

Doubts, Philosophy, and Therapy

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Abstract: There is nowadays a tendency, to be dated back to Gordon Baker’s reading, to interpret the later Wittgenstein as proposing a thoroughly therapeutic view of philosophy. Accordingly, he was not dealing with philosophical problems to show how they originated in a misunderstanding of our language. For that would have presupposed his advancing theses about how language works. Rather, his therapeutic method was in the service of liberating philosophers from the kind of intellectual prejudices that would prompt them to ask philosophical questions. The article examines the complex interconnections between Wittgenstein and Waismann to show how the thorough-going therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein proposed by Baker is in fact a projection of Waismann’s ideas onto Wittgenstein. Moreover, by looking at Wittgenstein’s complex anti-skeptical strategies in *On Certainty*, it shows that his aim was not to provide therapy against philosophers’ inclinations, but to show that skeptical doubts are misguided and nonsensical.

0. INTRODUCTION

There is nowadays a tendency to interpret the later Wittgenstein as someone who proposed a thoroughly therapeutic, or resolute view of philosophy. Accordingly, he was not dealing with *philosophical problems* or *questions*, not even to show how they originated in a misunderstanding of our language. For that would have presupposed his having a view—and hence advancing *theses*—about how language does in fact work. Rather, he was merely trying to cure individual philosophers’ “troubled states of mind” (Baker 2004c, 212). Thus, his therapeutic method was really in the service of *liberating philosophers* from the kind of intellectual uneasiness and prejudices, which would prompt them to ask philosophical questions. To put it starkly: his therapeutic method was not aimed at solving or dissolving philosophical problems but was rather aimed at curing individual philosophers’ minds from certain urges and tendencies to ask philosophical questions. In this sense, his therapeutic method aimed at offering *paths of resistance* to philosophers’ bad instinct—that is, the instinct to look for explanations, to build theories, or to

generalize from an impoverished diet of examples and uses of words—by fortifying their will through a set of images and techniques that would keep their instincts at bay.¹

In fact, this kind of thorough-going therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein's later philosophy was advanced, well before the rise of the New Wittgenstein movement,² by Gordon Baker (2004a, 2003, 2004c, 2004b), after his separation from Peter Hacker. Baker had long worked on the translation and edition of Friedrich Waismann's works, most notably *The Principles of Linguistic Philosophy* (PLP) and *How I See Philosophy* (HISP) and had been influenced by Waismann's rendition of Wittgenstein's ideas in the former work—which notoriously should have been an accessible exposition of Wittgenstein's ideas in the *Philosophical Investigations* (PI)—and by the view of philosophy advanced in the latter, particularly in the titular chapter of that collection.

In the following, I will do two things. First, I will go over the complex interconnections between Wittgenstein and Waismann to show how the thorough-going therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein proposed by Baker is in fact a projection of Waismann's ideas—and, in particular, of the later Waismann—onto Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, composed about twenty years earlier. Second, I will go over Wittgenstein's remarks on doubt in *On Certainty* (OC), to show, with a concrete example, how his method was not thoroughly therapeutic. It will then become apparent that Wittgenstein was not interested in providing any therapy against philosophers' skeptical inclinations or urges, even though he certainly presented considerations to think that skeptical doubts are misguided and nonsensical. That, in turn, will allow us to re-assess the apparently resolutely therapeutic claims Wittgenstein made about the nature of philosophy in PI and to provide reasons to resist the kind of reading of his later philosophy that Baker initiated and that nowadays has so much currency thanks to the New Wittgensteins.

1. READING WITTGENSTEIN THROUGH WAISMANN'S LENSES

Baker's later rendition of Wittgenstein's ideas was deeply influenced by his work on Waismann. It is therefore apposite to summarize the main tenets of Waismann's views about philosophy. Before doing so, let me remind the reader of the chronology. PLP was published posthumously in 1965. This work was composed in collaboration with Wittgenstein (and Moritz Schlick) between 1929 and 1932 with a coda up to 1936. Afterwards, however, the two philosophers parted ways because Wittgenstein was deeply dissatisfied

1. Indeed, if they persisted in their traditional *modus operandi*, philosophers would be at fault from a *moral* point of view and would manifest a *defected character* (Baker 2004a, 199).

2. See Cray and Read 2001 for a number of representative samples of this movement.

with what he considered Waismann's misinterpretation of his own views, and Waismann continued working on it by himself. The book reached proofs stage in 1939 but, with the outbreak of World War II, it was not published, and it underwent thorough revisions between 1940 and 1953. It was published only well after Waismann's death, occurred in 1959. A few years before dying, and twenty years after the end of his collaboration with Wittgenstein, Waismann published HISP (1956) in which he further developed his views about philosophy. In that paper he radicalized, but also problematically developed views that he had first put forward in PLP.

In PLP, Waismann essentially expounds and applies Wittgenstein's *morphological* method. This is a revolutionary method Wittgenstein elaborated by developing ideas first put forward by Goethe (2009) in the *Metamorphosis of Plants*. Accordingly, in answering the Socratic/Platonic question "What is φ ?" philosophers should take seriously Theaetetus' response which consisted in providing examples of what is ordinarily considered to be an instance of φ (PLP, 84–85). By laying these cases one next to the other, it soon becomes apparent that they do not share a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions—an essence—which all and only things that fall under the concept " φ " allegedly have in common. That is why the Socratic/Platonic way of going about answering the original question was misguided, according to both Wittgenstein and Waismann. Rather, these different cases are all grouped under the concept " φ " because, as Waismann puts it (PLP, 182), every two of them are connected by intermediate links. For instance, both tennis and playing with dolls are grouped under the concept "game" because they share something in common—though not the same thing—with an intermediate case, such as playing patience. Namely, there is winning and losing at tennis just as there is at playing patience; yet patience, like playing with dolls but unlike tennis, can be played alone. Thus, a good theory of φ would consist in laying cases of φ one next to the other, to bring out their similarities and differences and thus attain an understanding of " φ ." In fact, "theory" and "understanding" here take the form of a "surveyable representation" (PI, 122 "übersichtliche Darstellung," previously translated with "perspicuous representation"), or of a "synoptic presentation" (PLP, 80), as opposed to an explanation. Since there is no essence, there is no room left for an inquiry that aims at explaining what φ is, in and of itself, as it were. All it can be done is to survey the various uses of " φ " and note—Waismann would say "tabulate"—the rules of its various employments.

