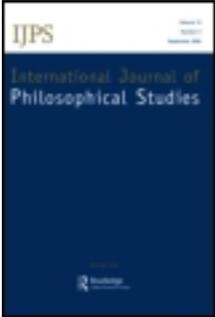


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Reading *On Certainty* through the Lens of Cavell: Scepticism, Dogmatism and the ‘Groundlessness of our Believing’

Chantal Bax

Abstract

While Cavell is well known for his reinterpretation of the later Wittgenstein, he has never really engaged himself with post-*Investigations* writings like *On Certainty*. This collection may, however, seem to undermine the profoundly anti-dogmatic reading of Wittgenstein that Cavell has developed. In addition to apparently arguing against what Cavell calls ‘the truth of skepticism’ – a phrase contested by other Wittgensteinians – *On Certainty* may seem to justify the rejection of whoever dares to question one’s basic presuppositions. According to *On Certainty*, or so it seems, the only right response to someone with different certainties is a reproach like ‘Fool!’ or ‘Heretic!’. This article aims to show that *On Certainty* need not be taken to prove Cavell wrong. It explains that Wittgenstein, in line with the first two parts of *The Claim of Reason*, does not reject scepticism out of hand but rather questions the sceptic’s self-understanding. Using arguments from Part Three of *The Claim*, the article moreover argues that a confrontation with divergence calls for self-examination rather than self-righteousness. Precisely because Wittgenstein acknowledges ‘the groundlessness of our believing’ or, in Cavellian terms, ‘the truth of skepticism’, he is not the authoritarian thinker that some have taken him to be.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; Cavell; *On Certainty*; scepticism; dogmatism; foundationalism

1. Cavell and *On Certainty*

While his writings can by no means be reduced to a mere commentary on the *Philosophical Investigations*, Stanley Cavell has without a doubt offered one of the most original and innovative contributions to scholarship on the later Wittgenstein. Many have for instance welcomed his reinterpretation of the Wittgensteinian method, according to which the appeal to ordinary language never puts an abrupt and non-negotiable end to philosophical debate but rather always invites a further

exploration of our everyday practices. There has likewise been approval of Cavell's related claim that Wittgensteinian criteria are not meant to dismiss scepticism out of hand, and that those only trying to prove the sceptic wrong risk failing to see what scepticism can teach us about our relationship to the world around us. The Wittgenstein who emerges from writings like *The Claim of Reason* is engaged in an unrelenting quest for self-knowledge and takes this undertaking to be ethical through and through – a sharp contrast with the dogmatic and reactionary thinker who figured in the critiques of Herbert Marcuse and Ernest Gellner, or who more recently makes an appearance in the work of Alain Badiou.¹

From this perspective, it can be regretted that Cavell has so far never really engaged himself with Wittgenstein's post-*Investigations* remarks, most notably those collected in *On Certainty*. Cavell explicitly and rightly states that he is under no obligation to comment on Wittgenstein's every single observation, even less so because he does not consider himself to simply or only be an interpreter of Wittgenstein.² Even so, a number of the entries in *On Certainty* may at first sight appear to undermine the Wittgenstein-inspired outlook that Cavell has developed. The collection first of all contains Wittgenstein's most detailed discussion of scepticism, and the main moral thereof could be taken to be that sceptical doubt can be rejected without further ado because doubt presupposes certainty: every question we raise is parasitic on a host of presuppositions that always already go unquestioned and doubting these presuppositions would be nonsensical or unreasonable. Cavell's claim that Wittgenstein can be said to affirm the 'truth of skepticism'³ has consequently been contested, for instance by Malcolm Turvey and Marie McGinn.⁴

Yet the challenge *On Certainty* poses to Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein is not limited to the issue of sceptical philosophy. Wittgenstein may seem to use the same insights about the taken-for-granted basis of human knowledge, not just to preclude each and every conversation with the sceptic, but to justify the unconditional rejection of whoever begs to differ with what one takes to stand fast. Certainties make investigation and discussion possible in the first place and as such, Wittgenstein appears to argue, they prohibit level-headed engagement with anyone who suggests that one's basic assumptions may not always already go without saying – be it by explicitly asking for a justification of one's certainties or by simply testifying to a different outlook on things. According to some of the entries in *On Certainty*, or so it seems, the only right response to someone who doubts or disagrees with one's fundamental presuppositions is something along the lines of 'Rubbish!', 'Fool!' or 'Heretic!'.⁵

These post-*Investigations* writings, then, could at first glance be taken to invalidate Cavell's understanding of Wittgenstein as a thoroughly anti-dogmatic thinker who never evades discussion and seizes every

opportunity to investigate where he stands with regard to himself and to (real or imagined) others. My aim in this paper is to show that *On Certainty* need not be taken to prove Cavell wrong, or to show that a Cavellian reading can be given of these writings, too.

