the possibility of both obeying a rule and going against it (depending on how you look at the purportedly action-guiding rule), there appears to be no fact of the matter to my meaning the same thing by a word on different instances of its use. In this way Kripke derives a metaphysical conclusion about what grounds meaning from epistemological considerations about what one must know in order to use terms meaningfully.<sup>21</sup>

The claim that *Tractatus*-style models of meaning generate a paradox of interpretation is intimately connected with the claim that it generates a regress of interpretations, given that a rule does not prescribe an inherently contained norm. To repeat: the conclusion of the Regress argument is that it is not the case that a rule is ever present to mind, or in possession of the rule-follower, *except* in the form of something that requires further interpretation. Postulating a semantic item in accounting for a semantic ability begs the question of how we mean anything by our words given that any rule must have a rule to interpret it. It is clear, then, that a rule in Wittgenstein's sense lacks a crucial feature of an action-guiding norm: it is a reasonable enough supposition

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<sup>21</sup> See also Chapter 2, footnote 12, where I defuse an objection to Kripke based on a misunderstanding of this idea.

that a norm must be specifiable in finite terms; it seems however, that an internal rule isn't so specifiable. The skeptical paradox is consistent with this discovery; by way of it, Kripkenstein establishes on logical or conceptual grounds that norm-governed behavior, such as the correct use of linguistic resources, is not determined by mental representations. The upshot of the Regress and the Paradox for Kripke is the following. "Since the sceptic who supposes that I meant quus cannot be answered, there is no fact about me that distinguishes between my meaning plus and my meaning quus. Indeed, there is no fact about me that distinguishes between my meaning a definite function by 'plus' (which determines my responses in new cases) and my meaning nothing at all" (*WRPL*, 21).

Kripke adds that Wittgenstein's alternative picture of rule-following (i.e., norm-governed behavior) comprises a skeptical solution to this problem of meaning. In Chapter 2, this was identified as a handy way in which to understand Wittgenstein's attitude to skeptical problems. It will be recalled that giving a skeptical solution to a problem involves granting that the skeptical problem as it stands has no solution, and showing that the relevant practices are immune to skeptical attack.

On Kripke's reading, while it may be that there *no fact about me* that determines what I mean by 'plus', my use of 'plus' is accountable to and justified by communal norms regarding its use. More specifically, the second leg of giving a skeptical solution involves what has been called the strategy of skeptical inversion:<sup>22</sup> instead of accounting for the collective practices in terms of the truth of the assertions made in some context—their truth having been determined by verifying the correspondence of the inner

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<sup>22</sup> The term "skeptical inversion" is borrowed from Garfield 2002, p. 10.

representation of the meaning of what is asserted to an external state of affairs—one accounts for the correctness (appropriateness) of the assertions in terms of their correspondence with practices. The order of explanation is thereby reversed, and the focus shifted to highlight the practices that institute meaning.

It is important to note that the skeptical solution to semantic skepticism avoids the intellectualist trap: it avoids the presupposition that norm-governed behavior is (and must be) the rational outcome of internally represented rules. Instead, it points out, via the skeptical inversion, that the norms that characterize successful linguistic performance are external to the speaker's mind. Kripke's reading thus makes Wittgenstein into a *norm externalist*. I think this attribution is right, although we must be careful to understand it in the context of what I have said above about Wittgensteinian explanations.<sup>23</sup> I will explain this remark presently.<sup>24</sup>

Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein is called "the communitarian view" because it says that my use of a term is deemed correct by reference to the norms agreed upon by my linguistic community. *WRPL* gives a communitarian view about what meaning consists in (i.e., without also advancing necessary and sufficient conditions for meaning, as explained above). One can think of an analogous view about the nature of knowledge. According to that view, my claim to know that *p* is accountable to and justified by communal norms governing knowledge claims.

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<sup>23</sup> I think it is impossible to read Wittgenstein as anything but a norm externalist. Consider in this context a clearly externalist (though not apparently communitarian) remark about epistemic norms in *On Certainty*: "It is always by favour of Nature that one knows something" (*OC* 505). The idea would again be that knowing something to be the case is not determined by internal states (such as those of having an appropriate amount and kind of evidence in support of a belief, or *feeling* certain), but by objective, external norms. I discuss *OC* 505 further in the next chapter.

<sup>24</sup> See subsection 4.2.4.

The communitarian account of meaning is controversial for reasons set out in the following passage from Fogelin.

The community provides what an isolated speaker cannot provide: an independent standard for determining whether a rule has been followed correctly or not. This can be spelled out in various ways. We might insist that an individual interpret the rule as members of the community interpret it, or at least insist that the individual's action conform to the rule as the community interprets it. It is, however, hard to see how such a maneuver will get us out of our difficulties, for the paradox of interpretation breaks out anew, now at the community level.

Whatever the members of the community do, or say they are doing, under some interpretation of their rules their actions will conform to them, and under others they will not. Wittgenstein's claim that "there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not an interpretation*",<sup>25</sup> is not restricted in its scope. It applies to individuals and communities alike. (Fogelin 2009, 26)

The communitarian claim is that the correctness of the individual's practice is to be gauged by measuring it against what the community does. But then in virtue of what is the community's practice correct or incorrect? It seems that Kripke's skeptical solution is

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<sup>25</sup> It is argued that that Wittgenstein chose to say this shows that he is not a skeptic about meaning at all. Fogelin, who has a slightly more complex take on Wittgenstein's skepticism, holds that "Wittgenstein has no brief against rule-following, and no brief against meaning either. He does not think that either rule-following or meaning is inherently paradoxical. His target is a certain account of rule-following (or account of meaning) that, he shows, leads to a paradox. (Fogelin 2009, 18)" I am in general agreement with this view, but I do think that Fogelin is somewhat unfair to Kripke. I explain why below.

not any kind of solution, because it leaves the problem of normativity, i.e., the problem summarized by the Paradox, unsolved.

We now seem to be back to square one. Kripke has argued on Wittgenstein's behalf that there is no fact of the matter to my meaning something by a word, but has then resorted to sneaking facts about communal practice into the alternative explanatory picture. Unfortunately, this leaves us with the problem of explaining the normativity of communal practice! Several of Kripke's critics charge him with getting Wittgenstein grievously wrong whereas others find fault with the communitarian view of meaning (Blackburn 1984, C. McGinn 1984) Some critics of the first camp charge him with overlooking a particular sentence in *PI* §201 (see footnote 16, above); others criticize him for misconstruing Wittgenstein's presentation of the rule-following problem and his positive account of norm-governed behavior, and for turning him into a skeptic (Williams, 1999). Yet others are critical of attributing a theory to Wittgenstein and thereby misunderstanding his philosophical method ("therapeutic" readers generally speaking). I have indicated some of my answers to these questions above, and overlooked others that do not affect my reading of the relevant passages in the *Investigations* and *On Certainty*. However, what I will do here is to sketch an answer the question raised at the beginning of this paragraph, namely, how can Kripke's Wittgenstein claim to have given a cure for the rule-following problem if we are stuck with another version of it?

#### 4.2.4 *Forms of Life Again*

In his book, Kripke presents the arguments of Wittgenstein as they struck him; here, I shall argue for the credibility of Kripke's view by assimilating it to my own reading of Wittgenstein. The main argument of this chapter has been that Wittgenstein

gives an account of normativity grounded in convention, and that convention for Wittgenstein is grounded in forms of life. I believe that Kripke's account of Wittgenstein's views gives one half of my story.

Let us bracket for a while the talk of Wittgenstein's giving a skeptical solution to some problem, or discovering a new kind of skeptical problem. The crux of the communitarian view is that our linguistic behavior is deemed correct if it squares with communal norms. What does this view look like when considered merely as an impressionistic picture of how assertions are assessed in the contexts in which they are made? If we looked for an explanation of linguistic normativity in what is clearly in view (e.g., language-games) rather than what we can only speculate about (e.g., internal states), we would all subscribe to the communitarian view. The communitarian view is almost banal on this rendering. It says that my use of the word '*tushār*' when describing the snow on the high Himalayas in Bengali is correct because it matches an established pattern of use in that language. If I called it anything else, it would mean that I had made a mistake, or perhaps that I didn't know the word. If I used it bizarrely, e.g., by calling the ice in the freezer '*tushār*' it might be taken for a joke or just bad Bengali skills. Kripke fills out or clarifies this account of things in terms of assertibility conditions, as we have seen above. This really is *all* there is to the communitarian reading of Wittgenstein.

Now let us consider the question of a standard of correctness for the behavior of the linguistic community as a whole. This is the question of how communal practice escapes the Paradox of interpretations. The answer to that worry is *indicated by* Kripke's skeptical solution, particularly by the idea that our practices are immune to semantic

skepticism. What that means, I think, is that the Paradox does not arise with respect to the community, because there really *isn't* an interpretation on which the community can be said to be following a collectively instituted rule and an interpretation on which it can be said *not* to be following such a rule. In essence, the worry about the correctness of the community's normative behavior is based on confusion: the community does not follow or fail to follow norms; it institutes them. Could the American treasury forge fifty dollar bills? It could, after all, use the wrong material on which to print the bills and leave out the watermark, etc. But none of this would amount to forgery, simply because forgery does not make sense at that level. What the treasury issues is money. Similarly, what the community endorses is common linguistic currency.

