

WITTGENSTEIN AND THE APPEAL TO OUR PRACTICES

by

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To my parents

ABSTRACT

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein repeatedly responds to an imagined sceptic by appealing to our everyday expressions of knowledge, doubt, and certainty, thereby showing the sceptic's use of these expressions to flout common practice. Where the sceptic would raise doubts, we ordinarily would not blink an eye. The sceptic's words, despite their resemblance to our own, should not be mistaken for ours—in the sorts of context in which she utters them, they do not clearly express anything. Against the backdrop of ordinary use, this argument against the sceptic appears incisive. However, such ordinary use is precisely the sceptic's target. She aims to show that we are unwarranted in our epistemic conduct. If Wittgenstein means to refute scepticism, his appeal to our epistemic practices cannot stand on its own. It may well be that the sceptic disregards their bounds, but unless it can be shown that they so stand to reality as to warrant what we do, as to in fact produce knowledge, any appeal to them comes to nothing. In the following thesis, I will argue that Wittgenstein need not substantiate this relation between our epistemic practices and reality, for with this appeal to our practices, he intends not to refute the sceptic but to transform her claim into something with which we can and do live. In the first chapter, I provide a more detailed account of the thesis's subject and structure. In the second, I present Wittgenstein's response to scepticism in *On Certainty* and the apparent difficulty it runs into. In the third, I turn to Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations as a parallel problematic from which we can draw insight. In the fourth, I consider two readings of the rule-following considerations that attempt to avoid the parallel problem of substantiating

the relation between our practices and reality and argue that having forgone this relation all together, neither is tenable against scepticism. In the final, I argue for parallel readings of the rule-following considerations and *On Certainty* that, while dependent on a certain relation between our practices and reality, hold that substantiating this relation is something we need not do.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein repeatedly responds to an imagined sceptic by appealing to our everyday expressions of knowledge, doubt, and certainty. Where the sceptic would raise doubts, he observes, we ordinarily would not blink an eye—the existence of external objects, our own whereabouts, etc. are not matters to which we are genuinely alive. Indeed, that we do not take issue with such matters seems to be a precondition for engaging in our everyday epistemic practices. It would not be clear that one could be doing chemistry, for instance, if one persistently worried about the continued existence of one's apparatus, if one suspected that one's Erlenmeyer flasks tended to disappear when one turned one's back and then reappear when one glanced their way again. The practice of chemistry excludes such matters from doubt. The sceptic, then, in raising doubts precisely about matters such as these, shows herself to have disengaged from our epistemic practices and misappropriated our expressions—removed from the particular sorts of context in which we use them, they are idle and do not clearly express anything.

Against the backdrop of ordinary use, Wittgenstein's criticism of the sceptic appears incisive. Her doubts, it turns out, are doubts not at all. Though her words bear striking resemblance to our own, they cannot give expression to what she intends with them, for what she intends transgresses the bounds in which these words can be given sense. However, ordinary use and the bounds of our epistemic practices are precisely the

sceptic's targets. She aims to show that we are unwarranted in our epistemic conduct—in claiming knowledge when we do, in being satisfied with justifications when we are. To reply, then, as Wittgenstein does, by appealing to what we do seems no reply at all. It may well be that the sceptic stands in violation of the bounds of our epistemic practices, but if these bounds do not reflect our epistemic situation as we take it to be, if our practices do not in fact enable us to acquire knowledge, then this appeal comes to nothing. Unless our epistemic practices so stand to reality as to warrant what we do, the sceptic's intelligibility within these practices is immaterial. Thus, insofar as we read Wittgenstein as intending with his appeal to *refute* scepticism, we must either be able to identify an argument in his corpus that substantiates this relation between our practices and reality or accept that his appeal to our practices is unsupported and cannot properly address the sceptic's claims.

In the following thesis, I will argue that Wittgenstein need not in fact substantiate this relation between our epistemic practices and reality, for with his appeal to our practices, he intends not to refute the sceptic but to transform her claims into something with which we can and do live. In appealing to what we do, Wittgenstein recognises that reality as it stands to our practices cannot be an object of knowledge for us and so in this way concedes the sceptic's claims. The world as such is not just another object about which we can make claims, to which we can compare our practices, side-by-side. It is something we know only through our practices. Just because we *cannot* know reality as such, then, does not mean that we *do not* know it. Knowing and not-knowing are relations reserved for such considerations as the distance between the sun and the earth or the years until Haley's comet will again be visible from our planet. For us, the world just is as we

apprehend it through our practices. We are in no position to justify them or our view of the world through them—and there is no need to do so. In appealing to our epistemic practices in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein thus affirms our condition but does so in such a way that we are able to see our practices not as obscuring the world but opening it to view.

I begin in the second chapter by presenting Wittgenstein's response to scepticism in *On Certainty* and developing the difficulty it runs into if we read it as an attempt to refute the sceptic's claims. I first provide some background on the text, explaining that we might best understand it as emerging in response to arguments G.E. Moore made in defence of naïve realism. Famously, Moore claimed, among other things, that he knew with certainty that he had two hands. Though any justification he could give for this would be no more certain than his initial claim, it would be unthinkable to concede that he did not know but only believed this to be so. Wittgenstein rebukes Moore for his use of 'I know', arguing that the propositions of which Moore would claim knowledge—at least in the circumstances in which he utters them—cannot be understood as propositions that Moore, or anyone else for that matter, *knows*. And this rebuke, I argue, should not be read as countenancing scepticism but as moving towards showing it to be a misunderstanding, one which shares much in common with Moore's position.

Both Moore and the sceptic, in asserting their respective philosophical theses, disengage from our epistemic practices and misappropriate our expressions for their own confused ends. I show how this transpires first with Moore, how his knowledge claims when forced into ordinary conversation can descend into the scepticism against which he

initially makes his claims. I then argue that we need not follow Moore into the sceptical abyss. If we recognise that our expressions of doubt and knowledge have a particular place in our lives, that only under certain conditions can we make sense of them, we will see that Moore's use of 'I know...' is mistaken. I turn then to the sceptic, showing that her words are similarly uttered in confusion. The considerations over which Moore and the sceptic would vie, e.g. the existence of unassuming teakettles, cups, and saucers, are not ordinarily at issue for us. Indeed, that we do not subject them to doubt or claim knowledge of them is part and parcel of our epistemic practices—Lavoisier could not have identified oxygen if he had been dogged by the thought that his apparatus disappeared and reappeared between eye blinks. Our practices exclude such doubts. Moore and then sceptic, then, in taking our epistemic expressions from the practices in which they have their home, fail to see that these expressions cannot be given sense in certain sorts of context, that any sense that can be given to these expressions is undercut by these particular uses of them.

Finally, I raise the motivating concern of the thesis: if Wittgenstein intends with his appeal to our epistemic practices to *refute* scepticism, this appeal as it stands is not enough. Unless he can show that our practices are what we take them to be—that is, productive of knowledge—this appeal is empty, for the sceptic's target *is* our epistemic practices. If in fact we are wrong about our practices—perhaps, we do not have knowledge when we typically think that we do—then the sceptic's unintelligibility from within our practices is hardly something she need worry about. If, then, we are not inclined to think that Wittgenstein would make such an obvious mistake, we must either

locate something in his corpus that could substantiate our epistemic practices as they relate to the world or try to understand his appeal as something other than a refutation of scepticism.

In the third chapter, I turn to the rule-following considerations of the *Philosophical Investigations* as a parallel problematic from which we can draw insight. Though *On Certainty* in one sense is all about the relation between our practices and reality, in another it says very little—just why we should have confidence in our practices in the face of the sceptic is not entirely clear. Her words may strike us as idle, but that is no guarantee of our correctness. By way of the rule-following considerations, then, which speak of practices more explicitly, we may come to understand Wittgenstein's appeal to our epistemic practices better.

The rule-following considerations take off like this: if our words are to mean anything, we must use them in accord with a standard of correctness—a rule—but the expression of a rule, much like a sign-post, can be interpreted in any number of ways, and a sign-post that points every which way points nowhere at all. If the expression of a rule, like '+2' or 'turn left' is ever susceptible to interpretation, it cannot ground what we take to be its correct applications.

Wittgenstein suggests that this problem rests on a misunderstanding, *viz.*, that interpretation is the only way we have of grasping a rule. Only if there exists a custom—a regular use of sign-posts, letters, commands, etc.—can there be such a thing as following a rule. Interpretations cannot support themselves. Initiation into the linguistic customs of a community allows us to interpret what we do not quite understand—but often enough,

there is no need for interpretation, for in sharing our customs in common, we simply understand one another. The platonist, who insists that the rules *themselves* provide the standard we need, and the meaning sceptic, who does not see how meaning can be possible, both overlook the importance of customs to meaning.

In the fourth chapter, I argue that the rule-following considerations parallels the problematic in *On Certainty* in three ways. First, the central disagreement is again between realism and scepticism of sorts—in this case, the platonist who invokes the rules themselves as grounding the correct use of our words and the meaning sceptic who denies the possibility of our words meaning anything. And again, their respective theses rest on a common misunderstanding that Wittgenstein aims to bring out. Second, Wittgenstein again appeals to what we do in the face of scepticism—this time to show that there *is* a correct way of acting in accord with a rule. Third, this appeal to our linguistic practices again raises the question of how our practices stand in relation to the world, for again, that we so happen to do things in a certain way does not seem to ground our doing them in just this way. Just because, for instance, we are in the habit of calling certain things 'yellow' does not make our use of the word meaningful—only if our practice reflects a real distinction in the world, *viz.*, between yellow and non-yellow objects, would our use of the word be meaningful. Thus, if we are inclined to read Wittgenstein as not having made such an obvious mistake, we must either show how he substantiates the relation between our practices and the world or try to understand his appeal as something other than a refutation of scepticism.

I then consider two readings of the rule-following considerations that attempt to

avoid the difficulty of having to substantiate the relation between our linguistic practices and the world. I reject Saul Kripke's reading for two reasons: first, in interpreting Wittgenstein as accepting the sceptic's negative conclusion, *viz.*, that there are no facts about what we mean because what we do is ever susceptible to interpretation, Kripke reads Wittgenstein as conceding something that he clearly takes to be a misunderstanding; and second, it is unclear that the 'sceptical solution' that Kripke attributes to Wittgenstein can deliver, once so much has already been conceded to the sceptic. I reject Crispin Wright's reading on the basis of an argument that John McDowell makes: in rejecting a picture of meaning wherein investigation-independent facts—facts, that is, about states of affairs that we have yet to fully investigate—determine the use of our expressions, Wright has only the consensus of the community on which to go, and such consensus in itself cannot provide norms sufficiently robust to make the use of our words meaningful. I conclude this chapter content with McDowell's argument insofar as it shows Wright's anti-realist reading to be untenable but alive to the fact that McDowell's realism leaves Wittgenstein open to a persistent worry about how we can show our linguistic practices to stand to the world such as to make our expressions meaningful.

In the final chapter, I begin by identifying two insights that we can take from McDowell's reading of Wittgenstein: (i) only from *within* a practice is it possible to appreciate its norms and so take them for what they are—in viewing a practice sideways-on, e.g. hearing words as grunts and squawks, we cannot magic meaning back into the picture, for we have withdrawn from the only standpoint from which it was possible to appreciate the practice *as* a practice, and (ii) for meaning to be possible, our judgements

cannot be the source of the standard against which we check the use of our words—the correct use of our expressions must track investigation-independent facts. I then suggest that there exists a tension between them. Commitment to the latter seems to require foregoing the former: showing that the correct use of our words in fact tracks investigation-independent facts compels us to find a standpoint from which to view our practices in relation to the world, from which to confront our practices sideways-on.

From here, I develop McDowell's first insight, unable to see how we might reach a vantage point from which we could substantiate the relation between our practices and the world. I elaborate on what Wittgenstein understands by the notion of practice, suggesting that initiation into the practices of a community is initiation into a way of grasping and living in the world. I then argue that this understanding of practices and ourselves explains why we have not been able to say more about the relation between our linguistic practices and the world. Asking after this relation presupposes that there is in fact a standpoint from which we can view the world *as such*, on the one hand, and our practices, on the other. But clearly this is not so—distancing ourselves from our practices only obscures the face of the world and cannot give us a way of grounding them. In appealing to our practices—both in the rule-following considerations and in *On Certainty*—I conclude, Wittgenstein intends not so much to refute scepticism as *transform* it. Following Stanley Cavell, I suggest that Wittgenstein's appeal acknowledges that our condition in relation to the world as such is one of not knowing—not in the sense that our view of the world is unjustified but in the sense that it cannot be. Our practices afford our only perspective on the world, and these are not something that we have decided upon but

something that we have inherited.

CHAPTER 2

THE APPEAL TO OUR EPISTEMIC PRACTICES

1. Wittgenstein's central concerns in *On Certainty* take off from a dissatisfaction with the common-sense claims that G.E. Moore makes in defence of naïve realism. Moore, in such papers as 'A Defense of Common Sense' and 'Proof of an External World', argues that he knows with certainty a number of propositions—famously, 'here is one hand and here's another' and 'there exists at present a living human body, which is my body'. These seemingly incontrovertible propositions are directed towards a particularly Cartesian-cum-Humean scepticism and are thus meant, first, to establish that we are indeed entitled to such knowledge and, second, to ground the existence of the external world.¹ Against Moore, Wittgenstein contends that propositions of this sort, at least in circumstances such as those in which Moore utters them, cannot be understood as propositions that Moore, or anyone else for that matter, *knows*. Knowledge claims, and with them, expressions of belief, conviction, and certainty, can only be made intelligibly within certain limited contexts, and where Moore makes his claims, the meaning of his words hangs in the air.

What Moore tries to get at, holds Wittgenstein, is not what we typically understand as

1 The scepticism that Moore aims to refute is of a distinctly Cartesian-cum-Humean variety (as opposed to say, Pyrrhonian) in the sense that (i) it gains traction by subjecting a 'best case of knowledge' scenario to doubt—e.g. where I, like Descartes, am in my dressing gown, sitting by the fire when I am struck by the fact that on many such an occasion I have in fact been in bed, only *dreaming* that things were so—the strategy here is to move from a particular 'best case' scenario (now turned doubtful) to a generalisation about all such cases; (ii) it brings into question the causal regularity that we would otherwise take for granted. That it is scepticism of this variety in which Moore, and hence Wittgenstein, take an interest is evident from the sort of claims under investigation, e.g. 'I am a human being', 'motor cars do not grow out of the earth', 'the sun is not a hole in the vault of heaven', 'here is a hand'.

knowing.