To this end, I will first of all give an overview of the main arguments in *On Certainty* itself. I will explain how Wittgenstein's discussion of Moore can be said to acknowledge the moral of scepticism, though I will by and large refrain from using Cavellian terms in the second section. This will rather be the aim of the third section, which proceeds to read *On Certainty* through the lens of Cavell. I will use the arguments from Part Two of *The Claim* to explain that Wittgenstein does not dogmatically dismiss the sceptic by stating that he or she has transgressed certain pre-given bounds of sense. Wittgenstein rather questions the sceptic's self-understanding – which is also why his affirmation of the truth of scepticism does not make him into a proponent of the sceptical cause. For as Cavell maintains, the truth of scepticism is not exactly what the sceptic takes it to be. In the fourth section, I will then turn to the entries in which Wittgenstein seems to silence, not just the sceptical philosopher, but anyone who dares to challenge what one takes to stand fast. I will argue that, precisely because of the truth of scepticism, Wittgenstein should not be taken to justify the exclusion of diverging voices out of hand. Applying some of the arguments from Part Three of *The Claim*, I will explain that an encounter with someone who does not share one's certainties calls for self-examination rather than self-righteousness.

Hence, I will offer a reading of *On Certainty* that supports and elaborates on Cavell's understanding of the *Investigations*, thereby defending the Wittgenstein that emerges from his work. In the concluding section I will moreover point out that a Cavellian reading of *On Certainty* also allows for a more sophisticated understanding of the concept of certainty itself. Given that there are limits to what one can do in a single paper, however, I will not explicitly discuss competing interpretations of Wittgenstein, either in the last or in the other sections; I will reserve such discussion for the footnotes. For similar reasons, I will focus first and foremost on only one of Cavell's numerous writings, namely, the aforementioned *The Claim of Reason*. This after all remains the most important and extensive source for Cavell's anti-dogmatic reading of the later Wittgenstein.

2. *On Certainty* and Anti-scepticism

Not unlike the first chapters of *The Claim*, *On Certainty* starts out as a discussion of anti-scepticism rather than of scepticism itself, taking issue with G. E. Moore's attempt to refute the sceptic. While Wittgenstein

agrees with Moore that the sceptic's questions need not bring all our thinking and acting to a stop, he feels that something is amiss with Moore's insistence that he indisputably *knows* things like 'There exists at present a living human body' (Moore, 1959a: p. 33) and 'Here is one hand' (Moore, 1959b: p. 144). It is moreover precisely in the course of his critique of Moore that Wittgenstein is able to formulate several important insights into the nature of human knowledge – several of which the sceptic can in a sense be said to share.

Wittgenstein first of all observes that we normally only say that we know something when we have sufficient grounds for our statements, or when we at any rate know how we will be able to back them up.⁶ Knowledge claims, namely, can also be disputed. Someone might ask me how I know that Egyptian fenugreek seed caused the E.coli outbreak in Germany, or that this watch is a genuine Rolex. My subsequent explanation may or may not convince my interlocutor, who might go on to provide grounds to the contrary, which in turn may or may not serve to convince me. Knowledge claims, then, are things we doubt and discuss and about which we try to come to an agreement, though we may not always succeed in doing so.

This is not quite the case with the statements Moore lists in his attempt to refute the sceptic, Wittgenstein points out. Moore's argument, for a start, precisely makes use of the fact that we would normally not question someone saying 'This is my hand' (though we might wonder why this person feels the need to make this claim in the first place).⁷ Wittgenstein explains: 'The propositions presenting what Moore "*knows*" are all of such a kind that it is difficult to imagine *why* anyone should believe the contrary' (OC: § 93). Hence, when Moore says that he knows that the earth has existed for many years, he means 'that any reasonable person in [his] position would also know it, that it would be a piece of unreason to doubt it' (OC: § 325). Yet if a certain statement is not considered to be eligible for doubt and disagreement, it is unlike the statements we normally call knowledge claims. Far from being immune from discussion, it is precisely its connection to questions and investigations that makes a statement into a claim to knowledge: 'Where there is no doubt there is no knowledge either' (OC: § 121).

In a similar vein, Moore's statements differ from ordinary knowledge claims in lacking clear procedures for justification, or in lacking justification procedures of any kind. For the facts Moore lists are not only things we normally do not question, we would not even know how someone's having two hands or a body could be proven to be true: 'Moore chooses precisely a case in which we all seem to know the same as he, and without being able to say how' (OC: § 84). Yet if we cannot say how we know something to be true, we can strictly speaking not be said to know it either. 'One says "I know" when one is ready to give compelling

grounds' (OC: § 243), Wittgenstein explains, so when compelling grounds are absent, the label 'knowledge' does not truly apply.⁸

Yet these considerations do not bring Wittgenstein to brush Moore's statements aside as being without any use or interest. On his view, the fact that we typically would not doubt that Moore has two hands, or would not think about asking him to prove that he has a body, shows that Moore-style propositions play a very special role in our epistemological practices. For as Wittgenstein argues, at some point questions and investigations come to an end.⁹ When a scientist conducts an experiment, she questions lots of things, but not whether her microscope really exists or whether the numbers she writes down may not suddenly rearrange themselves.¹⁰ This is not out of negligence: if she were to investigate all of these things, she would never be able to get her research off the ground. This holds for non-scientific, everyday practices as well. We would not be able to make any claim or perform any action if we would have to answer all possible questions about them beforehand: 'We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put' (OC: § 343). And, Wittgenstein finds, it is precisely this hinge-like function that the facts Moore lists fulfil. His emphatic insistence that he simply *knows* that the earth exists indicates that, here, he '[has] arrived at the rock bottom of [his] convictions' (OC: § 248). Rather than expressing knowledge claims, Moore points to something that makes knowledge possible in the first place.

