

## Durham E-Theses

---

### *Action and Necessity: Wittgenstein's On Certainty and the Foundations of Ethics*

WEE, HONG, SHEN, MICHAEL

#### How to cite:

---

WEE, HONG, SHEN, MICHAEL (2024) *Action and Necessity: Wittgenstein's On Certainty and the Foundations of Ethics*, Durham theses, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/15401/>

#### Use policy

---

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in Durham E-Theses
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full Durham E-Theses policy](#) for further details.

**Action and Necessity:**  
**Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* and the Foundations of Ethics**

Michael Wee

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis develops an account of ethics called the Linguistic Perspective, which is realist in a practical, non-theoretical sense, and is rooted Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*. On this account, normativity is intrinsic to human action and language; the norms of ethics are the logical limits of the most basic, unassailable concepts that practical reasoning requires for intelligibility. Part I lays the groundwork for this account by developing a Tractarian Reading of *On Certainty*. Here, I contend that *On Certainty* is primarily concerned with the logical requirements and limits of language, and like the *Tractatus* it develops these concerns in a realist direction. *On Certainty*, I argue, does so by advancing three key claims about logic: Everything descriptive of a language-game is part of logic; the boundary between logical and empirical propositions is not sharp; logic is founded on action. I investigate these claims, with particular emphasis on how natural human reactions provide logical conditions for the possibility of language. Hinge propositions, I argue, are rooted in these reactions; they point us to the limits of intelligibility of our concepts, though these limits are vague and inarticulable. In Part II, I discuss the practical syllogism and its validity. I argue that practical reasoning is distinct from theoretical reasoning and embodies a different standard of logical validity for inference. This standard is not strict and narrow, but creative and wide open; furthermore, it is an intrinsically ethical standard. Then, I advance my Linguistic Perspective on ethics, according to which human reactions provide the conditions for ethical normativity, just as they do for language. I argue that we can access ethical norms by reflecting on those linguistic concepts that are rooted in the most basic patterns of action, and by identifying the norms of behaviour that ensure the development of those concepts without contradiction.



# **Action and Necessity**

**Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* and the Foundations of Ethics**

Michael Wee

**A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**Philosophy Department  
Durham University**

December 2023

‘Ethics does not treat of the world. Ethics must be a condition of the world, like logic.’

— Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*

‘Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described? You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it.’

— Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*

## Table of Contents

Abbreviations of Works by Wittgenstein	i
Declaration	iii
Statement of Copyright	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	1
<b>Part I: A Tractarian Reading of <i>On Certainty</i></b>	
1. <i>On Certainty</i> : Naturalising the <i>Tractatus</i> ?	11
1.1 Knowledge and certainty: A new question, or a new method?	11
1.2 The ‘old problem’: Language and the world	16
1.2.1 The foundations of a Tractarian Reading	16
1.2.2 <i>On Certainty</i> ’s logical claims	21
1.2.3 Tractarian motifs in <i>On Certainty</i>	25
1.3 Grammar and nature	30
1.3.1 Articulating the autonomy of grammar	31
1.3.2 Qualifying the autonomy of grammar	34
1.4 The question of Wittgenstein’s naturalism	38
2. The Logical Role of Hinge Propositions: Language, Rules, and Reactions	40
2.1 The logical-empirical distinction in <i>On Certainty</i>	40
2.2 <i>On Certainty</i> and the rule-following considerations	42
2.2.1 Training and human reactions in the <i>Investigations</i>	43
2.2.2 The problem of regularity in rule-following	45
2.3 Pre-linguistic and post-linguistic reactions	49
2.3.1 Training and meaning: A conceptual connection	50
2.3.2 Metaphors and post-linguistic reactions	53
2.3.3 Aspect perception	55
2.3.4 Hinge propositions and conceptual complexity	59
2.4 The dynamic nature of hinge propositions	62
2.4.1 The general limits of concept-formation	63
2.4.2 Learning scientific hinge propositions	64
2.4.3 Causation and induction: ‘Under ordinary circumstances’	66
2.5 The logical circle of rules and reactions	70

3. Approaching the Limit: Logical Necessity and Practical Certainty	73
3.1 The logical ‘must’	73
3.2 Logic and inference in the <i>Tractatus</i>	75
3.2.1 The logocentric predicament	76
3.2.2 Internal relations	77
3.2.3 Tautology	79
3.3 Logic and thinking: Internally related concepts	83
3.3.1 Enlarging internal relations: Negation and ‘all’	83
3.3.2 Inference as use	87
3.3.3 The convergence of certainty and necessity	89
3.4 Wittgenstein’s expanded notion of logic	94
3.4.1 The use of the logical ideal	95
3.4.2 Logic as the limit of grammar	99
3.5 Logic as action	102

## **Part II: The Linguistic Perspective on Ethics**

4. The Practical Syllogism in Action: From Logic to Ethics	105
4.1 Anscombe and the practical syllogism	105
4.2 Two clusters of conceptual problems	107
4.2.1 Validity and the form of the practical syllogism	107
4.2.2 The practical use of the practical syllogism	110
4.2.3 Anscombe on practical knowledge	112
4.3 Practical and theoretical aims in syllogistic reasoning	113
4.3.1 Anscombe’s mirror image account	113
4.3.2 Action and the premises of practical inference	115
4.3.3 Practical inference: A different standard of validity?	120
4.4 The internal structure of action	121
4.4.1 Reasons and conclusions	122
4.4.2 A Humean assessment of premises	125
4.4.3 Three distinctive features of practical premises	127
4.4.4 Non-propositional reasons and the syllogistic form	129
4.4.5 The conclusion as action	133
4.5 Ethics and the practical syllogism	135
4.5.1 Reasoning and dispositions of reasoning	136
4.5.2 Practical validity: Creative and wide open	138

4.5.3 Practical necessity and good ends in reasoning	140
4.6 In search of basic practical concepts	145
5. The Necessity of Action: Language and the Immanence of Ethics	147
5.1 Locating ethics	147
5.2 Approaching ethics through language	149
5.2.1 Human nature and practical reason: Defining the Linguistic Perspective	149
5.2.2 First-personal access to normativity	151
5.3 Normativity in action	156
5.3.1 Ethical normativity as part of linguistic normativity	156
5.3.2 Basic inclinations and ‘good is to be done’	159
5.3.3 Basic normativity as embedded in conceptual complexity	161
5.4 Ethics and the outer limits of concepts	163
5.4.1 Practical necessities: Anthropological or logical?	163
5.4.2 Absolutely the right concepts, or the right absolute concepts?	166
5.4.3 Lying, promising, and the practice of justice	169
5.4.4 Deontic norms and virtues	172
5.5 The Great Wittgensteinian Parallel	176
Conclusion	179
Bibliography	181



### Abbreviations of Works by Wittgenstein

- BBB *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigations'*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972.
- CE 'Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness'. Translated by Peter Winch. *Philosophia* 6, nos 3–4 (1976), 409–25.
- CL1 *Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1930–1932*. Edited by Desmond Lee. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980.
- CL2 *Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1932–1935*. Edited by Alice Ambrose. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979.
- CV *Culture and Value*. 2nd ed. Edited by G.H. von Wright, Heikki Nyman, and Alois Pichler. Translated by Peter Winch. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- LE 'A Lecture on Ethics'. *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 1 (1965): 3–12.
- LFM *Wittgenstein's Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics, Cambridge 1939*. Edited by Cora Diamond. Hassocks: The Harvester Press, 1976.
- LWPP2 *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*. Vol. 2. Edited by G.H. von Wright and H. Nyman. Translated by C.G. Luckhardt and M.A.E. Aue. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.
- NB *Notebooks 1914–1916*. 2nd ed. Edited by G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979.
- OC *On Certainty*. Edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Translated by D. Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1977.
- PG *Philosophical Grammar*. Edited by Rush Rhees. Translated by Anthony Kenny. Oxford: Blackwell, 1974.
- PI *Philosophical Investigations*. 4th ed. Edited by P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Oxford: Blackwell, 2009.
- PPF 'Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment'. In *Philosophical Investigations*, 182–243.
- PR *Philosophical Remarks*. Edited by Rush Rhees. Translated by Raymond Hargreaves and Roger White. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975.
- RFM *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. 3rd ed. Edited by G.H. von Wright, Rush Rhees and G.E.M. Anscombe. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1979.

- ROC     *Remarks on Colour*. Edited by G.E.M. Anscombe. Translated by L.L. McAlister and Margarete Schättle. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
- SRLF    ‘Some Remarks on Logical Form’. In *Philosophical Occasions: 1912–1951*, edited by J.C. Klagge and A. Nordman, 29–35. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.
- TLP     *Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus*. Translated by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness. London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1961.
- WSP     *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives*. Edited by C.G. Luckhardt. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979.
- WVC     *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle: Conversations Recorded by Friedrich Waismann*. Edited by Brian McGuinness. Translated by Joachim Schulte and Brian McGuinness. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979.
- Z        *Zettel*. Edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970.

## **Declaration**

I confirm that no part of the content of this thesis has previously been submitted by the author for any degree in this or any other university. All the material is the author's own work, except for quotations and paraphrases which have been suitably indicated.

## **Statement of Copyright**

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

Michael Wee

## Acknowledgements

In the first place, I wish to thank my family, who have helped me along in this journey in more ways than I can count. I thank my parents, Leong How and Teresa, for their unwavering support throughout my years of academic study and for first instilling in me a love of learning as a child. I thank my wife, Elisabeth, and my children, Damiaan and Edith, for being a constant source of strength for me and for the sacrifices they have made in the last three years. I thank my mother-in-law, Frédérique, for all her encouragement and for always graciously offering the use of her home office during our family visits to Belgium. I also remember in a special way my late father-in-law, Laurent, who died just a few months before I began my PhD in 2020. This thesis is about language and ethics, and it is often in our families that we first learn to speak and we first learn right from wrong. Therefore, I dedicate this thesis to my family.

I wish to thank Durham University for funding this PhD through the Durham Doctoral Studentship, and I thank the Philosophy Department for its welcoming and collegial spirit. I am grateful to my supervisors, Andy Hamilton and Benedict Smith, for all their constructive feedback and the stimulating discussions we have had, which have helped to sharpen my ideas. I also wish to acknowledge my annual reviewers, the department's various directors of Postgraduate Research, the Philosophy administrative staff, and the organisers of the Eidos postgraduate research seminar for their efforts to support and develop the Philosophy postgraduate community's research life.

I owe a very special debt of gratitude to members of the community, past and present, at St Cuthbert's Presbytery in Durham: Fr Andrew Downie, Fr Peter Hannah, OP, Fr Trevor Tibbertsma, and Fr Peter Wagnanski. I am grateful for their spirit of fraternity, and for the many enjoyable and insightful conversations we shared over the dinner table. I also want to thank the wider parish and chaplaincy community for the warm friendships I have been blessed with these past three years.

This thesis has its roots in my time at the Anscombe Bioethics Centre in Oxford. While working on various bioethical questions, I became increasingly interested in and convinced of the need to pursue more fundamental questions on the nature of normativity and the role of our most basic moral convictions, which seemed to me to be underived certainties rather than conclusions of moral arguments. It was during this time that I also developed an interest in Wittgenstein. I am grateful to the Director, David Albert Jones, for encouraging me to develop this interest alongside the core work of bioethics. More generally, I thank all my colleagues from the Centre for their support and guidance during this richly formative period in my intellectual life, and for allowing me continued access to the Centre's library, the Steve Lawson Collection, to help with my doctoral research. A special thanks must also go to Daniel De Haan

from Champion Hall, Oxford, who was the first to suggest that I read *On Certainty* in connection with my interests in connatural moral knowledge during this time, and for our many conversations since then.

The result of this interest was a preliminary attempt to link Wittgenstein's hinge propositions to Anscombe's thought on absolute moral prohibitions, which was published as 'Anscombe's Moral Epistemology and the Relevance of Wittgenstein's Anti-Scepticism' in the journal *Enrahonar*. Although my thinking on the matter has evolved since then, this paper laid the foundations for my doctoral project. Hence, I am grateful to David Albert Jones, Anselm Müller, and the late Luke Gormally, for their comments on my paper. Not long after this paper was accepted for publication, I was invited by Severin Schroeder to present some of my developing thoughts on Wittgenstein and ethics at the Reading University Wittgenstein Forum in 2020, and I am also grateful for that opportunity to refine my ideas.

During my time as a doctoral student, I had the opportunity to receive feedback on my thesis from various sources. In 2021, I presented some preliminary ideas for my thesis at the department's Value Theory Cluster Workshop. In 2022, I presented material from Chapter 1 in Skjolden, Norway, at a conference on 'The *Tractatus* after 100 Years' organised by the Nordic Wittgenstein Society and Bergen University; I also presented a different part of Chapter 1 that year to Eidos that year. In 2023, I presented Chapter 2 at the University of Vienna's Department of Philosophy, as part of its 'Wittgen=steine' lecture series. Later that year, I returned to Vienna for a conference on 'Wittgenstein and Hegel on the Foundations of Logic', organised by the CENTRAL network, where I presented Chapter 3. I am grateful for all the comments and questions I received at these events. I also thank Will Nolan and Rían Coady for taking the time to read Chapters 4 and 5 respectively and for their constructive comments.

I wish to thank the monks of Douai Abbey in Berkshire, and in particular the guestmaster, Fr Oliver Holt, OSB, for accommodating me at short notice in February 2023 for a week-long writing retreat. During this time I undertook significant preparatory work for Chapters 3 and 4, in concert with the gentle rhythm of monastic prayer and silence.

Finally, I have had the good fortune of benefitting from numerous helpful conversations and correspondence with other scholars and students—a reading suggestion, a critical comment, or an encouragement to follow a particular direction can often go very far. It is impossible to name everyone who has helped me in this way, but I shall do my best, with apologies for any unintended omissions: Michaël Bauwens, John Berkman, Chiara Brozzo, Dominic Burbidge, Barnaby Burleigh, Janice Chik, Chris Cowie, Amber Donovan, Marcus Döller, Juliet Floyd, Alexander Gesswein, Richard Gipps, John Haldane, Herbert Hrachovec, Lucian Ionel, Lassi Jakola, Fr Matthew Jarvis, OP, Fr Oskari Juurikkala, Sr Blandine Lagrut, Sasha Lawson-Frost, Olof Leffler, Clare Mac Cumhaill, Ruby Main, Gilad Nir, Roger Teichmann, Br Matthew Warnez, BH, Anja Weiberg, Carolyn Wilde, Rachael Wiseman.

## **Action and Necessity**

**Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* and the Foundations of Ethics**

## Introduction

*Im Anfang war die Tat*. ‘In the beginning was the deed’. Wittgenstein was fond of quoting this line from Goethe’s *Faust* (CV, 36; OC §402). It was, for Wittgenstein, not only a way of asserting the primacy of practice over theory, or action over ratiocination, but also the key to understanding linguistic meaning as shaped by the manifold activities and practices that constitute our—that is, human—forms of life, and rooted in the way we use words in such practical contexts. Language, he thought, was a refinement of that primordial ‘deed’ (CV, 36), that is to say, our most basic forms of action and patterns of behaviour—hence the maxim ‘Words are deeds’ (CV, 56). And then, towards the end of his life, Wittgenstein became absorbed by questions relating to doubt and certainty, leading him to write that ‘it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted’ (OC §342). The tantalising suggestion is that certain linguistic concepts are logically necessary. But are they absolutely necessary, or only relative to a particular investigation or mode of discourse?

This sketch helps to illustrate the unity of the two main philosophical themes of this thesis—action and necessity—and how they show themselves in language. If this picture is essentially correct, then language is not just a medium for an investigation into action and necessity; language is the locus for the development of these concepts. But there is something else already implicit in this picture I have sketched, an unstated condition of understanding the intelligibility of the relationship between language, action, and necessity: Ethics. If there are concepts—which in turn signal forms of action—that are logically necessary, how could that not be understood as relating to ethics?

It is the central contention of this thesis, therefore, that Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* offers us a Linguistic Perspective from which we can understand the foundations of ethics. Furthermore, it is a realist ethics that the Linguistic Perspective points to—but it is not a theoretical moral realism, in Wittgenstein’s pejorative sense of ‘theory’, which refers predominantly to metaphysical hypotheses that can neither be verified nor falsified by evidence (cf. PI §109). The realism that I will defend consists, rather, in the notion that normativity is immanent in human action, and that the norms of ethics just are the outer limits of the most basic concepts presupposed by any reasoning that aims at action, i.e. practical reasoning. One way of describing the Wittgensteinian picture of language and action is that language is a natural expression of practical reasoning. It is hence through language that we can have first-personal access to the fundamental principles of practical reasoning.

This is not a view that Wittgenstein himself defends. This thesis is not a study of Wittgenstein’s ethics, but an exercise in Wittgensteinian ethics, rooted in the insights of Wittgenstein’s last work, *On Certainty*. For this reason, this thesis will involve a significant historical-interpretative component. I will

turn now to discussing the context of interpreting *On Certainty*, in order to explain the rationale of the structure of my investigation.

### *On Certainty and the Uncertainty of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy*

An important idea of Wittgenstein's later philosophy is that language is an intrinsically normative, rule-governed activity; the defining expression of this idea is, arguably, the rule-following considerations of the *Philosophical Investigations* (§§143–232), which investigate the role of rules as conditions of intelligibility for linguistic practices.<sup>1</sup> To engage meaningfully in any language-game is to play by the rules, that is, to place oneself under a particular normative standard. The rules of grammar, as Wittgenstein calls them, may not be explicitly formulated or taught but are embodied within the practice of the language-game itself. But this picture of normativity seems to lead to an inescapable relativism of concepts. Indeed, Wittgenstein is often interpreted as suggesting that different linguistic concepts are always, in principle, possible (cf. PG I, §133; PPF xii, 366).<sup>2</sup> But the approach that *On Certainty* takes adds a new dimension to the rule-following considerations. While the rules of grammar may determine the conditions of intelligibility relative to a particular concept or discourse, *On Certainty* points to the existence of basic certainties which arguably play a different conceptual role: These certainties concern the logical possibility of even having rules of grammar. To be sure, acknowledging this insight does not itself solve the problem of conceptual relativism. But does it give us a tool with which to combat it? I believe that this question of conceptual relativism, and the contribution of *On Certainty* to this question, is a fundamental point of uncertainty of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

Let us look at Wittgenstein's own examples of such certainties, which seem, at first glance, trivial or insubstantial: 'This is my hand' (OC §1), 'My name is L. W.' (OC §594), 'water boils at 100°C' (OC

---

<sup>1</sup> The emphasis on rules of grammar as constituting normativity is associated with Baker-Hacker interpretation of Wittgenstein. See G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, *An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations*, vol. 2, *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985). For a discussion of this view, see Severin Schroeder, 'Analytic Truths and Grammatical Propositions', in *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy: Essays for P.M.S. Hacker*, ed. Hans-Johann Glock and John Hyman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 83–108. For a different line of interpretation on rule-following and normativity, see Stanley Cavell, 'The availability of Wittgenstein's later philosophy', in *Must We Mean What We Say: A Book of Essays*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 41–67. To characterise the difference between the two in broad terms, the Baker-Hacker line emphasises the autonomy of grammar from reality, while the Cavellian line emphasises the contribution of human forms of life to normativity. For discussions of Cavell's view of normativity, see Arata Hamawaki, 'Stanley Cavell on What We Say', *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy* 9, no. 9 (2001): 42–56; Edward Guetti, 'Cavell and the "History of the Rejection of the Human"', *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy* 9, no. 9 (2001): 57–76; Juliet Floyd, 'Wittgenstein on ethics: Working through *Lebensformen*', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 46, no. 2 (2020): 115–30. For a discussion of whether the two lines of interpretation can be made compatible, see Stephen Mulhall, 'Stanley Cavell's Vision of the Normativity of Language: Grammar, Criteria, and Rules', in *Stanley Cavell*, ed. R.T. Eldridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 79–106.

<sup>2</sup> This view is suggested or implied in a number of places, such as Friedrich Waismann, *The Principles of Linguistic Philosophy*, ed. Rom Harré (London: Macmillan, 1965); Baker and Hacker, 'Grammar and Necessity', in *Analytical Commentary*, 2:263–347; Michael N. Forster, *Wittgenstein on the Arbitrariness of Grammar* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Andy Hamilton, 'Anscombe on Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*: linguistic idealism, world-pictures and scepticism', in *The Anscombean Mind*, ed. Adrian Haddock and Rachael Wiseman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 100–24.



§293). These so-called hinge propositions (cf. OC §§341;343) may look like empirical statements, but in fact they play a special logical role (OC §§96;136): Inasmuch as they are ‘exempt from doubt’ (OC §341), they make particular forms of discourse possible. If there are no foundational certainties about where my hands are, we could not speak sensibly about hands—and indeed intelligibly discuss special cases where someone is not sure about the presence of their hands, e.g. after surgery (cf. OC §23). Similarly, the boiling point of water looks like an object of discovery—and empirical testing may have been part of its history—but now it has been adopted as the standard of further testing, a paradigm in the light of which other experiments are intelligible (cf. OC §98). Wittgenstein also emphasises the need to look at hinge propositions in a holistic context, and not just in relation to individual concepts:

All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system. And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments: no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life.

(OC §105)

We do not learn the practice of making empirical judgments by learning rules: we are taught *judgments* and their connexion with other judgments. A *totality* of judgments is made plausible to us.

When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)

(OC §§140–1)

On the basis of this textual evidence, it seems intuitive to read *On Certainty* as being in continuity with the *Investigations* and suggesting that the logical necessity of hinges is ultimately concept-relative, and concepts are ultimately relative to the particular form of life shared by a community of language users, which furthermore is subject to change over time. After all, Wittgenstein has suggested that we should not think of another community which has different—or apparently less sophisticated—concepts as failing to recognise something that we do; they simply have different needs and interests (PPF xii, §366; cf. RFM I, §150).<sup>3</sup> On such a reading, there would be no universal hinge propositions. This approach is, for example, favoured by Andy Hamilton, who also draws attention Wittgenstein’s dynamic conception of hinge propositions (OC §§96–9), in which propositions that are hinges at one point could cease to be so; he is therefore sceptical that *On Certainty* suggests the possibility of universal hinges.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> This point is also emphasised in Rachael Wiseman, ‘Human Essence and Linguistic Idealism’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Elizabeth Anscombe*, ed. Roger Teichmann (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 344–58, which discusses Anscombe’s essay on *On Certainty*. See G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘The Question of Linguistic Idealism’, in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe*, vol. 1, *From Parmenides to Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 112–33.

<sup>4</sup> Andy Hamilton, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Wittgenstein and On Certainty* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 86–128. By contrast, Danièle Moyal-Sharrock is more sympathetic to the idea of universal hinges, in *Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 136–56. Among other things, she points to four candidates for universal hinges from Strawson’s discussion of *On Certainty*: The existence of external objects, the existence of other minds, the reality of induction, and the reality and determinateness of the past. See P.F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (London: Methuen, 1985), 25–9.

By contrast, Gertrude Conway offers a different approach to reading *On Certainty*, and Wittgenstein's later philosophy more broadly. She distinguishes between a primary and a secondary understanding of forms of life; while the latter involves those concepts which vary from community to community, the former is constituted by those interests and inclinations shared by all humans.<sup>5</sup> Hence, she repeatedly draws attention to elementary forms of action that are universal to all human life, but which are so obvious they are generally unnoticed—seeing, touching, gesturing, remembering, doubting, measuring, counting. All meaning and discourse is ultimately grounded in 'fundamental activities' such as these.<sup>6</sup> Danièle Moyal-Sharrock has thus spoken of Conway's work as delineating 'anthropocentric bounds of sense', in the context of a wider discussion on the possibility of universal hinges.<sup>7</sup> Here, Moyal-Sharrock also points to Strawson as giving us four plausible candidates for universal hinges in his own discussion of *On Certainty*: The existence of external objects, the existence of other minds, the reality of induction, and the reality and determinateness of the past.<sup>8</sup> It is less obvious, on the face of it, that these statements from Conway, Moyal-Sharrock and Strawson correspond to anything Wittgenstein was prepared to commit to, much less argue for directly. But it is notably when Wittgenstein talks about the 'reasonable man' or 'reasonable people' in *On Certainty* (§§108;220;252) that he could be taken as implying there are limits to the possibility of alternative concepts. The closest he comes to a list of universal hinges is:

So it might be said: 'The reasonable man believes: that the earth has been there since long before his birth, that his life has been spent on the surface of the earth, or near it, that he has never, for example, been on the moon, that he has a nervous system and various innards like all other people, etc., etc.'

(OC §327)

But it is clear that some of these cannot be genuinely universal hinges—even today there are surely communities who might have no concept of 'nervous system' corresponding to the Western scientific one. These hinges might well point to the outer limits of reasonableness shared by all humans engaged in reasoning, but they remain local expressions of putatively universal limits.

It seems to me, in any case, that the suggestion that there are outer limits to the legitimate plurality of linguistic concepts is one that we should take seriously, in connection with *On Certainty*. It is not just that our concepts provide the conditions of intelligibility for discourse, but the concepts themselves subject to conditions of intelligibility—and this would certainly represent a big change from a

---

<sup>5</sup> Gertrude D. Conway, *Wittgenstein on Foundations* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1989). Significantly, Cavell is an important influence on Conway's book, and Conway expressly sets up her position as being in contrast to Baker and Hacker on the autonomy of grammar (cf. n. 1 of this Introduction).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 65;138–40.

<sup>7</sup> Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein*, 152.

<sup>8</sup> P.F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (London: Methuen, 1985), 25–9.

fundamental assumption in much of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, prior to *On Certainty*. But it is possible that such limits do exist, and yet that Hamilton's view on the essentially dynamic character of hinges is also right—if it turns out that hinges are not the right place to look for some universal standard. Both Hamilton and Moyal-Sharrock agree that there is something artificial about the articulation of hinge propositions;<sup>9</sup> they are normally unspoken and shown fundamentally in the way we act with certainty (cf. OC §204). One possibility, then, is that certain hinges, maybe even those mentioned in OC §327, are signs of our first-personal access to the logical limits of concept-formation, but they always remain relatively local expressions of those limits and are thus dynamic. The limits themselves are something fundamentally inarticulable, one wants to say transcendental—in the sense of being underlying, non-personal conditions of the humanly possible, as opposed to transcendent which suggests going beyond those limits.<sup>10</sup> If we tried our best to articulate these limits, they would likely resemble philosophical claims—Strawson's big four could be an example. Wittgenstein does not consider these hinge propositions, as Hamilton rightly points out;<sup>11</sup> he does not change his view that philosophical doctrines, e.g. about the external world or the law of induction, are nonsensical statements (OC §§35;287). The question is whether there are statements that, while failing to express sense, might still—like the propositions of the *Tractatus*—be useful in illuminating one's path in order to 'see the world aright' (TLP 6.54). Furthermore, if my suggestion is broadly correct, then this relationship between our first-personal access to logic through language and the transcendental nature of logic is also reminiscent of the *Tractatus* (5.6; 6.13).

#### *Logic and ethics*

*On Certainty*, then, invites us to consider a fundamental question of philosophy: What are the bounds of reasoning and reasonableness? The answer to that question is not found in *On Certainty*—among other reasons, this should not surprise us since these remarks of Wittgenstein's that constitute the text as we have it were, as the editors noted, 'all first-draft material, which he did not live to excerpt and polish' (OC, Preface). But I will argue that *On Certainty* gives us the resources with which to answer that question, and that it does so because its primary concern is language and logic. In view of the considerations above, I contend that *On Certainty* is, at heart, a Tractarian work of philosophy, but it is a naturalised *Tractatus*. *On Certainty*'s naturalism is not a scientific one like Quine's, but an anthropocentric one, in which human

---

<sup>9</sup> Hamilton, *Guidebook*, 2; Moyal-Sharrock, *On Certainty*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> This distinction is one suggested by Immanuel Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). See also Sami Pihlström, 'The Transcendental and the Transcendent', in *Transcending Signs: Essays in Existential Semiotics*, ed. Eero Tarasti (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 47–76.

<sup>11</sup> Hamilton, *Guidebook*, 142–4.

nature—understood broadly and non-metaphysically—occupies a central place. ‘Human being’ is a logical concept which provides a natural foundation to reasoning and knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

This Tractarian Reading that I will develop is centred on what I consider to be *On Certainty*’s three main insights about logic:

- (1) Logic involves everything descriptive of a language-game (OC §§56;628);
- (2) The boundary between logic, or rules, and empirical propositions is not sharp (OC §§52;97319);
- (3) Logic and language are founded on action (OC §§110;204;342).

It is in the context of investigating the meaning of these claims that I will seek to answer interpretative questions about the nature and role of hinges and the relationship between *On Certainty* and the rest of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. The first three chapters of this thesis will be devoted to developing this reading, and the order of these three insights will roughly guide the progression of these chapters—though where necessary I will also point to their internal unity.

These three claims provide the starting point for an answer to the question of the bounds of reason, though such an answer necessarily goes beyond interpretation of *On Certainty*. Crucially, as I will show, this answer has inescapably ethical implications. To put it succinctly, if hinges have something to do with the bounds of reason, then action has something to do with logical necessity, and this would undoubtedly have implications for the study of ethics. Furthermore, if hinge certainties lie at the bottom of linguistic rules and their normativity, then the normativity of language is surely a viable route towards understanding the nature of ethical normativity. Following *On Certainty*’s suggestion that logic is founded on action, I will argue that practical reasoning rather than theoretical reasoning is the primary paradigm of reasoning, and that this is key to understanding the outer limits of reasoning and the sources of necessity in reasoning. Language, on this view, can be seen as a natural expression of practical reasoning. Through language, therefore, we can investigate which concepts are indispensable to the intelligibility of practical reasoning as a whole; through reflection on the relationship between our modes of action and the logical possibility of these concepts, we can also determine their outer limits. This, in essence, is the Linguistic Perspective on ethics that I will defend in the fourth and fifth chapters of this thesis. The most fundamental

---

<sup>12</sup> The version of naturalism that I espouse is indebted to David Macarthur’s concept of non-explanatory liberal naturalism in relation to *On Certainty*, as well as to Penelope Maddy’s discussion of her ‘second philosophy’ naturalism and Wittgenstein’s logic, though it is not identical with either. With Macarthur I share a rejection of scientism, and with Maddy I share the view that logic is grounded in the contingent natural world. See David Macarthur, ‘Wittgenstein’s Liberal Naturalism of Human Nature’, in *Wittgenstein and Naturalism*, ed. Kevin M. Cahill and Thomas Raleigh (New York: Routledge, 2018), 33–55; Penelope Maddy, *The Logical Must: Wittgenstein on Logic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

norms of ethics are just the outer limits of the most indispensable concepts that any practical reasoning must take for granted in human life.

Although it is useful to see this thesis as containing two distinct parts, with the first three chapters advancing my Tractarian Reading, and the last two advancing the Linguistic Perspective, the transition between them is intended to be a seamless one. It is not that the problem of the limits of reasonableness happens to be connected with ethics; it shows what is meant by ethics. The entire argument of this thesis will also make clear why there are no ‘moral hinge propositions’ modelled after the hinge propositions found in *On Certainty*. In part, this is for the same reason as my rejection of the possibility of universal hinges stated above. The outer limits of concepts are not the same as the hinges with which we might express our first-personal understanding of them. The other reason is that Wittgenstein’s use of hinge propositions is predominantly situated in the context of empirical knowledge (although he does also consider religious hinge propositions). Ethics, on the view that I defend, is fundamentally a discipline about action and about praxis, not about knowledge. Hence, any simplistic transition from hinge propositions to ethics must be resisted. Wittgenstein’s anti-scepticism in *On Certainty* may be effectively deployed as an argument against a theoretical doctrine like idealism,<sup>13</sup> but it can only be deployed in ethics if we have a viable conception of a practical contradiction—a contradiction expressed in action—rather than a contradiction in thought or concepts.

It is, hopefully, clear by now why this thesis takes the route it does towards ethics. For a start, the principles and insights that I will use in my last two chapters are not often ones that are generally accepted by moral philosophers. Secondly, they will not be readily accepted by scholars of Wittgenstein without a detailed defence. They are hard won conclusions relating both to interpretation of Wittgenstein and to fundamental questions about the nature of reasoning and normativity.

A final point on my method of investigation: As my argument progresses, it will become increasingly clear that, after Wittgenstein, there is a second major philosophical protagonist in this thesis. That protagonist is none other than Elizabeth Anscombe. Not only is my reading of the *Tractatus* indebted to her classic introduction to the text,<sup>14</sup> my last two chapters are also the result of a productive disagreement with some of Anscombe’s specific ideas on practical reasoning—though, as I will show, it is a disagreement on Anscombean and Wittgensteinian grounds. To adapt the title of a recent book,<sup>15</sup> one might say that this part of the thesis is an exercise in Reading Anscombe with Wittgenstein, *Going On to Ethics*.

---

<sup>13</sup> See Anthony Kenny, *Wittgenstein* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 203–18, for a classic exposition of this argument.

<sup>14</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, 3rd ed. (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1967).

<sup>15</sup> Cora Diamond, *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going On to Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

## *Summary of chapters*

My thesis will proceed in the following way. In Chapter 1, I lay the foundations for a Tractarian Reading of *On Certainty*, arguing that its new insights are best understood in the context of its continuities with Wittgenstein's earlier and later writings. Here, I argue that *On Certainty* is primarily concerned, not with epistemology, but with the old Tractarian problem of the logical limits of language and its relation to the world. I contend that *On Certainty*, like the *Tractatus*, presents a form of realism that is practical rather than metaphysical in orientation. I explain the three logical claims of *On Certainty* and conclude with an extended discussion of whether Wittgenstein's later philosophy treats the rules of grammar to be autonomous from reality or not. Both strands of thought exist in his writings, but I suggest it is the non-autonomous one that is more convincing and which leads us to *On Certainty*'s approach to language.

In Chapter 2, I advance an account of the logical role of hinge propositions, which ties them to natural human reactions. This account will take the *Investigations*' remarks on rule-following as its point of departure. The *Investigations* already recognises the logical importance of human reactions and the role of training, though this is brought out more clearly by *On Certainty*. I argue that human reactions are necessary for the conceptual possibility of having language at all, but while they make the basic form of language-games possible, this basic form does not exist in reality. It is always embedded within different layers of conceptual complexity. Hence, hinge propositions are not foundations of language in any straightforward way. I also explain why, on account of this conceptual complexity, hinge propositions are potentially revisable yet exempt from doubt—they are certainties that we grasp first-personally within the logical limits of language, which are properly vague.

In Chapter 3, I then turn to logical inference, and argue that even strict logical inference is founded on action. I trace the development of this view from the *Tractatus* to Wittgenstein's later writings and lecture on mathematics, in which the distinct concepts of certainty and necessity begin to converge. This developing view forms an important part of the philosophical background for *On Certainty*'s view on the role of action as foundational to language and logic. In this chapter, I also discuss the unity of *On Certainty*'s three logical claims, to conclude my Tractarian Reading.

In Chapter 4, I begin the properly ethical part of my thesis by discussing the importance of the practical syllogism. Although Wittgenstein does not discuss the nature of the practical syllogism himself, it is a topic that is suggested by his insights on action as grounding logical inference. This topic also raises fundamental questions about the nature of reasoning, and I attempt to address these questions in this chapter. My primary argument is that practical inference embodies a different logical standard from theoretical inference; practical validity is creative and wide open, unlike the strict and narrow validity of theoretical deductive inference. This also helps us see that practical reasoning is intrinsically ethical.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I advance an account of ethics which I call the Linguistic Perspective. The previous chapter ends with the observation that the ethical nature of practical reasoning depends on the general ends of an agent's life. This chapter is devoted to the question of whether, through the understanding of language and logic developed in the first three chapters, we can arrive at indispensable linguistic concepts, which provide the primary ends of practical reasoning. I argue that normativity is an intrinsic feature of action, and basic moral errors are simply failures in practical rationality. There are basic, unassailable concepts of human life which practical reasoning must have in place by logical necessity. These concepts have outer limits of intelligibility, and these limits point to basic ethical norms. These norms, like the limits of language discussed earlier, are properly vague, but they acquire greater specification in contact with other concepts.

## **Part I**

### **A Tractarian Reading of *On Certainty***



## Chapter 1.

### *On Certainty*: Naturalising the *Tractatus*?

In this chapter, I argue that the new insights that Wittgenstein develops in *On Certainty* are best understood in the context of the deep continuities that the text shares with his earlier and later writings. In particular, I contend that *On Certainty* is a text primarily concerned with the logical structure and limits of language, and like the *Tractatus* it develops this concern in a realist direction. The realism of both the *Tractatus* and *On Certainty*, however, is not primarily metaphysical, but practical in orientation. In exploring this connection, I lay the foundations for a Tractarian Reading of *On Certainty* and outline its three main claims regarding the nature of logic: Everything descriptive of a language-game is part of logic; the boundary between logical and empirical propositions is not sharp; logic and language are founded on action. I then discuss the gradual acceptance of the role of nature in constraining language in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, which leads to *On Certainty*'s new approach to the logical requirements of language.

#### 1.1 Knowledge and certainty: A new question, or a new method?

Of what can we be certain, and is this the same thing as knowing something to be true? This was the question that occupied Wittgenstein for the last two years of his life, and during this time he devoted himself extensively to it. The result of these labours was the collection of remarks now known to us as *On Certainty*. At first glance, it is a startlingly new question for Wittgenstein's philosophy, which up till and including the *Philosophical Investigations* had never treated epistemology as a central concern. Notably, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein had relegated the theory of knowledge to being a matter of psychology, which like the other natural sciences he deemed inessential to the philosophy of logic (TLP 4.1121). Was Wittgenstein experiencing—or on the brink of—a profound change in his philosophical outlook?

The picture changes somewhat when we consider, first of all, the various remarks Wittgenstein makes on the grammatical features of 'knowing' in the *Investigations* (§§78;148–50;184;572). Though he does not give the concept of knowledge an extended treatment in its own right, it would certainly do the *Investigations* an injustice to say that it was unconcerned with epistemological themes. §§320–5, for instance, deals with certainty and justification, while the remarks around §§472–86 are a well-known discussion of the law of induction. These remarks are preceded by the following questions:

Does man think, then, because he has found that thinking pays?—Because he thinks it advantageous to think?

(Does he bring his children up because he has found it pays?)

How could one find out *why* he thinks?

(PI §§467–8)

which lead Wittgenstein to consider those instances where we think precisely because it pays—like doing calculations to install a boiler—and what this says about the nature of justification on the basis of past experience. Looking further afield, we also find the text ‘Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness’, which Rush Rhees distilled from MS 119, written in 1937.<sup>1</sup> There, Wittgenstein discusses the impossibility of doubt in the ‘basic form’ of the language-game (CE, 411–4), the meaning of knowing something intuitively (CE, 417–9), and the importance of natural human reactions (CE, 409–10;414;420).

These preliminary considerations suggest that, where *On Certainty* is concerned, we should take the matter of knowledge and certainty as inaugurating a new method rather than a new question. Wittgenstein’s abiding interest in the bounds of logic and sense continued right up into his final years, though knowledge and certainty now struck him as a powerful new route of enquiry into those questions he raised in the *Investigations* and in MS 119: What is the basic form of a language-game? What is thinking for? Hence, in *On Certainty* we see a newfound interest in the foundations of language-games (§§403;411), and we see numerous remarks on the figure of the ‘reasonable’ person and what cannot logically be doubted (§§108;220;252;327;452–4). This latter strand of investigation is less conclusive, but it might suggest an underlying dissatisfaction with the dominant view of his later philosophy that concepts are fundamentally explained by their use and usefulness to us. Nonetheless, given the inconclusiveness of Wittgenstein’s investigation, it is understandable why Oskari Kuusela, who helpfully points out the use ‘logic’ is ‘particularly prevalent’ in *On Certainty*,<sup>2</sup> also takes as definitive Wittgenstein’s statement from *Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment* (otherwise known as Part II of the *Investigations*) in ruling out the possibility of discovering logical conditions for thought and language:<sup>3</sup>

If concept formation can be explained by facts of nature, shouldn’t we be interested, not in grammar, but rather in what is its basis in nature?—We are, indeed, also interested in the correspondence between concepts and very general facts of nature. (Such facts as mostly do not strike us because of their generality.) But our interest is not thereby thrown back on to these possible causes of concept formation; we are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes.

(PPF xii, §365)

Wittgenstein does not, it is true, explicitly reverse his rejection of the idea that ‘certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones’ (PPF xii, §366). But *On Certainty* does travel cautiously in that direction, especially when Wittgenstein speaks of being ‘intellectually very distant’ from those who have concept of travelling to the moon so radically different from ours as to be unintelligible.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kim van Gennip, ‘On the Origin and Compilation of “Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness”’, in *Language and World: Essays on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, ed. Volker Munz, Klaus Puhl, and Joseph Wang (Heusenstamm:ontos verlag, 2010), 343–50.

<sup>2</sup> Oskari Kuusela, *Wittgenstein on Logic as the Method of Philosophy: Re-examining the Roots and Development of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 204–5. See also Wiseman, ‘Linguistic Idealism’.

In short, I believe there is much that is new in *On Certainty*, but it is not easily separable from what is continuous with the rest of Wittgenstein’s thought. Perhaps, the editorial decisions that led to the publication of *On Certainty* in 1969 as a standalone work have played a part in contributing to the impression that *On Certainty* addresses a brand new philosophical question, and is the product of a new phase in Wittgenstein’s thought. We see this impression at work in the emergence of the notion of a ‘Third Wittgenstein’, with *On Certainty* deemed as his third masterpiece, after the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*.<sup>4</sup> But the textual history of *On Certainty* suggests a more complicated picture, even though this history is obscured by the fact that the *Remarks on Colour* were only published in 1977, while Vol. 2 of the *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology* was finally published in 1992. It is not immediately obvious, therefore, that these three texts—which I shall collectively refer to as the Last Writings—in fact come from a series of nine manuscripts (MS 169–77 in von Wright’s collection) which were artificially separated by affinity of subject matter. To illustrate with regard to *On Certainty*, while the whole of MS 175 and 177 is reproduced in the published text, only selected portions of MS 172, 174 and 176 appear in *On Certainty* and while the rest are found in the other two Last Writings.<sup>5</sup> The careful reader will, of course, realise that questions regarding certainty, logic, and psychology criss-cross through the three discretely published texts, but only recently has there been more scholarly attention paid to the organic unity of the Last Writings. Notably, Andreas Krebs has commented on the notion of a ‘liminal space between rule and empirical proposition’ as one that appears throughout the Last Writings, and is already suggested in the *Investigations*.<sup>6</sup> Joachim Schulte also points to the following remark from the *Remarks on Colour*, which he describes as ‘rarely quoted’ but as indicative of a ‘lifelong occupation’ of Wittgenstein’s:

Sentences are often used on the borderline between logic and the empirical, so that their meaning changes back and forth and they count now as expressions of norms, now as expressions of experience.

(For it is certainly not an accompanying mental phenomenon—this is how we imagine ‘thoughts’—but the use, which distinguishes the logical proposition from the empirical one.)

(ROC I, §32)

The publication history of the Last Writings, though unhappy, is what it is now. But I think one can still study *On Certainty* without the assumption that it is a standalone work—it would amount to

---

<sup>4</sup> Danièle Moyal-Sharrock, ‘Introduction: The Idea of a *Third* in Wittgenstein’ in *The Third Wittgenstein: The Post-Investigations Works*, ed. Moyal-Sharrock (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 1–11. See also Danièle Moyal-Sharrock and William H. Brenner, ‘Introduction’, in *Readings of Wittgenstein’s On Certainty*, ed. Moyal-Sharrock and Brenner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1–15, which emphasises the relevance of *On Certainty* for epistemology.

<sup>5</sup> For a wide-ranging discussion of the creation of these three discrete texts, see Lassi Jakola, ‘Editorial Approaches to Wittgenstein’s “Last Writings” (1949–51): Elizabeth Anscombe, G.H. von Wright and Rush Rhees in Dialogue’, in *The Creation of Wittgenstein: Understanding the Roles of Rush Rhees, Elizabeth Anscombe and Georg Henrik von Wright*, ed. Thomas Wallgren (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 235–72. Jakola also refers to Kim van Gennip, ‘Connections and Divisions in *On Certainty*’, in *Knowledge and Belief: Papers of the 26th International Wittgenstein Symposium, 3–9 August 2003, Kirchberg am Wechsel*, ed. Winfried Löffler and Paul Weingartner, (Neulengbach: Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society, 2003), 129–131, in which she argues that Wittgenstein’s alleged editorial marks do not unambiguously demarcate thematic shifts.

<sup>6</sup> Andreas Krebs, ‘Certainties and Rule-Following’, *Wittgenstein-Studien* 13, no.1 (2022): 23–30.

focusing on those aspects of the Last Writings that pertain to certainty, doubt, and knowledge. With that in mind, as well as the considerations discussed above, I want to advance a reading of *On Certainty* that emphasises continuity with the overall development of Wittgenstein's thought, and to situate its genuinely new insights within that continuity. In essence, I propose that we should read *On Certainty* as primarily concerned with language and logic, rather than epistemology, and I will also draw attention to connections with other parts of the Last Writings where appropriate, given their textual history.

In this regard, a crucial source of continuity is found not just in the *Investigations* and MS 119 as mentioned above, but also in the *Tractatus*. This is a connection that, surprisingly, remains under-studied despite the considerable attention *On Certainty* has received in recent years. Various commentators have noted briefly a connection to the *Tractatus*, and I provide here a representative sample of these observations without implying full agreement: *On Certainty* presents us with a 'roughly sketched (and possibly naturalistic) anti-realism';<sup>7</sup> it makes use of something resembling Tractarian formal concepts and its underlying emphasis on the limits of thought;<sup>8</sup> it considers some empirical propositions as indicating the foundations of language.<sup>9</sup> But this connection has rarely, if ever, been given the extended treatment it deserves. Ultimately, what I believe studying this connection will reveal is the unique approach *On Certainty* takes to the old question of what the logical requirements of language and the limits of what can be said are. Certainty and knowledge are but fresh lineaments to Wittgenstein's thinking on a problem that Wittgenstein once described in the following way:

Here we have the old problem, which we would like to express in the following way: 'the thought that p is the case doesn't presuppose that it is the case; yet on the other hand there must be something in the fact that is a presupposition even of having the thought (I can't think that something is red, if the colour red does not exist)'. It is the problem of the harmony between world and thought.

(PG I, §94)

Here we have a helpful statement of *On Certainty*'s Tractarian preoccupations and its fundamental difference from the *Investigations*. Of course, in the *Investigations* if Wittgenstein is interested in anything it is also the logical requirements and limits of language, and the difference between the two texts is not simply that in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein starts referring more explicitly to logic again. The heart of what I call a Tractarian Reading of *On Certainty* is that Wittgenstein takes up this concern with the limits of language in a way that resemble the realism of the *Tractatus*—a realism that is not primarily metaphysical, but still takes seriously the contribution of the world to the shaping and constraining of language. There are hints of this tendency already present in the period surrounding the composition of the *Investigations*,

---

<sup>7</sup> A.C. Grayling, *Scepticism and the Possibility of Knowledge* (London: Continuum, 2008), 113.

<sup>8</sup> G.H. von Wright, 'Wittgenstein on Certainty', in *Problems in the Theory of Knowledge*, ed. von Wright (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), 53–5.

<sup>9</sup> Strawson, *Skepticism*, 17–8.

as I will explain later on, but by and large this kind of realism is antithetical to the *Investigations*' way of doing philosophy. The return of logic in *On Certainty*, then, marks more than a shift in emphasis; it marks the return and refashioning of a Tractarian outlook that grants an important conceptual place to the empirical realm. Hence, it will be necessary to study in detail the key claims about logic that Wittgenstein makes in *On Certainty*, to better understand this Tractarian outlook.

The main purpose of this chapter is therefore to establish the continuity of thought between the *Tractatus* and *On Certainty*, and to argue for the importance of reading the two texts alongside each other, in the light of the 'old problem' of language and the world. I will proceed as follows. In Section 1.2, I discuss how *On Certainty* and *Tractatus* are both essentially concerned with the same task of investigating the logical requirements of language, but that *On Certainty* takes up this task with renewed concern for the epistemic conditions of logic. In doing so I lay the foundations for my Tractarian Reading of *On Certainty*, and identify the text's three key claims about logic. In Section 1.3 I identify another strand of thought, this time from the later philosophy, that also pre-empts *On Certainty*'s philosophical approach. Unlike the strand of thought in the later philosophy that emphasises the autonomy of language from reality, this second strand reveals Wittgenstein's increasing appreciation of the importance of the role of nature in conditioning language, which contributes to *On Certainty* approach to the 'old problem'. Finally, in the conclusion, Section 1.4, I briefly discuss the question of whether this approach can be considered a kind of naturalism.

In advancing my reading of *On Certainty* in this way, I do not signal complete disagreement with the idea of the Third Wittgenstein, despite my difference in emphasis. To apply Wittgenstein's insight on concept-formation somewhat self-referentially to this issue, we can still accept that there is some usefulness to the idea of a Third Wittgenstein, without suggesting that is 'absolutely the correct' classification. Moyal-Sharrock is, in my view, right to situate *On Certainty* in the context of the broader set of writings from around 1944 onwards, which include not just the Last Writings but also other writings on psychology published as the *Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment*, both volumes of the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Vol. 1 of the *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, and arguably *Zettel*, most of which was written between 1946 and 1948.<sup>10</sup> Aspect-perception, knowledge of others' mental or emotional states, and general facts of nature are particular are issues that become particularly prominent in these writings. For the sake of convenience, I will refer to this broader set of writings as the post-*Investigations* writings, though this is not meant as a judgement on the correct status and name of the

---

<sup>10</sup> Moyal-Sharrock, 'Introduction'.

*Fragment/Part II of the Investigations*. Those who are partial to the latter should therefore take my reference to the post-*Investigations* writings to mean ‘post-Part I of the *Investigations*’.

## 1.2 The ‘old problem’: Language and the world

What is the relevance of knowledge for understanding the requirements of logic and the limits of language? Despite the rejection of epistemology in the *Tractatus*, this question is one that Wittgenstein eventually revisits in *On Certainty*, with several hallmarks of Tractarian thought. In this section, I will lay the foundations of a Tractarian Reading of *On Certainty* by exploring the continuities of thought between the *Tractatus* and *On Certainty*, and delineating more precisely *On Certainty*’s main claims about language and logic. This will demonstrate the mutually illuminating nature of reading these two texts alongside each other.

### 1.2.1 The foundations of a Tractarian Reading

The ‘old problem’ of language and the world is, as I have suggested above, the cornerstone of continuity between *On Certainty* and the *Tractatus*. Both texts, as I will argue, seek to define the precise relationship between language and the world that allows language to meaningfully represent reality. Arguably, even in the *Investigations* this problem does not disappear,<sup>11</sup> though it is addressed more obliquely. But a consistent feature of Wittgenstein’s response to this problem is that it is impossible to speak of this problem in a literal way. Hence, before one can even tackle interpretative questions about the direction of fit between language and reality in any of these texts, one is faced with Wittgenstein’s insistence that one ‘cannot use language to get outside language’ (PR §6). The problem of language and reality can only be properly grasped if this is accepted as an ineliminable feature. Although ‘language and the world’ is a useful, if crude, way of framing the problem, it does not detract from the fact that everything we say is said in and through language. There is no other vantage point, no stepping outside of language to access the world as it is. Wittgenstein’s move has parallels with Kant’s ‘Copernican Revolution’, which suggests that we cannot step outside of sensory perception and can only study reality as it is represented to us by our senses.<sup>12</sup> I will first discuss the significance of this feature of the problem, in order to explain how *On Certainty*’s approach in effect picks up loose ends from the *Tractatus*.

Despite Wittgenstein’s Copernican move, one can begin to feel the contours of a possible solution to the ‘old problem’ when we look at how language is used—how concepts are given life, so to speak, in

---

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Kenny, for example, writes, ‘Even the isomorphism between the world and language survives, though with its poles reversed, in the later philosophy.’ See ‘The Ghost of the *Tractatus*’ in *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures*, vol. 7, *Understanding Wittgenstein*, ed. Godfrey Vesey (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1974), 12.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of this parallel, see İlham Dilman, *Wittgenstein’s Copernican Revolution: The Question of Linguistic Idealism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

their application. This is true of both the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*. The *Tractatus* is, for good reason, associated with the idea of language-world isomorphism: It speaks of metaphysical entities—the simple objects of the world—which determine the logical form of the world (TLP 2.0213) and it describes language as depicting the world through shared logical form (TLP 2.18–2). But this isomorphism, we soon find, is not something that is directly discoverable or articulable. For a start, Wittgenstein invokes Frege’s context-principle: The primitive, logically proper names for simple objects, since they cannot be ‘dissected any further by means of a definition’ (TLP 3.26), are said to only have meaning ‘in the nexus of a proposition’ (TLP 3.3). Logic, Wittgenstein later explains, ‘has to be in contact with its application’ as it cannot anticipate its application, not even what elementary propositions there are (TLP 5.557). So although the existence of simple objects and the elementary propositions that contain them is presented as an a priori requirement of language (cf. TLP 3.23), and not something we discover from looking at the world, we know of this requirement only because we are already using propositions that make contact, so to speak, with the world.

Likewise in the *Investigations*, it is fundamentally through the language-games woven into our forms of life that words have meaning. Our concepts are shaped by our interests as a community, and meaning is inseparable from the way we use our concepts to address our interests. We speak truly or falsely about the world only through the linguistic standards of shared concepts. The *Investigations* undoubtedly takes a more expansive view of the significance of use in determining meaning, though that as we just seen above even the *Tractatus* has some notion of use as revealing, if not determining, meaning.<sup>13</sup> Unlike the *Tractatus*, the *Investigations* for the most part avoids talk of an extra-linguistic world making contact with language—all contact happens within language, or so it seems. Yet Wittgenstein can still say:

The agreement, the harmony, between thought and reality consists in this: that if I say falsely that something is *red*, then all the same, it is *red* that it isn’t. And in this: that if I want to explain the word ‘red’ to someone, in the sentence ‘That is not red’, I do so by pointing to something that *is* red.

(PI §429)

Of course, the sample of a red object from ‘reality’ is really part of language here (PI §16)—it has become an instrument for teaching the use of a word, a tool *within* language that illustrates the rules for the use of the word ‘red’, and not *evidence* of language-world isomorphism.<sup>14</sup> So we can say that both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* share a sense that the problem of language and the world is not really the problem of whether language really resembles the world, for we could not investigate that claim. It is the

---

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the *Tractatus*’s narrower conception of meaning as use, see Hidé Ishiguro, ‘Use and Reference of Names’, in *Studies in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, ed. Peter Winch (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 20–50.

<sup>14</sup> See G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, ‘Ostensive definition and its ramifications’, in *Essays on the Philosophical Investigations*, vol. 1, *Wittgenstein: Meaning and Understanding* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 81–118, for a wider discussion of samples.

problem of what we can learn about language from its application to things, an application that we find ourselves already thrust into. Although both texts have different philosophical presuppositions and methods of investigation, they converge on this point: What is conceptually prior to language, whether it goes by the name of logical form or forms of life, is known only through language use.

Now that we have some sense of the complexity of engaging with the ‘old problem’, we can better appreciate the importance of *On Certainty*’s new method in relation to *Tractatus*’s specific failure to confront the importance of epistemology. For it turns out that despite the *Tractatus*’s lip-service to Frege’s context-principle and to the significance of application in logic, Wittgenstein seems to wilfully ignore important questions pertaining to these aspects of his thinking. The *Tractatus*, as mentioned above, remains officially unconcerned with epistemology. Anscombe, however, points out an inconsistency here—for Wittgenstein does say nonetheless that elucidatory propositions containing primitive names of simple objects can ‘only be understood if the meanings of those signs are already known’ (TLP 3.263).<sup>15</sup> Should not the way in which we come to know the most basic elements of linguistic representation be relevant to philosophical inquiry about language? If the route to philosophical understanding requires reflection on how we already use language to represent the world, then questions about knowledge must come in: How is it that we are already able to use language in ‘perfect logical order’ (TLP 5.5563), even prior to philosophical reflection? (This idea that ordinary language is in good working order, like the idea that we cannot get outside language, seems to be another constant throughout Wittgenstein’s changing views, although how we uncover that order is a question to which he provides different answers.) Is that logical order—or are rules of grammar, to use Wittgenstein’s later terminology—something we know intuitively or something that we acquire by training? Even if we cannot get outside of language, can we still investigate whether language is in some way *conditioned* by the world, or indeed by us as subjects in the world? It is only in *On Certainty* that these sorts of questions finally provide the outlines of a new method of investigation.

Anscombe, in her unrelenting criticism of the *Tractatus* for its epistemological lacuna, also points to the importance of *certainty* in relation to logic:

Knowledge and certainty, however, *are* topics for the philosophy of logic. In doing logic we are not indeed interested in what is the case, or in what things are certainly known, or in the conditions for certainty in practice. But logical theory must allow for the certainty of propositions which are not logically necessary. Otherwise logic would have no application. For ‘It is clear in advance that the logical proof of a significant

---

<sup>15</sup> Anscombe, *Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, 28. Anscombe translates ‘bekannt’ as ‘acquainted’ rather than ‘known’ (used in the Pears-McGuinness translation) as for Anscombe this better emphasises the possibility—though she ultimately rejects this interpretation—of understanding elementary propositions as observation statements, as had been Popper’s view. See 25–7 for this discussion.



proposition and proof *in logic* (i.e. proof of a logical proposition) must be two quite different things. The significant proposition asserts something, and its proof shows that it is so' (6.1263, 6.1264).<sup>16</sup>

So necessity must be distinguished from certainty though the latter, as Anscombe suggests, is evidence of the former at work. While logic here refers to what shows us the *necessary* steps for valid reasoning (e.g. to make an inference), propositions known through, say, empirical means could be known with *certainty*, if one is provided with proof by means of logic. Anscombe's point is motivated by what she considers a misleading impression that the *Tractatus* gives about certainty—that only logical propositions, which are strictly speaking tautologies and therefore say nothing about the world, can be certain—and she argues that the *Tractatus* does allow for significant propositions, which say something about the world, to be certain as well. This point essentially boils down to much the same criticism as before. Although Wittgenstein talks about the application of logic, he is obscure on how we get acquainted with the facts to which logic is applied, from which application we derive certainty in our knowledge.<sup>17</sup> All that Wittgenstein provides is a vague notion of 'projection', his term for our mental process of 'think[ing] of the sense of a proposition' (TLP 3.11). Clearly there is a need for some rudimentary acquaintance with the elements of our thought so that we can think or utter a proposition that has a 'projective relation to the world' (TLP 3.12).

