The Commitments of Knowing

An investigation into the claim of certainty in human knowing

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Wittgenstein and Literary Theory

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December 10, 2021

Be a philosopher, but amidst all your philosophy be still a man
David Hume

Philosophy concerns those necessities we cannot, being human, fail to know. Except that nothing is more human than to deny them.
Stanley Cavell

nice quote

Preface

The thoughts that follow are the precipitate of coming to know philosophy in a new way through this course. Wittgenstein writes: "Philosophy just puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. — Since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain. For whatever may be hidden is of no interest to us."[1] The undergoing of this investigation of the claim of certainty in human knowing and the writing of this paper take after this picture of philosophy, where the goal is for one to lay out what one sees.

Endeavoring to say what I see, I began this investigation with a collection of passages, thoughts and questions that appeared to be connected, but in a way that I could not yet articulate. I found myself initially frustrated by the task of philosophy, which seemed to require all of explanation and deduction: the organization of the relevant facts towards the presentation of a compelling and important conclusion. Like Wittgenstein, "my thoughts soon grew feeble if I tried to force them along a single track against their natural inclination."[2] I was stuck. Then, in an 'Aha' moment, a way presented itself in which I could go on: I would lay out all the parts before me, like a collage of Wittgensteinian paragraphs, and criss-cross like Ludwig.

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[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. 4th rev. ed. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Shculte (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 55e.

[2] Ibid., 3e.

What emerged has been a dialogue between different voices – principally René Descartes and Stanley Cavell – concerning the place of certainty in knowledge. That ordinary language philosophy can account for and survive the insight that "certainty is not enough" is one of its greatest strengths and weaknesses: a strength in that it sees our (fallible) subjectivity not as a limitation to knowing but as the very conditions of knowledge; and a weakness insofar as it reveals *our* weakness, that we are vulnerable (and responsible) to the self-exposure of *our* judgments and perceptions that are part of all our human knowing.[3]

The safeguard of certainty can be welcome relief from the existential fear of risking and revealing oneself in every utterance. One fear I have had philosophizing – living even – has been: "but what if I am wrong?" I very well could be, and my failure would expose my self. But that is not to say I will always be wrong. (Can you be so sure?)

My interest in this subject comes from the desire to respond to this parenthetical voice, to investigate the claim of certainty in human knowing in light of the fear and faith it can take to trust oneself (myself) to know.

Durham, December 2021

(*) Why is the act of revealing a weakness a weakness?

[3] Toril Moi, "A Wittgensteinian Phenomenology of Criticism", forthcoming in *Wittgenstein & Literary Studies,* edited by Robert Chodat and John Gibson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 15.

1. Animadverti jam ante aliquot annos quàm multa, ineuente aetate, falsa pro veris admiserim, & quàm dubia sint quaecunque istis postea superextruxi, ac proinde funditus omnia semel in vitâ esse evertenda, atque a primis fundamentis denuo inchoandum, si quid aliquando firmum & mansurum cupiam in scientiis stabilire; (Descartes, *Meditations*, I. 1.)[4]

These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the posture of skepticism. Our ability, even proclivity, to misjudge what is before us leads the philosopher to dismiss the entire foundation of knowledge. In discovering the falsehood of some childhood beliefs – possibly that his childhood friend's family was not in fact Huguenot, or that Ptolemy's geocentric model of this universe did not reflect the structure of our solar system – Descartes must "demolish everything completely and start again", for "once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses on its own accord"[5].

2. There are several characteristic features of <knowledge> in this skeptical point of departure. Knowledge demands certainty: for the skeptic, "there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised", which compels him to "withhold my assent from these former beliefs just as carefully as I would from obvious falsehoods, *if I want to discover any certainty.*"[6] (Emphasis added.) Certainty is required "to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last." The picture of knowledge is of a building,

[4] Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had ace[ted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.

René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*. 2nd ed. Translated and edited by John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 15.

[5] Descartes, *Meditations*, 16.

