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# Skepticism, Metaphors and Vertigo

## Wittgenstein and Cavell on the Human Condition

**Abstract:** The relation of Wittgenstein's later philosophy to skepticism seems to be ambiguous, since he rejects radical skepticism but also highlights the groundlessness of our beliefs. In this paper, I am going to discuss Wittgenstein's hinge propositions in this respect. Against the usual view, I will show that they do *not* function as a contextualist or foundationalist refutation of skepticism. What is more, they also do *not* confirm skepticism. In contrast, I will argue that following Wittgenstein skepticism is neither false nor true, but still has a point, which can be elucidated with Stanley Cavell's concept of a *truth of skepticism*. This concept roughly states that we can not know about the existence of the world and the others, but that we have to acknowledge them. With the help of Wittgenstein, I am going to clarify this position. The key idea is that the problem of skepticism can be understood as a metaphorical way of presenting the finiteness of the human condition and that vertiginous skeptical irritations lead to an adequate human self-understanding in this respect.

Something is obscure with the status of skepticism. What does it mean for the human to be confronted with unanswerable questions? Should he somehow deal with his incapability of answering them? Shouldn't he nonetheless try to find answers? Or are these questions senseless in the end, since they can not be answered anyhow? In the following, I am going to discuss this obscure status of skepticism. In the first part of this paper, I will deal with the ambiguous position of Wittgenstein's later philosophy to the problem of skepticism, which seems neither to reject nor to confirm skepticism. This problem will be elucidated by referring to Wittgenstein's concept of the hinge propositions. In the second part, I am going to clarify the ambiguous role of these propositions. For this purpose, I will show that skepticism can be understood as a metaphorical way of presenting the finiteness of the human condition. This will be explicated with the help of Thomas Nagel's metaphor of the view from nowhere and with John McDowell's concept of the sideways-on view. Furthermore, Stanley Cavell's concept of a truth of skepticism will be discussed in this respect. Finally, referring to Cavell, McDowell comments on a feeling of vertigo in the face of the groundless human situation. This gives rise to my overall claim that vertiginous skeptical irritations lead to an adequate human self-understanding in the light of the finiteness of the human condition.

## 1. The Hinge Propositions in *On Certainty*

For a start, I am going to discuss the ambiguous position of Wittgenstein's later philosophy to the problem of skepticism. On the one hand, Wittgenstein rejects radical skepticism: "A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt" and "A doubt without an end is not even a doubt." (OC 1969: 450 and 625) On the other hand, it is Wittgenstein's overall concern to highlight the groundlessness of our beliefs: "The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing" and "At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded." (OC 1969: 166 and 253) On the one hand, he refers to the self-defeating character of skepticism, on the other hand, he uses the argument of the infinite regress to show that our beliefs are unwarranted in the end.

Therefore, Wittgenstein has a peculiar position between the traditional attempts to refuse skepticism and the confession that the problem of skepticism can not be solved. Instead of refusing skepticism as senseless in the line of the pragmatic tradition,<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein's position seems to include both, the refusal as well as the confirmation of skepticism. Against that, in epistemology Wittgenstein is typically considered to be anti-skeptical,<sup>2</sup> whereas for example Kripke discusses Wittgenstein's skepticism with regard to meaning<sup>3</sup> and Fogelin relates Wittgenstein to Pyrrhonism.<sup>4</sup> A possibility to embrace *both* aspects in Wittgenstein's philosophy can be found in the work of Stanley Cavell, who speaks about a *truth of skepticism* and introduces the concept of *acknowledgment* in this context. This interpretation represents a position *between* skepticism and anti-skepticism and hence promises to capture Wittgenstein's ambiguous position more adequately.<sup>5</sup>

Cavell mainly deals with the *Philosophical Investigations*, whereas in the following Wittgenstein's relation to skepticism will be considered with the help of his later work *On Certainty*. The position between skepticism and anti-skepticism can be explicated here with the concept of the notorious hinge propositions. These propositions can not be doubted and are substantiating every thinking and questioning, but are themselves without reason. They do not have a foundation and can even change over time. Because of this double-edged character, the

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1 Cf. e.g. the positions of Peirce and James, cf. also McGinn 1989.