In order to bring this out more fully, *On Certainty* needs to make a number of corrections to Moore's statements. First and perhaps foremost, Wittgenstein tries to find a new terminology for Moore's purported knowledge claims. Being exempt from doubt and justification, as stated, the label 'knowledge' does not truly apply to them, and Wittgenstein accordingly looks for a more appropriate characterization. While he does not always succeed in avoiding the word 'knowledge' for Moore-style claims, and tries out several alternative descriptions, there is one term that above all seems to capture the specific nature of Moore's statements. The things we unhesitatingly take for granted in everything we do and say, Wittgenstein submits, are not instances of knowledge but of certainty.¹¹ These presuppositions collectively make up a picture of the world¹² that informs all our enquiring and asserting but that is not questioned itself; we rather always simply and confidently take these things for a fact. So where Moore says 'I know' it would have been more accurate to say: 'I am familiar with it as a certainty' (OC: § 272).

Yet according to Wittgenstein, Moore-style statements do not only not amount to knowledge claims, they are in fact not of a propositional nature at all.¹³ That is to say, it is precisely by normally going unexpressed that my conviction that there are external objects serves to

underlie my doings and sayings, from my disputing the date of an Attic vase to my playing a game of basketball. To be sure, a certainty may at some point become the topic of discussion – this has for instance happened to Wittgenstein’s own conviction that it is impossible for humans to go to the moon.¹⁴ A certainty may also be explicitly formulated for purposes of instruction, like when we say ‘This is a hand’ to a child we are teaching English.¹⁵ In such a case, however, these statements no longer or not yet function as certainties. In normal circumstances, making a certainty explicit interrupts rather than facilitates the everyday flow of life. Hence, Wittgenstein states that in so far as giving grounds comes to and end, ‘the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true ... it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game’ (OC: § 204). While certainties form the basis for our intellectual pursuits, they are themselves of a non-intellectual or practical nature.

In the course of these observations, Wittgenstein is also able to explain why we are so certain of the things Moore lists, even though we are unable to give grounds for them. For as Wittgenstein points out, there is also another sense in which our basic presuppositions are non-intellectual. Rather than having acquired certainties after a process of painstaking investigation and experimentation, we more or less automatically come to subscribe to them in the course of our upbringing:

I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false. (OC: § 94)

Indeed, while certainties like ‘This is a hand’ are taught explicitly, most of what we take to stand fast is transmitted in an implicit manner. Children for instance ‘do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist ... – they learn to fetch books, sit in armchairs’ (OC: § 476) and thereby come to take the former for granted. It is thus simply by being a member of a particular community that a person has the certainties she has; she has incorporated them as she was initiated into the practices of her fellow men.

This gives Wittgenstein all the more reason to distinguish certainties from claims to knowledge. For as stated, knowledge claims are things we debate and discuss with the aim of reaching agreement, but without the guarantee of doing so. When it comes to certainties, by contrast, the members of a community do not have to reach an agreement: they already are in agreement, and in a more profound way than an explicit quest for concurrence could ever achieve. Wittgenstein notes: “‘We are quite sure of it’ does not mean just that every single person is certain of it, but that we belong to a community which is bound together by

science and education' (OC: § 298). We would even consider someone who does not share our certainties an outcast or outsider, someone with whom we would not know how to reason.¹⁶ Moore's argument, as stated, precisely draws on the fact that members of a community always already take the same things for granted, but this is also precisely why his statements cannot be said to amount to knowledge claims. The agreement here is of a very different kind.¹⁷

3. The Truth and Falsity of Scepticism

To come back to my main aim in this article, the findings of the previous section can all be summarized in Cavellian terms. Moore's anti-sceptical protestations inadvertently demonstrate what can with Cavell – and *pace* critics like Turvey and McGinn – be called the truth of scepticism: at the most fundamental level, 'Our relation to the world ... is not one of knowing' (CR: p. 45).¹⁸ For as Wittgenstein's discussion of Moore makes clear, our intellectual pursuits are made possible by our unthinkingly already taking a whole conglomerate of things to stand fast. This does not come in the form of our consciously or even tacitly approving of certain empirical propositions. What Wittgenstein calls 'certainties' only show themselves in the way we unhesitatingly talk and act; the foundation of our knowledge consists of nothing over and above 'our shared commitments and responses' (CR: p. 179).

There is moreover no justification for the things we take for granted than that we have come to incorporate them in the course of our upbringing, which cannot be called a proper justification at all. As Cavell explains: 'Wittgenstein's discovery, or rediscovery, is of the depth of convention in human life; the conventionality of human nature itself' (CR: p. 111). In *On Certainty*, this comes out in Wittgenstein's observation that we both share our certainties with and owe them to the other members of our community. Both in the sense that there is nothing beyond our own actions and reactions to serve as a basis for knowledge, and in the sense that these certainties are inherited rather purposively obtained, Wittgenstein maintains that we have to 'realize the groundlessness of our believing' (OC: § 166).