Initially, Wittgenstein's claim may strike us as astonishing. The propositions of which Moore claims knowledge, we might think, may be platitudinous, but they are certainly not indeterminate or unknowable. We, like Moore, may be tempted to say of a proposition like 'I have never been on the moon' that it is not just that we *believe* it, though we could be wrong, but that we are certain of it—we *know* it. And moreover, if we were to give up our claim on a proposition such as this, any other claim to knowledge we might make would be threatened. If we could not even be said to know that we had never been on the moon or that our bodies had never disappeared for a time and then later reappeared, etc., then it seems that we could not be said to know anything at all. Thus, Wittgenstein's claim, we might think, cannot but court the sort of scepticism against which Moore directs his attack. However, Wittgenstein's exasperation in *On Certainty* is as much meant for the sceptic as it is for Moore.² If the propositions of which Moore would claim knowledge in his circumstances cannot in fact be known, neither can they be doubted. Expressions of doubt, much like claims to knowledge, can only be made in certain contexts, and the sceptic, like Moore, disregards the bounds in which her words can be given sense. Wittgenstein's repudiation of Moore, then, must be situated in a wider context, where, as we will soon see, what is at stake is the possibility of knowing at all—a

2 I think that it is fair to say that there are a number of predominant moods that pervade Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty*. Arguably, one of these is a kind of exasperation stemming from the extent to which both Moore and the sceptic's words (as Wittgenstein imagines them) depart from everyday use when put to the service of advancing philosophical theses. Take, for instance: "For when Moore says 'I know that that's' I want to reply 'you don't *know* anything!'—and yet I would not say that to anyone who was speaking without philosophical intention. That is, I feel (rightly?) that these two mean to say something different" (*OC* 407). Another such predominant mood might be something more like frustration, something that speaks to the elusiveness of what Wittgenstein is trying to get across.

possibility that we need not, according to Wittgenstein, relinquish to the sceptic.

2. When Wittgenstein says of Moore's words that their meaning “yet stands in need of determination” (*OC* 348), it is because he does not think that the meaning of our utterances can stand apart from the circumstances in which we utter them, and where Moore claims “I know that...” we cannot make out what his words are supposed to be *doing*. Though, of course, we can see what Moore intends with his words, *viz.*, to make a knowledge claim, the words alone, thinks Wittgenstein, are not enough to make what he says intelligible *as* a knowledge claim.³ This charge quickly comes to a head when we imagine trying to humour Moore, for, as will soon become apparent, it is then exceedingly difficult to resist being drawn into a sceptical mode of thinking, one from which return is unlikely—and this tangle between Moore and the sceptic is precisely what Wittgenstein would rather sidestep all together.

But first, let's consider a more ordinary case to which we can then compare an exchange with Moore. Suppose that I own a stand of sugar maples and am out to tap them

3 There are, of course, other sorts of circumstances in which uttering these very same words does amount to making a knowledge claim. Whereas Moore, gesturing mid-lecture, might claim 'I know that I have two hands' with both his hands in plain view (which according to Wittgenstein comes to nothing at all), a soldier just coming to after an explosion might say the same and in fact mean something by it, *viz.*, that he *still* has two hands—though the impact of the blast has numbed them, he can see them at his sides. In this latter case, the circumstances give the words something to do—they have a *use*. But with Moore, the meaning of these words remains indeterminate, for how they are to be used in this case is not clear. They are, so to speak, “on holiday” (*PI* 38) and as of yet have no sense.

I owe this reading of Wittgenstein's picture of meaning to James Conant's 'Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use' and find the following passage particularly illuminating on this matter: “In Wittgenstein's later work, he furnishes countless carefully constructed examples, each of which is designed to engender in the reader the experience of a hallucination of meaning. He aims to show us through such examples how we are prone to imagine we transfer the meaning of an expression where we have failed to transfer the use. In having failed to transfer the use, either *we* mean something different from what we take ourselves to mean or we mean nothing at all. Wittgenstein, in his later writings, describes the sort of awkward relation we occupy with respect to our words in such cases as one in which we are led ‘to speak outside language games’” (1998: 248).

for sap and make syrup. In the course of my tree-tapping, there are a number of questions I might ask myself, e.g. 'Is this tree really a sugar maple?', 'Is it late enough in the season for the sap to have started its flow?', or 'Is this tree mature enough to be tapped yet?'. These are easily things about which I might find myself uncertain. Perhaps other maple species have made their way into my stand over the years, some of which closely resemble the sugar maple. Or, perhaps I have forgotten quite how old some of my younger trees are. Happily, there are determinate criteria against which I can check such uncertainties. I can call up a friend more experienced than me on the finer points of maple classification. I can dig up my father's records for the years in which he planted. There is, then, easy recourse for such uncertainties—e.g. with my friend along to lend her expert eye, I can walk through my stand and point confidently to particular trees, saying “I know that that's a sugar maple,” or something to similar effect. My doubts are easily contained when I turn to the appropriate authorities.

But cases of this sort—wherein one could not be more familiar with what lies before one—are precisely those over which Moore and the sceptic would vie. Indeed, we might imagine that where I would not have blinked an eye amidst the maples, Moore might attempt to make his point, the sceptic not far behind. Perhaps Moore too has an old familiarity with these trees. Of one, then, he might declare, “I know that that's a tree.” How would we respond if we were standing there with him? Perhaps: “Was there ever any doubt that it was?” Or, if we were really to humour him: “Well, how do you know?” Ordinarily, we would expect an answer whose satisfactoriness we could at least evaluate. But in directing this question at Moore, it is unclear what sort of answer could count as

satisfactory. He might say something like “A friend of my great-grandfather planted it as a maple seed many years ago, and such seeds grow into maple trees,” or “I read about trees in a botany book as a boy—this thing here matches its description of a maple exactly.” In a different set of circumstances—say, when we had asked Moore what *kind* of tree it was that we were looking at, and he had said “I know that that’s a *maple* tree...”—either response would have been just what we were looking for. But here, we cannot really say. *Any* grounds that Moore might give us, it seems, would be no more certain than his initial claim (see *OC* 243). What if this friend of his great-grandfather had planted a bean and not a seed so many years ago? What if the botany book and everything else with it were something that we and Moore had dreamed up, a collective hallucination? These worries, of course, verge on the surreal, but nothing in this conversation seems to prevent us from conjuring them up. Moore’s claim almost invites us to dive into such speculation. His words misfire—the certainty that he tries to convey is lost in the delivery.

In the case of Moore’s utterances, then, it is unclear what the words ‘I know that that’s a tree’ might mean. When we try to understand his utterance as if it were a knowledge claim, the whole situation is cast into doubt. In saying it, as though we needed reassurance, Moore invites uncertainty and speculation where there were none before. It never occurred to us that this tall, leafy thing was *not* a tree. But then Moore’s pronouncement hits us, and we may begin to wonder whether we missed something about our surroundings. Just maybe, everything is not as it appears to be. In trying to make sense of Moore, we end up scrutinising what in our own estimation needed no investigation at all. We get reeled into his way of speaking and no longer know whether to

trust the tree or ourselves.

Humouring Moore's claim as we would any ordinary knowledge claim, we thus find ourselves on the verge of scepticism. In spite of all we may have seen and done out in the maple stand, we are not far off from insisting that we cannot say with certainty that the things among which we stand are trees and not mere appearances of trees. There are possibilities that we have not yet ruled out. What if these were not the very same maples that our forefathers had planted—what if extraterrestrials had razed those to the ground last night and put up exactly similar ones in their stead, the extraterrestrial equivalent of a practical joke? Extraordinary as this would be, there is nothing in our experience that speaks against such a possibility. When we then ask ourselves “How do we know that these are trees?” the proof may seem suddenly lacking. Our immediate experiences, old photographs, grandparents' stories, etc. may all seem susceptible to doubt, to the possibility of illusion. We might then find ourselves echoing the sceptic: “Nothing certain seems to ground the conviction that these appearances are in fact trees. It is impossible to say for certain that we know that we stand among trees and not, say, figments of our own making. And these same considerations apply to all else around us. Whether in fact the world is as it appears to be seems wholly beyond our determination.”

3. But we can step back from this precipice. Indeed, many of Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* are intended as a reminder of where ordinarily we stand epistemically and what little it takes for us to be able to go on (see, for instance, *OC* 34, 143, 476). Though the sceptical mood into which we might have found ourselves descending certainly bears

a striking resemblance to the tenor of our everyday doubts, this, suggests Wittgenstein, is but a resemblance. Expressions of doubt and knowledge have a particular place in our lives—if we forget this, we only need reflect on the ways in which doubts arise day-to-day and the ways in which we quell them, often with ease. Though being in error is something with which we are all familiar, and its possibility is something that can dog us (e.g. “Did I really lock the door before leaving? I think I remembering doing it, but I'd better check,” “What if she meant 3:15 and not 5:15? We are meeting today, aren't we?” “Did I count out five cups of flour or six just now? Maybe it was four. Oh, I don't know. I should start again,” etc.), there are limits on what we can properly call 'doubt'. At some point the words become empty, or worse, plainly irrational:

Doubting has certain characteristic manifestations, but they are only characteristic of it in particular circumstances. If someone said that he doubted the existence of his hands, kept looking at them from all sides, tried to make sure it wasn't 'all done by mirrors', etc., we should not be sure whether we ought to call that doubting. We might describe his way of behaving like the behaviour of doubt, but his game would not be ours. (OC 255)

In certain circumstances a man cannot make a *mistake*. (“Can” is here used logically, and the proposition does not mean that a man cannot say anything false in those circumstances.) If Moore were to pronounce the opposite of those propositions which he declares certain, we should not just not share his opinion: we should regard him as demented.

In order to make a mistake, a man must already judge in conformity with mankind. (OC 155-156)

When, ordinarily, *we* insist that something is uncertain, it is because the circumstances in which we find ourselves give us determinate grounds for doubt—we have reason to believe that we might be mistaken.⁴ Particular features of our circumstances lead us to

⁴ As Wittgenstein suggests above, our notion of what it is to make a mistake only extends so far. Not every false belief that one may have counts as a mistaken belief. If, for instance, I awake one day falsely believing that I live in the year 2050 and that aliens have enslaved humanity, there is a sense in which I cannot be said to be making a mistake, as one might in making a calculation or in spelling a word one does not often use. The notion of being mistaken only has application to one's case if one already judges

suspect that things may be other than they seem. We do not go out of our way to consider what else around us might not be as it appears. Doubting has a certain place in our lives. It is not something that we do idly. If indeed we have our doubts about something, we tend not to act as though we were certain of it. We look to resolve our doubts, to see whether in fact our doubts are warranted, for doubting concerns not just what we ought to believe but what we ought to do. Thus, in the case of a suspect tree, I will not bore a hole into its trunk until I know for certain whether or not it is a sugar maple. Instead, I will consult a botany book or send for a local expert. My difficulty is not intractable—just as there were determinate features of my circumstances that led me to suspect this particular tree, so there are determinate criteria by which I might identify its species and resolve my uncertainty. I may find, for instance, that my suspect tree has sharp, brown-tipped buds and that this, according to a botany book, is typical of sugar maples. Knowing this, I can tap the tree and go on as I would have. The grounds on which I had my doubts have fallen through, giving me no reason to doubt any longer.

A sceptic's doubts, by comparison, are unmotivated and out of place. Nothing peculiar to her circumstances grounds them, only the possibilities that she *cannot* rule out. If indeed the trees among which she stood were mere appearances, it would be unclear, at least for as long as the illusion held out, how she might come to know this. Her circumstances could give no indication that things were other than they appeared. Illusion

as most everyone else does—if one thinks that *P* justifies *Q*, that *R* entails *S*, etc. just the same as everyone else. When I begin to doubt the people around me, falsely believing that they are the mouthpieces of our alien overlords, I show myself to be out of step with everyone else and their judgements. It is difficult for others to understand even how I could have come to believe these things, what could have motivated my doubts (if they can be called 'doubts' at all). The notions of doubting and being mistaken are thus related in this way: if in a situation making a mistake does not have any clear application, neither then does doubting—there can only be semblances of such.

thus remains in some sense a possibility here. However, it does not seem that such possibility gives rise to what could properly be called 'doubt'. Doubt is something that we express when given indication that things may not be as we think they are. And thus it presupposes that we might in principle come to know how things stand, one way or the other. If this were not so, it would not be clear in what sense we could have doubted in the first place. If we could not say what would have to be the case for us to know that things were indeed one way—that is, if we knew of nothing in principle against which we could check our circumstances—then we could have no grounds for suspecting that things are not as they seem. Without a sense of what would count as things in fact being the case rather than merely seeming it, what grounds could we have for thinking that things looked amiss? Our doubts cannot exclude the possibility of knowledge if they are to have proper grounds, if they are to avoid being idle (see *OC* 117).

Thus, Wittgenstein seeks to shake us from the sceptic's hold and consider our words in light of the everyday:

“I know that that's a tree.” Why does it strike me as if I did not understand the sentence? Though it is after all an extremely simple sentence of the most ordinary kind? 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. (*OC* 347)

When the sceptic demands justification for our knowing some state of affairs to be so—the number of chairs in the room, the earth's existence long before our birth, the identity of an old friend sitting across from us, etc.— or denies that knowledge here is possible, we have great difficulty imagining what she might mean. Though she speaks as we sometimes do, the circumstances for such talk are all wrong. We find that we cannot have

a conversation with her.⁵ She insists that the grounds on which we claim knowledge be such as to rule out all possibility of things seeming other than they are. And since our grounds leave some such possibilities standing, we must content ourselves with doubt. Clearly, her talk is not our own. Doubt, for us, is confined to those circumstances in which we have indication that something is amiss. It is something that in principle we might resolve. The possibilities that so perturb the sceptic are thus not possibilities to which we are genuinely alive. Knowledge, as it pertains to our lives, does not require that we rule out *all* possibility of things being other than they appear. We claim knowledge when we have justification, and the lengths to which we must go to justify our claims depend on the circumstances in which we find ourselves, on the particular challenge to our beliefs that we now face. Knowledge and doubt, then, have much less a place in our lives than the sceptic might think, if her talk is any indication (see *OC* 9-10). Often enough, considerations of knowledge and doubt do not arise for us at all. We simply act (see *OC* 148).