2 For example in non-epistemic, contextualistic or neo Moorean approaches, cf. e.g. Pritchard 2011.

3 Kripke 1982.

4 Fogelin 1987 and 1994.

5 Cavell 1979.

consideration of the status of these propositions will shed some light on Wittgenstein's relation to skepticism between refusal and confirmation.

Wittgenstein's engagement with skepticism was motivated by his reading of the papers of George Edward Moore about the *Defence of Common Sense* and the *Proof of the External World*. Moore's approach of refuting skepticism starts with propositions, which can not be doubted in Moore's opinion, for example "Here is one hand, and here is another" or "I have always been on or near the surface of the earth." Wittgenstein also refers to these propositions. But while he like Moore argues that they can not be doubted, he claims at the same time that they are groundless and fallible. This peculiar double-edged character shall now be investigated more closely.

Wittgenstein's best known metaphor for the status of the Moorean propositions is that of the hinge, which he uses three times in *On Certainty*:

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

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

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (OC 1969: 341–343)

The mathematical proposition has, as it were officially, been given the stamp of incontestability. I.e.: "Dispute about other things; *this* is immovable – it is a hinge on which your dispute can turn." (OC 1969: 655)

Other important notions for the same concept are picture of the world, mythology, rules of a game and river bed, which also shall be cited here:

But 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.

The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.

The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other. (OC 1969: 94–97)

Wittgenstein gives a wide range of different examples of hinge propositions. He refers to the above-quoted Moorean propositions as well as to such diverse statements as the declaration of one's own name, the statement that no one has ever been on the moon (this was a plausible assumption two decades before the first moon landing), or that you're not dreaming at the moment (OC 1969: 628, 286 and 676).<sup>6</sup> What is more, the hinge propositions are not isolated from each other, but form a nest of propositions (OC 1969: 225). More exactly, they constitute a frame of reference and give one another mutual support (OC 1969: 83 and 142).<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, all important characteristics of the hinge propositions can be explicated with the passages cited so far. It is not Wittgenstein's point that it is impossible to put certain beliefs into question, but that some beliefs "belong to the logic of our scientific investigations". In the implementation of a scientific experiment, for example, the existence of the apparatus is not taken for granted due to a bare assumption. In contrast, Wittgenstein further explicates that it is part of the experiment to believe in the existence of the apparatus, since otherwise it would not be an experiment (OC 1969: 337). This is also true for every judgment, since following Wittgenstein every judgment presupposes something which is not doubted – otherwise it would not be a judgment (OC 1969: 150 and 232). It simply *belongs to the structure of our knowledge* that our conclusions rely on hinges or move in a river bed. In Wittgenstein's description of the *structure* of our knowledge there are certain propositions being fixed and others revolving around them. Hence, the hinge propositions do not function as a foundation of our beliefs, but as hinges *within* our practice of knowledge. Moreover, Wittgenstein explicitly says that the hinges are themselves carried by this practice:

What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it. (OC 1969: 144)

I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house. (OC 1969: 248)

This means that our practice is only functioning with certain stable hinges, but that it nonetheless does *not* have any foundation as a whole: The house of our practice carries its own foundation-walls and is itself not carried by anything

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<sup>6</sup> A Categorization of the hinge propositions can be found in Wright 2004: 42. The relation of the hinge propositions to Wittgenstein's concept of grammatical sentences is not clear, cf. Basols 2010: 115.

<sup>7</sup> This suggests a comparison with the holism of Quine's *web of belief*, cf. Quine/ Ullian 1970.

and is therefore rather floating. Again and again Wittgenstein stresses that there is no foundation of our practice. Particularly, the hinge propositions are not justified by a special evidence, but by our acting:

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i. e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game. (OC 1969: 204)

Not least, the hinges might even change, as Wittgenstein points out with the metaphor of the shifting river bed. Hence, the tension between the fact that we can not doubt the hinge propositions and the fact of their groundlessness can be dissolved as follows: We can not doubt the hinge propositions *within* our practice, but this practice as a whole might completely change and can not be safeguarded. According to Wittgenstein, our thinking has to rely on a river bed of certain propositions, but Wittgenstein does not tell us which river bed is the right one. What is more, we can not even use the categories of right and false without the system of a river bed.