Wittgenstein, it seems, was held back by his dogmatism about logic and was keen not to let anything empirical dilute what he saw as the central task of the *Tractatus*—clarifying the *internal* logical requirements that language has to satisfy as a tool of representation, whatever may be the case in the world. Hence, he did not even seem to regard the exact status of his simple objects as particularly important;<sup>18</sup> they were posited to fulfil a theoretical requirement. This is also why it is not necessary to read the *Tractatus* as being committed to a realist metaphysics to understand its fundamental point; the simple objects are, at the very least, a heuristic for understanding what is necessary for language to do its job.<sup>19</sup> In this way, the realism of the *Tractatus* is fundamentally a practical one, though this practical

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 157–8.

<sup>18</sup> Wittgenstein's disregard for the precise status of simple objects is particularly clear from the following recollection: 'What I once called "objects", simples, were simply what I could refer to without running the risk of their possible non-existence; i.e. that for which there is neither existence nor non-existence, and that means: what we can speak about *no matter what may be the case*' (PR III, §36). In another place, he also speaks of objects as 'elements of representation' (WVC, 43). Norman Malcolm also recounts a conversation where Wittgenstein, reflecting on his earlier work, said that he thought of himself at the time as a logician, and therefore 'that it was not his business, as a logician, to try to decide whether this thing or that was a simple thing or a complex thing, that being a purely *empirical* matter'. See Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 70.

<sup>19</sup> Brian McGuinness, 'The So-Called Realism of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', in *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, ed. Irving Block (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981), 60–73. José Medina puts this point across nicely in 'Deflationism and the true colours of necessity in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', *Dialectica* 57, no. 4 (2003): 361: 'Tractarian objects are to be viewed as the "truth-value potential" or "semantic role" of names. The upshot of this interpretation is that objects, the meanings of names, are not mysterious *names* that we may or may not be lucky enough to bump into; but rather, that they should be thought

orientation is framed by Wittgenstein's dogmatic 'requirement that sense be determinate' (TLP 3.23). This requirement, combined with the truth-functional calculus which showed how the truth-values of complex propositions could be understood in terms of their constituent elementary propositions (which depict concatenations of simple objects), is taken as proof of the *demand*, 'on purely logical grounds' (TLP 5.5562), for the existence of simple objects.<sup>20</sup> Underlying the structure of sense in the *Tractatus* is a belief in an idealised logical order which *must* be found in the reality of language use, and which constitutes the essence of all representation—as Marie McGinn argues, it is this that constitutes Wittgenstein's early dogmatism about logic as seen in the *Tractatus*.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most succinct expression of this dogmatism is his dictum, 'The only necessity that exists is *logical* necessity' (TLP 6.37). Therefore, 'no empirical cloudiness or uncertainty may attach to it' (PI §97)—as Wittgenstein later puts it when ventriloquising his Tractarian view of logic.

It is significant that this implicit tension between Wittgenstein's dogmatism about logic and his recognition of the importance of application and use in the *Tractatus* is also what lies at the heart of his subsequent abandonment of Tractarian philosophy. For what precipitated the breakdown of the *Tractatus* system was the troubled concept of logical form, manifested in Wittgenstein's inability to explain the colour exclusion problem in purely logical terms. Although in the *Tractatus* itself Wittgenstein glosses over the problem with the conviction that 'the simultaneous presence of two colours at the same place in the visual field... is ruled out by the logical structure of colour' (TLP 6.3751), in the *Notebooks 1914–1916* we see that Wittgenstein was already aware of the potential difficulty of explaining colour in logical terms:

A point cannot be red and green at the same time: at first sight there seems no need for this to be a logical impossibility. But the very language of physics reduces it to a kinetic impossibility. We see that there is a difference of structure between red and green.

[...] The fact that a particle cannot be in two places at the same time does look more like a logical impossibility.

(NB, 81)

The problem of colour exclusion would go on to become a significant problem of principle for Wittgenstein's philosophy, since the impossibility of the same patch being of two different colours could not be expressed by a contradiction in truth-functional analysis, i.e. was not a problem of *logical* incompatibility. By the time he writes 'Some Remarks on Logical Form', he realises that inquiry into

---

of as discourse entities, that is, as entities whose profile is configured by the semantic features exhibited in the use of simple signs in our symbolism'.

<sup>20</sup> Anscombe also points to these remarks in *Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, 28 to emphasise the logical character of the demand for simple objects.

<sup>21</sup> Marie McGinn, *Elucidating the Tractatus: Wittgenstein's Early Philosophy of Logic and Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 279; see also 12–26.

logical form is ‘in a certain sense *a posteriori*’ (SRLF, 30), and cannot be mere a priori conjecture; José Medina comments that this ‘constitutes an important departure from the Tractarian view, according to which we have “*a priori* knowledge of the possibility of a logical form” (6.33; my emphasis); and “there cannot be a proposition whose form could not have been foreseen” (4.5)’.<sup>22</sup>

That being said, the difficulty of analysing logical form from a purely a priori standpoint is anticipated obliquely by Wittgenstein’s discussion of scientific laws in the *Tractatus*, which at the time he still thinks show us ‘a priori insights about the forms in which the propositions of science can be cast’ (TLP 6.34)<sup>23</sup>. And as we mentioned earlier, in the *Tractatus* there is already the view that we need to look at the application of logic in order to understand its a priori forms. That is why, surprisingly enough for a text so concerned with perfect logical order, Wittgenstein says that it ‘would be completely arbitrary to give any specific form’ of elementary propositions (TLP 5.554); forms have to be ‘invented’ to be projected onto the world (TLP 5.555). So the switch from a priori knowledge of logical form to a posteriori inquiry is not as surprising as the official doctrine of the *Tractatus* would suggest; in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein is already aware that, much as the requirements for sense are internal to language, the world also plays a role in conditioning the application of logic to the world as found in language. It seems that the key lesson, for Wittgenstein, which he only learns explicitly in the wake of the colour exclusion problem is that once we have to admit of a diversity of logical forms about different concepts, then it is hard to see how the requirements of logical order in language are purely internal. Logic must learn from the empirical sphere; one cannot ignore how the world is, and as a corollary to that how we are acquainted with the world.<sup>24</sup>

### 1.2.2 On Certainty’s logical claims

The difficulty of balancing the internal logical requirements of language with the application of language to the world, within which we are inescapably remain, together with the suggestion that the form of scientific propositions might provide a valuable clue about logical form, are what set the stage for *On Certainty*’s new method of investigation. These Tractarian preoccupations continue to animate *On Certainty*, as seen from its repeated reference to the logical possibility and impossibility, and its focus on empirical-looking propositions that reveal to us the logical structure of scientific investigation (OC §§136;342). In

---

<sup>22</sup> José Medina, *The Unity of Wittgenstein’s Philosophy: Necessity, Intelligibility, and Normativity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 38.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. TLP 6.32: ‘The law of causality is not a law but the form of a law’.

<sup>24</sup> In *Elucidating the Tractatus*, 268–9, McGinn comments on TLP 5.554 and 5.555, arguing that Wittgenstein ‘has made it clear that, insofar as logic does not represent, it belongs to the subject side, and not to the side of the object. It is what is essential to representation, and what is essential to representation has nothing to do with how the world is’. Though I am in broad agreement with McGinn’s overall approach to interpreting the *Tractatus*, I differ on this point. Even if Wittgenstein is concerned with the internal requirements of representation in the *Tractatus*, as I believe he is, the germ of the problem of what the empirical contributes to the logical is already present in that same work.

effect, *On Certainty* can be seen as an attempt to answer Anscombe's two points of criticism relating to the *Tractatus*'s absent epistemology: 1) How are we acquainted with the facts, including the most basic elements of linguistic representation, to which logic is applied? 2) Are there propositions which, though not logically necessary, are known with certainty? I will show how *On Certainty*'s approach to these questions leads to its three central logical claims.

Let us start with the second question by way of the formulation of the 'old problem' we saw earlier, taken from *Philosophical Grammar*. Wittgenstein writes that 'there must be something in the fact that is a presupposition even of having the thought (I can't think that something is red, if the colour red does not exist)'. This is particularly apt for considering *On Certainty*, which is an extended reflection precisely on what language presupposes so that it can function as a method of representation. We see this idea first germinating in one of the earliest of the post-*Investigations* writings. In *Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment*, Wittgenstein briefly flirts with the idea that 'playing our language-game always rests on a tacit presupposition' (v, §31) before making a comment that could well have been in *On Certainty*: 'Doesn't a presupposition exist when a doubt exists? And doubt may be entirely lacking. Doubting has an end' (v, §33). In *On Certainty* the idea of tacit presuppositions now comes to the fore—Wittgenstein looks at presuppositions that manifest themselves as various certainties in life, and Wittgenstein at one point even describes these as propositions which are 'exempt from doubt' (OC §341), using the metaphor of hinges: 'If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.' (OC §343) These are a diverse group, ranging from 'This is my hand' (OC §1), 'water boils at 100°C' (OC §293) 'the earth had already existed long before I was born' (OC §301) and 'My name is "L. W."' (OC §594). They all have the form of empirical propositions, and some are explicitly scientific in character, but Wittgenstein contends that they are not in fact empirical discoveries confirmed by evidence (OC §250). Rather, they play a 'peculiar logical role in the system of our empirical propositions' (OC §136).

This certainly seems to be a new approach, compared with the *Investigations* and Wittgenstein's other writings from the 1930s. One of the central notions that he had developed during this time was the rules of grammar, which are simply the rules for the use of our concepts. (See Section 3.4.1 for a wider discussion of Wittgenstein's use of 'grammar' and its ordinary meaning.) These rules provide the conditions of intelligibility that allow us to speak about the world, and are not justified by reality:

Grammar does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfil its purpose, in order to have such-and-such an effect on human beings. It only describes and in no way explains the use of signs.

(PI §496)

By contrast, Wittgenstein's hinge certainties—or hinge propositions, where they are articulated—in *On Certainty* seem to be points in our language that are nailed to reality. They are not logically necessary, but

nor is their certainty that of a very well-founded, thoroughly justified piece of empirical knowledge. They are categorically different. I suggest we can understand them as presuppositions that make possible different forms of discourse and, therefore, knowledge. While rules of grammar provide us with conditions of intelligibility, hinge certainties point to what makes grammar conceptually possible in the first place. It is only when we have a concept of hands that we can talk about them, but what lies at the bottom of us having that concept seems to be the practical certainty of OC §1. This is quite different from the certainty that Anscombe was after in her critique of the *Tractatus*, but it is a compelling answer.

Wittgenstein himself is explicit about the foundational role that these certainties play:

But why *am* I so certain that this is my hand? Doesn't the whole language-game rest on this kind of certainty?

Or: isn't this 'certainty' (already) presupposed in the language-game? Namely by virtue of the fact that one is not playing the game, or is playing it wrong, if one does not recognize objects with certainty.

(OC §446)

It seems that what is important about the role of 'my hand' is that it is *my* hand—that 'my hand' is a kind of foundational certainty, not just a token that can be used in different ways, depending on the language-game. Here one thinks of the *Tractatus*'s famous aphorism, '*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*' (TLP 5.6). While not all the hinge certainties identified in *On Certainty* involve immediate, first-personal observational awareness, a good number of them do, such as the certainty that a sick man is lying there as you are sitting by his bedside (OC §10) and the certainty that 'this is a book' (OC §17). These certainties seem to function not so much as the bounds of sense, but as guarantors of sense. Already, there is a parallel emerging between their logical role and that of the simple objects of the *Tractatus*, of which Wittgenstein says, cryptically, 'Names are like points; propositions like arrows—they have sense' (TLP 3.144). Could it be that the role once played by the logically proper names of simple objects, which can neither be true nor false, having no sense (unlike the propositions they occur in), be taken over by hinge certainties? After all, if hinge propositions are not empirical statements, properly speaking, then they are neither true nor false. And perhaps it is no mere coincidence that there has sometimes been a tendency to read the simple objects as objects of immediate experience, like a speck in one's visual field.<sup>25</sup> While I do not think such an interpretation of Tractarian simple objects is accurate, it is likely borne of the same worry that Anscombe had—how are we acquainted with these objects, such that their elucidatory propositions make sense to us? By contrast, these hinge propositions of immediate experience are not shrouded with the same air of mystery, as far as our acquaintance of them goes. Hence, with first-personal hinges at least, we have an answer to both of Anscombe's points of criticisms mentioned earlier. But the

---

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, Merrill B. Hintikka and Jaakko Hintikka, *Investigating Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 45–86.

precise nature of their ‘peculiar logical role’ remains mysterious, since that is not to be understood in the context of the Tractarian system of sense.

*On Certainty* does not build up a new structure equivalent to the Tractarian system; it takes for granted much of the achievements of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy about rules of grammar and forms of life. The new ‘structure’ of the later philosophy is not logic in the narrow, formal sense but the whole of human life. But the repeated emphasis on logic in *On Certainty* suggests that this new structure, though more diffuse and flexible than the Tractarian one, is still answerable to the perennial question of logic and language: How does this structure show the logical requirements of language, and following from that are there limits to what can be said? The difference now is that Wittgenstein has learnt to take seriously the application of language to reality, into which we are already thrust—we only ever begin investigations into language *in media res*. Only through our first-personal contact with reality by means of language can we conduct any logical investigation.

With that perspective, *On Certainty* offers a new solution to Wittgenstein’s old Tractarian problem. First of all, rather than fit the world into the ideal of logic as the *Tractatus* attempted, logic instead is expanded to take in the world. This wider view of logic means that the logical requirements of language, though they remain internal to language, including the way language is conditioned by the world—this is why certain empirical-looking propositions play a ‘peculiar logical role’, and why our first-personal acquaintance with these elements of the world is of great importance. Secondly, if the whole structure of our forms of life is logical then the character of logical propositions must be dynamic—they change, just as societies change, though this point must still be made compatible with the way the world conditions language. Finally, if there are limits to language then this still cannot be said—to attempt this is to try and utter philosophical doctrines, which even in *On Certainty* are not hinge propositions but are still treated as nonsense (OC §§35;287). But it is shown in the way we act, in our practical certainties to which language bears witness. ‘Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described?’ Wittgenstein asks. ‘You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it’ (OC §501).

This condensed explanation, I believe, demonstrates the logical character of *On Certainty*, and shows the essential unity of the three central logical claims of the text:

- (1) Logic involves everything descriptive of a language-game (OC §§56;628);
- (2) The boundary between logic, or rules, and empirical propositions is not sharp (OC §§52;97;319);
- (3) Logic and language are founded on action (OC §§110;204;342).

The substance of these claims may sound foreign to the *Tractatus* but I hope it is clear by now why their origins and motivations are utterly Tractarian. These three claims shall roughly guide the order of investigation from this chapter through to Chapter 3, and my aim will be to explore and defend their various implications so that *On Certainty*'s answer to the 'old problem', and in particular the logical role of hinge propositions, can be better understood. Only after having discussed each claim in turn will we arrive at a more complete understanding of their unity, which I shall address towards the end of Chapter 3. It is important to stress, however, that these three claims together form a single picture, though they usefully highlight different aspects of that picture.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss some further Tractarian motifs in *On Certainty* to conclude the argument for a Tractarian reading, before offering a preliminary investigation of the first claim through analysis of the notion of autonomous grammar and its shortcomings.

### 1.2.3 Tractarian motifs in *On Certainty*

In *On Certainty* we find two motifs from the *Tractatus* which help us to better appreciate the logical nature of its investigation into knowing and certainty. They are anti-scepticism and the saying-showing distinction.

#### (1) Anti-scepticism

Both *On Certainty* and the *Tractatus* take an interest in scepticism, not simply as a problem of epistemology but more fundamentally as a mode of philosophising which shows the limits of what can be thought and said—limits which are transgressed in our attempts to say the unsayable, resulting in nonsense.<sup>26</sup> Towards the end of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes:

Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical, when it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked.

For doubt can exist only where a question exists, a question only where an answer exists, and an answer only where something *can be said*.

(TLP 6.51)

This, helpfully, also provides a clear statement of purpose for Wittgenstein's later dispute with Moore in *On Certainty*. There, Wittgenstein's starting point is Moore's claim that he has 'proven' the reality of the external world by propositions such as 'Here is one hand, and here is another'. In his 'Proof of an External World', Moore had stressed that the combination of his hand gesture and the utterance 'here' was good *evidence* to show that he clearly '*knew*' (emphasis Moore's) that there was such a hand.<sup>27</sup> Wittgenstein does

---

<sup>26</sup> Von Wright, 'Certainty', 54–6.

<sup>27</sup> G.E. Moore, 'Proof of an External World', in *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 144–8.

not dispute that 'Here is one hand' is the sort of thing one can indeed say with certainty, and legitimately so. He does, however, take issue with the use of the verb 'know' in relation to such an utterance.

There are special circumstances in which meaningful doubt of the existence of one's hands is possible, and hence 'I know...' would be an appropriate thing to say:

If I don't know whether someone has two hands (say, whether they have been amputated or not) I shall believe his assurance that he has two hands, if he is trustworthy. And if he says he *knows* it, that can only signify to me that he has been able to make sure, and hence that his arms are e.g. not still concealed by coverings and bandages, etc. etc. My believing the trustworthy man stems from my admitting that it is possible for him to make sure. But someone who says that perhaps there are no physical objects makes no such admission.

(OC §23)

But the last quoted sentence is the nub of Wittgenstein's argument against Moore in the early pages of *On Certainty*. To know is to be able to, e.g. verify a statement by observation, or give grounds. Such activities constitute our practice of acquiring and testing knowledge. But where there is no intelligible doubt to be had or possible mistake to be made, there is no sense in which one can mean one *knows* such-and-such to be true. Where an utterance like 'Here is one hand' is concerned, we do not in normal circumstances have a clear idea of what it would be like to be mistaken about it (cf. OC §17). It is as certain as anything could be. If a mistake is not possible to make, then the assertion that we 'know' it is *logically* impossible (OC §21); it would be a misuse of the word 'know'. To return to the *Tractatus*'s formulation, there can be no doubt for there is no question that can be asked. This also points to an important remark of the *Tractatus*, that it is impossible to make mistakes in logic (TLP 5.473). If logic is widened to take in the whole of language, then in parallel with the *Tractatus* those things about which we cannot make mistakes have a special logical role.

This discussion, which opens the published text of *On Certainty*, is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it introduces a distinction between knowledge that is gained by empirical testing and propositions that have the 'form' of empirical knowledge, but about which 'no doubt can exist if making judgments is to be possible at all' (OC §308). 'Here is one hand' certainly has the form of an empirical statement, but as mentioned earlier its role is a logical one. It is quasi-empirical propositions like this that raise the question of whether *On Certainty* can be characterised as espousing some form of harmony between language and the world. Secondly, Wittgenstein's anti-scepticism does not mean that he settles in favour of realism about physical objects over idealism. When he says that 'There are physical objects' is nonsense (OC §35), there is an echo of virtually the same statement in the *Tractatus* (TLP 4.1272), which arguably also eschews any *theoretical* realism, though as argued earlier might be said to be realist in a practical way—and it is this kind of realism that provides a valuable guide for reading *On Certainty*. For Wittgenstein, idealism about physical objects is not a meaningful theory, because in the first place the thesis it opposes is not a genuine



proposition either. Both realism and idealism are strictly speaking *unsinnig*, or nonsense—the ‘scepticism of the idealist’<sup>28</sup> tries to ask a question that cannot be asked, while the ‘assurances of the realist’ (OC §37) are an attempt to say what cannot be said. Both are attempts to get outside of language, as it were, and see what is lying underneath it—to speak of physicality *itself* or existence *itself*, rather than within the relevant language-game.

Wittgenstein is therefore more than just warning against the false assimilation of our concepts like knowledge, proof and evidence, at least as we understand them empirically, to disputes where such a language-game does not apply (cf. OC §§24;59). There is something reminiscent of the *Tractatus* when Wittgenstein says that ‘physical object’ is a logical concept (OC §36).<sup>29</sup> As von Wright puts it, ‘there is no procedure of investigating, whether or not the external world itself exists’, because its ‘existence is, so to speak, “*the logical receptacle*” within which all investigations concerning the mind-independent existence of various objects are conducted’. It is this insight that sums up why Moore’s ‘I know that here is one hand’ is an attempt to say the unsayable.<sup>30</sup> Like in the *Tractatus*, we have reached an outer limit of thought and language—in the language of the *Tractatus*, ‘physical object’ is a formal concept, and that something belongs to a particular formal concept is something that be expressed in a proposition, though it can be shown (TLP 4.126).

## (2) Saying and showing

This consideration, in turn, leads us to another Tractarian motif shared by *On Certainty*, which is the saying-showing distinction, and it is important for understanding the outer limits of language. I will first discuss how this distinction is ultimately a problematic one in the context of the *Tractatus*, before turning to its renewal in *On Certainty*.

In 4.022 of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein emphasises that a proposition ‘*shows* its sense’; it ‘*shows* how things stand if it is true. And it *says* that they do so stand’. A little later, he continues:

Propositions can represent the whole of reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it—logical form.

In order to be able to represent logical form, we should have to be able to station ourselves with propositions somewhere outside logic, that is to say outside the world.

Propositions cannot represent logical form: it is mirrored in them.

What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent.

What expresses itself in language, we cannot express by means of language.

---

<sup>28</sup> Admittedly, Wittgenstein’s usage of the term ‘scepticism’ here is rather loose and non-standard, in comparison with the broader philosophical literature, although the parallel with the *Tractatus* remains clear.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. OC §58: “I know” is here a *logical* insight. Only realism can’t be proved by means of it.’

<sup>30</sup> Von Wright, ‘Certainty’, 53–4.

Propositions *show* the logical form of reality.

They display it.

(TLP 4.12–121)

We have, in fact, already seen this distinction at work in relation to formal concepts. Formal concepts show the structure of language; the concepts themselves are not what we say to be true (and hence we cannot infer from their use the existence of physical objects or numbers), but it is only through them that we can say anything at all. But more broadly, the saying-showing distinction points to the general mystery of the *Tractatus*'s picture of language-world harmony, the defects of which we have already seen. To use a less philosophically-loaded example, a picture of a cat shows its similarity with the reality it depicts, but the picture does not depict *the similarity itself*; moreover, if we tried to explain in words the very meaning of similarity, at best we can use different examples, but the very essence of similarity or mirroring is something fundamentally grasped by what is shown.<sup>31</sup> In a similar vein, for the *Tractatus*, language as a whole shows its mirroring of the world but it cannot meaningfully describe this very mirroring.

This language-world harmony is therefore not a theory based on evidence that could justify or refute it; it is shown in our use of language. In this way, the saying-showing distinction is intimately connected to the internal limits of language. The distinction is another facet of Wittgenstein's general insight that it is not as if we could check the facts of the world, right down to the simple objects they are purportedly constituted by, and see if our language corresponds with the logical forms we find in the world. Everything is accessed through and within language. The *Tractatus* therefore 'does not allow for a sharp separation between the logical and the ontological'.<sup>32</sup> Logical form is something like a possibility within the internal logical structure of language (cf. TLP 3.4;3.411), which is not verified by reality but its good logical order is shown by its application to reality.

The saying-showing distinction, then, is at the heart of the tension between language and the world in the *Tractatus* that we discussed earlier. If we are to take Wittgenstein quite literally, then we must accept that language, in the view of the *Tractatus*, is ultimately answerable to the world; this is the case so long as Wittgenstein continues to insist on the application of logic, which logic itself cannot anticipate (TLP 5.557). Hence commentators like David Pears stress that the 'direction of fit' is that of language fitting the world.<sup>33</sup> This is the general outlook of metaphysical readings of the *Tractatus*. And yet there is no possible tribunal within which this answering to the world can take place; instead we are asked to accept that ordinary language is in good working order as it is (TLP 5.5563). All our investigation

---

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Kenny, *Wittgenstein*, 66.

<sup>32</sup> Medina, 'Deflationism and the true colours of necessity in Wittgenstein's "Tractatus"', *Dialectica* 57, no. 4 (2003), 362.

<sup>33</sup> David Pears, *The False Prison: A Study of the Development of Wittgenstein's Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 111.

therefore remains within language, and quite narrowly so, because of the epistemological defects of the *Tractatus*. This intra-language focus has led others like McGinn to interpret the *Tractatus* as really being about how ‘representation itself has an essence, that is, that there are features of propositions without which they could not represent state of affairs, that is, express a sense’.<sup>34</sup> What is ‘essential to representation’, McGinn says, ‘has nothing to do with how the world is’.<sup>35</sup> But, in my view, the saying-showing distinction makes the question of direction of fit moot. We could not say which side is fitted to which, because we cannot know and cannot describe the precise similarity that exists between the two.

All this makes the distinction a problematic one in the context of the *Tractatus*. That is not to say that the distinction is worthless; as I shall go on to show, it is granted a new lease of life in *On Certainty*. But it is first worth asking why the distinction seems to disappear in the *Investigations*. Fundamentally, the idea of propositions mirroring reality in logical form gives way to the rules of grammar. The idea of mirroring the world is abandoned, and all linguistic moves are squarely within language. There is, then, no use for a distinction between saying and showing. Of course, rules of grammar can be shown by elucidatory propositions; they can also be stated by explanatory sentences, so long as they are not to be confused with empirical statements (e.g. ‘Red is a colour’ would explain a rule of grammar, not describe an empirical discovery). But there is no ineffable mystery of language-world harmony being hinted at by any of this. P.M.S. Hacker thus points to an important change in Wittgenstein’s view of formal concepts:

The concepts of space and time, of object, colour, sound, and taste, of shape and number, and so on may indeed have different roles from such concepts as ‘in central Oxford’, ‘at 2 p.m.’, ‘tree’, ‘red’, ‘F-sharp’, ‘24’, but they are not ‘metalogical concepts’ or ‘super-concepts’ between which a super-order holds, mirroring the logical form of the world, correctly represented in an ideal notation by variables. Rather, these terms have a use, which ‘must be as humble a one as that of the words “table”, “lamp”, “door”’ (*PI* §97).<sup>36</sup>

We have seen in our discussion of anti-scepticism that in *On Certainty*, a residual but non-theoretical kind of realism lingers on, as does the use of formal concepts. But these do not mark a return to metalogical concepts. Stripped of much of the *Tractatus* system, these elements continue to operate because of Wittgenstein’s newfound appreciation for the propositions of immediate, personal awareness that are exempt from doubt. How do these hinge certainties lead to the saying-showing distinction? It is their very certainty which is shown, but not said. While Moore’s ‘I know that here is one hand’ is nonsense, Wittgenstein does not take ‘Here is one hand’ to be nonsense. Indeed, he is fascinated by the peculiar sort of certainty that is shown by this utterance. This certainty is not, to be sure, shown by the confidence with which it is normally said, a mere ‘tone of voice’ from which one cannot infer anything

---

<sup>34</sup> McGinn, *Elucidating the Tractatus*, 174.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>36</sup> P.M.S. Hacker, ‘When the Whistling had to Stop’, in *Wittgenstein: Connections and Controversies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 154.

further (cf. OC §30). Rather, it is this: ‘My life *shows* that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on.—I tell a friend e.g. “Take that chair over there”, “Shut the door”, etc. etc.’ (OC §7, emphasis mine). When we try to put our finger on what it is about them that is unshakeably certain, we might struggle to say anything more than, ‘This is as real as it gets; when I mean “real”, this is the very definition of reality’—at best a tautology, if a useful one. Anything more—to claim this is something I ‘know’—would be nonsense, an attempt to say what is only shown.

This is, in brief, the strange, non-theoretical realism we find in *On Certainty*. Its certainties are peculiar because we do not tend to even think about them, let alone think to articulate them; we do not think to check on their status before acting (OC §148). Wittgenstein describes this certainty as follows:

Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life. (That is very badly expressed and probably badly thought as well.)

But that means I want to conceive it as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal.

(OC §§358–9)

What is shown is not an ineffable mystery about language mirroring the logic of the world, but something inarticulable about our nature and our way of life. Formal concepts like ‘physical object’ may no longer be endowed with a special logical or metaphysical aura, but fact of our reliance on certain key categories in language is still something special—it shows something about our shared interests in the way we live in the world. And it is this insight that leads us to begin, in earnest, an investigation into how our shared interests become a properly *logical* point for *On Certainty*.

### 1.3 Grammar and nature

Wittgenstein, as we have seen, claims in *On Certainty* that everything descriptive of a language-game is part of logic. In this section I want to make a preliminary attempt at describing Wittgenstein’s movement in this direction in his later philosophy. We will only grasp the full significance of this claim when we look at the other two other claims over the next two chapters and flesh out the details of what *On Certainty* takes to be the logical requirements of language. But even before *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein’s treatment of grammar and its relation to reality is at times ambiguous and suggests the need to look at the constraining role of nature.

To do so, I will look at the idea of autonomous grammar and the importance of internal relations in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, before discussing why the autonomy of grammar is ultimately only partially correct as an interpretation of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, especially when considering the evidence from the post-*Investigations* writings. This will help chart Wittgenstein’s gradual movement towards a practical form of realism in *On Certainty*.

### 1.3.1 Articulating the autonomy of grammar

I want to first outline the view of autonomous grammar, which is most associated with G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker's influential—if often disputed—interpretation of Wittgenstein.<sup>37</sup> The autonomy of grammar, quite simply, is the view that language is 'not accountable to any reality' (PG I, §133). But it is not what it seems to be. What it repudiates is easier to state: Contrary to the *Tractatus*, sense is not determined by any mirroring between the logical form of language and that of reality. The problem of language and world, though it still underlies the *Investigations*, is approached in a completely different manner. Wittgenstein suggests instead that even when we talk about the world, when we appear to be referring to things and reasoning about them, these are all moves *within* language alone, and not language as connected to or determined by reality. Our words do not pick out objective features of any extra-linguistic reality; rather, they make use of norms of representation with which we speak of reality, and such norms are what Wittgenstein calls rules of grammar. A statement like 'white is lighter than black' seems to say something *necessarily* true, relating to 'the *essence* of the two colours', but in fact what it expresses is an 'internal relation' between words (RFM I, §§104–5). That is to say, the meanings of the words 'white', 'black' and 'lighter' (or 'darker') are constituted by their connections. Although 'white is lighter than black', on the surface, looks like an empirical statement, this relation is not one we discover by examining the two colours; rather, the relation between 'white' and 'black' fixes a paradigm of what 'lighter than' means. Furthermore, even 'white' and 'black' themselves cannot be explained by reference to anything outside of language. One might say, pointing to samples of white and black, that these are what we mean by 'white' and 'black' respectively, giving the illusion that we have exited language and are dealing with things in themselves. But even such samples Wittgenstein considered to be 'tools' or 'instruments' of language (PI §§16;50) that help to explain our colour-words.

Is this just a gerrymandering of the definition of 'language' so that samples do not count as 'reality', in order to preserve the autonomy of grammar? This would be to miss the point. Nor is this a matter of analytic truth by definition. Of course, we might have given colours different names, such that 'turquoise is darker than maroon' becomes a 'true' statement in an alternative lexicon, but this is irrelevant. Wittgenstein's insight here is best demonstrated by a comparison with genuine empirical propositions. If 'white is lighter than black' were an empirical proposition, then it would stand in need of justification by reference to reality. That would also mean that it would be possible that it might just turn out false if the objective reality being investigated showed up to be otherwise. Wittgenstein expresses the problem with this view in a rather elliptical remark:

---

<sup>37</sup> See Baker and Hacker, 'Grammar and necessity', in *Analytic Commentary*, 2:263–347, and Hacker, *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, rev. ed. (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1997), 179–206, for classic expositions of this view.

...if anything is to count as nonsense in the grammar which is to be justified, then it cannot at the same time pass for sense in the grammar of the propositions that justify it (etc.).

(PR §7)

So if 'black is lighter than white' is an impossible combination of words because it has been found not to fit reality, then for that judgement to be possible there must first be a meaningful sense to 'black is lighter than white'. If I could say precisely what property of colours justified 'white is lighter than black', then 'it would be conceivable that the colours should not have this property' (PR §4). But this not the case—not as a matter of self-evident intuition about colour properties, but because its possibility is already excluded by the very words being tested. For it turns out, we cannot state the 'truth' or 'falsity' of 'white is lighter than black' except by using the selfsame words, e.g. 'White is lighter than black *because* this →, which is what I mean by "white", is lighter than this →, which is what I mean by black, and by "lighter than" I mean the how the colour white stands in relation to black, and "darker than" the reverse relation'. This is to say nothing at all that would count as justification; one is merely restating the proposition with the help of samples. No truth has been tested or discovered. A better characterisation of 'white is lighter than black' is that it helps to determine concepts. The use of samples combined with pointing, if not seen as fulfilling a justificatory role, might serve to teach someone how to use the words 'white' and 'black', or 'lighter than' and 'darker than'. It serves '*simultaneously* as a paradigm of what we understand by "lighter" and "darker" and as a paradigm for "white" and for "black"' (RFM I, §105), because these concepts are internally related. That is what makes 'white is lighter than black' a rule of grammar; it is not justified by reality.

This example is illustrative of a general pattern of thought in Wittgenstein's later works that might be taken as evidence of the autonomy of grammar. Putative 'necessary truths' are nothing more than the product of internal relations between our concepts, and not an objective feature of reality. A similar story is told, for example, about the propositions of mathematics, which Wittgenstein also considers rules of grammar because of the internal relations that hold between numbers, or between geometrical concepts, for example. Proofs in mathematics do not justify mathematical propositions in the sense of making them true, but rather they establish concepts and their internal relations:

One would like to say: the proof changes the grammar of our language, changes our concepts. It makes new connexions, and it creates the concept of these connexions. (It does not establish that they are there; they do not exist until it makes them.)

(RFM III, §31)

Intra-linguistic necessity of this kind, or about colour-concepts, is unalterable because it does not depend on reality; these internal relations 'persist... in the whole that they constitute; as it were independently of any outside happenings' (RFM I, §102). If one were to deny such necessities, one would not be denying something about reality; one would be changing the rules of grammar, and hence the very meanings of

words, and in that case one might as well use different words to express one's different concept, e.g. of 'lighter than' or of 'triangle', which would constitute a new norm of representation (cf. PR §133).

Autonomous grammar is certainly not limited to necessary truths for Wittgenstein, but applies to rule for the use of words in general. But if even supposedly necessary truths are ultimately rooted in autonomous linguistic rules, then a fortiori so are our other concepts with which we describe the world similarly not justified by reality; alternative grammars, e.g. for measuring time or length, are in principle possible. The key contrast, as should already be clear, is that between grammatical rules and empirical propositions. Although empirical propositions are tested and verified by reality, in the first place we are able to formulate empirical propositions and reason about them because of grammatical rules, which set conditions for intelligibility. Hence in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein talks about 'the scaffolding from which our language operates (for example, yields descriptions)' (PI §240), which is constituted by human agreement in our forms of life, as contrasted with the things we say *within* that framework which can be true or false (PI §241).

On this view of grammar, then, being unable to imagine different concepts is not proof that our concepts are absolutely the right ones:

Of course, here 'I can't imagine the opposite' doesn't mean: my powers of imagination are unequal to the task. We use these words to fend off something whose form produces the illusion of being an empirical proposition, but which is really a grammatical one.

(PI §251)

The distinction between the empirical and the grammatical remains a sharp one. Wittgenstein's remark here recalls an important passage from *The Blue Book* where he argues that propositions which seem to involve a metaphysical 'can'—like 'no two objects can have the same colour' or 'no two people can feel the same pain'—are really hidden grammatical rules (BBB, 55). These impossibilities, rather, form part of what it is to even use concepts of colour or pain intelligibly in language. To say that 'no two people can feel the same pain' is not to make a claim about metaphysical impossibility, but to establish a norm of representation, to delineate the concept of pain (or indeed other sensations) from other concepts. The temptation, as Wittgenstein puts it, is to predicate 'of the thing what lies in the mode of representation' (PI §104).

A central example in the *Investigations* relates to measuring; if an item however arbitrarily picked becomes adopted as a standard for measuring, say, a metre's length, then it becomes a rule of grammar (PI §50). Here Wittgenstein makes the point once more that a sample is an instrument of language; it is 'not something that is represented, but is a means of representation'. That is also why an item cannot be both function as a measure of one metre, as well as be described as being a metre—this being

Wittgenstein's controversial claim about the standard metre, which has generated much discussion in its own right, most notably from Kripke. Diamond remarks that to measure the standard metre with itself is similar to the 'Socrates is identical' with Wittgenstein identifies as nonsensical in the *Tractatus* (TLP 5.473), and it is also 'like the absurd case of laying one's hand on top of one's head to give one's height' (cf. PI §279).<sup>38</sup> These statements say nothing, and are in need of a grammar to supply them meaning. Without a recognisable language-game within which we are making comparisons to another length, the concept of 'length' or 'measure' (and talk of what is identical in length) cannot exist. It is within that language-game that we can properly describe something as being a metre in length, which belongs to empirical discovery and plays a different role in language from the rule of grammar.

### 1.3.2 *Qualifying the autonomy of grammar*

The autonomy of grammar has sometimes raised the question of whether our concepts are therefore at the mercy of a certain capriciousness—whether Wittgenstein is espousing a 'full-blooded conventionalism', to use Michael Dummett's appellation.<sup>39</sup> If language is not answerable to reality but is constituted by internal relations between concepts, which crucially seem to depend on our use of them, could we not choose otherwise? Could we choose not to accept a mathematical proof, for example, and could we as a community decide to change our concepts? Certainly, Wittgenstein sometimes gives the impression that our concepts rest on arbitrary choice, talking about a proof as something 'deposited in the archives of language' (RFM III, §29), for example. Likewise in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein borrows approvingly from the passage in *Philosophical Grammar* (I, §133) that expresses the notion of autonomy, saying:

*Essence* is expressed in grammar.

Consider: 'The only correlate in language to an objective necessity is an arbitrary rule. It is the only thing which one can milk out of this objective necessity into a proposition.'

Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.)

(PI §§371–3)

But Wittgenstein is in fact somewhat equivocal, even ambiguous about this. David Stern has pointed out that a crucial passage from *The Big Typescript* where Wittgenstein states that grammar is arbitrary exists in different versions, and whereas the first version already makes it clear that the arbitrariness of grammar is meant in quite a limited way, the rewritten version is more explicit in saying that the 'rules of grammar are both arbitrary and not arbitrary'. They are arbitrary in that one can choose

---

<sup>38</sup> Cora Diamond, 'How Long Is the Standard Meter in Paris?' in *Wittgenstein in America*, ed. Timothy McCarthy and Sean C. Stidd (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 110;120.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Dummett, 'Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Mathematics', *The Philosophical Review* 68, no. 3 (1959): 329. See also Barry Stroud, 'Wittgenstein and Logical Necessity', *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 4 (1965): 504–18, for a different take on whether Wittgenstein was a conventionalist.



different systems of measurement, but they are not arbitrary in that we can compare different systems for their practicality or usefulness. Wittgenstein continues, ‘In this sense one would call it an arbitrary rule of cooking to weigh the ingredients out in pounds, but not to let eggs cook for three minutes.’<sup>40</sup> In *Zettel* we see again this language of arbitrariness combined with non-arbitrariness:

We have a colour system as we have a number system. Do the systems reside in *our* nature or in the nature of things? How are we to put it? *Not* in the nature of numbers or colours.

Then is there something arbitrary about this system? Yes and no. It is akin both to what is arbitrary and to what is non-arbitrary.

(Z §§357–8)

Elsewhere, in his Cambridge lectures, Wittgenstein says something similar:

But it [grammar] is not arbitrary in so far as it is not arbitrary what rules of grammar I can make use of. Grammar described by itself is arbitrary; what makes it not arbitrary is its use.

(CL1, 49)

And in the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* he makes a similar point:

[...] It all depends *what* settles the sense of a proposition, what we choose to say settles its sense. The use of signs must settle it; but what do we count as the use?—

That these proofs prove the same proposition means, e.g.: both demonstrate it as a suitable instrument for the same purpose.

And the purpose is an allusion to something outside mathematics.

(RFM IV, §10)

So far, this is not anything that seriously questions the fundamental philosophical point of the autonomy of grammar: Concept-formation is not bound by reality, and concepts make contact with reality within language. How we use concepts is still somewhat arbitrary, if there is no logical standard that determines what is correct use, though once we use concepts then the grammar which we use is not arbitrary in that specific context. Hence, Baker himself has pointed to the importance of this insight in arguing that Wittgenstein’s autonomous grammar is entirely different from the forms of conventionalism which preceded him, and which influenced the Vienna Circle. Whereas the earlier conventionalism saw systems of symbolic conventions as ‘free-floating bodies’, mathematical rules of grammar such as Euclidean geometry were for Wittgenstein rules for use ‘*in empirical propositions*’.<sup>41</sup> We might say something similar of our colour-words; we use our concepts of primary colours to make plans for painting and decorating houses, and we use concepts of ‘lighter’ and ‘darker’ to make a whole range of inferences in civil life. What might have been free-floating, self-contained conventions come to life through the roles

---

<sup>40</sup> David G. Stern, ‘Wittgenstein and Moore on Grammar’, in *Wittgenstein in the 1930s: Between the Tractatus and the Investigations*, ed. Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 38–9.

<sup>41</sup> Gordon Baker, *Wittgenstein, Frege and the Vienna Circle* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 242.

they play in our lives. Though they are not justified by what is ‘outside mathematics’ or colour-geometry, their application in life gives them sense.

But this is not the final word on the autonomy of grammar. Is there any sense in which human use is not arbitrary *tout court*? Let us first consider a non-linguistic analogy in order to develop this point.

An important paradigm in civil life, which we recognise as arbitrary and changeable, but whose reality we do not doubt, is that of the currency we use for money, and indeed the monetary system more broadly. Historically, there have been a variety of different monetary systems and broadly we can distinguish between two major paradigms—the fiat money of modern economies and commodity money, which might take the form of a gold standard, or, in ancient civilisations, gold or silver coins used as actual currency. We can and do debate about the relative usefulness of the two different types of currency. Usefulness to the needs of civil life, which of course can change over time, is one element of us adopting or rejecting a particular system of money. But it is not all. To state something so obvious and hence easily neglected (like Wittgenstein’s hinge certainties), currency must gain currency among users in order to have meaning; otherwise, it remains a ‘free-floating’ convention. Even a ‘bad’ monetary system, e.g. one that is fast outliving its usefulness because of extreme inflation, is still genuinely money so long as it is used by buyers and sellers as such. While the positive law of the state might help, we know that this is not all. If inflation makes banknotes practically unusable, or for some other reason ordinary citizens lose confidence in their national currency, other goods can quickly take the role of a medium of exchange, or barter trade might become the norm. Already this example should show us that what is arbitrary can be used to answer to a general need in civil life, and this makes it more than just a convention that can be changed at whim. Nobody who buys and sells denies the *reality* (in a non-metaphysical sense) of money.

But let us take a closer look at commodity money in particular, which has a relatively simple notion underpinning its validity compared with fiat money. Economists like to say that the difference between commodity money and fiat money is the former’s intrinsic value. Perhaps that is a difficult term for philosophers to accept if taken metaphysically, but what it means practically—in civil life—is that what makes, say, gold coins effective as a form of currency is the fact the currency itself is something valued by users of it; it can function as a medium of exchange because the metal of the coin is itself something that money-users would want to exchange items for. To use gold coins as currency is, in effect, to act on the presupposition that someone, somewhere at the end of a chain of transactions in the market economy, will want the gold of these coins for its own sake, and that is why this currency can be continually exchanged for other goods. It is both a symbol of value as well as genuinely valued, and indeed the two aspects can become so deeply intertwined that we cannot perceive the beauty of a gold object without thinking of the connotations of wealth. Is there something arbitrary about this? In one sense, yes—the

choice of the particular metal, or indeed object, is certainly arbitrary since one can imagine other possibilities that may be more or less useful. Furthermore, our attraction to gold is something that Wittgenstein might call a ‘general fact of nature’—it is not a logical or even a psychological necessity, for there are surely human beings who do not find gold pleasing to the eye. Indeed, when gold is used excessively in interior design to symbolise wealth, without regard for aesthetic qualities such as harmony and balance, we would find it gaudy. That is why we do not find it difficult to imagine alternative systems of money, as we have already seen, Wittgenstein would warn us not to take our concepts as ‘absolutely the correct ones’ for this reason (PPF xii, §§365–6).

Does this, then, make commodity money’s existence at the mercy of caprice? It is certainly possible that gold might suddenly lose its value overnight if, in a bout of mass hysteria, everyone suddenly found it ugly, but this arbitrariness does not in general bother us because it is a pattern of behaviour we can rely upon. Hence, while rejecting the existence of absolutely correct concepts, Wittgenstein goes on to say:

Compare a concept with a style of painting. For is even our style of painting arbitrary? Can we choose one at pleasure? (The Egyptian, for instance.) Or is it just a matter of pretty and ugly?

(PPF xii, §367)

Wittgenstein’s point here recalls Schopenhauer’s famous remark that ‘man does at all times only what he wills, and yet he does this necessarily’;<sup>42</sup> so even our artistic endeavours seem to be constrained somewhat by what we find attractive, at least where beauty or pleasantness is the aim (which it may not be in modernist art, for instance). Likewise, we cannot choose, for the most part, whether we find gold attractive or not, and this is what has made it an abiding form of currency. In this way we have a ‘grammar of money’, as it were, which is akin to what is both arbitrary and non-arbitrary—and the non-arbitrary part is stronger than use or usefulness.

It seems to me that this is the non-arbitrariness that Wittgenstein was trying to bring out with the comparison to cooking, but which he was unable to articulate at the time. Of course, there are different ‘grammars’ of cooking—different cuisines, indeed different tastes—but we can usually rely on general patterns of taste to speak broadly about what is good and bad cooking. In such matters we need not look for a philosophical ideal or absolute here and can rest content with this level of generality. It is enough that the activity of cooking is tethered to particular human needs and these needs are bound by general patterns of taste, and in this way the usefulness of cooking is not a totally arbitrary matter, even though we can certainly imagine different patterns of taste, just like we can imagine something other than gold being used for currency. So while usefulness can be a slippery and complex concept, there are cases of

---

<sup>42</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essay on the Freedom of the Will*, trans. Konstantin Kolenda (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), 98. This sentence is sometimes paraphrased as saying man ‘cannot will what he wills’.

more obvious, immediate usefulness where basic human needs are concerned, and our concepts become more tightly tethered to these needs.

Wittgenstein is thus not dogmatic about the autonomy of grammar. It is a useful point of distinguishing his later conception of the language-world relation from the Tractarian one, but it is a work in progress, not a doctrine. Although grammar is presented in sharp contrast to empirical propositions to guard against a naïve linguistic realism, of the kind which might see names as straightforward labels of objects as they really are—this latter view being precisely the subject of the *Investigations* discussion of naming (roughly §§1–74)—Wittgenstein recognises that the situation is more complex. Grammar derives its legitimacy or validity from use, and use is to some extent a factor of usefulness, and is expressed in the practices that make up our form of life. But what determines the bounds of usefulness? We have general facts of nature which grammar presupposes—already in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein gives the example of how if lumps of cheese ‘suddenly grew or shrank with no obvious cause’ the whole activity of fixing the price of cheese by weight would be useless, and so meaningless (PI §142). But considering our discussion of money, cooking, and painting, it seems right to also include under the heading of ‘general facts of nature’ broad, consistent patterns of human reactions.

This discussion suggests that there are two fruitful lines of inquiry that can be conducted to further our understanding of the logical requirements of language. The first is how exactly these elementary forms of attraction just discussed shape grammar. The second is whether there are deep-seated human needs that are not at all arbitrary, which may point to the logical limits of concept-formation. I am not suggesting that Wittgenstein offers a full answer to the second question, as I already said earlier in this chapter. Even where universal human needs and broadly similar patterns of behaviour are concerned, as with food and cooking, it still seems like there is so much possible variation within the same broad concept. But understanding why *On Certainty* talks about it seeming ‘obvious that the possibility of a language-game is conditioned by certain facts’ (§617), and why these facts are part of logic as the text’s first logical claim states, will be key to developing the resources to answer that second question.

#### **1.4 The question of Wittgenstein’s naturalism**

These general facts of nature, prior to *On Certainty*, are the signs of a slowly emerging naturalism in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. This is not a scientific naturalism like Quine’s, but it is a naturalism in that what is given by nature constrains concept-formation and determines the outer limits of language. That is the view that I will be advancing over the next two chapters. Wittgenstein, I argue, is concerned not only with where language is genuinely autonomous from reality—and we have seen evidence of that above, though it is not the whole picture. He is also interested in what is unassailable in that reality, and how it shapes language, as this remark in the Last Writings suggests:

Could a legislator abolish the concept of pain?

The basic concepts are interwoven so closely with what is most fundamental in our way of living that they are therefore unassailable.

(LWPP2, 43–4)

Wittgenstein's invocation of a 'legislator' here brings to mind H.L.A. Hart's legal philosophy—though he was a legal positivist and so broadly rejected the idea of moral constraints being a necessary foundation of law, Hart conceded that even in positive law there is a 'minimum content of the natural law'.<sup>43</sup> We might say that Wittgenstein similarly allows for a minimum content of human nature in grammar. Rather than looking for something like the logical form of the *Tractatus* that underlies language in some grand, unifying sense, Wittgenstein's method is to point to what is broadly uniform, and sufficiently so to tether language to reality. The formal concepts of the *Tractatus* do not survive in their metalogical form, but their successor concept might be whatever are the most important categories and practices that virtually all humans share in their language—pain, counting, measuring, colour, come to mind.<sup>44</sup> Despite cultural variations in how these concepts might be practised or expressed, these are broad similarities that speak to shared human ways of reacting to our environment. Their linguistic importance is not based necessarily on some essential property of representation, but on the underlying anthropological facts. And this, I contend, lies at the heart of Wittgenstein's *sui generis* naturalism.

It is this aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophy that, somewhat surprisingly, opens up the space for a return to Tractarian ideas, purified from their dogmatism about logic. The autonomy of grammar, although a necessary means of breaking free from the old philosophy, was incomplete on its own; internal relations alone cannot explain the logical structure of language. There is something else that holds the core of language together, and that core is our human nature—not as a metaphysical concept, but as a practical one which reacts to the world in broadly convergent ways. In this way Wittgenstein's response to the 'old problem' in *On Certainty* finally takes shape in this way: It is no longer a question of harmony between language and the world, but one of partnership.

---

<sup>43</sup> H.L.A. Hart, *The Concept of Law*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 193–200.

<sup>44</sup> Conway, *Foundations*, 65.

## Chapter 2.

### The Logical Role of Hinge Propositions: Language, Rules, and Reactions

In this chapter, I discuss the ‘peculiar logical role’ of hinge propositions in relation to the broad consensus in natural human reactions required for a community of language-users to emerge. I argue that human reactions are necessary for the conceptual possibility of having language at all. This argument is rooted in the rule-following considerations of the *Investigations*, which already accords a central role to training and human reactions. This role is, nonetheless, brought out in a more developed manner in *On Certainty*, with a particular focus on its logical significance. I also argue that these reactions do not provide simplistic foundations for language, because they are always embedded in different layers of conceptual complexity. It is in view of this dynamic between primitive certainty and conceptual complexity that hinge propositions can be both exempt from doubt and yet can lose their status as hinges, and so become properly empirical propositions again. Human reactions provide logical limits to concepts, but these limits are vague.

#### 2.1 The logical-empirical distinction in *On Certainty*

From our preliminary investigation into the role of nature in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy prior to *On Certainty*, we already saw two lines of inquiry emerging. The first concerns the role of broad patterns of human reaction in concept-formation; the second concerns the most basic, unassailable concepts that result from these patterns. In this chapter I shall take on the first line of inquiry and show how it explains the ‘peculiar logical role’ of hinge propositions in *On Certainty*. This, in turn, will help us understand the importance of the second logical claim of *On Certainty*, which is that the boundary between logic and empirical propositions is not sharp.

It is important to understand at the outset that this logical claim has two distinct aspects to it. One is that it contributes to our understanding of the first logical claim; part of the fluidity of the logical-empirical boundary is that some empirical propositions, over time, become adopted as logical ones. These propositions, being thereby descriptive of our language-games, become part of logic, and they show us the logical requirements of language. But another aspect of this fluid boundary relates to the dynamic nature of hinge propositions, which can shift over time—a hinge proposition can lose its status and become an ordinary empirical proposition once more. Both these aspects, in my view, can be understood in terms of human reactions. Examining their conceptual relationship will also help us better appreciate Wittgenstein’s non-theoretical realism and the emerging picture of language-world harmony that *On Certainty* offers, which as I previously suggested can be understood as a kind of partnership between language and the world (see Section 1.4). This is to be contrasted with the mirroring relation of the

*Tractatus* which Wittgenstein repudiated, and a strict interpretation of autonomous grammar and internal relations, which represents an important strand of Wittgenstein's later philosophy but is not the whole picture.

Anscombe once characterised *On Certainty* as an attempt to 'steer in the narrow channel' that lies between 'the falsehoods of idealism and the stupidities of empiricist realism'.<sup>1</sup> The idealism here is a linguistic one—that we only access the world through our linguistic concepts, which are fundamentally arbitrary or autonomous—while empiricist realism would see our concepts as carving nature at its joints, identifying real categories and divisions that exist in the things-in-themselves. Although she did not discuss the role of human reactions in relation to this philosophical challenge, she did consider human reactions to be of great importance. She writes in relation to Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations in the *Investigations*, in one of her two 1985 reviews of Kripke's reading of rule-following:

Wittgenstein's discussions several times emphasize something which Kripke does not mention: the teacher cannot succeed in teaching unless the pupil has certain reactions which he is not obliged to have and which the teacher can't teach him; is responsive in certain ways in which he does not have to be. And this does not mean that the teacher can't teach, for example, an inattentive pupil. Rather, he won't be able to teach him unless, for example, he does get the basic cardinal numbers by heart and in order and *does go on in a new stretch*, after the examples and the practice, like *this* and not in some other way. This is something that cannot be taught; it is a prerequisite of teaching. The ancients and medievals had a problem whether and how teaching is possible; the point I have been making—which is in Wittgenstein—is a contribution to that discussion; the matter, I believe, is not discussed nowadays. I have never heard of its being a question discussed in philosophy departments: Is it possible for one human being to teach another?<sup>2</sup>

More recently, Krebs has pointed out the connection between this overlooked feature of the *Investigations* in relation to hinge certainties, emphasising that with natural reactions we are concerned with what 'is necessary in order to have a language at all'.<sup>3</sup> In line with these observations, I will be arguing that the logical role of hinges is that of our natural human reactions; these reactions help us understand the philosophical importance of training or teaching, which provides a necessary conceptual foundation to Wittgenstein's thoughts on rule-following. While rules of grammar determine the conditions of intelligibility for discourse, hinge certainties are required for the conceptual possibility of even having linguistic rules in the first place. At the same time, I will also discuss how these hinge certainties do not provide simplistic foundations for language, because they are inextricably caught up in our everyday conceptual complexity. That is why, though they condition language, the logical limits they provide are vague.

---

<sup>1</sup> Anscombe, 'Linguistic Idealism', 115; cf. 133.

<sup>2</sup> Anscombe, 'Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language', in *From Plato to Wittgenstein: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2011), 240.

<sup>3</sup> Krebs, 'Certainties', 29.

My argument in this chapter will proceed in this order. In Section 2.2, I discuss the role of human reactions and training in the *Investigations*, and examine the issue of regularity in particular in the context of rule-following. In Section 2.3, I discuss the role of human reactions in relation to regularity in order to bring out their logical role for language, and argue that they provide conceptual conditions for language and rule-following to be possible at all. However, I also raise the issue of conceptual complexity, arguing although basic human reactions are always caught up in more complex layers of normativity. In Section 2.4 I then discuss the dynamic nature of hinge propositions, and show how the mutability of hinge propositions is logically compatible with their being exempt from doubt. It is here that I also connect hinges to *On Certainty's* emerging understanding of the limits of language. Finally, in the conclusion, Section 2.5, I reflect on the logical circle of rules and reactions.

## 2.2 *On Certainty* and the rule-following considerations

At the beginning of the *Investigations*, we already find Wittgenstein coming face-to-face with the theme of natural human reactions. It is a theme which becomes more important in his post-*Investigations* writings, though it is already present before that. The *Investigations* famously takes as its point of departure a quotation from Augustine's *Confessions* that suggests how language functions as a system of labels: 'When grown-ups named some object and at the same time turned towards it, I perceived this, and I grasped that the thing was signified by the sound they uttered, since they meant to point *it* out' (PI §1). This picture of language recalls the *Tractatus* view of naming, and Wittgenstein goes on to repudiate it. He develops his notion of language-games to reinforce the relationship between language and 'the activities into which it is woven' (PI §7) in order to demolish the erroneous picture of words as labels for things.

This much is well-known. Nonetheless, the importance of this aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophy somewhat obscures the significance of the next part of the passage he quotes from Augustine:

This, however, I gathered from their gestures, the natural language of all peoples, the language that by means of facial expression and the play of eyes, of the movements of the limbs and the tone of voice, indicates the affections of the soul when it desires, or clings to, or rejects, or recoils from, something. In this way, little by little, I learnt to understand what things the words, which I heard uttered in their respective places in various sentences, signified.