The sceptic's mistake, then, is in thinking that certain practices of ours, *viz.*, knowing and doubting, can be taken from their proper place in our lives and intelligibly extended to alien circumstances. What she does not realise is that the sense of these

5 The difficulties of conversing with the sceptic run deep. This will become more apparent in Chapter 3 below, when we discuss the role of our practices in making the world (including ourselves) intelligible. For now, it will suffice to say that, first, we may find it difficult to take the sceptic's pronouncements seriously knowing that when she puts philosophy aside for the day, she, like us, will not check that she has feet before rising from her chair or look into the eyes of her loved ones and fear that they are mere automatons; and, second, if we try having a serious discussion with her, either this discussion will come to an impasse (we unable to see the possibilities she describes as reasons for doubt, she unable to look past these possibilities), or we will have to some extent concede to her pronouncements and so engage in self-denial—doubting something like one's name or the earth's age brings into question the whole of one's history, one's capacity to make judgements, one's conception of oneself, etc. One cannot bring these things into doubt without bringing far more about oneself into question. At various points in *The Claim of Reason*, Stanley Cavell brings this point into focus. See, for instance, pp. 241-242.

practices depends on the context in which they take place. Such expressions as 'I know' and 'I am uncertain of ... ', lose their meaning when used where they have no clear application. It is as though the sceptic had stood up in the middle of an argument to shout things like 'Objection!' and 'Leading the witness!', thinking that she could practice law at the dinner table (see *OC* 350). What is supposed to follow from such displaced expressions is not clear.

4. According to Wittgenstein, both Moore and the sceptic have lost their way amidst our language. Both, in the attempt to advance their respective theses, forget the sorts of contexts that delimit the use of our ordinary expressions. If we were to think of our practices of knowing and doubting as games—or what Wittgenstein is fond of calling 'language-games'—then it would be fair to say that both Moore and the sceptic transgress the limits of what we might reasonably call 'playing the game'. It is not that they break the rules—one can occasionally move a pawn one too many spaces forward by mistake, or even deliberately to cheat one's inattentive opponent, without losing one's right to say that one is playing chess. Rather, it is that they forego the sort of agreement necessary to the possibility of playing at all. Again, both knowing and doubting require giving grounds—one cannot sensibly insist that one is engaged in either if one cannot produce any. But the sorts of circumstances over which Moore and the sceptic choose to vie are precisely those in which neither seem able to give grounds for his or her claim. This, thinks Wittgenstein, is because they fail to recognise that the propositions of which they would affirm (or deny) knowledge in such circumstances can have *no* part in the games of knowing and

doubting. Rather, these propositions, which have come to be known as 'hinge' propositions, form part of the ground on which these games are played and thus cannot be thrown in with those at play: “[...] the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, as it were like hinges on which those turn” (*OC* 341). That we do not treat them as propositions that can enter into the language-game of knowing is a precondition of our being able to play it.⁶ This is not to say that these propositions are in any traditional sense foundational to our knowledge. Moore's 'here is one hand and here's another' is not to be equated with Descartes' *cogito*. That Wittgenstein likens Moore-type propositions to hinges is, rather, indicative of the role they have in our lives—they stand to us in such a way that subjecting them to the rules of this language-game would bring the propositions of which we would in fact claim knowledge into question; it would devastate our confidence in ourselves and our conception of the world around us. The hinge propositions, then, are not ordinary empirical propositions subject to testing, justification, and revision—they, or rather their exclusion from scrutiny within our epistemic practices, is necessary to what we call 'judging' and to our conception of ourselves as capable of judging, as assessing how things stand with the world:

When Moore says he *knows* such and such, he is really enumerating a lot of empirical propositions which we affirm without special testing; propositions, that is, which have a peculiar logical role in the system of our empirical propositions. (*OC* 136)

[...] I am inclined to believe that not everything that has the form of an empirical proposition

6 As Wittgenstein acknowledges, *which* propositions play the role of hinge propositions can change. Our language-games are not inflexible; they change as we change—as we discover new things about ourselves and the world (see *OC* 96). Wittgenstein, in remarking about the impossibility of going to the moon in 1949-1951 (see *OC* 108), inadvertently provides us with an example of just this phenomenon.

is one. (OC 308)

“Do I know or do I only believe...?” might also be expressed like this: What if it *seemed* to turn out that what until now has seemed immune to doubt was a false assumption? Would I react as I do when a belief has proved to be false? or would it seem a to knock from under my feet the ground on which I stand in making any judgements at all?—But of course I do not intend this as *prophecy*.

Would I simply say “I should never have thought it!”—or would I (have to) refuse to revise my judgement—because such a ‘revision’ would have to amount to annihilation of all yardsticks? (OC 492)

[...] 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. (OC 150)

In treating these propositions as one would any other empirical proposition, both Moore and the sceptic attempt to turn the very ground beneath their feet, as if it too could be dug up and tested, kicked around and scattered with little consequence. But these propositions in certain circumstances, as Wittgenstein suggests, do not have the role of ordinary empirical propositions (e.g. of this sort: ‘the average distance between the earth and the sun is approximately 149 million kilometres’)⁷—we cannot try to subject them to doubt or give grounds for them without losing our grip on empirical inquiry entirely, i.e. on the very practices of knowing and doubting.⁸ Which is to say that these propositions stand

7 These propositions, of course, can play the role of ordinary empirical propositions, e.g. I claim, “I know that that’s a tree,” of a child’s rudimentary drawing and explain that he told me so when he gave it to me to stick on the refrigerator. But the cases in which both Moore and the sceptic are interested are notably ones in which these propositions do not play this ordinary role and so, according to Wittgenstein, cannot be treated as propositions to be known or doubted.

8 Wittgenstein identifies the sort of propositions of which Moore would claim knowledge and the sceptic deny in a number of ways: (a) the temptation to which Moore succumbs with these propositions is not particular to him—similarly situated, we would certainly not find ourselves denying the age of the earth or checking every now and then to see whether we still had two hands (see OC 100), (b) indeed, though we may struggle to give good grounds for not doubting these propositions, we could not bring ourselves to disavow them except at great cost to ourselves: “[...] But what could make me doubt whether this person here is N.N., whom I have known for many years? Here a doubt would seem to drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos” (OC 613), (c) we need not have been explicitly taught the truth of these propositions or ever sought to satisfy ourselves of it, but again, these are not propositions that we doubt (see OC 143, 476), (d) they are not part of the everyday commerce of our thoughts or conversations: “[...] Much seems to be fixed, and it is removed from the traffic. It is so to speak shunted onto an unused

apart from those that we ordinarily consider in the everyday course of our lives—they are not propositions for which we seek justification or at which we arrive as a matter of explicit reasoning. Philosophical considerations aside, the question of their truth or falsity does not arise for us (*OC* 317). Instead, these propositions in part constitute the certainty that we *show* in engaging in our epistemic practices, a certainty that is necessary to them—not just pragmatically but logically. It is not clear, for instance, whether one could be said to be doing chemistry if one came to doubt the existence of one's apparatus. Investigating molecular phenomena seems in its very nature to exclude taking doubts of this sort seriously (see *OC* 337). One's expressions of doubt could not be but idle. Either this or they would “seem to drag everything with [them] and plunge it into chaos” (*OC* 613).

This we have already seen in the precariousness of Moore's position—trying to claim knowledge of what appears all too obvious but for which one can give no grounds initiates one's descent into scepticism. And such scepticism is even more alienated from the everyday than Moore's stab at realism: “Nothing would follow from it, nothing be explained by it. It would not tie in with anything in [our lives]” (*OC* 117). If indeed, then, the sense of our expressions, of our claims and doubts, depends on the context of their utterance and thus on what our words there are able to *do*, the sceptic's failure, shared with Moore, to distinguish ground from game seems to render her doubts null, doubts not at all.

siding” (*OC* 210).

5. This, then, appears to capture Wittgenstein's response to the disagreement between Moore and the sceptic: (i) beginning with Moore's claims, he shows us that the words with which we might express knowledge of or conviction in some state of affairs can only do so under certain circumstances, *viz.*, circumstances in which these words are given something to do, and in Moore's case, the meaning of these words still stands in need of determination; we can see this in trying to engage Moore's claims as we would any other knowledge claim—the conversation either goes nowhere (e.g. Moore: “I know that that's a tree.” —KH, with sarcasm not undue: “Oh, really? I would never have guessed!”) or in confusion, descends into doubt about what otherwise in our judgement would have needed no scrutiny, (ii) the doubts we then express are not unlike the sceptic's, and these, holds Wittgenstein, again seem alienated from ordinary life and thought—it is unclear why they persist when nothing really seems amiss or what we are to do differently if indeed we take them seriously, (iii) thus, Wittgenstein suggests that both Moore and the sceptic fail to recognise the bounds of our practices of knowing and doubting—both attempt to express themselves outside of these practices, subjecting propositions whose certainty is necessary to these practices to treatment from *within* them, as if such propositions were ordinary and empirical, and hence open to investigation, (iv) but here, their words fail them; their meaning as it stands from within the context of our practices cannot carry outside these bounds—thus, the respective theses to which Moore and the sceptic would give expression cannot be made intelligible. The sceptical threat against which Moore directs his claims is one that only arises when we make the mistake of trying to speak where our words are inert. This threat, then, seems only cause for

confusion and need not trouble us.

But this strategy against the sceptic, it seems, is not without its own difficulties. At least, insofar as we read Wittgenstein as intending to succeed where Moore has come up short and *refute* scepticism, his strategy seems in need of further supplementation. While his appeal to our ordinary epistemic practices shows the sceptic's claims to be unintelligible within the bounds of these practices—that it would be impossible to at once countenance scepticism and continue on with one's day-to-day claims without experiencing some conflict—what it does not show is that our epistemic practices as they stand are warranted, that what we take to be knowledge within these practices is *really* knowledge. It may well be that the sceptic's claims flout what we take to be proper to making knowledge claims and expressing doubts, but if our practices cannot be shown to stand to the world so as to be able to in fact produce knowledge, Wittgenstein's appeal to our epistemic practices comes to nothing. What we so happen to do *might* give us knowledge of the world, but just as easily, our practices might be merely conventional, giving us only the *impression* of having knowledge. Though we certainly conceive our epistemic practices as a way in which the world is disclosed to us, it may well be that we, as a matter of course, stop asking for and giving grounds for our claims at a certain point not because these claims are then truly justified but because going on would be paralysing. If we lived recognising that we required justification at every turn, then none of us would ever get around to putting one foot forward, much less pruning trees or making maple syrup. Perhaps, then, what we do is just a matter of convenience, of coping with what would otherwise be a life crowded by unshakeable doubts. If this were the case,

there would stand very little between our ordinary epistemic practices and scepticism—just a thin veneer of stipulation to keep our doubts at bay. If, then, Wittgenstein's appeal to our epistemic practices is to be adequate to the task of refuting scepticism, it must be able to show not only that the sceptic disregards the bounds of these practices but that these practices so stand to reality as to enable us to get things right about reality.

But of course, we should keep in mind that Wittgenstein may not intend his appeal to what we do as a total disarmament of the sceptic. It is possible that he means the appeal only as a way of taking out *some* of the sceptic's teeth and that substantiating the relation between our practices and reality would be besides the point. Understanding his response to the disagreement between Moore and the sceptic will be a matter of coming to see where the emphasis in his appeal lies.

CHAPTER 3

THE APPEAL TO OUR LINGUISTIC PRACTICES

1. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein is more or less silent on matters concerning the relation between our epistemic practices and reality, at least insofar as we are concerned about showing these practices to in fact be productive of knowledge. There is little to indicate the grounds on which he might have taken his appeal to our practices to rest and hence little by which to assess the strength or intent of this appeal. The few suggestive remarks that he does make are hardly enough to go on.⁹ But fortunately for us, this appeal to what we do in *On Certainty* is not without precedent elsewhere in Wittgenstein's corpus. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, as we will come to see, the so-called rule-following considerations stand as an interestingly parallel case, wherein the central disagreement is again between realism and scepticism of a sort and Wittgenstein's dissatisfaction with both again leads him to appeal to our practices: "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.'" (*PI* 217). The rule-following considerations, then, stand as a case from whose lessons we might hope to draw insight and relate back to our difficulty in *On Certainty*.

2. Early on in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein likens a rule to a sign-post and considers by what means it might point us in a determinate direction:

⁹ See, for instance, *OC* 425, 475, 559.

A rule stands there like a sign-post.—Does the sign-post leave no doubt open about the way I have to go? Does it shew which direction I am to take when I have passed it; whether along the road or the footpath or cross-country? But where is it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one?—And if there were, not a single sign-post, but a chain of adjacent ones or of chalk marks on the ground—is there only *one* way of interpreting them? (*PI* 81)

This image of a sign-post, trailed by a chain of more just like it—as if these might help to clarify what just the one was meant to convey—anticipates what at *PI* 201 Wittgenstein identifies as 'the rule-following paradox'. The more that we reflect on this sign-post, the more difficult it becomes to say just what about it is supposed to direct us one way rather than another. What's to say that its finger does in fact indicate that we should, say, go left? It is easy enough to imagine how someone else might interpret it differently and go right or even turn back and take the path from which she first came. And what could another or even a chain of such sign-posts do except compound our confusion? It seems, then, that one might take such a sign-post to mean almost anything at all. But if this is indeed so, then we lose hold of our conception of it as a sign-post—a sign-post that directs us any which way directs us nowhere and is no sign-post at all. Its finger does not *point*. It means nothing. This is precisely the difficulty in which we find ourselves at *PI* 201, only the stakes are raised—in jeopardy is not just the possibility of sign-posts but of meaning all together.

If a word is to be meaningful—that is, to be more than empty scratches on a page or squawks in the air—those who use it must do so in accord with a standard of correctness or a rule. Lacking such a standard, one could not use it to any effect. Imagine an infant who has just picked up on the word 'dog'. The first time we hear her utter it, she does so as the neighbour's terrier bounds into view. Perhaps, we think, she has learned her

first word. But then she goes on to pipe, “Dog!” when we offer her a spoonful of peas and yet again when a clap of thunder startles her and she bursts into tears. At this point, we might have to resign ourselves to the fact that 'dog' for her is not yet a word, that she cannot mean anything by it. A sound to which the concepts of correctness and incorrectness have no application is just that—a sound.

But then we may ask ourselves: in virtue of what are *we* able to engage in meaningful acts—what in our case grounds the distinction between correct and incorrect use such as to make our words meaningful? How is meaning in our case so much as possible? Obviously, the infant's case is not our own. When I yelp, “Dog!” and run down the street in terror, only to turn back and see that that from which I fled was in fact a shrub, it seems fair to say that I was mistaken, whereas in the infant's case we could not say even that. The following answer might tempt us: for each of our words there exists a rule that determines a pattern of meaningful use and so determines the correct and incorrect applications of the word. Just, then, as a novice in mathematics might come to grasp the meaning of the instruction '+2' by studying a segment of an arithmetic sequence going up by twos, e.g. '2, 4, 6, 8...', so it is that all of us come to speak meaningfully—we grasp the rule that lies behind each word's use and are thereby able to anticipate where we might apply it accordingly. Speaking a word meaningfully, then, seems a matter of being trained into the appropriate mental state, wherein one's thinking is aligned with the rule as to keep in step with the pattern of use that it dictates.