Yet, there is more to the morphological method than merely the idea of arranging together these different uses of a given word to appreciate their similarities and differences. For both Waismann (at least in PLP) and Witt-

Wittgenstein think that it can have a *diagnostic* function vis-à-vis the nature of philosophical questions. Philosophical questions for them are not genuine questions, which admit of yes/no answers. Rather, they often depend on taking certain problematic linguistic forms at face value, and/or on conflating the characteristic features—the rules—of one use of a given word, with those of a different use of it. Examples of the first kind are nominalizations, which induce the idea that we are talking about a thing, even when we are thinking about time, numbers, geometrical figures, pain and other mental states, etc. thus prompting philosophers to think of them as entities. Another example is thinking that there must be a common essence to all things named that way, for instance when we think about knowledge, meaning, truth, etc. Finally, an example of the conflation of rules is G. E. Moore's idea that his truisms are known with certainty. For, according to Wittgenstein, the propositional use of "I know" in connection with empirical propositions is 1) based on evidence (OC, 18, 243); and 2) is defeasible (OC, 12))—that is, it must be possible, at least in principle, for new information to come in such that we would have to conclude that we do not know what we thought we did know. In contrast, the "grammatical use" of "I know" (OC, 58) 3) is not based on evidence (or on evidence which is stronger or non-circularly dependent on what it should prove); and 4) is indefeasible, because, given the role the proposition which is said to be known plays in our language games and epistemic practices, it seems precluded that new information could come in—at least in a given context or at a particular time in history—such that we would have to conclude that we don't know it after all, relative to that context or to that moment in time (OC 103, 116, 194, 203, 270, 360). In contrast, the Moorean use of "I know" would have us say that there are propositions for which we must have (or must have had) some empirical evidence (1), which cannot be defeated by any increment in information (4). A perspicuous representation of the different uses of "I know" should help philosophers such as Moore see that their theories are based on taking the propositional use of "I know" as a paradigm when, in fact, in the relevant case our actual use of "I know" is "grammatical," and on conflating the rules that govern each of these uses of "I know."

Notice, however, that for Wittgenstein, there *is* a correct understanding of the use of language in connection with Moore's truisms—namely "I know" is used in its grammatical sense and, as such, does not express the obtaining of an epistemic relationship between a subject and a proposition.³ Furthermore, he thinks that this is simply how things are in our language. Hence, this is tantamount to a correct description of certain linguistic *facts*.

3. On Wittgenstein's uses of "I know" in OC, see Coliva 2010, chap. 2; and Coliva 2021.

By contrast, according to Wittgenstein, Moore is not seeing the workings of language aright, at least in this connection and, by conflating the propositional and the grammatical use of “I know,” he is producing nonsense. For, literally, he is straddling contexts of use. If there is therapy, then, it is based on Wittgenstein’s conviction that there is a correct way of seeing the workings of language. Seeing things aright should convince Moore and everyone else, as long as they are willing to realize that in the name of semantic continuity they are overlooking important differences and that, by straddling contexts of use and rules, are producing nonsense. Thus, there is, after all, a sense in which therapy should also act on philosophers’ widespread—not individual—instincts by creating certain paths of resistance against the urge to sweep aside differences, or to think that one use of language is more fundamental than other ones, manifested in the tendency to model any kind of knowledge on propositional knowledge. Yet, this is philosophically relevant, for Wittgenstein, only to the extent that it allows one to see things as they are and to avoid making certain typically philosophical mistakes.

Waismann, in contrast, and already in PLP, insists that no thesis is advanced, no explanation proposed. As we saw, this is something Wittgenstein did too, albeit in the sense of not advancing *philosophical* theses, but merely correct observations regarding the actual workings of our language. Yet, Waismann claims “we neither deny nor affirm” (PLP, 68) *any* thesis. Therefore, he takes himself merely to be countering some images regarding the functioning of language with different ones, which would make one’s initial urge to theorize disappear “by altering the angle from which the question is generally regarded” (PLP, 68), and to be “pointing out the advantages and disadvantages of any decision” (ibid.). Thus, there is no real possibility of agreeing or disagreeing with what he says. At most, one could be persuaded by these different images or not. Yet, even if one were, it would be a matter of personal decision, for no image is, as such, more correct than any other. For instance, being more attracted to semantic continuity or discontinuity would just be a matter of personal inclination. One could of course change one’s views during one’s lifetime, but that would be a kind of *conversion* more than the result of a reasoned procedure, based on seeing language *aright*.

Interestingly, these ideas were radicalized in HISP, where Waismann insists that in philosophy there are no proofs, theorems, or yes/no questions (HISP, 1); that there are arguments, but many things are beyond proof including one’s starting points in an argument (HISP, 1). Furthermore, philosophers can only “build up a case” (HISP, 30). For philosophical questions are “*not so much as questions as tokens of a profound uneasiness*” (HISP, 2; em-

phasis added). As such, philosophical questions cannot be solved, but only dissolved (HISP, 10) and no one can be proved wrong.

Waismann also insists that by following this method “we don’t force our interlocutor. We leave him free to choose, accept or reject any way of using words” (HISP, 12). For this is “the true way of doing philosophy undogmatically” (HISP, 12), contrary to the tendency of *bullying* in philosophy (HISP, 18) by the stick of logic or language. Doing otherwise—that is, making any kind of philosophical assertion—would only “add to the world’s woes a new apple of discord” (HISP, 12). Thus, presenting intermediate links is just a method to *persuade* one to look at things differently (*ibid.*). As a result, philosophy consists more in a conversation that presents and makes a case for a certain vision than in a proof (HISP, 18, 31) or than in a correct description of linguistic facts. Hence, in the end it remains a matter of personal decision (HISP, 21) whether one is persuaded by the application of the morphological method or not.