In order to flesh out this Cavellian reading of *On Certainty* more fully, let me first of all use Cavell's insights to make sense of the particular mix of foundational and anti-foundational language that Wittgenstein employs, talking about the preconditions for human knowledge on the one hand and about the groundlessness of our believing on the other. Explained along Cavellian lines, Wittgenstein can be said to investigate the foundations of our everyday practices, but the foundations he lays bare are of a very particular kind.¹⁹ Wittgenstein's view of knowledge,

Cavell maintains, is ‘anthropological, or even anthropomorphic’ (CR: p. 118); he takes it to ‘[depend] upon nothing more and nothing less than shared forms of life’ (CR: p. 168). Wittgenstein thus offers a human foundation for human knowledge, and this is bound to dissatisfy anyone who holds that only something unaffected by the all-too human can have a foundational function. From that perspective, the grounds described in *On Certainty* do not make for grounds at all, for they are only grounds in so far as we uphold them. Or as Wittgenstein characterizes his particular brand of foundationalism: ‘one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house’ (OC: § 248).

This also explains why Cavell’s insistence that Wittgenstein discovers a kernel of truth in scepticism all the same does not make him into a proponent of the sceptical cause.²⁰ Read through the lens of Cavell, the sceptic precisely assumes that an anthropomorphic foundation cannot be a true foundation. She will only let her doubts be eased if we show her something independent and a-historical underlying our language games. Yet that there are no such grounds to offer does not mean that the sceptic is right in all respects, Wittgenstein maintains. It is not just the case that our practices cannot be justified by reference to pre-given facts – they do not need such grounds either: ‘What I need to shew is that a doubt is not necessary even when it is possible. That the possibility of the language-game doesn’t depend on everything being doubted that can be doubted’ (OC: § 392). Or to put it in the words of Cavell, if our relation to the world is not one of knowing, ‘it is also true that we do not fail to know such things’ (CR: p. 45).

Hence, while *On Certainty* can, with Cavell, be said to underscore the truth of scepticism, it should, with Cavell, also be said offer ‘a reinterpretation of what skepticism is, or threatens’ (CR: p. 7). At this point, I want to turn to Part Two of *The Claim of Reason*, where Cavell precisely examines why scepticism, if it is not completely false, cannot be completely true either. This will not only serve to get a final grasp on the idea of the truth of scepticism as applied to *On Certainty* – it will also show that, read through the lens of Cavell, Wittgenstein does not dogmatically silence the sceptical philosopher, even if he doubts the meaningfulness of her questions. For as I explained in the introduction, *On Certainty*’s seeming dogmatism is another reason that this collection could be taken to undermine Cavell’s interpretation of Wittgenstein.

To very briefly summarize the most relevant steps here, Cavell first of all returns to his earlier findings about the inability of ordinary language philosophy to provide a direct refutation of the sceptic. To bluntly tell her that her question normally does not arise does not only violate the insight that ordinary language has no hard and fast rules,²¹ the sceptic also knows very well that her query is somewhat out of the ordinary. She will accordingly only feel that her question has been begged when

she is told that everyday language has no place for it; on her view, this simply means ‘that ordinary language has itself been shown not fully trustworthy’ (CR: p. 164). Even so, Cavell explains, the success of the sceptic’s inquiry crucially depends on its following the course of an ordinary investigation. For even if the question ‘How do you know this is a hand?’ normally does not arise, once it is raised we are expected to take the steps we normally take when someone asks us how we know something. And for whatever basis we give the sceptic will then be able to provide another ground for doubt (e.g. ‘Because I see it’ – ‘But [you] don’t see *all* of it’ [CR: p. 144]).

Here, however, it becomes clear that the sceptic is simultaneously required to diverge from normal investigative practices in an essential way. Investigations are usually undertaken because there is a specific reason to have a closer look at a particular claim, which also gives us an indication as to where to direct our inquiries. Yet so far, Cavell points out, it is unclear why the sceptic asks us about our knowledge of our hands – what is more, if she would give a more precise reason for her question, it would immediately lose all sceptical force. Her question, namely, would then simply become a specific question about a specific issue on one specific occasion, and nothing follows from such a question about the fate of human knowledge as such. Cavell concludes:

[The skeptic’s investigation] must be the investigation of a concrete claim if its procedure is to be coherent; it cannot be the investigation of a concrete claim if its conclusion is to be general. Without that coherence it would not have the obviousness it has seemed to have; without that generality its conclusion would not be sceptical. (CR: p. 220)

Explained along Cavellian lines, in other words, sceptical doubt is not senseless because we always already know beforehand where to draw the line between what can and what cannot be questioned.²² It is rather the case that when we probe the sceptic’s questions – instead of rejecting them out of hand – they either turn out to not express any clear doubts at all, or show themselves to be of a perfectly everyday and therefore non-sceptical kind.

Something similar holds for Moore’s (purported) claims to knowledge. Wittgenstein is not claiming that Moore has no right to ever say things like ‘I know this is a hand’, or as he could have stated with Cavell: ‘I am in no way hoping ... to convince anyone that certain statements cannot be made or ought not be made’ (CR: p. 212). The argument rather is that simply saying ‘I know this is a hand’ by itself does not achieve anything. In order for someone to understand what you mean by those words, it has to be made clear what your point in saying them is: ‘If

someone says, “I know that that’s a tree” I may answer: “Yes, that is a sentence. An English sentence. And what is it supposed to be doing?” (OC: § 352).²³ Moore’s claim is thus not so much nonsensical as meaningless; it still remains to be seen what he means his words to say. However, once a more concrete reason and context are provided for his statement, it becomes an ordinary knowledge claim that cannot bear the weight of supporting human epistemology as a whole: ‘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).²⁴ Like the sceptic’s question, Moore’s statement has to be specific in order to count as a proper knowledge claim, yet as a concrete claim, it does not accomplish what he wants it to.