We can do more to explicate this idea. Consider Wittgenstein's idea that acting in a norm-governed way is akin to acting on an order. "Following a rule is analogous to obeying an order. We are trained to do so; *we react to an order in a particular way*" (*PI* §206, italics added). Why the comparison of a norm to an order? Wittgenstein has in view the facts of linguistic training, which for him is the reinforcement and supplementation of natural responses to aid the development of our social selves or, as I call it below, our second nature. Speakers of natural languages are trained to behave in ways that make sense to other speakers, and discouraged from behaving in ways that don't. Using the word '*tushār*' to mean snow is simply what members of my community do and, more importantly, *they cannot do otherwise* if they mean to refer to snow.<sup>26</sup> We

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<sup>26</sup> This point is brought into greater relief by the Private Language Argument.

Notice that on this view, we can easily allow for deviant behavior. But we cannot all act in ways that fail to institute the norm; there is a very real sense in which most of us must mean bicycle by 'bicycle'. This is required for the language to function as a means of communication.

are not making the absurd claim that there could not have been a different word for snow in Bengali (ignoring synonyms for the moment). We are pointing to the non-negotiable (or as Fogelin would say, *de facto*) nature of expressions in natural language. The reference of ‘*tushār*’ is fixed into place in the Bengali language; “it is there—like our life,” (OC 559) to be picked up and used as one would a tool.

Think of the similes at the beginning of the *Investigations*, where language is compared to a collection of various tools (*PI* §11), and to an ancient city with new quarters (*PI* §18). Language is both a tool and a stable system with its own dynamics of change. It is possible to put tools to a new use, and to do nothing while unused old buildings fall to ruin. Conceptual change does happen, indeed, it happens constantly. But it is a gradual process that reflects changes in the life of the community (*OC* 63).<sup>27</sup>

The central idea here is the primacy of practice. While a language reflects the forms of life of its speakers in ways that have been discussed above, it is also what lays down the norms of correctness and incorrectness of individual linguistic behavior. (Recall the skeptical inversion.) What the members of a community do with linguistic expressions is not arbitrary, because for them there is a fact of the matter to what words mean in their language. But then *the set of conventions that constitute language and provide the norms of assessment of individual behavior is not arbitrary either*. The content and character of conventions are products both of our animal natures (call this first nature) and the complex ways in which our social lives are organized (call this second nature).

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<sup>27</sup> Compare the process of adopting a new name for a city in order to, say, dissociate the referent from its colonial past: the latter is something that can be done by fiat.



Our workaday use of language engages both these components. Recall for a moment Wittgenstein's claim that expressions like "My head hurts" *replace* pain behavior. Here, language acts to modify natural expression. But the modification in question is by no means non-natural or arbitrary: for one, your complaint or appeal for comfort finds sympathy with me, and not because I run through an argument by analogy for the existence of your mental states. If you say to me that your head hurts, and I have an aspirin, I shall (assuming I am "a regular sort of guy") respond to your report by offering it. I would not set about trying to determine if you meant something else by your words. My response (think of it as a verbal response such as "Would you like an aspirin?") would be motivated by both natural sympathy and a socially acquired ability to grasp the intention behind your spoken words.

This is the general picture of language that the communitarian view links up with. Wittgenstein's notion of forms of life is fundamental to it. It accounts for the conventional and de facto features of language and the communitarian character of linguistic norms. It forms the crux of Wittgenstein's naturalism as well as that of his Pyrrhonism, as I will argue in the following chapter. Kripke indicates that Wittgenstein's account of normativity has to do with communal conventions, but does not take the next step of grounding the conventional in the natural and social aspects of human nature. But as I have shown above, his account is quite consistent with such a reading of Wittgenstein.

### 4.3 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have provided a wider context in which to understand the treatment of rule-following in *Philosophical Investigations*. I have argued that Wittgenstein's diagnostic/ therapeutic recourse to an alternative picture of language contains a broadly externalist, conventionalist and naturalistic account of normativity. I have explicated the relationship between my reading of the rule-following passages and Kripke's reading in *WRPL*. I have also given a quick and mostly oblique defense of Kripke's communitarian reading of Wittgenstein.

In the next and final chapter, I shall (i) back up the reading of *On Certainty* provided in Chapter 2 above with a discussion of Wittgenstein's view of epistemic norms with the help of the materials presented in this chapter, and (ii) extend the discussion of Wittgenstein's philosophical method to include a fuller discussion of his Pyrrhonism, and the relationship between his Pyrrhonism and his naturalism concerning forms of life.

**CHAPTER 5**  
**KNOWLEDGE, NORMS AND METHOD: REFLECTIONS ON THE**  
**META-EPISTEMOLOGY OF *ON CERTAINTY***

**5.1 On Naturalism and Transcendental Questions: A Brief Historical Survey**

In this chapter, I expand and supplement the interpretation of *On Certainty* introduced in Chapter 2 with the help of the analysis developed in the previous chapter. I concluded in Chapter 4 that Wittgenstein presupposes that a naturalistic account of the source of linguistic norms can be given. He gives expression to what I have been calling “naturalism” in several brief and schematic references to forms of life in the *Investigations* and elsewhere. The word ‘source’ in the phrase “source of linguistic norms,” above, refers to the set of psycho-social conditions that underlie or make possible linguistic practices. Thus, given our nature as *Homo sapiens* and the augmentation of that nature through the processes of socialization and acculturation, we come to be able to assess and engage in norm-governed linguistic practices.

This is a transcendental idea about linguistic norms because the considerations introduced by the concept of forms of life yield a view about the conditions of the possibility of human linguistic behavior. In the passages dealing with rule-following in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein answers the transcendental question: “What are the necessary conditions of the possibility of meaning?” These are not mental states or inward rules that guide our use of words, but certain social regularities or practices, the enforcement of norms that institute them and a psychological constitution that makes possible conformance to these norms in a more or less uniform manner. A crucial

component of this answer is the idea of forms of life. To reiterate: forms of life are the social arrangements that constitute regularities into practices while also grounding norm-governed behavior as instantiations of the practices.

Wittgenstein extends this account to an analysis of knowledge in *On Certainty*. There, he poses a second transcendental question, namely, “what are the necessary conditions of the possibility of *knowing*, or of *being justified*?” Wittgenstein’s answer: regularities in the practices of justification, doubting and criticism; the norms that institute these practices; and a psychology that leads to uniform conformance with the norms. Given the forms of life within which epistemic practices “have their life,” this answer involves distinguishing between knowledge and certainty: according to the norms that all epistemic agents obey, knowledge presupposes the possibility of doubt and its resolution, whereas certainty does not. Moreover, what counts as *objectively certain* (but not *known*) i.e., what is presupposed or taken for granted by all parties in a given epistemic context, is itself determined by social norms.

It is evident that the two transcendental questions about the possibility of meaning and knowledge and the answers to them are exactly parallel. Both answers are externalist because (i) they do not make reference to mental contents in order to account for the possibility of meaning or knowledge, and (ii) they implicate the view that I call norm externalism, according to which the rules for evaluating linguistic and epistemic moves are social or communal. They are also naturalistic because instead of giving an intellectualist account of how it is that we mean, or know or are justified in believing something, they ground meaning and knowing in practices, which in turn are a product of our physical natures as *Homo sapiens* and our social training.

In what follows, I shall discuss both the homologies and differences between the two answers discussed above. I shall also explain some intricacies of Wittgenstein's rich and complex understanding of epistemic normativity. I shall conclude with some comments on the philosophical method that the discussion in *On Certainty* exemplifies.

### 5.1.1 A Second Humean Analogy

The Wittgensteinian understanding of linguistic and epistemic practices and the relationship between them is grounded on the notion of *groundlessness*. In the previous chapter, I have spoken of the groundlessness of moves in a language-game. Ultimately, the practice of meaning *sepia* (and not, say, *sienna brown*) by the term 'sepia' is not justified by a reason, where by 'reason' one means a private mental item that guides language use in any given instance. Is it then justified by the social fact that among English speakers, 'sepia' means *sepia* and not *sienna brown*? The complete answer to this question is that if one is looking to justify a practice, there is a social norm to which one might refer, but also that the norm-governed linguistic behavior is not in need of further justification. This is what is meant by Wittgenstein's remarks to the effect that justifications come to an end when we seek reasons to ground moves made in language; that the bedrock of our speech-acts is simply established practice, and that we obey norms (or rules) *blindly*.

To say that the bedrock of our speech-acts is established practice is to highlight the lack of reasons for acting (in the sense of having private meanings-in-the-head, etc); to say that we obey norms *blindly* is to emphasize the way in which norms are deployed—the way in which their observance is exhibited in practice. What Kwasi knows about the meaning of 'sepia' in English is (or had better be) what everyone else

does too, given their natural constitution and social training: his behavior demonstrates that he can use the word correctly. When he selects pictures for the family album, he separates the old sepia-tinted ones from the black-and-white and colored prints of recent vintage. It is something he could do on auto-pilot for the most part. Now Kwasi is certainly deploying a norm, but it is not so much a rule that he observes (though it would not hurt to talk in that way) as an acquired ability to identify and re-identify sepia objects.

‘Observing a rule’ can be parsed as apprehending a norm in order to act upon it, and also as acting in conformity with a norm without necessarily apprehending it. The parenthetical two sentences above says that Kwasi does not need to apprehend the social norm that forbids the use of ‘sepia’ to pick out objects that are sienna brown, etc, in order to act in conformity with it.<sup>1</sup> The norm in question is part and parcel of Kwasi’s repertoire of socially acquired skills.