(PI §1)

Wittgenstein would not call these gestures and reactions a 'language', properly speaking. However, we see them playing an important conceptual role when Wittgenstein argues against the possibility of a private language:

How do words *refer* to sensations? [...] Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, natural, expressions of sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour.

(PI §244)



This brief statement already suggests something of the foundational role that natural human reactions play in Wittgenstein's account of linguistic meaning. Although in this particular context Wittgenstein is concerned with sensation-words, the importance of human reactions is much broader than that. Our reactions lie at the very possibility of acquiring language at all and of playing the appropriate language-games. To argue for this point, I will first situate the importance of reactions in the context of Wittgenstein's discussion of following a rule, which brings to the fore the intrinsically normative character of language.

### 2.2.1 *Training and human reactions in the Investigations*

Wittgenstein, as Anscombe and Krebs point out, already recognises the importance of training and human reactions in the *Investigations*, and this is an important connection between *On Certainty* and the *Investigations* that can be developed in relation to hinge propositions. I want to first look at how the *Investigations* treats of training and human reactions, before turning to Wittgenstein's subsequent developments on this front in *On Certainty*.

The important connection between the two texts can be seen from a particular passage (PI §197) that occurs somewhere in the middle of the rule-following considerations, which roughly span from §§143–242 of the *Investigations*.<sup>4</sup> In these considerations, Wittgenstein grapples with what it means to follow a rule. Language is rule-governed and to use a particular concepts is to adhere to their normative standard, a condition of saying anything intelligibly. But what is the nature of these rules that constitute our concepts? Wittgenstein is clear what these rules are *not*. In PI §193 he introduces the idea of a machine that symbolizes its own mode of operation—this illustrates the common temptation to idealise how a machine works and to think that all its possible future movements, e.g. all the movements of a clock, are completely predetermined and, somehow, already mysteriously present. This idealised picture, of course, neglects the empirical possibility that parts may break down and stop working. Its implausibility is used to dissuade us from thinking that we can grasp the whole use of a word—all possible applications of a linguistic rule—'at a stroke' (PI §191), even though we sometimes think this is what we experience. There are many implications of this analogy, and perhaps one of them is that, just like the parts of a machine which may or may not work, we too in our following of rules are susceptible to foibles and flaws in real life. This is particularly so when we are learning a new rule, and the possibility of mistakes is

---

<sup>4</sup> Commentators differ on the exact range of the rule-following considerations in the *Investigations*; for some, §185 is taken as the start of this set of remarks. I have decided to take a wider view of the relevant range, though there are also important remarks about rules outside the range I have given, which incidentally is also Kripke's range; see Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). On account of the fact that §185 begins with 'Let us return to our example (143)', §143 can be justifiably taken as the start of the rule-following considerations.

brought out strikingly by Wittgenstein's earlier example of the deviant pupil who does not follow the rule '+2' correctly from the number 1000 onwards (PI §185). Quite often, mastery of a rule is not something that one has or has not; it is acquired over time. The more we apply a rule correctly, the better we understand its meaning.

A more fundamental but related point of the machine-as-symbol is that there is a conceptual incoherence between grasping a rule in advance of its use, which seems atemporal and abstract—'at a stroke'—and the actual use of a rule, which is necessarily spread out over time, and as tangible as the parts of a machine. This leads us to the particular passage I have in mind, the first sentence of which captures this conceptual incoherence well:

For we say that there isn't any doubt that we understand the word, and on the other hand that its meaning lies in its use. There is no doubt that I now want to play chess, but chess is the game it is in virtue of all its rules (and so on). Don't I know, then, which game I want to play until I *have* played it? Or is it, rather, that all the rules are contained in my act of intending? Is it experience that tells me that this sort of game usually follows such an act of intending? So can't I actually be sure what I intended to do? And if that is nonsense—what kind of super-rigid connection obtains between the act of intending and the thing intended?—Where is the connection effected between the sense of the words 'Let's play a game of chess' and all the rules of the game?—Well, in the list of rules of the game, in the teaching of it, in the everyday practice of playing.

(PI §197)

Wittgenstein is not denying that we can meaningfully intend to play chess in advance of playing it; it cannot be that we cannot intend to play a game until we have played it. But neither is it the case that in that act of intending we are somehow keeping in mind—in some unconscious mental process—all the rules of the game. So what connects the intention, which presumes a requisite level of mastery of the rules of the game, with the actual application of the rules together? Wittgenstein's list is not of three separate items, but of the three elements constituting a singular practice: the connection consists 'in the list of the rules of the game, in the teaching of it, in the everyday practice of playing'—in other words, training.

There is no doubt, then, that Wittgenstein appreciates the importance of training in the *Investigations*. Training ensures that we acquire mastery of a rule, or set of rules, over time, and it closes the gap between the momentary intention to play chess and the abstract-seeming set of rules. What it means to follow a rule is nothing more, nothing less than the fact of acting in accord with it in 'case to case of application' (PI §201). A rule is, conceptually-speaking, a practice (PI §202), not an algorithm in the mind nor a special mental process—this is established by the earlier part of the rule-following considerations, including the machine-as-symbol analogy. Training is simply an indispensable part of the history of practices.

The role of pre-linguistic reactions is also present in the rule-following considerations of the *Investigations*. In the case of the well-known example of the pupil who deviates from the rule '+2', finding it natural to add '4' after 1000 instead, Wittgenstein comments briefly: 'This case would have similarities to that in which it comes naturally to a person to react to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction from fingertip to wrist, rather than from wrist to fingertip.' (§185) Already there is a recognition that training someone to master a concept depends on what they find natural to do; our natural reactions are responsible for the conceptual possibility of rule-following.

Finally, it is worth considering at this stage an important passage from Wittgenstein's 1939 *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*, which is related intimately to the thought of the *Investigations* and comes from the same period of Wittgenstein's drafting of the *Investigations*:

And it has often been put in the form of an assertion that the truths of logic are determined by a consensus of opinions. Is that what I am saying? No. There is no *opinion* at all; it is not a question of *opinion*. They are determined by a consensus of *action*: a consensus of doing the same thing, reacting in the same way.

(LFM XIX)

Although this passage refers to logical truths, Pears notes that as the wider context relates to 'the meanings of individual words', this claim about the consensus of action, and indeed of reactions, can be taken as an extension of that context about linguistic meaning.<sup>5</sup> For just before this claim, Wittgenstein writes that when 'you say to someone, "This is red" (pointing); then you tell him "Fetch me a red book"... he will behave in a particular way. This is an immensely important fact about us human beings... Another such fact is that pointing is used and understood in a particular way—that people react to it in a particular way' (LFM XIX). We see an echo of PI §242, where Wittgenstein asks if the 'agreement in judgements that is required for communication' seems to 'abolish logic', before answering that it does not, and going on to distinguish between the method for measurement and the obtaining of measurements. So *On Certainty*'s wider view of logic, such that 'everything is descriptive of a language-game is part of logic' (§56), and its connection to human reactions, has roots in much earlier writings from Wittgenstein's later philosophy. We shall see how this theme of human reactions undergoes further development.

### 2.2.2 *The problem of regularity in rule-following*

We have seen, therefore, that *On Certainty* is deeply continuous with the *Investigations*. Although *On Certainty* and other post-*Investigations* writings develop the importance of training and human reactions further, the newness of those insights is best understood in the context of this continuity. What is perhaps less apparent in the *Investigations* is that the agreement in reactions operates on a different conceptual level from the agreement in practice that constitutes rule-following. This may also simply be a factor of the

---

<sup>5</sup> David Pears, *Paradox and Platitude in Wittgenstein's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 21.

latter having been the subject of more scholarly attention than the former. Before I turn to *On Certainty*, I want to bring out more clearly the importance of these different conceptual levels by looking at an under-explored concept which is crucial to understanding rule-following: The concept of regularity.

In PI §205 the question of the connection between intending to play chess and all the rules of chess comes up again, this time in relation to the possibility of inventing a game which has never yet been played. This leads to a discussion of the importance of regularity in rule-following, and is an extension of the insight that following a rule is something that has to be carried out in real life, and not just as an abstract thought. In order for rules to be intelligible, there must be some degree of regularity in the connection between actions or activities and words (PI §207). Presumably, in the case of a newly invented game, there cannot be constant fluctuation in the rules, or overly open-ended rules requiring a brand new interpretation each time. Likewise with familiar concepts like orders and reports, there must be regular patterns of behaviour linked to the use of these words. But if regularity is so central to rule-following, how is it taught? Can regularity be explained or defined?

This is precisely the question Wittgenstein poses in the next remark: ‘Then am I explaining what “order” and “rule” mean in terms of “regularity”?—How do I explain the meaning of “regular”, “uniform”, “same” to anyone?’ (PI §208). These are difficult, abstract concepts, especially for a new language-learner. It is noteworthy that the question of what sameness is, is precisely one of the reasons for the saying-showing distinction in the *Tractatus* (TLP) as we discussed in the last chapter (see Section 1.2.3). A proposition, in mirroring the logical form of the world, describes things in the world, but does not describe the very mirroring (TLP 4.12). Indeed, how would we explain to a child, for instance, that the image of a street in London in a painting is the ‘same’ as in real-life? Is this the same sameness as two people having the ‘same’ idea? Clearly, if we are to avoid tautology (cf. PI §§215–6), then we have to rest content with giving examples, and hoping the child gets the gist of it, and slowly learns to distinguish between different kinds of sameness. (Our tortured expressions here are a sign that we are reaching rock-bottom in our investigation.) Hence Wittgenstein’s answer is that regularity and sameness are taught by training, by means of examples and exercises:

In the course of this teaching, I’ll show him the same colours, the same lengths, the same shapes; I’ll make him find them and produce them; and so on. For example, I’ll teach him to continue an ornamental pattern ‘uniformly’ when told to do so.—And also to continue progressions. [...]

Imagine witnessing such teaching. None of the words would be explained by means of itself; there would be no logical circle.

The expressions ‘and so on’, ‘and so on *ad infinitum*’, are also explained in this teaching. A gesture, among other things, might serve this purpose. The gesture that means ‘go on like this’ or ‘and so on’ has a function comparable to that of pointing to an object or a place.

(PI §208)

It helps, in the light of this passage, to understand regularity in relation to the concept of infinity. We should not understand Wittgenstein as suggesting here that the gesture for ‘go on like this’ is a kind of ostensive definition for regularity. It is the activity as a whole that explains the closely related concepts of infinity and regularity. Infinity, for Wittgenstein, is not a real entity or metalogical rule impartially governing the use of words, hence the well-known rejection of rules as being ‘rails invisibly laid to infinity’ (PI §218). It is a heuristic for understanding. Infinity is not simply like the numbers we know, only much bigger, so big we cannot picture it—nor is it a ‘human shortcoming’ (PI §208) that we cannot do so. It is, as Peter Winch points out, a new concept, one which is understood through examples of enumeration but which is not itself a product of enumeration (PG II, §10). Winch says, ‘The way in which we come to grasp the sense of the expression involving infinity is indeed difficult to describe... it is what Wittgenstein is describing in his discussions of *following a rule* and of the kind of training on which this rests’. To look for evidence of it being grasped, we must observe how it is ‘manifested in the grammatical differences in the way the trainee talks’.<sup>6</sup> But what would that be like? Presumably, one who grasps infinity will not ask what ‘infinity plus one’ is. Someone who has learnt how to go on *ad infinitum* with a particular linguistic rule will reach for words to the effect of ‘so it’s all the same from here’. The concepts of infinity, regularity, and sameness are therefore an important part of grasping linguistic rules. They are not contained within the thing being taught—whether that thing is the mathematical operation of addition, or the use of words like ‘game’ or ‘order’—but are a condition of being taught a rule about that thing.

But is this enough to avoid a vicious ‘logical circle’ as Wittgenstein suggests? At this point Wittgenstein seems ready to draw a line under the problem. ‘But is that *all*?’ he asks. ‘Isn’t there a deeper explanation; or at least, mustn’t the *understanding* of the explanation be deeper? [...] But then, whence the feeling that I have more?’ (PI §209). There is no more to be said about ‘the justification for my acting in *this* way in complying with the rule. [...] I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do.”’ (PI §217). If following a rule is nothing other than acting in accord with it, and acting in accord with the rule is following it with a requisite level of regularity (how regular does regular need to be?),<sup>7</sup> then it is circular to explain regularity in terms of being in accord with

---

<sup>6</sup> Peter Winch, ‘Im Anfang war die Tat’, in *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, ed. Irving Block (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981), 168.

<sup>7</sup> Francis Y. Lin discusses the issue of regularity in ‘Wittgenstein on the impossibility of following a rule only once’, *British Journal of the History of Philosophy* 28, no. 1 (2020): 143–5. Here, he mistakenly takes Baker and Hacker to task for relying so much on regularity in their account of rule-following when the word ‘regular’ appears nowhere in PI §§198–9, the closest being ‘ständig’, which means ‘established’ rather than ‘regular’. However, Wittgenstein uses ‘Regelmäßigkeit’ or ‘regularity’ in both §208 and §209. Lin argues, in any case, that regularity is ‘too strong a requirement for *all* rule-following’, citing the example of a boss who fires the first worker who comes late after instituting a rule that says all latecomers will be fired. I grant that it would seem odd to say that the boss has not yet followed the rule, having only done so once. But this turns out to be a weak objection, if one reads PI §199 in the following way. The impossibility of there being only one occasion where one person followed a rule is not about a single rule considered in isolation. If the boss’s rule on latecomers was the only rule there was in the world, then certainly we would not be able to establish whether the rule was followed or not from just one dismissal.

the rule. How, then, can a rule provide a standard of correctness—the normative standard of the language-game—to be adhered to, if the regularity essential to the rule’s intelligibility is explained in terms of the rule’s applications themselves? Why should one not feel entitled to act differently, capriciously even—to act (as Kripke might say) *quegularly*, rather than regularly? It seems that the only way out would be something like Kripke’s so-called sceptical solution, where acting in accord with a rule is explained in terms of matching dispositions between linguistic users to apply the rule in a certain way.<sup>8</sup> I am not, of course, suggesting that this problem of regularity should throw us into sceptical confusion, nor am I seeking an analytic definition of regularity. In practice, teaching regularity seems to work out rather well, as all of us fluent language-users can attest to. But because it appears to be such a central concept to rule-following, it seems in need of further conceptual elucidation. It belongs to the bedrock—it is more fundamental than the practical agreement of rule-following—and for that reason it is more difficult to describe.

It is for this purpose that I find Cavell’s line of questioning is instructive:

One may explain the difference between, say, contract and auction bridge by ‘listing the rules’; but one cannot explain what *playing a game* is by ‘listing rules.’ Playing a game is ‘a part of our [that is, we humans] natural history’ (§25), and until one is an initiate of this human form of activity, the human gesture of ‘citing a rule’ can mean nothing.<sup>9</sup>

There is a difference between learning or understanding a particular game, and understanding what it is to play a game at all; the latter is a ‘precondition’ for the former.<sup>10</sup> The same might be said of following particular rules like ‘+2’, vis-à-vis what it is follow a rule at all. If it is regularity, then what makes regularity regular?

At first glance, this seems to be a most un-Wittgensteinian line of inquiry: Is this not a symptom of the ‘craving for generality’ that Wittgenstein famously criticises (BBB, 17)? Perhaps one might object that these are all the wrong questions to ask; they represent a futile attempt to get behind language and see what underlies it. Of course, if we are imagining regularity to be a kind of *justification* or a ground for rule-following, then Wittgenstein’s criticism would apply. But if regularity is a conceptually constitutive feature of rule-following, then further investigation is warranted.

---

But in practice the establishment of such a rule presupposes a wider background of rule-following. Any new rule, even if it has only been followed once, is understood as being of a relevantly similar kind to other rules that have been followed multiple times. As Wittgenstein’s teaching example in PI §208 suggests, we learn how to go on uniformly by looking at different examples, which provide the background understanding of rule-following. Of course, how we understand similarity and regularity *within* and *between* different rules is precisely what is under discussion in this chapter.

<sup>8</sup> Kripke, ‘Wittgenstein on Rules’, 90–2.

<sup>9</sup> Cavell, ‘The availability’, 46.

<sup>10</sup> Mulhall, ‘Cavell’s Vision’, 84.

But is it possible to achieve a non-tautologous answer to the question of what makes regularity regular? Cavell, it seems, is suggesting that we take the role our natural history plays seriously. This may well be the route to going beyond ‘This is simply what I do’, but without falling prey to the ‘craving for generality’. Our natural history, I suggest, can give us clarity about the very conceptual possibility of following a rule at all. This means we must revisit the importance of training, and in particular how it takes our natural human reactions for granted. And it is this direction that Wittgenstein takes increasingly in his post-*Investigations* writings, which I will address in the next section.

I want to conclude this section by noting what Pears has said on the matter of human reactions—or pre-linguistic reactions as they are sometimes called. He notes that Wittgenstein’s ‘use of the pre-linguistic system on to which language is grafted forces his philosophy beyond the point at which he sees it as bound to halt—internal standards of correctness’.<sup>11</sup> Language, Pears contends, begins to ‘lose its autonomy’ when we see it ‘as a system built on pre-linguistic foundations’, because we can start asking questions about whether our criteria for different rules are strict enough.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, we might even start asking whether our concepts are the right ones. Though Pears did not discuss this matter in relation to *On Certainty*, his remarks here are very apt the direction of my investigation laid out in the last chapter (see Section 1.3). Understanding the logical role played by human reactions in language will help us come to a newer conception of the logical requirements of language, without the idealised logic of the *Tractatus*, but without the strict autonomy of grammar either.

### 2.3 Pre-linguistic and post-linguistic reactions

At the heart of my interpretation of Wittgenstein’s solution to the problem of regularity is a deceptively straightforward way of looking at things: The regularity required to follow rules and learn language is simply *our* regularity—which we find in our reactions to our environment, in our instinctive behaviour, in what we find natural to do. It is taking this into account that the role of training becomes more conceptually important than it initially appears to be in the *Investigations*. While in the last chapter, I discussed textual evidence outside the *Investigations* that suggested the inadequacy of the autonomy of grammar (see Section 1.3.2), it is Wittgenstein’s thought on pre-linguistic reactions that truly takes a bold step outside of internal relations to look at the conceptual possibility—and conceptual constraints—of having a language at all.

Perhaps the most notable passage from Wittgenstein in relation to pre-linguistic reactions is the following from *Zettel*:

---

<sup>11</sup> David Pears, *False Prison*, vol. 2 (1988), 479, n.37.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 457.

It is a help here to remember that it is a primitive reaction to tend, to treat, the part that hurts when someone else is in pain; and not merely when oneself is—and so to pay attention to other’s pain-behaviour, as one does *not* pay attention to one’s own pain-behaviour.

But what is the word ‘primitive’ meant to say here? Presumably that this sort of behaviour is *pre-linguistic*: that a language-game is based *on it*, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of a thought.

(Z §§540–1)

This passage, together with PI §244 from the private language argument, discusses the significance of pre-linguistic reactions to sensation-words. However in the *Fragment* PPF xi, §289 Wittgenstein expands this significance beyond sensation-words:

What is the primitive reaction with which the language-game begins a which can then be translated into these words? How do people get to use these words?

The primitive reaction may have been a glance or a gesture, but it may also have been a word.

(PPF xi, §289)

We would do well to read this in relation to Augustine’s ‘natural language of all peoples’. Likewise, in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein gives us the clearest indication of this broad significance of pre-linguistic reactions. Hence, in this section I will discuss the logical role of human reactions and connect them to hinge propositions in *On Certainty*. But, I will conclude this section by also pointing out how the complexity of concepts suggests that we cannot think of human reactions as a simplistic, empirical foundation for language. The normative standard of linguistics rules, it turns out, rests on a multi-layered structure of reactions.

### 2.3.1 Training and meaning: A conceptual connection

There is an important series of remarks in *On Certainty* (§§534–48), written just weeks before Wittgenstein’s death, where, like in PI §5 and other places, he returns to the figure of ‘Das Kind’ literally ‘the child’, but usually translated as ‘a child’) as a heuristic for relatively simple language-games. In fact, many of these remarks begin with the words ‘Das Kind’. One of the points under consideration is that even apparently simple forms of language use presuppose sophisticated human capacities, which training takes for granted. Wittgenstein’s aim is to at least gesture towards those things that are so obvious we do not even think them worth remarking on. For a child to acquire knowledge of natural history, one ‘presupposes that it can ask what such and such a plant is called’ (OC §534). Likewise, a child’s knowledge of colour-words presupposes a concept of colour. Wittgenstein remarks, with a degree of understatement, ‘What he knows here is not all that simple’ (OC §545). These observations already show a great deal of difference from the picture of training in PI §6 that we saw earlier; though still at a primitive stage, this child is more advanced than the child of PI §6 who cannot yet ask the name of the object.



Although Wittgenstein's use of the word 'concept' [*Begriff*] in the context of this discussion is a convenient shorthand, it can also be misleading, as if one needed a thorough-going, intellectualised understanding of the concept of colour in order to learn the proper use of colour-words. Of course, if asked by someone to *explain* the concept of colour, we may well give an intellectualised account, for example by saying that colour is something that is seen, and then delineating it from other qualities that are also visually perceived, like extension and motion. This is, however, unlikely to be of much use to a child learning a language. It is implausible to suppose that a child already possesses such knowledge, if inarticulately so, *in advance of* learning colour-words. But how, then, is training achieved without that kind of explanation?

Training works when it presupposes a more primitive, indeed more animal, ability to grasp the so-called 'concept' at hand (cf. OC §§359;540). In the middle of the *Das Kind* remarks, Wittgenstein makes an important claim about language acquisition:

The child, I should like to say, learns to react in such-and-such a way; and in so reacting it doesn't so far know anything. Knowing only begins at a later level.

(OC §538)

The distinction between what properly belongs to knowledge—which involves actual empirical investigation, justification, giving grounds—and the precondition for gaining such knowledge, indeed for playing the language-games necessary for knowledge, is a fundamental one to *On Certainty*, as we saw in the last chapter (see Section 1.2.3). Given that the hinge propositions of *On Certainty* are not *known* but are said to lie outside the path of empirical enquiry and are exempt from doubt (§88), and function as foundations to our language-games (§411), there is then an emerging connection between hinge propositions and the pre-linguistic foundations of language.<sup>13</sup> Pre-linguistic reactions, as I will explain further, are what makes language and rule-following possible at all.

Let us imagine that the child is learning phrases like 'This is a red book' and 'This is a red rose'. This activity is not just about samples and ostensive definitions, though that is part of the story. Wittgenstein's particular focus now is on the learner's reactions. As with the case of pain (PI §244), we can surmise that the child already has a baseline set of reactions to the stimuli concerned, although they are unrefined and uncategorised. The job of the teacher is to refine the child's reactions, to help the learner notice what is common between a red book and a red rose, for instance, and be able to point out other instances of 'red' in the room, and to induct the child into a normative standard where only certain things count as red, and certain things do not. This is thus the link between rules and reactions. Rules

---

<sup>13</sup> Moyal-Sharrock also emphasises repeatedly the importance of 'animal' certainty in her account of hinge propositions in *Understanding Wittgenstein*.

ultimately require the child to find it natural to continue applying ‘red’ in such a way; regularity is not so much taught, but is brought out and given shape. The child goes from one set of untutored reactions to a set of refined reactions; the underlying regularity of the child’s reactions is made more precise. So when the child is able to say independently, ‘That’s a red bike!’, this is as foundationally basic as ‘Here is my hand’, the opening hinge proposition of *On Certainty*. This is not something the child *knows*, although it has the form of an empirical proposition. It is still a reaction, but one which now fits into a more consistent pattern.

It is useful at this stage to recall the words of *Zettel*:

Am I doing child psychology?—I am making a connection between the concept of teaching and the concept of meaning.

(Z §412)

We can see now that the connection between training and language goes well beyond a causal connection. Language itself is ‘conditioned by certain facts’ (OC §617), and these facts include both general regularities found in nature (PI §142) as well as our own regularity in reactions. But regularity also must be crystallised into basic certainty. This is why Wittgenstein says, ‘If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either’ (OC §114). Before we can learn meaningful uses of words, we need to first react in a given way to a stimulus, including recognising things with certainty. It is this certainty that Wittgenstein refers to when he says:

But why *am* I so certain that this is my hand? Doesn’t the whole language-game rest on this kind of certainty?

Or: isn’t this ‘certainty’ (already) presupposed in the language-game? Namely by virtue of the fact that one is not playing the game, or is playing it wrong, if one does not recognize objects with certainty.

(OC §446)

This connection between our reactions and the certainty of meaning in language-games is already suggested in a much earlier text, ‘Cause and effect: Intuitive Awareness’ (CE), which we can now read alongside *On Certainty*:

The origin and the primitive form of the language game is a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms develop.

[...] The primitive form of the language game is certainty, not uncertainty. For uncertainty could never lead to action.

I want to say: it is characteristic of our language that the foundation on which it grows consists in steady ways of living, regular ways of acting.

(CE, 420)

In short, the connection between training and linguistic meaning is a conceptual one. On the basis of these insights from Wittgenstein, I contend that we can see natural reactions as lying at the possibility of grasping any kind of rule—for which regularity is needed—at all. They are, furthermore, responsible

for the most immediate, first-personal sort of hinge propositions, and this is a facet of the line between logical and empirical statements not being sharp—since of course, as we have already seen (see Section 1.2.3) there are special cases where hinge certainties like ‘Here is my hand’ could be legitimately doubted.

### 2.3.2 *Metaphors and post-linguistic reactions*

Thus far I have been using the term pre-linguistic reactions interchangeably with natural human reactions, in line with Wittgenstein’s usage in Z §541. This ‘pre-linguistic’ character of such reactions refers to conceptual priority, rather than chronological priority. Our most fundamental linguistic concepts, like pain or colour, are not invented out of thin air, nor are their basic conceptual relations purely internal, for they rely on ‘prototype[s]’ of thought (Z §541) as a pre-condition of their intelligibility. In this sense such foundational reactions are *pre-linguistic*. We are also beginning to see how grammar, though it provides conditions for intelligibility, is itself also subject to some criteria for intelligibility.

But to reinforce the importance of pre-linguistic reactions from another standpoint, it is helpful to turn our attention to what I want to call post-linguistic reactions, for the conceptual role of human reactions throws up an interesting question about rules and metaphors.

Commenting on the notion of pre-linguistic reactions, Stephen Mulhall has noted that while the learning of language is first grounded by pre-linguistic reactions, this in turn opens us up to:

...a new realm of spontaneous *linguistic* reactions—responses to our experience that are possible only because we have acquired language, and that themselves form the basis of new language-games, a further extension of our range of linguistic behaviour’; learning a language is hence to acquire a ‘second nature’.<sup>14</sup>

So the child who has not simply mastered the language-game of red (and other colours) but has also acquired a whole range of different linguistic reactions will soon be able to react in more complex ways—‘That red rose is lovelier than the pink one’, for example. Perhaps there is no hard and fast separation between these two layers of linguistic reactions, but I want to take a closer look at the importance of the second, post-linguistic layer.

My suggestion, in view of Mulhall’s remarks above, is that post-linguistic reactions are crucial to understanding our grasp of new metaphors, something open only to those who already have mastery of a sufficient range of concepts. Mulhall has suggested that the use of metaphors does not seem to be a rule-governed activity.<sup>15</sup> This seems right; it would be folly to try and pinpoint a rule or set of rules governing the multifarious uses of the word ‘running’ (as applied to lions, rivers, and routes, among other things). A phrase such as ‘architecture is frozen music’ cannot be explained except by appeal to some further

---

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 170.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Mulhall, ‘Language-Games and Language: Rules, Normality Conditions and Conversations’, in *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Glock and Hyman, 159.

analogy, yet its meaning would, in general, be readily grasped by competent language-users who share a network of similar cultural beliefs or reference points. But this need not trouble what I have said about regularity and rule-following in language-learning, for the grasp of metaphors corresponds to a different aspect of language. It is precisely the post-linguistic reactions of our ‘second nature’—our initial grasp of language grounded in our more basic, pre-linguistic reactions—that makes metaphors available to us. The grasping of a metaphor stems from the same kind of immediate certainty that the learning of basic concepts like colour and number requires; only this time, this certainty is often a different level, having already been refined and tutored.

In a different place, commenting on Cavell’s philosophy, Mulhall writes that although we can understand new projections of a word like ‘feed’ when we hear talk of ‘feeding the meter’ or ‘feeding our pride’, in other cases the use of a word like ‘feed’ (metaphorical or not) might not be as legitimate. Mulhall gives as an example leaving a lion a bushel of carrots, which could not meaningfully be counted as ‘feeding’, or as the lion ‘refusing’ it—one cannot speak of refusing what would not be accepted in the first place. The limits of the use of our words, Mulhall contends, ‘are neither arbitrary nor optional’.<sup>16</sup> There is a reason why some metaphors or turns of phrases take off, and some do not capture the imagination—why do we run a test but not walk it? Just as we cannot change our pre-linguistic reactions, we cannot amend our post-linguistic reactions at will either. Of course, we could imagine humans reacting in different ways to the world around us—that would be a typically Wittgensteinian way of approaching this issue. As Cavell observes with a touch of humour, ‘someone *may* be bored by an earthquake or by the death of his child or the declaration of martial law, or *may* be angry at a pin or a cloud or a fish, just as someone may quietly (but comfortably?) sit on a chair of nails’, but human beings ‘on the whole do not respond in these ways’.<sup>17</sup> The grammar of concepts like boredom or anger are conditioned by the broad, consistent patterns in our behaviour, beginning with the way we react to things. And in the grasping of words both in their first instance, and later as metaphor, a key part of these reactions is the noticing of similarity—we are able to react similarly to the same group of colours; we are able to apprehend the similarity between feeding a lion and feeding a meter. This similarity, like regularity, can only be explained with respect to our reactions, pre- and post-linguistic.

I want to conclude this part of the discussion with two brief observations. Firstly, metaphor pervades language in a manner that is so thorough and yet not usually recognised. Beyond standard, clichéd figurative expressions, we reach for metaphorical expressions all the time to describe moods, films, relationships, and so on. Some, like running a test, in fact we hardly think of as metaphorical

---

<sup>16</sup> Mulhall, ‘Cavell’s Vision’, 95.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 111.

because they have been firmly established as the norm for describing that activity. It is not immediately obvious whether we would classify ‘running a test’ as a literal or a metaphorical description. Secondly, there are some metaphors—in this broader sense just identified—that are indeterminate in their status. It is helpful to recall Wittgenstein’s remark, which we saw previously, about how ‘sentences are often used on the borderline between logic and the empirical, so that their meaning shifts back and forth and they are now expressions of norms, now treated as expressions of experience’ (ROC III, §19). Let us take a word like ‘lyrical’, which could describe poetry or music of vastly different kinds. To call Keats’s poetry lyrical is quite a different thing from calling Larkin’s lyrical. It is not always clear, I think, when we are using ‘lyrical’ as a description and when we are, in effect, establishing a new norm. The reactions underpinning the word ‘lyrical’ are quite unlike those underpinning basic mathematics, where ‘[d]isputes do not break out’ (PI §240). Disputes can easily break out over characterising and applying a term like ‘lyrical’. One also thinks of the term ‘nobilmente’ [nobly] in music, first widely used by Elgar and hence very closely—grammatically—associated with his music.<sup>18</sup> ‘Nobly’ is a difficult concept to define; while it is not impossible to grasp its application to music, its use depends on rather diverse reactions. Not only that, in the context of Elgar’s music we might ask whether each new piece takes on ‘nobilmente’ as a description, or sets out a new norm. The line between the two, as Wittgenstein suggests, is not sharp.

### 2.3.3 *Aspect perception*

We have come a long way from the rule-following considerations, for the discussion of pre-linguistic—and indeed, post-linguistic—reactions has opened up a new conceptual dimension of language. Our regularity is at the heart of language, but it in turn allows for new, spontaneous forms of creativity in language, on the basis of our ability to perceive different kinds of similarity. This point about similarity takes us to another important element that must not be neglected in relation to Wittgenstein’s thought on human reactions: Aspect perception. As Baker and Hacker note, an early version of PI §201 is found in MS 180a, crucially in the context of a discussion about aspect perception. In the manuscript source, just before Wittgenstein talks about the difficulty of rules determining a course of action, because every action could be interpreted to be in accord with the rule (which is now PI §201, accompanied by the famous words ‘This was our paradox’), he discusses how we know that words fit the situation, and he gives the examples of recognizing colours and persons. ‘And now I must move on to words or actions. Actions, for example, pass over to words’.<sup>19</sup> Although this discussion of aspect perception is not as mature

---

<sup>18</sup> I owe this example to Andy Hamilton. See ‘nobilmente’, in Michael Kennedy, ed., *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 515.

<sup>19</sup> My translation of the original: ‘Und nun muß ich zu Worten, oder Handlungen. Handlungen, zu Worten z.B., übergehen’. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘Ms-180a’, in *Interactive Dynamic Presentation (IDP) of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophical Nachlass*, ed. the Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen (WAB) under the direction of Alois Pichler (Bergen: Wittgenstein

as that found in the later writings on the philosophy of psychology, it is clear that Wittgenstein sees a connection between the perception of similarities and the repudiation of the role of interpretation in rule-following in favour of action in the particular case. I want to argue, therefore, that aspect perception should be understood as part of the phenomenon of human reactions that makes language possible.

One of the central questions that Wittgenstein poses in his philosophy of psychology is whether an act of interpretation is involved in seeing or recognising something *as* something. But more generally, as Severin Schroeder writes, all the examples of aspect perception in Wittgenstein's writings are basically variations on the theme of seeing a likeness:

Aspect perception, in general, involves noticing a similarity. [...] When I see something *as X* I am aware of a similarity between it and *X*, be it a glass cube, the head of a rabbit, or a galloping horse. But then, it can be argued that virtually *all* seeing is or involves seeing resemblances. When I see a tree, for example, and realize that it is a tree, I see its resemblance with other trees. In general, seeing that something is of a certain kind involves seeing its likeness, in relevant respects, with other, familiar, objects of that kind.<sup>20</sup>

If my brief account of metaphor, via Mulhall and Cavell, is right, then aspect perception must be part of the same family of abilities involved in grasping words both literally and metaphorically through our natural reactions. Does Wittgenstein think so?

We can indeed trace the connection between reactions and aspect perception through the idea of an 'attitude' [*Einstellung*] that Wittgenstein sometimes uses. Mostly famously Wittgenstein says, 'My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul' (PPF iv, §22). Meanwhile, in his discussion of the grammar of sensations in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein asks at one point, 'What gives us *so much as the idea* that beings, things, can feel? Is it that my education has led me to it by drawing my attention to feelings in myself, and now I transfer the idea to objects outside myself?' (PI §283). Wittgenstein answers in the negative; it is not an inference of reason. He then contrasts looking at a human body with looking at stones or indeed a corpse: 'Our *attitude* to what is alive and to what is dead is not the same. All our *reactions* are different' (PI §284, emphasis mine). An attitude here is not a hunch or a vague intuition; it is part of our *reacting* to a situation.

Indeed, in the *Fragment*, Wittgenstein explicitly links the concept of attitude to his discussion of aspect perception. As mentioned, one of his central questions is whether there is an act of interpretation in seeing something *as* something—say, a line-drawing as the head of a rabbit—or whether we see the aspect directly. Using the example of a picture of an animal transfixed by an arrow, Wittgenstein first asks whether we *see* the arrow or we 'merely *know* that these two bits are supposed to represent part of

---

Archives at the University of Bergen, 2016–), 34v–35r, accessed 25 October, 2023, <http://wab.uib.no/transform/wab.php?modus=opsjoner>.

<sup>20</sup> Severin Schroeder, 'A Tale of Two Problems: Wittgenstein's Discussion of Aspect Perception', in *Mind, Method, and Morality: Essays in Honour of Anthony Kenny*, ed. John Cottingham and Peter Hacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 355.

an arrow' (PPF xi, §180). Subsequently he says, "To me it is an animal transfixed by an arrow." That is what I treat it as; this is my *attitude* to the figure. This is one meaning in calling it a case of "seeing".' (PPF xi, §193) The contrast with *knowing* is especially important for *On Certainty's* hinge propositions, as we have already seen; Wittgenstein is implying that in seeing a particular aspect there is no knowledge in the proper sense. We have something as conceptually foundational as pre-linguistic reactions—an attitude. The directness of perception here is similar to the directness of applying concepts according to the right rules, underpinned by the regularity of our reactions.

Another important question that Wittgenstein raises is whether the capacity to perceive certain aspects depends on the mastery of certain concepts or techniques. But I think that the reverse question is equally fair, and is particularly germane to our discussion of pre-linguistic reactions: Does the capacity to perceive particular aspects underly the ability to master certain language-games? We can start by looking at matters from a negative perspective—what would it be to not be able to see certain aspects? Wittgenstein raises the possibility of what he calls 'aspect-blindness'; whereas there are some cases of aspect perception that depend on mastery of a technique, like 'seeing *this* as the apex' of a triangle and not its base (PPF xi, §222), perhaps in other cases an individual simply has a flat-out inability to see something *as* something in relation to a particular aspect. This Wittgenstein likens to colour-blindness, or not having absolute pitch (PPF xi, §257).

These are not in fact analogies, but are themselves good examples of aspect-blindness. Avrum Stroll has suggested, in relation to *On Certainty*, that the pitch-perfect person's ability to pick out notes seems to be a kind of 'knowledge', yet it also seems to fit with the character of a hinge proposition.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps, this is another manifestation of Wittgenstein's claim in *On Certainty* that the boundary between logical and empirical statements is not sharp (OC §319). For most people who do not have absolute pitch, finding out the particular pitch of a sound is a kind of empirical knowledge—it is subject to verification. But for the person with absolute pitch, this is not knowledge but a hinge certainty. It is like an experienced painter who does not need a colour chart to identify a very exact shade of a particular colour. Wittgenstein would certainly caution against thinking that the painter must consult a chart in his head; just as most ordinary language users do not need to do so to tell apart red from orange from yellow, so our expert painter-decorator can tell apart finer shades of orange like tangerine and coral. It is similar with the pitch-perfect person. People with perfect pitch simply 'do not remember the pitch. They simply hear an "A" sound as being different from a "B" sound, just as everyone sees the colour red as being different from blue'.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Avrum Stroll, 'Von Wright on *On Certainty*', in *In Search of a New Humanism*, ed. by Rosario Egidi (Dordrecht, Springer: 1999), 95.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis Porter, quoted in Andy Hamilton, *Lee Konitz: Conversations on the Improviser's Art* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 260, n. 168.

What is the upshot of all this? For a language to be widespread, it cannot be based on particularly niche abilities. There has to be a general and consistent aspect perception across the board, such that we agree in our reactions and attitudes. Of course we can allow that within a common language there can be different degrees of skills, some of which are only available to those with extensive training and experience, or with rather specialised capacities for aspect perception. One does not need to have absolute pitch to become a piano tuner, though absolute pitch might help one do the job more efficiently. Examples of such specialised capacities help us to appreciate how most of language relies on much more general capacities. With a little bit (or a lot) of training, we might be able to become a discerning consumer of wine—we can tell apart flat from full-bodied wine, we can identify notes on the palette. But perhaps so much of disagreement over art and beauty, for example, stems from the lack of common reactions to the stimuli concerned.

Having said all this, the difference or similarity between reactions and attitudes does not seem all that important—Wittgenstein is not, after all, constructing a theory here with fine-grained distinctions in his terminology. Perhaps an attitude, rather than a reaction, suggests the taking in of something more abstract (e.g. a soul), hence its use in the discussion on aspect perception. But both point to different aspects of the same root phenomenon; they are about the capacity to respond to stimuli in certain ways, which forms the basis of the grasp of a concept or, where the concept is already grasped, a more profound experience. Whichever is the case, the response itself is not an act of ratiocination. And that is why Wittgenstein says, ‘Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination’ (OC §475). Only where there is widespread agreement in reactions or attitudes can we share concepts successfully with many others, with the regularity necessary for them to play a part in our form of life. Pears puts the point across strikingly:

... man himself is both measurer and measuring instrument. His reactions have taken over the role of the graduating lines on the ruler and they themselves serve as criteria for the application of his words.<sup>23</sup>

A very helpful example in this regard is the measurement of temperature, which would not be possible if in the first place we did not have more or less consistent reactions to hot and cold, and secondly if there were no correlations between these sensations and the changes in the volume of fluids like mercury.<sup>24</sup> Although we take these connections for granted, could we make an internal connection within the same concept of heat between the heat of fire and the heat of cooked food if not for our common variation in sensations? If we did not have broadly common variations in heat-sensations, the connection between fire and cooked food would be an external, empirical one—we would not connect them within

---

<sup>23</sup> Pears, *Paradox*, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Hasok Chang, *Inventing Temperature: Measurement and Scientific Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 47.



the same concept of heat (that concept, if we possessed it, would look very different). So we can see how the internal relations in our concepts depend on a pre-linguistic structure.

#### 2.3.4 *Hinge propositions and conceptual complexity*

Here I want to sum up what we have discussed so far about human reactions, but also introduce another layer of complexity to this discussion, which will help us in the next section where I turn to the dynamic nature of hinge propositions, in relation to Wittgenstein's scientific examples.

From the account above we can better understand the logical role of hinges, if we identify the more immediate, first-personal examples with their corresponding underlying reactions. These hinges function at a different conceptual level from rules—whereas rules give conditions for intelligibility, our first-personal hinges are expressions of our natural, shared patterns of reactions that make language possible at all. It is in this way, I contend, that the world conditions language—not by a mirroring relation, but by a creative partnership. Our pre-linguistic reactions themselves do not give us ready-made concepts, but they seem to restrict the overall shape of our concepts, even if the outer limits they put in place are somewhat vague and hard to define. In this way, the internal logical requirements of language are answerable, in some degree, to the world—but answerable through its application. Our reactions do not therefore determine meaning; that is determined by the linguistic rules we follow in our practices. But the regularity of our reactions makes the regularity of rule-following possible. For this reason, Wittgenstein says in *On Certainty*, 'In the beginning was the deed' (OC §402); underlying our shared language is 'a consensus of *action*'. As Julia Hermann puts it:

The acting that grounds our language-games can be understood as shared actions and reactions, including primitive verbal and non-verbal reactions, shared ways of making judgements of sameness, shared ways of following rules and so on. All of these actions and reactions form part of the agreement in action, which includes agreement over judgements, and which makes sophisticated practices such as justifying, doubting and evaluating possible.<sup>25</sup>

It is, hence, such a consensus that is responsible for our ability to utter with certainty propositions that have an empirical form, but which for the most part play a logical role. In this way, we can understand Wittgenstein's second logical claim in *On Certainty*, regarding the logical-empirical boundary.

But there is an important note of caution to be struck about this account of reactions and rules. To speak of 'agreement' or a 'consensus' in judgements and reactions, as opposed to opinions (LFM, 183–4; PI §242), can still be misleading. As I have stressed, when speaking of 'pre-linguistic' reactions we are not talking about chronological priority, as if we all agreed in reactions first, and then came up with language. We are not doing natural history, and this is not speculation about the origins of language, but

---

<sup>25</sup> Julia Hermann, *On Moral Certainty, Justification and Practice: A Wittgensteinian Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 66.

a conceptual investigation. Language-learning and rule-following always takes place *in media res*. This point is important in order to avoid an overly one-sided view of the role of reactions. Lars Hertzberg has, for example, criticised the ‘individualist emphasis’ of ‘Cause and Effect’, which has misled some commentators into thinking that

the concept in question (say, that of a cause) could somehow emerge directly from the primitive reaction: as if my reacting to the cause in itself supplied me with an understanding of causality, rather than a pattern of reactions and interactions providing the room in which we can imagine talk about causality developing.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, Hao Tang warns that we must not be tempted to think that ‘the crucial primitive reactions are the real references of our sensation-words’,<sup>27</sup> or indeed any other basic word learnt in this way. As a case in point, learning a sensation-language is not a labelling system for different grunts and noises and other primitive reactions, though it may first look like it. But Wittgenstein already tells us in the *Investigations* that ‘the verbal expression of pain replaces crying, it does not describe it’ (§244). So once again, it is important to look at the philosophical importance of training. What is required for a learner to be inducted into the relevant language-game is not just a teacher, but the possibility of being embedded in the language-game itself.

In this regard, Medina speaks helpfully of a ‘*participatory view of learning*’. The natural reactions required for learning are

...not just perceptual reactions to salient features in the environment; they are interpersonal reactions oriented towards action. The learner needs to be sensitive and responsive to certain signs of approval and disapproval that are used to structure her behaviour normatively.<sup>28</sup>

Both learner and trainer must be seen to share the same crucial reactions. If we neglect the interpersonal aspect of language learning, then the risk is that Wittgenstein’s account becomes seen as a form of behaviourism, with reactions mistaken to be referents. As Winch points out, to teach a child a particular set of sensation-words to express a certain set of reactions is, in fact, already to presuppose what pattern, which language-game, the child’s reactions fit into.<sup>29</sup> The child must be able to see the similarity between someone tending to their pain, and their tending to someone else’s, and the family of concepts—being hurt, being comforted—surrounding this pattern.

---

<sup>26</sup> Lars Hertzberg, ‘Very General Facts of Nature’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Wittgenstein*, ed. Oskari Kuusela and Marie McGinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 368.

<sup>27</sup> Hao Tang, ‘A Meeting of the Conceptual and the Natural: Wittgenstein on Learning a Sensation-Language’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 91, no. 1 (2015), 117.

<sup>28</sup> José Medina, ‘Wittgenstein’s Social Naturalism: The Idea of *Second Nature* After the *Philosophical Investigations*’, in *The Third Wittgenstein*, ed. Moyal-Sharrock, 83–4.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Winch, ‘Discussion of Malcolm’s Essay’, in Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?*, ed. Winch (London: Routledge, 1993), 124, quoted in Tang, ‘A Meeting’, 116.

The role of human reactions is therefore a complex one. Although this role might be called ‘foundational’, the idea of a foundation in *On Certainty* is not simple. It is not an empirical foundation of language that Wittgenstein speaks of—language is not based on the certainty of direct sense perception alone. Nor is the characteristic certainty of well-trained reactions a sign of rationalist self-evidence, like Descartes’ clear and distinct ideas. This is why the logical role of hinges, is ‘peculiar’, and Wittgenstein refuses to give any reductionist account of them. ‘I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions,’ says Wittgenstein, before adding a twist: ‘And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house’ (OC §248). The whole language-game, though it rests on basic certainties and regularities in reactions, is also the structure through which pre-linguistic reactions make any sense at all. The important lesson here, I want to argue on the basis of Medina’s and Winch’s insights, is that while we can, to aid conceptual understanding, talk about the basic or primitive form of the language-game as Wittgenstein does in ‘Cause and Effect’ to see what language must take for granted, this primitive form does not exist. Even the child who is learning basic instances of the language-game of, say, pain is being inducted into a complex practice regarding pain and related concepts like comforting—a practice which is structured by both pre- and post-linguistic reactions. The child’s first few attempts at using ‘pain’ may be the closest thing we can observe to a primitive form of a language-game, but very soon this is caught up in more complex expressions about, e.g. someone pretending to be in pain, or non-physical (metaphorical in the broad sense) pain. (See Section 5.4.3 for a discussion of pretence.) The child is not in a position to choose which parts of this complex concept she wishes to accept and what parts not to; once she has grasped the basic case of pain, she cannot choose which metaphors about pain come naturally to her which she also learns from the community around her, and so she is caught up in a multi-layered conceptual web from the start. This complexity, in turn, means that we cannot straightforwardly discern the logical limits of concepts on the basis of the underlying pre-linguistic reactions involved.

This means that even the most basic hinge propositions like ‘Here is my hand’ have a conceptual complexity that is not reducible to the explanatory role of the reaction; for a child or a mature language-user to utter ‘Here is my hand’ is to be embedded into a complex web of concepts.<sup>30</sup> We can look at this complexity from a different, complementary angle, using this passage from the *Fragment*:

Someone who was trained to emit a particular sound at the sight of something red, another sound at the sight of something yellow, and so on for other colours, would not yet be describing objects by their colours. Though he might help us to arrive at a description. A description is a representation of a distribution in a space (in that of time, for instance).

---

<sup>30</sup> I am grateful to Marcus Döller for stressing the importance of conceptual mediation of immediate and certain perceptions to me. See John McDowell, ‘The Myth of the Given’, in *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 256–72, for an account of the role of conceptual capacities involved in direct perceptual experience.

I let my gaze wander round a room and suddenly it lights on an object of a striking red colour, and I say ‘Red!’—I haven’t thereby given a description.

(PPF xi, §70–1)

Just identifying colours accurately and consistently is not sufficient for linguistic meaning. Commenting on this passage, Anscombe suggests that one has to say ‘*of* the object that *it* was red’ to make a proper description.<sup>31</sup> We can rephrase this point in the context of hinge propositions. Our investigation into pre-linguistic reactions showed us what lies at the conceptual possibility of words like ‘hand’ or ‘red’. But what makes words like ‘here’ or ‘this’ conceptually possible? For a child to speak *of* the object, that it is red or it is a hand, involves a layer of complexity that not all that primitive or basic, after all. Whereas Russell once thought that ‘this’ in combination with pointing was a name, this was never Wittgenstein’s view even in the *Tractatus*.<sup>32</sup> Even to say ‘This is an *x*’ is to draw on a network of conventions in language—this is an important aspect of the context-principle, that only in the ‘nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning’ (TLP 3.3)—and the ‘tacit conventions on which the understanding of everyday language depends are enormously complicated’ (TLP 4.002). So ‘this’ is an enormously complicated word, and to be able to use it is a sign of a fairly complex conceptual mediation that goes beyond the pre-linguistic reaction and the basic certainty of the situation. This complexity is easily missed, because like our regularity it is easily and necessarily taken for granted:

‘I know that this is a hand.’—And what is a hand?—‘Well, *this*, for example.’

(OC §268)

It turns out, then, that the normative standards of our concepts rest on a very complex structure of human reactions, which is also why our concepts are taught or learnt singly, but always in the context of other concepts. Hence Wittgenstein emphasises the need to look at the whole web of concepts:

We do not learn the practice of making empirical judgments by learning rules: we are taught *judgments* and their connexion with other judgments. A *totality* of judgments is made plausible to us.

When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)

(OC §§140–1)

## 2.4 The dynamic nature of hinge propositions

Now we are in a better position to understand the other aspect of *On Certainty*’s second logical claim, about the lack of a sharp boundary between logical and empirical statements: The dynamic nature of hinge propositions, which is such that hinge propositions can lose their status as hinges and become matters for empirical testing again. The mutability of hinges, as I shall argue, does not contradict the idea I have been

---

<sup>31</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘A Theory of Language?’, in *Perspectives*, ed. Block, 157.

<sup>32</sup> Ishiguro, ‘Names’, 27.

developing that human reactions provide logical requirements for language and even set limits to our concepts. I will first discuss what these limits might be, before explaining how hinges can change in status within those limits.

#### 2.4.1. *General limits of concept-formation*

As I have already argued, certain hinge propositions—those involve situations of immediate, first-person awareness—can be readily identified with the pre-linguistic reactions presupposed in language learning. While this is not sufficient to say there are ‘absolutely the right’ concepts, with certain concepts we can see that there is very little room for manoeuvre because of how tethered they are to our basic patterns of acting. It is noteworthy that Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* hints that there might be limits to our concept-formation, as when he says ‘the reasonable man *does not* have certain doubts’ (OC §220), though he is understandably vague about these limits. Still, the point is put across forcefully:

If someone supposed that *all* our calculations were uncertain and that we could rely on none of them (justifying himself by saying that mistakes are always possible) perhaps we would say he was crazy. But can we say he is in error? Does he not just react differently? We rely on calculations, he doesn't; we are sure, he isn't.

(OC §217)

The question of ‘Does not he not just react differently?’ is significant for us. Part of the suggestion is that because this person reacts differently, he is unable to take part in the relevant language-game. But there is a stronger suggestion, which is that if anything is to count as calculating, it would be something like this, and one cannot be too far out. Calculating, like so many of our other concepts and practices, is also shaped by what we find useful, but it is also answerable to our reactions for its intelligibility. The outer limits of the concept may be hard to definitively articulate, but when we see something so far out, we can say, ‘We rely on calculations, he doesn't; we are sure, he isn't’. So even if we cannot say what is absolutely the right concept of calculating, we can certainly say when there is simply no calculating.

This remark has to be balanced by Wittgenstein's wariness of someone trying to argue with another on the basis of a completely different language-game, as with a physicist trying to convince someone that their practice of consulting an oracle is ‘wrong’—wrong from the physicist's set of certainties, not the other person's (OC §609). Naturally this also brings to mind the much-discussed example of the wood-sellers in the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, who ‘pile up logs and sell them, the piles are measured with a ruler, the measurements of length, breadth and height multiplied together, and what comes out is the number of pence which have to be asked and given’ (I, §143). To us this seems irrational—it would make more sense to sell wood by, say, weight, and not the size of the area that piles of wood occupy. It seems too arbitrary to be intelligible. Why does Wittgenstein not speak of them with the same force as in OC §217? He seems reluctant to conclude that these wood-sellers are not calculating.

The lesson, I think, is different: Sometimes, from the outside of a practice we cannot see its intelligibility. We do not know the history of this practice, and why it may be intelligible in relation to other cultural beliefs we have yet to learn (cf. LFM XXI). This is compatible with my interpretation of OC §217—there may be limits to concept-formation, but these limits cannot always be read off straight from the practice, and can only be slowly discerned in the context of the network of related concepts and practices. This is yet another implication of the complexity of conceptual mediation as discussed above.

#### 2.4.2 Learning scientific hinge propositions

It is within this general framework that hinges have their dynamic character. This is particularly evident from the scientific propositions that Wittgenstein discusses, which just as the *Tractatus* suggested (see Section 1.2.1) help to reveal the logical order of language. This order is now a much looser one. But I want to suggest that the way to understand scientific hinge propositions is through the notion of post-linguistic reactions discussed earlier.

Wittgenstein's examples of scientific hinge propositions include 'water boils at 100°C' (OC §293) and 'the earth had already existed long before I was born' (OC §301). These are obviously different from hinges involving immediate, first-personal awareness—for a start, it is much easier to imagine being wrong about the scientific hinges. Even if it is highly unlikely, we have a sense of what it would be to be wrong about them. This does not detract from their logical character, where our scientific systems are concerned:

But if someone were to say 'So logic too is an empirical science' he would be wrong. Yet this is right: the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing.

(OC §98)

Certain genuinely empirical propositions become 'hardened' so as to function as 'channels' for other propositions to flow through, though Wittgenstein extends this river metaphor by saying that over time this relation can change, with fluid propositions hardening and hardened ones turning fluid (OC §96). So how do they get adopted as a rule of testing?

For a scientific proposition to harden into a rule of testing, learners—now we speak not of language-learners but students of science—must have reached a level of concept-mastery where they are able to react adequately to this new rule. A student must first have an appreciation of what water is, what heat is, and what measuring is, before the new conceptual experience of learning that water boils at 100°C is open to them. Medina's insights on language-learning and structuring behaviour normatively are helpful for thinking about this kind of situation as well, which is similar to Wittgenstein's pupil who must learn that '+2' contains only one way of proceeding even after 1000:

...the process of language learning is completed when the novice starts applying the learned procedures 'as a *matter of course*' (PI 238). This involves not only the establishment of a regularity in the learner's behaviour, but also the inculcation of a *normative attitude* towards how to proceed. Through repeated practice, the novice internalizes the normative standards of the linguistic community; and by the end of the learning process the novice regards the way she has been taught to go on as the only way to proceed.<sup>33</sup>

When learning scientific hinge propositions, the normative standards of the community are more complex, but in that complexity lies more flexibility than concepts like colour and pain. Regarding the way one is taught that this form of measurement is 'the only way to proceed', this does not mean one must rigidly stick to Celsius and never to use Fahrenheit; it is more a matter of understanding that if anything is to count as measuring temperature, it must involve something like this. This is not something always articulable, not even by the teacher, but it is part of the logical requirements of being able to follow certain types of rules at all—though like all rule-following, mastery can take time. Indeed, it is not the authority of the teacher's insistence that makes the rule of testing a hinge; like our discussion above on a child grasping the concept pain by being embedded in the relevant language-game, so will our science students need to be embedded in the relevant linguistic practices regarding temperature and measuring, in order to develop the right normative attitude. From learning to measure the temperature of water a student might then go on to learn, not just what is involved in measuring the temperature of food, the room, or the human body, but also about variability in temperature over time and the best places for an accurate temperature reading. In all this a rule like 'water boils at 100°C' continues to function as a paradigm for the concept of measurement—of course, others may arise in the course of teaching too—the grasping of which is an early exemplar of the normative attitude required for this wider language-game of measuring temperature.

If this account is correct, then how do scientific hinge propositions change and lose their status? More importantly, does this contradict the idea that hinge propositions are 'exempt from doubt'? A clue is in the observation stated earlier that we can imagine what it would be like for us to be mistaken about something like the boiling point of water. After all, the measurement of water's freezing and boiling points is relative to atmospheric pressure—the modern definition of 100°C is the boiling point *at sea level*, or one atmosphere of pressure (yet another example of how interconnected our concepts are).<sup>34</sup> Might there not be some other condition that we have yet to discover, which also affects the boiling point at the one atmospheric pressure? And if such a discovery were made, does it mean that all our measurements prior to that were wrong? No—they would be wrong only if we thought that there was an absolutely correct concept of measuring water, in which case the newly refined concept would not be absolutely

---

<sup>33</sup> Medina, 'Social Naturalism', 83–4.