Waismann then goes as far as stating: “As we have no views, we can afford to look at things as they are” (HISP, 21; emphasis added), and takes this to be the only way of correctly subscribing to Goethe’s motto “describe, do not explain.” Hence, he thought of himself as propounding no theses at all, and not just, as Wittgenstein, as propounding no *philosophical* theses and as merely drawing attention to the linguistic *facts* to get rid of philosophical misapprehensions. Thus, for Waismann, philosophy so construed is “one of the liberatory forces” (HISP, 13) not only from philosophy itself (HISP, 20, the aim of which is to abandon the search), but also from one’s personal uneasiness (cf. HISP, 20, “a certain strain disappears”). If so, philosophy—like psychoanalysis—is a discipline that produces or restores a sense of well-being, if properly performed.

Small wonder then that Baker (cf. also Morris 2007, 2019) saw a profound analogy between Waismann’s conception of philosophy and psychoanalysis and, by projecting backwards Waismann’s views, especially in HISP, onto Wittgenstein’s PI, provided a psychoanalytic, resolutely therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. Yet, for reasons just explored, Waismann’s resolutely therapeutic ideas have no real currency in Wittgenstein’s PI (Hacker 2007), or in OC—that is, all his major works after the *Tractatus*. That is, philosophy when properly performed does not merely silence *individual philosophers’* questionings by persuading them to look at things differently so that they no longer feel the urge of raising those questions. Rather, if it does silence this questioning, it is because it allows one to see things *aright*. In this sense it silences philosophers’ questionings by clarifying how philosophical

questions, which are not merely signs of personal intellectual uneasiness, are predicated on misleading analogies and categorial confluences.⁴

There are many aspects of HISP that should have warned Baker (and Morris) against projecting Waismann's views backwards onto Wittgenstein (as Hacker 2007 correctly points out), besides the chronology of these works. I will mention a couple general ones here before turning to the concrete example of Wittgenstein's treatment of "doubt" in OC.

Surprisingly, and somewhat paradoxically,⁵ Waismann introduces ideas in the second half of HISP that were not already present in PLP. First, contrary to PLP, ordinary language is not considered to have the power of determining what is meaningful and what isn't. As he writes, "linguistic usage can change and what seemed like nonsense, it is no longer so" (HISP, 23). Moreover, while it remains that ordinary language is not precise,⁶ and that trying to regiment it would be like trying to "carve cameos on a cheese soufflé" (HISP, 22), it is also said to contain clichés and therefore to induce analogies and generalizations that are ungrounded. Writes Waismann: "Just as a good swimmer must be able to swim up-stream, so the philosopher should master the unspeakably difficult art of thinking up-speech, against the current of clichés" (HISP, 19). Wittgenstein clearly assigned much more weight to ordinary language and while he was well aware of the possibility of lan-

4. Quite eloquently, Morris (2007, 75–76) writes: "On Wittgenstein's conception, a 'must' can only be countered by a 'need not be'—not by an 'is.' . . . Thus what is required to liberate the person from the tyranny of his dogma is an *alternative* picture, an *alternative* way of looking at things." She also rightly notes (2007, 76) that "the same assertion could play the role of a liberating alternative picture in one circumstance, of a prejudice in another." Thus it is not as such better than the original one. At most, it is simply useful in getting rid of a way of looking at things that seemed unproductive. Finally, Morris points out that the aim of this way of doing philosophy would just be "creating disquiet" (2007, 77), as opposed to putting forward arguments for or against a given philosophical view.

5. It remains a mystery to this reader how Baker (2004a; 2003) thought that the two parts of HISP could be made to cohere with one another and of the second one as being consistent with Wittgenstein's later views in PI and beyond. Baker claims that the paradox of how freedom and vision could be consistent with the morphological project—that is, the project of describing grammar—is due to an equivocation about "freedom." That is, for Waismann, according to Baker, freedom is not absolute—it does not mean being at liberty of thinking whatever one wants. Rather, freedom means freedom from specific prejudices. Such freedom could be attained by attending to a *correct description* of linguistic usages and their rules. Yet, as we have been seeing in this section, this restricted sense of freedom is at odds with many of Waismann's pronouncements in HISP, which deny that there is a correct description of language.

6. Yet, "My point is: language is plastic, yielding to the will to express, even at the price of some obscurity" (HISP, 22). Hence, "ordinary language simply has not got the . . . logical hardness to cut axioms in it. . . . If you begin to draw inferences it soon begins to go 'soft' and fluffs somewhere. You may just carve cameos on a cheese soufflé" (HISP, 22).

guage changing and evolving, he seemed convinced that a) at least relative to a given context, or moment in time, it was possible to distinguish meaningful combinations of signs from nonsensical ones, despite the fact that superficial linguistic similarities could make it difficult to attain clarity. Connectedly, b) that in some cases we should dismiss certain doubts as nonsensical instead of considering them as raising the possibility that something “really un-heard of” (OC 513) could happen, for that would precipitate the whole of language and epistemic practices into the “abyss” (OC 370).

Second, and more importantly, Waismann, in HISP, distances himself from Wittgenstein’s idea that the aim of philosophy is to attain a clear understanding of the workings of our language and hence of the status of our concepts. Quite eloquently, he writes: “It is all very well to talk of clarity, but when it becomes an obsession it is liable to nip the living thought in the bud” (HISP, 16). And, against the early Wittgenstein he adds, “no great discoverer has acted in accordance with the motto, ‘Everything that can be said can be said clearly’” (TLP 4.116, quoted in HISP, 16). Furthermore, he writes, against the *later* Wittgenstein that the aim of philosophy “is not a matter of clarifying thoughts,” or of “hairsplitting” or of clarifying “the correct use of language” (HISP, 38). Nor is it “to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle” (PI, 309, quoted in HISP, 32–33). For “there is something clearly exciting about philosophy, a fact not intelligible on such a negative account” (HISP, 33).