But here is where Wittgenstein's remarks about the sign-post anticipate the paradox at *PI* 201. One may think that one has from one's observations discerned the rule

lying behind the use of a word such that on the occasions one utters it, one stands in accord with this rule and so speaks meaningfully. But what is to say that there was ever any determinate rule for one to discern, that there was ever anything to ground one's utterances as correct or incorrect? Suppose that 'yellow' is the word in question. Having observed others' use of the word, I now believe that I have grasped the rule behind its use. *R*, I take it, is an expression of this rule and can thus guide my use of 'yellow'. However, my conviction in the rule to which *R* gives expression is grounded in the limited number of cases wherein I witnessed the word's use. Just as the novice mathematician might continue an arithmetic sequence in any number of ways, perhaps in spite of what was intended (see *PI* 185), so I have hit upon only one interpretation of these cases among many. What rule might lie behind all these cases, if any, is not something that I can in fact discern—my observations leave it underdetermined, and adding one, two, or a hundred more such cases to my experience could not remedy this. That there is any rule here to follow is beyond my determination. Or, to put this difficulty another way: though *R* seems to give expression to the rule to which I have committed myself, it too seems susceptible to interpretation. Perhaps when I first formulated *R*, it struck me as meaning that I should do one thing. But now, unbeknownst to me, I have taken to following it in some other way. What commitment is there to speak of in my following *R*, when what my following consists in is acting as *R* happens to strike me now? Any statement of the rule is subject to interpretation and cannot be the standard of correctness that we need. In directing us every which way, it gives no direction at all. Wittgenstein puts it this way:

This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every

course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here. (*PI* 201)

Thus, in spite of what we might intend, or whatever feeling we might have of having grasped precisely what a rule calls for, we seem faced with the prospect that nothing in fact can underpin our use of words, that what we “speak” and “write” is not far from an infant's first babbling.

But we need not concede to this sceptical line so quickly. For one, this obvious amendment of the above picture seems available to us: it is a mistake to think that interpretation must end in regress—though our signs, even those through which we give expression to rules, are susceptible to interpretation after interpretation, the rules *themselves* are not. Here, then, interpretation comes to an end—the rules themselves stand as “the last interpretation” (*BB* p. 34) behind all other interpretations, that which cannot itself be interpreted but through which our interpretations have their meaning. We might thus imagine that meaning something with our words is a matter of having a mental state of sorts, wherein our thoughts align with the rules, their applications extending like “infinitely long rails” (*PI* 218) along whose tracks our thoughts might run. Our words would be meaningful so long as our thoughts kept to the track.

However, this unapologetically platonist picture of meaning leaves us far from that which we take ourselves to inhabit.¹⁰ If what one means by one's words must still be

¹⁰ In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein does not speak explicitly of platonism, but such recurring motifs throughout the rule-following considerations as “the steps” that “are *really* already taken” (*PI* 188) and “the machine” whose movement “seems to be already completely determined” (*PI* 193) suggest that he has platonism in mind. Remarks like the following said in connection with these motifs in turn suggest that platonism is one of his targets: “But when we reflect that the machine could also have moved differently it may look as if the way it moves must be contained in the machine-as-symbol far more determinately than in the actual machine. As if it were not enough for the movements in question to be empirically determined in advance, but they had to be really—in a mysterious sense—already *present*.”

interpreted to accord with a rule, then possibly with the exception of oneself, what in fact one means is anyone's guess—with *which* rule one intends to speak in accord is something that one cannot communicate, meaning that one cannot communicate at all. Imagine a conversation between me and you on this picture. It may be a fact that I speak my words in accord with determinate rules and so speak meaningfully, but my words, put out into the air, would be but noise until interpreted again in accord with these rules (or some other rules). Though you, then, might believe that I intend my words along the lines of these very rules, I could never confirm this for you—the calls for clarification, the examples, the re-articulations that we might pass back and forth between us in our effort to exchange thoughts would fall dead in the air between us, *still* in need of interpretation despite the same rules that were for each of us present to mind. So long as we conceive of meaning as something inner, something that each of us for ourselves must confer on what would otherwise remain lifeless sounds, our conversations could be no more than guessing games (see *PI* 503-504).

And, from my own standpoint, what could guarantee that I do in fact speak my words in accord with determinate rules? I may have the feeling that I do, whether or not my thoughts are so engaged with the rails. Though there may have been a time when indeed they were, if they had since then been derailed, I would be in no position to tell. Again, it seems that I would just act as the rule strikes me, and it is difficult to see what sense we could give to the notion of 'going on in the same way', if this was all that

[...] When does one have the thought: the possible movements of a machine are already there in it in some mysterious sense?—Well, when one is doing philosophy” (*PI* 193-194).

But because Wittgenstein's remarks both on what platonism for him amounts to and on what he finds objectionable about it are merely suggestive, I have drawn heavily from John McDowell (1998a: 203-212) and David Finkelstein's (2000: 54-55, 66-68) interpretations of Wittgenstein on these matters.

following a rule consisted in. As Wittgenstein says:

“All the steps are really already taken” means: I no longer have any choice. The rule, once stamped with a particular meaning, traces the lines along which it is to be followed through the whole of space.—But if something of this sort were really the case, how would it help? (PI 219)

[...] to *think* that 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)

Thus, this insistence on there being rules that work like infinitely long rails we can latch onto is of no help in itself. The standard that these rules could set would not be a standard available to us. All that we could have is the *impression* of saying something with our words.

3. At this point, then, it may appear as though Wittgenstein intends to concede meaning to the paradox. If the very rules to which one commits oneself cannot genuinely serve as a standard for *us*, it may seem that our conception of words as rule-governed, and hence as bearers of meaning, is not one that we can substantiate. Though we would not be the first to advance this reading, it would mean overlooking what Wittgenstein goes on to say of the paradox:

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 a 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 a rule” and “going against it” in actual cases. (PI 201)

Here, he suggests that we only find ourselves caught in the paradox if we think that interpretation is the only way we have of grasping a rule. Only if we think that our words and our rules are not already there to be understood, and thus in need of interpretation, do

we think that we must either fruitlessly insist on the 'rules as rails' picture or concede that meaning anything with our words is impossible. But, as our own efforts show, Wittgenstein thinks, interpretation cannot be the only way in which we grasp meaning. In attempting to ground what we mean in interpretation after interpretation, we at least show that interpretation is *one* way of giving sense to what we mean. But interpretation could not be even that if there was not a more fundamental way of making sense, for, as we have seen, giving an interpretation re-attracts the question for which we first sought an answer through interpretation (e.g. What do you mean by 'P?'). In trying to ground our words in interpretation to begin with, then, we already show interpretation to be a way of answering the question—this could not be so unless there was another way of answering that did not invite further interpretation.¹¹ Wittgenstein puts it like this:

“But how can 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: every interpretation, together with what is being interpreted, hangs in the air; the former cannot give the latter any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning.

[...] Let me ask this: what has the expression of a rule—say a sign-post—got to do with my actions? What sort of connexion is there here?—Well, perhaps this one: I have been trained to react to this sign in a particular way, and now I do so react to it.

But that is only to give a causal connexion; to tell how it has come about that we now go by the sign-post; not what this going-by-the-sign really consists in. On the contrary; I have

11 In *Self-Consciousness* (pp. 22-25, 34-38, 69-72, 79-84), Sebastian Rödl identifies a recurring form of explanation in traditional philosophical problematics—its hallmark is that it re-attracts a question of the same form that it was intended to answer, e.g. in the case of belief: Why do you believe *P*? —Because I believe *Q*. Why do you believe *Q*? —Because I believe *R*. Why do you believe *R*? ... When we encounter this form of explanation, argues Rödl, we should not despair, for what we confront is not a regress—that we take an explanation of this form to answer the question at hand *at all* suggests that there is another form of explanation we may employ that does not re-attract the question. This latter form of explanation gives sense to the former. Without it, the former form would be empty, and no regress could have gotten off of the ground. In the case of belief, an explanation of the latter form might be, “I saw *Q*” if we take perception here to be veridical. In 'The Idea of Practice', Rödl applies this argument to the rule-following considerations in particular. I owe my understanding of this part of *PI* 201 to Rödl's argument in both pieces.

further indicated that a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom. (*PI* 198)

This last line is particularly suggestive. Having just dismissed the misconception of interpretation as all-important to meaning, Wittgenstein draws our attention to customs—only if there exists a custom, he intimates, can we give sense to someone's acting in accord with a rule. There can be no following sign-posts, playing chess, taking orders, etc. unless there is a custom of doing just these things, for only in virtue of such customs can we say that turning left with a sign-post's finger is correct or that moving one's bishop along the rank and file is incorrect. Customs are what give us our standards of correctness. Often enough, then, we need not interpret what the expression of a rule calls for because there is a custom of following it in such-and-such a way (see *PI* 213).

This appeal to the notion of a custom may first strike us as extraordinarily simple, platitudinous even—for, as we may say, it is of course the case that human customs confer life onto our signs; what for a dog, for instance, is but another spot at which to mark his territory or scratch himself, is for us a sign-post that points, “*This way!*” Who would think to insist otherwise—insist, that is, that a lump of stone or etchings in the sand were intrinsically meant to be understood in such-and-such a way? That I can take a wrong turn at a sign-post but a dog cannot speaks to the necessity of initiation into human custom when it comes to such matters of correctness and incorrectness. This is hardly news.

But this quick dismissal misses Wittgenstein's point. If his appeal to the notion of a custom here is meant to support the thought that the paradox of *PI* 201 is a misunderstanding, then he cannot simply mean that the particular bearers of meaning we happen to use—sign-posts, chess pieces, pennies, Roman numerals, etc.—being human

artefacts, go by the rules on which we have so happened to have decided. That in some sense a rook is only a rook for someone initiated into the game of chess is true but uninterestingly so. Wittgenstein's appeal, rather, is meant to suggest that human customs have a role in grounding the distinction between correct and incorrect uses of our words, that they in one way or another make meaning possible—not just in regard to what we should call a 'bishop' and the directions in which it may advance across the board but, more importantly, in regard to the sorts of shade we may call 'yellow' or the sort of matter we may call 'diamond'. And this is far more radical a claim. If someone stops me while I am out picking tomatoes, for instance, and asks me, “Why are you only picking some of those?” and none of my explanations satisfy her (e.g. KH: “I was told to pick only the yellow ones.” —“But how do you know that those count as 'yellow'?”), then I, having run out of explanations, may rightly echo Wittgenstein in saying:

“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.” (*PI* 217)

For, given *PI* 201, such an appeal is a perfectly adequate response (to be distinguished from a response like “This is what I *felt* like doing,” which makes no appeal to anything but a whim), the only response, perhaps, left to give. That this is what I do grounds my explanations *as* explanations—from the standpoint of one for whom picking *these* tomatoes is just the right thing to do, for whom these tomatoes are just what is called 'yellow', these are the only explanations one can give. For me, there is no need to *interpret* 'yellow' as meaning one thing or another. I simply grasp the word and see that *these*, being yellow, are the tomatoes that I should pick. I can attempt to explain why this

is so (e.g. *this*, *that*, and *those* are what we call 'yellow'), but for one who does not share my standpoint—as clearly is the case with she who presses me beyond the point of explanation—such attempts will seem groundless. When pressed to this point, then, all that I can do is try to bring my interlocutor to see things as I do and then to do as I do. But this goes beyond giving reasons—it is akin to the training that one would give a young child in order to share with her one's language and one's world. It would seem, then, that the paradox of *PI* 201 only arises when we treat our words as though we had no customs on which to draw, as though such words could mean anything. Only then do they seem in need of interpretation, but at this point, we have already given up on the only grounds that we could have had for going with one interpretation rather than another.

4. Undoubtedly, Wittgenstein's appeal to custom is meant to show the paradox to be founded on a misunderstanding. Interpretation is not the only way in which we may grasp a rule—in fact, it is the exception. The customs into which we are all initiated give us a view of the world in common, such that, ordinarily, our words, gestures, and signs need no interpretation—we simply see them for what they mean. But is this fact of our customs meant to *solve* the paradox entirely and produce the backdrop of facts against which our use of words is made meaningful? Is Wittgenstein's appeal to custom, in other words, intended in the place of the platonist's 'rules as rails'—a picture that *guarantees* the meaningfulness of our words? If this is so, we should ask ourselves to what extent this appeal can in fact deliver.

It seems that we may anticipate at least two serious difficulties. First, if our

initiation into human customs is to falsify the paradox at *PI* 201, i.e. that (i) every course of action can be made out to accord with a rule, and that, therefore, (ii) no course of action can be determined by a rule, then such initiation must be able to fix for us the meaning of a rule's expressions such as to guarantee agreement among us in the rule's application. For, only if a rule's requirements are manifest to all of us in the same way, such that we can amongst ourselves apply it and recognise particular instances of its application, can there be no need for interpretation, either of our actions or our rules. But it is not clear that initiation into a custom can do this work. It seems that such initiation could not but consist in presenting would-be initiates with an expression of a rule alongside particular instances of its application. We might, for instance, try to initiate young children into the custom of measuring by weight by giving them scales and asking them to bring us small quantities of one thing or another, e.g. fifty grams of cheese, seventy grams of coffee, twenty grams of rye, hoping that in the end they might have some conception of what a gram is and how it differs from ten or twenty grams. But even if we did this more than once with the same children, we could only give so many examples of what we wanted to get across—what prevents some of the children from failing to see these examples as we do and misunderstanding the rule of which they are applications? Often enough, it is precisely the novice who asks, “Why do things this way?” or “What tells us to do that?” beyond the point of explanation, who tries to extend the rule in ways in which it does not apply. Why, then, for the would-be initiate, isn't it the case that every course of action can be made out with a rule that she has not yet grasped? And what allows her to go from not seeing our examples as applications of the same rule

to seeing them just as we do? Unless there is more to say about what initiation into a custom amounts to, that we do in fact go on in the same way as one another will remain a miraculous feat for which such initiation is hardly sufficient explanation. That we manage to say anything with our words to one another would then seem to rest on something entirely too contingent and unknown.