<sup>34</sup> Cutler J. Cleveland and Christopher Morris, ed., *Handbook of Energy*, vol. 1, *Diagrams, Charts, and Tables* (Waltham, MA: Elsevier, 2013), 596.

correct either, since there is still the possibility of yet new conditions being discovered. Provisionally, I want to say: Our prior measurements would still have been correct, but our language-game has now changed. But let us look at this issue more broadly, in relation to the concept of causation.

#### 2.4.3 Causation and induction: 'Under ordinary circumstances'

Causation is a concept for which, as we shall see, we need to keep in mind the different layers of reactions underpinning it in order to grasp its linguistic complexity. While the picture of pre- and post-linguistic reactions within the same broad concept may provide a helpful conceptual distinction, we also need to confront the reality where there is interplay between these different layers. This will help us make better sense of the mutability of scientific hinge propositions that nonetheless remain 'exempt from doubt'.

Let us return once more to Wittgenstein's text 'Cause and Effect', where Wittgenstein notes that our language of causality is rooted in reactions:

There is a reaction which can be called 'reacting to the cause'.—We also speak of 'tracing' the cause; a simple case would be, say, following a string to see who is pulling it. If I then find him—how do I know that he, his pulling, is the cause of the string's moving? Do I establish this by a series of experiments?

(CE, 410)

Winch notes that our ascribing of causality in such situations is 'immediate and confident', undergirded by an 'unhesitating response' to the situation.<sup>35</sup> So far, this sounds like our most basic hinge propositions. However here there is a relationship between these instances and the scientific practice of establishing causality which is not straightforward. After all, the scientific standard of experimentation and verification is a hugely important part of the concept of causation for many competent language-users today. At the same time, we readily ascribe causation even in situations where the alleged cause has not been tested as a hypothesis through repeated experiments.

It must be stressed that, in the everyday case, the ascription of a cause is not a hypothesis at all; no testing is required. When someone pulls a string that I am holding and I fall, does it ever make sense to say, 'Correlation does not imply causation'? What would a doubt in such a case look like? It is the conviction that these primitive causes do happen—we do not truly 'know' them to happen—that underlies our investigation of other kinds of causes, which exist or purportedly exist on a spectrum of contentiousness. So it seems that the scientific notion of cause, being more complex, is a post-linguistic one, while everyday causation is pre-linguistic. And yet, if my earlier remarks on conceptual mediation and complexity are right, then even when we speak about causation in the everyday case we do not divorce such cases totally from the scientific way of thinking about the concept.

---

<sup>35</sup> Winch, 'Im Anfang', 173.



For such reasons, Winch cautions that immediate awareness of a cause is not infallible; it is still, like scientific cases, ‘vulnerable to further evidence’.<sup>36</sup> However far-fetched, there may well be the possibility of elaborate pranks, or misperceptions—something could come to light and reveal we were mistaken. But a worrying implication of this point seems to be that even a hinge certainty like ‘here is my hand’ is similarly vulnerable—but have we not said that in such a case, we do not know what doubt would be like? Is this throwing Wittgenstein’s anti-scepticism into doubt—are we meant to now consider radical Cartesian doubts once more? Once again, we have to remember that imaginability is not always a good criterion for logical possibility. This is a subtle logical point about certainty, that something ‘exempt from doubt’ could change, and yet that does not mean our current certainty is merely provisional. It is ‘comfortable’ (OC §357). Let me first explain this point in relation to scientific causation, before coming back to everyday causation.

It is useful to ask what sort of post-linguistic reaction is required to grasp the scientific concept of causation, just as we did of ‘water boils at 100°C’. We can glean something of an answer to this question from Anscombe’s lecture ‘Causality and Determination’. Anscombe echoes Wittgenstein’s ‘Cause and Effect’ in identifying paradigm cases of causation with situations of immediate awareness:

The truthful—though unhelpful—answer to the question: ‘How did we come by our primary knowledge of causality?’ is that in learning to speak we learned the linguistic representation and application of a host of causal concepts. [...] A small selection: *scrape, push, wet, carry, eat, burn, knock over, keep off, squash, make* (e.g. noises, paper boats), *hurt*.<sup>37</sup>

But her focus here is not on the phenomenon of our reactions to these causes. Her target in this lecture is the Humean notion of causation as referring only to exceptionless generalisations. Anscombe argues that even when someone tries to formulate a causal law in the form of an exceptionless generalisation, there is a presupposition that if things turn out differently there must have been a necessitating cause. This, she says, is really ‘a bit of *Weltanschauung*’.<sup>38</sup> Experience does not teach us that there *must* be preventing factors at work when an expected effect does not obtain despite the apparent presence of a cause.<sup>39</sup> This, too, is a deeply Wittgensteinian point, for in a later part of the *Investigations* (§482) Wittgenstein speaks of induction as a groundless standard for judging inferences about the future based on the past. The principle of induction, though it may be cast in a more intellectualised form, and for which we can give all kinds of reasons—pointing to the regularity of observations, repeated testing, and so on—is ultimately based on our ‘primitive reactions’ to experiences such as being burnt by a fire, which

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘Causality and Determination’ in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 137.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>39</sup> Roger Teichmann, *The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 179.

leads us to stay away from fire in the future, without having to reason explicitly about this.<sup>40</sup> This idea is taken up again in *On Certainty* (§130), where Wittgenstein states that ‘experience does not direct us to derive anything from experience’.

But what I want to suggest is that it something like this *Weltanschauung* Anscombe identifies that is required as a normative attitude to understand scientific causation. It is not about the truth or falsehood of this notion that there must be a necessitating cause of things turned out differently; it is a paradigm for understanding scientific causation, which impels us to conduct rigorous experiments with controls in order to rule out different factors. This is a general point about scientific investigations, and which applies therefore to our previous discussion about discovering that ‘water boils at 100°C’ is wrong. If taken as an attitude, then this *Weltanschauung* is a hinge certainty—if articulated as a *principle*, then it would be a philosophical claim, and hence nonsense for Wittgenstein. What would the difference consist in, practically speaking?

The difference is that the hinge certainty is always vulnerable to further revision, because it is fundamentally reliant on an indeterminate notion of ‘ordinary circumstances’. But this ‘always’ is not a metaphysical always; rather, it is an ‘always’ that points to our epistemic limitations. It may be that some hinge certainties are, in fact, extremely unlikely to change. That is something we cannot know in advance—the ‘comfortable’ certainty of hinge propositions is a first-personal one, even in scientific cases, because they also presuppose a normative attitude on the learner’s part, just as more basic hinge propositions presuppose a regularity of pre-linguistic reactions.

Let us see how such scientific hinge propositions can potentially lose their certainty. Anscombe notes that even where we purport to construct and test a universal law of causation in some particular case, we are always presupposing ‘quite properly a vague notion’ of ‘normal conditions’. As an example, Anscombe explains that to state the flashpoint of a substance is really to say, ‘If a sample of such a substance is raised to such a temperature and doesn’t ignite, there must be a cause of its not doing so’. The problem, however, is that we do not know in advance whether normal conditions obtain, and while we can give a general range of possible conditions that might prevent an effect from materialising, it is not possible to enumerate in advance all possible conditionals for a law of causality.<sup>41</sup> Commenting on this point, Roger Teichmann observes that ‘it is not even clear that it is a *task*, any more than is counting all the rational

---

<sup>40</sup> P.M.S. Hacker, ‘Inductive reasoning’, in *Analytical Commentary*, vol. 4, *Wittgenstein: Mind and Will, Part I: Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 64.

<sup>41</sup> Anscombe, ‘Causality’, 138.

numbers between 1 and 2'.<sup>42</sup> In this way, a scientific hinge proposition might lose its status when a new condition is discovered that prevents the expected effect from materialising.

We see the same point made about hinges more generally in *On Certainty*.<sup>43</sup> 'Under ordinary circumstances I do not satisfy myself that I have two hands by seeing how it looks' (OC, §133), writes Wittgenstein; but in the next remark, he asks us to consider 'particular novel circumstances' where books we placed in drawers vanished—should this 'alter our assumption' that books do not (generally) disappear (OC §134)? Wittgenstein does not answer his own question, but I think one can surmise that the answer is 'no'. Like the immediate awareness of causation discussed earlier, we have certainty in this case that our books have not vanished on the basis of a primitive reaction to our past experience. This certainty is comfortable enough to be exempt from doubt, practically speaking. But it is not strictly infallible because it presupposes a vague notion of ordinary circumstances:

But can it be seen from a *rule* what circumstances logically exclude a mistake in the employment of rules of calculation?

What use is a rule to us here? Mightn't we (in turn) go wrong in applying it?

If, however, one wanted to give something like a rule here, then it would contain the expression 'in normal circumstances'. And we recognize normal circumstances but cannot precisely describe them. At most, we can describe a range of abnormal ones.

What is 'learning a rule'?—*This*.

What is 'making a mistake in applying it'?—*This*. And what is pointed to here is something indeterminate.

(OC §§26–8)

So Wittgenstein is suggesting quite clearly that it is impossible to avoid this encounter with indeterminacy.<sup>44</sup> Ordinary circumstances are just an ineliminable feature of rule-following.

We can finally understand how a hinge proposition being exempt from doubt is compatible with its possible revision, even to the point of losing its hinge status. It is not, in fact, unique to scientific propositions, though the specific case of causation is helpful in bringing out the dynamic, revisable character of hinges. The underlying point is one of indeterminacy with regard to logical conditions. We cannot say in advance what might make a hinge change; the comfort of my certainty is for here and now. Hence, we see that Wittgenstein gives a more nuanced statement of hinge propositions much later on in *On Certainty*:

But since a language-game is something that consists in the recurrent procedures of the game in time, it seems impossible to say in any *individual* case that such-and-such must be beyond doubt if there is to be a

---

<sup>42</sup> Teichmann, *Anscombe*, 180.

<sup>43</sup> The notion of ordinary circumstances is also present in the *Investigations*. Cf. PI §§88;117;213;349.

<sup>44</sup> It is likely also that these thoughts are somewhere in the philosophical background of Anscombe's lecture, given that it was delivered just two years after the publication of *On Certainty* under Anscombe's own editorial direction (though she does not cite *On Certainty* in this lecture).

language-game—though it is right enough to say that *as a rule* some empirical judgment or other must be beyond doubt.

(OC §519)

The primitive form of the language-game which had no doubt in it is, ultimately, a heuristic for understanding the logical role of certainty in language, not a historical or empirical reality. As a rule, for concepts to hold in our linguistic life they must contain some element of exemption from doubt, but it is not always possible to pinpoint specific instantiations of it. Hinge certainties are a good indication, but their certainty is only comfortable, not objective and *sub specie aeternitatis*.

This notion of ordinary circumstances also helps us re-evaluate our understanding of the logical limits of concept-formation. As I suggested earlier, there are limits to the intelligibility of concept-formation, but these limits cannot be easily read off a practice, especially when one is external to it. We can now say that the strange wood-sellers—*if* their system of measuring was to be considered intelligible—were likely operating with a different set of ordinary circumstances, which they grasped from their web of concepts. We have our web of concepts, and our ordinary circumstances are different. It is not that the limits to the intelligibility of a concept like measuring change depending on culture and the web of concepts; I am saying that our access to those limits is only ever through our own linguistic practices, which embody our grasp of ordinary circumstances. That is why the logical limits to concept-formation are difficult to articulate—they are as it were behind the veil of ordinary circumstances. This is also why hinges are not to be identified with those limits, because hinge propositions are ultimately products of our first-personal grasp of a normative standard, which has its epistemic limitations—a point brought out by Wittgenstein’s term ‘comfortable certainty’. Wittgenstein certainly comes close to asserting universal hinges in the following remark:

So it might be said: ‘The reasonable man believes: that the earth has been there since long before his birth, that his life has been spent on the surface of the earth, or near it, that he has never, for example, been on the moon, that he has a nervous system and various innards like all other people, etc., etc.’

(OC §327)

But, as I mentioned in the Introduction, these cannot truly be universal because they depend on the knowledge systems of one’s community, and they are subject to change. One wants to add to Wittgenstein’s remark, in the context of the modern, Western, scientific worldview, the reasonable person believes those things. These hinges, conditioned by our grasp of properly vague ordinary circumstances, point to outer limits of concepts only from within our version of those concepts.

## 2.5 The logical circle of rules and reactions

The second logical claim of *On Certainty* is thus a highly complex one. Our natural human reactions, as I have argued, play an important role in providing for the conceptual possibility of having language at all;

they are thus to be treated as part of the logical requirements of language. However, they cannot be treated as simplistic foundations for language because they are not extractable from language in actual day-to-day use. Winch comments astutely that the immediate awareness of everyday causation ‘is itself conceivable only *within* an established use of language’, and so if one thinks that such immediate certainty provides a foundation for language, one is really just ‘going round in a circle—*within* language’.<sup>45</sup> Crucially, that established use of language contains more basic and more complex layers of concepts. To apply this point to ‘here is my hand’, even to say such a thing on the basis of one’s immediate awareness is already to participate in a linguistic concept that is far more complex than what is invoked in the current situation. A lot more than the immediate awareness is called upon for someone to say ‘here is my hand’.

Hence, we have seen some key elements of those many things presupposed in language—the human reactions we have been discussing include elements such as a grasp of regularity and relevant similarity, and a properly vague notion of ordinary circumstances. None of these is separable from the whole structure of language, and that is why the logical order of language is manifest in its application. This was a problem for the *Tractatus*, but now it is used to Wittgenstein’s advantage in *On Certainty*. All of this now is part of logic; all of it is *within* language, not conditioning it from the ‘outside’ which in any case one cannot get to. There is a kind of logical circle—rules depend on reactions to be in place, but reactions depend on rules to be articulated—but we need not see that circularity as a limitation because it is not a circular theory or explanation of cause and effect. It is certainly not the kind of vicious logical circle that Wittgenstein was anxious to avoid in the rule-following considerations (cf. PI §208) Wittgenstein, I suspect, would say this account of reactions and rules is no more than a description, and I see no logical reason why descriptions cannot be circular. The logical requirements of language—all those elements of our human reactions just identified—come from our contact with the world, but they are also part of language.

In this way, *On Certainty* espouses a vision of language that is realist, for linguistic concepts are not free-floating conventions that we impose arbitrarily onto the world; it is part of the essence of anything we can meaningfully call linguistic representation that it relies on a consensus of reactions to things in the world, and on various certainties being in place so that we can speak, question, and debate intelligibly about anything at all. The realism that emerges is thus not one that relies on justification by or correspondence to things in the world. Language and the world are bound together in a dynamic process of concept formation and re-formation. ‘The real’, ‘reality’, and ‘realism’ are not variants of a master-concept that distinguishes between true and false concepts; realism, in the practical sense that I have been

---

<sup>45</sup> Winch, ‘Im Anfang’, 173.

drawing out, is a way of stating a condition of speaking and thinking within the bounds of language, and accepting those bounds as the way one simply does things. It is a realism that is not said, but shown by our adherence to the certainties of language.

## Chapter 3.

### Approaching the Limit: Logical Necessity and Practical Certainty

In this chapter I argue that logic is founded on action. I first explore the roots of Wittgenstein's thought on logical necessity in the *Tractatus*, arguing that a certain core of his older conception survives the destruction of the *Tractatus* system and conception of an idealised logic. I then argue that Wittgenstein's later thought on logical necessity, especially in his writings and lectures on mathematics, suggests that strict logical inference and inductive inference exist on a spectrum of necessity, and this spectrum depends on human needs and on action. I connect these insights back to my reading of *On Certainty* and show how they help us make sense of the unity of *On Certainty*'s three logical claims. Wittgenstein's notion of logic is expanded because strict logical inference is the outer limit of the same process of human action conditioning language.

#### 3.1 The logical 'must'

At the end of Chapter 1, I pointed to two related lines of inquiry that Wittgenstein's later philosophy suggested in its increasing emphasis on the role of nature in conditioning language. The first concerns the role of human reactions, and this was addressed in the last chapter. The second concerns the possibility of pinpointing the most basic, unassailable linguistic concepts which emerge from our shared patterns of acting. I will only attempt to address this possibility directly in Chapter 5, in part because it would involve going beyond what Wittgenstein himself suggests in *On Certainty*. Nonetheless, in this chapter I want to lay the foundations for that attempt by investigating the third logical claim of *On Certainty*, that logic and language are founded on action (OC §342). Before we attempt to identify any basic concepts that could not be abolished (cf. LWPP2, 43–4), it is worth exploring what unassailability would consist in. This is precisely what we will arrive at when we investigate the relationship between logic and action—that unassailability is a practical one, which is at the core of Wittgenstein's developing views on logical necessity.

In the last chapter, I argued that the normativity of language and rule-following depend on our sense of regularity in our reactions, though this relationship was a conceptual one. Rules and reactions are not separable in practice but exist in a dynamic circle. This conceptual picture might do well to demystify large parts of language, but it brings about an intriguing, if slightly disquieting, suggestion: Is logic similarly conceptually dependent on our reactions? We can accept meaning as contingent on our regularity—though even then we have already seen that there are limits, however vague, on concept-formation. But logic, we are tempted to think, must be made of harder stuff, since it concerns the very concepts of correctness and wrongness. Could we really accept the idea that, as Jonathan Lear once put

it, the law of non-contradiction is ‘merely one of the deeply held tribal beliefs of our tribe’<sup>1</sup>—one of our potentially revisable hinges, perhaps? And is that Wittgenstein suggests in *On Certainty*? Let us look at what Wittgenstein says:

What *counts* as [an empirical proposition’s] test? ‘But is this an adequate test? And, if so, must it not be recognizable as such in logic?’—As if giving grounds did not come to an end sometime. But the end is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting.

(OC §110)

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 §204)

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

(OC §342)

This looks like less of a unitary claim than the first two logical claims of *On Certainty*. But as I suggested previously, all three logical claims belong to single, unified picture, though they point to different aspects of it. This third claim is important to this unity; in studying the relationship between logic and action that it suggests, this will also lead us to confront the question of what Wittgenstein’s expanded view of logic consists in precisely. An answer has already been emerging: In order to make sense of the logical requirements of language vis-à-vis its ongoing application in the world, Wittgenstein has had to accept a wider view of what is within language and logic—that would include, it seems, our reactions as manifested in hinge certainties. But does that include the stricter kind of logic associated with formal logic? Although Wittgenstein does not discuss formal logic much in *On Certainty*, I believe that there is an important continuity in Wittgenstein’s prior, developing thoughts on logical necessity. In understanding the nature of the narrower sense of logic, we will better understand *On Certainty*’s wider sense of logic.

The core of my argument in this chapter is that in *On Certainty*, certainty and necessity merge into one in practice, even if they remain distinct conceptually. ‘Is it that rule and empirical proposition merge into one another?’, Wittgenstein asks (OC 309). In the *Investigations* (§97), Wittgenstein already rejects the idea that logic has to be an ‘a priori order of the world’ such that ‘no empirical cloudiness or uncertainty may attach to it’, being ‘of the purest crystal... as it were the *hardest* thing there is’. There is another line of development in this regard, found in the *Remarks on the Foundations on Mathematics*, where Wittgenstein suggests, for example, that the laws of inference do not ‘compel’ one to make any particular move (RFM I, §116). We can, no doubt, point to certain kinds of transitions as being examples of what

---

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Lear, ‘Wittgenstein’s Transcendental Anthropology’, in *Subject, Thought, and Context*, ed. Philip Pettit and John McDowell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 271.



we mean by ‘thinking’, but thinking seems to be constrained by the laws of logic by internal relations—logic is grammatical concept. *This* is what we call thinking, and the laws of logic are one way of expressing the rules of that concept. But Wittgenstein also cautions that ‘the line between what we include in “thinking” and what we no longer include in ‘thinking’ is no more a hard and fast one than the line between what is still and what is no longer called “regularity”’ (RFM I, §116). This recalls our discussion from the last chapter about regularity in rule-following as our regularity in reactions. Is the concept of logic also subject to logical requirements arising from our reactions. To put it another way, while in the last chapter we asked what makes regularity regular, here I want to ask: What makes necessity necessary? The answer, I suggest, is our necessity, and I will trace the development of Wittgenstein’s thought on logical necessity to show support for that answer.

This suggestion raises two crucial questions which I will attempt to answer as my argument progresses. One is whether this account of logic, as consisting in our necessity, reduces logic to just another language-game, as one concept among many others, when in practice we tend to treat logic as more of a meta-concept—rules for other rules. The other, related question is whether it is significant that we find it difficult to think of alternatives to classical logic, unlike other language-games such as counting and measuring.

The answer, in brief, is that the necessity of logic comes down to our manner of acting. My argument will proceed as follows. In Section 3.2, I discuss the role of internal relations and tautology in the *Tractatus*, arguing that they form a core element of Wittgenstein’s philosophy of logic which survives the abandonment of the wider *Tractatus* system of logic. In Section 3.3, I then show how the notion of internal relations is expanded, in the later philosophy, to encompass not just relations between propositions, but between propositions and the very concept of thinking and reasoning. This suggests that the aim or use of a piece of reasoning, shown by our way of acting, determines the strictness required of the logical relations used. Certainty and necessity, though they start out as distinct concepts in Wittgenstein’s early and later philosophy, converge in this way. In Section 3.4, I connect these insights to my reading of *On Certainty*, and show how they point to the unity of the text’s three logical claims. Wittgenstein’s notion of logic, I argue, is expanded because strict logical inference is the outer limit of the same process of human action conditioning language. In the conclusion, Section 3.5, I suggest that the arguments of this chapter lead us to investigate the nature of practical reasoning.

### **3.2 Logic and inference in the *Tractatus***

What makes logical inference correct, and why can we not rely on some pure form of logical compulsion as an explanation? I want to first explain what I think is the core of Wittgenstein’s thought on logical necessity in the *Tractatus* which survives the breakdown of the Tractarian system. It is constituted by the

role of internal relations and that of tautology, and is motivated by the conviction that the validity of logic is not justified by comparing it to some deeper layer of reality outside of logic.

### 3.2.1 *The logocentric predicament*

One way of understanding this conviction is through the so-called ‘logocentric’ predicament that Samuel Sheffer famously pointed to in his 1926 review of Russell’s *Principia Mathematica*:

...the attempt to formulate the foundations of logic is rendered arduous by a... ‘logocentric’ predicament. *In order to give an account of logic, we must presuppose and employ logic.*<sup>2</sup>

This echoes Wittgenstein’s attitude towards logic in the *Tractatus*:

Clearly the laws of logic cannot in their turn be subject to laws of logic.

(TLP 6.123)

If we are reasoning within logic, then there is no going outside of logic even when reasoning about logic itself. Once we recognise this, then the question of *justifying* logic, in fact, simply falls away, as it cannot be meaningfully articulated. Indeed, in the later philosophy this same move is in relation to grammar and reality (as discussed in Sections 1.2.1 and 1.3.1)—one cannot step outside of language—and I will revisit this point when I discuss the later Wittgenstein’s wider view of logic towards the end of this chapter. What Wittgenstein says in the later philosophy about grammar is applicable here to logic as narrowly conceived: ‘...if anything is to count as nonsense in the grammar which is to be justified, then it cannot at the same time pass for sense in the grammar of the propositions that justify it’ (PR §7). Unless we are prepared to admit of the possibility that the laws of logic might turn out to be false, the question of justifying them is meaningless. But we cannot even imagine what this would be like, given that the laws of logic constrain the possibilities of thought: ‘Thought can never be of anything illogical, since, if it were, we should have to think illogically’ (TLP 3.03). We simply have no conception of what it would be for the law of non-contradiction to be false, not because our imagination is not up to the task and we should simply try harder. The psychological possibility of imagination is not what determines the logical limit as I have stressed previously; it is the reverse. An impossible thought has been circumscribed by our reasoning within logic.<sup>3</sup>

The logocentric predicament can be further understood through the problem of infinite regress, as identified by Lewis Carroll in 1895. If the movement from premises to conclusion in valid inference relies on further logical laws for justification, then such laws must figure among the premises to mediate this

---

<sup>2</sup> Henry Sheffer, review of *Principia Mathematica*, by Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, *Isis* 8, no. 1 (1926): 228.

<sup>3</sup> See Jasmin Trächtler, ‘Wittgenstein on “Imaginability” as a Criterion for Logical Possibility in *The Big Typescript*’, *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 9 (2020): 165–86, <https://doi.org/10.15845/nwr.v9i0.3536>, for a thorough discussion of what imaginability means in some of Wittgenstein’s writings on grammar. Similar lessons can be applied here—imaginability is not a psychological criterion and not a reason for something being logically impossible. Rather, ‘for Wittgenstein the scope of imaginability is determined by language’.

transition. But if so, then we are faced with the same problem of having to justify further why these rules can mediate such a transition.<sup>4</sup> Consider this typical example of a valid inference:

- (1) All whales are mammals;
- (2) All mammals are vertebrates;
- (3) Therefore, all whales are vertebrates.

Is there any further rule that justifies the inference of (3) from (1) and (2)? We can formulate *modus ponens* in this way:

$$((\forall x)(Fx \supset Gx) \ \& \ (\forall x)(Gx \supset Hx)) \supset (\forall x)(Fx \supset Hx)$$

Substituting  $Fx$  for ‘x is a whale’,  $Gx$  for ‘x is a mammal’, and  $Hx$  for ‘x is a vertebrate’, we would seem justified in drawing the conclusion that  $(\forall x)(x \text{ is a whale} \supset x \text{ is a vertebrate})$ .<sup>5</sup> But if this is so, then we can still ask what justifies this *modus ponens* law. Furthermore, do we require explicit knowledge of this rule as an additional premise, in order to be justified in our making the inference? Rather than succumb to an infinite regress of justificatory grounds, and added to that the impossibility of knowing or keeping in mind a whole host of propositions just to make one inference, in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein urges us to recognise that all we have done here is to restate in more explicit terms the calculation involved in this inference (cf. TLP 6.1262). This may be necessary in more complicated inferences in order to make perspicuous the connections between propositions, but this is not what justifies the inference. To restate the point, there is simply no question of justification here.

### 3.2.2 Internal relations

In view of the logocentric predicament, we can see why Wittgenstein stresses that it is simply the internal relation between propositions that constitutes a valid inference:

If the truth of one proposition follows from the truth of others, this finds expression in relations in which the forms of the propositions stand to one another: nor is it necessary for us to set up these relations between them, by combining them with one another in a single proposition; on the contrary, the relations are internal, and their existence is an immediate result of the existence of the propositions.

(TLP 5.131)

If  $p$  follows from  $q$ , I can make an inference from  $q$  to  $p$ , deduce  $p$  from  $q$ .

The nature of the inference can be gathered from only from the two propositions.

They themselves are the only possible justification of the inference.

‘Laws of inference’, which are supposed to justify inferences, as in the works of Frege and Russell, have no sense, and would be superfluous.

(TLP 5.132)

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Carroll, ‘What the Tortoise said to Achilles’, *Mind* 4, no. 14 (1985): 278–80.

<sup>5</sup> McGinn, *Elucidating the Tractatus*, 210.

An important aspect of this claim is that there is no mediating proposition or logical law, knowledge of which we must first acquire; in this way the problem of infinite regress is avoided.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Wittgenstein goes so far as to say that logical propositions may be redundant, so long as we have a perspicuous notation through which we can recognise the properties of propositions (TLP 6.122). We can already see that with the rejection of justification and knowledge in logic, this anticipates *On Certainty*'s hinge propositions which neither justify nor are knowledge.

For our present purposes, the question of what Wittgenstein's true target was when he mentioned 'the works of Frege and Russell' in relation to superfluous laws of inference is not of great importance; more important is the diagnosis and solution that Wittgenstein offers. Nonetheless I want to mention briefly the reasons that Ian Proops has given for casting doubt on the suggestion that the problem of infinite regress is the target of TLP 5.132. One reason Proops gives is that Russell was already aware of this problem and pointed it out in both the *Principles of Mathematics* and *Principia Mathematica*, and Wittgenstein read both works; thus the reference to Russell in TLP 5.132 cannot be about this problem. Another reason is that TLP 5.132 mentions that inference is grounded in *both* the premise(s) and conclusion—were Wittgenstein's main concern to be with infinite regress, we would expect him to say rather that logical laws are not necessary *as further grounds of inference*, and all that is required are the premises. So Proops argues that 'whatever *Wittgenstein* means by the "justification of an inference", it must be something in which the *conclusion* itself can figure'. Wittgenstein's true target, Proops alleges, is the accounts Frege and Russell both drew up of logical entailment involving 'an essential appeal to logical laws'.<sup>7</sup>

In response, it seems to me that even if Wittgenstein's true target was indeed something else, we need not exclude the possibility that the problem of infinite regress is still in the philosophical background of Wittgenstein's discussion of inference in the *Tractatus*. In any case, it continues to be illustrative of the logocentric predicament which Wittgenstein appears to accept. Indeed, in relation to the positive solution that Wittgenstein offers, Proops does not dispute that Wittgenstein's main point here in response to Frege and Russell is the internal relation between propositions. Furthermore, Proops also stresses that Wittgenstein is opposed to a conception of 'the laws of logic as fact-presenting statements'.<sup>8</sup> This opposition speaks to the worry alluded to above, that logical laws are statements one must have knowledge of in order to be able to make a valid inference, which complicates the matter of infinite

---

<sup>6</sup> Thomas G. Ricketts, 'Frege, The *Tractatus*, and the Logocentric Predicament', *Noûs* 19, no. 1 (1985): 11–2.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Proops, 'The *Tractatus* on Inference and Entailment', in *From Frege to Wittgenstein: Perspectives on Early Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Erich H. Reck (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 283–307. For a different take on Wittgenstein's target, see Gilad Nir, 'Rules of Inference: A Study in Early Analytic Philosophy', PhD diss. (University of Chicago, 2017), 168–98.

<sup>8</sup> Proops, 'The *Tractatus*', 293.

regress further. ‘Logic must turn out to be a *totally* different kind than any other science,’ writes Wittgenstein in a letter to Russell (NB, App. III, 120), making the point that unlike the empirical sciences logic does not discover new facts about the world. Indeed, in TLP 6.111 Wittgenstein is even more explicit about logic not being a science, suggesting that to think that it is would be to assert that logic not only discovers facts about propositions but also construes the properties of ‘true’ and ‘false’ as ‘two properties among other properties’ of propositions. That all propositions possessed one of these two properties would then appear to be a ‘remarkable fact’ that logic has discovered. But Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* is committed to the idea that one can understand a genuine, fact-presenting proposition independently of whether one knows its truth-value; to understand a proposition implies that one understands what it would be for it to be true or false. But as already explained above, owing to the logocentric predicament this is not possible for logical statements. Hence, they do not present facts, and therefore do not say anything that is true or false—they lack a sense, in the terminology of the *Tractatus*. This point about the nature of logic underscores the importance of internal relations: The only facts involved in inference are the facts of the propositions involved.

Kuusela explains another important facet of Wittgenstein’s denial that logic discovers facts about the world:

...although language users are not infallible with regard to what can be said or what makes sense (including what can be inferred from what), they must be assumed to possess the ability to tell sense from nonsense in principle, by virtue of their possessing linguistic competence or the ability to speak or think. Otherwise it becomes incomprehensible how language or thought are possible in the first place, since, clearly, the ability of linguistic agents to use language or to think (including inferring correctly and judging the correctness of inferences) cannot depend on logicians... For as long the laws of logic are conceived as objects of knowledge, i.e. something that we could be ignorant or mistaken about, rather than merely occasionally confused about, the laws or principles of logic cannot at the same time be regarded as something necessarily always already assumed in language use or thinking, and therefore binding. The laws of logic cannot be at once a possible object of scientific discoveries, and something always already relied upon by language users and thinkers.<sup>9</sup>

For this reason, Wittgenstein insists that logic ‘must look after itself’ (TLP 5.473); it is immanent in language use and a feature of the internal requirements of linguistic representation.

### 3.2.3 *Tautology*

Nonetheless, Proops’ point that whatever grounds inference must feature the conclusion itself is apt, because even if we accept that there is no need to fall into an infinite regress because the relevant premises are sufficient, we would still need to account for the drawing of the conclusion. Such talk would, perhaps, bring about the temptation to think of inferring as a ‘special activity’ which the mind carries out according to logical laws (RFM I, §17). But it is clear from TLP 5.132 that an inference is justified by both premise(s)

---

<sup>9</sup> Kuusela, *Wittgenstein on Logic*, 62–3.

and conclusion, rather than the premise(s) justifying the conclusion drawn. In other words, inference is not synonymous with the conclusion drawn, but with the set of all propositions involved as a whole.

Proops' concern is therefore a legitimate one, and I think it is addressed at least indirectly by Wittgenstein's Tractarian view that logical propositions, while lacking in sense and saying nothing as we discussed earlier, are not nonsense [*unsinn*] but are senseless [*sinnlos*], because they are tautologies. Let us first consider what Wittgenstein says about tautologies in TLP 4.461–4.462. Whereas a nonsensical statement simply does not say anything because its constituent words are not arranged in any syntactically meaningful way, tautologies—along with contradictions—appear at first glance to have a truth-value. Tautologies are always true while contradictions are always false. They are not nonsense as we can understand them syntactically. Despite this, they are not real propositions because they do not actually say anything about the world; they 'do not stand in any representational relation to reality'. Hence Wittgenstein says, 'I know nothing about the weather when I know that it is either raining or not raining'. Therefore on the Tractarian understanding of sense, tautologies and contradictions lack sense, but not being nonsensical Wittgenstein reserves the category of 'senseless' for them. Wittgenstein also stresses that although tautologies do not say anything, they are part of the symbolism of language—Wittgenstein likens this to the role of '0' in the symbolism of arithmetic. In the case of tautology, a proposition is structured such that all its conditions for representing the world 'cancel one another', making it true in all possible situations, since every possible combination of truth-values of its constituent elements is admitted into tautology. Conversely contradictions are structured such that that they are false in all possible situations. Thus, subsequently in TLP 4.466 Wittgenstein calls tautology and contradiction the 'limiting cases' of senseful propositions. As Medina puts it, tautology and contradiction 'show the limits of representational significance... It is between these limits that the logical space for meaningful discourse lies.' Possibility (senseful propositions), necessity (tautology) and impossibility (contradiction) are thus 'bound up with each other' within the same logic of linguistic representation.<sup>10</sup>

We can better appreciate now what is so significant about logical propositions being tautologies. Let us look at another brief series of remarks from the 6's in the *Tractatus*. Note that in the numbering system of the *Tractatus*,<sup>11</sup> 6.113 (along with 6.111 and 6.112) should be read as a comment on or development of 6.11, which is in turn an elaboration of 6.1. The tenor of the final remark quoted below indicates its central importance to Wittgenstein's early conception of logic:

The propositions of logic are tautologies.

---

<sup>10</sup> Medina, 'Deflationism', 368.

<sup>11</sup> See David Stern, 'Tree-structured readings of the *Tractatus*', *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 11 (2022–23): 7–52, <https://doi.org/10.15845/nwr.v11.3675>, for a discussion of the *Tractatus*'s numbering system.

Therefore the propositions of logic say nothing. (They are the analytic propositions.)

(TLP 6.1–6.11)

It is the peculiar mark of logical propositions that one can recognize that they are true from the symbol alone, and this fact contains in itself the whole philosophy of logic. And so too it is a very important fact that the truth or falsity of non-logical propositions *cannot* be recognized from the propositions alone.

(TLP 6.113)

The claim that tautology contains ‘in itself the whole philosophy of logic’ is a striking one. The contrast between logic and actual fact-presenting (i.e. empirical) statements is one we have already seen above from 6.111 in relation to the discovery of facts, but here this distinction takes on a new aspect. A tautology is necessarily true, but its necessity is not an empirical one: as TLP 6.113 above suggests, and as TLP 6.126 says more explicitly, the truth of tautology is known from a *calculation* of the properties of the symbolism alone. That is how we identify logical propositions. Two further subsequent remarks confirm the importance of calculation in understanding the nature of logic:

In logic process and result are equivalent. (Hence the absence of surprise.)

Proof in logic is merely a mechanical expedient to facilitate the recognition of tautologies in complicated cases.

(TLP 6.1261–6.1262)

Calculation is not an experiment.

(TLP 6.2331)

This sets the scene for logical necessity being, in one sense, an intra-linguistic matter. No experiment—no testing of reality—is needed to understand a statement, or inference, that is necessarily true. The process of proving a logical proposition is no different from the result; it is just a restating of the same proposition, just we saw above with the putative inference rule for justifying the conclusion that all whales are vertebrates. It is hence just a ‘mechanical expedient’ for recognising tautologies. This conception of logic as calculation also speaks to Proops’ point about our understanding of inference being something that involves both the premise(s) and conclusion, since both elements of the inference are required for the calculation to be complete. But the drawing of the conclusion from the premises is not some special activity; the conclusion is the same thing as the process of calculation.

So we can see why Wittgenstein emphasises that logical propositions, being tautologies, are neither confirmed nor refuted by experience (TLP 6.1222). They do however set limits for how we can speak intelligibly about experience. If my reading of Wittgenstein’s early philosophy of logic is correct thus far, we can see that this already contains a germ of the idea of rules of grammar, which do not describe reality but are rules for representation. The later philosophy contains a broader idea of what counts as logical truths, but there is a common idea with the Tractarian approach to logic.

Let us look a little more closely at the calculation of tautologies. A simple tautology would be something like:

$$p \supset p$$

Another simple tautology but with two elements this time, which Wittgenstein himself uses as part of his demonstration of the schema of different combinations of elementary propositions and their truth-grounds, is:

$$p \supset p \cdot q \supset q$$

One can also express logical laws as tautologies, such as the law of non-contradiction:

$$\sim(p \cdot \sim p)$$

Without the negation sign at the front, the proposition would be a contradiction: ‘ $p$  and not- $p$ ’. Such a proposition could only be false whatever the truth-value of its sole element,  $p$ . But by the whole proposition being negated, it becomes a proposition that is true whether the truth-value of  $p$  is true or false. On a similar basis one could construct artificially elaborate tautologies:

$$\sim([p \cdot \sim q] \cdot [\sim(p \cdot r) \cdot (q \vee r)])$$

In every combination of truth-values of  $p$ ,  $q$  and  $r$  this proposition would still be true. Even without a truth-table, we can unpack the calculation involved in this proposition bit by bit. Let us first ignore the opening negation sign. The first proposition in square brackets is the proposition ‘ $p$  and not- $q$ ’. But the truth-conditions of this proposition (namely that  $p$  is true and  $q$  false) cannot be fulfilled at the same time as the truth-conditions of the second proposition in square brackets, to which it is joined by the operation of conjunction. The second proposition in square brackets states has two parts: a negation of ‘ $p$  and  $r$ ’ (so only if both elements were true would this part be false) in conjunction with the disjunctive proposition ‘ $p$  or  $r$ ’ (true if one or both elements were true). It is clear now that the two propositions in square brackets are not compatible with each other, since if  $p$  is true then  $r$  cannot be true due to the negation of ‘ $p$  and  $r$ ’, but if  $r$  is not true then  $q$  must be true for the disjunction ‘ $q$  or  $r$ ’ to be true. But if  $q$  were true then ‘ $p$  and not- $q$ ’ is false. So without the opening negation sign, the whole proposition would be a contradiction: all its elements combine in such a way, through different operations, to erase any truth-possibility whatsoever. Now, if our calculation is right, then to get the complete reverse result all we need is to negate the entire proposition, and we get a tautology: a proposition that is true on all truth-value combinations of its elements.

Although this truth-functional way of discerning tautologies seems to be the paradigmatic case of tautology, Wittgenstein also allows that the proposition ‘ $(p \supset q) \cdot (p) \supset (q)$ ’ be treated as a tautology,



which thereby shows that  $q$  follows from  $p$  and  $p \supset q$  (TLP 6.1201). Unlike the examples just given above, ' $(p \supset q) \cdot (p) : \supset : (q)$ ' is not of the sort that will turn out to be true on all truth-values of its constituent elements. Wittgenstein's truth-functional analysis is of greatest utility when applied to elementary propositions because of the requirement that they be independent from each other. Hence a truth-tabular representation of a proposition made up of elementary propositions can exhaustively capture all possible truth-combinations. There would be no hidden inferential relations—indeed, if  $p$  and  $q$  were elementary propositions, there could be no inferential relation between them. So if  $q$  can be inferred from  $p$ , what must be the case is that they are more complex propositions and that they ultimately share truth-grounds (TLP 5.11). This difference, nonetheless, does not detract from the central point here that tautologies can be used as 'reminders or guides for inferences'.<sup>12</sup> ' $(p \supset q) \cdot (p) : \supset : (q)$ ' is still a proposition that fulfils the criterion of TLP 6.113 that its truth can be made out from a calculation of its symbols alone. It says nothing, but the fact that  $p$ ,  $q$  and  $\supset$  can be combined together to form a tautology shows that  $q$  follows from  $p$  (TLP 6.1201).

We have, then, two core elements of Wittgenstein's early account of logic of inference—internal relations and tautology—which, as I shall argue in the next section, survive the breakdown of the *Tractatus* system. But we have also now been introduced to two elements of the early philosophy of logic which will be put into question. The first is the strict separation between logic and empirical knowledge. The second is the idea of the conclusion of inference being automatically accounted for by the premises by virtue of the tautology involved.

### 3.3 Logic and thinking: Internally related concepts

I want to turn now to Wittgenstein's later philosophy of logic and discuss how the Tractarian core identified above undergoes a transformation, with a particular focus on internal relations. The notion of internal relations, in essence, becomes so expanded that it takes into its ambit our human needs and interests. That is how acting comes to be at the bottom of logical necessity, and this is the root of Wittgenstein's expanded view of logic.

#### 3.3.1 Enlarging internal relations: Negation and 'all'

With the disintegration of the *Tractatus* system, Wittgenstein no longer held that sense was guaranteed by essentially independent elementary propositions which he regarded as the smallest propositional unit of sense (the actual smallest unit being the logically proper names of simple objects, though they concatenate

---

<sup>12</sup> Nir, 'Rules of Inference', 283.

into these elementary propositions). Inferring one non-elementary proposition from another was ultimately an exercise in tautology because:

The truth-grounds of the one are contained in those of the other:  $p$  follows from  $q$ .

If  $p$  follows from  $q$ , the sense of ' $p$ ' is contained in the sense of ' $q$ '.

(TLP 5.121–122)

If both propositions were analysed down to their constituent elementary propositions this would become clear. But this is no longer what grounds inference, and nor is logic grounded in 'the essential nature of signs'.<sup>13</sup> Another part of the mythology of the *Tractatus* was that primitive ideas in logic were also independent of one another (TLP 5.451), and for logical signs to be introduced 'properly' then the sense of all their combinations should be introduced as well (TLP 5.46). Without these two requirements logic and language cannot function in an idealised, calculus-like manner, so how does Wittgenstein ground inference?

Wittgenstein continues to use the notion of internal relations, but now this is enlarged and applied to the relationship between logic and thinking itself—including the very notion of a proposition. Logic is not just the necessity that consists in the internal relation between certain appropriately related propositions, but is the necessity of the very use of propositions. This move is thus an expansion of Wittgenstein's response to the logocentric predicament that we previously discussed, and it paves the way for the wider notion of logic he comes to adopt:

The propositions of logic are 'laws of thought', 'because they bring out the essence of human thinking'—to put it more correctly: because they bring out, or shew, the essence, the technique, of thinking. They shew what thinking is and also shew kinds of thinking.

Logic, it may be said, shews us what we understand by 'proposition' and by 'language'.

(RFM I, §§133–4)

The steps which are not brought in question are logical inferences. But the reason why they are not brought in question is not that they 'certainly correspond to the truth'—or something of the sort,—no, it is just this that is called 'thinking', 'speaking', 'inferring', 'arguing'. There is not any question at all here of some correspondence between what is said and reality; rather is logic *antecedent* to any such correspondence; in the same sense, that is, as that in which the establishment of a method of measurement is *antecedent* to the correctness or incorrectness of a statement of length.

(RFM I, §156)

Whereas logic in the *Tractatus* is something mysterious and idealised, here logic is simply what we mean when we refer to speaking, inferring, etc. In this simple sense already Wittgenstein could very well say 'logic is just what we do', though this would leave many questions unanswered, so we must continue deepening our investigation.

---

<sup>13</sup> McGinn, *Elucidating the Tractatus*, 287.

In a similar vein we find that Wittgenstein begins to speak of the definition of a proposition as being a language-game. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein was committed to a strict notion of bipolarity—genuine propositions are either true or false. This seems to reflect a logical truth about events and how we talk about them:

In itself, a proposition is neither probable nor improbable. Either an event occurs or it does not: there is no middle way.

(TLP 5.153)

But in one of his Cambridge lectures Wittgenstein says that concept of ‘proposition’ is internally related to the fact that the law of excluded middle is a tautology:

But to say a proposition is what can be true or false comes to saying that what we mean by ‘proposition’ is partly given by the rule  $p \vee \sim p = \text{Taut}$ . It is what this and other rules apply to. And this means that these rules determine the game played with ‘proposition’.

(CL2, 140)

Elsewhere in these lectures, Wittgenstein also makes a comparison between negation and inference with respect to internal relations:

But how is the meaning of ‘negation’ defined, if not by the rules?  $\sim \sim p = p$  does not follow from the meaning of ‘not’ but constitutes it. Similarly,  $p, p \supset q. \supset .q$  does not depend on the meanings of ‘and’ and ‘implies’; it constitutes their meaning.

(CL2, 4, emphasis mine)

The narrower conception of internal relations and tautology had a place in the *Tractatus* because there Wittgenstein took for granted the immutability of basic logical operations. But in the later philosophy Wittgenstein does not take that for granted anymore. Even logical operations are to be explained by internal relations. This decisive move in Wittgenstein’s philosophy of logic is explored in greater depth in the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*—Appendix I, for instance, is a discussion of negation in which Wittgenstein repudiates the idea that the negation sign has a fixed, essential meaning. Why does double negation sometimes produce an affirmation, while at other times it strengthens the negation? (Think of the French ‘ne...pas’.) Neither result flows somehow from an immutable meaning of negation; they both represent different ways of constituting the meaning of a negation sign. Thus Wittgenstein writes:

Whoever calls ‘ $\sim \sim p = p$ ’ (or again ‘ $\sim \sim p \equiv p$ ’) a ‘necessary proposition of logic’ (not a stipulation about the method of presentation that we adopt) also has a tendency to say that this proposition proceeds from the meaning of negation. When double negation is used as negation in some dialect, as in ‘he found nothing nowhere’, we are inclined to say: *really* that would mean that he found something everywhere. Let us consider what this ‘really’ means.

(RFM App. I, §11)

A couple of remarks prior to this, Wittgenstein asks what meaning the strengthening of a double negation would have consisted in when one utters it. ‘In the circumstances in which I use the expression, perhaps

in the image that comes before my mind as I use it or which I employ, in my tone of voice' is at least a provisional answer Wittgenstein considers (RFM App. I, §5). Note here that the reference to 'the image that comes before my mind' has to be read in the light of the rule-following considerations in the *Investigations*. So long as we do not think of the mental image as forcing a particular meaning on us, Wittgenstein is not opposed to recognising its importance in our experience of language use. Of course, in the surface grammar of a language the difference between these two types of double negation could be marked by strict rules about the use of various negating words, as in French. But even without such surface-grammatical indications, double negation could still be used in a strengthening way, as in 'he found nothing nowhere'. Wittgenstein insists that these two types of negation are not 'different species of negation... That no one would say' (RFM App. I, §6). At root we have the same concept, but two logically plausible different uses. Wittgenstein offers a striking geometrical analogy to explain this, comparing negation to drawing half of a circle's circumference. Two half turns could cancel one another out or could make a single half turn, depending on how they are added together:

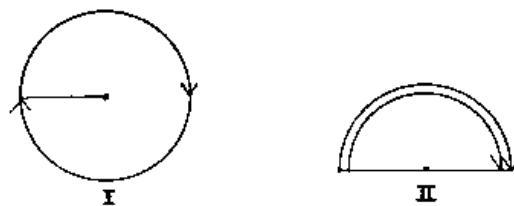


Fig. 1 (RFM App. I, §1)

None of this discussion is meant to show that ' $\sim\sim p = p$ ' is wrong, or arbitrary at best. The fundamental point here is that meaning is constituted by the different uses of the same sign, and even a sign like negation which seems so solid in its meaning—as if it were one of the foundation stones of the hardness of logic—admits of different grammatical uses. It is not that there is one 'real' meaning of negation and the other is an aberration or a derivative use, or that these are different concepts which happen to share the same word; both are permitted within the same concept. What delineates their different use is not always determinate, however, and one must look to factors like context, tone of voice, and the precise form of words used. Regarding tone of voice, a well-known story is told of J.L. Austin who claimed in a lecture at Columbia University that, unlike double negation resulting in an affirmation in some languages, there was no language in which a double positive results in negation. Sydney Morgenbesser, who was in the audience, supposedly muttered, 'Yeah, yeah'.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Debra Aarons, *Jokes and the Linguistic Mind* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 195.

The last factor—the form of words—seems to be of particular importance for Wittgenstein: when the wrong form of words is used, this could be misleading and lead to the wrong way of framing the issue at hand. Wittgenstein’s example is of an imaginary form of measurement designated by ‘W’ where 1 foot = 1 W while 2 W = 4 foot, 3 W = 9 foot and so on. We would be referring to the same length when we say ‘this post is 1 W long’ and ‘this post is 1 foot long’, but we would be framing the issue wrongly if we asked whether ‘W’ and ‘foot’ therefore have ‘the same meaning’ in these two sentences. (RFM App. I, §§12–3) This confusion trades on the ambiguities involved in the expression ‘the same’—sameness, similitude, equivalence are all concepts that have stricter and looser senses. Even to rephrase and ask, ‘Are W and foot the same measurement in these two sentences?’ would be misleading—it would depend on the context, and what shade in the spectrum of sameness will satisfy the questioner. When measuring this post, does it make a difference whether you use W or foot—after all the result is both 1 in each measurement? Well, it depends on what else you are measuring alongside this post!

In a similar vein to his remarks on negation, Wittgenstein makes this observation:

It is important that in our language—our natural language—‘all’ is a fundamental concept and ‘all but one’ less fundamental; i.e. there is not a *single* word for it, nor yet a characteristic gesture.

The *point* of the word ‘all’ is that it admits no exception.—True, that is the point of its use in our language; but the kinds of use we feel to be the ‘point’ are connected with the role that such-and-such a use has in our whole life.

(RFM I, §§15–6)

It seems to me that we can use these insights about the enlargement of internal relations to construct an account of *modus ponens* inference. The lesson we must learn is that in making even a strict logical inference we are not somehow compelled by the meanings of words like ‘all’ and ‘implies’. The very act of inferring in such-and-such a manner is constitutive of the meanings of these words. Words like ‘all’ and ‘not’ are particularly significant for logic, but they are not immutable logical constants. I will turn, therefore, to describing what such an account of inference might look like, on the basis of Wittgenstein’s remarks above.

### 3.3.2 Inference as use

Suppose one encountered the following sign stuck on the door of a library:<sup>15</sup>

All food and drink prohibited in the library Only bottled water permitted
--

---

<sup>15</sup> I once saw a similar sign in Wolfson College, Oxford, though I have modified its wording to bring out the logical point more strikingly.

If we were to take a strict logical reading of this sign, then the two statements are mutually incompatible. But that need not be the case if we do not take ‘all’ to only ever mean a strict, exceptionless *all*. We understand, given the context, that the second statement is meant to carve out an exception to the first, even though it does not use the more precise language we find in, say, Acts of Parliament that proclaim a broad prohibition and then specify exceptions or permitted defences.

Consider a similarly loose use of the word ‘all’:

- (4) All mammals give birth to young alive;
- (5) Platypuses lay eggs;
- (6) Therefore, platypuses are not mammals.

But the conclusion here is wrong. Once again, under a strict interpretation, we would be right in making such an inference. But the ‘all’ of the first premise only expresses a general rule about the classification of mammals, and in ordinary language ‘all’ is used in this way all the time (and in saying ‘all the time’ I am doubtless using ‘all’ even more loosely than in the first premise). Presented in the right form and in the right context, it would be clear to us that (4) is not expressing an exceptionless rule or empirical truth, much less an analytic definition of ‘mammal’—unlike ‘All bachelors are unmarried men’. So this syllogism is unsuccessful not because ‘all’ is used wrongly, but because the syllogistic form is quite an unnatural and misleading way of expressing what we mean to say here. It would be as if we tried to represent content from our library sign in the following way to ‘prove’ that the sign is self-contradictory:

- (7) All food and drink are prohibited in the library;
- (8) Bottled water is a kind of drink;
- (9) Therefore, bottled water is prohibited in the library.

Expressed in the right form relative to the needs of the situation, (4) and (5) when combined do not necessarily lead to a denial that platypuses are mammals, just as (7) to (8) need not lead to a prohibition of bottled water.

Returning then to our very first syllogism:

- (1) All whales are mammals;
- (2) All mammals are vertebrates;
- (3) Therefore, all whales are vertebrates.

What makes the conclusion (3) correct is not the premises on their own, but the whole syllogism—premises *and* conclusion. But unlike the *Tractatus* account, the inference is underpinned by more than just the internal relations between the propositions which underpin the inference. There is also the internal

relation between the propositions and the syllogistic form—and the syllogism, given its characteristic purpose in our language, is what constitutes the meaning of ‘all’ here. It seems like (3) is something we *have to* draw out from (1) and (2) when we understand the premises *properly*; we want to say, it follows inexorably from their meaning, and in particular the fact that ‘all’ means *all*. But this meaning of ‘all’ is not pre-ordained; it is so because of the needs of the linguistic agent, in the light of which the syllogism is put to use.

Hence, even in strict syllogistic inference, the conclusion is not something automatically accounted for just because of its internal relation to the premises. This internal relation does not exist except on account of the use required by the agent. This, I suggest, is the way to understand how the distinction between logic and empirical propositions becomes fluid in the context of strict logical inference, as I will now explain.

### 3.3.3 *The convergence of certainty and necessity*

Officially, Wittgenstein continues to contrast logic with empirical knowledge and reasoning, though this strict separation is gradually called into question. The way that he rethinks negation and ‘all’ are modest evidence of that, and has led us to imagine what an account of strict logical inference might be like on that basis. But let us return to more solid textual evidence.

In RFM I, §9 Wittgenstein writes, ‘What we call “logical inference” is a transformation of our expression,’ he says, and his paradigm example is that of passing from measuring in inches to measuring in centimetres on a ruler. His purpose in this discussion is to disabuse us of the notion that a logical inference has validity because it corresponds to reality. Hence he poses the following question:

But still, I must only infer what really *follows!*—Is this supposed to mean: only what follows, going by the rules of inference; or is it supposed to mean: only what follows, going by *such* rules of inference as somehow agree with some (sort of) reality? Here what is before our minds in a vague way is that this reality is something very abstract, very general, and very rigid. Logic is a kind of ultra-physics, the description of the ‘logical structure’ of the world, which we perceive through a kind of ultra-experience...

(RFM I, §8)

Wittgenstein does not deny that we do make inferences on the basis of empirical evidence, but these are inductive inferences and are not strictly logical in character: ‘The stove is smoking, so the chimney is out of order again’. This is the basis on which we act, not a properly logical inference like, ‘The stove is smoking, and whenever the stove smokes the chimney is out of order; and so...’ (RFM I, §8). The latter formulation has the requirements of logical necessity built into it, such that drawing the inference ‘The chimney is out of order’ would be absolutely correct. This would be another instance of *modus ponens*, and because of this structure Wittgenstein seems to think that it is unanswerable to reality. If we have made an inference in an inductive manner, and it turns out that the stove is smoking for some other reason,

then we simply ditch the proposition and infer what might actually be the case.<sup>16</sup> Whereas the statement of logical inference remains correct on the basis of those premises, whatever the empirical evidence might turn out to reveal. Thus Wittgenstein writes that a ‘logical conclusion is being drawn, when no experience can contradict the conclusion without contradicting the premises’; such an inference is ‘only a movement within the means of representation’ (RFM VII, §25).

In a later part of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein also makes this same contrast:

Does it *follow* from the sense-impressions which I get that there is a chair over there?—How can a *proposition* follow from sense-impressions? Well, does it follow from the propositions which describe the sense-impressions? No.—But don't I infer that a chair is there from impressions, from sense-data?—I make no inference!—and yet I sometimes do. I see a photograph for example, and say ‘There must have been a chair over there’ or again ‘From what I can see here I infer that there is a chair over there.’ That is an inference; but not one belonging to logic. An inference is a transition to an assertion; and so also to the behaviour that corresponds to the assertion. ‘I draw the consequences’ not only in words, but also in action.

(PI §486)

Inductive inference is thus rooted in facts, and crucially also linked to action. This is a familiar theme from the last chapter—inference of this kind is seen primarily as a practice into which we have been inducted, leading us to make inferences in certain characteristic ways. This is just what we do, and how we act, in such a situation. Importantly, this remark occurs in the context of a discussion about justification on the basis of past experience:

I shall get burnt if I put my hand in the fire—that is certainty.

That is to say, here we see what certainty means. (Not just the meaning of the word ‘certainty’ but also what certainty amounts to.)

(PI §474)

If anyone said that information about the past couldn't convince him that something would happen in the future, I wouldn't understand him. One might ask him: What do you expect to be told, then? What sort of information do you call a reason for believing this? What do you call ‘convincing’? In what kind of way do you expect to be convinced?—If *these* are not reasons, then what are reasons?

(PI §481)

So justification and evidence from the past are taken as being internally related, and they produce certainty, just as propositions and inferring (in the strict sense) are internally related with logic, and they produce necessity. So far, on the basis of these remarks, it seems like Wittgenstein officially remains committed to the *Tractatus* view of the strict separation between logic and experience. But is there anything that calls into question this view of non-overlapping magisteria?

My account of inference as use helps us to see that on such a view strict logical inference would not be as strictly distinguished from ordinary, inductive inference as Wittgenstein's official view suggests.