Thus, what *is* its aim? He answers: “Philosophy[’s] . . . most essential feature is: *vision*” (HISP, 32; emphasis added). “A philosophy is an attempt to unfreeze habits of thinking, to replace them by less stiff and restricting ones. Of course, these may in time themselves harden, with the result that they clog progress” (HISP, 34). In the same vein, he writes: “the genius of the philosopher shows itself nowhere more strikingly than in the *new kind of questions he brings into the world*” (HISP, 16; emphasis added). And he also contemplates the possibility that questions first raised within philosophy may pass into science (HISP, 14), in which case: “A whole new chapter might be written on the fate of the questions, their curious adventures and transformations—how they change into others and in the process remain, and yet, do not remain, the same” (HISP, 15).⁷ In sum: “A philosophy is there to be lived out. What goes into words dies, what goes into the work lives” (HISP, 38). The morphological method here no longer seems to be the most powerful tool to clarify the status of our concepts or indeed *silence* philosophers’ *questions*. Rather, it is a tool that could be used to describe the complex and fruitful

7. Waismann (1949–1953) rejected the analytic/synthetic distinction around the same time as Quine (1951).

relations amongst questions and the underlying visions that great philosophers have proposed and that may in some cases supersede the boundaries of philosophy and inform scientific investigations. Indeed, for Waismann in HISP (38): “To say that metaphysics *is* nonsense is nonsense.” Thus, *contra* Wittgenstein and earlier Waismann himself, we should recognize the power of those systems of thought and live them through to see what of them may inform fruitful ways of thinking.

Still, it remains that these systems are not correct or incorrect. They are just complex and worked out *visions*. They are edifying if they have the power to generate thoughts and ideas, whereas they die the moment they clog thought by taking it through clichés and already trodden paths. *Pace* Rorty (1979) and his reading of Wittgenstein, nothing like the idea that philosophy’s aim is vision and that its main function is edifying and that as soon as it turns into a stable position—Rorty would call it “epistemology”—it dies, can be found in Wittgenstein. For, as we repeatedly saw, he did think, for better or for worse, that there was a correct way of describing our language and linguistic practices, and thereby show how philosophical theories that departed from them and conflated their rules—like most of what would normally count as metaphysics, for Wittgenstein—were in fact nonsense.⁸

2. DOUBTS: ORDINARY AND PHILOSOPHICAL

There is something clearly paradoxical about skeptical doubts. Namely, if one really doubted that there are physical objects around one, or that people in one’s surroundings were in fact robots or replicants with no minds or memories of one’s own, one would be considered mentally deranged or seriously deluded, and would be prescribed serious medications and therapies. Yet, clearly, we don’t think that philosophers who—like Descartes—proposed radical skepticism, or who—like Hume—even embraced it, were mentally deranged and seriously deluded. Quite the opposite: we think of them as amongst the greatest philosophical geniuses of all times, who raised issues that are still worth pondering about and that, most would agree, have still found no consensus answer in the philosophical community.

This, on the one hand, should immediately signal the fact that philosophical doubts are unlike ordinary ones, even if they happen to be about

8. Baker (2004b: 116) in contrast notes: “One might think that in affirming such generalizations [about grammar] he [Wittgenstein] commits a *petitio principii*. These are hardly trivialities to which everyone agrees the moment they are pronounced.” Since Wittgenstein, according to Baker, could never have been so dogmatic, he then takes him to be doing something altogether different. Yet, since Wittgenstein thought of himself as describing linguistic *facts*, he did not think of being dogmatic. Not any more than one would have reasons to think of being dogmatic by saying “It is raining” when it is in fact raining.

the same contents. On the other, it should also cast doubt on pushing the analogy between therapy in philosophy and psychoanalysis too far. In fact, Wittgenstein, in OC, goes at great length to show that philosophical doubts are unlike ordinary ones. Moreover, as we will see, even though they need to be “cured,” the cure is substantially different from the one we would administer in the case of their ordinary counterpart. What is interesting, even to these days, is that Wittgenstein and Waismann made a very serious attempt at understanding the peculiar nature of philosophical doubts. We will review their views in this order.

2.1. *Wittgenstein*

Wittgenstein’s account goes essentially through the following stages. First, in keeping with the morphological method, a survey of ordinary uses of “doubt” is provided. Second, it is shown how the philosophical use of it departs from the ordinary one. Third, because of that, philosophical doubts are deemed nonsensical. Of course, while the first two stages are thoroughly descriptive, the conclusion drawn by Wittgenstein (and the early Waismann) rests on the claim that meaning is use *in ordinary linguistic contexts*. Hence, there is nothing like a legitimate philosophical context of use of “doubt,” which, regardless of the rules that govern ordinary employments of that word, can produce sense. And, of course, this is a substantive *philosophical* and *metaphilosophical thesis*—one that, as we have briefly seen in §1, also Waismann in PLP, but not in HISP subscribed to.

Here I will not try to assess this thesis. My main concern is to bring out the fact that, contrary to merely “liberatory” readings of his thought, Wittgenstein not only did provide descriptions of linguistic usage, answerable to linguistic facts, but was also committed to, and often explicitly propounded, (meta-)philosophical theses, which were in the service of showing how more traditional philosophical positions were in fact misguided or even nonsensical.

Let us now review the above-mentioned stages of Wittgenstein’s critique in more detail. First off, for Wittgenstein, ordinary doubts manifest themselves only in certain circumstances and are accompanied by characteristic behavior. As he puts it,

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 as like the *be-*

haviour of doubt, but his game would not be ours. (OC 255; emphasis added; cf. OC 120, 154, 524–525)

The striking feature of philosophical doubts is that they contravene all this: they are raised in what appear to be normal, even ideal circumstances; are not accompanied by any characteristic behavior, and do not have consequences in practice. Indeed, if in what appear to be normal or even ideal circumstances doubts were accompanied by characteristic behavior and had consequences in practice, we would deem doubters to be cognitively impaired or even mentally deranged.

Second, “[o]ne doubts on specific grounds” (OC 458). Consider the following situation. A friend tells me “I know that Marco is at home” and I reply, “I doubt it, because I’ve called him several times and had no reply.” Another time, I am skiing with a friend, and he tells me, in the middle of a snowstorm, “That building over there must be a restaurant.” I say: “I doubt it, there are no restaurants on this side of the mountain. Perhaps it’s a shepherds’ hut.” With respect to someone’s claim to knowledge, I have reasons to doubt if I am aware of facts, or circumstances, that speak against what my interlocutor claims to know. Of course, my reasons remain defeasible and don’t guarantee that I am right and my interlocutor wrong. For, clearly, Marco could have been in the shower and thus may have failed to hear the telephone ring, and, unbeknownst to me, a restaurant may have recently opened on that side of the mountain.