Second, while we might be happy to concede that a custom can ground one's turning left at a sign-post or one's advancing a pawn a single square forward, it seems another thing entirely to concede that a custom may ground one's calling a buttercup 'yellow' or one's adding two and two to make four. In the former sort of case, it is not difficult to see how the existence of a custom would be enough to ground one's actions. So long as one is playing chess, for instance, one must agree to keep to its rules and see the relevant bits of the world through the guise of the game—one must, that is, see this bit of wood as a bishop, those bits as one's own pieces, this arrangement as a checkmate, that as one's defeat, etc. Only in so doing can one be said to be doing more than shifting around bits of coloured wood, to be *playing chess*. That chess is played in such-and-such a way, then, that *this* and *that* are examples of moves in accord with its rules, that *this* is what counts as a draw, etc., are enough both to ground and constrain the moves that one might make. One needs nothing apart from the custom, from the regular agreement between persons sitting in front of chessboards, to play thus-and-so. However, it seems objectionable to conceive all rule-governed acts in just this way—language in particular, if it is to be meaningful, requires more than just customs to ground the distinction between correct and incorrect acts. Though our words, of course, were at some point

invented in the history of our forebears, that they are meaningful seems not just in virtue of the customs of which we are all initiates but in virtue of the fact that with them we are able to *describe* the world. That, for instance, my use of the word 'yellow' is meaningful when I say "The fireflies winked yellow," seems not because I speak from the standpoint of a custom, wherein *this* sort of thing we happen to call 'yellow'—rather it is because 'yellow' corresponds to something in the world, *viz.*, a colour, and so is something I may ascribe to other things in the world, correctly or incorrectly. Thus, while the fact that one is playing chess may give good enough grounds for one's advancing a rook down a file, it does not seem as though we can say something similar about one's calling the light 'yellow', if what we do is aim to speak the truth. We should distinguish between customs or practices whose normative constraints are wholly anthropogenic (like chess) and those whose constraints must answer to the world, at least if they are to remain the customs we have taken them to be (e.g. reference, scientific inquiry). That, then, there is a custom of calling such things 'yellow' is not enough to make my utterances of 'yellow' mean something—there must in fact be yellow things in the world to which our custom corresponds and in virtue of which our calling particular things 'yellow' is either correct or incorrect. If Wittgenstein's appeal to our linguistic customs is to solve the paradox of *PI* 201, he must be able to show that these customs stand to the world in just this way, that they so relate to the world as to enable us to describe it.

But of course, we should keep ourselves open to the possibility that Wittgenstein's appeal to custom is not meant to solve the rule-following paradox and replace 'rules as rails' platonism—after all, he only says at *PI* 201 that the paradox is a *misunderstanding*.

We must consider whether this can be shown without embarking on an all-out refutation of the position the paradox represents. Much of what we should make of Wittgenstein's appeal thus depends on determining what he meant to accomplish.

CHAPTER 4

LESSONS FROM THE RULE-FOLLOWING CONSIDERATIONS

1. At this point, we should have in view the ways in which Wittgenstein's treatment of rule-following in the *Investigations* parallels his treatment of knowledge and doubt in *On Certainty*. There are, I think, three interrelated points of comparison at which consideration of the former will give us insight into the latter.

(i) *setup*: In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein confronts Moore's naïve realism, on the one hand, and Cartesian-cum-Humean scepticism on the other. It seems that one must side either with Moore in claiming, “I know that that's a tree” or with the sceptic and deny that what one has amounts to knowledge. But Wittgenstein does neither, for both positions, he thinks, represent an extreme born of the same misunderstanding and are thus not positions we need choose between. Both take it that one can give sense to expressions of doubt and knowledge beyond the bounds of the epistemic practices in which they have their home. Both, then, take expressions that we do say, and of which we can make sense, and confound them, twisting them to fashion their respective philosophical theses: *when one is so situated as not to be able to conceive how one could be mistaken with respect to a state of affairs, one has knowledge of it, and even when one is so situated as not to be able to conceive how one could be mistaken with respect to a state of affairs, there are possibilities that one has not yet ruled out—thus, one cannot know that this state of*

affairs is the case. But these theses, thinks Wittgenstein, rest on a mistake. One cannot take expressions outside of their practices and expect their meaning to extend likewise—here, they can only be mistaken for something they are not. Wittgenstein's task in *On Certainty* is thus a matter of undoing this misunderstanding and rehabilitating the expressions in question in their ordinary use.

In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein is similarly confronted with two opposed extremes—on the one hand, there is the 'rules as rails' platonist who insists that there are determinate standards of correctness with which we only need mentally engage in order to speak meaningfully; on the other, there is the sceptic whose arguments entail that it is a mystery how a sound or a mark on a page could mean anything. And again, Wittgenstein commits to neither position, for the choice between them again rests on a common misunderstanding, *viz.*, that our signs are dead until they are *interpreted* in accord with a rule. From this, the platonist forms her thesis: *our signs are made meaningful in virtue of rules whose applications extend of themselves and so determine correct and incorrect use—interpreting and intending our signs in accord with these rules give them life; it is just a matter of latching onto them for guidance*, and the sceptic her thesis: *our signs cannot be meaningful, for every sign can be interpreted to accord with a rule such that nothing grounds the distinction between correct and incorrect applications of the rule—our signs, then, remain dead*. But grasping a rule, thinks Wittgenstein, need not be—indeed, most often is not—a matter of interpretation. Our signs only appear lifeless if we consider them 'sideways-on' as it were, but to do this is to close ourselves off from the customs in which these signs have their life (see *PI* 432). Interpretation is limited to those occasions on

which a sign's meaning is not already manifest to us. Like doubt, we can only make sense of it in certain settings. Again, then, in the rule-following considerations, Wittgenstein aims to correct a serious misunderstanding and rehabilitate what is right to its place in ordinary use.

There is, however, at least one serious qualification to this parallel that we should now consider. Though both in *On Certainty* and in the rule-following considerations Wittgenstein confronts a form of scepticism, these, we should note, are different forms. The sceptic to whom he responds in the former, as we have already seen, is a *Cartesian* sceptic in the sense that she is concerned with the actuality of things—she takes the possibility of experience for granted but asks of 'best case of knowledge' scenarios whether things are *really* as they seem. For her, the gap that we have yet to overcome is that between appearance and reality. By comparison, the sceptic of the latter is what we might call, following James Conant, a *Kantian* sceptic in the sense that she is concerned not with *what* in fact a sign means or whether she has interpreted it correctly but *how* it is possible for a sign to so much as seem to mean something at all.¹² She is concerned, that is, with the possibility of meaning, with bridging the gap between lifeless signs and

12 In 'Varieties of Scepticism', Conant provides a meticulous account of these two forms of scepticism. As he argues, it is important that we are aware of which of these forms of scepticism is under consideration in Wittgenstein's reflections, for to Kant's strategy against the sceptic Wittgenstein adds his own—we should be attentive to what Wittgenstein in fact does where: "The Wittgensteinian way is not an alternative to, but rather a supplementation of the Kantian way. [...] The Wittgensteinian way incorporates a further movement, pushing the sceptic in the opposite direction from the one in which Kant seeks to push him: not only following the sceptic's presuppositions out to their ultimate consequences, but also examining the initial steps in the Cartesian sceptic's progress towards doubt, identifying how the sceptic passes from ordinary to philosophical doubt [...] The Kantian way compels the sceptic to progress further and further forward, further and further from the ordinary, and deeper and deeper into philosophical perplexity, to an ever more violent form of questioning, to the point at which the sceptic's question consumes itself. The Wittgensteinian way adds to this pressure an additional one that seeks to bring the sceptic back to the place where he started, where he already is an never left, but in such a way that he is able to recognise it for the first time" (Conant, 2004: 124-125).

determinate expressions of thought.

We cannot get any further into the differences between these two forms of scepticism here. However, it is important that we note that any insight that we gain from our study of the rule-following considerations cannot be applied directly to *On Certainty* because of the formal difference between the two cases. Though Cartesian and Kantian scepticism are certainly related, a strategy employed towards the solution or dissolution of a case of the one cannot be straightforwardly applied in a case of the other. Just how this bears on our inquiry will come to light in greater detail below.

(ii) *an appeal to what we do*: in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein develops for us a picture of ordinary doubt. Such doubt has a particular place in our lives—we experience it when something about our situation seems amiss, when we have some indication that things may not be as they appear. There are, then, circumstances in which expressions of doubt have no place, in which our words have nothing to do, perhaps because nothing we can name seems amiss or because doubt here would bring everything in our lives to a standstill. Doubt only makes sense if we know what in principle would count towards us turning out to be right or wrong, for it concerns not only what we should believe but what we should do. Set against this picture, the doubts of the Cartesian sceptic are idle—though nothing seems amiss, she insists that we are not entitled to certainty here, that there are possibilities that we have not yet ruled out, as if such possibilities that cannot be ruled out could give us reason to doubt ourselves. In developing this comparison, Wittgenstein thus appeals to our epistemic practices against the sceptic—though her

expressions bear a striking resemblance to ours, he suggests, we cannot understand her doubts as doubts because she speaks outside of the contexts in which our expressions of doubt have their sense. What the sceptic does not appreciate is that we can only give or ask for grounds for belief up until a certain point. After this, there is only what we do—what we do, that is, as a matter of engaging in what we call 'knowing' and doubting'—and here, giving or asking for grounds is not something we can make sense of. These acts are only intelligible from *within* the practice: “[...] As if giving grounds did not come to an end sometime. But the end is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting” (OC 110). In this way, Wittgenstein's response to scepticism in *On Certainty* rests on an appeal to what we do.

In the rule-following considerations, Wittgenstein similarly locates his dissatisfaction with scepticism in its disregard for the bounds set by what we do. The doubts that this sceptic expresses about the possibility of meaning only get their grip on us if we concede that grasping a rule is giving it an interpretation. In conceding this, it appears that nothing favours any one interpretation of a sign over the others, that our taking '*P*' to mean *P* is a groundless assumption ('*P*', it seems, could mean most anything at all). But this, according to Wittgenstein, is not our situation. Ordinarily, our words are not susceptible to interpretation because our initiation into linguistic customs (e.g. referring to colours, recounting events, telling stories) has made it such that we now see the world in a particular way. Lines in the sand, shrieks in the air, dots on a page—all these have become words for us. There is no need to interpret—initiation into linguistic customs makes the meaning of signs manifest to us. Though we may give justifications

for understanding a sign, obeying an order, or following an instruction in the particular way that we do, here too justification comes to an end, for it can only be understood as such from within the practice in question. Again at bottom, we have only what we do to ground what we do. Thus, Wittgenstein gives the same role to what we do in the *Investigations* as he does in *On Certainty*—in both cases, when we have exhausted all justification, we hit bedrock and can only say, “This is what we do.”

(iii) *customs/practices as they stand in relation to the world*: if Wittgenstein's appeal to practices in *On Certainty* is meant to refute scepticism, it seems that this appeal requires further substantiation. In order for the appeal to do the work of showing the sceptic's doubts to be nonsensical, Wittgenstein must show that our epistemic practices stand in relation to the world in such a way that when we are satisfied with the grounds we have been given or do not see grounds for doubt, we are (most of the time) in fact justified in being so satisfied. Our epistemic practices, that is, must reflect something of the world such that our knowledge claims do in fact coincide with our having knowledge rather than our being under the illusion that this is so, e.g. so that when I say, “I know that that's a sugar maple” after having consulted a botany book or taken in a sample for analysis, I do in fact have knowledge and had no grounds for doubting that it was a tree. Otherwise, Wittgenstein's appeal can carry no weight—that we stop asking for grounds at *this* point or do not doubt under *these* circumstances may just be a matter of convenience, of avoiding paralysis by our doubts. Refuting scepticism here thus requires that we fill in a gap between what we do and how things are.

Similarly, in the *Investigations*, for Wittgenstein to solve the rule-following paradox of *PI* 201, he must show that our linguistic customs so stand in relation to the world as to enable us to speak meaningfully by being able to speak the truth. Though our custom of playing chess might be good enough to ground our moving a bishop along a diagonal, our having a custom of calling things of *this* sort 'yellow' or of calling things of *that* sort 'round' is not sufficient for making such utterances meaningful. That I should call *this* 'yellow' should depend on more than having a custom wherein this is done—it should depend on the way the world is, on the fact that this thing is indeed yellow. The truth, and not simply what we take to be true, must determine the correct and incorrect applications of the word—only then can our words be descriptive of the world and say something. So unless Wittgenstein can in some way show that our customs do stand in relation to the world such that we can speak the truth, it does not seem that his appeal to our linguistic customs can silence scepticism about the possibility of meaning. Thus, both of Wittgenstein's appeals to what we do call for clarification about the ambitiousness of his aims and about his view of certain practices of ours as they stand in relation to the world.

From this overview, the strong structural parallels between Wittgenstein's responses to scepticism in *On Certainty* and in the rule-following considerations should be clear. While not perfect, they are enough, I think, to motivate a deeper look into the latter in the hope of gaining insight into how we're to understand the former.

2. The differences in opinion among Wittgenstein's various commentators are notoriously radical, and in this respect, the rule-following considerations are no exception. There are a number of ways that we might construe these differences, but those most salient to our interests are as follows: as being between (a) communitarian and non-communitarian readings, (b) sceptical and non-sceptical readings, (c) assertability-conditional and truth-conditional readings, and (d) anti-realist and realist readings.¹³ Up until this point, we have, for the most part, considered the difficulty that Wittgenstein's appeal to our practices faces from a realist standpoint—that is, we have described the two problematics in question thinking that Wittgenstein intends to *refute* scepticism and appeal to our linguistic and epistemic practices as *reflecting* how things stand with the world. A look at three of Wittgenstein's most astute commentators on the rule-following considerations will help us see whether and to what extent our approach so far has been justified.

In *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Saul Kripke famously argues that Wittgenstein's solution to the paradox of *PI* 201 is sceptical—that it begins, that is, by conceding that the sceptic's challenge cannot be answered, at least not in a way that affirms the existence of facts about what we mean. This solution, then, is not what Kripke calls a 'straight' solution, wherein one denies that scepticism was ever warranted in the first place (think Descartes in the *Meditations*). Rather, it is akin to Hume's sceptical

13 Construals (b) through (d), I take it, are straightforward—(a), however, proves to be less so. Apart from interpretations such as those of Colin McGinn or G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, which maintain that Wittgenstein's notion of practice makes room for a solitary individual (think Robinson Crusoe) establishing rules of his own and engaging in rule-following behaviour without difficulty, nearly all interpretations of the rule-following considerations are *in some sense* communitarian. But as we will see below, what such communitarianism amounts to will differ from commentator to commentator, depending on his other commitments. Construals (a) through (d) thus cut across one another in interesting ways in each view.

solution in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. It accepts that we can give no justification that would refute the sceptic's negative thesis, *viz.*, that there are no facts that ground one's meaning one thing rather than another, but then goes on to show that such justification is unnecessary for preserving everyday experience—there remains a sense in which we can mean something with our words (Kripke, 1982: 66-68). Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein is, as we might already suspect, somewhat idiosyncratic. Before considering the so-called sceptical solution, then, we should first turn to his formulation of the rule-following paradox.