Of course, Wittgenstein also maintains that the variation of a single hinge proposition would change the complete system of our judgments (OC 1969: 419, 490 and 558). Accordingly, Wittgenstein calls it a mental disturbance if somebody would put into question the place where he lives (OC 1969: 71). However, he nonetheless concedes that it is impossible in the end to even know one's own name with complete certainty (OC 1969: 425 and 470). Here, the tension between the indubitability of the hinge propositions on the one hand and their groundlessness on the other hand comes to a head. But as I just said, this tension can be resolved in so far as we can not doubt the hinge propositions within our practice, but that our whole system of thought could be different. This second aspect is overseen in contextualist refutations of skepticism. A similar point has been made by Robert Fogelin in his discussion of contextualism. Of course, in everyday contexts we don't have reasons to doubt our hinge propositions and to consider, for example, the possibility of being a brain in a vat. On the contrary, in this case, there even are good reasons not to doubt: "In the context of an informed understanding of present technology, we do know that we are not brains in vats." (Fogelin 2004: 168) However, it is still impossible to exclude totally the scenario that we are brains in a vat, namely if the context of this problem is epistemology: "If the context is ordinary (or plain) then he does have adequate – or at least very good – reasons for believing that he is not a brain in a vat. If the context is epistemological, well, then he does not." (Fogelin 2004: 170) Even worse, within the epistemological context, the contextualist position does not resolve the skeptical doubts, but even seems to reinforce them (*ibid.*). This is due to

the special way of the contextualist dealing with skepticism. There are no arguments in an epistemological context. Instead, the contextualist argues that our everyday contexts are not epistemological: “The key move in the contextualist response to skepticism is to refuse to assign a privileged status to epistemological contexts.” (Fogelin 2004: 168). But *if* the context is epistemology, skepticism can not be averted by a contextualist: “If you epistemologize in earnest, then you will be led to skepticism.” (Fogelin 2004: 170)

This argument can be transferred to Wittgenstein’s description of the hinge propositions. Within the special contexts of our practice it is impossible to doubt certain propositions, since it belongs to the structure of our practice to move in a river bed. One of these hinge propositions is that we are not brains in vats and, accordingly, our practice would not work as it does if we would doubt this implicit assumption. However, in an epistemological context, it is clear that the river bed of hinge propositions might nonetheless be shifting as a whole and it might even turn out that we are *in fact* brains in vats. To illustrate this, Wittgenstein designs scenarios that are equally dramatic as Putnam’s – albeit anti-skeptical – argument about the brain in a vat and that are also reminiscent of the dramatic skeptical examples of David Hume:

What if something *really unheard-of* happened? – If I, say, saw houses gradually turning into steam without any obvious cause, if the cattle in the fields stood on their heads and laughed and spoke comprehensible words; if trees gradually changed into men and men into trees. Now, was I right when I said before all these things happened “I know that that’s a house” etc., or simply “that’s a house” etc.? (OC 1969: 513)

It is impossible to exclude these scenarios from the outset. To give just one striking example, for Wittgenstein the idea that someone has been on the moon was as absurd as the idea that houses gradually turn into steam (OC 1969: 106). But only two decades after he had written *On Certainty*, this situation changed with the first moon landing. Of course, Wittgenstein does not give a detailed analysis of the process of the shifting river bed or of a change of the hinge propositions and hence leaves open the question how this can be possible at all. On the one hand, the hinges must always stay put within our practice, but on the other hand they shall be able to vary over time: The moon landing simply was possible one day, even without a scientific revolution in the sense of Kuhn, but within the framework of classical Newtonian mechanics.<sup>8</sup> Be that as it may, the river bed

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<sup>8</sup> I was pointed to the problem that Wittgenstein does not explain the process of the shifting river bed in a discussion of this paper at the Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen in May 2015 – I would like to thank all participants of this discussion. This problem includes

of our thoughts *can* shift and indeed *does* shift. This means for the status of the hinge propositions that we always *have to* rely on something in our everyday contexts, on which we actually *can not* rely, what can be seen in an epistemological context: “I really want to say that a language-game is only possible if one trusts something (I did not say ‘can trust something’).” (OC 1969: 509)