The notion of groundlessness assumes importance for Wittgenstein because of the nature of his answer to the transcendental question about meaning. In the *Investigations*, he answers, among others, the question “What makes meaning something by a word

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<sup>1</sup> It is not helpful at this stage to be told that Kwasi *tacitly* knows the norm regulating the use of ‘sepia.’ The appeal to an intellectualized item, such as a tacitly apprehended norm, does not explain the norm-governed character of Kwasi’s behavior. Kwasi is observing a norm and he really does know how ‘sepia’ is used. The reasonable thing to say here is that his observance of the norm amounts to obeying it blindly, per Wittgenstein. On the other hand, to say that Kwasi knows the norm tacitly is to say, for instance, that he knows (tacitly) that ‘sepia’ does not apply to stuff that is sienna brown, and magenta and cerulean blue and...

Moreover, to insist upon an account of Kwasi’s ability in terms of knowledge-that arguably opens the door to a KK regress: if Kwasi knows that the norm governing the use of ‘sepia’ is such that the term only applies to sepia-tinted objects, then he knows also that he knows that the norm governing the use of ‘sepia’ is such that..., which in turn he knows that he knows, and so on ad infinitum. The notion that Kwasi knows the norm *tacitly* thickens the brew rather disagreeably. In sum, pending a clear understanding of what ‘tacit knowledge’ is and isn’t, we would do well not to take this line of explanation seriously.

possible?” His answer is naturalistic in the way that I have explained: according to Wittgenstein, meaning something by a word is primarily a practice having a social character and significance; it is a capacity acquired by the social cultivation of our natural endowment as meaning-producing creatures. Our speech-acts have both context and purpose, or as Kripke says, the meanings of our expressions bear a strict correlation to the roles the expressions have in our lives. And here, by “our lives” we mean the life of a community of language-users, because language is primarily a social instrument. Our linguistic behavior is ungrounded in the sense that while it may not run afoul of the norms that determine significance, it does not depend upon our *apprehension* of those norms. This is a minimalist account of what it takes to make sense in language, but it is also reflective of how things appear to be the case with language-users.

Wittgenstein has a good deal to say about linguistic training and the circumstances of language acquisition, such as how we learn to call things by their names,<sup>2</sup> what sort of cognitive/linguistic maturity is required in order to ask for definitions of terms, etc. He also says a good deal about the provenance of the varieties of linguistic behavior in particular contexts: these demonstrate his view that norm-governed linguistic behavior is grounded on blind obedience of the norm. In this sense, Wittgenstein combines transcendental inquiry into the possibility of meaning with a naturalistic account of linguistic phenomena.

We need not balk at the running together of naturalism and a transcendental approach, as it has been done before. There is a complex philosophical approach of this sort at work in Hume’s *Treatise*. When Hume considers a range of issues, such as the

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<sup>2</sup> It will be recalled that in this matter, Wittgenstein rejects Augustine’s view.

nature of personal identity, causality and justice, he begins by asking not what these things are, but whether we have ideas of them, and if so, where those ideas originate. Hume's account of the origin of those ideas in each case appeals to the conditions under which certain cognitive practices, such as engaging in causal, self-referential and moral discourse, become possible. In the case of identity and causality, these enabling conditions are psychological processes that operate in a customary fashion; in the case of justice, Hume speaks of social conventions that make possible the emergence of the idea.

With respect to identity generally speaking, Hume argues that there is a tendency to confound the continued identity or invariability of something over time with the relations between distinct successive objects (e.g., the church building fallen into ruin and the new structure put in its place), and explains it in terms of a propensity of the mind to smoothly pass along the succession of distinct but closely related objects (*T* 1.4.6; SB 258). This is analogous to his explanation of the idea of causality in terms of the propensity of the mind to pass from one occurrence to another constantly conjoined with it in experience. In each case, the relevant idea in the mind (i.e., that of a continued substance and of causality respectively) is a product of the association of ideas, which is a function of the faculty of imagination.

The customary or conventional character of the association of ideas is reflected in our thinking of the newly built church as identical with the one it has replaced, and in habitually ascribing to ourselves and others a mental substance or soul.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> An echo of this view may be found in a passage from Wittgenstein that I quoted (via Baker) in Chapter 4: "My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul" (*PI*, p. 152). A few steps will take us from Hume's view that our talk of a soul is the result of confounding the "two ideas of identity" to



transformation of a natural predisposition into habitual practice is best expressed in Hume's view of justice as an artificial virtue. In Hume's view, a natural capacity for benevolence or respect for the property rights of others is not enough to underwrite the modern (i.e., Eighteenth-century Scottish) idea of justice. A person with a sense of justice is simply someone who is educated in the value of just behavior, and trained to behave justly and to criticize and praise others' unjust or just acts appropriately.

I have argued in Chapter 3 that *On Certainty* reflects a deep Humean influence, with Wittgenstein nearly echoing Hume on the question of our grounds for confidence in external objects. For Hume, the question isn't whether there are external things, but how we come to have the idea of them, and how we form a *belief in* them—a belief that is manifested in our unthinking manipulation of them in spite of philosophical worries about their existence.<sup>4</sup> The rather quaint account that I outlined in Chapter 3 emphasizes the power that Hume attributes to the faculty of imagination in the generation of a belief

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Wittgenstein's view that philosophical, and in particular, *metaphysical* opinions are the result of conceptual/linguistic confusions.

<sup>4</sup> For Wittgenstein, practical engagement with the external world is the ground of what he calls our *right* to hold this or that unquestioned belief about it. An extension of this idea is that our engagement with cultural artifacts and inherited imaginative constructs serves as the ground of further "rights." If you have been brought up accepting that the shaman makes rain when necessary, you will not only be led to hold that belief, but will have *inherited* the right to hold it! It cannot be emphasized enough that this is a descriptive claim about how certain epistemic language-games are set up. I think it is clear that this thought is not a reflection of relativism on Wittgenstein's part.

As it happens, this is an interesting later elaboration of the Tractarian aphorism (*TLP* 5.6) that the limits of one's language are the limits of one's world. Given what Wittgenstein says in *On Certainty*, it would seem that the limits of one's world (which is already shared with one's immediate epistemic community) are not non-negotiable or permanent. One might find this heartening (or disappointing), but this latter idea is an unsurprising consequence of Wittgenstein's naturalism: it is on account of our common human capacities, in particular empathy and rationality, that it is possible for us to reject deeply internalized beliefs and to communicate across each others' "worlds."

whose provenance he cannot explain by reference to rational or sensory processes of belief acquisition. We have seen how, in *T* 1.4.2, Hume describes the role of custom and the principles of association in making possible our discourse about material bodies. To put a Wittgensteinian spin on Hume's story, our rational behavior with respect to material bodies is made possible by our unreasoned confidence with respect to them. Hume's genetic account of the origin of the idea of material bodies is yet another dimension of his transcendental approach, a dimension also reflected in the psychologism in Wittgenstein's accounts of the possibility of our participating in the conventions that determine meaning and that enable certainty and knowledge.

In the previous three paragraphs, I have argued that Hume's *Treatise* pursues a transcendental project, and I have further emphasized that there is a broad analogy between Hume's project and those of the later Wittgenstein. There are of course differences in the way that these projects are executed. In general, Hume appeals to the mechanisms of our minds, specifically, to a version of faculty psychology, to explain how we come to possess the ideas of causality, personal identity and the artificial virtue of justice. Wittgenstein doesn't do anything similar; instead, he presupposes that human beings have similar psychological endowments in order to be able to respond to, say, the component of ostension in linguistic training. But Hume and Wittgenstein are alike in their espousal of the transcendental method in tandem with a naturalistic understanding of the structure of reasons *as it obtains* in epistemic language-games.

This is enough similarity here to merit our attention. Hume appeals to the idea of custom to explain why we think of the self as one continuous entity; why we subsume distinct events under the same type; and how we cultivate the virtue of justice. A parallel

move in Wittgenstein is the appeal to naturally-based social conventions to make sense of the possibility of language-games involving justification and doubt.<sup>5</sup> All these arguments contain claims to the effect that some cognitive or moral practice becomes possible when certain natural human capacities are conventionally “formatted.”

### 5.1.2 Transcendental Concerns in Kant and Wittgenstein

A more famous transcendental approach is of course that of Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>6</sup> The analogy with the *Critique* is particularly helpful to understand the trajectory of Wittgenstein’s thinking about linguistic and epistemic norms. Certain aspects of Wittgenstein’s view of norms can be highlighted by comparing it to Kant’s view about the transcendental ground of knowledge.

According to Kant, knowledge of things outside the mind is made possible by the combined working of the faculties of sensibility and understanding. The sensibility acts as a receptacle for sensory information, producing what Kant calls the sense-manifold in response to empirical experience. The understanding deploys certain *a priori* concepts (the “categories”), which are applied with the aid of the faculty of imagination to the sense-manifold, resulting in empirical knowledge. Kant’s work in the *Critique of Pure Reason* isn’t so much about developing a faculty psychology that explains the production of knowledge as about stating the conditions under which such knowledge as we have would become possible. The uniqueness of his method lies in not attempting to explain

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<sup>5</sup> As I neared the end of my research on the current project, I discovered that the analogy goes deeper than I could have possibly discussed here. Wittgenstein’s views on religion as an anthropological phenomenon are strikingly Humean, at least in spirit. See Kober (2005, especially 233-248) for an interesting take on religious faith that is both inspired by *On Certainty*, and (to my nose) redolent of Hume.