Yet, in the case of Moore’s proof, what grounds could there be to doubt that what Moore holds up in front of himself is his hand? My senses testify to it. Thus, if I had that doubt in those circumstances, where perceptual conditions are optimal and I am cognitively lucid, I should in fact have to doubt of the deliverances of my eyesight, or that I am cognitively lucid. Hence, I should have to doubt that those are in fact optimal conditions. But that runs contrary to the nature of the case. If I did nevertheless doubt it, that would show that I am affected by some mental disturbance. Once more, the skeptical doubt, which is raised irrespectively of the usual criteria that govern the language game with “to doubt” is, in Wittgenstein’s opinion, nonsensical. For, to repeat, it is his view that philosophy is no further and independent language game where our ordinary language can go “on holiday.” Rather, it often depends on a misuse of our ordinary language—of the only language we have got—which produces an *appearance* or an *illusion* of sense.

Third, a doubt about the *existence* of a physical object is possible, for Wittgenstein, only within a specific kind of language game. Consider the following situation. One might say “Perhaps this planet doesn’t exist and the light-phenomenon arises in some other way” (OC 56); or else, one might

claim that a given historical figure, like Homer, never existed. These are perfectly legitimate doubts, which characterize the methodology of scientific and historical investigations. Yet, in order to find out whether a given planet or a historical figure exist(ed), as well as to doubt it, we can't call into question the existence of the instruments that give us the evidence on the basis of which we formulate our hypotheses and doubts; nor can we doubt the fact that the earth has existed for a very long time, if we still want to be able to use a finding or a source as evidence for or against a given historical hypothesis. We can thus see that our doubts about the existence of physical objects and people are subject to *methodological restrictions*, which guarantee the very possibility of raising those doubts. For, otherwise, we would no longer know what could speak for or against a given hypothesis. Wholesale doubts about the existence of all physical objects, or about the long existence of the Earth, would destroy the possibility of raising rationally motivated doubts. For any evidence for empirical doubts like the ones just mentioned is predicated on taking for granted the existence of physical objects or the long existence of the Earth. Writes Wittgenstein,

If someone doubted whether the earth had existed a hundred years ago, I should not understand it, for *this* reason: I would not know what such a person would still allow to be counted as evidence and what not. (OC 231)

On the one hand, our system of historical and geological evidence speaks in favor of the fact that the Earth has existed for a very long time. On the other, what we consider our system of justification in its favor can exist only if the extended existence of the Earth isn't called into question. For, otherwise, we could no longer consider a fossil, or a historical document, as evidence in favor of the long existence of the Earth. Hence, if, on the one side, we don't have any non-circular evidence that speaks in favor of the fact that the Earth has existed for a very long time; on the other, to call that into question would destroy what we ordinarily regard as grounds either to assert or to doubt, within history, geology and other disciplines, of the existence of objects, people, etc. Hence, *there can't (logically) be reasons, internal to our disciplines, to doubt of the very long existence of the Earth*. As a consequence, any doubt we might have with respect to that fact would only have the appearance of a doubt but wouldn't be real. Or else, it would simply be pathological (OC 452–454).

Lastly, “the game of doubting itself presupposes certainty” (OC 115). Hence, in Wittgenstein's view, certainty precedes doubts and makes them possible. For, first, we must know the meaning of the words we use to express our doubts, if we really want to doubt something. Writes Wittgenstein: “If I

don't know *that* [e.g. that *this* is my hand], how do I know if my words mean what I believe they mean?" (OC 506). That is, if, in Moore-like circumstances, I doubted that this object that I hold up in front of myself is my hand, it would then be doubtful that I knew the meaning of that word. For, if I were in doubt about the application of that word, on those circumstances, I would show that I don't really know the meaning of that term. As Wittgenstein writes, "The meaning of a word is what is explained by the explanation of the meaning" (PI, 560). Hence, to know the meaning of a word, one must be able to explain it. But if I doubted that this is in fact my hand, how could I still ostensibly explain the meaning of that word by pointing at it? I could, at most, give some sort of verbal definition, which, however, I would be unable to apply to its worldly referent. Thus, I would then be unable to use it, thereby showing that I don't really know its meaning. Yet, if one didn't know the meaning of the words one is using, what sense would one's words make? And what sense would one's doubt make? Once more, it would not be a real doubt but merely an appearance or illusion of doubt. The absence of uncertainty or doubt in the circumstances that surround philosophical doubts is therefore constitutive of one's knowledge of the meaning of the words one is using, which, in its turn, is a necessary condition—in fact a presupposition—for raising any meaningful doubt.

Second, the absence of doubt—hence an *attitude of trust*—is constitutive of the possibility of acquiring a language and of learning how to raise meaningful doubts. Writes Wittgenstein:

A pupil and a teacher. The pupil will not let anything be explained to him, for he continually interrupts with doubts, for instance as to the existence of things, the meaning of words, etc. The teacher says 'Stop interrupting me and do as I tell you. So far your doubts don't make sense at all.' (OC 310)

That is to say, the teacher will feel that this is not really a legitimate question at all. . . . The teacher would feel that this was only holding them up, that this way the pupil would only get stuck and make no progress.—And he would be right. . . . This pupil has not learnt how to ask questions. He has not learnt *the* game that we are trying to teach him. (OC 315)

Finally, as we saw, it is only if we take for granted certain things, such as the very long existence of the Earth, that we can participate in the various language games within which it makes sense to doubt whether a given historical figure really existed, or whether a specific historical event took place. Similarly, it is only by taking for granted that there are mind-independent objects, that our senses work mostly reliably, and that our cognitive facul-

ties are mostly reliable that we can utilize our senses and memories to raise doubts about the existence of specific physical objects like planets, or that we can harbor meaningful doubts about where we left our keys.

By marshalling all these observations regarding our language and epistemic practices, then, Wittgenstein is making the point that philosophical doubts conform to none of the criteria that govern ordinary ones. They are raised in perfectly standard, even ideal, cognitive and environmental circumstances, they have no consequence in practice and aren't accompanied by the typical behavior of doubt; they are neither based on grounds, nor are they raised within specific language games in which, by taking for granted what they try to call in doubt, we could ascertain the existence of specific physical objects or people; and they are raised in circumstances in which, if a doubt was seriously raised, it would also be doubtful that the words used therein would still have a meaning, or that subjects were cognitively well-functioning or sane. Hence, for Wittgenstein, philosophical doubts are merely illusions of doubt.