On Certainty, then, is not trying to dismiss either Moore or the sceptic beforehand, in spite of what some of the remarks about the nonsensicality of their statements may suggest, and in spite of Wittgenstein’s insight that certainties normally go unquestioned and unexpressed. Indeed, it is now possible to reformulate a point I already made in the previous section: it is not the case that certainties can never be described or made explicit, it is just that there always has to be a reason for doing so; think of the aforementioned instances of instruction, or think of situations, as Cavell points out and I will discuss more fully in the next section, in which ‘[our] attunement [in forms of life] is threatened or lost’ (CR: p. 34). Yet as these very reasons indicate, when certainties are made explicit they not yet or no longer function as certainties. For some reason or other, some of the things we always already take for granted do not go without saying anymore, if only temporarily.

4. Of Fools and Heretics

After explaining that *On Certainty* is about the groundlessness of our believing or about the human foundations of human knowledge, I have argued, with the help of Cavell, that Wittgenstein does not set out to suppress the voices of the sceptical and the anti-sceptical philosopher. My arguments so far may however sound rather hollow in the light of a number of remarks that have not yet been discussed. For even if Wittgenstein cannot be said to brusquely brush the claims and questions of Moore and the sceptic aside, he seems to do just that when the content rather than the justification of our certainties is questioned, remarking: ‘One might simply say “O, rubbish!” to someone who wanted to make objections to the propositions that are beyond doubt. That is, not reply to him but admonish him’ (OC: § 495). Such a response seems justified by the fact that certainties, making investigation and discussion possible in the first place, can as such not be the topic of a reasoned

debate. When confronted with a different outlook on things, Wittgenstein may consequently appear to argue, people can only revert to not-so-rational means: ‘Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic’ (OC: § 611).

Remarks such as these may seem to undermine what I have argued in the foregoing, for if Wittgenstein condones the unconditional rejection of whoever dares to question what one takes to stand fast, why would he acknowledge something like the truth of scepticism? Indeed, it appears that, on Wittgenstein’s view, questions about one’s certainties need never give one pause and only make one hold on to one’s groundless views all the firmer. This would mean that he is exactly the reactionary thinker that critics like Marcuse and Badiou have made him out to be, and that Cavell’s anti-dogmatic reading simply misrepresents the true nature of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Yet as I will show, there is a Cavellian moral to be drawn from the remarks just quoted as well.

It should first of all be noted that Wittgenstein does not maintain that the only right response to someone who questions one’s certainties is ‘Rubbish!’, ‘Fool!’ or ‘Heretic!’. We might be inclined to respond in this way because what is at stake are the very foundations of our everyday practices, yet as Cavell remarks in his discussion of Kripke in *The Argument of the Ordinary*: ‘What I am inclined to say is precisely not something I necessarily go on to say’ (AO: p. 71). When confronted with someone who is ‘contradicting [one’s] fundamental attitudes’, as Wittgenstein accordingly states elsewhere in *On Certainty*, one might just ‘have to put up with’ (OC: § 238) this deviance. Or as *The Claim* explains, there can be crossroads at which ‘we have to conclude that on this point we are simply different’ (CR: p. 19). That such a response is possible too means that, rather than always already reverting to name-calling, it should be said to be a practical question how we will approach someone contradicting our fundamental attitudes.²⁵ Depending on several factors like our relation to this person²⁶ and the certainty at issue, we might react in any one of several possible ways.

Moreover, that we might be inclined to say things like ‘Fool!’ and ‘Heretic!’ in response to an objection to our certainties does not mean that we are justified or licensed to do so.²⁷ That is to say, Wittgenstein’s remark that one might admonish rather than reply to a contradicting voice is first and foremost motivated by his holding that it would be inappropriate to try and provide grounds in support of what one takes to stand fast. Certainties, namely – to once more repeat this Wittgensteinian insight – form the foundations on the basis of which arguments are given and assessed, but they can themselves not be supported by means of argumentation. It is for this reason – but it is also only for this reason – that it would be more appropriate to admonish a dissenter than it

would be to offer him an elaborate justification for one's certainties. This however does not provide a positive justification for calling the other a fool or a heretic. That we might be inclined to say such things only goes to show that we are at an intellectual loss when it comes to the very foundations of our everyday practices.