<sup>6</sup> Hereafter in this work: *Critique*.

empirical knowledge in terms of essential features of the external world.<sup>7</sup> Kant concerns himself with the question of how the mind must be structured in order to possess empirical knowledge—of *what it is about us* that makes us cognitive agents. This focus marks out his approach as being transcendental in character.

It is well known that Kant was an admirer of Hume, and despite his claims to do something quite different in spirit from his predecessor, we find in his transcendental philosophy a quasi-Humean construal of the role of the imagination in producing empirical knowledge. Lest this seem like a wild claim, I should like to draw the reader's attention to such readings of Kant as trace eminently Kantian claims to the *Treatise* or *Enquiry*. For example, it has been argued that while it is true that Kant claims to demonstrate that Hume is mistaken in tracing our knowledge of causation to a subjective, psychological source (i.e., custom), a passage preceding the Transcendental Deduction (*CPR* A 91–92/B 123–123) reveals that Kant's view about our knowledge of particular causal laws (versus his view about the causal *principle* that every event has a cause) is not antagonistic to Hume's (De Pierris and Friedman 2008, note no. 4).<sup>8</sup> It would appear from Kant's argument in the Second Analogy that it is the causal principle that has the status of what Kant calls a synthetic a priori truth, i.e., a universal (and therefore

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<sup>7</sup> He implies that this is what Aristotle did in *Categories* (*CPR* A 79-80/B 105). Note that when the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I follow established convention in referring both to the A and B editions of the text.

<sup>8</sup> The best known proponent of this view is L.W. Beck, whose 1978 essay on the subject bears the significant title "A Prussian Hume and a Scottish Kant." Beck observes that Kant is only concerned to defend the "every-event-some-cause" principle in the Second Analogy but that this is a claim that Hume grants in the *Treatise* (*T* 1 3.3; SB 78) without putting in jeopardy his view that knowledge of particular causal laws—such as the law that the ingestion of carbohydrates causes nourishment, an instance of what Beck calls the "same-effect-same-cause" principle—is had through induction alone. This is not an uncontroversial reading (e.g., see Guyer (2003)), even though it has found defenders in recent years (see Allison (2004)).

objective) and necessary truth that applies to experience (and therefore isn't just true by definition). Instantiations of the causal relation, such as the law that being illumined by the sun causes an object to grow warm, do not enjoy this status. This means quite simply that knowledge of causation has its source in experience—precisely Hume's point. Thus, arguably, the difference between Hume's and Kant's views on causality is smaller than advertised.

In Kant's system, the imagination synthesizes the yield of sensibility with the *a priori* concepts of the understanding according to rules set out in the Schematism (*CPR*, Book II; Chapter 1).<sup>9</sup> The two significant features of this mental activity (at least for our purposes) are that it does not involve apprehension of the rules Kant mentions, and that it is indispensable. Synthesis is crucial for the production of empirical knowledge, and yet it does not involve a conscious intellectual process such as thinking or deliberation. When presented with objects of experience, the organism responds with their imaginative synthesis with the schemas of categories of the understanding. Such synthesis is required in order for knowledge to be possible.

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<sup>9</sup> To give the briefest idea of how this is supposed to work: the "schema" of the *a priori* concept of *quantity* or *magnitude* is *number*, which is no more than "the unity of the synthesis of the manifold of a homogenous intuition in general" (*CPR* A 143/B 182). I.e., our grasp of quantities involves application of the relevant *purely conceptual* category of quantity (either *unity*, or *plurality* or *totality*, according to Kant's table of categories) by the imagination to homogenous sensory experiences via the so-called "formal condition of the... connection of all representations," namely, time (*CPR* A 138/B 177). Simply put, the temporal profile of experiences is supposed to mark them off as being those of either unitary objects or multiple objects or masses of things, and on Kant's view, there is a dedicated mental faculty that uses the temporality of experience to make sense of it in conceptual terms. This explanation ought to suffice for our purposes, for we do not care about most details of Kant's view; it is his emphasis on the activity of the imagination that is of interest here.

Turning now to Wittgenstein, we have already noted how one might think of the speaker's obedience to linguistic norms as a blind process of acting in conformity with them. When placed in a linguistic context, a cognitively efficient human being naturally behaves in norm-governed ways. Wittgenstein is not one to speculate about how this happens; his focus is the purely transcendental question of how linguistic activity is possible. To the extent that giving an answer to this question requires stating the *mental or psychological* preconditions that make possible engaging in linguistic practices, Wittgenstein appeals to what I shall call social naturalism.<sup>10</sup>

By *social naturalism* I mean the general view that certain characteristically human capacities, such as language-use and the systematic pursuit of knowledge for various instrumental and non-instrumental uses have an essentially social basis—that while these capacities are grounded in the physical/genetic endowment of human beings<sup>11</sup> they cannot be understood without reference to the social practices that make them possible. This is because these capacities are aspects of the human ability to engage with the members of one's community. Evidently this is an ability shared with other organisms. But it is possible to understand its specifically human manifestation in ways that we cannot use to study the social behavior of other organisms.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Medina (2002) has used this term to characterize the thought of the later Wittgenstein. I am not sure that Medina would agree with everything that I shall take it to signify, and therefore would like to distance myself from his interpretive view while helping myself to his name for it.

<sup>11</sup> Thus, for example, it makes sense to speak of a "linguistic center" in the brain, of the peculiarities of the left hemisphere, etc.

<sup>12</sup> Thus while on the one hand, a Wittgensteinian would accept that the phenomena studied by the social or "human" sciences have a natural basis, on the other hand, she has reason to prescribe description (*Verstehen*) as the primary method in the social (or human) sciences. Here I am drawing upon Wittgenstein's own method, namely,

To sum up the claims made in this subsection: using analogues from the history of philosophy, I have shown how an examination of the groundlessness of linguistic practice reveals both Wittgenstein's transcendental approach and his social naturalism. On the one hand it orients us to the view that the possibility of making sense depends upon the ability to engage in a norm-governed practice of making utterances in the right contexts. On the ground, this ability reveals itself to be a blind capacity—as “the mastery of a technique” that does not require heeding the norm in the sense of apprehending it. Possessing this kind of command over common linguistic resources constitutes the mental or psychological precondition of making sense. Basically, you count as a capable speaker if you behave like one.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, it reflects Wittgenstein's naturalistic idea that linguistic skill is the result of social training, in particular, training aimed at developing the sort of mastery that does not require heeding the norm. It is this process of training that turns a public system of signs into a “natural language,” or converts language into our second nature.

An analogous story can be told about Wittgenstein's view of human epistemic practices. This is the subject-matter of the next section.

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that of perspicuous representation of language-games, to envision an analogical method for social science. Of course perspicuous representation is a method in philosophy, and if Wittgenstein is right, then it isn't aimed at revealing surprising facts about human beings. But I take it that there is such a thing as a good or correct description of a language-game versus a bad or non-perspicuous representation. (It is in this sense that I spoke of Wittgensteinian explanations in the previous chapter.) If I am right about this, perspicuous representation can serve as the descriptive, proto-theoretical basis for explanation in the social sciences.

<sup>13</sup> Of course if you did heed the norm and appeared not to do so, you would still count as a capable speaker. The norm applies purely externally: it does not also require you to have a particular inner state. Your speech-act needs to fit the context, and that is all. This idea is of great significance in understanding the view of epistemic norms contained in *On Certainty*.

## 5.2 A Social Naturalist View of Epistemic Norms

### 5.2.1 *A Passing Note on the Selective Advantages of Norm-Governed Behavior*

The official agenda of this section is to examine in depth a certain aspect of Wittgenstein's social naturalism, namely, his understanding of epistemic normativity. In this subsection, I take a step back in order to comment upon the significance of Wittgenstein's approach to explaining normativity in general, before discussing his account of epistemic normativity. I have described Wittgenstein above (in Chapter 4) as a norm externalist; it is now time to put that description in perspective.

Wittgenstein's remarks about norm-governed behavior lead one to the idea that there are definite advantages to behaving in a norm-governed way versus failing to so behave. There are benefits to being counted as "a reasonable person" or "a master of a technique" that are not available to those among us who are judged to be "demented" or as generally incapable of playing some language-game of import. Here I do not mean playing some language-game better than others, although being Pericles may be more practically advantageous than being an average public speaker. I mean instead the ability to play a language-game at all.