2.2. *Waismann*

In HISP Waismann too considers skeptical doubts. He first notices that they are unlike ordinary ones because they “never die” (HISP, 13). No amount of evidence, that is, would be capable of silencing them. Yet, contrary to Wittgenstein's strategy, he writes: “Are they doubts? Are they pseudo-questions? They appear so only when judged by the twin standards of common sense and common speech. The real trouble lies deeper” (ibid.). Where does it lie, for Waismann? It lies in the fact that

[a skeptic] struggles to express himself in a language which is not fit for his purpose. . . . His doubts cut so deep that they affect the fabric of language itself. For what he doubts is already embodied in the use of thing-words. . . . [I]n order to make his doubts fully expressible, language would first have to go into the melting-pot. (HISP, 14)

Thus, for Waismann, skeptical doubts simply challenge what we take for granted because it is deposited in the language we speak, or, to put it *à la* Carnap (1950), the framework we hold on to, given our upbringing within our community.

Hence, contrary to Wittgenstein, according to whom such doubts are nonsensical, Waismann concludes (ibid.):

If his [i.e., a skeptic's] doubts are taken seriously, they turn into observations which cast a new and searching light on the subsoil of language, showing what possibilities are open to our thought

(though not to ordinary language), and what paths might have been pursued if the texture of our experience were different from what it is. These problems are not spurious: they make us aware of the vast background in which any current experiences are embedded, and to which language has adapted itself; thus they bring out the unmeasured sum of experience stored up in the use of words and syntactical forms.

Thus, far from being nonsensical, skeptical doubts may be illuminating, according to Waismann. For they highlight how our language and current way of thinking are intertwined with the way we experience the world. Yet, if the latter had been different or if it changed in the future,⁹ also our thought would be different and we would have another language (or framework, *à la* Carnap). In short, skeptical doubts draw attention to the contingency and, in some sense, the arbitrariness of our language and current way of thinking (or framework). This form of conventionalism is absent in Wittgenstein's mature thought, while it resonates with Carnap's (especially Carnap 1950). For our form of life and picture of the world may be contingent yet they are largely inescapable for us.

3. THREE ANTI-SKEPTICAL STRATEGIES

Not only does Wittgenstein apply the morphological method to show how the philosophical use of "doubt," by departing from the ordinary one, is merely illusory. He also puts forward no less than three anti-skeptical strategies in OC—that is, multifaceted arguments aimed at countering specific skeptical views, by showing that they end up being nonsensical.

3.1. *Against Idealism*

The first one is against idealism—that is, the philosophical position that denies that there are mind-independent physical objects. As always in Wittgenstein, this does not take the form of maintaining the opposite—realist—view. Rather, it consists in deeming the whole realist/idealist dispute meaningless once the status of "There are physical objects" is properly appreciated. Writes Wittgenstein:

But can't it be imagined that there should be no physical objects? I don't know. And yet 'There are physical objects' is nonsense. Is it supposed to be an empirical proposition?—And is *this* an empirical proposition: 'There seem to be physical objects?' (OC 35)

'A is a physical object' is a piece of instruction which we give only

9. The possibility of such changes and inclusions of new, potentially inconsistent elements into our concepts is what Waismann (1945) refers to as "open texture."

to someone who doesn't yet understand either what 'A' means, or what 'physical object' means. Thus it is an instruction about the use of words, and 'physical object' is a logical concept. (Like colour, quantity, . . .) And that is why no such proposition as: 'There are physical objects' can be formulated. Yet we encounter such unsuccessful shots at every turn. (OC 36)

Now, according to Wittgenstein, "physical object" is a logical—categorical—concept, like "color" or "quantity." When we say of something that it is a physical object, we are thereby imparting a linguistic instruction. Hence, "*this* (said while pointing to an object) is a physical object" plays a grammatical, not an empirical or descriptive role. That is, we are not thereby affirming that the object falls under the concept and has certain properties. Rather, we are giving a piece of linguistic instruction concerning the use of 'a.' In particular, we are instructing the interlocutor about which inferences containing 'a' are allowed or forbidden. For instance, that it is legitimate to infer that that object is still in a drawer even if no one sees it (provided it is safe to assume that no one has tampered with it), while it is not legitimate to infer that it might have vanished out of its own accord (OC, 134, 214).

Thus, Wittgenstein tells us that "There are physical objects" is nonsense if it is meant to be an empirical proposition. To take it as such means to disregard its grammatical role (at most). Hence, we can't take ourselves to have *proved* the existence of physical objects—as mind-independent entities—just by noticing that the expression "physical object" is used in our language and is taken to license certain inferences while forbidding others.

Yet, is pointing *this* out "an adequate answer to the scepticism of the idealist, or the assurances of a realist"? (OC 37). "For them after all it is not nonsense" (*ibid.*). Answers Wittgenstein: "It would, however, be an answer to say: this assertion, or its opposite is a misfiring attempt to express what can't be expressed like that" (*ibid.*). What, then, are the realist and the idealist trying, misleadingly, to express? As to the realist, Wittgenstein's answer is:

So one might grant that Moore was right, if he is interpreted like this: a proposition saying that there is a physical object may have the same logical status as one saying that here is a red patch. (OC 53)

Hence a realist like Moore is right to point out that we aren't objectively certain just of propositions about sense data, or of arithmetic (OC 447–448, 455, 651–655, cf. 656–676), but also about propositions regarding what we categorize as physical objects, such as hands, tables and chairs in certain circumstances, like those paradigmatically exemplified by Moore's proof. Yet,

such certainty is a function of the role these propositions play in our language games and epistemic practices and isn't itself of an epistemic nature.¹⁰

An idealist, however, is right to insist that we haven't thereby proved the mind-transcendent existence of objects. Yet, he fails to notice that "There are physical objects" is a grammatical statement, not an empirical one. If so, neither its assertion nor its negation can be taken to state a deep metaphysical truth. Hence, "There aren't physical objects," as well as its opposite, are just nonsense, if interpreted in the metaphysical way in which both the realist and the idealist tend to interpret them—that is, as stating a deep empirical fact about the structure of reality.