As Kripke understands it, the trouble with following a rule is this: though I perfectly well understand what it would be for me to use a word like 'plus' correctly, if I consider my past uses of it, I will be unable to determine whether or not I in fact spoke in accord with the rule *plus* (Kripke, 1982: 11-13). Search as I may, I will find no fact of the matter that confirms that I have always used 'plus' in accord with *plus* and not, say, *quus*, a rule equally compatible with my past uses of the word. Kripke defines the 'quus' function as follows: $x \text{ quus } y = x + y$, if $x, y < 57$, otherwise $= 5$. Given that I have never performed an addition problem whose terms were greater than or equal to 57, nothing in my history of doing sums can speak to my having followed one rule over the other. The answers that I have given are equally susceptible to either interpretation. And though I may try to insist that I acted in accord with *plus*, explaining the method I used in my head or appealing to an 'inner' feeling that I have always had when the correct answer has struck me, I will find that there is always a way that what I have done or felt can be interpreted to accord with *quus* (Kripke, 1982: 16). Perhaps, what I do when I add is

represent each term in the equation as a corresponding number of pebbles and then count all of the pebbles. Though such a method might at first appear inimical to *quus*, I will soon discover that nothing in my history prevents my sense of 'count' from being interpreted to accord with *quounting* (where, if one has counted 57 or more pebbles corresponding to one term of an equation, the result of one's counting must be 5). Having only ever performed a finite number of addition problems, the facts of my history underdetermine how I must act in future—there is no fact of the matter about which rule I have followed in the past, and so nothing that can speak for any addition problem that I do now. Unable, then, to substantiate my use of a word like 'plus' as being in accord with a determinate rule, I must resign myself to the fact that there are no facts about my meaning anything. And this conclusion, of course, is generalisable to each and every one of us. This, according to Kripke, Wittgenstein concedes to the sceptic—no facts can ground any determinate meaning that we take ourselves to communicate with our words:

To say that there is a general rule in my mind that tells me how to add in the future is only to throw the problem back on to other rules that also seem to be given only in terms of finitely many cases. What can there be in my mind that I make use of when I act in the future? It seems that the entire idea of meaning vanishes into thin air. (Kripke, 1982: 22)

But this, thinks Kripke, is not the end of the matter. That we mean *P* by '*P*' need not rely on a fact. This is an assumption of truth-conditional theories of meaning, wherein our utterances are made meaningful because what they express is truth-apt, which is to say that their content may truly or falsely describe independent states of affairs. An utterance like 'this is yellow' is thus meaningful so long as our use of it tends to correspond with circumstances in which it can be said truly. But if we take seriously the sceptical paradox of *PI* 201, a picture of this sort is no longer tenable—there are no facts

about what one means and so no sense in which what one says can be said truly or falsely of the world. We cannot go so far as asking for the conditions under which 'this is yellow' is true, for how we have been using the sentence is underdetermined by the facts—they point as much to our meaning *grelow* by 'yellow' as they do to our meaning yellow by it.¹⁴ Instead, then, of searching for facts to ground meaning, thinks Kripke, we should consider the role that our words have in our lives. Giving content to what someone means by a word is thus a matter of asking after the role that ascriptions of meaning play for us (Kripke, 1982: 73). We might ask ourselves, for instance, about the role that such a sentence as 'By "plus" KH means *plus* and not *quus*' has in our language. In doing so, we would receive not the truth conditions for this sentence but its assertability conditions, the conditions, that is, under which we are *justified* in asserting it. And in a case like this, argues Kripke, where we are interested in ascribing meaning to someone's words, the conditions come to this: (i) that the speaker, in this case, KH, believes that she uses the word in accord with the rule in question, *viz.*, *plus*, and (ii) that fellow members of her linguistic community believe that she uses the word in just the same way as they would in these circumstances (Kripke, 1982: 90-91). For, when we ascribe meaning to someone's words, it is in the interest of (i) if we are the speaker, showing that we indeed grasp the sense of the words we speak just in the way that everyone else does, or (ii) if we are fellow members of the speaker's linguistic community, identifying the speaker as a *full* member of this community—as one who shares our understanding of the world and can

14 I mean by 'grelow' a colour akin to Nelson Goodman's *grue*—the underdetermined facts of one's history are consistent with one meaning *grelow* in calling things 'yellow', i.e. that they are yellow now upon examination but were green up until some past time *t*.

be expected to do as we do. But both conditions must be satisfied if we are to be justified in asserting such a sentence. The first, Kripke recognises, is not enough on its own, for one can believe that one speaks in accord with a rule without it being so. The second, then, is meant to provide a measure of accountability—one is subject to correction by one's peers, as an apprentice might be to her master. One, therefore, only means *P* by '*P*' if the members of one's community in turn judge that this so. This approval from the community gives content to our ascriptions of meaning. In this way, thinks Kripke, we preserve the everyday sense that we can mean something with our words.

Though Kripke's essay is an interesting study of the rule-following considerations, it does little to challenge the assumptions of our approach thus far. First, as other commentators have pointed out, its claim that Wittgenstein accepts the sceptical upshot of the paradox at *PI* 201 stands in clear contradiction with the analysis that directly follows.¹⁵ Here, Wittgenstein states unequivocally that the paradox rests on a misunderstanding. Only in supposing that we must interpret a rule to grasp it does the paradox get off the ground. Any plausible reading of the substance of Wittgenstein's remarks thus cannot interpret him as leaving the paradox unaddressed. Kripke's reading not only allows the paradox to stand but perpetuates its essential misunderstanding—if ascriptions of meaning are only given content in virtue of approval from one's linguistic community, what one means with one's words is still susceptible to interpretation; it is just that one's community has agreed that we are justified in giving them *this* interpretation.

Second, it is unclear that Kripke's Wittgenstein, having made such a concession,

15 See (G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, 1984), (Malcolm, 1986) and (McDowell, 1998b).

can in fact escape the paradox's sceptical conclusion. Though Kripke is not wrong to place importance on Wittgenstein's continual appeals to a word's use and the place that our words have in our lives ordinarily, this thought cannot serve Kripke's ends in this case. He is right in believing that the first of his assertability conditions cannot give content to an attribution of meaning—for, in the case of a single person, seeming correct and being correct are indistinguishable from one another. I may set out to act in accord with a particular rule, but since I will only act as seems to me to be correct, I have no access to an independent standard against which I can check my acts. However, drawing on the opinions of one's peers as Kripke does cannot help with this difficulty. If I take it that in adding two and two to make four I mean *plus* by 'and' and not some other rule, perhaps because of a feeling that I have, what do the opinions of a few others do to secure this belief? That they too would do the same as me in this case, their act perhaps accompanied by a similar feeling, does not further substantiate my belief—except, perhaps, if we think that empirically such consensus makes it more likely that my belief is correct than if it were just me who thought so. Otherwise, Kripke's introduction of a linguistic community seems simply to compound the initial problem. Now there are a great deal of us who believe, seeing that they would do as I do, that my performance accords with *plus* and that when I use the sign '+' I do indeed mean *addition* and not some other operation. But there still seems to be no standard against which we can check our judgements. Just as in the individual case, then, where *seeming* to be correct and *being* correct are the same for me, so we can say of all of us that *our* seeming to be correct and *our* being correct are the *same* for us. It does not seem that the simple fact of agreement,

that we have all agreed that *this* is what will count as addition, is enough to justify our asserting that “By '+', KH means *plus* and not *quus*.” If all we have is communal agreement, there is no real standard by which we can distinguish between correctness and incorrectness. Without having more to go on, there is just the community's opinion supported by the community's opinion, spinning, as it were, in the void.

At bottom, then, Kripke's reading of the rule-following considerations is inadequate to the task. It is not attentive enough to the text and so takes up the very misunderstanding that Wittgenstein denounces as such. And having conceded this much to scepticism, it does not have the wherewithal to preserve the possibility of meaning. What Kripke's Wittgenstein gives us is a *semblance* of meaning—with standards left up to a linguistic community whose members are no better off than oneself, one comes to believe that one is saying something just because one has agreed with the others that everyone means just what they think they mean.

3. In some ways, Crispin Wright's reading of the rule-following considerations resembles Kripke's—it shares in one way or another many of the latter's leanings, e.g. communitarianism, anti-realism, hostility to truth-conditional theories of meaning, etc. It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss Wright out of hand because of this. His reading of Wittgenstein, I think, is worth consideration in its own right, if only to bring out the serious challenges that need taking on with a commitment to realism.

According to Wright, the upshot of the rule-following considerations is not, as Kripke would have it, that there are no facts about meaning but, rather, that speaking

meaningfully is not a matter of having one's words conform to *investigation-independent* facts—facts, that is, to do with states of affairs that we have not yet fully investigated.¹⁶ Only in committing ourselves to such a picture of meaning—wherein our expressions are beholden to a pattern of use that extends *of itself*—do we run into the troubles of the paradox at *PI* 201. Wright sets up the problem as follows. If one is committed to investigation-independence, then one would believe, say, of a particular distant star yet unobserved that there are *already* determinate facts about it that we *could* state: “the putative investigation-independent fact about the correct description of [the star's] shape [would be] a fact about how we would describe it if on the relevant occasion we continued to use germane expressions in [...] the way in which we have always tried to use those expressions when aiming to tell the truth” (Wright, 2001b: 34). This commitment, then, leads us into a picture of meaning wherein grasping the meaning of an expression is grasping a general pattern of use, “conformity to which requires certain determinate uses in so far unconsidered cases. The pattern is thus to be thought of as extending *of itself* to cases which we have yet to confront” (Wright, 2001b: 34).

The trouble with this picture, thinks Wright, is that in the end we cannot actually

¹⁶ Wright makes the distinction between evidence-transcendent facts and investigation-independent facts (2001b: 33-34). On the one hand, facts about the past are evidence-transcendent in that the states of affairs about which these facts purport to be are no longer accessible to us for verification—though, of course, we may at present have evidence that dinosaurs once roamed the earth, anything that we want to say about there having been such dinosaurs is *not* about the existence of fossils (which we can verify) but about dinosaurs (which we can't). On the other hand, facts about, e.g. the number on the scrap of paper that I have just pulled from a hat, are investigation-independent in that we have not yet fully investigated the state of affairs in question. Though, of course, whether the number is odd or even, whether it is prime, whether it is a multiple of five, etc. are objective and decidable questions, that we have not yet looked at the scrap of paper on which it was written makes the truth or falsity of these considerations investigation-independent. In suggesting that the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* is sceptical of investigation-independence, then, Wright attributes to him a far more radical position than even that of the verificationist.

make sense of it—we follow no such patterns in speaking meaningfully. One may think that one's use of 'green' follows a determinate rule and so conforms to a particular pattern of use, but how can one substantiate this? One may try to give a characterisation of the rule one follows or provide examples of the sort of thing that one calls 'green', but one's attempts will come to nothing, for another can always interpret these attempts differently from the way that one intends them. And though one may still be tempted to insist that one knows what one's understanding of 'green' requires of one, even if others may not catch on (one calls things of *this* sort 'green!'), what could this be but a feeling that one has? One cannot give content to what one means by “things of *this* sort.” As Wright puts it:

I can flatter myself that I use a word in a stable, determinate way and know within myself at least what this way is, and how I intend to continue. But if there really were an objective but perhaps incommunicable pattern which I set out to follow in my use of the word 'green', then it is conceivable that while seeming to myself to be using the word in an essentially consistent way, my employment of it might actually be quite chaotic and irregular. All that I can effectively intend to do is to apply 'green' just when it *seems* to me that things are relevantly similar; but that is not a commitment to any regularity—it is merely an undertaking to apply 'green' just when I am disposed to apply 'green'. (2001a: 29)

One's situation is like that of the private linguist: “And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule” (*PI* 202). All that one has is one's feeling of conviction that *this* is the sort of thing one calls 'green'—no determinate pattern guides one's use of the word. Seeming correct and being correct are thus the same for one. And, moreover, turning to one's fellow speakers will be of no help if what one seeks to do is show one's uses of 'green' are pattern-guided, whether what one does is try to persuade these others that one speaks in accord with a rule or to match one's uses to a seeming communal pattern. Others' agreement with one cannot turn one's disposition into conformity with an

antecedent and independent fact about what one should call 'green' (Wright, 2001b: 38). Thus, speaking meaningfully, concludes Wright, cannot be a matter of speaking in accord with the dictates of investigation-independent facts—such a commitment would leave us with this impossible question: “how can we penetrate *behind* our agreed verdict about a particular question in order to compare it with the putative investigation-independent proper description?” (Wright, 2001b: 40). So, he argues, we must accept “in the sense implied by investigation-independence” that a community does not go “right or wrong in accepting a particular verdict on a particular decidable question; rather—from that point of view—it just goes” (Wright, 2001b: 41).

And to accept this, thinks Wright, is not to consign ourselves to meaning scepticism—what follows, rather, is a reconceptualisation of what it is for us, in keeping faith with our grasp of our concepts, to be correct or incorrect. We have no privileged overview of the total range of circumstances in which, if we are true to our understanding, say, of *F*, we will judge the conditions for its application satisfied (Wright, 2001a: 28). In speaking meaningfully, we do not track any determinate pattern of use. Thus, what we *should* judge of a situation that we have yet to confront is not something about which there is anything to say—what counts as correct or incorrect in accord with our understanding does not extend this far. So, argues Wright:

[...] we have to regard correct use, or response to correct use, of any particular sentence on a new occasion as in some fashion objectively indeterminate; it is what competent speakers do—where competence is precisely *not* a matter of disposition to conformity with certain investigation-independent facts—which determines the correct use of expressions, rather than the other way about. (50-51)

Because our grasp of our concepts does not commit us to determinate patterns of use, the

correct use of our expressions, in regard to cases we have yet to confront, cannot be *reflective* of independent, predeterminate states of affairs. Rather, given our competence with our concepts, it must be that our own judgements *determine* in such cases what should be said. For instance: if in peering into my telescope I stumble on a star that had never been seen before, up until the point of my discovery, whether it was bright, red, or gigantic was indeterminate—there was no saying just how we would judge this state of affairs upon investigation. Our grasp of our concepts committed us to nothing in particular. Only, then, after I had had a good look at the star and others had made their observations could we say what it is correct of us to say of it. In this way, thinks Wright, the correct use of our expressions depends entirely on us, on our judgements insofar as we are competent speakers of our linguistic community.

To give content to his notion of linguistic competence, Wright depends on there being prior agreement in the linguistic community. One is competent on his picture if one, having undergone training of a sort, accords with the community in the application of certain basic concepts, so far as any reasonable test can tell (Wright, 2001c: 60-61).