Individuals who are capable of behaving in norm-governed ways—at the most fundamental level, if they are linguistically capable—enjoy selective advantage in the sense that this ability provides them entry into the life of the community. It makes possible engagement with the world of human concerns and values generally, and with specialized domains of knowledge and skill therein. It is important to realize that merely having the natural capacity for norm-governed behavior does not make this possible; the development of those capacities through participation in norm-governed activity is the



crucial enabling condition of individual selective success. Using a transcendental lens makes what might otherwise seem like a pretty minimal requirement into a significant condition of living a potentially valuable human life. On this reading, Wittgenstein's account of norm-governed behavior tells a story about the conditions of the possibility of sapience; to crib de Beauvoir's famous remark: one isn't born a human being but becomes one.<sup>14</sup>

At the level of the community as well, one can see benefits accruing from consistent norm-governed behavior. Consider the matter through an analogy with plant and animal species. There are arguments to the effect that the development of certain valuable traits worked in favor of species that saw evolutionary success through natural selection.<sup>15</sup> One can utilize the idea of adaptation to explain the more mundane success of

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<sup>14</sup> Stanley Cavell identifies this as a fundamental insight of the later Wittgenstein. He writes: "From the time of the *Brown Book* (1934-35), Wittgenstein's thought is punctuated by ideas of normality and abnormality. It goes with a new depth in the idea that language is *learned*, that one becomes *civilized* (Cavell 1996, 32)." On my reading, too, the preoccupation with "normality and abnormality" is an aspect of Wittgenstein's preoccupation with the question of normativity generally. Cavell's illuminating discussion of what he rather dramatically calls "Wittgenstein's Swiftian proposal about separating out the child [that fails to play by the norm in any given context] and treating it as a lunatic" also implicates forms of life as the basis of the determination that a given individual is a norm-obeying member of the community. He remarks: "It seems safe to suppose that if you can describe any behavior which I can recognize as that of human beings, I can give you an explanation which will make that behavior coherent, i.e., *show it to be imaginable in terms of natural responses and practicalities*... And if I say "They are crazy" or "incomprehensible" then *it is not a fact but my fate for them*. I have gone as far as my imagination, magnanimity, or anxiety will allow; or as my honor, or my standing cares and commitments can accommodate" (Cavell 1996, 38; italics added). Basically, the difference between the normal and the abnormal is a difference between forms of life that work for us and those that do not.

<sup>15</sup> This is not a view held by all evolutionary biologists. There are other arguments to the effect that traits developed for the purpose of overcoming genetic constraints and natural contingencies better explain the evolution of species than natural selection. The former view is dubbed "adaptationism," whereas the opposing view (or at

tribes, nations and other human groupings: one might say, for example, that groups that developed certain consistent patterns of norm-governed behavior—whether this be military discipline, or mercantile practices, or less prominently, socio-ethical practices grounded in some notion of individual and/or collective growth (e.g., various ancient civilizations in their classical period)—flourished while others did not fare as well. Human institutions that are based on consistent adherence to norm fare better than those that aren't so based: consider the remarkable success of science vis-à-vis the moderate or less than moderate success rates of traditional institutions of empirical knowledge.

This is to give a rather broad picture of the fundamental importance in human societies of norm-governed behavior. My goal here is to highlight a big reason for seeking to explain normativity or problematizing it, as Wittgenstein has done through his transcendental questions about meaning and knowledge. Norm-governed practices are extremely important in part because of the adaptive advantage they confer. Wittgenstein makes an important intellectual contribution by telling a naturalistic story about the ontogenesis of this important class of phenomena.

I will explain both these claims. With respect to the first, it may justly be asked whether Wittgenstein *had* such a reason in view. Do we have textual evidence to support the claim that he zeroed in on the task of accounting for norm-governed phenomena because he was struck by their selective advantages in the continued evolution of human beings as a species? We do not. Wittgenstein did not share the preoccupations of late 20<sup>th</sup> century evolutionary biologists or contemporary philosophers of biology. But we can work on the assumption that Wittgenstein was familiar with Hume's *Treatise*. Perhaps he

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least what is sometimes regarded as an opposing view) is called "pluralism." See Orzack and Forber (2010) for the basic arguments in support of these views.

was even familiar with Hume's discussion of justice as an artificial virtue—a virtue that Hume deemed important enough to cultivate in the young on account of its tremendous practical advantages. In the course of this discussion in the *Treatise*, Hume reflects on the fundamental importance of conventions in human lives:

It is only a general sense of common interest; which sense all members of the society express to one another, and which induces them to regulate their conduct by certain rules... Two men, who pull the oars of a boat do it by agreement or convention, tho' they have never given promises to each other. Nor is the rule concerning [respect for the property of others] the less deriv'd from human conventions, that it arises gradually, and acquires force by a slow progression, and by our repeated experience of the inconveniencies of transgressing it. On the contrary, this experience assures us still more, that the sense of interest has become common to all our fellows, and gives us a confidence of the future regularity of their conduct: And 'tis only on the expectation of this, that our moderation and abstinence [i.e., from stealing, etc] are founded. In like manner are languages gradually establish'd by human conventions[.] In like manner do gold and silver become the common measures of exchange, and are esteem'd sufficient payment for what is a hundred times their value. (*T* 3.2.2; SB 490)

This is a highly impressionistic big-picture account of the importance of norm-governed behavior (or behavior that conforms to certain conventions) in the life of a community that emphasizes an important feature of conventions, namely, that they are unlike overt

pacts between people: conventional behavior presupposes a common psychological endowment and an implicit understanding of mutual conveniences. (Hume might have been talking about the goings-on in *PI* §1.) If Wittgenstein was familiar with Hume's sentimental account of moral virtues, he would have been familiar with the view that the artifice of what Hume calls "justice" is cultivated and adhered to on account of the advantages it affords. It does not take many steps to get from appreciation of Hume's point to wondering what makes basic norm-governed phenomena such as language and epistemic practices possible.

As for my second claim, namely, that Wittgenstein "naturalizes" these phenomena, I will say the following for now. Like Hume, Wittgenstein explains norm-governed phenomena—a large class of human behaviors that take place within a social context—in terms of natural capacities developed with certain human/social ends in view. At no time does he discard the social in favor of an offline theoretical or intellectualist explanation of what must go on in the mind for meaning or knowing to be possible. He tells a naturalistic story about meaning and knowing while fully acknowledging the social nature of the phenomena he is trying to understand.

### *5.2.2 Wittgenstein on Epistemic Norms*

Let us work out the details of this naturalistic story with respect to epistemic norms. By "epistemic norms" I mean the norms that determine when it is appropriate to claim to know, or whether one is justified in believing and claiming propositions. Wittgenstein's views can be anticipated on the basis of what I have said up until this point: he would argue that the possibility of knowing or possessing justification depends

upon the ability to engage in norm-governed practices of investigation, and of giving and asking for reasons.

Notice that to take this strategy is to develop an epistemic parallel to the Private Language Argument in the *Investigations*. It may seem obvious pre-reflectively that it is possible to know that *p* even if no community recognizes you as a knower, or as one capable of knowing that *p*. You may have the evidence that supports your belief that *p*, or your belief may be produced by reliable sources. Surely, one might think, it is the capacity to acquire evidence that supports one's claims, and not *counting as having done so* that makes knowing possible. Private knowledge seems to be an obvious possibility, just as private language does antecedent to the Private Language Argument.

In order to respond to this intuition, I shall first adopt Wittgenstein's tactic of appealing to the circumstances of learning a basic move in the relevant language-game. In this instance, the game would be that of making and questioning knowledge claims.<sup>16</sup> We see immediately that in order for one's knowledge claim to be appropriate, one must possess *and adduce* evidence for one's claims. We are talking about getting trained up in the practice of making knowledge claims: in the first stages of this process, whether my claim is sound is determined by external considerations alone: I have to be told that my claim is sound since I cannot as yet determine it to be such.

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<sup>16</sup> I am assuming a child would not learn to say "I know that X" before she has learned to assert "X", where 'X' stands for a proposition one claims to know. Abena is more likely to say "Kwasi has hidden my doll" before she says "I know that Kwasi has hidden my doll". (Perhaps she would then learn the use of 'I know' via such promptings as "Do you know that he did? Are you sure? What makes you think that he did?" etc.) To give the linguistic analogue: one requires adequate practice in using names for objects before being able to ask for definitions of terms.

When I am better able to play this game, I get a handle on evidence and truth, etc., and learn on pain of being dismissed as “the boy who cried wolf” to make claims that are as well-supported by evidence as they can be. The important thing is that it is my ability to negotiate the rules of various epistemic games involving making knowledge claims, raising doubts, justifying or questioning justifications, recognizing mastery of a domain, etc. that makes me a credible epistemic agent. The analogy with learning language is very tight indeed, since immersion in the practices of claiming knowledge, filing doubts and demanding reasons for presented claims is the necessary enabling condition of knowing different things in different contexts.

Wittgenstein is hence exploring the transcendental conditions of knowing anything at all, rather than providing an “analysis of knowledge,” presupposing that *epistemic practices are human practices like any other*. There are, of course, specialized practices of knowing (or disciplines of knowledge) with their own internal norms and assumptions. It is a virtue of Wittgenstein’s naturalistic story that it accounts for all the different varieties and levels of knowledge (i.e., expertise versus passing familiarity) in terms of a unified picture of normativity. This will become clearer as we proceed.

Finally, it is clear in the case of someone who has *mastery* of a sufficient number and variety of epistemic language-games—i.e., nearly all reflective persons exercising some manner and degree of epistemic virtue such as vigilance, responsibility etc.—that obeying the norms of those language-games does not necessitate apprehending them in the sense discussed above. If you were to observe Moore and Wittgenstein seated in the garden near Moore’s home, arguing about whether or not Moore knows that *that is a tree*, you would be witness to a skilled exercise involving claims and counterclaims,

admissions and denials that never make reference to the norms that warrant various moves in the debate. Typically, specialists in any field do exercise high degrees of vigilance when defending their claims, or questioning the claims of others.<sup>17</sup> This may in part be a pragmatic exercise in view of the requirement that they *appear* to be intellectually honest and careful researchers with a commitment to truth—but it is important to appreciate that this, too, is part of the practice of those disciplines.

Thus it is true at all times in one’s career as an epistemic agent that one is subject to communal norms regarding what counts as an appropriate claim, and, consequently, regarding what counts as an instance of knowing. This is not an incidental feature of the conditions under which one knows something; it is a transcendental condition of knowing anything at all. The basic idea—and it *is* very basic—is that if you are not responsive to norms governing the epistemic context in which you find yourself, you do not *know* anything any more than Romulus, freshly brought in from the woods, knows that the cooked meat on the table is edible.