Wittgenstein's point, therefore, is that "There are physical objects" can only make explicit some basic feature of grammar, or, equivalently, of our conceptual scheme, which countenances, within the fundamental fabric of the world, mind-independent objects.

That we do have such a conceptual scheme is shown by our linguistic and epistemic practices. Furthermore, its objective certainty—not truth—which, for Wittgenstein, is always a function of the role certain propositions play in our overall picture of the world, is manifested by the fact that "the *hypothesis* . . . that all the things around us don't exist . . . would be like the hypothesis of our having miscalculated in all our calculations" (OC 55). Yet, according to Wittgenstein, it is not "conceivable that we should be wrong in *every* statement about physical objects; that any we ever make are mistaken" (OC 54). For, as we have already repeatedly seen, the very meaning of our words doesn't depend on there being an agreement just in definitions, but also in judgements. Now, it is a fact that we do agree in judging of certain objects, which may not be presently perceived, or that may pre-date our existence, that they exist. That is why the hypothesis that there be no mind-independent physical objects boils down to the hypothesis that we may always have been mistaken. That hypothesis, in its turn, seems to make no sense, for it would deprive the expression "physical object" of its meaning.¹¹

Again, it is not my aim here to evaluate this argument. Rather, it is worth stressing, against merely "liberatory" readings of the later Wittgenstein, that the insistence on the grammatical nature of "There are physical objects," which places both the realist and the idealist beyond the bounds of sense, is a substantive *thesis*. Furthermore, it is merely if one is convinced of its being licensed by a *correct* understanding of the actual workings of our language that one would think that it is not, as such, a *philosophical* thesis. Were one

10. See Coliva 2020 for Wittgenstein's analogy between hinges and Moore's truisms, on the one hand, and elementary arithmetical statements, on the other.

11. See Coliva 2010, chap. 3 for details.

not so persuaded—that is, were one skeptical of flouting semantic continuity, and/or of offering a different interpretation of categorial concepts (like “object”) and of sortal ones (like “pen” or “table”)—one would be considering Wittgenstein as advancing a substantive philosophical claim, in need of serious defense like all philosophical theses. Yet, it is precisely because—perhaps mistakenly—Wittgenstein was utterly persuaded of seeing language *aright*, contrary to his philosophical opponents, that he also claimed—consistently and correctly, from his own point of view—that he was not in the business of offering either philosophical theses, or explanations, but merely descriptions.

3.2. *Against Cartesian Skepticism*

We have seen (§1) that, for Wittgenstein, doubts can only come after certainty, in the twofold sense of coming after an attitude of trust and of being necessarily based on taking for granted certain things. We know, however, that in classical epistemological projects, since Descartes’ *Metaphysical Meditations*, doubt has been considered the source of certainty; and it has been thought that only by calling into question *any* opinion, we could then determine what is known with certainty. This way, certainty would come *after* doubt and any *conceivable* doubt would be *legitimate*—that is to say, *intelligible and meaningful*. Furthermore, methodological skepticism was meant to be *global*, because it called everything into question to see if something could survive doubt after all.

Yet, as Wittgenstein put it, “If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything” (OC 115, cf. 450, 519, 625). For, as we saw, the very existence of language and the possibility of learning it depend on a general attitude of trust and on not calling into question certain things. Similarly, doubts are subject to methodological restrictions that depend on the features of specific language games where some things must stay put. Furthermore, not every *possible* doubt is meaningful for Wittgenstein (cf. OC 302, 392, 606). Only those doubts that are grounded in reasons and make a difference in practice are. These doubts, in their turn, presuppose that something be exempt from doubt.

Now, there is a couple replies to this line. One runs as follows: let us concede that to have language and our ordinary epistemic practices, doubt must come after certainty. Yet, once language and our ordinary epistemic practices are acquired, one can then raise any kind of doubt, while still using words meaningfully, and thus call into question the very foundations of our ordinary epistemic practices. Another one, instead, concedes that to have language, doubts are possible only based on taking for granted certain things.

Yet, it points out that philosophical doubts aren't essentially linguistic. They could just occur in one's mind.

In response, it must be kept firmly in mind that for Wittgenstein words never carry meaning on their sleeves independently of the circumstances of their use and, as we saw in §1, concepts are inseparable from linguistic usage, for they are the sum of those various uses.¹² Hence, also Cartesian global skepticism is strictly nonsensical for Wittgenstein, for it is based on putting the cart before the horse: certainty does not come after doubt but before it, as it allows us to acquire language and those epistemic practices that need to stay put to raise meaningful doubts at all. Appearances to the contrary are in fact a product of a mistaken conception of meaning, as well as of philosophy and, possibly, of the idea that thought could be independent of language and of its applications. Global skepticism is self-undermining to the point of precipitating into nonsense. It is neither rational—that is, supported by reasons—nor meaningful.

Furthermore, Wittgenstein considers one of the classic skeptical scenarios, namely the hypothesis from dreaming, and, unsurprisingly, deems it nonsensical as well. Here are the relevant passages.

I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming. Someone who, dreaming, says "I am dreaming," even if he speaks audibly in doing so, is no more right than if he said in his dream "it is raining," while it was in fact raining. Even if his dream were actually connected with the noise of the rain. (OC 6 76)

The argument "I may be dreaming" is senseless for this reason: if I am dreaming, this remark is being dreamed as well—and indeed it is also being dreamed that these words have any meaning. (OC 383)

First off, according to Wittgenstein, the doubt or even the hypothesis "I might be dreaming right now" is nonsense because those words (either spoken or entertained silently in one's mind) could never be used to describe one's occurrent state. If I were dreaming, I would also be dreaming of making an assertion or a judgement, for there could be no intentional connection between those words and the fact they are supposedly describing. At most, I would be describing the *dream* I am having of dreaming, not my present state of dreaming. Yet, if they cannot be used to make any assertion—either truly or falsely—they merely seem to have what we may call a "descriptive meaning," while in fact the only established pattern of use for those words, in

12. Not to mention the fact that the private language argument in *Philosophical Investigations* is often taken to purport to show the impossibility of concepts without a public language.

the first-person present,¹³ is to express one's surprise or one's intense joy. That is, the words "I am dreaming" in ordinary language have only an *expressive* function. Therefore, they cannot be used meaningfully to describe a state of affairs, either real or even dreamt of.