Therefore, Wittgenstein’s answer to skepticism is neither a contextualist nor a foundationalist refutation. And since our practice is working if it relies on its hinges, it also is not a confirmation of skepticism. In contrast, Wittgenstein’s handling of skepticism shows that we have to change our attitude towards our knowledge. We move within a river bed, but we can not control the river bed. The skeptic doubts the propositions that belong to the river bed, what is impossible following Wittgenstein. The anti-skeptic claims to be able to justify the propositions of the river bed, what also is impossible following Wittgenstein. Therefore, Wittgenstein is neither skeptic nor anti-skeptic, but describes the finite situation of the human in respect to his knowledge. Our knowledge can not be safeguarded, but has to be and can be acknowledged. In the words of Wittgenstein: “Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgment.” (OC 1969: 378) This also is the central claim of Stanley Cavell’s concept of the *truth of skepticism*, which roughly states that we can not *know* about the existence of the world and the others, but that we have to acknowledge them. Skepticism is neither false nor true, but results in a change of our attitude towards our knowledge. We can not safeguard our practice, but it rests on a practical certainty which has to be and can be acknowledged. This will be explicated more precisely in the second part of this paper.

## 2. The Truth of Skepticism: Metaphors and Vertigo

Wittgenstein’s position between skepticism and anti-skepticism can be elucidated further if one considers the fact that the philosophical reasoning belongs to

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two aspects. Firstly, one has to make clear how a shift of the river bed is possible at all. In a similar context, this applies to the question of how it is possible to change a form of life. Against the common claim that Wittgenstein’s philosophy gives rise to conservatism, Jaeggi 2013 argues that forms of life can be and have to be criticized. Secondly, it would be interesting to relate the metaphor of the shifting river bed to concrete scenarios, for example from the history of science. Without Wittgenstein in the background, this is done in philosophy of science, which analysis the dynamics of the change of scientific theories.

the practice of thinking, talking and doubting and therefore is itself a special practice. Following Wittgenstein, as every practice the practice of philosophical reasoning has to rely on special hinge propositions and can not be put into question as a whole. It is impossible to escape from this practice and to reach a neutral point of reflection. This is particularly true for the practice of philosophical reasoning *about* our practice. There is no pure philosophical language outside our practice of speaking and thinking. Even the philosophical reasoning *about* philosophy is not a kind of second order philosophy, but remains *within* our practice of speaking and thinking. As Wittgenstein puts it, “I cannot use language to get outside language” (PR 1975: 54), or, as he claims in his *Philosophical Investigations*:

One might think: if philosophy speaks of the use of the word “philosophy”, there must be a second-order philosophy. But that’s not the way it is; it is, rather, like the case of orthography, which deals with the word “orthography” among others without then being second-order. (PI 2009: 121)

If one transposes this point to the context of skepticism, it says that skepticism is part of our philosophical practice, which like every practice belongs to a river bed or a mythological world-picture. We can neither leave this river bed nor put it into question as a whole. This particularly applies to the talk about a river bed itself. On the one hand, it is plausible to say that our thinking and acting takes place in a river bed of undoubted and practically performed hinge propositions. On the other hand, it is impossible to imagine the dimension in which this river bed itself could shift. This dimension is just as unthinkable as a doubt that doubted everything or a house which carries its own foundation-walls. The space, in which this house would be floating, can not be conceived, because the philosophical practice can not escape from its river bed and is thus only able to indicate metaphorically that it belongs to a river bed. This metaphor is understandable somehow, although it is not consistently thinkable. This can be applied to skepticism in a more concrete way. It was Thomas Nagel who argued that skepticism is demanding an absolute standard of objectivity, but that this standard is not consistently thinkable. This standard would have to be a *view from nowhere*, but to be absolutely objective, this view still would have to be checked by another one, which immediately leads into a regress of perspectives. This regress puts the whole concept of objectivity into question. In the words of Thomas Nagel:

However often we may try to step outside of ourselves, something will have to stay behind the lens, something in us will determine the resulting picture, and this will give grounds for doubt that we are really getting any closer to reality. The idea of objectivity thus seems to



undermine itself. The aim is to form a conception of reality which includes ourselves and our view of things among its objects, but it seems that whatever forms the conception will not be included by it. (Nagel 1986: 68)

We can neither conceive a space outside the river bed, nor a view from nowhere, which would be free from any special world-picture. Although Nagel still argues for the quest for absolute objectivity by way of transcending ourselves,<sup>9</sup> he concedes at the same time that the metaphor of the view from nowhere cannot be understood literally: “The most familiar scene of conflict is the pursuit of objective knowledge, whose aim is naturally described in terms that, taken literally, are unintelligible: we must get outside of ourselves, and view the world from nowhere within it.” (Nagel 1986: 67) However, although it is unintelligible when taken literally, we still understand what is intended with the metaphor of the view from nowhere and also what is intended with the Wittgensteinian metaphors of the first part of this paper, particularly because we take these metaphors from special contexts in which they can be understood literally and transpose them to the human practice as a whole.

A similar argument can be found in a 1981 paper of John McDowell,<sup>10</sup> where he introduces the concept of a *view from sideways on*. Similar to the context which is discussed here, this concept reflects the idea of a view from outside of our practices. As McDowell puts it, a good explanation should be “[...] recognizable from an objective standpoint, conceived in terms of the notion of the view from sideways on – from outside any practices or forms of life partly constituted by local or parochial modes of response to the world.” (McDowell 1998: 214) McDowell discusses the sideways-on view in the context of Wittgenstein’s arguments about rule-following, in which the view from sideways on stands for a platonistic position in the philosophy of mathematics. While Nagel argues with regard to the view from nowhere that this view is not consistently thinkable, McDowell states that the platonistic picture of the sideways-on view is not conceivable too: “But this picture has no real content.” (McDowell 1998: 208) We only understand this metaphor because we think that we can have a view from sideways on: “We cannot occupy the independent perspective that platonism envisages; and it is only because we confusedly think we can that we think we can make any sense of it.” (ibid.) Furthermore, against Nagel’s demand of approaching absolute objectivity by way of transcending ourselves, McDowell ar-

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<sup>9</sup> He explicates this idea with his concept of self-transcendence, cf. Nagel 1986: 74–77.

<sup>10</sup> *Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following*, reprinted in McDowell 1998. I would like to thank Hanna Ginsborg for recommending this paper to me in our discussions on Skepticism, Wittgenstein and Cavell on the occasion of her lecture at Dresden in June 2015.

gues that this would be impossible in the end. As was stated in the first part of this paper, we cannot secure our practice with an independent perspective from outside. Following McDowell, this security would be illusory: “But one strand in Wittgenstein’s thought about ‘following a rule’ is that the source of the temptation is the desire for a security that would actually be quite illusory.” (McDowell 1998: 203)<sup>11</sup>

Now, if the skeptic claims that it is impossible to have an epistemic position of absolute objectivity, he still presupposes the existence of this neutral or absolute position of total security. With Wittgenstein’s argument concerning the status of the philosophical language and with Thomas Nagel’s and John McDowell’s point about the non conceivable metaphor of the view from nowhere or from sideways on respectively it should be clear that we not only can not have this position, but that against the skeptic’s presupposition this position is not even thinkable. Therefore, Wittgenstein’s philosophical concern does not belong to skepticism. And since he nevertheless metaphorically points to the groundlessness of our practice and the floating character of the hinge propositions, his philosophical concern can neither be referred to anti-skepticism. While the skeptic presupposes a view from nowhere as a realistic scenario, albeit as a scenario that we can not reach, the anti-skeptic also presupposes this scenario and claims to be able to reach it. In contrast, Wittgenstein shows that this scenario is not even conceivable. However, this does not dissolve skepticism, because we can understand with the help of Wittgenstein’s metaphors that something is wrong with our knowledge. We have to rely on hinges which we can not secure and we are moving within a river bed of thoughts which might change over time and as a matter of fact does change over time. We do understand these metaphors as well as the metaphors of the view from nowhere or from sideways on, even if we can not consistently think of them. These metaphors are transposed from special contexts to the human practice as a whole and are therefore somehow understandable. They are telling us something about the finiteness of the human condition – and even the term “finiteness” has a metaphorical status and can not be understood properly without an idea of the non conceivable concept of infinity. However, with the help of the metaphors of the hinges, of the river bed, the floating house carrying its own foundation-walls and the view