Indeed, it is precisely the groundlessness of these practices that one is confronted with when one faces a person with a different set of certainties and finds that, here, normal ways of arguing break down.²⁸ For 'when [the limits of attunement] are reached', as Cavell describes such a situation in *The Claim of Reason*, 'I cannot get below them to firmer ground. The power I felt in my breath as my words flew to their effect now vanishes into thin air', and I am consequently 'thrown back upon myself' (CR: p. 115). This means that, rather than only holding fast to one's groundless certainties all the firmer, a confrontation with a deviant or diverging voice could also give one a little pause. It is perhaps one of those events in which one might, as Wittgenstein observes, be 'torn away from the *sureness* of the game' (OC: § 617). And as Cavell continues his description of a confrontation situation: 'When my reasons come to an end and I am thrown back upon myself ... I can use the occasion to go over the ground I had hitherto thought foregone' (CR: p. 124). This may then bring one to realize that one always already takes a host of things for granted simply because one is a member of a particular community, and that these things are not self-evident from all perspectives:

I may [then] feel that my foregone conclusions were never conclusions I had arrived at, but were merely imbibed by me, merely conventional. I may blunt that realization through hypocrisy or cynicism or bullying. But I may take the occasion to throw myself back upon my culture, and ask why we do what we do, judge as we judge. (CR: p. 125)

Hence, what starts out as a confrontation with a deviant or diverging voice could develop into a confrontation with oneself and one's community: with the fact that there is no other reason for our eating meat or our distinguishing between races – to use some of the examples Cavell himself employs – than that we have always done so until now. This may take the form of actively questioning some of the community's certainties in the way Cavell suggests in the quote just given, but it might also, or as a precursor to such active questioning, lead to a dis- or uncovering of what one always already takes for granted in the first place. Certainties are, after all, not things one consciously entertains; in this sense, too, we cannot be said to know what we are certain of.²⁹ When it comes to the very foundations of our everyday practices, therefore, it should with Cavell be said that 'the self is not obvious to the self' (CR: p. 312). Yet

as Wittgenstein remarks, even though one has unwittingly come to take a host of things for granted in the course of one's upbringing, one can 'discover them subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates' (OC: § 152). A confrontation with deviance or divergence, then, might also lead to self-examination and to self-knowledge.

Having formulated the moral of Wittgenstein's seemingly dogmatic remarks in these terms, Cavell's writings now also suggest a different way of understanding the fact that certainties cannot be the topic of a reasoned debate, or a way of understanding that this need not imply complete irrationality. What I have in mind is Part Three of *The Claim of Reason*, in which Cavell examines what the nature of moral judgment can be said to be, given that it does not take the form of arguing from shared premises to shared conclusions. This fact is often taken to point to 'the failure or irrationality of morality' (CR: p. 255), yet as Cavell argues, in the case of morality, too, its limitations need not be interpreted as failures. For even if the participants in a moral conversation lack shared premises and may never arrive at a shared conclusion, this does not disqualify morality as such; it only indicates that these specific persons cannot be said to live in the same moral universe.³⁰ Moreover, even when a moral conversation only leads to a delineation of moral worlds, so to speak, this does not necessarily leave the participants empty-handed. Quite the contrary, for it allows them to understand more fully, or even for the very first time, where they stand with regard to the other and with regard to themselves. According to Cavell – to wrap up this much too cursory discussion of Part Three of *The Claim* – the rationality of morality consists in its ability to lead 'to a knowledge of our own position, of where we stand; in short, to a knowledge and definition of ourselves' (CR: p. 312).

Returning to *On Certainty*, something similar can be said about a situation in which different certainties 'really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another' (OC: § 611). To be sure, when confronted with someone who contradicts one's fundamental attitudes one might respond with obstinacy, with name-calling or with proselytism. Such responses are however not the only possible or even the most valid ones. As Cavell observes, 'if I say "They are crazy" or "incomprehensible" then that is not a fact but my fate for them' (CR: p. 118) – a fate that may already indicate something about myself and my community, namely, 'its power to exclude, its impotence to include' (AO: p. 76), as *The Argument of the Ordinary* has it. For there are also other ways of dealing with difference.

Moreover, if a confrontation with deviance or divergence should in fact be said to form a confrontation with the very groundlessness of certainties, that fact would be more accurately reflected, not by automatically excluding or dismissing the dissenter, but by turning one's

attention to what one takes for granted oneself. A dogmatic dismissal could in a Cavellian vein be explained as a projection of the groundlessness of one's own certainties onto the other, and as bespeaking the misconception that self-knowledge takes care of itself.³¹ For even if normal ways of arguing break down at such a point, it pre-eminently provides one with an opportunity for exploring where exactly one stands, not only with regard to the other, but also with regard to oneself: for coming to see what one apparently takes to be unquestionable and indisputable, and that one does so on no other grounds than one's upbringing within a particular socio-cultural context. Temporarily interrupting the everyday flow of life, such reflection need not lead to a denunciation of any one of one's certainties, but it may lead to a better understanding of the kind of person one is and the kind of community one belongs to.

5. A Cavellian Reading of *On Certainty*

My arguments in the foregoing go to show that even though Cavell has never really engaged himself with *On Certainty*, the anti-dogmatic reading of Wittgenstein he has developed can be used to understand these writings too. For as I explained in the third section, *On Certainty* does not brush sceptical questions aside as nonsensical without further ado. While Wittgenstein can, with Cavell, be said to question the sceptic's self-understanding, *On Certainty* first and foremost exposes what Cavell calls the truth of scepticism, regardless of Turvey's and McGinn's critique of this phrase. Moreover, as I explained in the fourth section, it is precisely because Wittgenstein recognizes the truth contained in scepticism that he cannot be said to justify the unconditional exclusion of deviant or diverging voices. A confrontation with deviance or divergence, namely, is at the same time a confrontation with the groundlessness of one's own certainties, and it cannot be stated beforehand how one will respond to such a realization. Explained along Cavellian lines, though, it should inspire self-examination rather than self-righteousness. Being thrown back on oneself in such way provides an opportunity for discovering some of the things one always already takes for granted, simply by virtue of the upbringing one has received. On this reading, then, Wittgenstein is far from the reactionary thinker that critics like Marcuse and Badiou have made him out to be.