Once more, it is not my aim to evaluate this argument. The point is rather to make a case against "liberatory" readings of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, by showing that he was thoroughly engaging with his philosophical opponents by putting forward no doubt contentious yet utterly philosophical arguments, based on the view of meaning as use and the primacy and inescapability of ordinary language and of our actual epistemic practices. And, as already remarked, this pairing contains a specific view about language, which can be considered to be non-philosophical and merely descriptive by those who, like Wittgenstein, are utterly convinced of its correctness; as well as a specific metaphilosophical view about the primacy of ordinary language such that deviance from it—to be often witnessed in philosophy—would result in nonsense.

3.3. *Against Humean Skepticism*

Finally, while, as we saw, there are remarks in OC explicitly addressed to the dreaming hypothesis, the argument against Humean skepticism can only be evinced from those passages where Wittgenstein discusses the fact that our inquiries are all based on presuppositions which can't sensibly be doubted on pain of annihilating the possibility of raising rational doubts and questions at all (OC 217, 232, 519). The interest of this argument is that it is not necessarily connected to semantic theses, even though Wittgenstein no doubt took it to carry over to establish that Humean skepticism, like any other form of skepticism, would be meaningless.

The main feature of Humean skepticism is that, contrary to Cartesian skepticism, it does not traffic in far-fetched skeptical scenarios. Rather, it challenges the rationality of our basic assumptions (or beliefs) concerning the existence of physical objects and/or the reliability of our senses. Humean skeptics rightly point out that empirical reasons for believing that there is a pen here because one sees it are produced by taking both these assumptions for granted. That is, we could not have any empirical reason in favor of that ordinary belief if we did not take for granted that there are physical objects and that our sense organs work mostly correctly. Such assumptions, however, neither are nor can be supported by empirical reasons—since that

13. Obviously, for Wittgenstein, they have a present third-personal descriptive use as well as a first- and third-personal descriptive use in the past.

would be problematically circular—or by a priori ones.¹⁴ Hence, according to a Humean skeptic, they are not rationally held. If so, also the ordinary empirical beliefs that are only justified because those assumptions are taken for granted would turn out not the rationally held after all.

Wittgenstein's response has a Kantian flavor. For Wittgenstein remarks that it belongs to the *logic* of our investigations (OC 342, cf. 56, 82, 628) and to the *method* of our inquiries (OC 151, 318) that certain things be indeed exempt from doubt and not called into question.¹⁵ That is, taking those assumptions for granted is a *condition of possibility* of all our perceptual investigations.

Now, since there cannot be reasons to doubt either of the existence of physical objects—since everything speaks in favor of it and nothing could speak against it—or of the reliability of our senses—for any reasons we may have depend on relying on them, relying on them is not arbitrary and irrational. Rather it is mandated by empirical rationality itself. For it is only by relying on both these assumptions that reasons can be produced for or against any empirical claim.

A point worth noticing is that the insistence on the reason-bounded nature of doubt is not an observation just about our practice which may suggest the idea that we don't or even can't raise doubts about the presuppositions of our epistemic investigations because that would be *pragmatically impractical*, since it would deprive us of those very practices—like forming beliefs on the basis of perceptual and testimonial evidence—which, after all, serve us reasonably well. Rather, it is a point about the *logic* of any epistemic enquiry, as we have just seen.

Finally, it is a consequence of Wittgenstein's argument that, although the conditions of possibility of our practices lie equally beyond doubt and justification, it is a fact that *within* those practices we do produce justifications for specific empirical propositions which, when true, amount to knowledge. Thus, the worrying conclusions reached by Humean skepticism—that we never really have knowledge of ordinary empirical propositions—is blocked. Surely, it is always knowledge *within a system of justification* and therefore by courtesy of some assumptions. Yet, it is knowledge, nevertheless. In fact, it shows how knowledge is not absolute, but always delimited and made possible by the kind of epistemic system—with its hinges or basic assumptions—which gives rise to it.

14. For a detailed discussion of both claims, see Coliva 2015: chaps. 1–3.

15. It must be kept in mind that most of the times the later Wittgenstein talks about "logic," he is in fact introducing the idea of a norm. Now, according to his later views, norms, even those of evidential significance and not just those of grammar, depend on the actual features of our language games. As he repeatedly stressed, "everything descriptive of a language-game is part or logic" (OC 56, cf. 82, 628).

Once more, it is not my aim to assess this argument—even though I have strong sympathy for it¹⁶—but merely to stress, contrary to “liberatory” readings, that Wittgenstein did rationally engage with his philosophical opponents and proposed arguments aimed at exposing what he considered deeply mistaken views not just about language and the relationship between philosophy and ordinary language and practices, but also about (empirical) rationality and its groundless presuppositions.

4. CONCLUSIONS

By reviewing Wittgenstein’s complex treatment of philosophical doubts, it becomes evident that purely “liberatory” readings of his later thought are deeply misguided. Indeed, at least at their origin, namely in Baker’s work, they depended quite clearly on projecting the later Waismann’s views about philosophy backwards onto Wittgenstein’s later works.

Yet, for better or for worse, Wittgenstein proposed a battery of arguments and considerations aimed at exposing the self-defeating and nonsensical nature of philosophical doubts. Furthermore, his arguments were based on strong philosophical convictions, such as the idea that meaning is use and that ordinary language and epistemic practices determine the conditions for raising rational and meaningful doubts. Philosophical doubts that depart from those conditions are therefore merely illusions of doubts, in his view.

True, he did not argue for any of his methodological tenets. Yet, he was utterly convinced that they were grounded in a correct understanding of the workings of language and of our epistemic practices. They were not, for him, merely alternative images on a par with philosophically more traditional ones. That is why, I have been claiming, he took himself merely to be describing things, rather than explaining them or putting forward philosophical theses. No matter whether one concurs with him, it remains that Wittgenstein clearly had a vision about meaning, knowledge, doubt, philosophy, skepticism and their interconnections worth taking seriously.

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16. Coliva 2015, especially chapters 3 and 4, can be seen as an elaboration and defense of it.

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