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**11** This criticism on the desire for security as well as the concept of a practical certainty, which was introduced in the first part of this paper, resembles the classical concepts of *securitas* and *certitudo*, which for example are used with a quite similar intention by Luther, cf. e. g. Schrimm-Heins 1991. Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* has a corresponding religious background – not without reason Wittgenstein mentions John Henry Newman in the very first paragraph. This background is analyzed more closely in Pritchard 2015.

from nowhere or from sideways on as well as with the help of scenarios like the houses which turn into steam something can be *shown* what can not be consistently conceived but what nevertheless can be understood in a metaphorical way. Hence, Wittgenstein elucidates with his metaphors and examples the human condition: The human depends on hinges and thinks in a river bed, which themselves are not secured by any further foundation and rather form a special part *within* the human practice. The human practice is revolving around the hinges or moving within a river bed respectively, and this is not a statement about its foundation, but about its structure. What is more, these spatial metaphors are not to be understood as an indirect or tropic way of speaking. In contrast, what they show can only be shown in this way, they are *absolute metaphors* in the sense of Hans Blumenberg. As Blumenberg points out, the totality of the world can not be conceived on a theoretical level. Nevertheless, it is possible to envision it with the help of special images: “Although it has been idle, ever since Kant’s antinomies, to make theoretical assertions about the totality of the world, the quest for images to ‘stand in’ for this objectively unattainable whole is by no means a trifling matter.” (Blumenberg 2010: 15) This analogically applies to the totality of our practices which cannot be grasped as a whole, but which nonetheless can be – metaphorically – described as, for example, moving in a river bed.

Again, skepticism and anti-skepticism as well are presupposing a position outside our practice, a view from nowhere or from sideways on, and differ only in their respective claims about the possibility to reach this position. Since one can maintain with Wittgenstein that a space outside of our practice is not even conceivable, Wittgenstein’s philosophical concern does neither belong to skepticism nor to anti-skepticism. Furthermore, since he nonetheless shows with his examples and metaphors the finiteness of the human condition, he does not simply dissolve skepticism. Rather, one might say with Stanley Cavell that Wittgenstein is pointing to the *truth of skepticism*. We can not conceive a position of absolute knowledge, since we can not imagine a view from nowhere. Following Cavell, this can be described alternatively with the argument that our basic relation to the world and to the others is not a relation of knowledge, but of acknowledgment. In the words of Cavell: “The *Claim of Reason* suggests the moral of skepticism to be, that the existence of the world and others in it is not a matter to be known, but one to be acknowledged.” (Cavell 1988: 109) Following Cavell, the fact that we can not consistently think of an absolute standard of objectivity does not simply make skepticism senseless. Instead, this fact, which can be called the truth of skepticism, shows the finiteness of our knowledge and our dependence on acknowledgment. As I have shown so far, this idea

can be related to Wittgenstein's dealing with skepticism in *On Certainty*.<sup>12</sup> While Wittgenstein shows metaphorically the groundlessness of the human situation, which as a spatial metaphor can not be understood literally, Cavell claims that we can understand this situation from within a new attitude towards the world and the others which can be gained during the process of a skeptical irritation. Following Cavell, the insight in the finiteness of our knowledge, which Wittgenstein shows in his skeptical scenarios or in his metaphors about the groundlessness of our beliefs, makes the world uncanny to us. It belongs to Cavell's concept of the truth of skepticism that we have to find a new way of trusting in the world and the others as a result of skeptical irritations. The world changes somehow in the process of a skeptical irritation, which makes skepticism not senseless, although skepticism can not be understood literally. As Cavell puts it in his lecture on the *Uncanniness of the Ordinary*:

The return of what we accept as the world will then present itself as a return of the familiar, which is to say, exactly under the concept of what Freud names the uncanny. That the familiar is a product of a sense of the unfamiliar and of the sense of a return means that what returns after skepticism is never (just) the same. (Cavell 1988: 100)

This return to the world is not a singular result of a skeptical irritation, but has to be performed over and over again. Skeptical irritations can for example begin with the metaphorical imagination of our groundless situation as it can be found in Wittgenstein or with a view into the abyss of the regress of the view from nowhere which is described by Nagel. These metaphorical imaginations are able to make the world uncanny to us and lead to the new attitude of acknowledgment. Of course, the shift to this new attitude is not a simple process, since the uncanniness can be really unsettling. In an early lecture, Cavell describes the insight in the groundlessness of the human practice even as terrifying:

That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls “forms of life.” Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but noth-

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<sup>12</sup> As was quoted above, the point that knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgment can be found explicitly in *On Certainty* (OC 1969: 378). However, Cavell insists that he has developed his concept of acknowledgment prior to the publication of *On Certainty* in 1969, cf. Cavell 2004: 284.

ing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying. (Cavell 1969: 52)

In addition, John McDowell refers in his above-mentioned paper to this passage and claims that the terrifying insight in the groundlessness of all the mentioned human practices leads to vertigo:

The terror of which Cavell writes at the end of this marvelous passage is a sort of vertigo, induced by the thought that there is nothing that keeps our practices in line except the reactions and responses we learn in learning them. The ground seems to have been removed from under our feet. (McDowell 1998: 207)

Furthermore, McDowell relates his concept of a sideways-on view to this passage of Cavell. He claims that this view would be “[...] a standpoint independent of all the human activities and reactions that locate those practices in our ‘whirl of organism’.” (McDowell 1998: 207–208) And it is the failure of the attempt of getting this view which leads back to the “whirl of organism” of mathematics and all the other human practices. Without this view and especially after the failure of the attempt of getting it, one really feels the groundlessness of the human situation – and this induces vertigo: “So if dependence on the ‘whirl of organism’ induces vertigo, then we should feel vertigo about the mathematical cases as much as any other.” (McDowell 1998: 209) This vertigo results from the insight into the groundlessness of the human situation, or, in other words, into the uncanniness of the ordinary, which is uncanny because it can not be safeguarded from an objective perspective. However, the attempt to safeguard the human practice from an objective perspective, i.e. the attempt to transcend the human practice towards a view from nowhere or from sideways on, somehow belongs to the human nature, as Cavell claims for example in *Declining Decline*: “I mean to say that it is human, it is the human drive to transcend itself, make itself inhuman, which should not end until, as in Nietzsche, the human is over.” (Cavell 1989: 57) What is more, it might even be claimed that the human condition can only be understood adequately if one fails in the attempt of gaining an absolute standpoint. As I quoted McDowell above, we can only make sense of the idea of an independent perspective because we confusedly think that we can occupy it (McDowell 1998: 208). Therefore, in addition to Cavell I would suggest that the human drive to transcend itself does not only belong to the human nature, but is the only way to an adequate human self-understanding in terms of a metaphorical presentation of the human condition. To get an adequate understanding of the spatial metaphor of the finiteness of the human situation, one has to try to escape this finiteness towards an absolute perspective and to fail

in this attempt. Only then is it possible to really understand what it means that the human situation is finite and what it means to be part of a “whirl of organism”. The right understanding of the groundlessness of the human practice can only be gained through the experience of the vertigo in the moment of the failure to find a ground. One only has a full understanding of what it means to be human if one is tempted to be inhuman. No redemption without fall.