Wright thus takes his cues from this passage in the *Investigations*:

If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgements. This seems to abolish logic, but does not do so.—It is one thing to describe methods of measurement, and another to obtain and state results of measurement. But what we call “measuring” is partly determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement. (*PI* 242)

Here, Wittgenstein suggests that the possibility of language—insofar as language concerns the expression and exchange of thoughts—rests not just on our agreement in definitions but on our agreement in judgements, our agreement, that is, in what we take to

be the case, given our definitions. It is not enough that we agree on definitions like x is F , if x is G —after all, we might agree on this and then still predicate F of different things from one another. If we cannot agree on how to apply our expressions as a matter of course in actual cases, then such expressions cannot serve as expressions—just what they're supposed to express is unclear. Only if we are disposed for the most part to agree, say, that *that* is F or that *that* is G , can we mean anything to one another in calling something ' F ' or ' G '.

Wright seems to take from this passage that such basic agreement in judgements is enough for there to be language. So long as one is so trained to agree in one's judgements with the rest of the community, from one set of circumstances to another, then one counts as a competent speaker of the language—the things that one calls 'yellow', 'bright', or 'warm' will for the most part coincide with the judgements of one's fellow speakers. What one intends with one's use of such expressions should thus be communicated to one's fellows as in fact what one meant. Little more can be said about just what one means by any such expression, since there is no determinate pattern of use to which one commits oneself in using the expression as one does. What linguistic competence comes to, then, is judging the same as one's peers in regard to a range of basic concepts—this agreement lays the groundwork for substantive disagreement about more complex matters (Wright, 2001c: 58-59).

It is not difficult to see how Wright's reading of the rule-following considerations can appear attractively Wittgensteinian in spirit and thus a reading after which we might model our interpretation of Wittgenstein's strategy in *On Certainty*. In some respects,

Wright's vision of a linguistic community whose members agree in their basic judgements resonates with Wittgenstein's appeal to what we do. The normativity that governs our linguistic and epistemic practices does indeed depend on our being initiated into seeing the world in a particular way—to take part in these practices, we must be so disposed as to judge and react just the same as our fellow participants. If we could not go on in the same way or see ourselves as doing so, there could be no practice of going on in just this way. And like on Wright's picture, that we go on in *this* way in particular is something for which our grounds eventually give out. If one's judgements fall out of step with those of one's peers—profess one's linguistic competence as one may—one may just find oneself dismissed as never having understood the relevant concepts or as having lost one's understanding along the way. In this way, Wright's vision of the linguistic community in the rule-following considerations appears to offer us a way of understanding *On Certainty*.

However, as John McDowell brings to our attention in 'Wittgenstein on Following a Rule', there does, for Wittgenstein, appear to be a notable distinction between what is the case and our consensus on what is the case—which is to say, for instance, a distinction between something being yellow and something being called 'yellow' by most speakers in a linguistic community (McDowell, 1998b: 234). As Wittgenstein puts it in *Zettel*:

Colour-words are explained like *this*: “That's red” e.g.—Our language game only works, of course, when a certain agreement prevails, but the concept of agreement does not enter into the language-game. If agreement were universal, we should be quite unacquainted with the concept of it.

Does human agreement *decide* what is red? Is it decided by appeal to the majority? Were we taught to determine colour in *that* way? (Z 430-431)

The answer to these questions appears to be “No.” Though, as Wittgenstein admits, a certain amount of agreement is necessary for there to be a language-game of colour identification at all, the fact of our agreement cannot in itself ground the use of our expression as correct, if 'red' is meant to apply only to red things. Children are not taught to call things of *this* sort 'red' simply because *this is what we do*—presumably they are taught to call 'red' what is red. Communal agreement alone cannot be what decides on what should be said of a particular case, on what the case in fact is. Our agreement is no guarantee of our correctness. It sets no standard that can be taught or followed.

But if this is so, then the training so envisioned on Wright's picture that we receive in order to be initiated into the linguistic community cannot be training for speaking a language—it is more so akin to learning a game like chess, wherein correctness depends only on the judgement of competent players. Saying something with one's words, by comparison, requires that one be able to speak and be mistaken, and if one has only one's community against which to check one's words—a community whose own judgements are the source of its correctness—then it is not clear just what standard it is that one holds oneself to. Wright, then, in foregoing, somewhat similarly to Kripke, an account of meaning grounded by investigation-independent facts—despite distancing himself from the sceptical overtones of the latter—cannot help but also share in the latter's loss of a robust sense of norms and, with this, a loss of the possibility of meaning. McDowell puts it this way:

[...] does Wright's reading of Wittgenstein contain the means to make it intelligible that there should so much as *be* such an action as calling an object “yellow”? The picture Wright offers is, at the basic level, a picture of human beings vocalising in certain ways in response to

objects, with this behaviour (no doubt) accompanied by such “inner” phenomena as feelings of constraint, or convictions of the rightness of what they are saying. [...] But at the basic level there is no question of shared commitments—of the behaviour, and the associated aspects of the streams of consciousness, being subject to the authority of anything outside themselves. [...] How, then, can we be entitled to view the behaviour as involving, say, calling things “yellow”, rather than a mere brute meaningless sounding off? (1998b: 235)

Here, McDowell's criticism suggests that our initial way of spelling out Wright's picture was too generous. For, insofar as this picture relies on the agreement in judgements of the community and nothing more as a standard of correctness for the use of our expressions, the distinction between correct and incorrect uses of an expression is an illusion. Here, then, just as with Kripke's reading, wherein the corrections to which we are subject by our fellows provide only the appearance of our words being norm-governed, nothing is in fact available to ground the use of our words as correct or incorrect. As a result, it is difficult to say just in what sense Wright can help himself to the description “calling things 'yellow'” if whatever the community happens to do counts as doing so—calling things 'yellow' requires the possibility that majority of us turn out to be wrong in our use, a possibility on which he cannot deliver. Thus, McDowell argues that the notion of shared commitment is out of Wright's reach—without appeal to investigation-independent facts, there is nothing to which members of a linguistic community can commit. That there are propensities towards agreement of some sort among these individuals can be attributed to “their belonging to a single species, together with similarities in the training that gave them the propensities” (1998b: 235). But that we all call *this* 'yellow' on Wright's picture cannot amount to an agreement in *judgements*—at best this is an agreement in reactions, for it is not subject to norms. And devoid of norms, our words cannot be but noise.

What Wright's reading of the rule-following considerations shows us, then, is this

—that in ridding ourselves of a picture in which the correctness of our expressions depends on investigation-independent facts, we forfeit our claim to express ourselves in a norm-governed way, and if this is the case, our acts cannot be identified as *calling something 'yellow'* or *giving a command*, for these descriptions conceive our acts as meaningful, and meaning depends on there being norms with which one can accord. Thus, with Wright, what we have is a picture of a community in which nothing is *said*, where what we have is “a collection of individuals presenting to one another exteriors that match in certain respects” (McDowell, 1998b: 252). Here, the signs are indeed lifeless, and there are no grounds for understanding them one way or another. If, then, we are to conceive ourselves as *saying* anything at all, we cannot begin from a norm-free picture, where all agreement amounts to is ‘matching exteriors’. We must begin from the thought that our acts are already norm-governed, that we are bound together by shared commitments and so able to grasp the meaning of one another's words in accord with these commitments—this is what is meant in Wittgenstein's appeal to our linguistic practices. And this, as McDowell describes it, is not interpretation but the capacity to “hear someone else's meaning in his words” (1998b: 253), “a capacity for a meeting of minds” (1998b: 253).

But beyond this, McDowell appears reluctant to say anything—about how “the concept of a communal practice can magic meaning into our picture” (1998b: 254) or about how it is that we can have “reflective knowledge of features of *others'* understanding of a particular expression” (1998b: 254). He rests content having shown this: that if we take Wittgenstein to be committed to the possibility of meaning, then we

cannot read him as denying a role for investigation-independent facts in grounding the meaningful use of our expressions. To be able to say anything at all with our words, there must be facts that stand independent of our judgement to which our words can be answerable. The community alone cannot be the arbiter of our judgements, for its judgements just are our judgements—its consensus cannot furnish us with robust enough norms if what we aim to do with our words is speak the truth. To describe ourselves, then, as participants of the same communal linguistic practices is to explain meaning in the only way available to us—that is, from the perspective of engaged participants who are *already* committed to the same determinate uses of our expressions and so need not interpret each other's words.

We, however, cannot rest entirely content with McDowell's argument here. For, though it challenges readings of the rule-following considerations that tend towards anti-realism, it does little to address the underlying sceptical concerns that have propelled our inquiry. McDowell may stop short of calling himself a realist (1998b: 253), but in calling upon investigation-independent facts to ground the use of our expressions as meaningful, he commits himself to the existence of independent facts about meaning and so places himself within the region of realism (1998a: 253-255). And in so doing, his reading of Wittgenstein remains open to sceptical doubts. The conclusion of McDowell's argument, we should note, takes the form of a conditional: *if* one is committed to possibility of meaning, then one cannot deny the role of investigation-independent facts in grounding the distinction we make between correct and incorrect uses of our expressions. While this is enough to take on Wright, it does nothing against the sceptic, who would deny the

antecedent of such a conditional to begin with. Calling upon investigation-independent facts invites the sceptic to ask whether there is any correspondence between what we do and what there is. In committing Wittgenstein to this realist picture, then, McDowell leaves us still with a variant on the same pressing question: how can we know that our linguistic practices stand in relation to the world such as to make our expressions meaningful?

CHAPTER FIVE

PRACTICES—THERE LIKE OUR LIFE

1. As I see it, McDowell's reading of the rule-following considerations affords two central insights into Wittgenstein's notion of practice. First: only from *within* a practice, from the standpoint of an engaged initiate, is it possible to appreciate its norms and so take them for what they are. If one confronts a practice, so to speak, sideways-on—hearing words as grunts and squawks, seeing a mural as blots of colour—one cannot then magic meaning back into the picture, for one has abandoned the standpoint from which one saw things in a particular way and was thus able to communicate and exchange thoughts. Second: for meaning to be possible, our own judgements cannot be the source of the standard against which we check the uses of our expressions. If what we do with our words is aim to speak the truth, then correct uses of our expressions must track investigation-independent facts—facts that form determinate rules of use to which we are committed as initiates of our linguistic practices.

But it is unclear that we can embrace both of these points fully. For, if we take seriously the first injunction—that we should not attempt to gain a better vantage point on our practices by looking at them from sideways-on—then it seems that we cannot appeal to our linguistic practices as reflecting investigation-independent facts. This appeal implies that there is for us a standpoint from which we can behold our practices, on the one hand, and the world, on the other, and see the putative isomorphism between them.

But insofar as the possibility of meaning concerns us, we will find ourselves gravitating towards the second, for only if the commitments made within our linguistic practices track investigation-independent facts can our words amount to anything.

It would be worthwhile, I think, for us to develop McDowell's first insight more fully. For, though the second seems more in step with the sceptical concerns that have propelled our inquiry, increasingly it appears as though any correspondence between our practices and the world is not something that we are in a position to substantiate.¹⁷ What we must do, then, is show that in this position, we need not give ourselves up to the sceptic (or the conventionalist).

2. To develop McDowell's first insight—that we can only appreciate the norms to which we are committed from within our practices—it would help to say more about just what Wittgenstein thinks a practice is. Admittedly, there is little for us to go on. Wittgenstein mentions the notion of practice explicitly only a few times in the *Investigations*, and its correlates—custom, form of life, and institution—make only a few more appearances. But, as we have already seen, the few remarks that he does make are rich. For instance:

[...] I have further indicated that a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom. (*PI* 198)

[...] But if a person has not yet got the *concepts*, I shall teach him to use the words by means of *examples* and by *practice*.—And when I do this I do not communicate less to him than I know myself. (*PI* 208)

¹⁷ Wright anticipates this difficulty most clearly in asking: “how can we penetrate *behind* our agreed verdict about a particular question in order to compare it with the putative investigation-independent proper description?” (2001b: 40). It is unclear just how the realist is supposed to compare the picture to which we are committed to the world. It is not as though our picture is something that we can just move aside and look beyond.

From these, I think, we can gather this much: it is only within our practices that our concepts have their life and thus through initiation into these practices that we come to see just what the correct application of our concepts calls for. In being initiated into our community's practices as children—into picking things out by their colours, playing with others, telling stories, counting, celebrating, etc.—we come to inherit the world of our forebears and learn what such things as colours, numbers, people, pumpkins, truth, and beauty are.¹⁸ To be initiated into a practice, then, involves not only learning *how* to engage in certain acts but coming to see the world in a particular way—as being populated by objects, as being filled with certain joys and risks, as being in many ways beyond our comprehension. Thus, our calling things 'yellow' or 'tomatoes' or 'harvests' are inseparable from the ways in which we live in the world—the use of such expressions is *internal* to our way of living.¹⁹ Practices constitute forms of life—they arise out of our interactions

18 Though, for the most part, our discussion of practices has concerned only linguistic practices, we should realise that, for Wittgenstein, learning what something is or what a word refers to is not a matter of just being taught through ostensive definitions. This was Augustine's mistake: "Augustine describes the learning of a human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one" (*PI* 32). It is not just that children do not have the words—they don't have the concepts either. And these they learn not just through ostensive definition but through learning to live in the world of their forebears. Stanley Cavell (1979), especially 'Excursus on Wittgenstein's Vision of Language', brings out this point particularly nicely.

19 In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre, in giving an account of a neo-Aristotelian notion of practice, makes a similar point: "There are thus two kinds of goods possibly to be gained by playing chess. On the one hand there are those goods externally and contingently attached to chess-playing and to other practices by the accidents of social circumstance—in the case of the imaginary child candy, in the case of real adults such goods as prestige, status and money [...] On the other hand there are the goods internal to the practice of chess which cannot be had in any way but by playing chess which cannot be had in any way but by playing chess [...] We call them internal for two reasons: first, as I have already suggested, because we can only specify them in terms of chess [...] and secondly because they can only be identified and recognised by the experience of participating in the practice in question" (1981: 176).

In speaking of goods, MacIntyre's account is somewhat more teleological than ours need be—whether or not, for Wittgenstein, practices have definitive ends need not concern us. What is important to take from MacIntyre is his sense of the internal. Practices structure our way of conceiving the world; they make its states of affairs intelligible—but only insofar as we understand and are committed to these practices, for what is made intelligible is made so in terms of these practices. If we were to distance ourselves from our commitments, we would lose our sense of the world as we had it from within them.

with each other and the world as beings of a particular kind. As Wittgenstein says:

What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; we are not contributing curiosities however, but observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes. (*PI* 415)

It is sometimes said that animals do not talk because they lack the mental capacity. [...] But—they simply do not talk. Or to put it better: they do not use language—if we except the most primitive forms of language.—Commanding, questioning, storytelling, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing. (*PI* 25)

This inheritance bequeathed to us by our forebears, then, though inescapably human, is not something that was at some point decided upon—it is simply what has transpired from our living in the world (see *PI* 241). It has grown out of our particular nature, in response to this nature and to the world.