---

<sup>16</sup> Baker and Hacker, ‘Grammar and necessity’, 286–7.



The multiple senses of ‘all’ suggest that even the strictly logical sense of inference amounts to a characteristic way of acting; arguably ‘the logical’ is on a spectrum with ‘the empirical’. Where our linguistic use sits depends on our needs in a given context. This view matches up well with a second strand of thought found in Wittgenstein’s writings and lectures on mathematics, where his view on the relationship between logical and non-logical inference is more nuanced. In a sense it is important that the two types of inference are first strictly distinguished before the position can then be given some qualification, so that the tension between the two strands does not pose an insuperable problem. Let us look at two key moments where Wittgenstein presents this second strand.

In Lecture XXI of the *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics* Wittgenstein begins with the question, ‘How do we become convinced of a logical law?’ Wittgenstein stresses in this lecture that experience does not corroborate logical laws—we do not take someone’s inability to act on our instruction ‘Leave the room and don’t leave the room’ as proof of the law of non-contradiction. Instead, Wittgenstein ties our being convinced of logical laws to learning the use of words. An important part of our use of words is the elimination of sentences we do not use, like contradictions. This shows itself in action; Wittgenstein’s example is of a general who has to deal with two contradictory reconnaissance reports, one stating there are 30,000 enemy soldiers and the other that there are 40,000. Both cannot be true, and each has a bearing on how one might respond to the situation militarily. The general therefore has to make a choice and act on one report—perhaps he knows one of the reporting soldiers is prone to exaggeration. Wittgenstein draws this conclusion:

‘Recognizing the law of contradiction’ would come to: acting in a certain way which we call ‘rational’.

(LFM XXI)

Although both the example of leaving the room and that of the general involve experience, the problem with the first case is that it treats logic as something to be justified by experience—in essence, a kind of knowledge. Wittgenstein continued to reject this view as he did in his Tractarian period, as discussed previously. The second case shows that a logical law is something *put to use*—it serves our needs and interests in the given situation. Usefulness alone is not what makes a logical law valid; indeed most of our other linguistic concepts which we adopt because of their usefulness do not involve strict logical inference. But what the example suggests is that logic is also tied to characteristic ways of acting and that there are situations where strict logical inference is called upon. So although logical inference is not answerable to reality in order for it to be correct, it is adopted because, to speak loosely, the situation calls for it. This difference is a subtle one, and it adds an extra dimension to the internal relation between logical laws and the meaning of ‘rational’. The external world itself does not command us as to what is rational or logical to do in this regard; but it is in our reacting to the world that the demands of rationality manifest

themselves in how we act. There are looser concepts in life like buying and selling where we can allow for a variety of systems, although with others like Wittgenstein's wood-sellers we would struggle to call this buying and selling—it is noteworthy that in this same lecture Wittgenstein refers to this same example as 'a kind of logical madness', though he later suggests this could be made sense of if we knew something more of their history. (See Sections 2.4.1 and 2.4.3 for my discussion of the wood-sellers.) But when we are speaking of rationality, a more fundamental concept than buying and selling, then the field of possible systems narrows considerably.

Let us look at the other place where Wittgenstein speaks of logical inference in relation to action. Similar to LFM XXI's emphasis on logical laws being related to our techniques for the use of words, in Part VII, §30 of the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* we find Wittgenstein describing logical inference as 'part of a language-game'; carrying out a logical inference is here likened to following instructions, such as someone building a house according to instructions given him, who therefore has to make calculations every now and then to ensure that his work with the building materials is carried out 'in conformity with the result'. He then gives an example identical in structure to the example of the smoking stove. In this case, someone who cleans the axle of a wheelbarrow when it does not move is acting on a non-logical inference of 'The wheelbarrow won't push. So the axle needs cleaning' rather than 'Whenever the wheelbarrow can't be pushed...'. Wittgenstein then uses these two contrasting examples to ask two questions that are targeted at his official view of the separation between the logical and the empirical: 'Can I now say: "Non-logical inference can prove wrong; but logical inference not"? Is logical inference correct when it has been made according to rules; or when it is made according to *correct* rules?'

This is a significant moment in Wittgenstein's philosophical development because he does not give an unqualified 'yes' to the first question; nor does he unambiguously reject the suggestion that logical inference is correct when made according to *correct* rules. Wittgenstein does not make a full about-turn from his view that logical inference is a movement within the rules of representation and hence no experience can contradict it. What room does he have left for manoeuvre? He suggests thus:

It might be said: experiment—calculation are poles between which human activities move.

(RFM VII, §30)

Just as in LFM XXI the suggestion is that there are some activities which require the precision and the idealness of strict logic. In fact, this is already suggested in the very early part of Part I's discussion on inference in the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*:

'But then what does the peculiar inexorability of mathematics consist in?'—Would not the inexorability with which two follows one and three two be a good example? [...] We should presumably not call it 'counting' if everyone said the numbers one after the other *anyhow*; but of course it is not simply a question

of a name. For what we call 'counting' is an important part of our life's activities. Counting and calculating are not—e.g.—simply a pastime. Counting (and that means: counting like *this*) is a technique that is employed daily in the most various operations of our lives. And that is why we learn to count as we do: with endless practice, with merciless exactitude; that is why it is inexorably insisted that we shall all say 'two' after 'one', 'three' after 'two' and so on.—But is this counting only a *use*, then; isn't there also some truth corresponding to this sequence?' The *truth* is that counting has proved to pay.—'Then do you want to say that "being true" means: being usable (or useful)?'—No, not that; but that it can't be said of the series of natural numbers—any more than of our language—that it is true, but: that it is usable, and, above all, *it is used*.

(RFM I, §4)

But we have to wait till much later, in the portion of Part VII just discussed, to see this idea used to add nuance to the strict separation of the logical and the empirical, in a way which prefigures *On Certainty*.

In my view, the fundamental question prompted by these remarks of Wittgenstein's is this: What need do we have of necessity? There is no analytic answer to this question—to define necessary conditions for necessity would be circular. Rather, the answer shows itself in action. We react and grasp with certainty, on the basis of a range of ordinary circumstances which are hard to define (see Section 2.4.3) which situations require strict logical necessity and which do not. Cleaning the axle of a wheelbarrow and building a house are both practical activities but they are on different ends of a spectrum of necessity. In the former case, we do not use strict logical inference because we know that there are many other possible causes for the wheelbarrow being immobilised, though dirt trapped in the axle might be the most common one. With building a house, however, the stakes are much higher and we resort to mercilessly exact calculations because they eliminate as much as possible the possibility of unforeseen causes of damage on our houses. The time for experimentation is past; now, rigid calculation alone will fulfil our interests. Just as the regularity of rule-following in language is our regularity, the necessity of logic is our necessity—when our interests demand (need) it. This sense of what level of necessity to apply is another presupposition of language-learning and is manifested in the context of our web of concepts.

To conclude this section, let us look at something McGinn says in relation to the rigour of logic in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. McGinn is not wrong to say that the rigour of logic is 'the rigour with which human beings are taught to calculate, think, and infer' and it is 'internal to our practice of inference and calculation'; Wittgenstein realises that it 'never depended upon the idealized conception of logic as the essence of representation—on the idea of the formal unity or essence of a proposition' as he had once imagined in the *Tractatus*.<sup>17</sup> But what must not be ignored is the fact that the ideal, even if no longer the 'essence of representation', still fulfils an important function in our concept-formation. The ideal is just one part of the way we react to the acquisition of concepts. Acknowledging this, of course, goes against the grain of the more well-known strand of Wittgenstein's thought which emphasises the strict separation

---

<sup>17</sup> McGinn, *Elucidating the Tractatus*, 288.

between the logical and the empirical—the image of the logical machine in contrast with the actual machine, whose parts are subject to wear and tear, in the rule-following considerations being one key moment in the later philosophy where Wittgenstein seems to be particularly dismissive of the importance of the logical ideal.<sup>18</sup> However, when we look at the last writings we find that Wittgenstein is equivocal about this.<sup>19</sup> When discussing colour concepts, Wittgenstein on the one hand calls the idea of a pure colour concept as a ‘chimera’ and a ‘false idealization’ (LWPP2, 48). He wonders where such an ‘illusion’ comes from and whether we are dealing with ‘a premature simplification of logic’ (ROC III, §74). Yet he also speaks more positively of the *use* of ideals:

Lichtenberg says that very few people have ever seen pure white. Do most people use the word wrong, then? And how did *he* learn the correct use?—On the contrary: he constructed an ideal use from the actual one. The way we construct a geometry. And ‘ideal’ does not mean something specially good, but only something carried to extremes.

And of course such a construct can in turn teach us something about the actual use.

And we could also *introduce* a new concept of ‘pure white’, e.g. for scientific purposes.

(A new concept of this sort would then correspond to, say, the chemical concept of a ‘salt’.)

(ROC III, §§35–§)

In everyday life we are virtually surrounded by impure colours. All the more remarkable that we have formed a concept of *pure* colours.

(ROC III, §59)

Thus we can say that the ideal of strict logical inference is something that we construct and use on the basis of our interaction with the world, which sits on one extreme of a spectrum that includes other, looser forms of reasoning. When it comes to classifying whales, building houses and acting on reconnaissance reports in war, the ideal is not forced upon us, but is something that we find useful, unlike in classifying platypuses, cleaning axles and bringing water bottles into libraries. Just as we saw with the rules of grammar in the last chapter, the reality of the logical ideal is not only constituted by internal relations between propositions, but also founded on the way we act.

### 3.4 Wittgenstein’s expanded notion of logic

Wittgenstein’s claim that logic is founded in ways of acting in *On Certainty* is one that, therefore, has deep roots in his later philosophy. The *Tractatus*, as we have seen, also played a role in this development, already rejecting the notion that logic requires justification or knowledge, which paved the way for the

---

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Philip Bold, ‘Crossing pictures of “determination” in Wittgenstein’s remarks on rule-following’, *Philosophical Investigations* 00, no. 0 (2023): 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phn.12394>.

<sup>19</sup> An early sign of this less dismissive stance towards the ideal is also found at the end of the *A Lecture on Ethics* which predates the *Investigations*: ‘This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science... But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it’ (LE, 12).

importance of internal relations. It is time to connect these insights about logical necessity more directly to *On Certainty*. We have already seen how the relation of logic and action, in Wittgenstein's writings and lectures on mathematics, is of a piece with *On Certainty*'s second logical claim—the rejection of a sharp boundary between logic and empirical propositions, and with that the importance of reactions and ordinary circumstances. I want to relate this to the wider notion of logic, which takes in everything descriptive of a language-game, in order to explain the relationship of logic and action in the specific context of *On Certainty*.

### 3.4.1 *The use of the logical ideal*

What does Wittgenstein's wider notion of logic consist in? I want to suggest that it is the same logic as that involved in strict logical inference. From the considerations discussed above we can see that even strict logical inference is related to our manner of acting and our interests, just like other aspects of language. It is what we might call a narrower sense of logic, as opposed to the wider sense that Wittgenstein refers to in OC §§56;628, which takes in everything descriptive of a language-game.

We can understand this point through a comparison with Wittgenstein's use of the word 'grammar', which is also a logical concept for Wittgenstein, expressing rules for use of concepts. For Wittgenstein, his apparently idiosyncratic use of grammar is not intended as a new technical term, which would have been out of step with Wittgenstein's aversion to theory (cf. PI §109). Wittgenstein thought that his investigation of grammar was continuous with the surface grammar studied by professional linguists.<sup>20</sup> Grammar as we normally understand it deals with the way words get modified when combined with each other, in order to signify things like case, tense and number—as well as what sort of combinations are invalid. But even where the outward form of a word does not change, words are still bound by combinatorial rules which relate to the concepts they represent; so one can talk about travelling to the North Pole but not to the East Pole. For Wittgenstein, 'East Pole' is as ungrammatical an expression as 'she will come yesterday'. One might say that surface grammar rules are reminders that we are dealing with categories that give a certain basic order to thought and language, like time (tense), individuation (singular or plural) and action (subject and object); that is why their combinatorial rules tend to be particularly strict. So even surface grammar cannot be divorced from the conceptual underpinnings of language, and grammatical rules of this kind help us communicate ideas more precisely. What Wittgenstein draws our attention to with his wider sense of the rules of grammar—simply the rules of use of any word—is that even where we are not dealing with these basic categories of thought, words are not passive labels but active concepts, and certain combinations are more felicitous than others, with

---

<sup>20</sup> Anscombe, 'A Theory', 155–6.

many also being excluded because they violate the concepts involved. Tense and number might be traditional grammatical concepts, but light and dark are also grammatical concepts—one cannot say that a bulb is shining darkly.<sup>21</sup>

I suggest that likewise we do not think of Wittgenstein's wider view of logic as a term co-opted from the logic of set theory, syllogistic reasoning and the like, and used for only vaguely analogous purposes. Rather, it is the same logic. Logic in the later philosophy is no longer a mythical, idealised structure that language must follow in order to represent reality successfully. The rules of grammar which mark out our different language-games *are* the rules of logic, for they proscribe what we can or cannot say intelligibly.

But this supposed continuity between formal logic and the all-pervasive logic of *On Certainty* seems, nonetheless, to bridge a wider philosophical gulf than that between surface grammar and the wider notion of grammar. How does Wittgenstein link these two elements together? A clue can be found in Wittgenstein's Cambridge lectures from 1932–33:

In what sense are laws of inference laws of thought?

Can a reason be given for thinking as we do? Will this require an answer outside the game of reasoning? There are two senses of 'reason': reason for, and cause. These are two different orders of things. One needs to decide on a criterion for something's being a reason before reason and cause can be distinguished. Reasoning is the calculation actually done, and a reason goes back one step in the calculus. A reason is a reason only inside the game. To give a reason is to go through a process of calculation, and to ask for a reason is to ask how one arrived at the result. The chain of reasons comes to an end, that is, one cannot always give a reason for a reason. But this does not make the reasoning less valid. The answer to the question, Why are you frightened?, involves a hypothesis if a cause is given. But there is no hypothetical element in a calculation.

(CL2, 4)

This contrast between what is outside and inside the game of reasoning is reminiscent of Gödel's well-known incompleteness theorems, published in 1931, with which Wittgenstein was familiar.<sup>22</sup> Gödel's insight was that a system cannot be both complete and fully consistent. When we ask a fundamental question as Wittgenstein does such as why we think in the way we do, this seems to appeal to something that is not established within the system of reasoning but outside of it, à la Gödel. But for Wittgenstein the necessity of logical inference is internal to the calculation, and we cannot give a *reason* that stands 'outside the game of reasoning' but which gives the reasoning its validity.

---

<sup>21</sup> Indeed, a language can do fairly well even without obvious expressions of surface grammar. In a character-based language like Chinese, prefixes and modifications of word-endings do not exist, and as a result it is commonplace to hear English-speakers say that 'Chinese has no grammar'. But grammatical categories like tense are conveyed in other ways, such as by words indicating temporality. When it comes to Wittgenstein's expanded notion of grammar, Chinese words are also subject to their own rules of use, as in any language.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. RFM VII, §§19;21–3 and App. III, §7–20.

To understand how Wittgenstein overcomes this problem, let us return for a moment to RFM VII where we saw that Wittgenstein's example of strict logical inference was that of someone building a house in conformity with calculations carried out beforehand of the materials. It would be a misunderstanding to think that the fact that our well-tested calculations seem to work very well in holding up our houses is proof that logic is therefore *justified* by agreement with the world. But as I argued earlier, an important part of grasping and applying concepts is our sense of the required level of strictness appropriate to the context—though this is as vague as 'ordinary circumstances'. It is through natural human reactions such as this, and those others discussed in the last chapter, that the world becomes part of language. So the role of our reactions in explaining and constraining why we think in the way we do is not 'outside the game of reasoning'. Rather, our reactions provide 'prototype[s]' of thought (Z §541). The strictness of logical inference is a matter of our choosing to follow that standard, but it is not a choice in the sense of choosing after deliberation of different options—that would be the kind of agreement in opinions, as opposed to reactions or judgements, that Wittgenstein rejects (PI §242). It is a choice made out of primitive certainty, which we cannot change at will:

What does man think for? What use is it?—Why does he make boilers according to *calculations*, and not leave the thickness of their walls to chance? After all, it is only a fact of experience that boilers made according to these calculations do not explode so often. But, just as having once been burnt, he would do anything rather than put his hand into a fire, so too he would do anything rather than not calculate for a boiler.

(PI §466)

We can approach the importance of this view of logic from a different angle: What if we discovered a flaw in our calculations? Wittgenstein discusses this in subsequent remarks in RFM VII following the suggestion that calculation and experimentation are poles of human activity:

There is a contradiction here. But we don't see it and we draw conclusions from it. E.g. we infer mathematical propositions; and wrong ones. But we accept these inferences.—And now if a bridge collapses, which we built on the basis of these calculations, we find some other cause for it, or we call it an Act of God. Now was our calculation wrong; or was it not a calculation?

Certainly, if we are explorers observing the people who do this we shall perhaps say: these people don't calculate at all. Or: there is an element of arbitrariness in their calculations, which distinguishes the nature of their mathematics from ours. And yet we should not be able to deny that these people have a mathematics.

[...] I mean: if a contradiction were now actually found in arithmetic—that would only prove that an arithmetic with *such* a contradiction in it could render very good service; and it will be better for us to modify our concept of the certainty required, than to say that it would really not yet have been a proper arithmetic.

'But surely this isn't ideal certainty!'—Ideal for what purpose?

(RFM VII, §§34–5)

This example serves a different purpose from the wood-sellers with their strange way of calculating the price of wood which Wittgenstein describes as 'logical madness' (LFM XXI), or the tribe in *On Certainty*

who believe that they travel to the moon in their dreams, from whom Wittgenstein thinks we should feel ‘intellectually very distant’ (OC §108). Here Wittgenstein accepts that this way of using mathematics, however flawed and arbitrary, is still a bona fide type of mathematics. But the point is similar to what I discussed in Section 2.4.1. A ‘reason is a reason only inside the game’ as Wittgenstein says in the Cambridge lecture quoted above. When one has not been inducted into a language-game—such as ‘explorers observing the people who do this’ in RFM VII—then one sees certain inconsistencies as flaws in the system. One would easily question whether calculations made with the flawed system were logically necessary ones. But when one is playing the language-game, one is operating with comfortable certainty (see Section 2.4.3). One lesson we learnt from the last chapter is that we cannot expect our systems to be perfect and complete. But logical necessity arises from within, through the first-personal normative attitude we have adopted in placing ourselves under a certain standard. Only from that first-person standpoint can we access the necessity of logic, within the relevant language-game and its application. And this is also how the sharp distinction between logic—necessity—and empirical evidence—certainty—converge into a certainty that is not empirical, but logical in its role.

Wittgenstein’s question at the end of the passage quoted, ‘Ideal for what purpose?’, should therefore not be interpreted as a wholesale rejection of the logical ideal. Rather, the ideal exists when there is a purpose for it, and we know the shape of this ideal through our certainty in reacting to and grasping a particular concept in its use. So logic in Wittgenstein’s wider sense takes in all of what contributes to language being as it is—our reactions to stimuli which consist our sense of regularity, similarity, ordinary circumstances, and now also the appropriate level of strictness, which exists on a spectrum depending on our purposes and needs. These all condition and shape language, not from without, but from within, through its application that we already find ourselves thrust into. In this way the ideal of strict logical inference is one part of this wider logic—it is part of the circular relation between our reactions and rules which encompasses the whole web of concepts in which we are embedded.

To return the remarks in *On Certainty* that articulates the third logical claim, we can see why Wittgenstein says that there is no catch-all definition of what is to count as the test of an empirical claim, for which we think there should be a clear logical standard. Ultimately it comes down to ‘an ungrounded way of acting’ (OC §110). What counts as an adequate test of an empirical claim relies on an ungrounded standard, e.g. about the principle of induction or a more specific rule of testing like the boiling point of water; a normative attitude expressed in our acting enables us to play the relevant language-game with certainty. This normative attitude includes, among other things, the adoption of a strict standard of necessity in some cases, and others a more relaxed standard. So what might seem to be a particular point about the ‘logic of our scientific investigations’, where certainty is manifest through those things that are



‘*in deed* not doubted’ (OC §342), is connected to the expanded notion of logic (cf. OC §§56;204) which includes all those things that condition the whole web of concepts in language. In this way, we see the unity of all three logical claims of *On Certainty*.

### 3.4.2 *Logic as the limit of grammar*

To conclude this section, I want to turn finally to the role of tautology in the later philosophy, and highlight the link between logic and the limits of concept-formation. Is there nothing special at all about strict logical inference, since it is just part of a spectrum of strictness?

Let us start with the context of the wider view of logic. Here we can say that the rules of logic are simply the rules of grammar—they determine what we can say intelligibly. And the regularity required for the grasping of rules is of a piece with the strictness with which we adhere to our rules; indeed, regularity and strictness are grammatically related concepts, and they bring out different aspects of thinking. That is why Wittgenstein, as we saw at the start this chapter, suggests that the line between what is thinking and what is not is just like the line between what is regular and what is not (RFM I, §116). This is not just an analogy; the latter concept, regularity, helps to illuminate the former. In some cases, we grasp the regularity and strictness required of the concept with great certainty; in others, less so.

What we must realise, then, is that in life we operate on a spectrum of certainties. Arguably, in descending order: I am certain that after checking my blind-spot it is safe to reverse the car, but it is always possible that in that half a second a cyclist coming from a side street at abnormally high speed appears in it. I am certain that interviewing a random selection of local residents will give an accurate estimate of this town’s voting intentions with a particular margin of error for that sample size, but there is at least a theoretical possibility that the random selection was more skewed than is statistically expected. I am certain that yelling at my boss will be counter-productive as he will react badly, but in extreme cases, e.g. if I am bullied, I might have to resort to it. I am certain these shares are likely to yield dividends in the current climate, though you never know. I am certain that voting for this politician will achieve this aim because in the past he has promised... The line between when we are justified, e.g. on the grounds of past experience, and when we are acting foolishly—unreasonably, or unthinkingly—is not always clear-cut. What matters is when we agree in our actions to adopt some regularly occurring certainty as normative, and some cases will be more obvious than others—hence Sorin Bangu talks about the role of ‘hyperstable regularities’:

As Wittgenstein emphasizes again and again, the key-platitude at the bottom of all this is that whenever and wherever there is language, there are regularities (PI 207)—and, when some of these happen to be extremely robust, we have an (implicit) ‘logic’. Then, under the pressure of various practical constraints and interests, some of these hyperstable regularities are, at some point, endowed with normative force.

At a later stage, in order to ensure social uniformity, the rules may be explicitly and carefully taught to those who are about to enter the linguistic community...<sup>23</sup>

In this way, we can see that tautology still plays a role in logic and language—though a more limited one. We are no longer talking about the cases of tautology in the *Tractatus*, which applied principally to elementary propositions. Those tautologies were constructed in such a way that they turn out to be true on all combinations of truth-values of their constituent elements. But in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein also allowed that ‘ $(p \supset q) \cdot (p) \supset (q)$ ’ be treated as a tautology although it is not of this kind. In fact this could not apply to elementary propositions because it expresses an inferential relation between two distinct propositions, and that would be possible with independent elementary propositions and that could not apply to elementary propositions which for the *Tractatus* are independent from each other. But ‘ $(p \supset q) \cdot (p) \supset (q)$ ’ can still be considered a tautology since its truth can be made out from a calculation of its symbols alone. And so in the Cambridge lectures Wittgenstein clarifies that it is not a rule of inference for logic (in the narrow sense), but it applies to ordinary propositions:

The proposition  $p \supset q \cdot p \supset q$  is a pattern by means of which the conclusion  $q$  is inferred; but  $q$  is not inferred. What allows the inference of  $q$  is not what the propositions *says* but the fact that it is a tautology. The rule of inference is not  $p \supset q \cdot p \supset q$  but ‘ $p \supset q \cdot p \supset q$  is a tautology’. The use of this rule is to make an inference from one *ordinary* proposition to another. Such a rule is to be distinguished from a rule of inference in a logical system. A rule of the latter kind is applied to the primitive propositions and their consequences, not to ordinary propositions.

(CL2, 138)

It is the *recognition* of ‘ $p \supset q \cdot p \supset q$ ’ as a tautology that allows it to license inferences among ordinary propositions. This point is hugely important for understanding *On Certainty*. Nature itself does not tell us to recognise certain relations as tautological for the purposes of linguistic representation; but one characteristic way of reacting to the world is in treating certain relations as tautological in this more ordinary sense of tautology. Rules of grammar are expressions of this kind of tautology which has its roots in our reactions; in fact, given that a sample is, for Wittgenstein, part of language (PI §16), when we say ‘This  $\rightarrow$  is red’ pointing to a red object, this is in effect a tautology. To use the language of the *Tractatus*, one is identifying a limiting case of the intelligibility of our concepts. These are not universal limits, which if they exist are properly vague (see Section 2.4.3), but are the limits pertaining to our use of these concepts.

Of course, having established a tautology—an analytic definition—in language, we are not bound to it at all times by the force of logical necessity. Our use of concepts is itself on a spectrum, because our needs in each context are different. There will be times when we are using our concepts in a very narrow

---

<sup>23</sup> Sorin Bangu, ‘Hard and Fast: On Wittgenstein’s Genealogical View of Logical Necessity’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 102, no. 2 (2021): 453.

way, making as few connections to other concepts as possible. We may be using a language-game purely as an internal system, to make a point about principle—so we talk strictly about all mammals being vertebrates and giving birth to young alive, or water boiling at 100°C. At other times, the tautology is loosened as we realise that we are rarely, if ever, using pure water; tap water with impurities or with fluoride will, for instance, not boil strictly at 100°C; we also realise our classification systems frequently admit of exceptions like platypuses, which is why we cannot infer axiomatically from ‘all mammals give birth to young alive’ to ‘platypuses are not mammals’. Perhaps when urgently making a cup of tea 95°C will be good enough for boiling. Red is red, but we might still call something red even in very poor lighting; or we might call a book red so long as that is the dominant colour on its cover. This is yet another feature of the ‘ordinary circumstances’ of rule-following. But notice also that some concepts will be more suitable for very strict use,<sup>24</sup> especially more basic ones, while others will be looser concepts. Michael Forster gives a few examples to consider:

...common sense frequently seems to violate the law of excluded middle in connection with vague predicates in what appear to be useful ways (‘Is this a river or not?’ ‘Well, neither, it’s in between’; ‘Is Hegel a religious thinker or not?’ ‘One can’t really say yes or no’).<sup>25</sup>

Such complex concepts as ‘river’ or ‘religious thinker’ will still have their limiting cases—paradigmatic applications of them—but these limiting cases do not bind other applications in a tight, axiomatic way.

So what we can say about strict logical inference is that it is not a law of thought or a language-game that regulates other language-games; rather, it is simply the strictest application within a particular language-game. We may have a paradigm of a concept, but when that concept comes into contact with other concepts or other unexpected features of the world we adjust its strictness accordingly. We cannot say in advance all the circumstances where we will use the strictest application, but this form of logical necessity will manifest itself according to our needs. In this respect, it is worth recalling Anscombe in *Intention* saying that ‘the primitive sign of wanting is *trying to get*’.<sup>26</sup> We might ask here: What is the primitive sign of needing? This, I think, is what Wittgenstein meant in bringing words back from their metaphysical uses to their everyday ones (PI §116). Logical necessity is no longer shrouded with mystery; it comes from our needing something so badly that we will, e.g. strictly adhere to our calculations for fixing boilers and building houses.

Seen in this way we do not have to worry about the related question of why it seems difficult to think of possible alternatives to classical logic, which one would think is possible if logic were just a

---

<sup>24</sup> I take inspiration from the idea in Maddy, *The Logical Must*, 30–1, who says that classical logic is true only of, and contingent on, those parts of the world that are appropriately structured; logic is thus like ‘a template that fits onto the world when and only when certain conditions are met’.

<sup>25</sup> Forster, *Arbitrariness*, 124.

<sup>26</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), §68.

grammatical concept. All concepts, as we have seen, are intertwined with one another, and logic is one of the most ubiquitously intertwined concepts. Yet there is one final point to consider: It seems that on this basis, even if by principles like the law of non-contradiction we are really talking about the strictest application of a concept, does it not identify a kind of logical limit? Strict logical inference is, I want to suggest, the outer limit of the grammar of logic. Logic has now been shorn of its crystalline purity, but its outer shape still persists in our imagination, giving us an ideal which at least sometimes suits our purposes.

### 3.5 Logic as action

Logical necessity therefore rests, in Maddy's words, 'on the familiar Wittgensteinian trio of our interests, our nature, and the world's regularities'.<sup>27</sup> Once we are clear that logic is not sharply distinct from the empirical realm, then logic has to take in everything that shapes our language, because logic cannot anticipate its application a priori (TLP 5.557). But language, conditioned by our reactions to the world, shows the application of logic—when it is strictly applied, when it is not. With this demonstration of the unity of *On Certainty's* three logical claims, my Tractarian reading of *On Certainty* is also complete. The logical requirements of language come from its application to the world, and the limits of what can be said are only accessed through our vague sense of ordinary circumstances. *On Certainty*, in summary, corrects the defects of the *Tractatus* while keeping a sense of the importance of the 'old problem'; by treating language as always and already in contact with its application, it does not mysteriously mirror the logic of the world, but it embodies the logic of our reactions to the world as manifest in our forms of life. This practical realism of *On Certainty* is thus the logical fruition of the investigation Wittgenstein began with the *Tractatus*.

This realist vision of language, I suggest, is also a sui generis kind of naturalism—rather than try to argue about definitions of naturalism, my approach has been to describe what I think Wittgenstein's version consists in. And the answer, on the basis of these three chapters, is that the whole of human life is a logical concept, pervading and conditioning language through action, rather than a set of empirical data to which language corresponds.

With that, I turn back to the second line of inquiry mentioned at the end of Chapter 1, which concerns the search for basic concepts that are unassailable. We now have some idea of what the unassailability of a concept (LWPP2, 43–4) would look like. It must concern a concept which is prone to being applied in a strict fashion very often. Let us recall Wittgenstein's question from the Cambridge lectures: Why do we think in the way we do? We cannot answer this question by looking at language

---

<sup>27</sup> Maddy, *The Logical Must*, 78.

isolated from ‘our interests, our nature, and the world’s regularities’. In the last chapter I suggested that while concepts provide conditions of intelligibility through grammatical rules, concepts themselves are subject to a standard of intelligibility given by our reactions, though that standard is perhaps ineliminably vague. Here in our discussion of necessity, we can ask the analogous question: Concepts give the conditions for strict application--when we need it—of certain linguistic rules, but are there also concepts which we strictly need? Why, for example, do we strictly adhere to calculations when we build houses? What is it about house-building that makes us need this necessity? Building shelter and building a safe one at that is not an optional end of thinking and reasoning; it is a human necessity. By this, I am making an anthropological (empirical) point but also a logical one. Logic is conditioned by human needs, as shown by our actions; reasoning does not take place in a vacuum.<sup>28</sup> This is a hugely important point for understanding the nature of reasoning about action, and as I will suggest, also about ethics. To those two topics I now turn, so that we can arrive at an account of basic, unassailable concepts in reasoning. This will take us beyond a reading of Wittgenstein, though it will be an account that is grounded in *On Certainty*’s logical insights.

---

<sup>28</sup> For an extended discussion of whether practical reasoning can be ‘pure’, with reference to Kant and Aristotle, see Jennifer A. Frey, ‘Against Autonomy: Why Practical Reason Cannot be Pure’, *Manuscripta* 41, no. 4 (2018): 153–93.

## **Part II**

### **The Linguistic Perspective on Ethics**

## Chapter 4.

### The Practical Syllogism in Action: From Logic to Ethics

In this chapter, I argue that the practical syllogism is not a mirror image of the theoretical syllogism. The two are not just distinct in their content or subject matter, but also in the form of the reasons and the inferential relations that each makes use of. This, in turn, suggests that practical and theoretical inference must be held to different standards of validity. In describing and defending the distinctively practical form of reasoning towards action, it will also become clear that accepting this account will require some modification of longstanding assumptions about the nature of reasoning. I demonstrate that this modification, though necessary, does not lead to practical reason being utterly unrecognisable as a form of reasoning but will help us better understand the internal structure of action. Finally, it will also pave the way for understanding practical inference as an intrinsically ethical endeavour.

#### 4.1 Anscombe and the practical syllogism

*‘The freedom of the will consists in the impossibility of knowing actions that still lie in the future. We could know them only if causality were like an inner necessity like that of logical inference.’*

— Wittgenstein (TLP 5.1362)

What is our interest in the practical syllogism, after the preceding investigation into Wittgenstein’s changing philosophy of logic? In the last chapter I argued that logical inference is rooted in action. This, quite naturally, leads us to the topic of the practical syllogism and the idea of action *as* inference. Wittgenstein himself did not address the nature of the practical syllogism, but my discussion of how we make inferences on the basis of rules of grammar, sometimes strictly and sometimes less so (see Section 3.4.2), points, in my view, to questions of how we characterise reasoning about action. At the very least, there is basis for suspicion about calling reasoning to an action a kind of inference—if that inference is modelled on theoretical deductive inference. This is also Wittgenstein’s point in the quote above. Hence, I believe it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the issue of the practical syllogism, which will give us a framework for turning finally to the issue of basic, unassailable concepts, which will be the subject of Chapter 5. Together, these two chapters are intended to lead to a renewed understanding of ethics, as a discipline primarily about practice and action rather than thought and belief.

The idea of formalising and studying the nature of reasoning about future action has a long history, dating back at least to Aristotle’s controversial examples of practical syllogisms. The term ‘practical

syllogism’, however, is a later appellation and not used by Aristotle.<sup>1</sup> This fact is significant because the term itself should be considered part of the very controversy surrounding its subject matter in contemporary philosophy. It implies that we can understand or even formalise practical inference on the model of the theoretical syllogism—this is a particularly modern view, not found directly in Aristotle, and it is a view which I shall be challenging in this chapter. By contrast, I will argue that the practical syllogism has a distinctive form and a different standard of validity from the theoretical reasoning, and as such cannot be taken as a mirror image of the theoretical syllogism.

My position is also the opposite of Anscombe’s position on the practical syllogism, but as I shall demonstrate, I take this position for recognisably Anscombean reasons—and also in view of my reading of Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*. Anscombe, I would argue, is the 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher most associated with the concept of practical inference—this concept was also, for Anscombe, part of a triad of elements of practical reasoning, together with practical truth and practical knowledge, which she wrote about.<sup>2</sup> Given that Aristotle never theorised about the practical syllogism at length, despite examples of it appearing frequently in his writings, I will take Anscombe’s essay ‘Practical Inference’, originally published in 1971, to be the locus classicus of philosophical discussion about the subject.<sup>3</sup> It is certainly her most sustained treatment of the practical syllogism, though the subject also appears in her earlier work, *Intention*. Although the primary aim of this chapter is not historical or exegetical, Anscombe’s essay is in my view an important point of departure because it introduces the core issues that will be the measure of success for any successful account of practical inference. Anscombe was also strongly influenced by Wittgenstein in her views on action, so this dovetails nicely with the issues discussed in the last chapter.

The structure of my argument will be as follows. In Section 4.2, I first lay out these key conceptual issues, as found in Anscombe’s essay and more recent literature, and explain their implications for studying the practical syllogism. In Section 4.3, I discuss Anscombe’s account of practical inference as a mirror image of theoretical inference, and show how it is flawed because it neglects the internality of the action-orientation of premises to their content. This in turn suggests that with practical inference we are looking at a very different kind of logical standard and set of relations. In Section 4.4, I show what the distinctive form of practical premises looks like, and argue that accepting this view necessitates a rethink of the nature of reasoning. Finally, in Section 4.5, I defend an account of validity in practical inference

---

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle’s Theory of the Will* (London: Duckworth, 1979), 114. Kenny translates Aristotle’s actual Greek expression for such syllogisms as ‘a for-the-sake-of-what account’.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of Anscombe on practical truth and action theory, see Sarah Broadie, ‘Practical Truth in Aristotle’, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (2006): 281–98. For a discussion of Anscombe on practical knowledge through action, and its relationship to the practical syllogism and ethics, see Jennifer A. Frey, ‘Anscombe on Practical Knowledge and the Good’, *Ergo* 6 (2019): 1121–1151, <https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.12405314.0006.039>.

<sup>3</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘Practical Inference’, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005), 109–46.



that is distinct from the standard of validity in theoretical inference; practical validity is creative and wide open, rather than strict and narrow. This validity, I argue, is intrinsically ethical in nature. In the conclusion, Section 4.6, I suggest that this leads us to investigation of whether there are indispensable primary ends of practical reasoning.

## 4.2 Two clusters of conceptual problems

It is worth addressing, even if only briefly, the question ‘What is inference?’ at the outset. Our investigation in the last chapter took for granted that both deductive and inductive inferences were kinds of inferences, so a working definition was not strictly necessary. But in this chapter, the very nature of reasoning and thus of inference will be our subject. In its most general sense, we can say that inference is a matter of drawing a conclusion from premises. With theoretical reasoning, we have a good idea of when an inference has taken place. In an influential paper, ‘What is inference?’, Paul Boghossian speaks of theoretical inference as ‘reasoning with beliefs... in which you start off with some beliefs and then, after a process of reasoning, end up either adding some new beliefs, or giving up some old beliefs, or both.’<sup>4</sup> The nature of that process and the justification involved shall not concern us here. But on the basis of this definition, we can say that any intelligible sense of practical inference must be a process of reasoning, with something analogous to premises and conclusions, and which has a conceptual relation to the production of action rather than belief or knowledge—whether this action is the conclusion itself, or is an execution of a conclusion.

What this process of reasoning in the practical sphere consists in is not at all straightforward. From Anscombe’s essay ‘Practical Inference’ we can identify two clusters of conceptual difficulties that beset any attempt to understand the practical syllogism. The first has to do with logical concerns—about validity and form—while the second relates to action theory. Understanding these sets of problems better, and their relation with other, will help us become clearer about what a successful account of the practical syllogism will look like.

### 4.2.1 Validity and the form of the practical syllogism

The central problem in relation to practical inference is the logical necessity or validity of the conclusion. Related to that are problems concerning the formalisation of such an inference—such as how many premises there are in a practical syllogism—and the exact nature of the conclusion. Can an action, for example, be a conclusion and can an action be *inferred*—or is this just an analogous use of the concept of inference, and a rather loose one at that?

---

<sup>4</sup> Paul Boghossian, ‘What is inference?’, *Philosophical Studies* 169, no. 1 (2014): 2.

As Anscombe puts it in ‘Practical Inference’:

Inference is a logical matter; if there is inference, there must be validity; if there is inference, the conclusion must in some way *follow* from the premises. How can an action logically follow from premises?<sup>5</sup>

It seems that a characteristic feature of practical reasoning is the ‘non-necessity’ of the conclusion drawn from reasons for action. An action may be justified on the grounds that it is an effective means of securing some good that an agent is aiming at, but often it will not be her only available option.<sup>6</sup> And unlike in deductive reasoning, a practical conclusion so justified is still defeasible; the premises do not ‘*prove*’ the action to be necessary or even good, as it is always possible that further premises not yet considered might ‘block’ the inference. Health is a good end, and tripe is good for health, but the agent may be vegetarian.<sup>7</sup> But suppose the means is the only one available and it is not blocked by any other consideration. Even then it is open to the agent to reason that it is better to not act in pursuit of the good that is aimed at right now—for alternative means may materialise later. Call this set of difficulties the Defeasibility Problem.

This problem, more than any other, is what makes practical inference so hard to characterise, let alone formalise—especially if we attempt to understand practical inference on the model of theoretical inference. It is often said that just as the theoretical syllogism preserves truth from premises to conclusion, the practical syllogism preserves goodness from premises to conclusion,<sup>8</sup> but the Defeasibility Problem seems to cast doubt on how we could ever formalise this—unless we gave up necessity as a feature of practical inference. This only leads to a more fundamental dilemma. As Will Small puts it, if we reject the non-necessity of the practical conclusions in order to better assimilate practical reasoning to its theoretical counterpart and the standard of validity associated with the latter, then we are in effect ‘refus[ing] to consider the idea of *practical* reasoning’; conversely, if we ‘give up on the idea that practical reasoning is capable of validity’, that approach ‘loses sight of it as a kind of *reasoning*’.<sup>9</sup>

Naturally, any solution we adopt in response to the Defeasibility Problem will require discussion of the form of the practical syllogism—both its premises and its conclusion. A few historical pointers will help illuminate the theoretical issues involved. Anthony Kenny makes two important observations in this regard. Firstly, modern commentators often take the classic form of the practical syllogism to involve two premises, one concerning the good aimed at—which he calls the premise of the good—and the other stating a possible means—which he calls the premise of the possible. These supposedly are the analogue of the major and minor premises in a theoretical syllogism, but in fact Aristotle’s own examples frequently

---

<sup>5</sup> Anscombe, ‘Practical Inference’, 120.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>7</sup> Will Small, ‘The Practicality of Practical Inference’, in *The Anscombean Mind*, ed. Adrian Haddock and Rachael Wiseman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 258–9.

<sup>8</sup> Anscombe, ‘Practical Inference’, 145; Frey, ‘Practical Knowledge’, 1138; Kenny, *Aristotle’s Theory*, 128.

<sup>9</sup> Small, ‘Practical Inference’, 262.

do not conform to this expectation, involving multiple premises.<sup>10</sup> Some are neither a premise of the good or of the possible but are mediating premises, displaying factual information that facilitate a transition from one premise of the good (or of the possible) to another, such as in this example from the *Metaphysics*:

- (1) This man is to be healed
- (2) Health being the kind of thing it is, humours must be balanced (1032b8, b19)
- (3) If he is heated, his humours will be balanced (1032b20)
- (4) If he is rubbed, he will be heated (1032b26)
- (5) Rubbing is in my power (1032b21).<sup>11</sup>

Anscombe's examples in 'Practical Inference', similarly, do not conform to the two-premise model. She does not address this question directly, though towards end of the essay she suggests that the two core elements of the premises are the end and the means.<sup>12</sup> It seems, then, that she would agree with Kenny's assessment that, whatever the articulation of the premises, the implicit structure is always that of the premise of the good and the premise of the possible.<sup>13</sup> But what this discussion also suggests is that any logical validity that comes from the elements of the good and the possible does not follow the same, tight theoretical pattern of 'All *x*s are *y*s; *a* is an *x*; therefore *a* is a *y*'.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, given that the precise articulation of the premises seems less crucial to the validity of the practical syllogism, and given the challenge posed by the Defeasibility Problem, we can provisionally say that there is something inherently open-ended and indeterminate about the practical syllogism. Are there different logical relations involved? That question will become crucial to our investigation.

Kenny's second observation is that Aristotle himself did not necessarily think of the conclusion of practical reasoning as an action, for the agent could be prevented in realising her practical reasoning—so a decision to act may instead be the conclusion of a practical syllogism.<sup>15</sup> Anscombe, by contrast, seems to take it for granted that the conclusion of practical reasoning is an action, and the only note of concern she sounds is that we ought not to understand this as meaning that when certain thoughts occur, it 'logically *must happen*' that someone acts in a certain way.<sup>16</sup> That would be to confuse logic with psychology. One might resolve this problem, at least at the level of nomenclature, by appealing to a distinction between practical deliberation and the practical syllogism, such that a decision to act could be

---

<sup>10</sup> Kenny, *Aristotle's Theory*, 122.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>12</sup> Anscombe, 'Practical Inference', 144–6.

<sup>13</sup> Kenny, *Aristotle's Theory*, 136.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 142–3.

<sup>16</sup> Anscombe, 'Practical Inference', 120.

a conclusion of deliberation, but when deliberation is integrated into the practical syllogism then the conclusion and outcome is an action.<sup>17</sup> Both deliberation and the syllogism, then, refer to different aspects of practical reasoning more broadly speaking. Not all deliberation is syllogistic, but the syllogism perhaps represents the gold standard of practical reasoning, involving the concept of logical necessity in a way that other looser forms of deliberation, which may involve practical analogues of inductive and abductive inference, do not. (For this reason I will generally use ‘practical reasoning’ interchangeably with ‘practical inference’ or ‘the practical syllogism’.) Nonetheless, taking an action to be the conclusion of syllogistic inference still requires further explanation. At first glance, it seems more plausible to argue that, as far as the *reasoning* process of an agent making use of a syllogism is concerned, we can consider it completed independently of whether the agent was able to act out the conclusion. Nishi Shah writes:

If I intend to raise my arm now to ask a question, but my arm suddenly becomes paralyzed or I become paralyzed by fear, my deliberation has not failed, although I have.<sup>18</sup>

This is, perhaps, one important manifestation of the dilemma that Small poses. If the conclusion of the practical syllogism is an action, then this does not conform with our expectations of what *reasoning* looks like; on the other hand, if the conclusion is not an action, then does practical reasoning collapse into a variant of theoretical reasoning which happens to have action as its subject matter—and worse still, a theoretical variant does not even meet the basic standards of logical validity?

#### 4.2.2 *The practical use of the practical syllogism*

A second set of problems relates to our expectations of how the practical syllogism can be made use of. Is the syllogism something that a deliberating agent can make use of to help her reason towards the logically correct conclusion? And what is the relation of the practical syllogism to actions which were not preceded by any deliberation, but which are still actions performed on the basis of reasons?

It is this latter type of action which, I think, explains why Anscombe takes it as uncontroversial that the conclusion of the practical syllogism is an action, because in many cases the action is all that we can point to, and no explicit syllogism is used:

Now one can hardly be said to make use of an argument that one does not produce, inwardly or outwardly. But the production takes time. If I do *A* ‘on the instant’, there isn’t time...<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to Will Nolan for this point. See also Klaus Corcilius, ‘Two Jobs for Aristotle’s Practical Syllogism?’, *History of Philosophy & Logical Analysis* 11, no. 1 (2008): 163–84, for an account of the distinction between deliberation and the practical syllogism. Corcilius argues that deliberation, for Aristotle, results in a proposition, while the practical syllogism is intended primarily as a casual explanation of the production of motion in animals and humans.

<sup>18</sup> Nishi Shah, ‘How Action Governs Intention’, *Philosophers’ Imprint* 8 no. 5 (2008): 4, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3521354.0008.005>.

<sup>19</sup> Anscombe, ‘Practical Inference’, 111.

This is not to say that such action cannot be described in syllogistic terms, but this will depend on how we have theorised the form of the practical syllogism. What Anscombe is suggesting, nonetheless, is that the practical syllogism clearly does not always capture the thought processes of the agent leading up to the action, and therefore this should not be its aim either:

Now can a person act on grounds upon the instant? For example, he steps behind a pillar to avoid being seen, as soon as he sees someone enter the building. If so, the setting forth of the grounds, displaying the formal connexion between description of the action and propositions giving grounds, will indeed take time but will relate to something instantaneous.<sup>20</sup>

This brief passage provides an important link between Anscombe's thought on practical inference and her earlier work *Intention*, in which she criticises the view that an intentional action must issue from some mental state—a mental intention—which is causally related to the production of the action. An intentional action, for Anscombe, is simply that which the agent can explain as having done out of a certain motive or reason; this reason need not have been brought to mind explicitly before acting.<sup>21</sup> This is nothing unfamiliar; all of us perform spontaneous actions in response to situations just like in the example above, which are not performed out of mere reflex but are occasions where the agent can point to a rational purpose embodied quite literally in that action. If this is the case, then what the practical syllogism captures is, more plausibly, the 'internal teleological structure' of the action.<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Frey puts it well when she says:

On Anscombe's view, by contrast, an agent's intentions and actions are, at least in the paradigmatic or successful case, part of *one and the same rational order*. That is, an action is not the specifiable effect of some separately identifiable prior cause but an event in progress that is constituted by the agent's own practical thought and will.<sup>23</sup>

If the practical syllogism aims to capture the internal structure of action, then this has implications for how we theorise the form of the syllogism. What form of propositions best captures the premises of the syllogism, especially when these premises are not necessarily articulated? In this regard there is a Humean worry that has to be addressed: Should we even be talking about propositions, if we want to say that the conclusion is an action—is deriving an action from propositions analogous to illicitly deriving an 'ought' from an 'is'? Addressing this Humean concern may mean a radical recasting of the form of the premises.

These implications are equally relevant to the possibility of trying to explicitly reason according to the structure of the practical syllogism before acting, e.g. when making a particularly difficult decision. Is this, at least, a *making use* of the practical syllogism? I assume that we want our account of the practical

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>21</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, §§5–6;11–6. Anscombe returns to this idea again in her later paper, 'The Causation of Action', in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, 89–108.

<sup>22</sup> Frey, 'Practical Knowledge', 1130.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 1128.

sylogism to provide some insight into the normative standard of practical reasoning—that is the whole point of the search for logical validity—and not just a description of how people reason and act, although the descriptive aspect regarding the structure of action will certainly provide an important test for our account of that normative standard. But when we consider the Defeasibility Problem’s implications, we encounter a further practical problem here. Must a deliberating agent consider *all* possible premises that might block the means she has identified before she come to a logically valid conclusion? This would be too onerous in practice—and arguably simply impossible in principle. Having reasoned that health is a good end and that tripe is good for health and that she is not vegetarian, how much further must the agent go and how will she decide what is relevant? Perhaps she will consider when her last meal was, whether the tripe available is too expensive, whether it has any unhealthy side effects, whether it has interactions with long-term medication she is on, and so on. The possibilities are endless, and this is even before considering what other alternatives are immediately available. I take it that practical reasoning can be valid even if the agent does not explicitly consider everything. Seen in this way, the agent who deliberates over time but still acts at some point is not all that different from Anscombe’s spontaneous agent after all. Not everything will be spoken for, and perhaps the answer to the Defeasibility Problem—though *normative* in nature—is found in attentive *description* of the internal structure of action.

#### 4.2.3 Anscombe on practical knowledge

We have now identified the main conceptual problems that any account of practical inference must be ready to address. Because of how interrelated they are, I will not be addressing them as discrete points, nor will I be following strictly the order in which I have introduced them, though I will make explicit reference to which particular problem I am addressing where it is helpful to do so. My underlying response to them, however, is that these problems can only be overcome if we divest our understanding of practical reasoning from the model of theoretical inference.<sup>24</sup>

Anscombe, as it turns out, defends the view that practical inference is a mirror image of theoretical inference. In my analysis I will show why this is wrong, but on solidly Anscombean grounds. Despite this disagreement, I still consider Anscombe to be an illuminating thinker regarding the difficulties of conceptualising practical reasoning. In *Intention* she writes persuasively about the ‘utter darkness’ we are in when it comes to conceptualising practical knowledge:

Certainly in modern philosophy we have an incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge. Knowledge must be something that is judged as such by being in accordance with the facts. The facts, reality, are prior, and dictate what is to be said, if it is knowledge. And this is the explanation of the utter darkness in which we found ourselves. For if there are two knowledges—one by observation, the other in intention—then it looks as if there must be two objects of knowledge; but if one says the objects are

---

<sup>24</sup> Frey also discusses the danger of modelling practical reasoning too closely on theoretical reasoning in ‘Against Autonomy’.

the same, one looks hopelessly for the different *mode of contemplative knowledge* in acting, as if there were a very queer and special sort of seeing eye in the middle of the acting.<sup>25</sup>

The difficulty for Anscombe, as I will demonstrate in the next section, is that she does not sufficiently extend this insight to inference because she remains wedded to a theoretical model of logical validity.

### 4.3 Practical and theoretical aims in syllogistic reasoning

In this section I will argue that the action-orientation of practical inference is internal to its content, and that is why a straightforward parallel between theoretical and practical inference will not work. I will begin by outlining Anscombe's account of the practical syllogism, before demonstrating how the problems with Anscombe's account help us better understand the need to analyse the distinctively practical orientation of the syllogism's premises. This in turn suggests the need to conceptualise a different standard of validity for practical inference.

#### 4.3.1 Anscombe's mirror image account

The essence of Anscombe's account is that there is 'no special form of practical inference'; rather, both theoretical and practical inference involve propositions connected to each other in the same way. 'The difference', she says, 'lies in the different service to which they are put'. For example, we might set forth some hypothetical considerations such as, 'If  $p$ ,  $q$ . If  $q$ ,  $r$ '. Anscombe says,

The question is: what are these considerations *for*, if they are not idle? There may be at any rate these uses for them: We may be able to assert  $p$ , and go on to assert  $r$ . Or we may want to achieve  $r$ , and decide to make  $p$  true—this being something we can do straight away. In either case we may appeal to considerations.<sup>26</sup>

So theoretical and practical inference are a mirror image of one another. If we accept that insight, then Anscombe says we can speak of a 'distinct "form"' of practical inference if all we mean is the 'change of mood and different order of the same elements'. Theoretical inference starts with the thing supposed or asserted:

$r$ . (Or: Suppose  $r$ .)

If  $r$  then  $q$ .

If  $q$  then  $p$ .

$p$ .

while practical inference starts with the thing wanted:

Wanted: that  $p$ . (Or: Let it be that  $p$ .)

If  $q$ , then  $p$ .

If  $r$ , then  $q$ .

---

<sup>25</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, §32.

<sup>26</sup> Anscombe, 'Practical Inference', 128.

Decision: *r!*<sup>27</sup>

No doubt, Anscombe's account of a neat mirror image between theoretical and practical reasoning has the virtue of parsimony and elegance. It does not multiply the forms of reasoning needed for understanding practical inference. This parsimony extends to the way Anscombe accounts for validity in the practical syllogism: Its validity is just that of the theoretical syllogism, given that the logical relations between propositions—or the logical facts as she also calls them—in the practical case are the same as in the theoretical case.<sup>28</sup> Fundamentally, practical inference is the same logic at work, just put to different use. This idea appears to preserve the intuition that practical reasoning is indeed *reasoning* since there is validity after all, while accounting for the non-necessity of the practical conclusion through the different ordering of the propositions, hence not neglecting the specifically *practical* nature of this reasoning. This solution seems to satisfy both horns of Small's dilemma.

Let me turn briefly to Anscombe's view of logic in this essay. Anscombe's reliance on the idea of the same logical relations between propositions at work in both syllogisms at times gives the impression of logical facts in a separable and independent existence in an abstract logical space, waiting to be put to use:

There would be no point in the proof patterns, if they were never to be plugged into believing minds, if nothing were ever asserted; and equally no point in patterns of practical inference if nothing were aimed at. But *still* one should not put the wanting or intending or believing into the description of the inferences.<sup>29</sup>

This would be too strong a thesis to attribute to Anscombe on the basis of this essay alone, although it is worth noting that the essay's epigraph is taken from Wittgenstein's *Notebooks*, with the claim that logic is only interested in the unasserted proposition (NB, 96). This points to the early Wittgenstein's rejection of Frege's assertion sign as merely psychological (NB, 96; TLP 4.442), so one might feel justified in sensing a whiff of the *Tractatus* in Anscombe's presentation of logic here, with its hints of abstract logical space and the immutability of primitive logical relations.

We can take Anscombe as being committed to a weaker version of this thesis. Its background claim is that both assertion for belief and the possibility of action are different uses of what would turn out to be the same logical relations. The idea that even the assertion for belief in the theoretical case of the syllogism is a *use* of the inference is one similar to my account of inference as use, as discussed in Section 3.3.2, in the context of Wittgenstein's later philosophy of logic and its continuities with the *Tractatus*. But importantly in Anscombe's view the validity of the theoretical case of inference is still privileged over

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 132;139.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.



the practical case. I take Anscombe's weaker thesis as saying: An inference in the practical case is valid if and only if we get a valid theoretical inference on reversing the order of the practical inference. The use of the inference therefore determines only the order of the inference, but it does not determine the nature of the logical necessity involved, unlike what I argued in my account of inference as use. We shall see why this becomes a problem for Anscombe's account.

A final point to note is that Anscombe's notion of inference as subject to use—though not determined by use—is related to her view of why an action can be a conclusion. The notion that action is the result of a practical inference should be no more surprising than belief being the result of a theoretical syllogism; it is nothing mysterious given that it is just how one has made use of the same logical facts. For Anscombe, action stands to practical inference as believing stands to theoretical inference—that is to say, both are *external* to the validity of the logic. Just as one can make an inference from premises one presupposes, for the sake of the argument, to be true without actually believing either the premises or the conclusion, Anscombe claims that the equivalent in the practical case is acting even when one does not believe in the premises, which she thinks is characteristic of slaves and other non-autonomous individuals who act on others' practical reasoning:

Not aiming at what the directing will aims at, not believing his premises, but still drawing the conclusion in action: *that* will be what corresponds to not believing the assertions and not believing the conclusion but still drawing the conclusion in the theoretical case.<sup>30</sup>

Just as, without believing it, I can draw a conclusion from your assertions, so our ironical slave can draw a conclusion in action from the specified objective and the assertion made by his master. In both cases the inference is something separable from the attitude of the one making it... So the inference patterns should not be given as ones in which these psychological facts are given a place.<sup>31</sup>

The uses of the syllogism are deemed irrelevant 'psychological facts'—a very Tractarian idea—and that is why premises should not contain anything about wanting or believing. I now turn to why Anscombe's account does not succeed.

#### 4.3.2 *Action and the premises of practical inference*

Has Anscombe successfully addressed the first cluster of conceptual problems outlined in the last section, to do with validity and the form of the syllogism? Far from charting an acceptable middle-ground vis-à-vis the terms of Small's dilemma, I shall argue that Anscombe's account proves unsatisfactory on both counts of reasoning and practicality because it does not sufficiently appreciate how inference patterns are shaped internally by their aims of either practical or theoretical reasoning. It also leaves unanswered further questions about validity and form.