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<sup>17</sup> This is less universal a statement than we would like, perhaps. According to an article in *The New Republic* (125: 5, October 2010) entitled “Lies, Damn Lies and Chinese Science,” present-day institutes of scientific research in China operate on ethically and politically indefensible norms of research consistent with a nationalistic agenda. This entails suppressing the results of studies with negative findings, and “peddling pseudoscience” that neatly mixes cutting edge research with, say, the wild claims of one’s favorite New Age author. One could easily provide evidence for the claim that this isn’t as “local” a practice as the author, Sam Geall, would have us believe.

There are all kinds of vested interests that might (and routinely do) impose extra-rational norms on researchers sensitized to the norms of scientific practice in the course of their training. Further, owing to a criminally lopsided understanding of such exalted values as scientific objectivity and freedom from bias, there has occurred (and arguably, continues to occur) egregious violence in the name of science. In this country, the Tuskegee experiment is perhaps the most notorious documented case of this kind. I shall ignore such “rough edges” to our story in the interest of telling it fully.

It may be noted that for Wittgenstein both knowledge and meaning are grounded in externalist norms. I can't know something if I cannot back up my claim with supporting evidence anymore than I can say "Good morning" in the middle of an ongoing conversation (*OC* 464). A prominent theme of *On Certainty* is that one's internal states (such as a degree of confidence in the evidence one possesses) have nothing to do with knowing something to be the case. As Wittgenstein says in *OC* 245, "There is no subjective sureness that I know something. The certainty is subjective, but not the knowledge." Wittgenstein is insistent that Moore cannot claim that he knows that he has two hands on the basis of his being sure that he does. This sounds like an odd thing to argue over until one sees it as an expression of a deep anti-internalism about epistemic norms. It isn't possession of top-of-the-line evidence, and most certainly not a further justified belief that one has top-of-the-line evidence that counts for knowing.

To appreciate this insight, one needs to be able to see the linguistic analogue in the Private Language case. What my words mean has nothing to do with the inner representation I have of their meaning. Kripke outlines the way in which Wittgenstein establishes that the capacity of the inner representation to guide the use of the word in future instances is pure fiction. Being certain about one's belief that *p* is strictly analogous to one's confidence in the use of an expression despite the possibility of being wrong: neither has anything to do with the norm-governed character of the ensuing behavior. The internal state of certainty concerning one's evidence is a red herring; it is irrelevant to one's knowing that something is the case. Normativity comes from without,



from the constitutive rules of communal practices, to be precise.<sup>18</sup> As Wittgenstein says (tantalizingly, as he is wont to), “It is always by favour of Nature that one knows something” (*OC* 505).

Just what, one might ask, is “Nature”? (One might also ask if Anscombe and Paul’s use of an upper-case ‘n’ is really necessary.) On my reading, ‘Nature’ refers to human nature, both physical and social, or if you like, a physical equipment that has been humanized, or as the ancient Indians would have described it, *sanskrit*—reformed, overhauled and worked over, cultivated and developed, civil-ized.<sup>19</sup> It refers to all the intricate domains ruled by convention (hence, perhaps, the translators’ use of ‘N’) within which it is possible to know things. It would have been quite clumsy to say “It is always by favor of forms of life (or forms-of-life) that one knows something,” but that is roughly what Wittgenstein means.<sup>20</sup> I explain this point more carefully in subsection 5.3.1, where

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<sup>18</sup> For example, take the hallowed “Laws of Cricket.” They say (and I paraphrase), the bowler may not step past the line on which the stumps stand before releasing the ball. One way to bowl a no-ball is to violate this rule.

<sup>19</sup> The analogy is too obvious to ignore, for the antonym of ‘sanskrit’ is ‘prākṛit’ (which means ‘natural’). What is reformed and worked over is stuff that is natural, such as dispositions to behavior, or the phonetic, syntactic and semantic crudities of vernacular speech. Not surprisingly, the term ‘Prākṛit’ stands for the vernacular tongues of ancient India—for “natural” languages, on which Sanskrit was “supervenient,” so to speak.

<sup>20</sup> Fogelin translates the phrase “*von Gnaden der Natur*” in *OC* 505 as “by the grace of nature.” The dictionary reveals that this is indeed the literal equivalent of the German expression. Hence Fogelin speaks of “epistemic grace.” He explains: “In making knowledge claims, or at least claims to empirical knowledge, we rely on the grace of nature not to defeat us—at least when we have behaved reasonably well. The philosopher, we might say, wants to replace this covenant of grace with a covenant of work.”

To “replace the covenant of grace with a covenant of work” is to pursue justification of our beliefs in the face of far-out defeating possibilities, trying to satisfy ourselves that our beliefs meet levels of scrutiny not encountered in ordinary circumstances— a rather strange project if you look at it in a certain way. To pursue such a project is to be a justificationalist. Justificationalism is the commitment to the notion

I relate this remark and Wittgenstein's epistemological stance generally to a much discussed idea contained in Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.

Let us return to Moore. Moore's use of his certainty that he has two hands as a defence of the claim that the external world exists and that he knows it is twice damned: on the one hand, he confuses the categories of knowing and being certain; on the other hand, he claims to know something that is impossible to *know* within that particular context. The first part of this claim was glossed two paragraphs ago, and has been treated more fully in Chapter 2. The second part of the claim makes reference to Wittgenstein's characteristic skeptical allowance to the epistemic nihilist. This was also explained in Chapter 2, but it is time to take a second look at it.

This is basically how the dialectical situation was presented earlier. The radical skeptic or epistemic nihilist and Moore have come to an impasse over the question "*Can we know propositions about the external world?*" Moore answers "yes," his opponent answers "no." Wittgenstein walks the Pyrrhonian *via media* between these dogmatic

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that there is a correct theory of justification—a procedure that tells us in advance of nature bestowing its grace, as it were, whether or not a belief is justified.

The point isn't that we should stop doing epistemology, but that we should reflect on what we actually do when evaluating knowledge claims. Ordinary justificatory procedures do not demand indubitable knowledge—they "do not demand that we eliminate all potential defeaters [for] it is part of these procedures to have built-in mechanisms for epistemically risky circumstances" (Fogelin 1994, 92). I think that my interpretation of this remark is consistent with Fogelin's, since ordinary justificatory procedures are just aspects of human practices. I have further argued that human practices are grounded on human nature. The difference between Fogelin's claim and mine is one of detail.

I should add, however, that Fogelin does not follow Wittgenstein as far as the claim that skeptical doubts are impossible to raise; in fact, he does not think that Wittgenstein is willing to bet his bottom shilling on that claim either. He argues using Wittgensteinian premises that "The abyss that Wittgenstein refers to in *OC* 370 is indescribable, but makes itself manifest" (Ibid., 201-02). I guess that still counts as the claim that radical skepticism is nonsensical. And that is all that *my* reading is required to show.

extremes, noting that Moore and the epistemic nihilist each take for granted an internalist conception of justification, i.e., they each take certainty to be the possession of the best kind of knowledge there is, namely, indubitable knowledge. I assert that Wittgenstein sees both disputants as assenting to the definition expressed by the biconditional C.

C: I know that p iff I am certain that p

Here, p is any ordinary proposition such as the proposition that I have two hands. C says that you know that p just in case you are in no doubt that p is true. Moore accepts both sides of the biconditional whereas the epistemic nihilist denies them both. The latter says that since one cannot be certain that p, there is always doubt regarding p, and so that knowledge is impossible. This is because, according to the epistemic nihilist, what is known cannot be doubted, and there is nothing that is beyond doubt. So she assents to C.<sup>21</sup>

The dispute between Moore and the epistemic nihilist engages the following two equally persuasive views:

M: It is possible to know empirical propositions precisely because it is possible to be certain of them.

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<sup>21</sup> The standard set by the epistemic nihilist is bizarre from a Wittgensteinian point of view. Wittgenstein argues that knowledge is not the same thing as certainty; in fact the two are nothing like one another. It follows from his remarks in *On Certainty* that “certain knowledge” is an oxymoron. Most importantly, though, indubitability as a condition of knowledge is simply *irrelevant*. When we affirm Kwasi’s knowledge claim that his great-grandfather was an Ashanti chief, surely we do it on the basis of something other than Kwasi’s certainty about that piece of family history.

EN: It is impossible to know any empirical propositions, because none of our epistemic practices guarantee indubitability, and anything less is unacceptable.

This is the *aporia* that engages Wittgenstein's attention. Wittgenstein surveys the terms of the debate, and starts off by rejecting what both Moore and the epistemic nihilist unquestioningly accept. He denies the biconditional C because, as he points out, it reflects a seriously misleading account of our epistemic life. He argues that actual epistemic practices—practices of obtaining and claiming knowledge and questioning and rejecting claims—in fact implicate doubt, are public, and have nothing to do with individual certainty.

On the one hand, while he agrees with Moore that we are certain that our hands exist, he clarifies the sense in which this certainty does not amount to knowledge. On the other hand, while he agrees with the epistemic nihilist that there is a lot that we claim to know about which we aren't certain, he points to a number of things that the latter loses sight of, namely (i) that knowledge is linked to justificatory practices; (ii) that where we speak of doubt, we imply the possibility of being justified; (iii) that we are often justified in believing p even though p is not indubitable; and (iv) that it is possible to be certain of p in the absence of justification for p. These ideas form the core of some of the most important arguments in *On Certainty*.