Yet a Cavellian reading of *On Certainty* not only puts some of Wittgenstein's seemingly dogmatic remarks in a different light; it also allows for a deepened understanding of the Wittgensteinian concept of certainty itself. In closing, let me therefore make some corrections or clarifications to the way I have been using this notion after introducing

certainties in section two as the elements that make up our picture of the world, or as the ‘things’ we always already take for granted. For even though I have emphasized that certainties are non-propositional and non-intellectual, I have still been talking about them as if certainties form concrete epistemological objects. This may be hard to avoid when discussing an epistemological collection of remarks, especially when the writer himself is not always consistent in his terminology, yet as a Cavellian reading of *On Certainty* makes unmistakably clear, certainties do not make for clearly definable beliefs that a person entertains, not even clearly definable beliefs that simply go unexpressed.³² That is to say, a person always already takes a host of things for granted, but this only shows itself in what this person says and does. Certainties do not play any active role in our everyday practices and as a result, they can only be known retrospectively – for instance when philosophically reflecting on human epistemology, or when confronted with someone who objects to what one has always taken to stand fast. It is only when the everyday flow of life is interrupted or taken a step back from that certainties can be identified.

Moreover, when one subsequently discovers them ‘like the axis around which a body rotates’ (OC: § 152), it not only seems impossible to list all the things one takes for a fact on a daily basis, formulating any one of them in sentence form does not even begin to capture how a taken for granted fact informs our everyday practices. The certainty that the earth exists or that people eat meat, for instance – to also use one of Cavell’s examples again – manifests itself in numerous and very subtle ways: not only in the things we say and do, but also in the manner in which we do and say them, as well as in the things we precisely refrain from doing and saying (like checking to see whether the ground is still there before stepping out the door, or asking the waiter for a vegetarian meal). Statements of the form ‘The earth exists’ or ‘People eat meat’ do not capture how pervasive and ingrained certainties are.

This perhaps provides another way of understanding Wittgenstein’s claim that the truths Moore lists cannot be expressed or put into sentence form. It in any case means that coming to see what one takes to stand fast is not a quick and easy process – not to mention the process one faces when self-examination reveals certainties about which one no longer feels comfortable saying ‘This is simply what we do’.³³ This brings me to something else that a Cavellian reading of *On Certainty* is able to bring to the fore, namely, that what we take for granted is not just subject to change³⁴ but is something we are to some extent able to alter ourselves. Read along Cavellian lines, after all, Wittgenstein provides a human foundation for human knowledge, and it is not or not always beyond our power to change our very own actions and reactions.³⁵ Or in the words of Cavell: ‘What I took as a matter of course ... I may come

to take differently ... What I cannot now take as a matter of course I may come to; I may set it as my task' (CR: p. 124). To be sure, such a conversion³⁶ cannot be brought about overnight, and like certainties can only be known retrospectively, it cannot be stated beforehand how exactly it will affect everyday practices. This however merely serves to underscore once more – to finish by returning to my main line of argument – that read through the lens of Cavell, Wittgenstein is a thinker of modesty and caution rather than an authoritarian know-it-all.³⁷

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Notes

- 1 See Gellner, 1963: pp. 59–63; Marcuse, 1964: pp. 170–99; Badiou, 1999: pp. 113–40; Badiou, 2011. (Though this latter book focuses on TLP rather than PI, it takes issue with several notions that are usually associated with the later Wittgenstein, such as the idea that truth is a mere effect of language games.)
- 2 See CR: p. xviii; RF: pp. 287–9. For an explanation of the abbreviated references I use, see the list in the reference section.
- 3 CR: pp. 6, 47, 241.
- 4 See Turvey, 2001; McGinn, 1998, 2004. While McGinn focuses on other mind rather than external world scepticism and uses other post-PI material to argue against Cavell, she similarly holds that he is wrong to claim that there is more to scepticism than a misunderstanding of our everyday practices. She however agrees with Cavell that a dogmatic dismissal of scepticism will not do – though she holds that Cavell, in spite of his anti-dogmatic rhetoric and in contrast to Wittgenstein himself, ends up providing a dogmatic rejection of scepticism (see McGinn, 1989: pp. 99–100, 160–63). She takes this to result from Cavell's failing to offer an account of the workings of our everyday practices in the way OC does; by reading OC through the lens of Cavell, I hope to show that a similar account can in fact be found CR.
- 5 See OC: §§ 495, 611.
- 6 See OC: §§ 18, 40, 50, 243, 484, 504.
- 7 See OC: §§ 93, 155, 219, 220, 252, 464, 467.
- 8 See OC: §§ 91, 483, 504, 550.
- 9 See OC: §§ 34, 110, 115, 192, 204, 343, 625.
- 10 See OC: § 337; cf. OC: §§ 163, 345, 346.
- 11 See OC: §§ 7, 115, 174, 272, 308, 358, 360, 415, 446.
- 12 See OC: §§ 93, 94, 95, 162, 167, 233, 262.
- 13 See OC: §§ 87, 110, 159, 204, 402, 427, 501.
- 14 See OC: §§ 108, 111, 264, 327. That certainties can lose their hinge function and become the topic of discussion themselves is the moral of Wittgenstein's river metaphor (OC: §§ 96–9).
- 15 See OC: §§ 36, 530.
- 16 See OC: §§ 155, 219, 220, 252, 325. I will however argue in the fourth section that difference in certainties need not always already imply dismissal and exclusion.