---

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

It is helpful to get a bad analogy out of the way first. It has already been noted by others that Anscombe's example of the slave is unconvincing—the *master* may think that it is his will that the slave is executing, but as Kenny points out the slave decides to act on his master's grounds premises only because he 'accepts them as in some way expressing *his* [the slave's] good'. The master's order is, for the slave's practical reasoning, just a 'secondary, intermediate' premise, and his starting point for practical reasoning is probably the avoidance of trouble.<sup>32</sup> Roughly, the slave's syllogism will be something like:

Premise of the good: It is good to avoid trouble.

Premise of the possible: Following my master's orders is a way of avoiding trouble.

Mediating premise: My master has ordered me to do *x*.

Conclusion: So I'll do *x*.

The master's own premises behind the order need not come into it for the slave to reason effectively towards the concluding action.

Anscombe's argument as a whole does not hinge on this one example, but it does make the mirror image account seem rather suspect because it shows that acting cannot be made out as a straightforward analogue of drawing a theoretical inference. Rather, it suggests that successful—that is to say, valid—practical inference only takes place when we act on premises that we take to be true or as genuinely expressing what is good for us. One might ask whether the slave in Anscombe's example must act according to premises pertaining to his own good—might he not just mindlessly accept his role and act on his master's commands? If this is the case, then it is hardly an act of reasoning. Not all actions are the result of inferences, and such actions will not be helpful to our discussion. As Small argues, the actual theoretical analogue of the ironical slave acting on grounds he does not believe in is 'believing a proposition on the basis of (e.g. because it is entailed by) propositions one does not believe; and it is very hard to see this as a case of *inference*'.<sup>33</sup> If this is correct, then it is a first step to understanding how action is internal to the character of reasoning in the practical case, and not an external use of logical facts.

Another point that helps us see the importance of viewing action as internal to reasoning is the question of validity, which Anscombe's account sidesteps. Why the mirror image seemed to overcome Small's dilemma was really because the validity it offered for the practical syllogism was only of a derivative kind. Because the syllogism is valid in the theoretical direction, it offers the same logical fact to cover validity when the direction is reversed. Anscombe's account effectively suggests that practical

---

<sup>32</sup> Kenny, *Aristotle's Theory*, 127.

<sup>33</sup> Small, 'Practical Inference', 278.

inference is not inference *in its own right*. It does not give an account of how the fallacy of affirming the consequent can be overcome:

I am to do Y  
If I do X I shall do Y  
So I am to do X.

If this is taken as an instance of the theoretical reasoning pattern  $q$ ; but if  $p$  then  $q$ ; so  $p$ , it illustrates the familiar fallacy of affirming the consequent.<sup>34</sup>

This fallacy, as explained by Kenny, illustrates how the logical relation involved in theoretical inference is not apt for practical inference. An example of a premise Anscombe gives that could be used in a reverse-order practical syllogism is, ‘If the plants are fed with [certain] substances, there will be spectacular plant growth’.<sup>35</sup> If the content of the premise is inverted, then judged by the standard of logical validity in theoretical reasoning it would be a fallacy. Suppose that  $q$  is ‘there will be spectacular plant growth’ and  $p$  is ‘the plant is fed with those substances’. A reverse-order practical syllogism would be:  $q$  (the aim), if  $p$  then  $q$ . From this can we conclude  $p$  as something to be done—feed the plants with those substances?

I think we would want to say that we *can* conclude  $p$  on this basis. An account of validity in the practical syllogism must explain why concluding so would not amount to the fallacy of affirming the consequent. Anscombe leads us on the right path in saying that the use of the syllogism is different, but because she sees the use as external to validity, she does not take this insight further to suggest that the logical relations must be seen as completely different, such that the fallacy is avoided. To conclude  $p$  on the basis of ‘if  $p$  then  $q$ ’ in a practical case seems to be something entirely different from erroneously concluding that in a theoretical case. The propositions seem to share, superficially, the same factual content though they are tensed differently. In a theoretical fallacy we would say, ‘There is spectacular plant growth; if the plant is fed with those substances, there will be spectacular plant growth; therefore, the plant was fed with those substances’. But in the practical case, which ought to be legitimate, we say, ‘Spectacular plant growth is aimed at; if the plant is fed with those substances, there will be spectacular plant growth; so feed the plant with those substances’. This is more than just a ‘change of mood’ and ordering of elements. These are different propositions from the theoretical case, even in content as I shall argue, because of the internality of the action-orientation in the practical case. Hence, the mirror image account does not, in the end, address the Defeasibility Problem and the related concern about the nature of the premises. Rather, it shows us the pitfalls of modelling practical reasoning too closely on theoretical reasoning.

---

<sup>34</sup> Kenny, *Aristotle's Theory*, 145.

<sup>35</sup> Anscombe, ‘Practical Inference’, 134.

What does it mean, then, for action to be internal to the nature of reasoning? My argument here is derived from my previous argument about theoretical inference. We have already seen from Section 3.3.2 how the conclusion in a theoretical inference is not compelled by the premises alone; the purpose of assertion/belief which is served by the inference is internally related to the strictness with which we make an inference. The inference pattern does not exist independently of the aim of reasoning, but is shaped by it. I want to extend this point to practical inference. Far from suggesting a mirror image between the two types of inference, the internality of these two different aims to their respective syllogism in fact leads to a divergence in the type of reasoning employed. If there is indeed a parallel between the two, it is modest. One similarity that is useful to state here, however, is that when we speak of logical necessity, we are not saying that someone is compelled either to believe a conclusion or to act in a certain way—and Anscombe agrees on this point, psychological compulsion being a distinct thing from the necessity of a logical connection between propositions.<sup>36</sup> In a similar vein, Kenny also states the view that ‘[n]either in theoretical nor in practical reasoning is anyone *forced* to draw a conclusion’.<sup>37</sup> This is correct, but it is not only that someone is not forced to believe something or act in a certain way even if it logically follows from the premises. No one is forced to reason in such a way. We can keep psychological compulsion distinct from logical necessity, and still argue that the aims of acting and believing/asserting shape the very nature of their respective inference patterns.

Let us consider an illustrative example of how the goal of action is internal to the practical syllogism. Anselm Müller draws our attention to the difference between considering the possibilities of taking something across a river in order to distract oneself and doing so in order to act. In the former case, he observes, ‘my awareness (or thought, if it occurs) that I am doing this to distract myself is in no way constitutive of what I am considering’, whereas in the latter case the practical orientation of the considerations is ‘internal to its own content’.<sup>38</sup> Focusing solely on the identical factual content in both cases seems to miss something constitutively important about the latter case. The goal of distracting oneself is an external motivation to the content of one’s reasoning; one could be thinking about any other thing to distract oneself, but the aim of distraction will not enter into considerations about means in relation to ends. I leave aside the issue that the aim of distraction may, of course, suggest some topics to be more appropriate than others. This would be an external constraint on the content of one’s reasoning, but not part of its internal workings.

---

<sup>36</sup> Anscombe, ‘Practical Inference’, 130.

<sup>37</sup> Kenny, *Aristotle’s Theory*, 130.

<sup>38</sup> Anselm Winfried Müller, ‘How theoretical is practical reason?’, in *Intention and Intentionality: Essays for G. E. M. Anscombe*, ed. Cora Diamond and Jenny Teichman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 99.

If this example does not already give us an intuitive grasp of the distinction I am trying to make, according to which in some cases the practical orientation of the premises is internal to their content, then let us consider an analogy with performative utterances—speech acts which by being uttered accomplish their own content. In a statement such as ‘I promise you that I will do the dishes’, the performative orientation of the speech act is similarly internal to its content. A statement simply meant to factually describe the empirical likelihood of future action, such as ‘I will be doing the dishes tonight’, perhaps uttered in response to the question ‘Are you doing anything tonight?’, appears to have the same factual content, but the two propositions are not the same. What would otherwise be merely factual content is, I want to say, transformed by the purpose of promising in the performative utterance. The difference in propositions cannot be pinned down to the specific linguistic formula of ‘I promise you that X’. In fact, what is striking about everyday language, at least in English, is that we are very unlikely to utter a sentence like ‘I will be doing the dishes tonight’ to convey mere factual information about my likely future behaviour—the circumstances would be quite unique for that to be the purpose of my utterance. If I tell my wife at dinnertime, ‘I will be doing the dishes tonight’, and hours later she finds me working on my thesis with the dishes undone, I would not get away with the excuse that I was only, say, just making an empirical inference about my behaviour—because it is Tuesday, and as a matter of habit rather than formal agreement I usually do the dishes on Tuesday, so in all likelihood I will be doing the dishes tonight! It will be treated, quite justifiably, as a statement of intent and a promise. This point should be kept in mind when we discuss the issue of how to accurately articulate the premises of a practical syllogism.

Returning to inference, the difference between a proposition whose subject happens to be moving something across the river or gardening, and a proposition that is oriented to action, may not be displayed in any obvious grammatical difference like mood or tense. A premise from Anscombe’s essay such as ‘If those substances are in the soil, the plant will be fed with them’ could be used as a plainly factual statement, uttered by a science teacher. It could be a premise in a theoretical inference—perhaps a scientist has been just been told the chemical composition of a new spray being developed for gardening and is reasoning about the effects of this spray based on her knowledge of the substances involved and how plants react to them. The same premise could also be used by a gardener reasoning about how she should achieve spectacular plant growth, in which case its practical orientation will be internal to its content. We can come up with similar possible uses even for a premise that has action built into it—Müller does not supply any premises with his example, but let us imagine something like ‘If I load the motorboat with this box of treasure, it will not sink’. This sounds like an actual premise of the possible, meant to lead to action. But it could also be a premise in a theoretical inference—suppose I am given the weight of the box (and

my own weight!), and the maximum loads of two different boats, I can make a theoretical inference and come to the conclusion that it is possible to take the box of treasure successfully across the river. Here, the action in the premise is part of its content, but it is not internal to its content in the sense of internality I have been trying to bring out. The key point, therefore, is that the form of words used may be deceptive; what matters is the teleological orientation of a premise towards action in the practical case that has real action as its end-goal. (I will discuss the tricky matter of hypothetical practical inferences later, in Section 4.5.3.)

So if there is any parallel between theoretical and practical inference it is, as I have said, a modest one in that the aims of both types of inference shape the form of the premises. With theoretical inference we do not tend to notice this because the default propositional form which we use seems to be nothing out of the ordinary, and wholly suited for the purposes of the inference already. This, I think, relates to what Anscombe calls the ‘incurribly contemplative conception of knowledge’ in *Intention*, as quoted earlier—theoretical reasoning is at home when its subject is something theoretical. When we are applying theoretical reasoning to reasoning that is practical in orientation, it may be expedient to use similar wording of a proposition to represent a step in the process of practical reasoning, but this must not be at the expense of neglecting that its content is not the same as when those facts are used in theoretical reasoning. The action-oriented content of the premises in the practical case will help us better conceptualise the form of the practical syllogism, which I will discuss in the next section.

#### *4.3.3 Practical inference: A different standard of validity?*

Before we turn to that discussion, it is worth briefly spelling out how the considerations above have also suggested a new direction for understanding the logical relations involved in practical inference. If the purpose of the theoretical syllogism is internally related with its standard of strictness, then how does the purpose of action in the practical case shape the standard of reasoning used? What does the internality of action to practical premises tell us about the standard of success that should be used to judge an inference?

Let us look at how to characterise the difference in aims. One type of reasoning aims at truth and the other at goodness. In *Intention* Anscombe suggests that ‘one wants a *good* kettle, but has a *true idea* of a kettle’ because ‘truth’ has as its subject the relation between a proposition and things, whereas goodness has as its subject the thing wanted.<sup>39</sup> This is a helpful starting point because it shows what gives theoretical inference its somewhat static character—its validity and soundness are at their most indisputable when key terms have no ambiguity and are clearly defined, while the parameters of the syllogism are not open to any other considerations besides the narrow issue at hand. In this way we can judge what is already the

---

<sup>39</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, §40.

case with success. The paradigm case of this type of logical inference thus rests on a standard of validity that is strict (in terms of the interpretation of the premises) and narrow (in terms of the field of possibilities considered). By contrast the thing wanted is not yet attained. Action is, of its nature, a step into the unknown—practical inference is about reasoning towards bringing a state of affairs into existence, rather than reasoning about a world already before us. If we want to take seriously the idea that action is internal to the reasoning used in practical inference, then we must take into account this point.

This point is indeed another way of characterising the difference between the fallacious concluding of ‘the plants were fed with those substances’ from the fact of the plant having grown spectacularly, and the legitimate practical case of concluding that the plant should be fed with those substances so that (as yet non-existent) spectacular plant growth can be achieved. The propositions are different, and so is the way that they relate to each other logically. Put simply, if we want to maintain what looks like the non-necessity of the conclusion from a theoretical perspective, and yet call this validity, then it must be a different standard of validity from the theoretical case. That standard, as we saw, is strict and narrow. The opposite of that is creative and wide open. Let us say provisionally that these are the hallmarks of validity in the practical case. It is creative because the premise of the good to be achieved does not restrict axiomatically what means must be used to achieve it; there is no suggestion that the means chosen has to be the only means or even the best means, so this is not like necessity in the theoretical deductive case. It is wide open because, as the Defeasibility Problem suggests, the validity of a practical conclusion depends on other considerations. And if this validity is also a species of necessity, this necessity will be of a practical kind.

Over the next two sections, I will discuss in greater detail how to make sense of this different standard of reasoning towards a state of affairs that does not yet exist, which cannot be held to the theoretical standard of validity. I will argue that while the Defeasibility Problem is right in suggesting that the validity of the practical syllogism depends on other implied premises and not just the premises of the good and the possible, we will not need to explicitly consider every possible premise that might defeat a potential conclusion, once we understand the distinctive form of practical premises, which embody a whole range of unspoken reasons.

#### **4.4 The internal structure of action**

We have thus far said little about the question of whether the conclusion of practical reasoning is an action. That the content of practical premises are shaped by their practical orientation does not prove ipso facto that the conclusion inferred must be an action. But as mentioned earlier, one possible reason why Anscombe does not address this question directly may have to do with the philosophical attention she pays to cases of spontaneous yet intentional and rational action. These cases strongly suggest that the

practical syllogism should take, as its primary explanandum, the internal structure of such action. In this section I will argue that analysis of this internal structure will help us better understand the distinctive form of the premises of a practical syllogism, whether relating to spontaneous action or prolonged deliberation. I will argue that practical premises are fundamentally non-propositional. This will also help make the case that the conclusion of practical inference is an action, and this will lead into our discussion in Section 5 of the standard of validity appropriate to practical inference.

But a word of caution is needed: Accepting the view that the conclusion is an action also means a radical rethink about our notion of reasoning. Once again this comes down to the supposed parallel between theoretical and practical reasoning. Although I rejected the possibility of that parallel accounting for validity in practical inference, we must confront a more fundamental aspect of this parallel, relating to the nature of reasons. I will discuss this point first before discussing the form of practical premises.

#### 4.4.1 *Reasons and conclusions*

While the nature of the conclusion or the premises is not the central question of theorising about the practical syllogism—that would be validity—taking these issues seriously helps us see the complexity of the issues at stake. Sarah Paul, for instance, has questioned the position that the conclusion of the practical syllogism is an action, arguing that the conclusion is an attitude or intention—this she refers to as the ‘Attitude View’.<sup>40</sup> She argues that there are often multiple ways of acting on the same conclusion of a practical syllogism and the choice between them is not a matter of reasoning. A sniper, for instance,

...could grip the rifle in any number of slightly different ways, make any number of slightly different finger motions, and so forth... One pen or another must be located in order to sign the contract, but any of the fifteen in the drawer will do.<sup>41</sup>

In Paul’s view, ‘the particular performance of an action’ is not ‘the kind of thing that can stand directly in the rationalizing relation to the premises, such that the transition to that event is a step in reasoning’—hence a failure to ultimately act on the final intention is a failure of execution, but not a failure of reasoning.<sup>42</sup> Perceptively, she adds that much as it is important to consider what a distinctively *practical* form of reasoning is like, ‘to suppose that the particular execution of a token action should be subsumed under the process of reasoning’ would seem to ‘modify the notion of reasoning beyond recognition’.<sup>43</sup>

It is noteworthy that Paul, like Anscombe, is motivated in part by the desire to maintain a parallel between practical and theoretical reasoning.<sup>44</sup> While for Paul it is the nature of the conclusion that is

---

<sup>40</sup> Sarah K. Paul, ‘The conclusion of practical reasoning: the shadow between idea and act’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 43, no. 3 (2013): 288.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 289.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.



important for maintaining this parallel, for Anscombe it is the nature of the premises that has implications for our understanding of reasons and reasoning. One point that Anscombe is particularly insistent on in ‘Practical Inference’ is the irrelevance of wanting to the terms of a practical syllogism. Putting wanting into the premises is, she says, ‘as incorrect as it would be to represent theoretical inference in terms of belief’,<sup>45</sup> so it is better to talk about the thing wanted or aimed at when we are making a formal account of reasoning. This objection comes from view of the fundamental externality of the use of a syllogism to its logical relations, which is central to her mirror image account, as we have already seen. But there is another related reason why Anscombe objects to putting wanting in the premises, which she gives in §35 of *Intention*:

But it is misleading to put ‘I want’ into a premise if we are giving a formal account of practical reasoning. To understand this, we need to realise that not everything that I have described as coming in the range of ‘reasons for acting’ can have a place as a premise in a practical syllogism. E.g. ‘He killed my father, so I shall kill him’ is not a form of reasoning at all; nor is ‘I admire him so much, I shall sign the petition he is sponsoring’. The difference is that there is no calculation in these. The conjunction ‘so’ is not necessarily the mark of calculation.

It may be said: ‘if “he was very pleasant... so I shall pay him a visit” can be called reasoning, why not “I admire... so I shall sign”?’. The answer is that the former is not a piece of reasoning or calculation either, if what it suggests is e.g. that I am making a return for his pleasantness, have this reason for the kind act of paying a visit; but if the suggestion is: ‘So it will probably be pleasant to see him again, so I shall pay him a visit’, then it is... And similarly: ‘I admire... and the best way to express this will be to sign, so I shall sign...’ is a case of calculating, and if that is the thought we can once again speak of practical reasoning.<sup>46</sup>

Anscombe’s objection seems to be, rather, that we do not put wanting into a syllogism because wanting in itself is not a *reason*. Müller has also expressed this particular objection: Although a form of words like ‘I want to get well’ can express a practical consideration, it is not the wanting that provides the reason. Surely, one can reason practically about the best way to get well without regard for whether one wants it or not, and besides ‘what is a reason for doing *A* would seem to be a reason also for wanting to do *A*’, so the wanting seems extraneous to the practical inference.<sup>47</sup>

A basic response to the combined Anscombe-Müller objection might be as follows: Wanting *on its own* is surely not a reason, but how about wanting something as a putative good—or to use the well-known phrase, *under the guise of the good*? This response would seem to answer the first part of Müller’s objection, that wanting itself does not provide the reason. Moreover, is there not a double standard in this account if we allow the thing wanted or the good aimed at to be a premise, but not wanting?

For Anscombe’s part at least, given both §35 of *Intention* and her mirror image account, it is fair to surmise that her objection is not so much to the wanting—since she allows for talk of the thing wanted<sup>48</sup>—

---

<sup>45</sup> Anscombe, ‘Practical Inference’, 138.

<sup>46</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, §35.

<sup>47</sup> Müller, ‘How theoretical’, 101.

<sup>48</sup> Anscombe, ‘Practical Inference’, 133.

as to putting ‘I’ into the premises. For Anscombe, *that* something is putatively good counts, *prima facie*, as a reason for acting, but to say that *I* want something (even wanting-under-the-guise-of-the-good) is an unnecessary psychological addition. In her partially concessive example in *Intention* §35 of ‘I admire... and the best way to express this will be to sign, so I shall sign...’, she neglects to make clear that there needs to be an unspoken premise here that will be something like ‘It is good that my admiration is expressed’. ‘I admire’ might of course be shorthand for all that—and this relates to the more general problem of how premises are not neatly identified with the way we naturally express them, as we have already seen in this chapter. But it is clear that Anscombe does not treat ‘I admire’ on its own as a reason for acting; it forms part of the context within which a reason can be identified, and that reason would for Anscombe not be cast as ‘I want’ but ‘it is wanted/good that...’. This aversion to putting ‘I’ in the premises is understandable when one takes theoretical reasoning to be the model of practical reasoning. Paul has, for instance, raised the issue that reasoning is something we think of as potentially shareable between different reasoners.<sup>49</sup> To put ‘I want’ in a premise seems to render the premise irreducibly subjective and hence not shareable.

There is another important aspect of Anscombe’s commitment to the parallel between theoretical and practical reasoning, which explains her rejection of first-person premises of the good. Crucially, the evidence is clear that Anscombe would stick to her position even if faced with the objection that both candidates for reasons—‘I want...’ and ‘It is wanted that...’—are equally liable to being questioned further: Is the thing that is wanted, or my desire for it, really good? This would be to bring ethics into the equation, and Anscombe is clear that her account of practical syllogism is completely divorced from ethics. Indeed, she lauds it as ‘the great Aristotelian parallel’:

This [is] the great Aristotelian parallel: if it is right, then the goodness of the end and of the action is as much of an extra, as external to the validity of the reasoning, as truth of the premises and of the conclusion is an extra, is external to the validity of theoretical reasoning.<sup>50</sup>

This point about the syllogism and ethics harks back to *Intention*, where Anscombe also criticises the ‘conception of the practical syllogism as of its nature ethical, and thus as a proof about what one ought to do, which somehow naturally culminates in action’.<sup>51</sup> Commenting on this part of *Intention*, Frey writes:

The role of the syllogism is to display a logical form of reasoning that is common to the wicked and the virtuous alike. Whether what is stated in the first premise picks out an end one *ought* truly to pursue is a question that goes beyond the action theoretic analysis of *Intention*. What we can know from analyzing action—even the actions of deplorable Nazis—is that there is a rational order internal to human actions that can be understood in terms of the agent’s practical reasons.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Paul, ‘The conclusion’, 299.

<sup>50</sup> Anscombe, ‘Practical Inference’, 146.

<sup>51</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, §41.

<sup>52</sup> Frey, ‘Practical Knowledge’, 1147.

So to reason on the basis of ‘I want’, in the sense of wanting-under-the-guise-of-the-good, is to introduce an ethical judgement into the syllogism, whereas to reason on the basis of ‘It is wanted that...’ is to reason on a merely putative good. Understood this way, this preserves Anscombe’s position that there can be valid practical reasoning that is not actually morally good—the practical analogue of the truth of a theoretical syllogism—in a way that the unsuccessful slave example does not.

The view that I will defend, in contrast to Anscombe’s, is that the practical syllogism is inherently ethical. Indeed, this is the inescapable conclusion if we are to confront seriously the question raised earlier, of whether the practical syllogism can be meaningfully made use of by an agent. But to get there we first need a radical rethink about the nature of reasons. And it is Anscombe’s observation about the spontaneous nature of acting for reasons that in fact shows us a way forward (though not one Anscombe took up herself). Moments of spontaneous acting-on-grounds make Paul’s arguments *prima facie* less convincing, since the execution of an action seems to be tied inextricably to the conclusion of the reasoning. What is curious, nonetheless, about such reasoning is that it has not unfolded over time as a discernible ‘process’. As part of this argument, I will also contend that ‘I want’ is an admissible, even necessary part of practical premises. This, I will show, is necessary for understanding the properly practical nature of premises oriented towards action, and it will also help make sense of the idea that the conclusion of inference is an action. Will it modify our notion of reasoning, as Paul fears? Yes. But beyond recognition? I will argue that it does not.

#### 4.4.2 *A Humean assessment of premises*

What is the distinctive form of practical premises? We have already made some headway in considering the internality of action to their content. Another way of looking at the matter is to take a Humean response to the supposed parallel between theoretical and practical reasoning. Eric Wiland expresses the point well when he says:

For how could a bit of reasoning conclude in an action, if all of its premises are of a completely different form? The form of an action, whatever it is, differs from the form of an ordinary judgment or assertion. And we should expect anything that deserves the name of reasoning to be disciplined enough to avoid the mistake Hume put his finger on. Just as we cannot reason from an ‘is’ to an ‘ought’, so too we cannot reason from something merely believed or merely intended to something actually done. There should be some sort of symmetry between the conclusion of any form of reasoning and at least *one* of its premises.<sup>53</sup>

I think it is fair to say, as a note of caution, that we can allow for some open-endedness about how much symmetry is enough symmetry between the action-conclusion and the relevant premise for the Humean worry to be assuaged. For instance, it would clearly be unrealistic to argue that an action-type can only

---

<sup>53</sup> Eric Wiland, ‘In the beginning was the doing: the premises of the practical syllogism’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 43, no. 3 (2013): 308–9.

come out of the same action-type, for that would lead to a new problem about how we can ever learn new actions. Wiland's conception of conclusion-premise symmetry is arguably too strict, and should allow for psychological states of wanting and intending to fulfil the Humean requirement of symmetry, since these—unlike mere belief or factual assertions—are oriented towards action, and in some cases it may be difficult to point to external actions to identify an active premise.

The following explanation of Wiland's strikes me as stretching the idea of an action-premise a little too much:

...if I now intend to run later, there are a number of things I am likely doing in service of running later. I might now wash my running socks, or cancel my kayaking trip, or stretch my muscles, or avoid exercising now so that I can indeed run later, or any number of other things. At the very least, I am maintaining (or improving) my health. So the fact that I am running later is not *neatly* isolated from what I am now doing. They interlace.<sup>54</sup>

But 'maintaining' my health is a very vague action, if it is an action at all—it is a verb, but a verb does not always point to an identifiable action (think of 'growing the economy' or 'impacting communities'). It is thus unclear how 'maintaining' health in the present moment would fulfil the Humean requirement of symmetry. It seems to me that a satisfactory account of the practical syllogism should leave open the possibility that an agent might, somewhat out of the blue, reason to act in a manner for which she was previously unprepared, or at least underprepared—the boundary between the two perhaps being somewhat fluid. While I have said that we must be prepared to accept that in some circumstances psychological states of wanting and intending will be sufficient to provide the active element in the premises, it is also worth remembering that, frequently, our wanting and our intending is not shown in action rather than in thought. To recall Anscombe's well-known dictum, 'The primitive sign of wanting is *trying to get*'.<sup>55</sup> So even an action that seems to come unexpectedly from an agent is likely to be rooted somewhere in her past repertoire of actions and reasonings.

With these amendments, I ultimately accept Wiland's general insights here: There must be an active element somewhere in the premises in order for an action-conclusion to result, and our actions do not typically come out of nowhere, or out of pure thought. In fact, I will also go further than what Wiland initially suggests, and argue that there must be active element in *both* the premise of the good and that of the possible. I also see no reason why this constraint would not apply to the Attitude View, for on that view the conclusion of the syllogism must still be a piece of reasoning that is apt for execution into action. It must likewise follow from premises that are similarly oriented to action. With these considerations, we can now move on to discussing the nature of practical premises.

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>55</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, §36.

#### 4.4.3 Three distinctive features of practical premises

Given this Humean assessment, and our earlier discussion of the action-oriented aspect of practical premises, I want to now argue that practical premises are fundamentally non-propositional. This can be seen from the what I shall call the *properly practical* features of such premises, in comparison with theoretical premises. There are, in my view, three distinctive features of practical premises. They are: (1) First-personal and situation-specific; (2) Dependent on personal histories (our capabilities, training, relationships, etc.); (3) Expressed in action or perception.<sup>56</sup>

Let us first look at the premise of the possible which identifies the means of achieving an end, to look out for these features. Small has written convincingly about how to conceptualise this premise in a properly practical form. He argues that practical reasoning ‘aims to identify a doable that is practicably specific and particular’—it is not enough to think about action in general terms or broad categories. Thinking about killing someone with a sword (to use Small’s example) will not issue in action unless we have identified and recognised the very target and the very weapon—not just a sword in abstract, but *this* sword right in front of me. In many cases, a certain amount of training, skills and background knowledge will be essential to effective practical reasoning, so that the means can be properly recognised and acted on. The skills required may be as mundane as knowing how to use a light switch, or they may be more specialised. If I want to disarm a bomb, it is not enough to know that

snipping the wire connecting the detonator to the explosive → disarming the bomb

as I must also know that

snipping *this* wire [with *that* ready-to-hand instrument] → snipping the wire connecting the detonator to the explosive

if this consideration is to provide a sufficient ground for acting.<sup>57</sup>

Only then, I would suggest, is the Humean requirement of symmetry properly met in the premise of the possible. The action of defusing the bomb could only be derived from a premise of the possible that contained the necessary know-how, and this would apply even to the attitude-conclusion on the Attitude View. If one failed to execute the concluding attitude of disarming the bomb because in fact one’s

---

<sup>56</sup> Although I have not cast this discussion in Aristotelian terms, there is a clear parallel with Aristotle’s concept of *nous* in practical reasoning. A.W. Price explains Aristotle’s use of *nous* in this way: ‘[The agent] perceive some feature of the context that prompts him, given the standing concerns that he has, to think of a certain goal with a desire to achieve it. Say that he has a generous nature, and perceives someone in need. (This perception need not be instantaneous. He may even reflect how to interpret the situation, and thereby come to perceive it as one where someone is in need, though not patently so.) It is then characteristic of him to form a practical desire... to give help... Such a complex of contextual-cum-conceptual awareness is at once desiderative, perceptual and epistemic.’ See A.W. Price, ‘Choice and Action in Aristotle’, *Phronesis* 61, no. 4 (2016): 447.

<sup>57</sup> Small, ‘Practical Inference’, 269–70. Small draws on Anton Ford, ‘On What Is in Front of Your Nose’, *Philosophical Topics* 44, no. 1 (2016), 150, which supplies the example of disarming a bomb.

knowledge of the correct wires to snip was defective, then it would be hard to see this as a successful case of practical reasoning even on the Attitude View. The premise of the possible was not sufficiently specified for practical purposes. The logical relations involved in performative practical inference, I suggest, depend on one's practical know-how.

What about the premise of the good—what would make it a sufficient ground for acting? This takes us back to the Anscombe-Müller objection, and I will make the case for putting 'I want' in the premises. From the perspective of Humean symmetry, to speak of 'It is good that...' or 'It is wanted that...' is incorrigibly propositional and theoretical. As with the practical recognition of means as available for action, there must be a practical recognition of the good as something to be sought. At a basic level, this means that the agent must want what is purported to be good.

In the context of real-life practical reasoning, the agent's wanting is not at all extraneous to the reasoning. Could not someone say, 'I don't really mind staying ill, but I know I should try and get better, so I'll take the medicine'? We could say that such an agent does not want to get better, and yet on another level there is also a desire to get better, and it is the one that wins out of the two. But here we must take a broad understanding of 'want' or 'desire', for it may not always involve a visceral feeling of attraction in order to be an active element that fulfils the requirement of Humean symmetry. It is not unusual that we find a clash in our desires and we have to make a decision. For whatever reason someone does not want to get well—perhaps because it means the end of sick leave and a return to difficult, thankless work. However, this person also desires to support her family and her reduced income while on sick leave has been inadequate. So while on one level she may not want to get well, this desire has in her judgement been trumped by another desire. In a similar vein to the practical recognition of means, shaped by our skills and capabilities, the element of wanting is key to understanding how the premise of the good can provide a sufficient ground by being properly practical.<sup>58</sup> Müller is of course right that, as mentioned earlier, one can reason about getting well without wanting to get well. One can make those inferential steps in one's mind, as it were, but without wanting the good in question at some level this is not likely to issue in action. It is not all that different from the case of inferring how to get something across a river in order to distract oneself. The reasoning involved is not shaped internally by the purpose of action, and is not far off from theoretical reasoning whose subject happens to be action.

If this analysis is right, then the way we articulate any of these premises is not all that important. What is important is that the three properly practical features are present. The good and the possible both have to be recognised as such from a first-person standpoint, and this recognition will be dependent on

---

<sup>58</sup> Robert Audi argues for a similar point in *Practical Reasoning and Ethical Decision* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 64–81.

our personal histories, and will be expressed in action, e.g. through our *trying to get* something, or perception, e.g. recognising the thing wanted *as good*. In practice, these three features will be hardly separable, and I enumerate them in this way only for conceptual purposes. In fact both the good and the possible may not be separable in the specific situation where one is acting. To that issue I now turn, in relation to the nature of reasons.

#### *4.4.4 Non-propositional reasons and the syllogistic form*

In light of these considerations, practical reasons are starting to look very different from the familiar, propositional kind. We tend to think of reasons as discrete points of argumentation, steps in reasoning that can be cast propositionally and shared with others. But this surely is not the only form of reasons that we are familiar with. Looking at forms of action that are spontaneous but that embody reasons for acting, we can see more clearly the importance of the properly practical features of premises just identified. How is it that certain spontaneous actions, though performed without deliberation, are done for reasons? In understanding this, we can understand more about the nature of reasons. And as a related question mentioned earlier in this chapter, how does the practical syllogism capture the internal structure of such spontaneous-but-reasoned actions? What we find, when we look more closely at such actions is that they are rarely, if ever, standalone cases. They are the result of training and induction into a practice. The insight here is essentially the same as the one that relates the importance of training to rule-following in Chapter 2—except here we are talking not about linguistic rules of individual words, but rules relating to a whole repertoire of action-types that we use on a daily basis.

Consider the case of a child who first learns a rigid rule about crossing the road—do not cross except when there is a green man. In time the child learns when jaywalking is safe and acceptable. She learns the different kinds of situations to look out for—cars and bicycles travelling at different speeds, traffic from different directions or from junctions. But each time that the child successfully judges the road to be safe and crosses, is she running through an argument in her head, retaining and weighing up these factors (as English judges like to say when assessing mental capacity) before coming to a decision? No; with practice the child learns to perceive more skilfully the relevant aspects in the situation. The different traffic circumstances are judged in an instant as safe or not safe according to criteria that have been internalised, and the child now has a practical recognition of traffic situations that someone who has not been trained lacks. She perceives reasons to cross or not to cross.

Our ability to act on the basis of reasons in an instant becomes far less mysterious once we factor in the background of training, practice, and regularity that undergirds our actions. We are able to cross roads safely, step behind a pillar suddenly to avoid being seen (Anscombe's example in 'Practical Inference'), make a cup of tea without thinking, and perform a whole range of other actions because we

have acquired the skills to do so in relevantly similar situations previously. Here we have to allow for some open-endedness about what counts as relevantly similar—in one sense every traffic situation (like every attempt to step into Heraclitus’s river) is unique, but most of them do not require extended reflection before crossing. From this perspective, the cases of spontaneous action-for-reasons and the cases where we might reason explicitly in a syllogistic pattern look much more similar now. Both rely on pre-existing abilities to pick out the relevant features of a situation.

What does this say about the nature of reasons and reasoning? Although the syllogistic form is a useful heuristic for talking about and debating reasons, it should not mislead us into thinking that reasoning is fundamentally, or even ideally, a process that follows that form. It is helpful to consider how similar and different our actions are to the actions of animals, which are also clearly teleologically oriented.

For example, a dog has a sense that food is good for it (it is hungry); it knows there is food in the cupboard (thanks to its sense of smell); so it goes and gets the food. There is a syllogistic structure in place, but we would tend to say that very little or no reasoning is performed—though one could certainly call such behaviour a prototype for reasoning, just as Wittgenstein called basic patterns of human behaviour ‘prototype[s]’ of thought (Z §541) (see Section 2.3 for a discussion of this claim). Why is the dog’s behaviour not reasoning? Is the difference being that as humans we *make an inference*, in that we followed a particular process, going from premises of the good and the possible to a conclusion? We might try and articulate this by pointing to the ‘therefore’ as capturing this reasoning process, as if the ‘therefore’ picked out something different about us in the moment. But this is a profound mistake, for if placed in the same situation as the dog we might also act without hesitation and grab the food in the cupboard that we know will satisfy our hunger. For all we know, in that moment the mental events of the dog are qualitatively the same as ours: hunger; food; grab and eat.

What this comparison suggests is that the presence of reasoning is not to be found in looking for something extra that happened in the moment of acting. But it is found, or at any rate proved, in the fact that we can look back and give reasons for why we acted in such-and-such a way—this is exactly what Anscombe refers to when she says that intention is not about looking for a mental state that caused the action, but is about getting an answer to the ‘special sense’ of the question ‘Why?’ that is posed in relation to someone’s action.<sup>59</sup> It is a fact of our natural history that we look back on our actions and identify reasons; we are not only able to think about ourselves as acting on the basis of reasons, we also use this interpretative power to develop our repertoire of reasons for further actions. This kind of self-reflexivity—the ability to ask questions such as, ‘How did I fare? How can I do better?’—is what any kind

---

<sup>59</sup> The whole of Anscombe’s *Intention* is centred on this very question.



of training, formal or informal, of any complex set of actions requires. We learn to act the right way in the right situations, we repeat those actions, we think about why we have done so, then repeat it in slightly similar situations, and then reflect on the relevant differences and adjust our actions accordingly, etc. All this leads to an internalisation of reasons in our ways of acting, and this forms the background history that makes possible different kinds of intentional actions that we perform without time to think. The good that is sought and the means to seek it are intertwined in this history, and are internally related—we learn the good of health by the means we are taught to stay in good health (including eating to satisfy hunger), not abstractly as a theoretical principle of the good. In this way, we can think of reasons for action—and therefore the premises of the practical syllogism—as fundamentally non-propositional.

This does not mean that we cannot articulate such reasons propositionally. A pedestrian who was asked, ‘Why did you cross the road in this specific place?’ would likely respond with something like, ‘I wanted to get to that bookshop to buy a present (premise of the good), and the road was reasonably clear at that moment (premise of the possible).’ This explanation only scratches the surface of all the agent’s relevant practical considerations with respect to either premise; it is at best a summary report of the range of reasons involved in this decision, and not to be confused with the reasons themselves.

For example, regarding the means chosen—crossing the road—a number of aspects would have had to be evaluated for the judgement of ‘reasonably clear’ to be made. There would also be the choice to cross at this spot rather than at another—perhaps the traffic lights are a little further away, and the pedestrian knows that this road is not usually busy at this particular time of the day, so it is not worth walking all the way to the pedestrian crossing. We might even add that the agent also knows that she is in a country where jaywalking is not a crime, unlike in the United States. Perhaps she has also recovered from a knee operation, and is now feeling supremely confident of her walking speed once more. All these and more form the background history that make the means chosen a practicable, reasonable option.

Likewise with the premise of the good, we cannot make sense of why wanting to get a present from that bookshop is a reason for acting unless we know something of e.g. the person the present is for (perhaps the intended recipient loves books, or is expecting a particular book), the agent’s relationship with that person and the occasion which demand this present (a loved one’s birthday or anniversary), cost-related factors that make this bookshop a good place for present-shopping (this bookshop has been reliably visited for this purpose on many occasions in the past), and so on.

What this suggests is that the so-called premises of the practical syllogism are better understood as a heuristic: They represent the two logical *conditions* for an action to be intelligible as being done for the sake of reasons. As was already pointed out earlier, Aristotle’s examples frequently involve more than two premises—but this is not surprising if we consider how much is implied in practical premises. If one

were to enumerate all of them and cast them as transitional premises, this would be an unwieldy task. So the idea of two premises, even if mistakenly modelled after the theoretical syllogism, is a useful shorthand for communicating a range of reasons that are present in a single, seemingly simple decision. They help to divide up into discrete logical steps elements of action that are not neatly separated in reality, being bound up with the agent's personal history.

This has implications for how we conceive of the syllogism's use for agents who are deliberating for an extended period of time: It gives agents a structure for delineating reasons which often come tangled up with each other. 'What are my different aims in this situation? Which means are within my powers and reach, and which means correspond to which aims?' are surely useful questions for an agent who is trying to reason carefully about how to act. Anscombe is right that the syllogism does not provide a formal proof that thereby necessitates the conclusion, though her motivation for taking this stance is the independence of practical-syllogistic reasoning from ethics, which I will address in Section 5 of this chapter. But my agreement with this stance comes from my emphasis on what I have been referring to as the properly practical aspects of such reasoning—the recognition of means that one has the skills to use, the wanting of certain goods owing to one's background history, and so on. An agent can deliberate more explicitly using the structure of the practical syllogism as an aide, but the formal structure will do nothing for the agent unless those properly practical aspects are in place and are grasped by the agent. As I stressed in the last chapter, the first-personal standpoint is important for one to reason within a particular language-game (see Section 3.4.1); my argument here is continuous with that point. Part of the properly practical grasp required for practical reasoning is being embedded within a particular set of concepts.

We can see why the form of the premises that the agent herself chooses to articulate is not of great importance. An agent may even, in deliberating, articulate some premises, while leaving others implied—frequently the premise of the good will be implied by the fact of the agent's trying to get the thing wanted, and deliberation will be mainly focused on the means ('I'll cross over there when the light turns green, or perhaps I'll just wait here and cross when it's clear'—the agent need not ever utter a word about the bookshop). For this reason also the agent need not go through in her head every single potentially overriding premise; that much will usually be part of her practical grasp of the situation, shaped by her training and personal history. What comes first as a matter of conceptual priority is that practical grasp, and it is in grasping these particulars and acting on them that the agent reaches the conclusion—the conclusion reached in the agent's acting, and captured in the syllogism, not the other way round. The use of the syllogistic form is secondary, even in cases of extended deliberation.

At this point, it is important to address a concern of Paul's stated earlier: Does this first-personal, non-propositional account of reasons make practical reasons in principle un-shareable, which seems to go

against a common intuition about reasons? Evidently, they are not as easily shareable as reasons cast in a conventional propositional form are, though it is worth considering the fact that even a propositional reason for believing something ('I believe that this piece of legislation is null and void because it was passed in an unconstitutional manner') requires some degree of shared knowledge and understanding (in this case, about correct constitutional procedure) for it to be shared. Practical reasons are also shareable, inasmuch as the relevant practical aspects in the given situation are shared by someone. So the shareability of practical reasons is a matter of degrees—no two situations will be exactly the same, and no two persons' skills and abilities will be exactly the same, but there will often be enough for some convergence, otherwise practical skills like driving and horse-riding could never be taught. And that is why joint deliberation about action is also possible, especially in those practical contexts involving a high degree of specialised training (think of a football team strategising together).

#### *4.4.5 The conclusion as action*

To complement this account of the form of practical premises, I turn now to the question of the conclusion of the practical syllogism.

I have argued that reasons for action are what the agent perceives and acts on in a given situation, and hence the syllogism is just an attempt to represent this practical process; the premises are not the reasons themselves. On this view, it is easier to see the concluding action as a step in reasoning. In many cases of practical reasoning, the action that results may not be preceded by an articulated decision, intention or attitude. Even if we granted that in principle such an action could always be articulated in some form, it is not clear why we should treat the articulable form as the real conclusion rather than the action, given that the latter proceeds from reasoning that has a distinctly practical character. If I am driving, I might reason on the basis of the practical aspects of the situation I have grasped that I need to turn left now. If I fail to do this—suppose I am suddenly distracted by something I hear on the radio—do we say that my reasoning was successful, but I just failed in the execution? I think we can concede that there was a partial success in one's reasoning, akin to reaching an intermediate conclusion, but the reasoning did not reach its final goal. Remember that when we think about the practical aspects of reasons for acting we are considering reasons that are shaped by our past acting and training—by things like the successful turning of the car to the left when there is a sudden obstruction on the right, which thereby allows me to act on such a reason (a premise of the possible, which concerns a skill I have acquired) in similar future situations. So the Humean requirement of symmetry works both ways—an action or an attitude aimed at action must proceed from premises that are similarly active, and having now investigated what such active premises look like we can see that they are oriented towards action as the sign of successful reasoning.

To return to the driving example, we cannot say that a failure of execution is still a successful case of reasoning because the reasoning involved is intrinsically real-world and practical in character. Having perceived the situation and its demands, one acts on the basis of the goods at stake (safety and human life) and one's skills (knowing how to execute a sudden left turn)—the reasoning is found in the situation and my response to it, not the articulable premises and conclusion which only summarise or describe the logical relations. Good reasoning in the context *is* making the right turn. Shah's example, raised earlier, about deciding to raise my hand to ask a question but being paralysed by fear, might seem to suggest more of a separation between the action and the reasoning process than in the case of driving. But raising one's hand is not a mere bodily action, an add-on to one's reasoning. If I fail to raise my hand, I have failed in the very point of the reasoning, which is to make known the fact that I have a question so that I can be called upon.

What this argument hinges on, to be sure, is the appropriate standard of success to apply to practical reasoning. I have been arguing that there is a fundamental asymmetry between practical and theoretical reasoning and that following this asymmetry makes more perspicuous a different conception of reasoning from the propositional kind—an embodied process that draws on one's personal history. Both practical and theoretical reasoning have a different character because they are shaped by different goals, and here is the crucial difference: While theoretical reasoning aims to form beliefs that accurately describe a particular state of affairs that is already the case (and this aim applies even to hypothetical theoretical reasoning which may not result in belief, but results in something that would be believed if true), practical reasoning aims at bringing into existence a state of affairs that is not yet the case. Anscombe is right that with truth the subject to be assessed is our idea e.g. of a kettle, which might be true or false, while with goodness the subject is the kettle which may be good or bad. But this is not all there is to goodness: The terminus of practical reasoning is that I use that kettle in a good manner. Reasoning to bring about an as yet non-existent state of affairs has to be judged by a different standard from reasoning to describe the world as it is, and I contend that its success is determined in part by whether that state of affairs is brought about or not.

So Paul is partially right to suggest that taking seriously the claim that concluding action is a step in reasoning would modify our conception of reasoning—trying to understand this claim has required us to rethink what reasoning looks like. But has this modified our conception of reasoning *beyond recognition*? I suggest that it has not, because we are able to identify reasons for action in the way I have described. Earlier, I described the premises of the practical syllogism as logical conditions for the recognition of action as grounded in reasons. My invocation of conditions for intelligibility was deliberately grammatical; reasoning, Wittgenstein says, is a grammatical concept and its boundaries are not sharp (see Section 3.1).

What we have been doing here is to identify the nature of the internal relation between reasoning and action, which is different from that between reasoning and belief/assertion. Paul's worry, to put it in Wittgensteinian terms, can be assuaged by pointing to two different internal relations. When we speak of action, we readily identify instances of action as reasonable, and others as not. By virtue of the internal relation I have been describing, we point to certain things as recognisable reasons—those things being our practical grasp of features of the situation. There is no undue modification of the notion of reasoning.

These different considerations, however, point to a pressing need to articulate clearly the standard of success for practical inference through which we can understand validity. Reasoning looks different now, and so must validity—it must be a validity that takes into account our personal histories and our first-personal, situation-specific position in reasoning to action, through action.

#### 4.5 Ethics and the practical syllogism

I have, thus far, not deal with the objection to the idea of the conclusion as action that concerns the availability of different means and whether our choice between them is a proper act of reasoning. This objection, as I will argue, relates to the question of whether the practical syllogism is intrinsically ethical or not. Whereas in the last section I have relied particularly on situations where a fairly narrow range of actions will successfully express the conclusion of the practical reasoning (raising one's hand, defusing a bomb, turning the car to avoid an accident), in many other cases there will be a wide range of means to choose from. Paul has called this 'mere plumping between equally adequate ways of getting [the action] done to which reason is indifferent'.<sup>60</sup>

The question of how to account for this feature of action takes us back to the fundamental issue of whether there is such a thing as validity in the practical syllogism. Anscombe introduces this problem with explicit reference to *calculation*, which points to what is necessary for a logically valid syllogism:

If an end, an objective, is specified, then how is correctness of calculation to be judged? By whether it indicates an action that is necessary for, or will secure, that objective. Not *only* by this, indeed, since an effective means may be cumbersome or clumsy or difficult, and a better means may be available. But a criticism of the means on any other ground, for example on grounds of outrageousness, makes an appeal to other ends which ought not to be violated in pursuing this one. If you don't mind burning the house down to roast the pig, and it is easy and effective, the pig getting well roasted that way, then why not do it?

Criticism of means which are good purely in relation to the given end, must be in the light of other ends which it is assumed that you have or ought to have. [...] Now the question becomes: what has a criticism of ends got to do with an evaluation of practical reasoning as such?<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Paul, 'The conclusion', 289.

<sup>61</sup> Anscombe, 'Practical Inference', 145.

And the answer to that question, in short, is ethics. The difference between my account and Anscombe's is that I do not take there to be anything called 'practical reasoning as such' as there is no talking about validity unless the ethical perspective is brought in. And this, *pace* Paul, will also take the view that even choosing between different available means is an act of reasoning.

#### *4.5.1 Reasoning and dispositions of reasoning*

Let us first recall how, earlier on, we discussed how the problem of choosing between means was central to the difficulty in conceptualising a practical analogue of logical validity in the practical syllogism. What I called the Defeasibility Problem points to typical cases of practical reasoning where the means identified will not be the only one possible or available. Even if it is the only means available to the agent, it is still open to her to decide whether or not to pursue the good stated in the first premise at all, at least for the time being. This raises the question of whether an agent who deliberates using the structure of the practical syllogism would be relying on multiple suppressed premises to decide whether a particular means is appropriate or not—does it contradict other ends, for example? The practical problem involved here is that it would be impossible to reason one's way through all these suppressed premises, and from this perspective we can understand Paul's motivation for not wanting to treat the choice between means as an act of reasoning. Then there was also the further problem that if we take the logical relations involved in the practical syllogism to be straightforwardly the reverse of the theoretical syllogism, then we would be guilty of the fallacy of affirming the consequent.

The approach that I have taken has been to rethink completely the parallel between theoretical and practical reasoning, on the basis that the uses of the two syllogisms are completely different and that they therefore involve different standards of success. What would be a logical fallacy if used for describing states of affairs may not necessarily be fallacious in the context of action—but why that is so depends on how we understand the logical relations in practical inference. The distinction between describing a state of affairs and bringing one into being, combined with our broadened understanding of what counts as reasons, puts us in a better position to do so, and so take on the Defeasibility Problem.

I want to begin this part of my argument by pointing out that Anscombe, especially as interpreted by Frey, and Paul are remarkably convergent on the matter of choosing between means, and there is much that I agree with from their analyses. For instance, Paul suggests that what is at work in choosing how we roast a pig, for example, are 'higher-order intentions or dispositions of rational agency that play a constraining role similar to that of one's background beliefs'.<sup>62</sup> But where do these dispositions come from? We can glean an answer from Frey's exegesis of Anscombe.

---

<sup>62</sup> Paul, 'The conclusion of practical reasoning', 298.

Frey comments that Anscombe's example of roasting a pig is meant to 'illustrate that the means are also identified and chosen in light of one's general ends as applied to the particular circumstances', in much the same way as the intended end in the first premise of the syllogism is made intelligible by the agent's 'more general ends'—she believes it is permissible to eat animals, she wants to make a good impression on her colleagues, and so on:

The rational intelligibility of the practical determination of means or ends depends upon its inferential connection to the wider context of a life in progress, which has been and will continue to be shaped by one's general sense of how to live. To put the same point another way, ends get their practical intelligibility as ends by implicit reference to other ends, including the general ends of human life as understood by the subject of action. Therefore, the full intelligibility of any practical syllogism always makes reference to other syllogisms...<sup>63</sup>

This is significant because it shows that unlike a theoretical syllogism, whose validity depends on it being closed off, as it were, to other considerations like potential exceptions and qualifications of key terms in the premises, with the practical syllogism it is quite the opposite. The path from the premise of the possible to the concluding action is intelligible only in the light of other reasons—in fact, Frey calls these connections 'inferential' above, which suggests *prima facie* that the choice of means is an act of reason. These reasons need not be articulated in deliberation because they have been successfully internalised by us. It does not even occur to us, in normal situations, that one could roast a pig by burning down the house—the absence of it from our deliberation is a sign of the success of our having internalised concepts of outrageousness, of respect for property, and of the proportionality of means. If we had to explicitly put this in a premise when working out what to do, this rather suggests a weakness in practical reasoning.

Understood in this way, I have no problems with calling our usually spontaneous choice of means a disposition of rational agency as Paul does, but the fact that it is a disposition should not count against its being part of our reasoning. To an extent, Paul is right—where the choice of means is between options whose differences are immaterial then the specific choice (e.g. to go this way rather than that around the table to get to the light switch) would not be reasoning. But the general ease of our choice obscures the various factors that have already been internalised (e.g. I will not climb over the table to turn the light on, barring an emergency). Our choice of means is, in my view, best understood as part of the many practical features of a situation that an agent needs to grasp to properly recognise a means as available to her—just like those other practical features we discussed earlier (like recognising which wire to snip to defuse a bomb), these dispositions of rational agency are also formed by training and practice. In general, we behave in ways that provoke the least avoidable outrage among others, and we behave in ways that respect property, and these other good ends which we are accustomed to aiming at thus constrain our

---

<sup>63</sup> Frey, 'Practical Knowledge', 1140. I have not quoted Anscombe directly here as the part of her essay 'Practical Inference' where she deals with this question is dense.

choice of means of making a good supper for our friends. To put this point across in the terms of Chapters 2 and 3 (see Sections 2.4.3 and 3.3.3 in particular), we reason on the basis of concepts which we access and understand only through their being intertwined with the whole web of concepts, into which we already find ourselves thrust as language-learners and -users. There might be some amount of unreasoned ‘plumbing’ between alternatives, but this should not obscure the general point that execution of a conclusion is a vital part of the reasoning process.

Through these considerations, the notion of a practical form of necessity, which I hinted earlier, is also slowly becoming clearer. In concert with the argument of Chapter 3, that certainty and necessity converge in the later Wittgenstein’s philosophy, we can understand practical necessity from paradigmatic instances of certainty in our concluding action. Entertaining friends over roast pig just is the kind of situation where we recognise with certainty that burning the house to roast a pig is categorically excluded. We can think of more familiar, everyday situations where we perceive the practical features of the context we are in and, with just a little reflection, act accordingly without hesitation. When one’s child is crying because she is hungry, in ordinary circumstances—we know, for instance, that she has not just had a big meal—the conclusion is to give her food. When we are ill and there is available, affordable, effective, and safe medication, we take it to get better. These are simple cases where the various factors involved in practical reasoning are familiar and controlled. To act otherwise is usually unthinkable; a special reason would be required. If anything looks like practical necessity, this would be it. In what follows I will attempt to articulate the logical standard that underlies such necessity, and how it might extend to more complex cases.

#### 4.5.2 *Practical validity: Creative and wide open*

The discussion in this section has so far has led us to see the dependence of the practical syllogism on many other considerations in an agent’s life, considerations which are quite distinct from those specific to the end and the means identified in the premises. Yet these different considerations can at times lead to relatively spontaneous and paradigmatically certain concluding actions. This discussion should lead us to consider what different sort of logical relation is involved here.

It is, I contend, not apt to talk about the practical syllogism preserving goodness from premise to conclusion, just as the theoretical syllogism preserves truth from premise to conclusion, as Anscombe, Frey and Kenny all have done. Preservation implies a closed shop of a syllogism, a hermetically sealed calculation; this best achieved by a strict and narrow standard of validity. The logical relations in the practical syllogism, I contend, are intrinsically *creative* and *wide open*. Let me offer a definition of practical reasoning in this regard:



Practical Reasoning: The aim of practical reasoning is to create a state of affairs which aligns with the vision of the good that is suggested by the specific end being pursued, understood also in the context of the agent's other ends.

Although the decision of what means to take is partly backward-looking, in terms of looking at one's ends as shaped by one's past training and practice, it cannot be understood on the model of preservation, because it is not a simple matter of preserving the goodness from the main premise of the good and also the goodness from one's considerations of other ends. While some ends may function more like strict, exceptionless (or almost exceptionless) constraints, others may be more fluid—respect for property is the kind of thing we typically think of as not holding absolutely in an emergency. Many of the ends involved in what Frey aptly calls 'the wider context of a life in progress' are by their nature open-ended; we might typically measure respect for persons, property and other things according to particular paradigm cases from our upbringing or culture, but we will often encounter new situations where we may have to weigh up different values, or decide whether the situation at hand calls for a new interpretation of a value such as respect.

Thus, the act of choosing a certain means as best, or at least good, for this situation is an essentially forward-looking endeavour. Müller gives us a helpful expression in his talk of shaping a life:

All the practical considerations of one agent relate to the shaping of one and the same life'; it is the 'practice' which practical reason ultimately 'serves'.<sup>64</sup>

Every new action gives fresh insight into what the overall direction of the agent's life looks like. In some cases, the action chosen may in fact lead to a new paradigm being established, and this will then shape the agent's deliberations in the future. Here it is useful to recall once more Wittgenstein's point that 'sentences are often used on the borderline between logic and the empirical, so that their meaning shifts back and forth and they are now expressions of norms, now treated as expressions of experience' (ROC III, §19). Someone might, for instance, recognise honesty as a very basic value to be upheld at all times, and dishonesty to be avoided. Yet there may be unexpected situations where, after deliberation, the agent judges the means to be 'dishonest' though this is ascribed in a novel way. Or in a different situation, the agent may decide that not telling the truth, but not telling an outright lie either, will be the best course of action as telling the truth may result in disproportionate harms. Consider these examples:

- (a) A student might decide that using Artificial Intelligence software in an open book examination would be 'dishonest' even if not currently disallowed, having considered factors such as standards of fairness in an examination, the wider accessibility of that particular

---

<sup>64</sup> Müller, 'How theoretical', 105.

software, and academic integrity. The same student might judge that it would not be dishonest to use the same software for a purpose like generating a cover letter for a job application, however, since the standards of integrity for a cover letter are different from academic work.

- (b) A government employee might decide that whistleblowing is not the best course of action to take at this point, for the purpose of improving internal processes in her department because, after considering all the possible consequences of such a move, she concludes that this would be disproportionate. Perhaps the problems she is dealing with are, though serious, not life and death matters; there are appropriate internal channels that have yet to be exhausted; the privacy of different colleagues will be unduly intruded upon if she goes public.