This shows that Wittgenstein is not siding with the epistemic nihilist (or radical skeptic).<sup>22</sup> To be precise, Wittgenstein is not himself a radical skeptic, because he does

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<sup>22</sup> This was never an option for Wittgenstein, whether “early” or “later”. Witness the following remark by the author of the *Tractatus*: “Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical, when it raises doubts where no question can be asked” (*TLP*

not share the Cartesian intuition that informs radical skepticism. He *can* indeed be called a skeptic on the grounds of the similarity of his method of philosophizing with that of the ancient Pyrrhonists, and indeed with that of Hume, who was more Pyrrhonian than he seems to have realized.<sup>23</sup> However, using the term ‘skeptical’ to describe the *Pyrrhonian* elements in Wittgenstein’s thinking cannot be confounded with ascribing Cartesian skepticism to him. This is why Kripke has claimed (albeit misleadingly) that Wittgenstein had discovered a new form of skepticism “that only a highly unusual cast of mind could have discovered” (*WRPL*, 60); he had in fact rediscovered an old form of it—one that appears to call for a somewhat unusual philosophical temperament.

It is necessary also to understand Wittgenstein’s criticism of Moore in the Pyrrhonian context. When Wittgenstein insists that ‘I have two hands’ is not justified in the language-game that Moore is playing, he means that it is beyond justification in the sense of being a basic presupposition of that language-game. There is nothing more secure that could serve as the basis of any justification of that claim. And of course the radical skeptic/epistemic nihilist, if he is talking about *knowledge*, as opposed to some caricature of it, is also playing the same language-game. Thus the same intuition undercuts both Moore’s thought and radical skepticism.

Next there arises the question of the status of this basic presupposition in the system of our beliefs. A close look at various sorts of epistemological language-games reveals that we have a right to help ourselves to a presupposition of this sort without possessing the sort of warrant for it that is required for any other belief. Grammatical

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6.5.1). The same remark could have appeared in *On Certainty*, though with a subtly changed account of what is “nonsensical” about skepticism.

<sup>23</sup> It will be recalled that this was argued in Chapter 3 in the context of a discussion of Hume’s summary dismissal of the problem of the external world in *T* 1.4.2.

investigation of epistemic language-games reveals that in most instances of its use, the expression ‘I know’ sets off what Pritchard (following Fogelin, perhaps) calls an “epistemic conversational implicature” (Pritchard 2001, 155): it indicates that one has evidence to back up one’s claim. Hence there is a distinction between beliefs we can back up and (per (iii), above) the beliefs or presuppositions we hold despite lacking evidential warrant. This distinction allows Wittgenstein to drive a wedge between the concepts of knowledge and certainty. Below are a few passages in which we find him investigating the grammar of ‘I know’ prior to stating in *OC* 308 that there is a categorical difference between knowledge and certainty.

—For “I know” seems to describe a state of affairs which guarantees what is known, guarantees it as a fact. One always forgets the expression “I thought I knew.” (*OC* 12)

The difference between the concept of ‘knowing’ and the concept of ‘being certain’ isn’t of any great importance at all, except where “I know” is meant to mean: I *can’t* be wrong. In a law-court, for example, “I am certain” could replace “I know” in every piece of testimony. We might even imagine its being forbidden to say “I know” there... (*OC* 8)

I would like to reserve the expression “I know” for the cases in which it is used in normal linguistic exchange. (*OC* 260)

The appeal to “normal linguistic exchange” is a significant Wittgensteinian move.

Wittgenstein has claimed that one might be certain of things that one doesn’t know. This

sounds almost paradoxical, but it isn't, as the second of these passages points out. We might unreflectively think of being certain as *knowing better*, but this would involve both a facile view of the resources of ordinary language, and misunderstanding of ordinary epistemic practices and the norms they institute. Wittgenstein says that the expression 'I know' functions exactly like 'I am certain' except in cases where 'I know' specifically means 'I can't be wrong.' The latter is an allowance made in ordinary discourse that enables a certain kind of assertion where what I take to be true is identified with what is the case. I may write in my diary in all sincerity, "I know that you love me," but it is certainly not the case that I can't be wrong about how things stand between us romantically. Hence none of this undermines the point that knowing is factive (Michael Williams 2004a, 81): if one knows that p, p is true.

This is a prime example of an externalistic linguistic/epistemic norm. Moore is justly celebrated by the camp of contemporary epistemological externalists who call themselves Neo-Mooreans, but in his argument against the radical skeptic he simply fails to note that what determines my knowing that p is not an internal state (dubbed "subjective certainty" by Wittgenstein) but whether I can marshal evidence for what I claim to know, or as we might say after Nozick, whether my belief tracks the truth in some determinable way. In this instance we find Wittgenstein to be solidly "on Moore's side"—I imagine that correcting someone on a point of principle while being in sympathy with their claim generally does count as support—but as I argue below, it would be a mistake to brand Wittgenstein as an epistemological externalist without making generous allowance for his complex Pyrrhonian disposition.

Finally, we find that neither of the protagonists in this aporia recognizes the transcendental conditions for engaging in epistemic activity. Moore not only asserts a hinge proposition, but claims to *know* it. We have seen that since hinges are logical/grammatical propositions (in Wittgenstein's sense<sup>24</sup>) framing language-games, it is not possible to *know* them in the context of the practices they frame. We can now see that their logical character is intimately tied to their unique epistemic status in the system. We can't "touch" them because our communal epistemic norms set them beyond the pale of belief and justification. The same criticism applies to the radical skeptic who utters a piece of nonsense when she questions Moore's claim. There are limits to doubt in the same way as there are limits to what we might say (again, in Wittgenstein's sense).<sup>25</sup> Doubting the proposition that one is sitting by a fire in a dressing gown on a fine evening when "everything speaks in its favor and nothing against it" is groundless, and hence arbitrary. It is an idle move in an epistemic language-game one is pretending to play.

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<sup>24</sup> See Section 2.2.1.

<sup>25</sup> This is *das Mystische* (TLP 6.45) in a new bottle, so to speak. The *Tractatus* was a classic transcendental idealist text that scrupulously kept ethical, religious and aesthetic value "outside" the world. But by 1949, this aspect of Wittgenstein's thinking had mellowed considerably. He still deemed assertions on these matters to be nonsensical, but for different reasons. The *Tractatus* says, "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical (TLP 6.522)."

Take the first line of this remark. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein isn't talking about our inability to represent concatenations of objects of any kind, empirical or metaphysical. Instead, he is talking about the problem with statements about the logical structure of language-games. These are language-games made up by things *we* do (such as taking communion and saying things like "Mahler is terrible"). To claim to *know* the structure of these language-games is to presuppose that there is a vantage-point outside all language-games. But there just isn't. Pritchard (2000) considers whether 'God exists' might not be a hinge proposition; we can now see that according to Wittgenstein it has to be one.

For "Kantian" readings of Wittgenstein, see Stenius (1960), A. Moore (1985) and Pears (1987). See Sullivan (2004) for a contrary view.



## 5.3 Concluding Remarks: A Descriptive Approach to Explanations in Philosophy

### 5.3.1 *Sextus Through Wittgenstein: A Potted History of Pyrrhonism*

In the previous subsection, I have stated the sense in which Wittgenstein might be identified as a skeptic, and a Pyrrhonist. The later Wittgenstein's relationship to ancient Pyrrhonism has been discussed before by Fogelin (1994), who explores the epistemological stance of a Pyrrhonist using vocabulary that Wittgenstein uses to describe his own philosophical method. He explains the manner in which the Pyrrhonists, who make it their job to demolish the dogmatic theories of their opponents, can themselves manage to steer clear of dogmatism. Per Sextus' claim in the *Outlines* (which is discussed below), they do not do this by relinquishing their philosophers' licenses, for they can continue to participate undogmatically in the epistemic practices extant in their cultures. Fogelin explains this business in a set of lucid remarks about a Neo-Pyrrhonist epistemological practice:

Having unleashed what amounts to an unmitigated skepticism with regard to epistemic justification, how can the Pyrrhonists, in good faith, continue to employ—apparently without qualms—standard terms of epistemic appraisal? The answer is that the Pyrrhonist is under no constraint to conform his activities—including his linguistic activities—to philosophical standards. In daily life, levels of epistemic standards are fixed (often unreflectively) by the exigencies of the given context. The Pyrrhonist undogmatically accepts the everyday epistemic practices of his culture.

At this point, however, *it is important not to turn Pyrrhonism into yet another version of justificationalism by treating it as a social theory of justification* [for the Pyrrhonist finds problems in *all* theories of justification] ...

The Pyrrhonist, like others, simply enters into what Wittgenstein calls forms of life, and does so without believing that these forms of life are justified. However, if we press for justification—and here the ancient Pyrrhonists and Wittgenstein concur—we quickly become aware that none is forthcoming. (1994, 195; italics added)

To follow up on Fogelin's final sentence: Wittgenstein follows the Pyrrhonists in being anti-justificationalist, i.e., in recognizing that every theory of justification falls victim to justificatory regress—what Fogelin and others have called the Agrippa problem after the ancient skeptic who first gave expression to it—and that therefore the idea that there is (or has to be) a correct theory of justification waiting to be discovered is itself suspect. That justification comes to an end, and that in the end we can only point to social practices in lieu of trying (in vain) to further justify our own practice is an idea that Fogelin buys wholesale from Wittgenstein.