However, the shift to the new attitude of acknowledgment is not straightforward, since it seems not to be easy to find a way from this vertigo back to the practical certainty advocated above. Regarding this question, McDowell argues that it would be better not to attempt to gain an external standpoint at all:

Now if we are simply and normally immersed in our practices, we do not wonder how their relation to the world would look from outside them, and feel the need for a solid foundation discernible from an external standpoint of view. So we would be protected against the vertigo if we could stop supposing that the relation to reality of some area of our thought and language needs to be contemplated from a standpoint independent of that anchoring in our human life that makes the thoughts what they are for us. (McDowell 1998: 211)

This seems to be in conflict with Cavell’s point about to human drive to transcend itself. Accordingly, with reference to a famous Wittgensteinian characterization of the status of philosophy (PI 2009: 133), McDowell concedes in a footnote to this passage that “[t]his is not an easy recipe. Perhaps finding out how to stop being tempted by the picture of the external standpoint would be the discovery that enables one to stop doing philosophy when one wants to.” (McDowell 1998: 211) This resembles the central claim of ancient Pyrrhonism that the *epoché* is followed by the attitude of *ataraxia*,<sup>13</sup> which in turn shows that the process of a shift in attitude is not an autonomous activity but has an aspect of passivity in it. However, as in the case of the process of the shifting river bed, it is not the aim of this paper to give a strong analysis of the process of the shifting attitude.<sup>14</sup> So, be this as it may, the idea that this new attitude results from stop doing philosophy does not contradict my claim that doing philosophy essentially consists in attempting over and over again to gain an external standpoint and also in failing in this attempt over and over again. Of course, one should be able to stop these vertiginous attempts and to rely on the practical cer-

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**13** The relation of Wittgenstein to Pyrrhonism is analyzed e. g. in Fogelin 1987 and Sluga 2004. Pritchard 2011 introduces the notion of *Wittgensteinian Pyrrhonism*. What is more, Pritchard also establishes the concepts of *epistemic vertigo* (Boult/Pritchard 2013) and even *epistemic angst* (Pritchard 2015).

**14** I did such an analysis elsewhere: There is a similar shift in the attitude within the context of the late Heidegger and a post-theistic understanding of religiosity, cf. Gutschmidt 2015.

tainties in the “whirl of organism”. But one only understands adequately that one is part of this whirl if one tries – unavailingly – to transcend it. Not least, even “transcending” is a spatial metaphor, which tries to describe the human situation and reflects the human desire for a metaphysical security that one cannot have because it is not even thinkable. It is not thinkable, but understandable as an absolute metaphor. In the end, this understanding leads to vertigo, which therefore belongs to a full understanding of the human condition.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the hinge propositions in Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* can neither be doubted nor justified. Instead, they have to be acknowledged. They form a central part of the structure of our practice, which is moving around these hinges. This shows that our entire practice can neither be doubted nor justified as well. This can be regarded as a position between skepticism and anti-skepticism and can be related to Stanley Cavell’s concept of the truth of skepticism. In a nutshell, the view from nowhere is not consistently thinkable, what seems to make the demand of the skeptic senseless. Against that conclusion, I have argued that the metaphor of the view from nowhere or from sideways on as well as the metaphors of the hinges or the river bed elucidate the finiteness of the human condition. It is not possible to secure the human practice in the mode of knowledge. The human always has to rely on unjustifiable hinges of thinking and in the end can only acknowledge his form of life. The stance of acknowledgment results over and over again from skeptical irritations which lead through the vertigo of the attempt of transcending the human condition and through the failure of this attempt to a new attitude towards the world and the others.

This allows a new understanding of the obscure status of skepticism. The human is confronted with unanswerable questions but should nonetheless try to find answers. This is not a senseless project, because its failure leads to the attitude of acknowledgment, which belongs to an adequate human self-understanding. Therefore, skeptical irritations are necessary to understand oneself appropriately as being part of the finite human situation in the whirl of organism. The finiteness of the human condition can only be presented metaphorically and can only be understood adequately through the vertiginous process of failing in transcending it.

Not least, this paper itself can be regarded as the experiment of a skeptical irritation and can in the end only be understood through a shift of the reader’s attitude towards the world, a shift which I was trying to provoke by considering the impossibility of a consistent understanding of metaphors like the river bed or

the view from nowhere or even of the finiteness of the human condition. Therefore, this paper has a performative aspect, which should also be recognized in every philosophical practice. As Wittgenstein puts it in the *Tractatus*: “Philosophy is not a theory but an activity.” (TLP 1922: 4.112)

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