In both these cases, the uses of ‘dishonest’ and ‘disproportionate’ arguably sit on the border between applying a norm and creating a new norm. Different reasonable people will likely differ in judgement when placed in these situations. These different judgements will likely be the result of the different ends in each agent’s life which have shaped their normative concepts, and will also go on to inform further their use of concepts like ‘dishonest’ and ‘disproportionate’ in other, relevantly similar situations.

Of course, not every decision in practical reasoning will be like this, but even outside of these cases practical reasoning will rarely involve simply applying fixed, straightforward rules. The decision to act at all on a particular end is itself a case of shaping one’s life; it indicates the relative importance of one’s priorities—though seeking to entertain one’s friends with a roasted pig is no bad thing in itself (excluding ethical concerns regarding eating meat to simplify the argument slightly), the same evening could have been spent elsewhere doing charitable work, or perhaps one could have opted for a cheaper meal because of the rising cost of living. Perhaps it is a one-off occasion, a well-earned night of frivolity that punctuates a life of arduous, mundane, and conscientiously performed work; or perhaps it is part of a wider trend in the life of someone who exemplifies a certain *joie de vivre* (such a person may well opt to burn a house down to roast the pig!).

It is important, therefore, to recognise the intricate connections between different cases of practical reasoning in each agent’s life that shape the standards of reasoning for that person, and which collectively give rise to an ethical picture or moral vision that both guides the agent’s actions and is itself guided by new actions.

#### 4.5.3 *Practical necessity and good ends in reasoning*

If my analysis is correct, then it is clear that—far from being outside of the reasoning process—choosing between means is integral to the practical analogue of validity in the syllogism. Hence, we can safely

conclude that the conclusion of the practical syllogism is an action. It should also be increasingly clear why there is no practical analogue of a theoretical syllogism that is valid but not true, and that is because of the intrinsically ethical nature of the practical syllogism. Validity in the theoretical case depends on the syllogism being hermetically sealed, while in the practical case the agent's deliberating about a particular means involves both questions related directly to the narrow circumstances of the syllogism (e.g. effectiveness of the means) and questions less directly related to that situation (other ends in one's life). What are the implications of this?

Firstly, we can also now see the difference between a hypothetical case of practical reasoning and a case oriented to actual action—I have been taking the latter as far paradigmatic. We can certainly reason and draw conclusions *hypothetically* about theoretical or practical matters; a scientist might be considering the potential implications should water be discovered on another planet, or an election strategist might be thinking about ways to win an election that has not yet been called. Note that in both these two examples the reasoning patterns are shaped by the hypothetical goals of the reasoner. While hypothetical theoretical reasoning takes the premises to be *supposed as true*, hypothetical practical reasoning takes a certain goal *supposed as wanted*. But since this is not meant to issue in action, the Humean requirement of symmetry will be much more easily fulfilled; the premises are oriented to action in a derivative way. Hypothetical practical reasoning passes from premises to conclusion much more easily than in the actual case, because a completely hypothetical situation is divorced from real-life considerations of what we can do and want to do on the basis of our personal histories and the practical specifics of the situation. Hence, what counts as a successful or valid hypothetical practical syllogism is a vague notion. One reason can about anything with no constraints other than a valid means-end relation (so in this respect it is more like Anscombe's mirror image account). This difference with actual practical reasoning chimes with something Small says about the form of practical reasoning—that we do not reason from 'were I to do *A*, I would thereby do *B*', but rather 'I *can* do *B* by means of doing *A*'.<sup>65</sup> The latter formulation emphasises the properly practical grasp of a means, while the former formulation expresses a more impersonal transition which could be thought by anyone in any circumstance with a basic understanding of the terms. (This is not a stricture about the articulation of premises, which as I have said is not important.) 'Were I to try and become Prime Minister, I would thereby get myself selected in a safe seat' is a hypothetical piece of practical reasoning that I could utter even if I have no political connections whatsoever and have not the faintest idea about the internal machinations of party politics and candidate selection procedures. But it would not form a plan of action unless I had the requisite skills to perceive opportunities that I *can* act on for the sake of fulfilling my lifelong political ambition, and have some understanding of why my

---

<sup>65</sup> Small, 'Practical Inference', 272.

desire to become Prime Minister is a reasonable one and not just a whim. Of course, it is frequently the case that we reason semi-hypothetically—‘if I had some free time this weekend, I would...’. The dividing line between hypothetical and actual practical reasoning may be fluid, but it is from the actual case that we understand the proper logical relations involved.

Secondly, we can recognise that the relevance of other ends in life is often obscured by the immediacy of our concluding action in circumstances that we are familiar with, which make it seem as if the premises involved necessitate the conclusion in a manner similar to deductive inference. This, we have seen, is false given the Defeasibility Problem. But these immediate action-conclusion events are also help us come to a more appropriate characterisation of the necessity involved—especially when we keep in mind the properly practical nature of reasoning, as I have been stressing in this chapter. When we feed a child immediately because we perceive their need and possess the relevant means (e.g. their favourite food), we do so because of a mastery of the relevant practical features of this—relatively simple—type of situation. We have already characteristically excluded delaying inordinately, or consideration of a multitude of other possible foods that the child may or may not like. A more complex case which exhibits a similarly paradigmatic certainty might be an emergency doctor on duty who responds immediately to a patient arriving from the scene of an accident. Of course, a doctor might stop and reflect on whether this should be her job in the long-term, or whether her work in a leading hospital represents an unequal distribution of resources in her country. But by and large, this is the kind of certainty in her life that exemplifies the kind of practical necessity that other, more complex instances practical deliberation aspire to. It is an example of what fits seamlessly, indubitably within all the other ends in the agent’s life. There is a sense in which cases of the agent acting in such-and-such a way unhesitatingly and with certainty show that, somewhat counter-intuitively, the action is what justifies the practical inference drawn from the premises—the opposite of deductive inference. I do not mean this is as a general rule, but it will hold for the most paradigmatic instances of practical inference. The more complex the matter is, the less certain the conclusion will be, and practical necessity becomes more of a guiding ideal.

Thirdly, our discussion of different ends in reasoning also demonstrates that the decision one makes when choosing between means is recognisably ethical in nature. In acting on a well thought out decision, one is suggesting that this is the right way to act not just in respect of the good aimed at in the first premise, but in respect of good in general. Of course, we may not get this right all the time—we may realise with hindsight that one’s action was too disproportionate, for instance, or that there were other factors one should have considered too—but the ethical, whole-life perspective is inseparable from the aim of the practical syllogism. So in the sense of ethics as acting in a way that aligns with the vision of the good *as one understands it*, the practical syllogism is an intrinsically ethical endeavour.

This view also suggests that validity in the practical case is not a binary matter of justified or unjustified as in deductive inference, but is a matter of degrees as we would expect in ethics. A valid conclusion to a practical syllogism need not be the very best way to act, and sometimes a better conclusion may only become evident in hindsight because other factors that were not considered then have surfaced. So perhaps logical validity in practical reasoning is not the same thing as necessity, where necessity is understood on the model of logical necessity in the theoretical case. That form of necessity is tied to the notion of truth-preservation, which is, as I have argued, inappropriate in practical reasoning. But logical validity in practical reasoning should at least approach practical necessity as I have described it above.

Does this ethical conception of practical inference imply that a practical syllogism cannot be valid if it concerns something utterly immoral—that all its components have to be good, even if not necessarily the best? This is an important question to address because much of my discussion of dispositions of reason has to do with means, not ends. This raises the possibility that one could still engage in practical reasoning on the basis of a supposed good that is in fact bad—does that come close to being an analogue of a valid but untrue theoretical syllogism?

An initial rejoinder would be to say that if ethics is crucial to the determination of the correct means for practical reasoning, then why should the end—the premise of the good—not also be judged ethically? Indeed, the above discussion has already implied this, since one may decide that in fact now is not the right moment to pursue a particular end that may otherwise be good. But this does not get to the heart of the objection. So to find an illustrative example, let us suppose I wanted to reason from a putative premise of the good that I should make money by deceiving others (though I do not actually believe that). How would I reason about the best means to take? Believing (for the sake of argument) that deceiving others for financial gain is good is not enough for me to choose between means; it is interconnected with a web of other things I value as good in life that would come into play. By what standard would I judge what is a ‘better’ way of defrauding someone? Would I prefer to defraud someone who is already very wealthy and would suffer relatively few consequences, or does that not matter to me at all? Or should I single out members of a particular profession whom I believe ‘deserve’ to be cheated of their money? If someone were truly to act on such a premise of deceiving others for gain, it is likely that their choice of means would also be informed by other background beliefs and ends in their life—perhaps, a certain disregard for the suffering of others, or particular political beliefs about the illegitimacy of property, or the uneven distribution of wealth in society. But suppose we took the standpoint of one who thinks that defrauding anyone is always, or at least generally, an utterly unconscionable act. Would we then say that this was an example of valid practical reasoning, just that it was immoral? Or that this was actually bad, illegitimate reasoning?

Anscombe would have opted for the former position; she thought that the question of ethics was external to the validity of practical reasoning because the goodness of one's ends could only be judged if there was an ultimate end against which all ends could be judged—and this would allow one to criticise a piece of practical reasoning that was nonetheless 'valid in the strict and narrow sense'.<sup>66</sup> It seems that, absent agreement on the ultimate end of human life, we should still be able to identify good practical reasoning, even if such reasoning is not ethically sound. But what is that strict and narrow sense of validity in practical reasoning that is not marked by ethical judgement on account of the ultimate end of human life (as opposed to the ethical judgement of choosing means that align with one's vision of the good)? If it is true that validity in the practical syllogism hinges on inferential relations with other ends in one's life, then the main determinant of validity would seem to be consistency with the rest of one's life. This would result in the view that a practical syllogism about an immoral matter—whether it is fraud, torture or murder—would be logically valid for a thoroughly evil person, though not for a good person. This view may well be attractive to many people; it seems plausible to say that we might disagree with someone's moral presuppositions while judging that they have reasoned well on account of those presuppositions.

I think that view would ultimately be a mistake, however, and it stems from the temptation once again to model practical reasoning on theoretical reasoning. Firstly, unless a person is so thoroughly evil, it will often be possible to find some instance or another of inconsistency with a person's other dispositions of reason. A typical, everyday response to an immoral end would often be something like, 'You say defrauding others is all right, but how would you feel if others did that to you?' or 'Wouldn't society crumble if everyone acted like that?'. These may not be, on the face it, polished philosophical responses, but they try to pinpoint some deep-seated internal inconsistency in the person who declares they are relaxed about committing fraud or torture or something manifestly wrong to most people.

There is a second, more complex reason: Consistency with other ends is, as we have already seen, not a simple business of preserving goodness, but involves a creative act of reason that is both backward- and forward-looking. But the standard by which we then judge whether such an act results in the correct conclusion or not is a difficult one to articulate as it must be, by nature, somewhat open-ended. Even if we identified an ultimate end of human life, this problem of open-endedness, I am guessing, would not necessarily go away. We should not, at any rate, take it for granted that knowledge of such an ultimate end automatically helps us reason whether something is absolutely the correct end to aim at, or whether an action is absolutely the correct conclusion to draw, in a particular instance of practical reasoning. Such knowledge, if it exists, would be thoroughly practical; it would show itself in the decisions we make, not

---

<sup>66</sup> Anscombe, 'Practical Inference', 147.

constrain them as a starting axiom. Returning to the point: If correctness in practical inference admits of degrees—something could be more or less correct, in other words more or less ethical—then this gives us hope that we could still say of an immoral aim that is, at the very least, a *less correct end* to draw from one's other ends in life.

This relates to a third reason, which has to do with how we identify the standard of consistency with other ends appropriate to the particular situation when choosing between means. Although part of my analysis of reasons for action has focused on the individual aspect of practical concerns, we have also seen a more intersubjective element at work, especially with my reference back to the Wittgenstein's web of concepts. I argued that we learn to identify practical aspects of a situation through training and practice—invariably, we derive many of our basic standards of practical reason from others, and even in the creative act of shaping one's life we constantly look at the way others act to refine our concepts of proportionality, honesty, respect, and so on. So this opens up the possibility of arguing that when someone attempts to reason practically from an end that is, for most people, manifestly immoral, then they have somehow failed in grasping some basic standard of practical rationality, because they have crossed a logical limit of a core practical concept.

These three reasons on their own or collectively do not demonstrate definitively that the practical syllogism is inherently ethical in this wider sense, where reasoning from bad ends is just not good reasoning, and cannot even be said to be valid in any strict, narrow sense. But taken together with the rest of my investigation into the practical syllogism—especially the disanalogy with the theoretical syllogism—I think they provide *prima facie* plausibility to the view that there is no valid practical reasoning that is not ethical. And the last point in particular takes us back to our search for basic, unassailable concepts that provide practically certain ends of practical reasoning.

#### **4.6 In search of basic practical concepts**

Just as in the last chapter we discussed how strict logical inference was simply one end of the spectrum of the strictness with which adhere to grammatical rules (see Section 3.4.2), we can see in a new context how strict and narrow theoretical inference is perhaps just a subset of practical inference. The latter is, as I have argued, creative and wide open—but within that style of reasoning, we sometimes need strict and narrow inference to transition between premises of the good or between premises of the possible to get from a more general to a more specific grasp of practical particulars (e.g. Vitamins are good for health; fruit is full of vitamins; fruit is good for health). My discussion of the creative, wide open standard of practical reasoning is also another angle of approaching the matter of how strictly we act on the rules of grammar (see Section 3.4.2). Very often our actions on the basis of our concepts involves a creative interpretation of the rules of grammar. All this makes clear now that the proper context to search for

basic, unassailable concepts is practical reasoning. After all, as Wittgenstein says, 'Words are deeds' (CV, 56). Our whole discussion of language, its logical limits, and the normative standard internal to our concepts was, in effect, a discussion of practical reasoning. And in the next chapter I will make its connection to ethics, via the unassailability of basic concepts, clear.



## Chapter 5.

### The Necessity of Action: Language and the Immanence of Ethics

In this chapter, I advance an account of ethics in which normativity is seen as an intrinsic feature of action, and basic moral errors are basic failures in practical rationality. I refer to this account as the Linguistic Perspective, because it is rooted in my reading of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and logic as advanced in Chapters 1–3. I argue that language is human nature refracted through practical reasoning, and that is why language is a source for arriving at ethical norms that are rooted in human nature, but which we can access without metaphysical study of that nature. I advance three claims regarding the nature of ethics that form the core of the Linguistic Perspective: Ethical normativity is a part of linguistic normativity, ethics is conceptually dependent on our basic inclinations which are manifested in language, and basic normativity is embedded in more complex conceptual normativity. I then show how we can reach norms of ethics by investigating the limits of intelligibility of concepts which are logically necessary for practical reasoning to take place at all.

#### 5.1 Locating ethics

Our investigation into the practical syllogism in the last chapter has revealed that practical reasoning is a distinct form of reasoning from theoretical reasoning. The central error of treating the practical syllogism as a mirror-image of the theoretical syllogism, and therefore as sharing the same essential logical structure, is what leads to difficulties in conceptualising the standard of validity appropriate to practical inference. As I argued, attention should be paid instead to what I have termed the *properly practical* features of practical reasoning: The first-personal, situation-specific nature of reasons for action, their dependence on our personal histories (the capabilities we have, the relationships we are embedded in, and so on), and the way in which they are expressed primarily in action or perception and only secondarily through linguistic articulation. This shows that practical reasoning is not simply theoretical reasoning in reverse, or theoretical reasoning whose subject matter happens to be action. It has a different logical standard, and we can only begin to make sense of this different standard if we grasp the internal purpose of practical reasoning. In brief, practical reasoning concerns both decisions to be made in the here and now as well as the overall shaping of an agent's life. A decision made in the present moment will draw on past experiences and reasons, but it may also shape future decisions by setting a precedent. That is so because while practical reasoning demands consistency with the agent's other ends, consistency is not always a mechanical application of strict rules. It will often involve a creative interpretation of concepts like respect, honesty, and proportionality, to name a few. Hence, validity in the practical syllogism looks completely different from validity in the theoretical syllogism. Whereas theoretical validity depends on the terms of

the syllogism being strictly defined and closed off to other considerations, validity in the practical case depends precisely on other considerations outside of the particular syllogism in question. There is no formulaic rule for integrating a practical syllogism into the nexus of ends and past deliberations that shape each agent's life.

All these considerations were also meant to make a *prima facie* case for thinking of practical reasoning as an intrinsically ethical endeavour, and I want to now take up that case in greater detail in this chapter. But to be clear, I do not mean to bring in some conception of ethics that is external to practical reasoning, and argue that practical reasoning is subject to such external standards. My aim is very much the reverse. I want to argue that whatever the internal purpose and standard of practical reasoning is, *that* is precisely what we should understand 'ethics' to mean. Ethical normativity is, in general, simply the normativity of practical reasoning—and it is a normativity immanent in human action, which shapes our concepts as we have already seen in Chapter 2. The upshot of such an account of ethics, if correct, is that where someone makes an error about some fundamental ethical value—as opposed to an error involving the application of principles to specific circumstances—then such an error is to be treated as existing outside the bounds of proper rational argument, rather than as a legitimate rival position. To borrow Anscombe's well-known remark:

But if someone really thinks, *in advance*, that it is open to question whether such an action as procuring the judicial execution of the innocent should be quite excluded from consideration—I do not want to argue with him; he shows a corrupt mind.<sup>1</sup>

But our account of practical reasoning, so far, is insufficient to make this point convincingly. We have already seen how, in a weak sense, practical reasoning is ethical since it involves the agent taking a whole-life perspective and considering the consistency of her actions with her other ends in life. But if ethics is simply consistency with oneself, then that would lead to an ineliminable relativism in ethics. I want to argue that this is not the case. But on what other grounds could we possibly criticise an agent, if she sincerely drew such a conclusion on the basis of consistency with the various general ends that have shaped her life thus far? Anscombe thinks that we can only do so if we have knowledge of an architectonic, ultimate end of human nature, with which we can then criticise a practical syllogism on properly ethical grounds.<sup>2</sup> I have already argued that this knowledge, even if possible, would not solve the problem since the correct standard of consistency for a valid act of interpretation of one's different ends is still not clear. Once we accept that the validity of practical inference is not the mechanical, logical validity of theoretical inference, then we cannot proceed from any purported ultimate end in an axiomatic way. So if we do not

---

<sup>1</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 17.

<sup>2</sup> Anscombe, 'Practical Inference', 147.

wish to concede ethical relativism, could we still criticise some of an agent's general ends, even without knowledge of, or agreement over, the ultimate end of human life?

In this chapter, I will argue that such a criticism is possible, at least with regard to the most basic concepts of practical reasoning. This argument will rely on our understanding of the internal logical requirements of language, shaped by human reactions, as discussed in the first three chapters. With that in mind, we come to a deeper appreciation of the normativity of linguistic concepts which, as I suggested at the end of the last chapter, is a matter of practical reasoning. In bringing out the relevance of my reading of *On Certainty* to practical reasoning more clearly, as I shall do in this chapter, I contend that we can arrive at something approaching realism in ethics. This method of applying language to practical reasoning I call the Linguistic Perspective. The argument of this chapter will proceed as follows. In Section 5.2, I define the Linguistic Perspective and explain why, from a Wittgensteinian perspective, language is a valuable source of ethical normativity. In Section 5.3, I argue for three claims regarding the nature of ethical normativity in relation to linguistic normativity: Ethical normativity is a part of linguistic normativity, ethics is conceptually dependent on our basic inclinations which are manifested in language, and basic normativity is embedded in more complex conceptual normativity. In Section 5.4, I argue that we can reach norms of ethics by investigating which concepts are foundationally basic to language and practical reasoning, and what the limits of intelligibility of these basic concepts are. This will show us what a practical contradiction at a foundational level looks like, which is indicative of a basic moral error—an error in reasoning. In the conclusion, Section 5.5, I reflect on the parallel between Wittgenstein's philosophy of logic and the account of ethics I have advanced in this chapter.

## **5.2 Approaching ethics through language**

I want to begin my argument by situating my approach within certain trends in metaethics, in order to highlight the concerns and motivations it shares with others as well as its distinctiveness.

### *5.2.1 Human nature and practical reason: Defining the Linguistic Perspective*

Why, in the first place, should we approach ethics through language? The specific claim about the importance of language for ethics that I wish to advance, and which I shall refer to as the Linguistic Perspective, is this:

The Linguistic Perspective: Language is human nature refracted through practical reasoning, and this therefore gives us access to human nature without the need for metaphysical study of it. Furthermore, being an expression of practical reasoning, language is an intrinsically normative activity, so a study of the logical foundations of language should lead to an understanding of basic concepts in practical reasoning that are grounded in human nature.

And these basic concepts shall be the focal point of my moral realism, which like the realism of *On Certainty*'s approach to language is not a theoretical but a practical realism. For this reason, I call my approach a 'perspective' rather than a 'theory'; 'perspective' better emphasises the first-personal nature of this approach, and it does not claim to be the only valid method or perspective in ethics. It does, however, delineate my approach from those that purport the existence of mind-independent moral facts.<sup>3</sup> It will be an important feature of the Linguistic Perspective that it does not rely on the existence of any intrinsically moral facts. Morality arises from the human perspective as it is brought to bear on, and shaped by, the facts of the world, and a primary source for understanding that perspective is language.

The Linguistic Perspective is grounded in the reading of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* that I developed over the first three chapters. There, I sought to explain the significance of *On Certainty*'s three central claims about logic by tracing their history and development in Wittgenstein's various writings, spanning from the *Tractatus* to the post-*Investigations* writings. When Wittgenstein writes that 'everything descriptive of a language-game is part of logic' (OC §56) he has in mind, first of all, the way language is shaped by the various activities, practices, demands, and interests that make up human life.<sup>4</sup> Logic, on Wittgenstein's wider notion of it, is expressed by the rules that govern the intelligibility of what we say through our linguistic concepts—formal logic and strict inference are only one part of logic, and represent the outer limit of how strictly we can apply these rules, though linguistic rules are typically looser in application. But language is not a mere, passive repository of the different aspects of human life, and as a result ethics cannot just be read off the rules of language-games, as if what conforms to language is what is morally right. Concepts in language are subject to dynamic change, because language is built on a substrate of pre-linguistic reactions which conditions basic concepts, but this basic level of language in turn leads to more sophisticated, post-linguistic reactions that lead to further concepts being developed or refined. Hence, Wittgenstein writes that the boundary between logical rules in language and empirical propositions, expressible only in view of those rules, is defined by its 'lack of sharpness' (OC §319). This is also why the study of language is fundamentally a study of the logic of our characteristic ways of acting and reacting (OC §§204;342), and this in turn is why I have argued in Chapter 4 that practical reasoning should be taken as our paradigm for reasoning, and that it is not reducible to theoretical reasoning.

The main aim of this chapter will therefore be to show how the Linguistic Perspective can be advanced and defended in greater detail, to arrive at a distinctive version of moral realism grounded in

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Mary Midgley sums up this important Wittgensteinian insight nicely in *The Owl of Minerva: A Memoir* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 159: 'The special importance of language does not, then, flow from its being a particularly grand isolated phenomenon. It arises because speech is a central human activity, reflecting our human nature—because language is rooted, in a way that mathematics is not, in the wider structure of our lives. So it leads on to an investigation of our whole nature'.

practical reasoning. But before I do so, I want to discuss a central problem faced by all attempts to develop ethics in relation to human nature, and show how the Linguistic Perspective is able to overcome this problem.

### 5.2.2 *First-personal access to normativity*

*‘At the end of my lecture on ethics I spoke in the first person. I believe that is quite essential.’*

— Wittgenstein (*WVC*, 117)

Any attempt to connect ethics to some basis in human nature, especially an account of norms and defects in human nature—which are taken as constituents of ‘natural normativity’—has to reckon with the objection from irrelevance. Jennifer Frey has described this objection as ‘a more sophisticated presentation of the so-called “naturalistic fallacy” of deriving an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’: So long as we want ethical norms to also be, at some level, a matter of right reasoning, then species-specific natural norms seem irrelevant, since we typically think of reasoning as something species-transcendent.<sup>5</sup> Even if we took the Kantian edge off from this presentation of the irrelevancy objection, we still cannot escape the following idea: If we seek a standard of normativity that constrains or guides action, and not just hypothetically or contingently, it must be present as a constitutive feature of practical rationality. Gabriele De Anna helpfully casts the objection in the form of a dilemma. If natural normativity is independent from practical reason, ‘then it does not need to constrain our practical reason from the outside and has no necessary motivational force on us’; if it is dependent on practical reason, ‘then the criteria for right action come from our practical reason’.<sup>6</sup> On the second horn of the dilemma, nature itself contains no ‘ought’, and normativity only arises when practical reason is applied to nature. This view, though apparently conceding something to nature, does not in any way privilege *human* nature over other objects to which practical reason is also applied.

Thus, the objection comes down to this: Even if something has been definitively established to be a natural norm or defect, we can always ask why we ought to follow nature. An Aristotelian might cast this in terms of human flourishing, but unless it has been demonstrated that flourishing is an intrinsic end, or indeed *the* end, of practical reasoning, any injunction to achieve flourishing remains hypothetical (‘If you want to flourish, then...’).

The only plausible way to overcome this objection, without giving up on either the rationality of ethics and or the relevance of human nature, is to argue that practical reasoning has its own norms which are not derived from a scientific or speculative study of human nature, but which are immanent in

---

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Frey, ‘How to Be an Ethical Naturalist’, in *Philippa Foot on Goodness and Virtue*, ed. John Hacker-Wright (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 49–50.

<sup>6</sup> Gabriele De Anna, ‘Potentiality, Natural Normativity and Practical Reason’, *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 52 (2018): 307.

practical reasoning itself and accessible to the deliberating agent from the first-personal perspective, e.g. through reflection on one's own ends in reasoning. But crucially, these norms are not autonomous from human nature; they are natural norms, but perceived from within the agent. And it is precisely this kind of first-personal access to normativity that the Linguistic Perspective offers to all language-users who can reflect on their own use of language and how their lives are shaped by their linguistic concepts and vice versa. In this way, such first-personal reflection through language is not to be confused with introspection or a rationalist form of intuitionism. Such reflection will necessarily involve looking at one's wider community, but as a participant within that community of linguistic practices, not as a neutral observer from without. (See Section 3.4.1 for a discussion of accessing the necessity of a particular practice from within, and Section 4.4.3 for a discussion of the first-personal nature of reasons for action.)

The Linguistic Perspective is not the only possible form of this general type of response to the irrelevancy objection. Indeed, this general type of response is not new and I therefore want to draw attention to some important connections before returning to the distinctive contribution brought by the Linguistic Perspective. For a start, this is the perspective that Aquinas offers in the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa Theologica* in his treatise on the nature of law and its different species—a portion of the *Prima Secundae* often referred to as the locus classicus of the natural law tradition. Perhaps the most important passage in this treatise, at least for our present purposes, is where Aquinas addresses the question 'What are the precepts of the natural law?'. Aquinas first writes that the first principles of the natural law are to practical reason what the law of non-contradiction is to speculative or theoretical reason—a self-evident foundation which all other reasoning takes for granted. The primary precept of the natural law (and thus of practical reason) is that 'good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided'. Aquinas then elaborates on this precept, emphasising that human good is naturally apprehended by practical reason:

Since, however, good has the nature of an end, and evil, the nature of a contrary, hence it is that all those things to which man has a natural inclination, are naturally apprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit, and their contraries as evil, and objects of avoidance. Wherefore according to the order of natural inclinations, is the order of the precepts of the natural law...<sup>7</sup>

Aquinas then lists a number of things to which humans are by their nature inclined to *qua* good: The preservation of life (shared with all living things), sexual intercourse and education of offspring (shared with animals), and knowledge of truth, especially of God, and living in society (unique to humans as rational animals).

It is this conception of practical reason that Frey points to, in the same paper cited above, as offering the beginnings of a solution to the irrelevancy objection. Frey explains that on Aquinas's view 'facts about

---

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *The 'Summa Theologica' of St Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1920), I-II, q. 94, a. 2, co.

human beings—spontaneous, non-observational knowledge of their most basic goods—define the starting points and limit of the structure of practical reason’. This first-personal knowledge by inclination is known as connatural knowledge in the Thomistic literature.<sup>8</sup> Anscombe, as I have argued elsewhere, also assigns connatural knowledge a central role in her writings on absolute moral prohibitions. Although Anscombe obviously predates the contemporary discussion on the irrelevancy objection, she also interprets Aquinas’s natural law ethics with a similar emphasis on fundamental errors about ethics being errors about practical reasoning itself, and this seems to be what is behind her ‘corrupt mind’ remark quoted earlier.<sup>9</sup>

Looking more widely at discussions in contemporary metaethical naturalism, whether directly in response to the irrelevancy objection or not, it is fair to say that the importance of the grounding normativity in practical reasoning itself in a way that is accessible from a first-personal perspective has become increasingly recognised. De Anna, for example, talks instead about ‘pro-attitudes’ that indicate the things we normally perceive as good, and on which our decision-making processes depend; he suggests that we can abstract norms of conduct from critical reflection on these attitudes.<sup>10</sup> His account is not explicitly Thomistic, but the role of these pro-attitudes is similar to connatural knowledge. Naomi Fisher offers a helpful adaptation of Christine Korsgaard’s notion of rational self-constitution; Fisher denies that we can freely choose and construct all our ends, but emphasises our embeddedness within our communities and their histories. We reflect on and shape our ethical norms through our participation in various practices—friendship, family life, civic institutions—already given to us; in living out one’s role as a parent, for example, one constitutes oneself according to normative standards accessible by participating in that practice.<sup>11</sup> These are ideas which are connected to my discussion of the role of human reactions in shaping language and to the way that the logical requirements of concepts are discovered only through their real-life application, and I will develop these connections further in this chapter.

But returning to the specifically Thomistic vision of practical reason seen above, arguably the most serious and sustained attempt to develop an ethical theory on its basis is the distinctive version of natural law ethics developed by John Finnis, Germain Grisez, and Joseph Boyle, which is sometimes called New Natural Law. Unlike forms of metaethical naturalism that seek to provide an account of natural norms and defects,<sup>12</sup> New Natural Law takes the principles of practical reason to be its starting point for

---

<sup>8</sup> Frey, ‘Ethical Naturalist’, 68–81.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Wee, ‘Anscombe’s Moral Epistemology and the Relevance of Wittgenstein’s Anti-Scepticism’, *Enrahonar* 64 (2020): 81–100.

<sup>10</sup> De Anna, ‘Potentiality’.

<sup>11</sup> Naomi Fisher, ‘Natural and Ethical Normativity’, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 54, no. 4 (2016): 417–39.

<sup>12</sup> I note, however, that both John Hacker-Wright and Michael Thompson emphasise the importance of the first-personal grasp of the good in their discussions of Philippa Foot’s metaethics. See John Hacker-Wright, *Philippa Foot’s Metaethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Michael Thompson, ‘Three Degrees of Natural Goodness’ (n.d.), accessed 24 October,

theorising about ethics. It maintains a strict separation between practical reasoning and theoretical reasoning, with normativity only pertaining to the former—theoretical reasoning contains no ‘ought’, but practical reasoning is intrinsically oriented towards ‘ought’s, so the naturalistic fallacy does not apply if one is making inferences from primary principles of practical reasoning. For New Natural Law theorists, these primary principles are the basic goods identified in the passage from Aquinas quoted above, such as life, friendship, and knowledge.<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that New Natural Law theorists see human nature as completely irrelevant. Although Finnis stresses that the first principles of practical reason are ‘self-evident’ and ‘indemonstrable’ and ‘not inferred from any metaphysical propositions about human nature, or about the nature of good and evil, or about “the function of the human being”’,<sup>14</sup> in other places Finnis, Grisez, and Boyle have also made it clear that these principles of practical reason are not completely autonomous from human nature.<sup>15</sup> To what extent exactly these principles are grounded in human nature is a matter of exegetical and theoretical debate,<sup>16</sup> but I take it as an uncontroversial statement that the central *methodological* claim of New Natural Law is that we can theorise adequately about the fundamental principles of ethics without doing metaphysics, but by attending to the intrinsic conditions of intelligibility on which practical reason depends. If done well, this process of reasoning will lead to ethics that inevitably reflects what fulfils our human nature—something that New Natural Law theorists call ‘integral human fulfilment’,<sup>17</sup> in preference to more explicit talk of ‘human nature’ in order to avoid confusion with deriving ethics from metaphysical claims.

At this point, it should be clear that the grounding work I have done in the last four chapters in relation to the Linguistic Perspective shares strong affinities with the New Natural Law approach. Although my account of practical reasoning as developed in Chapter 4 owes more to Wittgenstein than to Aquinas, I have, like New Natural Law theorists, emphasised the distinctiveness of the logical standard of practical reasoning, which is not reducible to theoretical reasoning, and the lack of a formulaic rule for making inferences from different ends in one’s life to what is to be done in the here and now (see Section

---

2023, <https://sites.pitt.edu/~mthompso/three.pdf>. The point is certainly present in Foot’s writings, though its importance is sometimes obscured by her more influential discussion of natural norms and defects; see in particular ‘Utilitarianism and the Virtues’, in *Moral Dilemmas: and Other Topics in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 59–77.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of New Natural Law’s claim about the separation between practical and theoretical reasoning and its Thomistic background, see Christopher Tollefsen, ‘Aquinas’s Four Orders, Normativity, and Human Nature’, *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 52 (2018): 243–56. For a general discussion about the role of the basic goods in New Natural Law, see Patrick Lee, ‘The New Natural Law Theory’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Natural Law Ethics*, ed. Tom Angier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 73–91.

<sup>14</sup> John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 34.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, John Finnis, Germain Grisez, and Joseph Boyle, ‘Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends’, *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 32 (1987): 99–151.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of this issue, see Mark C. Murphy, ‘Self-Evidence, Human Nature, and Natural Law’, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (1995): 471–84.

<sup>17</sup> In Finnis et al., ‘Practical Principles’, 131, integral human fulfilment is defined as ‘the realization, so far as possible, of all the basic goods in all persons, living together in complete harmony’.



4.5.2). I also discussed the naturalistic fallacy by way of the requirement of Humean symmetry between premises and conclusions: If practical reasoning is oriented towards action then the premises cannot be mere factual statements, since a decision about what one ought to do cannot be derived from fact (see Section 4.4.2). The premises must already contain an internal orientation to action, from which action can be derived as the conclusion of the practical syllogism. This has put the focus of our ethical investigation squarely on practical reasoning, and the search for indisputable ends of practical reasoning. If this search is successful, then the objection from the irrelevance of human nature can be overcome.

It is my contention, therefore, that the Linguistic Perspective is able to provide fresh foundations for ideas that are at the core of Aquinas's vision of natural law, in a way that is complementary to the key aims of New Natural Law. Like Finnis and his co-theorists, I believe that there are foundational ends of practical reasoning that are in principle accessible to all rational agents and which cannot be rationally acted against—identifying these ends is therefore what will enable us to say that certain fundamental errors in ethics are simply errors of reasoning. New Natural Law theorists cast this as the self-evidence of the basic goods, which are identified from Aquinas's list of natural inclinations, but this is one of the most controversial points of New Natural Law. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a proper critique of self-evidence as presented in by New Natural Law theorists,<sup>18</sup> and I will focus principally on advancing and defending the contribution of the Linguistic Perspective to our understanding of practical reasoning.

How will this be done? Let us look at the criterion for success of the task ahead. Frey rightly describes the respective first principles of theoretical and practical reasoning as 'conditions of rational intelligibility' for each sphere of reasoning; just as the principle of non-contradiction rules out contradictory statements as unintelligible, the 'logic of practical reason is such that practical contradictories are excluded'.<sup>19</sup> This brings us to familiar Wittgensteinian territory. Wittgenstein speaks of language as articulating logical rules because linguistic rules provide conditions of intelligibility, without which we cannot speak meaningfully (see Section 1.2.2). Furthermore, Wittgenstein's anti-scepticism in *On Certainty* is meant to show the sceptic, e.g. of the external world's existence, that such doubt embodies a contradiction (see Section 1.2.3). At the same time, as I mentioned in the Introduction

---

<sup>18</sup> One of John Finnis's most robust attempts to defend the self-evidence of basic goods can be found in 'Scepticism, Self-Refutation, and the Good of Truth', in *Law, Morality and Society: Essays in Honour of H.L.A. Hart*, ed. P.M.S. Hacker and Joseph Raz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 246–67. The good of truth is perhaps the easiest to defend through theoretical argument since it is both a theoretical and a practical good. But a defence of truth as a properly practical good, according to the version of practical reasoning I have developed (see Section 5.4.3), would look very different from Finnis's defence.

<sup>19</sup> Frey, 'Ethical Naturalist', 75–6.

to this thesis, one of the fundamental problems facing any attempt to apply this insight to ethics is that the concept of a practical contradiction is not clear.

Whatever a practical contradiction looks like, it will clearly be very different from a theoretical contradiction which cannot even be thought—as Anscombe famously renders one of Wittgenstein’s remarks in the *Tractatus*, ‘An impossible thought is an impossible *thought*’.<sup>20</sup> The combination of words that we might use to ‘describe’ such a contradiction, e.g. ‘square circle’, have no referent. Given that I argued in the last chapter that practical reasoning is not to be modelled on theoretical reasoning, our focus here should be on locating the properly practical features of a practical contradiction, not attempting to understand it through theoretical contradictions.<sup>21</sup> So we will need an account of the primary ends of practical reasoning to understand how a practical contradiction is manifested—or perhaps, how it fails to manifest. In a short but insightful discussion of *On Certainty* and natural law ethics, John Bowlin writes that in looking at language with a Wittgensteinian perspective we must look for the ‘judgements that form the foundation of all human linguistic practices’. He goes on to say, ‘Like the first precepts of the natural law, these judgements and activities mark the outer boundary of rational speech and human conduct. That boundary is simply “there—like our life” (*On Certainty*, §559)’.<sup>22</sup> In the rest of this chapter I shall demonstrate how language reveals to us those very judgements, which form the bedrock of ethical normativity.

### 5.3 Normativity in action

How does the Linguistic Perspective lead us to the primary ends of practical reasoning? I will make this argument over two sections. In this section, I will examine the concept of normativity and argue for three claims regarding ethical normativity and its relation to linguistic normativity.

#### 5.3.1 Ethical normativity as part of linguistic normativity

The first claim that I want to advance is that ethical normativity is a part of linguistic normativity. I want to begin with the observation that at times, when discussing the pre-linguistic reactions on which language is built, Wittgenstein refers to attitudes or actions that most of us would recognise as having ethical significance, without having any specific theory of ethics in mind. For example, in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein comments on how we should understand the situation of someone who has been given the order ‘+2’:

---

<sup>20</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, 163; cf. TLP 5.61: ‘We cannot think what we cannot think’.

<sup>21</sup> This, in essence, is the mistake Kant makes in his related notions of contradictions in conception and contradictions of the will. See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Christopher Bennett, Joe Saunders, and Robert Stern (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> John R. Bowlin, ‘Nature’s Grace: Aquinas and Wittgenstein on Natural Law and Moral Knowledge’, in *Grammar and Grace: Reformulations of Aquinas and Wittgenstein*, ed. Robert MacSwain and Jeffrey Stout (London: SCM Press, 2004), 163–4.

‘If I had then been asked what number he should write after 1000, I would have replied “1002”.’ And that I don’t doubt. This is an assumption of much the same sort as ‘If he had fallen into the water then, I would have jumped in after him.’

(PI §187)

For someone who has mastered basic arithmetic, no new decision or knowledge is needed to continue a series according to a rule like ‘+2’. Wittgenstein is clear that mastery of this kind of rule is not a theoretical understanding of a principle which requires an interpretation each time it is applied to a new situation. As William Child puts it, ‘I simply do what comes naturally, given my training... there is no intellectual procedure involved at the point of application.’<sup>23</sup> Theory and interpretation may be required subsequently in more complex cases where more complex rules are applied, but in the more foundational instances of language—which for Wittgenstein includes basic arithmetic operations—ratiocination is not involved. The grasp of a rule such as ‘+2’ is an ability shaped by past training, and this training is made possible by the natural reactions of the learner. As I argued in a previous chapter (see Section 2.3), any language held in common takes for granted a set of foundational human reactions shared by all language-users; these basic patterns of action Wittgenstein calls a ‘prototype’ of thought (Z §541). This, in brief, is why Wittgenstein asserts that language is founded on action (OC §204).

What these considerations—as well as Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations in the *Investigations* (§§143–242) taken as a whole—also remind us is that language is an inherently normative activity. The same set of human reactions may give rise to different linguistic systems or grammatical models, but in learning the rules of a particular language we must first adopt an attitude of the rule being the *only way* of doing things. I cannot master the rule ‘+2’ if I refuse to resolutely take the answers to simple sums shown to me as the only possible answers. This type of normativity in language is not generally the kind we would recognise as distinctively ethical—there is nothing inherently ethical in the decision to use metric rather than imperial measurements, though in adopting one system or the other I am placing myself under the respective normative standard required for measurement to be possible.

Nonetheless, we can see how ethical normativity comes from the same source as linguistic normativity. Let us compare the example from Wittgenstein above with a similar remark he makes in a later manuscript from 1943–44:

If I am drowning and I shout ‘Help!’, how do I know what the word Help means? Well, that’s how I react in this situation.—Now *that* is how I know what ‘green’ means as well and also know how I have to follow the rule in the particular case.

(RFM VI, §35)

---

<sup>23</sup> William Child, *Wittgenstein* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 136.

This remark brings out the foundational role of human reactions for language, and as with PI §187 we have a visceral situation of someone requiring help. Of course, we cannot hastily conclude from this that helping someone who is drowning is always the right thing to do. Our reaction in this situation is not proof that the moral vocabulary we might use in such a situation is an absolute concept, any more than our set of reactions to colour phenomena or arithmetic operations proves that our linguistic concepts governing colour or numbers are absolutely the right concepts. But such examples show us that basic human reactions—from both the drowning person and the rescuer—help make concepts like ‘help’ and ‘rescue’, which have ethical implications, logically possible. We are not, therefore, arguing about what ethical values or systems are right; we are the level of trying to understand what makes an ethical concept or attitude in the first place. When someone cries for ‘Help!’—an ethical demand—it is not an intellectual process of applying a theoretical concept to the particular situation. The person is acting out a central case of the concept, which determines the concept’s norms.

Seen in this way, we can understand this central tenet of the Linguistic Perspective: Ethics is not an external standard to language and action. Rather, normativity is an intrinsic feature of human action. Through language, we are already inducted into normatively structured concepts which take as their substrate natural patterns in human reactions—and some of these normatively-structured concepts are specifically ethical ones. Just as language cannot take hold in a community without general convergence in pre-linguistic reactions as its substrate, so also specifically ethical concepts can have no hold on us if they do not take for granted certain ways of acting and reacting as natural.

There is affinity here with Wittgenstein’s talk of our attitudes as lying at the bottom of ethics (cf. CV, 60). Anne-Marie Christensen has commented on this point, explaining that for Wittgenstein ethics does not reside in bare empirical facts; the enquiry into what is the right way of living only arises through our attitudes towards things. By this we should not understand an ‘attitude’ as something fleeting or whimsical; an attitude is a way of relating to someone or something, and Christensen thinks that Wittgenstein has in mind a ‘stable set of reactions that may stubbornly resist reflection’,<sup>24</sup> which sits at the core of ethical enquiry. These attitudes we can understand as part of the wider range of normal human reactions that make shared language possible. These proto-ethical attitudes are nothing obscure or mysterious, but are attitudes like how we relate to someone drowning. To give another example:

My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul.  
(PPF, iv, §22)<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Anne-Marie S. Christensen, ‘Wittgenstein and Ethics’, in *Oxford Handbook of Wittgenstein*, ed. Kuusela and McGinn, 798.

<sup>25</sup> In the original German Wittgenstein uses the word ‘Einstellung’ for attitude, whereas in *Culture and Value*, 60 he talks about our ‘Verhaltens’—a word which could be translated as both behaviour and attitude. While I am not suggesting exact equivalence between the two words, I note that both words are used in the *Investigations* and in *Philosophy of Psychology—A*

This is Wittgenstein's most well-known remark concerning attitudes, and it is also one of Wittgenstein's most ethically charged statements. In the first place, we treat other humans with a type of respect we do not characteristically show to other living things or to inanimate objects, not because of any theoretical opinion about moral status, but because of a primitive attitude that conditions our social relations. Such attitudes are the roots of normativity. Theoretical debate, e.g. about moral status, only comes later, and presupposes some convergence of attitudes; Wittgenstein makes this general point in *On Certainty*, saying, 'Doubt comes *after* belief' (OC §160). At a fundamental level, ethics is not a theory or an opinion—and therefore requires no new knowledge—for it is a practice. It takes for granted certain dispositions or ways of reacting. As Denis McManus puts it in relation to Wittgenstein's views on ethics, 'the crucial ethical lessons of life cannot be passed on as a set of rules of claims to knowledge; the only person who might benefit from "ethical instruction" is a person disposed to do so' and this 'cannot be brought about through such instruction'.<sup>26</sup>

### 5.3.2 Basic inclinations and 'good is to be done'

With this developing Linguistic Perspective, we can now revisit Aquinas's first principle of practical reason: Good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided. While the previous claim was about ethical concepts being made possible by shared reactions, here I want to shift the focus to the notion of the good. I will argue that we can understand the good as something to be done precisely because it is naturally apprehended by our inclinations. The connection is logically necessary; it is not a contingent connection where the good is something to be sought, and we happen to apprehend its basic instances.

There is a helpful analogy with logic and theoretical reasoning here. Wittgenstein pointed out in the *Tractatus* (6.111) that we should not treat 'true' and 'false' as two properties among others that propositions might happen to have—if we did, it would be a remarkable *empirical* fact that all propositions had one of these two particular properties, and that would be a category error of treating logic like a science. What we realise about logic, rather, is that it is presupposed in any investigation about logic itself. We can never get outside of logic to look at what grounds it—this, in essence, is the Logocentric Predicament. (See Section 3.2.1 for a discussion of this issue.) Likewise, I contend that in investigating ethics we cannot get outside of the intrinsic normativity of action. (I should like to call this the Praxocentric Predicament.) Just as believing anything presupposes some standard of truth, acting presupposes some standard of right action. It is not a remarkable empirical discovery that all linguistic concepts involve a normative standard, under which one must place oneself if one is to use that concept

---

*Fragment* as part of Wittgenstein's wider emphasis on actions, reactions, and attitude—phenomena to which he assigns a foundational role in concept-formation.

<sup>26</sup> Denis McManus, *The Enchantment of Words: Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 183.

meaningfully: To play chess, one must only move one's knights diagonally; to measure something in metres, one must use a metre rule in this way only; to comfort someone in pain, one does it just like this or that (stroking, say, or hugging), and not by hitting them further. Rather, this feature of language shows that action aims at what is to be done. There is no value-neutral zone, without any normativity presupposed (one thinks of Rawls's Original Position<sup>27</sup>), in which human action begins or in which we can observe action and then reason about its normativity. There is something that is to be done, because action naturally pursues various ends.

We would have no conception of good, as applied to any kind of action (a good chess player or a good comforter), if there was not anything we were inclined to do. This point follows from the fact that without general agreement in reactions we would have no concepts such as comfort and help. These concepts logically speak of something that is to be done, as good. If goodness could not, at least in general, be naturally apprehended, Aquinas's first principle of practical reason would be idle—not just in that it cannot motivate us, but also in that we would have no linguistic sense of it. If we could not understand goodness as the object of desire, could we understand goodness *as something to be sought*? It would be a concept external to all reasoning.

A non-ethical example previously discussed in Section 2.3.3 is helpful here. If we did not have any sensations picking out variations in temperature, we would not have the concept of heat; furthermore, the logical possibility of measuring heat with a mercury thermometer, for example, depends on the fact that mercury as a substance expands and contracts in a way that seems to mirror our experience of increases and decreases of heat. Of course, we can imagine humans without heat-sensations who might still discover by chance that mercury expands and contracts in different rooms or at different times of the day, and who try and work out a pattern. If their experimentation were refined sufficiently and with other variables controlled for, these humans may well end up measuring a phenomenon that corresponded more or less to what we call heat. But their concept of this phenomenon is a primarily a concept relating to mercury as a substance; it is not our concept of heat. For humans like us, the application of our concept of heat to both the weather and to food cooked over a fire is not mediated by any experimentation or further knowledge; we can feel the heat if we touch a piece of stir-fried chicken—and from this we would find it natural to stick a thermometer in the meat to check its temperature. For the humans without heat-sensations who discovered a special property of mercury, it would be a further empirical discovery that mercury also expands when put in contact with cooked meat, and further tests would have to be done to rule out other causes. For us, it is an internal, logical connection. The same lesson, I would argue, can be

---

<sup>27</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

applied to goodness and normativity. If we had no inclinations towards certain forms of acting, the concept of goodness just could not arise. If someone told us that ‘eating three meals a day is good for you’ and ‘it’s good to have friends’, we would not be able to understand any logical connection between the two statements, and between their content and needing to pursue them. Every new object of goodness recommended to us for pursuit would be like a new empirical discovery. We would not understand that goodness *just* is to be pursued. Normativity would be utterly mysterious, if it were not logically connected to inclinations in action. Whereas normativity as explained by concept-formation through patterns of acting and reacting—our natural inclinations—is utterly familiar.

### 5.3.3 *Basic normativity as embedded in conceptual complexity*

However, at this point I want to strike a note of caution. My third claim is that ethical normativity cannot be read straight off linguistic rules, because basic forms of normativity—as seen in paradigm cases of ‘comfort’ and ‘help’—are embedded within more complex concepts.

To use the concept of ‘comfort’ as a case in point, the two claims about normativity defended above would suggest that we cannot understand the meaning of comfort unless we had the appropriate natural reactions to comfort someone in pain. Both ‘pain’ and ‘comfort’ are conceptually-related terms, and we tend to learn one through the other. There are moments where pain cannot be logically doubted—Wittgenstein gives the example of a mother comforting a baby who is crying. Scepticism about someone’s pain-behaviour—which may be appropriate in the case of a football player in a World Cup final—is out of the question here, not because a baby is more honest, but because a baby has no concept of pretence. A mother who acts as if her baby was pretending cannot even be said to be genuinely in doubt. She is not even placing herself within intelligible linguistic practices of pain and comfort. For this reason, Wittgenstein argues that language cannot get off the ground unless there were instances where, in this case, pain cannot be doubted (CE, 414). We can make an analogous point with ‘comfort’—there are also cases where it would make little sense to question whether comfort is appropriate. In a case like Wittgenstein’s example, comfort is in ordinary circumstances just the thing to be done; our natural inclination here shows us the good and helps establish the normative standard of the concept.

This analogy is helpful, but we can see it is not a perfect analogy. There are obviously moments where a mother, while not doubting her baby’s genuine expressions of discomfort, will not be obliged to comfort the baby straightaway. This is not incidental to the analogy; it is part of the wider difficulty dealing with concepts directly concerning an end in practical reasoning (see Section 4.2.1 for a discussion of defeasibility in practical reasoning). The difficulty about the normativity of concepts with ethical implications is that they do not exist in their pure, basic form which we refer to for understanding their intelligibility. As I argued previously (in Section 2.3.4), in understanding the basic forms of concepts we

must not mistakenly think that such basic forms are extractable from real-life language use. The investigation into the natural reactions underpinning a concept like pain is meant to reveal its logical conditions; the basic form of the concept is a heuristic for understanding those conditions. In our actual language, this basic form is inextricably caught up in more complex layers of meaning. A child who learns the word ‘pain’ is already embedded in a multi-layered concept, even if she may not learn all the different facets of the concept—when pain is feigned, when pain is applied to emotions, in metaphors, etc.—straightaway. Likewise, an adult who cries ‘Help!’ or ‘Let me help you!’ may do so instinctively. At the individual level, there is no intellectual application of a concept. But at the wider, linguistic level these responses have already been mediated by concepts. They are inseparable from more complex instantiations of the concept, where we can talk about whether the help we gave was enough, or too much, or even unjustified. Basic normativity is always part of a wider conceptual nexus.

For the purposes of our argument, we can distinguish between two broad layers of concepts. The most basic forms of concepts, based on basic human reactions, are the first layer; the more complex layers, which are made conceptually possible by the first layer, I will refer to as the second layer for expedience. There are concepts that arguably only exist in this second layer. But often the second layer of concepts, which includes aspects like pretence, metaphor, and theoretical doubts or questions, will supervene on the first layer. Wittgenstein captures the tension between these two layers in a wonderfully terse remark:

That an actor can represent grief shows the uncertainty of evidence, but that he can represent *grief* also shows the reality of evidence.

(LWPP2, 67)

The second half of the statement shows the first layer of the concept of grief, from moments we take as indubitable; the first half, the possibility of pretence, is part of the second layer. This layer is borne of our self-reflexivity which is something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, our self-reflexivity enables us to recognise the good we seek instinctively *as* good,<sup>28</sup> without which the first-personal access of normativity that I previously stressed would have no significance. But that self-reflexivity is also what introduces the ineliminable complexity of our concepts, especially as our concepts come into contact with each other. A mother may not always comfort her crying child because the normativity of comfort is intertwined with that of other concepts—she knows that if she rushes to comfort all the time, the child (if she is older) may become spoilt or never learn to resolve problems independently; or she has to consider other ends that also need urgent pursuit (she may be working from home, or she might need to tend to an important phone call).

---

<sup>28</sup> Philippa Foot emphasises this point, taken from Aquinas, in *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 54–6.



In this way, we have now given a linguistic-conceptual explanation for the unresolved problem of practical inference in the last chapter: How do we make ethical decisions in a particular case, in the light of other ends in the overall shape of our life? Is it possible to distil from the complexities of normativity some basic, unassailable normativity?

#### **5.4 Ethics and the outer limits of concepts**

We have now laid the groundwork regarding the nature of normativity as well as discussed the inherent complexity involved in this investigation. What holds such great philosophical promise—the notion that linguistic concepts can only function with central cases that are ‘exempt from doubt’ (OC §341)—is qualified by the recognition that indubitability only holds as a general rule (OC §519), and can be overturned by other factors. This reflects nothing more than the complexity of human life, where what we take as certain at one stage in life (e.g. a child learning the maxim ‘always help those in need’ to understand ‘help’, or the conceptual connection ‘people cry when they are sad’ to understand ‘sadness’) may become progressively qualified.

Going forward, I will argue that based on the positive insights established—that normativity is an internal feature of language and action—we can get hold of judgements that are required for intelligible practical reasoning. But in view of the conceptual complexities of normativity, I suggest we should turn away from the individual instances of certainty that make the first layer of concepts possible, and look at a wider range of concepts which are foundational for language—and approach them in clusters, with due regard for the different layers of complexity. Beyond pain, help, and comfort, arguably other examples of foundational concepts are food, sleep, life, truth, love, friend, giving, making. These are the concepts that Wittgenstein would treat as ‘basic’ and ‘unassailable’ (LWPP2, 43–4; the only example he gives here is pain). It is these concepts that also typically ground the practical necessity of paradigmatic cases of certainty in practical inference, as discussed in Section 4.5.3. I will explain how we can arrive at such concepts, and argue that it is by looking at the broader picture of foundational concepts that we will, somewhat paradoxically, get to the finer details of the primary ends of practical reasoning.

##### *5.4.1 Practical necessities: Anthropological or logical?*

How do we judge which concepts are foundational for language—and which ones are foundational for practical reasoning in particular, such that denial of which would lead to a ‘practical contradiction’? Let us revisit Wittgenstein’s most famous metaphor from *On Certainty*, on which the term ‘hinge proposition’ is based:

If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.

(OC §343)

We know that with those basic propositions that are ‘exempt from doubt’, we cannot do without them if we want to engage in intelligible discourse about a particular subject. But it is the word ‘If’ that is the most difficult to interpret. If ‘If’ is purely hypothetical, then we have just found a new version of the irrelevancy objection. If I want the concept of comfort, then I need instances where comforting someone in pain is the natural thing to do. But what if I do not want this door to turn, what if I say I do not need this concept? Is that *logically* possible?

In Chapters 2 and 3, I have hinted at two possible responses to this question; it is time to bring them together. When we are faced with different linguistic models that instantiate a broad concept, e.g. different systems of measurement, we can ask, firstly, whether there are any limits to what counts as an intelligible instantiation of the concept. So there can be wildly different forms of measurement, some of which may be better suited to particular objects of measurement but not others,<sup>29</sup> and some arbitrariness may be allowed especially in more casual situations where the stakes are lower (measuring the trajectory of a comet hurtling towards earth is different from measuring wood for a campfire), but measuring systems that are too arbitrary would be ruled out—even if the dividing line may not be sharp. The importance of context to the strictness necessary for intelligibility suggests a further question: Why do we need this concept, and what about the concept requires us to apply its rules strictly in some cases? The question of ‘Why do we measure?’ here is a logical question, not an empirical one which a field anthropologist might seek to answer. Just as the role of natural human reactions relates to the logical possibility of language, so we are looking for a human need that explains the logical necessity of certain concepts for human language.

This is what leads us towards correct identification of a practical contradiction. A theoretical contradiction can be identified by the elements of a proposition contradicting each other (e.g. ‘It is raining and it is not raining’), but there is no directly equivalent procedure in practical reasoning. A contradictory thought just cannot be *thought*, but a supposedly contradictory action—for argument’s sake, someone who values truth but frequently tells lies—can plainly be *done*. It seems neither logically nor empirically true to say that by telling lies the institution of truth-telling collapses;<sup>30</sup> such a person may point to the complexity of concepts we just discussed earlier, where basic normativity often co-exists alongside more qualified versions of it. People, in any case, do tell numerous lies yet retain a basic expectation of truth-telling in ordinary circumstances, though their sense of what counts as ‘ordinary circumstances’ will be

---

<sup>29</sup> I am reminded here of the Coastline Paradox. Measuring a coastline is a vastly different activity from placing a ruler against a hardcover book, and what is similar about the two forms of measurement is vague. See Benoit Mandelbrot, ‘How Long Is the Coast of Britain? Statistical Self-Similarity and Fractional Dimension’, *Science* 155, no. 3775 (1967): 636–8.