This is in fact a Pyrrhonian idea, one that we encounter in Hume's appeal to custom in his discussion of beliefs about causality and personal identity. The Pyrrhonist recognizes that it is custom or convention that institutes norms in every sphere of life, including that of philosophical discourse. It would not be quite right to think of the Pyrrhonist as someone who, upon realizing this fact, "takes it easy," i.e., limits her philosophical exertions to criticizing those of others. (Not that this is a simple thing to do:

witness the Private Language Argument.) Without pronouncing on how it was with the ancients (for I am no expert on them), we can make a case that the Pyrrhonian method of doing philosophy developed in positive ways at the hands of Hume and Wittgenstein. In particular, perhaps without meaning to, Hume gave a boost to what Benson Mates calls “The Skeptic Way” by injecting it with a fresh dose of naturalism. Note that I say “a *fresh* dose.” There is a kernel of naturalism in Sextus already. Since Hume himself walked the Skeptic Way now and then, it isn’t entirely fortuitous that he ended up in a place close to Sextus. But we have spoken of Hume before. Here is Sextus:

We say, then, that the criterion of the Sceptical persuasion is what is apparent, implicitly meaning by this the appearances; for they depend on passive and unwilling feelings and are not objects of investigation. (Hence, no-one, presumably, will raise a controversy over whether an existing things appears this way or that; rather, they investigate whether it is such as it appears.) Thus, attending to what is apparent, we live in accordance with everyday observances, without holding opinions—for we are not able to be utterly inactive. These everyday observances appear to be fourfold, and to consist in guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise. By nature’s guidance we are naturally capable of perceiving and thinking. By the necessitation of feelings, hunger conducts us to food and thirst to drink. By the handing down of customs and laws, we accept from an everyday point of view that piety is good and impiety bad. By teaching of kinds of

expertise we are not inactive in those which we accept. And we say all this without holding any opinions. (Sextus 2000, 9)

It is significant that Sextus takes “guidance by nature” to enable both thought and sensation. This is directly relevant to my argument above that both Hume and Wittgenstein give transcendental accounts of various cognitive, linguistic and epistemic practices. We also find in this passage the elements that make up what we have in effect identified as the first (biological) and second (social) natures of human beings. In this passage, Sextus is talking about “the criterion of the Sceptical persuasion” in the sense of a standard for living life.

Now, activities in life include the practice of philosophy, which in all consistency is tied down to the guidance of nature. In other words, the skeptic (and by that I mean a Pyrrhonist) takes the guidance of nature as a maxim upon which to base her philosophical practice. What this boils down to is the principle that philosophical inquiry cannot be torn asunder from our biological and social life: speculation is legitimate so long as it does not proceed like Kant’s “light dove” that, feeling the resistance of the air, imagines “that its flight would be still easier in empty space” (*CPR* A 5/B 9). This attitude has a great deal in common with Wittgenstein’s opposition to upstart intellectualist answers to philosophical questions. In fact, Sextus’ prescription for (like-minded) philosophers is adequately expressed in Wittgenstein’s words: “Back to the rough ground! (*PI* §107).”

In the case of the latter Pyrrhonists (namely, Hume and Wittgenstein), philosophical inquiry is directed *at* nature—to be precise, at what Hume calls human nature, which includes both the biological and social aspects of human life. Their

methods of inquiry combine description of practices and explanation of how they come about, although they each approach their subjects of inquiry in widely different ways, as we have seen. If we interpret Sextus' prescription in a way that helps us to apply it to kindred philosophical styles, we see that there isn't any inconsistency involved in philosophizing even though one's disposition is primarily skeptical. In fact, it is known that the ancient Pyrrhonists styled themselves as ceaseless inquirers.

But it is also true that there are important differences in philosophical method between the ancient Pyrrhonists and their modern counterparts. While Hume talks appreciatively of life outside the study and Wittgenstein claims to want to stop doing philosophy, there is no let-up in seeking philosophical explanations. In fact, Hume claims the right to philosophize "in a careless manner" if he so chooses; e.g., he challenges opponents to better his explanatory accounts of various aspects of human nature and unapologetically engages in armchair faculty psychology.

In the previous chapter, I made a case for what I call Wittgensteinian explanations, by which I mean rough but fairly detailed descriptive pictures that aren't as sharply defined as theories or hypotheses. I had argued there that the point of giving an explanation of this kind is to attain (via grammatical investigation) a perspicuous view of the language-game or norm-governed phenomenon within one's sights, to contrast this view with intellectualist explanations premised on unjustifiable assumptions, and to thereby establish the correctness of the proposed naturalistic approach. In these very different ways, Humean and Wittgensteinian explanations further a naturalistic project consistent with a Pyrrhonian-style skepticism directed at intellectualist explanations of human practices.

### 5.3.2 Coda

My argument in this work as a whole has been that *On Certainty* is a Pyrrhonian text of a particular sort. To characterize Wittgenstein's Pyrrhonism I have compared his view to Hume's use of the notion of custom to account for various cognitive and moral practices. I see Hume as transforming in certain respects the ancient Pyrrhonian method of doing philosophy. The ancient stipulation that a Pyrrhonist professes no theories does not apply to Hume, for whom philosophical investigation is a daring exercise that does not necessarily serve the end of achieving *ataraxia*, which was, in the end, an ethical goal for the ancients. In this he is a little different from his successor in the Pyrrhonian tradition, who was both driven to do philosophy, and claimed to want to stop doing it (*PI* §133).<sup>26</sup>

What makes both Hume and Wittgenstein Pyrrhonists is their focus on norm-governed phenomena. In Hume's *Treatise*, these are investigated in oblique fashion, by way of such transcendental questions as, "What is it about us that makes her identify numerical different objects and call them by the same name? What natural capacities

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<sup>26</sup> I have been inclined to regard this as a disingenuous claim, but am intrigued by Lear's reading of it. He writes, "The real discovery [this is a reference to the wording of *PI* §133] enables me to stop doing philosophy because it is not a discovery that takes me further in my exploration of un-charted territory; it enables me to see that I already charted all the territory there is. This real discovery, Wittgenstein is certain, is a hard-won insight. For we must somehow overcome the nagging temptation to search further for explanation" (Lear 1982, 393). Lear then links completing the description of language-games to *Z* 133-34, quoted in Chapter 4, above.

This *is* illuminating. But in the passage from *Zettel*, Wittgenstein is talking about the temptation to philosophize in an objectionable way. To keep ourselves to the "rough ground," however, is the description of language-games ever complete? May it not be possible to depict the same terrain, the same practices in different ways? This is linked deeply to the idea that language is learned throughout life, and through it, knowledge is continuously augmented. So, while what Lear says is conceivable, is the "hard-won real discovery" a real option? Perhaps that is glib and speculative, but it will have to do for now.

underlie this practice?” And then, a naturalistic answer ensues. The later Wittgenstein is a naturalist in a different way, but his naturalism also comes as an answer to transcendental questions. The exploration of norm-governed phenomena is done by Sextus himself through a description of the practices of his dogmatist contemporaries. Hume and Wittgenstein apply this method to ordinary practices, thereby both increasing its scope, and making certain other questions (i.e., the transcendental ones) relevant. My examination of the views of these philosophers confirms that the Pyrrhonian tradition has a positive side, and that naturalism and a “community view” of norms are the keys to that positive side.

I have also drawn attention to Wittgenstein’s lifelong commitment to transcendental arguments, showing how it is commitment with his naturalism. The gist of Wittgenstein’s naturalism is that normativity can be naturalized, since all the considerations that Wittgenstein advances concerning private languages, communal norms and hinge propositions show that our norm-governed behavior is an upshot of our social natures. Our humanity or sapience consists in our being norm-governed creatures, but the norms that “govern” us are subservient to our concerns—our *life*. This is what the radical skeptic forgets: she ignores the social (and *hence* normative) dimension of humanity, whereas Moore’s buying into the illusion created by the radical skeptic’s argument leads him astray.

Thus it is extremely important not to theorize our capacity for norm-governed behavior as being somehow “supernatural.” The rational order that we value so much has its bases in human nature: for Wittgenstein, human beings *are* rational animals in the most robust sense there is. This is what Wittgenstein meant when he talked about the

“crystalline purity of logic” as being a *requirement* (*PI* §107), i.e., a requirement set up by a *practice* that exalts formalism and accuracy.

As I have argued in this work, it takes a Pyrrhonian philosopher to point this out. Since this work is about Wittgenstein’s ideas, it would make sense to let him have the last word on the matter.

“But still, it isn’t a game, if there is some vagueness *in the rules*”.—But *does* this prevent its being a game?—“Perhaps you’ll call it a game, but at any rate it certainly isn’t a complete game.” This means: it has impurities, and what I am interested in at present is the pure article.—But I want to say: we misunderstand the role of the ideal in our language. That is to say: we should indeed call it a game, only we are dazzled by the ideal and therefore fail to see the actual use of the word “game” clearly.

We want to say that there can’t be any vagueness in logic. The idea now absorbs us, that the ideal ‘*must*’ be found in reality. Meanwhile we do not as yet see how it occurs there, nor do we understand the nature of this ‘*must*’. We think it must be in reality; for we think we already see it there....

The ideal, as we think of it, is unshakable. You can never get outside it; you must always turn back. There is no outside; outside you cannot breathe.—Where does this idea come from? It is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off.

(*PI* § 100-03.)



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