- 17 It should be added that when it comes to certainties, disagreement or loss of agreement (cf. CR: p. 34) can also not be settled in the way disagreement about knowledge claims can. This will also be discussed in section four.
- 18 It should be noted that Cavell continues: ‘where knowing construes itself as being *certain*’ (my emphasis). Yet even though Cavell uses exactly the wrong word here, it will become clear that this is merely a matter of terminology and that the ideas expressed in CR and OC are in no way contradictory.
- 19 Whether Wittgenstein can be called a foundationalist is debated; e.g. Stroll, 1994, argues that he can, while Williams, 2007, argues that he cannot. Unlike Williams, I do not think that the label ‘foundationalist’ should be reserved for those defending a traditional version; Wittgenstein may radically rethink this notion but he offers a form of foundationalism nonetheless. I however agree with Williams that Stroll does not accurately represent OC’s outlook, making Wittgenstein into a more traditional foundationalist than he is, e.g. by ignoring the interdependence between knowledge and certainty (cf. Williams, 2007: p. 55; Stroll, 1994: pp. 150–51) and by suggesting that world pictures are static (cf. Williams, 2007: p. 58; Stroll 1994: pp. 159). The question of foundationalism can also be said to underlie the debate between Affeldt and Mulhall (see Affeldt, 1998; Mulhall, 1998). Explained in these terms, Affeldt takes Mulhall to task for making Cavell/Cavell’s Wittgenstein into too much of a standard foundationalist, yet as Mulhall can be said to argue, Cavell can precisely be used to bring out Wittgenstein’s non-traditional foundationalism. This may however require more careful formulations than Mulhall initially offered, as he himself concedes (see Mulhall, 1998: p. 41).
- 20 Cavell accordingly explains that to the extent that his interpretation of Wittgenstein differs from that of a critic like McGinn, this is not because he defends something akin to scepticism; see RF pp. 282, 287–289.
- 21 See CR: pp. 168–89.
- 22 Compare this to the reading offered by e.g. Stroll, who argues that Wittgenstein takes sceptical doubt to always already be nonsensical for operating outside the language game (see Stroll, 1994: pp. 110–12, 139–40). For a more thorough Cavellian critique of ‘bounds of sense’ readings of Wittgenstein, see Conant, 1998, 2005; Crary, 2007: pp. 96–123; Minar, 2007 (though Minar does not mention Cavell explicitly).
- 23 Cf. OC: §§ 348, 461; CR: pp. 206–7
- 24 Cf. OC: §§ 349, 350, 355, 622.
- 25 See CR: pp. 18–19, 124; AO: p. 82.
- 26 Cf. CR: pp. 269–70.
- 27 See AO: pp. 70, 72–3.
- 28 See AO: pp. 85–6.
- 29 See RF: p. 289.
- 30 See CR: pp. 268, 326.
- 31 See CR: pp. 351, 368.
- 32 Cf. Minar, 2007: p. 260. Unlike Minar, I however do not think that Wittgenstein’s ‘thin’ notion of certainty is due to his merely offering reminders. As I have argued, OC does not only show where both Moore and the sceptic go wrong, it also offers an alternative account of human knowledge. This account is perhaps less robust or more anthropomorphic than Wittgenstein’s opponents would like, but it is a constructive account nonetheless, not just a series of reminders. (See Bax, 2011: pp. 15–32, for a more general defence of a constructive reading of Wittgenstein).
- 33 See CR: p. 124.

- 34 See OC: §§ 96, 97, 256, 336. Compare this to Stroll, who repeatedly claims that certainties cannot be revised and does not seem to allow for changes in world pictures: Stroll, 1994: pp. 110, 159, 164, 167, 177, 180.
- 35 Maybe particular certainties can never be changed, e.g. those connected to certain biological facts; cf. Moyal-Sharrock, 2004: pp. 102-103. Read along Cavellian lines, however, it should be said that one cannot know beforehand what is and what is not 'giveupable' when it comes to one's world picture.
- 36 See OC: § 92.
- 37 This research was made possible by the Niels Stensen Foundation. I would also like to thank the members of the Johns Hopkins Humanities Center for reintroducing me to Cavell, the participants of the New School Wittgenstein Workshop for feedback on (what turned out to be an) earlier version of this paper, and Alice Crary and Martin Stokhof for their help in finalizing it. Thanks also go out to the anonymous reviewer whose comments enabled me to improve my argumentation.

Abbreviated references

- AO Cavell, S. (1990) 'The Argument of the Ordinary', in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome. The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- CR Cavell, S. (1979) *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press [Kindle edition].
- OC Wittgenstein, L. (1974) *On Certainty*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- RF Cavell, S. (2004) 'Reply to Four Chapters', in D. McManus (ed.) *Wittgenstein and Scepticism*, London: Routledge.

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