Thus, giving an interpretation of a sign differs from grasping a sign from within a practice in this way: we give an interpretation because the meaning of that with which we are confronted is for some reason or other not already manifest to us. What we do, then, when we give an interpretation is try to grasp the sign in terms of a practice with which we are already familiar, for as we have already seen, interpretations cannot stand on their own. We try, as it were, to fit the sign into the practice, to see it as an instance of engaging in this practice. And when there is no need for this, when the meaning of a sign is already manifest to us, it is because we, as initiates of the practice to which it belongs, already see it as an instance of the practice, as something whose being is explained by the practice and thus whose meaning comes to *this* in virtue of it. For instance: in the midst of following a recipe for shortbread, I may read the instruction 'Add one egg to creamed butter and sugar, beating until light and fluffy'. For me, there will be no question as to what this means—I will not think that I must snatch a robin's egg for this part or add it,

shell and all, to the bowl or try then to beat these ingredients to a cloud-like consistency in order to complete this step. Having already grasped what it is to bake, I see this line in the recipe as calling for something in particular, for an act of baking. Perhaps there are other acts that call for eggs still in their shells, e.g. decorating eggs for Easter or egging the neighbour's house, but such acts cannot be understood from within the practice of baking; they call for something else. What I do I do because of my grasp of the practice, because doing things in *this* way makes my act an instance of engaging in the practice. In grasping the practice, I am able to see this instruction *as* an instruction, as instructing a particular act of baking—as I might understand a seed *as* a seed from having grown lettuces from seeds of this sort or as I might understand someone writing a line of verse *as* writing a line of verse because she has told me that she is writing a haiku and not a letter or a grocery list.²⁰

Only, then, in being initiated into a practice do we come to see what engaging in this practice consists in and therein what particular signs mean: “To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique” (*PI* 199) And this seems largely a matter of being brought to see and react to the world in a particular way, something that is made possible by our shared nature and the extensions of this in the practices into which we are born, as precarious as this may

20 In 'The Idea of Practice', Rödl, in giving an interpretation of *PI* 201-202, says that “meaning is such as to explain itself” (2) and that “a practice is a self-explanation [...] something general that explains its instances” (2). Though he attributes this line of thinking to Kant and Hegel in their accounts of living things, we need not follow Rödl too deep into these philosophical traditions to recognise that this way of reading Wittgenstein is not inimical to what we have already seen—indeed, it is not unlike MacIntyre's account of practices. When Rödl calls a practice a self-explanation, he means that we are to understand the parts of a practice in terms of the practice as a whole and not through anything external to it, just as we might understand the parts of a bird—its gizzard as a gizzard, its wing as a wing, etc.—in terms of the bird as a living organism. Only in understanding a sign or an act as belonging to the practice of which it is a part do we grasp it for what it is and appreciate the norms that govern it.

be. Stanley Cavell puts this point eloquently in saying this:

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfilment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. (1976: 52)

3. Though the question of how our practices stand in relation to the world has propelled our inquiry, it may seem at this point that we have gotten no further in being able to address it—how we might go about considering this relation remains utterly mysterious. But now, with McDowell's first insight in hand, we can begin to see why this is so and why it is unproblematic.

In asking after the relation between our linguistic practices and the world with hope of solving the paradox of *PI* 201, we have supposed that it was possible to give sense to this question and thus supposed it was possible to give an answer. But even asking this question requires that we speak from a certain standpoint, one that, as we will now see, we cannot reach. For asking after the relation between two things presupposes that both are distinctly accessible to us. We might thus ask after the relation between Monet's *Houses of Parliament* and the British Houses of Parliament in London. Or, we might thus wonder about the relation between *East of Eden* and its author, John Steinbeck, about how the Salinas Valley of his childhood comes through in the novel, which shares the same setting. There is, however, no corresponding position from which we may view our practices as distinct from the world. Try as we might to distance ourselves from them and

behold the world *as such*, we cannot, for there is no such view of the world for us. To be sure, from a certain point of view, a written sentence can appear to us as lifeless marks; having written the word 'yellow' ten times in a row, I may come to lose my grip on it as a word that says something. And from this particular standpoint, we may begin to wonder how a word like 'yellow' comes to mean anything or how our uses of it can have any genuine correspondence with the world if they arise out of just what we humans happen to do. Here, then, we may be tempted to aspire to a different vantage point, one from which we can view our practices on the one hand and the world on the other and compare the two. But, again, there is no such vantage point, for the world is not just another object that we might turn on its side and consider from a new angle or bring out from a shadowy cupboard to examine in the light.²¹ The world is only intelligible to us in virtue of the judgements we can form about it, and the concepts that we deploy in such judgements are developments of our natural history, of our interactions with each other and the world as creatures of a particular kind. Thus, our practices, the natural-historical developments in which our concepts have their life and only in which their normative character is fully manifest, are not collectively a model or picture of the world (as Monet's painting is to the Houses of Parliament) that we once traced and now follow. Rather, they are a perspective *on the world*—our practices open the world to view, giving rise to our concepts and thus giving us a way of saying something about the world. As Cavell says, thinking of a young child, in initiation into our forms of life, things come to *exist* for us:

I have wanted to say: Kittens—what we call "kittens" do not exist in her world yet, she has not acquired the forms of life which contain them. They do not exist in something like the way

21 Cavell makes this point in *The Claim of Reason* (1979: 236-237).

cities and mayors will not exist in her world until long after pumpkins and kittens do; or like the way God or love or responsibility or beauty do not exist in our world; we have not yet mastered, or we have forgotten, or we have distorted, or learned through fragmented models, the forms of life which could make utterances like "God exists" or "God is dead" or "I love you" [...] bear all the weight they could carry, express all they could take from us. (1979: 172-173)

Through our practices, we are initiated into ways of living in the world, and with them come ways of grasping it, of taking what is alien to us and learning to live with it in such a way that it becomes familiar. Our practices, then, far from obscuring the face of the world, bring its features into view.

But still we may ask: if this is what Wittgenstein's appeal to practices amounts to in the *Investigations*—a reminder that the meaning of our words holds in virtue of the practices through which we have come to gain a foothold in the world—what kind of response to the paradox of *PI* 201 is this? If we stand in relation to the world so as not to be able to compare our practices alongside it, then what can an appeal to our practices do to stave off the sceptical threat? What we must realise is that nothing can be said about the relation between our practices and the world as a whole, for whether the use of our expressions corresponds with investigation-independent facts is not a consideration open to us—the world, as seen through our practices, just is the world for us.²² Trying to step outside of our practices simply renders the world more alien. Though our practices, then, cannot exactly serve as grounds for the use of our words when they themselves are neither justified nor unjustified, we need not look beyond our practices for justification—thinking

²² From within particular practices of ours, of course, *viz.*, the sciences, there is room to question the relation between practice and world. When Galileo, for instance, made his observations of Venus in its phases, his results brought into question how his contemporaries conceived the motion of planets in relation to the earth and the sun. Here, then, Galileo showed geocentric astronomy to be at odds with the world. And though his efforts led to the rejection of a practice, he could not have achieved this had he not been committed to other practices, e.g. measurement, inductive reasoning, the scientific method.

that we do, like both the realist and the sceptic, presupposes that we can speak from a standpoint that does not exist for us. Thus, when Wittgenstein brings our attention to the fact that there comes a point where our justifications are exhausted, that at the point of appealing to our practices our spade is turned, this is not so much a refutation of meaning scepticism as it is a dissolution of the problem. It is an admission to the fact, as Cavell puts it, that: “[...] the human creature's basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing” (241)—but delivered in such a way as to show that this is not a matter in need of remedy. What Wittgenstein does, then, is point to our practices as the source and limit of our concepts in being the source and limit of our view of the world. His appeal to our practices grounds meaning in the world in the only way that our relation to the world allows: “One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it” (*PI* 114).

Now we are in a position to sort out the tension we felt between McDowell's two insights into Wittgenstein's notion of a practice. Insofar as we are committed to the first of these, we cannot, as it were, view our practices from side-ways on and try to show from without that our linguistic commitments track investigation-independent facts. This, however, seems to be precisely what McDowell's second insight recommends—that we substantiate this relation between our practices and the world so as to ground the possibility of meaning. But, perhaps we can give priority to the first over the second such that the latter is nested within the former. Then we can say: standing from within our practices, our

words cannot be but meaningful; that the use of our words tracks investigation-independent facts is a precondition of their being meaningful—thus, though we are in no position to say that we *know* that our linguistic practices reflect what is the case, that this is so is part and parcel of our committed engagement in these practices. In this way, we can at least somewhat ease the tension between McDowell's two insights.

4. What we have concluded from our look at the rule-following considerations does not leave us far from seeing what must be the case in *On Certainty*. Here, Wittgenstein again appeals to our practices—in particular, to our epistemic practices—and in this case, the appeal is meant to *exclude* certain claims from intelligibility within our practices, *viz.*, those of Moore and the Cartesian-cum-Humean sceptic, and show our practices to be the only spaces within which intelligibility amongst ourselves is possible. This stands in contrast to the rule-following considerations in that the appeal there sought to make room for intelligibility in the first place. In spite of this difference, the thrust, and hence seeming difficulties of the appeal in *On Certainty* are much the same. For, in claiming that the words of neither the sceptic nor Moore can be properly situated within our everyday practices of knowing and doubting and that therefore their expressions, in spite of their resemblance to ours, cannot be made intelligible as expressions of knowledge or doubt, Wittgenstein again seems to rely entirely on being able to substantiate the relation between our practices and the world as being one in which the former reflects the latter. Failing to substantiate a relation of this sort, it seems, would again leave our practices open to a charge of conventionalism—a position still too close to the sceptical threat. But

in the case of *On Certainty* as in the case of the rule-following considerations, this difficulty concerning our practices as they stand in relation to the world is not something that we need address. It only appears to us a problem when we have stepped back from our practices, when at arm's length they suddenly seem alien and arbitrary to us, and we begin to see them as limiting us. This, however, is a mistake, for, again, though we may be able to distance ourselves from our practices, this distance does not afford us a better vantage point from which to view the world. Our practices, having arisen out of our interactions with one another and the world, give us the clearest view of the world, the one from which we can take the most in, given our nature and the life into which we have grown. It is, for us, the only view that we have on the world—everything else that we might attempt is equivalent to looking from the same standpoint, just while squinting or cross-eyed, as if straining our vision like this could help us to see more.

When Wittgenstein charges the sceptic with trying to speak outside of our practices of knowing and doubting, he draws on an understanding of our practices as conditions of mutual intelligibility that have evolved out of our common way of living in the world. The sceptic, in trying to express doubt in circumstances where her words do nothing (nothing is amiss), breaks with our practices and thus comes to deny this way of living, though it is her own. She tries to thrust certain considerations (about unassuming tables, chairs, books, teapots, etc.) into our talk of knowing and doubting, as though what human finitude amounted to was a kind of not-knowing, a condition of unaddressable doubting. The sceptic thus misunderstands what our human limitations come to. It may be that we cannot claim knowledge of the sorts of states of affairs that Moore would, but it is

no more the case that we do not know that such-and-such is so, that we have reason to doubt such states of affairs, as the sceptic would claim. To such considerations, we stand in a relation of neither knowledge nor doubt, for though it is the case that we cannot give justification for them being so, it is also the case that for us there is no need. That we stand in this relation, at one level, is just a matter of course—our epistemic practices do not admit of certain considerations, and that these considerations remain outside of them is constitutive of the practices that they are. Below this, there is also the thought that this view of the world is not one that we can justify, though it is not therefore a view unjustified. This picture of the world is one that we have grown into, that is bound up with our nature and the world—it is thus not the sort of thing that admits of justification.

As Wittgenstein says:

You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there—like our life.
(*OC* 559)

Our limited nature, then, opens us to a view of the world in which our practices of knowing and doubting are possible, but such knowing and doubting are therein constrained by these limits—trying to extend their application either as Moore or the sceptic attempt, as Wittgenstein suggests, comes at the cost of sounding mad or in denial of oneself because these limits are the ones by which all of us are able to make sense of the world and live in it (see *OC* 195, 613). Thus, when Wittgenstein appeals to our practices, this is an admission of our limits and so an admission of sorts to the sceptic's claim that we cannot know that such-and-such is the case, but it is, as Cavell would call it, a *transformation* (1979: 45) of this thesis into something that we can live with, that we do

live with every day. Wittgenstein does not so much refute scepticism in his appeal to practices as he does correct her misunderstanding of our condition. The force of his appeal, then, lies in its drawing on what is not just limiting but also constitutive of the life that we have inherited as our own.

5. The difficulty with which we began this inquiry was this: against scepticism in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein appeals to our everyday epistemic practices, elucidating the conditions under which we are warranted in expressing knowledge and doubt and thus showing the sceptic's claims to be unintelligible against the backdrop of these practices; but for this appeal to challenge the sceptic any further, to refute the sceptic's denial of our everyday claims, it seemed that Wittgenstein must in turn show that our epistemic practices so stand in relation to the world as to in fact be productive of knowledge—only then would we be warranted in claiming knowledge or raising doubts as we do in accord with our practices. Turning then to the rule-following considerations for insight, we found a parallel problem: in appealing to our linguistic customs against the sceptical paradox of *PI* 201, Wittgenstein again seemed to rely on there being a certain relation between what we do and what there is—only if the customs according to which we call *this* 'yellow' and *that* 'red' reflected real distinctions in states of affairs could such linguistic expressions mean anything.

Consideration of both Kripke and Wright's readings of Wittgenstein on rules did not dissuade us from our realist approach to this problematic. Though dispensing with a truth-conditional theory of meaning would free us from having to substantiate the

correspondence between our linguistic practices and the world, the picture with which we would be left, as McDowell argues, would hardly be a picture of meaning at all—only insofar as the use of our expressions is answerable to investigation-independent facts can our expressions be robustly norm-governed and thus meaningful.

But then the questions with which we began remained: (i) how can we show that our epistemic practices stand to the world such as to warrant our knowledge claims, and (ii) how can we show that our linguistic practices stand to the world such as to make our words meaningful? To contend with these, we turned again to McDowell, developing his insight about only being able to appreciate the norms that govern our practices from within: both the realist and the sceptic, in asking after the relation between our practices and the world, presuppose that there is a standpoint from which we can view our practices, on the one hand, and the world, on the other, but, for us, there is no such standpoint—our practices, rather, afford us our only perspective on the world. And so, though we have no vantage point from which we can affirm the relation between our practices and the world as we take it to be, from which we can say that we *know* that this is the case, because this relation is constitutive of our view of the world, neither is our situation one of not knowing. That the world is disclosed to us through our practices and that our practices are answerable to the world are internally related to one another and together constitutive of the human condition.

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