<sup>30</sup> Bernard Williams makes this point in his discussion of moral scepticism in ‘Egoism and Altruism’, *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956–1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 252.

typically, and arguably inescapably, vague (see Section 2.4.3 for a discussion of the logical role of ‘ordinary circumstances’). Some lies are even justified, they might say, and this is just what the creative act of interpretation involved in practical reasoning sometimes looks like, when it decides whether certain general ends in life can be ignored in ‘special circumstances’ (again, a properly vague notion).

Instead, a practical contradiction can be identified by asking: What are the limits of intelligibility of the concept? A question about practical contradictions is a question about what norms of behaviour must be upheld for a concept to be able to take root in language. It seems we must be able to point to certain cases where, as a general rule, truth-telling is obligatory, in order to have a viable concept of truth-telling. There must be at least paradigmatic cases of certainty; too many exceptions will render the concept of truth-telling meaningless. What those paradigmatic cases are, and how many is too many exceptions, are more difficult matters. Wittgenstein asks, ‘Is it essential for our language-games (“ordering and obeying” for example) that no doubt appears at certain points’ (OC §524)? The answer, it seems to me, is yes—but here we are looking, not for immediate cases that have visceral certainty anymore (cf. OC §519), but general statements of conceptual limits. And to know whether we are dealing with a practical contradiction of a foundational concept, we can ask: Why do we need the concept of truth-telling? Is it foundational to reasoning about human action because of a basic inclination—it is just what we do and seek?

To identify foundational concepts, we can ask what we simply pursue, without justification. This, I think, is the way to answer Wittgenstein’s question in the *Investigations*, ‘What does man think for? What is it good for?’ (PI §466). The point of thinking rests on things that ultimately cannot be justified. And we find those things by asking: What actions are necessary? Seeking food, shelter, and clothing is something that nobody needs to justify. We do not think of that as instrumental to welfare so much as providing the logical boundaries of the concept of welfare. Seeking companionship in friends and family—again these are not so much instrumental to a good social life as the very definition of it. Speaking and listening are conditions for the concept of communication, which implies truth-telling. We give and we take things, we compare things and thus measure them. These concepts look indispensable. Taking this as a logical, not empirical, insight means any practical reasoning always takes for granted such concepts. Practical reasoning cannot take place in a vacuum, with no presuppositions; it takes for granted a whole web of concepts in place and intertwined with each other. I would argue that these are concepts we cannot do without—we cannot engage in any kind of reasonable discourse about action, so they are basic concepts of practical reasoning. If we did not have a concept of giving and taking, we cannot have any conversations about what to do with things. If we did not have a concept of measurement—not necessarily with finely graded scales, but with comparative adjectives like big and small—we could not talk about

those things. Without concepts of welfare and sociability (whatever cluster of words we use to invoke these concepts), we could not even begin to reason about what to do to others. Do we have to do any of these things? There is a fundamental philosophical point here that is so obvious it seems almost trivial to say: Humans need to act. Our basic condition is that of acting<sup>31</sup>—towards others, towards things around us. And since we need to act, we also ask how we should act. That is why no one can intelligibly ask, ‘I do not believe in ethics; now what I should do?’<sup>32</sup> Our reasoning about action begins with an interconnected network of concepts in place.

There are two further points worth remarking on. First of all, basic concepts of this kind will sometimes be interchangeable with one another, or some will cluster with others to form other concepts. It is not the mark of a basic concept that it cannot be defined in terms of other concepts (that would be like the mythical elementary propositions of the *Tractatus*). Basic concepts are, like all concepts, grammatically related with other concepts (e.g. comfort and pain, to use a previous example). What makes them basic is our pursuit for them, not our linguistic-conceptual scheme. Secondly, we can distinguish between two different kinds of foundational concepts. Some will concern means, like measurement. Other will concern ends to be sought or avoided; these give us our basic picture of good that is to be sought and evil that is to be avoided. The basic ends that are good are the indispensable ends of practical reasoning, contradiction of which will be basic moral errors, and errors of reasoning. And we identify such practical contradictions by the method above. It is the outer limits of intelligibility of our most basic concepts that determine the bounds of ethics.

#### 5.4.2 *Absolutely the right concepts, or the right absolute concepts?*

I want to argue now that the most fruitful way to identify practical contradictions is by looking, not at basic ends in isolation, but by looking at how they cluster together and form more complex social realities—money, property, governance, for instance—arising from their second conceptual layer. How does this lead us to articulable ethical norms?

Consider, first of all, the thought that only because giving and taking are natural, basic modes of acting does the concept of private property become intelligible. Of course, we experience this reality with ownership coming first; giving and taking seems to rely on this fact in our reasoning. The apparent priority of ownership over the actions of giving/taking and buying/selling is reinforced by the most important cases of ownership being regulated by complex laws. In the course of giving reasons, we begin with ownership as one of those general ends in life where reasons tend to terminate—not that someone

---

<sup>31</sup> Wiland suggests a similar point in ‘In the beginning’, 314.

<sup>32</sup> I make this point in ‘Anscombe’s Moral Epistemology’, 95–6.

else's ownership of something can never be overridden in emergencies, but often it will be enough of a reason to block a potential means to an end in practical reasoning. Ownership is, for most of us, one of the core concepts of ethical reasoning, and yet it is a fairly complex one; it is certainly less basic than comforting or speaking. But the actions of giving and taking are logically foundational to the practice of ownership being able to exist, not the thing owned. Giving and taking do not require a concept of ownership, only physical possession; ownership is a second-layer concept deriving from just having and giving something. Self-reflexivity is required to grasp the full extent of the concept—to see a possession *as mine* and not just physically here with me. 'It's mine' can then provide sufficient practical (ethical) reason why you cannot take it.

Here we have the beginnings of a theory of private property on the basis of the Linguistic Perspective. I do not have the space to develop it further here, and I want to move to discussing an even more important concept to practical reasoning, but the structure of this argumentative sketch is meant to help bring out an important point: What is striking is that in everyday settings we often begin our practical reasoning with fairly complex normative concepts, which are from the second layer of conceptual normativity.

If we just looked at the basic ends identified above in isolation, they do not give us very substantial normative guidance in ethics. To be sure, they are already signs of significant philosophical progress—their place at the foundations of normativity is a hard-won conclusion. But a practical contradiction of truth-telling, or of welfare, would be rather vague. All we can say is that, in certain cases we need to tell the truth or we need to avoid harming others. These are practical truths, but rather atomistic ones. When we look at how these basic concepts interact with each other at different levels of complexity, I contend that we will be able to fill in the limits of intelligibility of concepts in greater detail, and this will lead us to more substantial primary ends in practical reasoning.

This strategy means we must confront the problem of conceptual complexity head-on. An obvious worry is that the second layer of concepts does not seem as solidly natural as the first. We see this worry, expressed in different terms, in a recent paper by Rachael Wiseman, who suggests that we cannot ground ethical normativity in practices which rely on language for their existence (what I would call second-layer concepts); her prime example, taken from Anscombe, is promising. To consider 'I promised you' as an argument-terminating reason relies on a linguistic practice, and the force of the promise is only internal to the rules of that practice. In that sense, having a rule about not breaking promises is no different from the strict rules governing chess. Both require self-reflexivity, or a 'self-referentiality' of rules as Wiseman puts it—to accept the rule as rule. She argues that we should look instead to the 'naturally intelligible normativity' of concepts regarding things whose very existence do not depend on language, even if of

course we only ever access such things through language (these would be first-layer concepts).<sup>33</sup> One might point out here that the big difference between promising and chess is that a lot of human good depends on promising,<sup>34</sup> so it seems less likely that we can decide not to engage in the practice of promising than is the case with chess (without denying that chess is conducive to other kinds of human good). Still, this seems like we are characterising promising by its instrumental value. We do not *have* to make promises, and when we do, why should breaking them be anything *morally* more concerning than moving a knight in the wrong way—especially if breaking a promise was meant to lead to some other good result? For this reason Wiseman cites Wittgenstein’s famous warning against assuming that we have ‘absolutely the correct’ concepts. What is so special about such a linguistic practice that some people think it can create a *moral* obligation? Certainly, nothing in my arguments so far concerning the Linguistic Perspective would suggest that any form of linguistic normativity is automatically ethical in nature; quite obviously, many linguistic standards of normativity are optional (like chess) or legitimately relative (like measuring).

I want to compare what Wiseman says with an important passage Bowlin gives us in his essay on natural law ethics and *On Certainty*:

Returning again to our moral sceptic, he will surely reply that he knows what ‘justice’ means, that he has sufficient mastery of the concept to press his doubts. He is not a fool, he will insist. He simply wants to know whether torturing children and killing the innocent represent basic transgressions of justice. But this cannot be right. If he has mastered the concept, then he has also accepted a collection of basic judgements about particular instances of just and unjust conduct, judgements that he considers true, judgements he cannot doubt without losing sight of the concept he claims to know. Included in that collection we will surely find the judgement that torturing children for fun is vile or that killing the innocent is unjust. Or, if not these, then some other short list of moral banalities that give ‘justice’ its substance and that most of us concede. From this it follows that the sceptic is either someone who knows not what justice is, someone who needs to be taught before he can muster real doubts about concrete cases, or, as is more likely, he is someone who trades in false doubt, someone who has mastered the concept well enough to be expected to know that there can be no uncertainty in *these* particular cases.<sup>35</sup>

Justice sounds like an even more complex concept than promising—arguably promising is part of justice. Justice is not a singular practice with fairly simple rules like promising, but it contains many practices with different levels of normative complexity: Fairness in trading, impartiality before the law, representative and accountable governance, to name a few. Extrapolating from Wiseman’s argument, one would say that we should not ground ethical normativity in a conceptual construct like justice which requires an even higher, more abstract level of self-reflexivity for moral agents to see something as transgressing the rules of justice. I do not want to suggest Wiseman would side with the sceptic, but

---

<sup>33</sup> Wiseman, ‘Linguistic Idealism’.

<sup>34</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘On Promising and its Justice, and Whether it Need be Respected in *Foro Interno*’, in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3, *Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 18-9.

<sup>35</sup> Bowlin, ‘Aquinas and Wittgenstein’, 170.

Bowlin's imagined sceptic could therefore take this line of argument and try another tactic, 'Yes, killing the innocent and torturing children are basic transgressions of what you call "justice", but what makes justice *the right concept* for structuring and anchoring our moral reasoning? Maybe justice is the wrong way of carving out different basic concepts, and we should take utility as our master-concept instead. Why should rejecting "justice" be seen as a defect of practical reasoning? I have a different grammar of practical reasonableness.' How should we reply to such a sceptic?

These are challenges that help us get to the bedrock of ethics. I will argue that even second-layer concepts can be foundational for normativity, if they can be shown to rely very tightly on first-layer concepts, and are the natural secondary expression of them. In this way, we are turning the point about the complexity of normativity on its head and using it to our advantage.

#### 5.4.3 Lying, promising, and the practice of justice

We previously said that from looking at logically necessary basic concepts, we can say that at least in general truth-telling is right—it lies at the very possibility of normativity. In his Last Writings, Wittgenstein considers the possibility of humans who do not lie:

Could one imagine that people view lying as a kind of insanity.—They say 'But it isn't true, so how can you say it then?!' They would have no appreciation for lying. 'But he won't say that he is feeling pain if he isn't!—If he says it anyway, then he's crazy.' Now one tries to get them to understand the temptation to lie, but they say: 'Yes, it would certainly be pleasant if he believed—, but it isn't *true!*'—They do not so much condemn lying as they sense it as something absurd and repulsive. As if one of us began walking on all fours.

(LWPP2, 20)

Can one imagine people who don't know pretence and to whom one cannot explain it?

Can one imagine people who cannot lie?—What else would these people lack? We should probably also imagine that they cannot make anything up and do not understand things that are made up.

Whoever couldn't pretend also couldn't play a role.

(LWPP2, 56)

As usual, Wittgenstein only hints at an answer and leaves us to figure out the appropriate conclusions. But I think his overall suggestion is that the ability to lie—or to avoid such a morally loaded term, pretend—is as natural to humans as truth-telling. Pretence is certainly a second-layer concept, our conceptual layers always come to us already intertwined. Pretence, it would seem, is quite crucial to human life. Children pretend to be fictional characters or play hide-and-seek; we act out roles, whether formally in plays, or just to joke around. Pretence is as natural to us as speaking in metaphors, arguably also a kind of pretence that becomes accepted as a standard of truth-telling (see Section 2.3.2 for a discussion of metaphor). So the normative standards governing speaking are complex, and truth-telling is not a rule we cleave to literally and strictly at all times. To put it another way, Wittgenstein's suggestion

is that people who do not know pretence seem to exhibit a stilted rationality—not that it is irrational, but that it is an incomplete rationality. And here is, I think, a case where Wittgenstein rolls back on his earlier idea that we must not think that those who lack a concept we have are lacking something that we have (PPF xii, §366). Truth-telling is defined by both its first and second layers; pretence only comes about because we have self-reflexivity about speaking something as true, which then suggests the possibility of speaking falsely, and extends our concept of truth-telling grammatically. Yet the normativity of truth-telling, I would suggest, is foundational to practical reasoning.

Whatever normative principles govern truth-telling, it seems like we cannot discern those principles by looking solely at the concept of truth-telling in isolation. After all, it is not as if people engage in pretence at random; truth-telling and pretence are part of the larger web of our linguistic concepts and practices. But it is in this complexity that our vague sense of when truth-telling is right becomes more specific. When I am speaking to my spouse about life plans, or when I am testifying in a murder trial, these are utterly different from instances where pretence might be tolerated, e.g. tricking somebody into entering their surprise birthday party. This greater specification is not in spite of truth-telling's connection with other concepts, but is possible because of it. We do not reason about truth-telling in isolation from other foundational concepts like welfare and sociability.

Now I want to connect this to promising. The first step is to make sense of the normativity involved in promising along similar lines to truth-telling. What forms of acting make promising conceptually possible? We act in the present moment according to various motives, but we can also make plans for future action on the basis of those motives. We can declare our intentions for the future to others, giving them reason to expect that we will do such-and-such a thing. Notice that we often do not need to say 'I promise that...' to make a promise. The declaration of future intent, like when I tell my wife 'I will do the dishes tonight', in certain contexts suffices for promising, though we do give a special place to linguistic formulae of oaths and vows for very serious matters, where we consider such promises to be binding come what may.

Anscombe has argued that the kind of 'mutual fostering of expectations' I have just described, in the less formal setting, does not by itself constitute promising; it can function as a linguistic instrument for promising only because people have grasped explicit rules of promising that people can make implicit promises by such fostering.<sup>36</sup> In terms of our self-reflexive grasp of promising, Anscombe is right, and this therefore seems to justify Wiseman's argument. Only when we have been inducted into the practice of promising and we have it in our repertoire of linguistic practices, and we know that others do as well,

---

<sup>36</sup> Anscombe, 'Rules, Rights, Promises', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 3:99.



can we identify implicit cases as belonging the wider class of promises. This is correct, but my argument is operating on a different level. It is similar to my argument earlier concerning the conceptual priority of giving and taking over ownership, which is compatible with ownership appearing to come first in everyday reasoning as the concept we invoke to justify decisions.

What we can ask, in a similar vein to Wittgenstein's example of people who do not know pretence, is whether there would be something missing from people who, for instance, never make plans for the future, or never talk about future plans with others. Once again, this seems like a stilted rationality. If someone is able to speak about her plans for the future, then she can be held to her word—there is no promise made to anyone, but simply a matter of whether she was speaking truthfully. Of course, in such a case a wider range of reasons might be acceptable for excusing her from not following through with her plans, compared with if she had made a promise, but there is a standard of normativity here then is continuous with truth-telling—a truth-telling for the future. In a world without promising, we would still perceive that something has gone wrong when someone repeatedly does not do things they declare they will do. This is linked to the matter of disappointing others, which we generally seek to avoid doing as a matter of sociability, and which comes into play even without the practice of promising.<sup>37</sup> So the underlying sources of normativity for promising are thoroughly natural to us, and the institution of promising follows quite seamlessly from this picture. Having made a promise obviously then gives an extra reason to keep to one's word, but we would not adopt that standard of normativity if in the first place we did not see it as generally good to stick to what we say we will do—it is a way of reaching back into a moment in the past where we decided something was worth doing. The difference promising makes is that now someone else can hold me to account, which 'feeble' as that is (as Anscombe puts it) is still less feeble than keeping to my word by myself.

This is the major difference between my account of promising and Anscombe's. For Anscombe, the paradigm case of promising is someone getting someone else to do their will.<sup>38</sup> In such circumstances, a clear-cut practice of promising must be presupposed, since the other person may not have any reason to fear being a disappointment just by refusing to do someone else's will. Perhaps the times we will first remember promising vividly are precisely those moments when we do not want to do something we have already promised, and those are moments when the force of the linguistic instrument may be the last thing keeping us faithful. But the normativity of promising, as I have argued, is made intelligible first by

---

<sup>37</sup> Candace Vogler says, 'I confess that I hate being a disappointment to others. But that is not a good way of describing my relationship with my mortgage lender.' A mortgage is certainly a very formalised promise, with a lot at stake—and one's credit history is a formalised record of whether one is likely to be a disappointment. See Vogler, 'Anscombe on Promising', in *The Moral Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe*, ed. Luke Gormally, David Albert Jones, and Roger Teichmann (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2016), 129.

<sup>38</sup> Anscombe, 'On Promising', 16–8.

those things we ourselves wanted to do, but which we can be reminded of thanks to our declaration to another (perhaps the beneficiary of the act). We can accept the normative force of promises regarding things we do not really want to do because we understand, from the cases of things we want to do, that there is something good about keeping our word. This is in line with the picture of normativity arising from our inclinations I discussed earlier. If promising, however, depended solely on the threat of reproach from others, then the normativity of such ‘promising’ is, in effect, nothing more than the Hobbesian normativity of command and obedience.

In summary, we can say with confidence of promising that, whether or not it is ‘absolutely the correct’ concept (we could imagine people who did not have the formal institution of promising), it is the correct absolute concept that follows from the patterns of behaviour mentioned above. By absolute concept I do not mean that promises always bind absolutely, but like truth-telling it does have an outer limit—we must be able to imagine some cases where promises do bind come what may, even if we may disagree about how often such cases will occur. And we know this outer limit by looking at the way our concept of promising interacts with other concepts, most especially those that seem to cluster together with it under the heading of justice. To this point I now turn.

#### *5.4.4 Deontic norms and virtues*

What I have been trying to establish is that even second-layer concepts can provide ends of practical reasoning. In fact, second-layer concepts are typically the starting points of practical reasoning, because we reason on the basis of ends already clustered together in practice, and seldom in isolation, about ‘welfare’ or ‘comfort’ or ‘sociability’. When we act instinctively to comfort someone, there is no deliberation involved in this instantiation of a first-layer concept. It is a prototypically reasonable way of acting. But in doing so one has not engaged in practical reasoning; one has performed an act that is a constitutive element of having practical reasoning at all. The starting points of reasoning are conceptually much richer—we already begin with concepts of promising and truth-telling, and added to that welfare and sociability, which have different layers of complexity. Concepts like promising, though not properly basic, are still practically necessary in a secondary way being so tightly linked to more foundationally basic practical concepts, as we have seen. And as I have said, concepts come to us already intertwined in their normative standards. This helps us get to more specific formulations of their limits of intelligibility.

I suggest that this is one of two ways of arriving at more substantial normative guidance in ethics. Let me consider this first path—the limits of intelligibility, which lead to deontic norms—in greater detail, before turning briefly to a complementary alternative, the virtues. Both deontic norms and virtues, on my account, are constituted by each other.

## (1) Deontic norms

My argument has been that when we look at the intertwining of concepts in their different layers of normative complexity, we get to a more specific sense of their outer limits. But there is a common thread which I have yet to point out explicitly, that runs through the different examples I have given, suggesting where these boundaries might be found. Here I take inspiration from Mary Midgley, who says that ‘*moral* is simply the superlative of *serious*’.<sup>39</sup> ‘Serious’ is another foundational concept that is part of the interconnected web of considerations we work within. There is no analytic definition of ‘serious’; we know it only by what we take seriously, as expressed in the way we do things—with more ceremony or ritual,<sup>40</sup> perhaps, with greater care or more forethought. We come to know what is serious by coming into contact, in practice, with the outer limits of concepts. We mentioned earlier that strict measuring is necessary in particularly serious cases; strict promising in serious matters; strict truth-telling in serious situations. The paradigm cases of serious will typically be life, death, sex—and maybe close relationships, children and vulnerable people, money. In the intertwining of concepts, we learn which cases are serious.

Cases of strict promising or strict truth-telling because of seriousness are ‘exempt from doubt’ because these are the cases that lead to a practical contradiction as defined earlier—not just any garden-variety case of lying or promise-breaking, which would be less paradigmatic. There must be cases where we are sure, and it is in serious matters that we can say something like, ‘If ever there is a time when promises have to count, this is it’. These will be those cases that define the outer limit of the ethical practice’s intelligibility. With further reflection, we can try to state with greater precision these deontic norms, and go from ‘always keep promises in serious matters’ to ‘always keep promises about money’, ‘always keep promises when someone’s life depends on it’, and so on. The more specific we get, the better we understand seriousness, but the greater the chance of exceptions and potentially overriding factors. We cannot enumerate them all in advance—‘always keep promises about money, but not if it means your children will starve’—but that does not count against there being cases we can be sure the norm applies. These norms are helpful in our ever-growing understanding of ‘serious’.

In this way, we can also see why ‘Do not kill’—with or without caveats—is always to be found in codes of morality. What could be more serious, and what else could better mark the outer limit of a concept like welfare, than such a deontic norm? But situated within the web of all our considerations, we start considering potential exceptions like capital punishment and just war, which is why for many the preferred formulation of the norm is ‘Do not kill the innocent’. This formulation is deceptively simple; the concept of ‘innocent’, like ‘serious’, is also complex and requires further specification, through

---

<sup>39</sup> Mary Midgley, ‘Is “Moral” a Dirty Word?’, *Philosophy* 47, no. 181 (1972): 223.

<sup>40</sup> Mary Midgley, ‘The Game Game’, *Philosophy* 49, no. 189 (1974): 242.

interaction with other concepts. However difficult it is to define the boundaries of the relevant sense of innocence here, the paradigm cases of who-is-not-to-be-killed-because-of-innocence are generally clear-cut. In such a case, the legal system plays a useful role as a continuation of practical reasoning, by making it absolutely clear in identifying who is protected from killing.<sup>41</sup>

We must accept that there are limits to how precise we can be, because these boundaries of intelligibility that hold these concepts in place often involve complex interplay with other concepts (e.g. innocence and desert). But these boundaries ultimately provide the outer limit of consistency with the general ends of the overall shape of one's life. When someone has transgressed these limits, then they are simply being irrational, judged by the practical standard of logic. These limits are the basic norms of ethics.

The difficulty of articulating this boundary is also why I have thus far shied away from defining what ethical normativity is, as a subset of wider linguistic normativity. It seems more natural to say now that ethical normativity is a spectrum of seriousness, with the most serious—the most needed—aspects of human life being the most indisputably ethical where normative standards are concerned.

It should also be clear now why I do not regard these deontic norms as 'moral hinge propositions'. Hinge propositions, as I argued in Chapter 2, are fundamentally dependent on a first-personal grasp of their certainty. They provide the logical conditions for concept-formation, and as such they point to logical limits, but their articulation does not necessarily track the outer limits of concept-formation. A hinge, though exempt from doubt, is always revisable in principle (though we cannot say when in advance); that is partly the reason why a hinge proposition should not be an attempt to state what looks like a philosophical doctrine. By contrast the outer limits of concept-formation, be they ethical or other concepts, will be difficult to clearly articulate with any precision. If we tried to do so they would look like a philosophical doctrine: 'Killing is morally wrong'; 'There are physical objects'. These are imprecise statements of often vague outer limits, and are best left unsaid except for the purposes of teaching.<sup>42</sup> But they are fundamentally taught and manifested in our action.

There is, nonetheless, a possible exception—Wittgenstein himself, in a very early piece of writing, did articulate what comes close to a moral hinge proposition. The very last series of remarks in the *Notebooks* (91), written on 10 January 1917, concerns the question of suicide. Here, Wittgenstein calls suicide 'the elementary sin'. 'If suicide is allowed,' he writes, 'then everything is allowed. If anything is

---

<sup>41</sup> Hermann, in *Moral Certainty*, 104–7, makes a similar argument about how exceptions to moral principles do not pose a fatal problem. She suggests that it is 'paradigmatic cases' that give us the certainty required for these principles, and this certainty is fundamentally non-propositional, so it cannot be expressed in neat propositional statements. Formulations of moral principles are, at best, 'labels for complex ideas'. See also Nigel Pleasants, 'Wittgenstein and Basic Moral Certainty', *Philosophia* 37, no. 4 (2009): 670;678, which is cited in this argument.

<sup>42</sup> See McManus, *Enchantment*, 175–87, for a helpful discussion of ethics as inexpressible, which relates the notion of conscience to learning ethics through application.

not allowed then suicide is not allowed.’ He thinks that this viewpoint shows us something about ‘the nature of ethics’, but he ends with the elliptical question, ‘Or is even suicide in itself neither good nor evil?’. Reading this series of remarks in the light of my own, Wittgensteinian approach to deontic norms, it would seem like suicide is the most fundamental practical contradiction there is, since it extinguishes the one who reasons practically. Suicide would be ‘neither good nor evil’ in the sense that it is part of the logical conditions of practical reasoning; it is not judged as good or bad within practical reasoning, but is necessary to be in place for practical reasoning to get off the ground. So in a strict sense ‘suicide is wrong’ is unsayable, but as an outer limit of practical reasoning it seems to be a particularly hard, exceptionless one. To suggest that such this prohibition on suicide—understood on this account—could admit of exceptions would be tantamount to saying that practical reasoning is optional for some people, in some circumstances. I do not take this to be a complete defence of the immorality of suicide, but the issue seems to me to be of fundamental importance.

## (2) Virtues

The other way of arriving at substantial normative guidance is to look at whether these foundational second-layer concepts of practical reasoning cluster together to form even higher-level concepts that help to structure our moral reasoning more succinctly. These normative-clusters are not concepts that are absolutely indispensable to practical reasoning, and therefore there is a wider legitimate diversity among them, and there will be debates about the best way to systematise them.

Nonetheless, some normative-clusters will be pretty hard to escape. Here I want to contend that it is the virtue of justice which seems to occupy a central place, in part because it is a virtue often concerned with the outer limits of concepts<sup>43</sup> and with the most serious things. I suggest that the best way to think of justice is as the virtue that recognises that our good is bound up with the good of others. It is the virtue that concerns what is due to others, e.g. through truth-telling, promise-keeping, or respecting the prohibition on murder, and it comes from the recognition that our basic concepts tend to implicate others inextricably. Justice, in turn, would also become a central virtue in legal systems and governance and would inform our understanding of the intelligibility and legitimacy of these human institutions.

In this way, we have a viable philosophical programme for understanding the virtues in relation to absolute norms. We can also imagine virtues that are not as tightly linked to deontic norms, but are also intuitive normative-clusters of different ethical concepts. A virtue of care and compassion might group together concepts to do with welfare, healthcare, comfort, and charitable aid—its outer limits might be

---

<sup>43</sup> Indeed it is debatable whether, on the basis of Aristotle’s account of justice in Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, justice conforms to the doctrine of the mean. See Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, ed. Lesley Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

concerned with what is expressed today, in the West, predominantly in the language of basic human rights.

### 5.5 The Great Wittgensteinian Parallel

I do not pretend to have exhausted the basic ends of practical reasoning in my investigation here, but I have tried to present something that is more than merely schematic. The same tools of reasoning could be applied to a wide variety of other concepts. But if my argument is correct, then the Linguistic Perspective does indeed make possible a form of ethics that establishes normativity as lying within practical reasoning, but is at the same time rooted in human nature. It is rooted in human nature for the simple reason that language arises from natural patterns of how we act; there is no necessary supposition that rational creatures who had different natures (say, aliens) would have the same ethics.

But I want to note that there is nothing in my argument that hinges on the instrumental value of any of the first layer or second layer of concepts I have identified as being central to practical reasoning. That they are of great instrumental value for human good is without a doubt—but what makes them constitutive of what ‘human good’ means is not instrumental. These concepts arise from unavoidable ways of acting, spurred on by our most basic inclinations in human nature. So here we have another way of characterising the great difference between theoretical and practical reasoning. A contradiction in theoretical reasoning is identified negatively: an *impossible* thought is an impossible *thought*, as Anscombe says. But practical reasoning, being essentially creative and relating to the overall shape of an agent’s life, has a different type of contradiction at its outer limit. It is identified when someone is acting in a way that is completely at odds with the most basic concepts of our practical life. I want to say: The *necessity* of action is the necessity of *action*. Because certain actions are necessary, certain concepts are necessary.

I want to end on a note of agreement with Anscombe, after two chapters that are partly the result of productive disagreement with some of her ideas. When speaking of absolute prohibitions, Anscombe once introduced the notion of mystical value, in contrast with utilitarian value. Many virtues are instrumentally valuable—honesty has a solidly utilitarian part. But some parts of some virtues are mystical; they seem to strike at what is *good in itself*. The perception that innocent life is not to be taken, that dead bodies of humans are not to be put out for refuse collectors, and that sex is not just like any other casual activity—these were her three paradigmatic examples of mystical, or supra-utilitarian, value.<sup>44</sup> The meaning of mystical value seems obscure at first sight, and the religious connotation of the word does indeed obscure its true point and, perhaps for some readers of Anscombe, may lead to mistaken

---

<sup>44</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘Contraception and Chastity’, in *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics* by G.E.M. Anscombe, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2008), 187.

associations with Anscombe's unshakeable Catholic faith (the relation of that to her ethics is a different topic altogether). As far as I am aware Anscombe never uses the word 'mystical' in relation to any specifically religious phenomenon or argument in her writings. Oddly enough, she talks about a mystical perception in relation to participation in democracy—that for all the flaws of democracy, which may or may not be truly instrumentally valuable for societal good, there is a perception of mystical value, she says, that I took part in the collective 'we' that made the decision, even if I was on the losing side.<sup>45</sup> I do not think she means here that this is something good in itself, unlike the other examples.

The other place where Anscombe discusses the mystical is her introduction to the *Tractatus*—which is the work most associated with Wittgenstein's mystical side: 'To view the world sub specie aeterni is to view it as a whole—a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole—it is this that is mystical.' (TLP 6.45) And most notably: 'There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.' (TLP 6.522) Anscombe observes that of all the things that are only shown, not said, for Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* the most prominent is the logic of the world—the conditions for correct thought. Anscombe then suggests it is not just the strict logical propositions, which are tautologies, that show the logic of the world; in principle, any meaningful proposition also shows something of this logic:<sup>46</sup>

All the logical devices—the detailed twiddles and manipulations of our language—combine, Wittgenstein tells us at 5.511, into an infinitely fine network, forming 'the great mirror'—that is to say, the mirror of language, whose logical character makes it reflect the world and makes its individual sentences say that such-and-such is the case. The simplest and most characteristic mark of this is that we do not have to learn the meanings of all the sentences of our language; given the understanding of the words, we understand and construct sentences, and know what they mean without having it explained to us.<sup>47</sup>

And when we encounter the limits of the world—the limits of logic, in other words—that is what is mystical.<sup>48</sup>

What does all this have to do with ethics? In Chapter 1, we already discussed how the *Tractatus* view of logic is one where we enter into its applications in the world *in media res*, and that is something the long quotation above from Anscombe also alludes to. Even if in the *Tractatus* view propositions can be, in principle, reduced to their atomic constituents, in practice we access their underlying logic through the network of our vast array of linguistic tools, through which logic has application. In that same chapter, I also connected the hinge propositions of *On Certainty* with what is shown and not said, though the full implication of this connection was not yet in sight. Nonetheless, from Chapter 3 we have already seen

---

<sup>45</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, 'On the Frustration of the Majority by Fulfilment of the Majority's Will', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 3:124–5.

<sup>46</sup> Anscombe, *Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, 163.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 164–5.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

that, despite the breakdown of the *Tractatus* logical system, the logic of the world—now a looser set of concepts, related to our forms of life—can still be seen from how we act.

Now at last I can say that this is the Great Wittgensteinian Parallel: Ethics and normativity, as I have presented it, is just like Wittgenstein's mystical view of logic. Wittgenstein thought that ethics was not a theory because, like logic and the Logocentric Predicament where no one needed to be taught the rules of logic explicitly to think logically, no one needed moral philosophers to act morally. The logic of ethics, I have argued, is immanent in action. We see this immanence by studying linguistic concepts—we have not been theorising about what is right and wrong, so much as describing its logical foundations. Sometimes, when investigating these concepts, we feel we have reached an outer limit, which like the *Tractatus*'s logic of the world is a condition and cornerstone of intelligible reasoning which we only access from operating within that logic. Like the boundaries of logic, the boundaries of ethics cannot be said, only shown—and they are shown, as I have been arguing, in action: Our basic forms of action which engender certain indispensable linguistic concepts, which together form an infinitely fine network of normativity. Our perception of the outer limits of ethics is mystical; we realise we have hit on something serious, so serious it is a condition of intelligibility for the relevant practical concepts. That is why Anscombe's mention of democracy is analogously mystical—though democracy is not a concept at the outer limits of ethics, the concept itself has outer limits, and one of them, which is necessary for democracy to be intelligible, is the notion of being a good loser, though a somewhat paradoxical idea.

Anscombe's contrast of the mystical with the utilitarian or useful parts of ethical concepts, I think, is meant to bring out the idea that to be able to think properly about ethics, we have to see it as something deeply paradoxical. When we go beyond instrumental reasoning we accept that sometimes not killing the innocent may prevent us from realising what some people would call 'the greater good'; consequences, though hugely important for sound reasoning in general, do not have the last word. Instrumental reasoning, in any case, cannot get off the ground unless we know what ends we are aiming at, and these ends are not something we need to learn—they are provided by the basic concepts that all practical reasoning must take for granted. 'Ethics must be a condition of the world, like logic' (NB, 77). And the world is only known through language which it shapes. '*The limits of my language* mean the limits of my world,' (TLP 5.6) Wittgenstein says. It is coming into contact with the boundaries of the basic concepts as standing at the limits of how we seek to define the overall shape of our lives in practical reasoning that we come to see our life—our world—as a limited whole. 'This, too, is mystical; though it's as common as humanity.'<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Anscombe, 'Contraception', 187.



## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued for a Tractarian Reading of *On Certainty*, with particular attention to the text's specific claims about the nature of logic. It is now clear that reading *On Certainty* alongside the *Tractatus* is a fruitful way of doing philosophy; both texts are mutually illuminating, with *On Certainty* correcting for the *Tractatus*'s neglect of knowledge and certainty as a topic for logic. In doing so, it breaks new ground in helping us understand the logical conditions and limits of language, bringing together insights about the role of nature and that of action that were gradually developing in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. I believe that Wittgenstein's fundamental preoccupations remained the same through his different so-called phases—however enumerated or divided—and these were what can be said meaningfully in language, and what cannot. That is why I have called knowledge and certainty a new method for Wittgenstein's philosophy in the context of his Last Writings, not a new question.

That part of language which cannot be said is of the greatest importance. As Wittgenstein put it in a well-known letter to Ludwig von Ficker regarding the *Tractatus*:

...I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have *not* written. And precisely this second part is the important one. For the Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my book; and I'm convinced that, *strictly* speaking, it can ONLY be delimited in this way. (WSP, 94–5)

At the time of writing the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein would not have disagreed with the thought that what cannot be said, though we must pass over in silence (TLP 7), we still show in our actions. What he did not see at the time, nonetheless, was the relevance of action for understanding logic. But the path for understanding logic as being founded on action has now been cleared for us by Wittgenstein's philosophy of mathematics and *On Certainty*, as I argued in Chapter 3. That is why, from my discussion of *On Certainty*, I sought to make a seamless transition to discussion of ethics and action.

The norms of ethics, like the logical limits of language, are fundamentally inexpressible. This is not an argument against trying—or else my last chapter would have been in vain. But in that chapter I also pointed to the limits of those attempts, however earnest. We can, as I have argued, access basic norms of ethics through reflection on the limits of intelligibility of our most basic, unassailable concepts in language—concepts which any practical reasoning worthy of the name must have in place. But these norms are properly vague, and only acquire greater specificity—and with that, more potential exceptions—when placed in the nexus of the wider range of all our concepts in life. This reflects nothing more than the complexity of human life itself. And yet what is remarkable is that in the midst of this

complexity, we continue to find a role for some sense of the absolute, the ethical ideal.<sup>1</sup> Ethics is not only about absolutes, but the notion of the ideal is a crucial element of the set of human reactions that makes ethics possible. It is shown in our way of acting, of our treating certain concepts as absolutely necessary. In that way, ethics is nothing mysterious, though it cannot be said.

For this reason, I see my account of ethics as solidly rooted in *On Certainty*, even if its ideas evidently go beyond what Wittgenstein was prepared to commit to in his life. It is *On Certainty* that makes possible this linguistic vision of thinking about ethics, and which puts us on a road towards reconceiving ethics as a discipline fundamentally about practice, not theory. At the same time, the limitation of our reasoning is such that we must approach ethics through a kind of reasoning that resembles theory. It is worth always remembering that Wittgenstein says ‘it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game’ (OC §204). To amend slightly the language of the *Tractatus*, then, the purpose of logic and ethics, once we have transcended discussion and description of it, is not so much to ‘see the world aright’ (TLP 6.54), but to act aright in the world.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is just like Wittgenstein’s point on how remarkable it is that we have concepts of pure colours, when we are everywhere surrounded by impure colours (ROC III, §59).

## Bibliography

- Aarons, Debra. *Jokes and the Linguistic Mind*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Anscombe, G.E.M. 'Modern Moral Philosophy'. *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19.
- . *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. 3rd ed. London: Hutchinson University Library, 1967.
- . *Intention*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976.
- . 'A Theory of Language?'. In *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, edited by Irving Block, 148–58. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981.
- . 'Causality and Determination'. In *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe*. Vol. 2, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*, 133–47. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981.
- . 'The Question of Linguistic Idealism'. In *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe*. Vol. 1, *From Parmenides to Wittgenstein*, 112–33. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981.
- . 'On Promising and its Justice, and Whether it Need be Respected *in Foro Interno*'. In *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe*. Vol. 3, *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, 10–21. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981.
- . 'On the Frustration of the Majority by Fulfilment of the Majority's Will'. In *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe*. Vol. 3, 123–9.
- . 'Rules, Rights, Promises'. In *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe*. Vol. 3, 97–103.
- . 'The Causation of Action'. In *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe*, edited by Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, 89–108. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005.
- . 'Practical Inference'. In *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe*, 109–46.
- . 'Contraception and Chastity'. In *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics by G.E.M. Anscombe*, edited by Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, 169–94. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2008.
- . 'Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language'. In *From Plato to Wittgenstein: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe*, edited by Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, 231–46. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2011.
- Aquinas, Thomas. *The 'Summa Theologica' of St Thomas Aquinas*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1920.
- Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Edited by Lesley Brown. Translated by David Ross. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

- Audi, Robert. *Practical Reasoning and Ethical Decision*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2006.
- Baker, G.P., and P.M.S. Hacker. *An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations*. Vol. 2, *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985.
- . ‘Ostensive definition and its ramifications’. In *Essays on the Philosophical Investigations*. Vol. 1, *Wittgenstein: Meaning and Understanding*, 81–118. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985.
- Baker, Gordon. *Wittgenstein, Frege and the Vienna Circle*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.
- Bangu, Sorin. ‘Hard and Fast: On Wittgenstein’s Genealogical View of Logical Necessity’. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 102, no. 2 (2021): 439–58.
- Broadie, Sarah. ‘Practical Truth in Aristotle’. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (2006): 281–98.
- Boghossian, Paul. ‘What is inference?’. *Philosophical Studies* 169, no. 1 (2014): 1–18.
- Bold, Philip. ‘Crossing pictures of “determination” in Wittgenstein’s remarks on rule-following’. *Philosophical Investigations* 00, no. 0 (2023): 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phn.12394>.
- Bowlin, John R. ‘Nature’s Grace: Aquinas and Wittgenstein on Natural Law and Moral Knowledge’. In *Grammar and Grace: Reformulations of Aquinas and Wittgenstein*, edited by Robert MacSwain and Jeffrey Stout, 154–74. London: SCM Press, 2004.
- Carroll, Lewis. ‘What the Tortoise said to Achilles’. *Mind* 4, no. 14 (1985): 278–80.
- Cavell, Stanley. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.
- . ‘The availability of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy’. In *Must We Mean What We Say: A Book of Essays*, 2nd ed., 41–67. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Chang, Hasok. *Inventing Temperature: Measurement and Scientific Progress*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Child, William. *Wittgenstein*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2011.
- Christensen, Anne-Marie S. ‘Wittgenstein and Ethics’. In *The Oxford Handbook of Wittgenstein*, edited by Oskari Kuusela and Marie McGinn, 796–817. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Cleveland, Cutler J., and Christopher Morris, ed. *Handbook of Energy*. Vol. 1, *Diagrams, Charts, and Tables*. Waltham, MA: Elsevier, 2013.

- Conway, Gertrude D. *Wittgenstein on Foundations*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1989.
- Corcilius, Klaus. 'Two Jobs for Aristotle's Practical Syllogism?'. *History of Philosophy & Logical Analysis* 11, no. 1 (2008): 163–84.
- De Anna, Gabriele. 'Potentiality, Natural Normativity and Practical Reason'. *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 52 (2018): 307–26.
- Diamond, Cora. 'How Long Is the Standard Meter in Paris?'. In *Wittgenstein in America*, edited by Timothy McCarthy and Sean C. Stidd, 104–39. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001.
- . *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going On to Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019.
- Dilman, İlham. *Wittgenstein's Copernican Revolution: The Question of Linguistic Idealism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Dummett, Michael. 'Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Mathematics'. *The Philosophical Review* 68, no. 3 (1959): 324–48.
- van Gennip, Kim. 'On the Origin and Compilation of "Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness"'. In *Language and World: Essays on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, edited by Volker Munz, Klaus Puhl, and Joseph Wang, 343–50. Heusenstamm: ontos verlag, 2010.
- . 'Connections and Divisions in *On Certainty*'. In *Knowledge and Belief: Papers of the 26th International Wittgenstein Symposium, 3–9 August 2003, Kirchberg am Wechsel*, edited by Winfried Löffler and Paul Weingartner, 129–31. Neulengbach: Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society, 2003.
- Guetti, Edward. 'Cavell and the "History of the Rejection of the Human"'. *Journal for the Historical of Analytical Philosophy* 9, no. 9 (2001): 57–76.
- Grayling, A.C. *Scepticism and the Possibility of Knowledge*. London: Continuum, 2008.
- Fisher, Naomi. 'Natural and Ethical Normativity'. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 54, no. 4 (2016): 417–39.
- Finnis, John. 'Scepticism, Self-Refutation, and the Good of Truth'. In *Law, Morality and Society: Essays in Honour of H.L.A. Hart*, edited by P.M.S. Hacker and Joseph Raz, 246–67. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- . *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.

- Finnis, John, Germain Grisez, and Joseph Boyle. 'Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends'. *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 32 (1987): 99–151.
- Floyd, Juliet. 'Wittgenstein on ethics: Working through *Lebensformen*'. *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 46, no. 2 (2020): 115–30.
- Foot, Philippa. *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001.
- . 'Utilitarianism and the Virtues'. In *Moral Dilemmas: and Other Topics in Moral Philosophy*, 59–77. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Ford, Anton. 'On What Is in Front of Your Nose'. *Philosophical Topics* 44, no. 1 (2016): 141–61.
- Forster, Michael N. *Wittgenstein on the Arbitrariness of Grammar*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- Frey, Jennifer A. 'Against Autonomy: Why Practical Reason Cannot be Pure'. *Manuscrito* 41, no. 4 (2018): 153–93.
- . 'How to Be an Ethical Naturalist'. In *Philippa Foot on Goodness and Virtue*, edited by John Hacker-Wright, 47–84. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- . 'Anscombe on Practical Knowledge and the Good'. *Ergo* 6 (2019): 1121–1151. <https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.12405314.0006.039>.
- Hacker, P.M.S. 'Inductive reasoning'. In *An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations*. Vol. 2. *Wittgenstein: Mind and Will, Part I: Essays*, 49–67. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- . *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*. Rev. ed. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1997.
- . 'When the Whistling had to Stop'. In *Wittgenstein: Connections and Controversies*, 141–69. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001.
- Hacker-Wright, John. *Philippa Foot's Metaethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Hamawaki, Arata. 'Stanley Cavell on What We Say'. *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy* 9, no. 9 (2001): 42–56.
- Hamilton, Andy. *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Wittgenstein and On Certainty*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.
- . 'Anscombe on Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*: linguistic idealism, world-pictures and scepticism'. In *The Anscombean Mind*, edited by Adrian Haddock and Rachael Wiseman, 100–24. Abingdon: Routledge, 2022.

- Hart, H.L.A. *The Concept of Law*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.
- Hermann, Julia. *On Moral Certainty, Justification and Practice: A Wittgensteinian Perspective*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Hertzberg, Lars. 'Very General Facts of Nature'. In *The Oxford Handbook of Wittgenstein*, edited by Oskari Kuusela and Marie McGinn, 351–72. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Hintikka, Merrill B., and Jaakko Hintikka. *Investigating Wittgenstein*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986
- Ishiguro, Hidé. 'Use and Reference of Names'. In *Studies in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, edited by Peter Winch, 20–50. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969.
- Jakola, Lassi. 'Editorial Approaches to Wittgenstein's "Last Writings" (1949–51): Elizabeth Anscombe, G.H. von Wright and Rush Rhees in Dialogue'. In *The Creation of Wittgenstein: Understanding the Roles of Rush Rhees, Elizabeth Anscombe and Georg Henrik von Wright*, edited by Thomas Wallgren, 235–72. London: Bloomsbury, 2023.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- . *Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by Christopher Bennett, Joe Saunders, and Robert Stern. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Kennedy, Michael, ed. 'nobilmente'. In *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 4th ed., 515. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Kenny, Anthony. *Wittgenstein*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973.
- . *Aristotle's Theory of the Will*. London: Duckworth, 1979.
- . 'The Ghost of the *Tractatus*'. In *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures*. Vol. 7, *Understanding Wittgenstein*, edited by Godfrey Vesey, 1–13. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1974.
- Krebs, Andreas. 'Certainties and Rule-Following'. *Wittgenstein-Studien* 13, no.1 (2022): 23–30.
- Kripke, Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Kuusela, Oskari. *Wittgenstein on Logic as the Method of Philosophy: Re-examining the Roots and Development of Analytic Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Lear, Jonathan. 'Wittgenstein's Transcendental Anthropology'. In *Subject, Thought, and Context*, edited by Philip Pettit and John McDowell, 267–98. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.

- Lee, Patrick. 'The New Natural Law Theory'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Natural Law Ethics*, edited by Tom Angier, 73–91. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Lin, Francis Y. 'Wittgenstein on the impossibility of following a rule only once'. *British Journal of the History of Philosophy* 28, no. 1 (2020): 134–54.
- Macarthur, David. 'Wittgenstein's Liberal Naturalism of Human Nature'. In *Wittgenstein and Naturalism*, edited by Kevin M. Cahill and Thomas Raleigh, 33–55. New York: Routledge, 2018.
- Maddy, Penelope. *The Logical Must: Wittgenstein on Logic*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Malcolm, Norman. *Wittgenstein: A Memoir*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Mandelbrot, Benoit. 'How Long Is the Coast of Britain? Statistical Self-Similarity and Fractional Dimension'. *Science* 155, no. 3775 (1967): 636–8.
- McDowell, John. 'The Myth of the Given'. In *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars*, 256–72. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- McGinn, Marie. *Elucidating the Tractatus: Wittgenstein's Early Philosophy of Logic and Language*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006.
- McGuinness, Brian. 'The So-Called Realism of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*'. In *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, edited by Irving Block, 60–73. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981.
- McManus, Denis. *The Enchantment of Words: Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Medina, José. *The Unity of Wittgenstein's Philosophy: Necessity, Intelligibility, and Normativity*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002.
- . 'Deflationism and the true colours of necessity in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*'. *Dialectica* 57, no. 4 (2003): 357–85.
- . 'Wittgenstein's Social Naturalism: The Idea of *Second Nature* After the *Philosophical Investigations*', In *The Third Wittgenstein: The Post-Investigations Works*, edited by Moyal-Sharrock, 72–92. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.
- Midgley, Mary. 'Is "Moral" a Dirty Word?'. *Philosophy* 47, no. 181 (1972): 206–28.
- . 'The Game Game'. *Philosophy* 49, no. 189 (1974): 231–53.
- . *The Owl of Minerva: A Memoir*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2005.



- Moore, G.E. 'Proof of an External World'. in *Philosophical Papers*, 144–8. New York: Collier Books, 1962.
- Moyal-Sharrock, Danièle. 'Introduction: The Idea of a *Third* in Wittgenstein'. In *The Third Wittgenstein: The Post-Investigations Works*, edited by Moyal-Sharrock, 1–11. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.
- . *Understanding Wittgenstein's On Certainty*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Moyal-Sharrock, Danièle, and William H. Brenner. 'Introduction'. In *Readings of Wittgenstein's On Certainty*, edited by Moyal-Sharrock and Brenner, 1–15. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Mulhall, Stephen. *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001.
- . 'Stanley Cavell's Vision of the Normativity of Language: Grammar, Criteria, and Rules'. In *Stanley Cavell*, edited by R.T. Eldridge, 70–106. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- . 'Language-Games and Language: Rules, Normality Conditions and Conversations'. In *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy: Essays for P.M.S. Hacker*, edited by Hans-Johann Glock and John Hyman, 152–74. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Murphy, Mark C. 'Self-Evidence, Human Nature, and Natural Law'. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (1995): 471–84.
- Müller, Anselm Winfried. 'How theoretical is practical reason?'. In *Intention and Intentionality: Essays for G. E. M. Anscombe*, edited by Cora Diamond and Jenny Teichman, 91–108. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979.
- Nir, Gilad. 'Rules of Inference: A Study in Early Analytic Philosophy'. PhD diss. University of Chicago, 2017.
- Paul, Sarah K. 'The conclusion of practical reasoning: the shadow between idea and act'. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 43, no. 3 (2013): 287–302.
- Pears, David. *The False Prison: A Study of the Development of Wittgenstein's Philosophy*. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987–88.
- . *Paradox and Platitude in Wittgenstein's Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Pihlström, Sami. 'The Transcendental and the Transcendent'. In *Transcending Signs: Essays in Existential Semiotics*, edited by Eero Tarasti, 47–67. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023.
- Pleasants, Nigel. 'Wittgenstein and Basic Moral Certainty'. *Philosophia* 37, no. 4 (2009): 669–79.

- Price, A.W. 'Choice and Action in Aristotle'. *Phronesis* 61, no. 4 (2016): 435–62.
- Proops, Ian. 'The Tractatus on Inference and Entailment'. In *From Frege to Wittgenstein: Perspectives on Early Analytic Philosophy*, edited by Erich H. Reck, 283–307. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.
- Ricketts, Thomas G. 'Frege, The *Tractatus*, and the Logocentric Predicament'. *Noûs* 19, no. 1 (1985): 2–15.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Essay on the Freedom of the Will*. Translated by Konstantin Kolenda. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005.
- Schroeder, Severin. 'Analytic Truths and Grammatical Propositions'. In *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy: Essays for P.M.S. Hacker*, edited by Hans-Johann Glock and John Hyman, 83–108. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- . 'A Tale of Two Problems: Wittgenstein's Discussion of Aspect Perception'. In *Mind, Method, and Morality: Essays in Honour of Anthony Kenny*, edited by John Cottingham and Peter Hacker, 352–71. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Shafer-Landau, Russ. *Moral Realism: A Defence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003.
- Shah, Nishi. 'How Action Governs Intention'. *Philosophers' Imprint* 8, no. 5 (2008): 1–19. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3521354.0008.005>.
- Sheffer, Henry. Review of *Principia Mathematica*, by Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell. *Isis* 8, no. 1 (1926): 226–31.
- Small, Will. 'The Practicality of Practical Inference'. In *The Anscombean Mind*, edited by Adrian Haddock and Rachael Wiseman, 253–90. Abingdon: Routledge, 2022.
- Stern, David G. 'Wittgenstein and Moore on Grammar'. In *Wittgenstein in the 1930s: Between the Tractatus and the Investigations*, edited by Stern, 27–44. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- . 'Tree-structured readings of the Tractatus'. *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 11 (2022–23): 7–52, <https://doi.org/10.15845/nwr.v11.3675>.
- Strawson, P.F. *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*. London: Methuen, 1985.
- Stroll, Avrum. 'Von Wright on *On Certainty*'. In *In Search of a New Humanism*, edited by Rosario Egidi, 93–6. Dordrecht, Springer: 1999.
- Stroud, Barry. 'Wittgenstein and Logical Necessity'. *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 4 (1965): 504–18.

- Tang, Hao. 'A Meeting of the Conceptual and the Natural: Wittgenstein on Learning a Sensation-Language', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 91, no. 1 (2015): 105–35.
- Teichmann, Roger. *The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Thompson, Michael. 'Three Degrees of Natural Goodness' (n.d.). Accessed 24 October, 2023. <https://sites.pitt.edu/~mthomps/three.pdf>.
- Tollefsen, Christopher. 'Aquinas's Four Orders, Normativity, and Human Nature'. *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 52 (2018): 243–56.
- Trächtler, Jasmin. 'Wittgenstein on "Imaginability" as a Criterion for Logical Possibility in *The Big Typescript*'. *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 9 (2020): 165–86, <https://doi.org/10.15845/nwr.v9i0.3536>.
- Vogler, Candace. 'Anscombe on Promising'. In *The Moral Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe*, edited by Luke Gormally, David Albert Jones, and Roger Teichmann, 119–32. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2016.
- Waismann, Friedrich. *The Principles of Linguistic Philosophy*. Edited by Rom Harré. London: Macmillan, 1965.
- Wee, Michael. 'Anscombe's Moral Epistemology and the Relevance of Wittgenstein's Anti-Scepticism'. *Enrahonar* 64 (2020): 81–100.
- Wiland, Eric. 'In the beginning was the doing: the premises of the practical syllogism'. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 43, no. 3 (2013): 302–21.
- Williams, Bernard. 'Egoism and Altruism'. In *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956–1972*, 250–65. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.
- Winch, Peter. 'Im Anfang war die Tat'. In *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, edited by Irving Block, 159–78. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981.
- . 'Discussion of Malcolm's Essay'. In Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?*, edited by Winch, 95–135. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Wiseman, Rachael. 'Human Essence and Linguistic Idealism'. In *The Oxford Handbook of Elizabeth Anscombe*, edited by Roger Teichmann, 344–58. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus*. Translated by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness. London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1961. [TLP]
- . 'A Lecture on Ethics'. *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 1 (1965): 3–12. [LE]

- . *Zettel*. Edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970. [Z]
- . *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigations'*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972. [BBB]
- . *Philosophical Grammar*. Edited by Rush Rhees. Translated by Anthony Kenny. Oxford: Blackwell, 1974. [PG]
- . *Philosophical Remarks*. Edited by Rush Rhees. Translated by Raymond Hargreaves and Roger White. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975. [PR]
- . Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness'. Translated by Peter Winch. *Philosophia* 6, nos 3–4 (1976), 409–25. [CE]
- . *Wittgenstein's Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics, Cambridge 1939*. Edited by Cora Diamond. Hassocks: The Harvester Press, 1976. [LFM]
- . *On Certainty*. Edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Translated by D. Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1977. [OC]
- . *Notebooks 1914–1916*. 2nd ed. Edited by G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979. [NB]
- . *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. 3rd ed. Edited by G.H. von Wright, Rush Rhees and G.E.M. Anscombe. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1979. [RFM]
- . *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle: Conversations Recorded by Friedrich Waismann*. Edited by Brian McGuinness. Translated by Joachim Schulte and Brian McGuinness. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979. [WVC]
- . *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives*. Edited by C.G. Luckhardt. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979. [WSP]
- . *Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1932–1935*. Edited by Alice Ambrose. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979. [CL2]
- . *Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1930–1932*. Edited by Desmond Lee. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980. [CL1]
- . *Remarks on Colour*. Edited by G.E.M. Anscombe. Translated by L.L. McAlister and Margarete Schättle. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990. [ROC]

- . *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*. Vol. 2. Edited by G.H. von Wright and H. Nyman. Translated by C.G. Luckhardt and M.A.E. Aue. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992. [LWPP2]
- . ‘Some Remarks on Logical Form’. In *Philosophical Occasions: 1912–1951*, edited by J.C. Klagge and A. Nordman, 29–35. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993. [SRLF]
- . *Culture and Value*. 2nd ed. Edited by G.H. von Wright, Heikki Nyman, and Alois Pichler. Translated by Peter Winch. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. [CV]
- . *Philosophical Investigations*. 4th ed. Edited by P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Oxford: Blackwell, 2009. [PI]
- . ‘Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment’. In *Philosophical Investigations*, 182–243. [PPF]
- . ‘Ms-180a’. In *Interactive Dynamic Presentation (IDP) of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophical Nachlass*, edited by the Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen (WAB) under the direction of Alois Pichler. Bergen: Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen, 2016—. Accessed 25 October, 2023. <http://wab.uib.no/transform/wab.php?modus=opsjoner>.
- von Wright, G.H. ‘Wittgenstein on Certainty’. In *Problems in the Theory of Knowledge*, edited by von Wright, 47–60. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972.