[6] Ibid., 18.

established, set in stone, upright; and should the foundations crumble upon the earthquake of doubt, then we find our structure to be founded not on knowledge at all but merely belief.

The second feature is that the philosopher speaks of knowledge as opposed to belief.

The third is that the philosopher distinguishes between empirical (physics, astronomy, medicine) and theoretical sciences (arithmetic, geometry etc.), the former being "doubtful" and the latter containing "something certain and indubitable"[7]. It is important to note that "arithmetic, geometry and other subjects of this kind…deal only with the simplest and most general things."[8] We are most likely to meet our requirement for certainty when we set our mind upon these "most general things."

Finally, the philosopher imagines knowledge as completely divorced from action: "I know that no danger or error will result from my plan, and that I cannot possibly go too far in my distrustful attitude. This is because the task now in hand does not involve action but merely the acquisition of knowledge."[9]

3. The philosopher not only understands what he says, but he believes what he says to be capable of being understood. The conviction that all must be doubted and that all can be doubted must be reasonable for the skeptical mind: "This is not a flippant or ill-considered conclusion, but is based on powerful and well-thought out reasons."[10]

It is not so that one can choose to suspect any claim to knowledge solely on the basis of one or some misdirected and corrected beliefs. To discover that drinking tea neither originated in

[7] Ibid., 17.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., 19.
[10] Ibid., 18.

Britain nor India is no reason to doubt the existence of the tea itself, "Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to a madmen."[11] Rather, there must be something more substantial to place the *existence* of tea in doubt, such as the philosopher's realization that he "regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake."[12] He exclaims: "How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events – that I am here in my dressing gown, sitting by the fire – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!"[13]

The claim of doubt is a claim of reason. nice

4. To (begin to, try to) reason is to (begin to, try to) establish understanding between people, between users of language. That language is shared, and any agreement or disagreement in opinion is facilitated by the fact that speakers of the language of opinion agree about the way words are used.

If it were otherwise, philosophizing would be impossible. Think of an argument concerning the meaning of the word 'red', where one person held 'red' to generally refer to a color in their language while the other understood the word 'red' to generally refer to dogs. Of course, the word 'red' could refer to both a dog and color – I might call my dog 'Red' because of the ginger hue to her fur – but unless there is some shared understanding of what 'red' can refer to in certain situations, and one person never sees it as a color and the other never as a dog, then there would be no debate – for the two in debate aren't just using the word in different scenarios, but they use it with different rules.

[11] Ibid., 16.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

5. “What is true or false is what human beings *say*; and it is in their *language* that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in forms of life.”[14]

We create norms in action and speech as we live together, and we follow or subvert or reform those norms throughout our lives. And to change or challenge a norm is to recognize that norm and all it entails, for the act of rejection is only meaningful insofar as there is something you have (seen and) rejected.

6. Professor Norman Malcolm writes that we use the word ‘know’ to claim grounds, to establish authority and to assert a privileged position[15]: “You know you’re not supposed to do that. The law forbids it” ; “why, I know what *this* philosopher would say because I took a graduate seminar on him this very semester”; “*I* know the way to the British Museum because I went last Thursday.” Stanley Cavell adds three more uses: to become acquainted with, to confess or acknowledge, and to agree or confirm what has already been said: “I know New York”; “I know I’m late”; “I *already* knew that”.[16]

The skeptic, and philosophers in general, seem to be more concerned with the uses that Malcolm describes – and primarily with establishing authority.

8. The problem of knowledge for the skeptic takes different forms, according to the object the philosopher is concerned with knowing. Descartes doubts the existence of the material world because his principal means of knowing the world around him – i.e. his sense perception – are

[14] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 94e.

[15] Stanley Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” *Must We Mean What We Say*. Up. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 235.

[16] Ibid., 236.

fallible. In his essay "Knowing and Acknowledging", Cavell responds to a skeptical position concerning other minds – viz. that we can never really know another person's pain, because the only person capable of experiencing it is the person in pain. This doubt does not entail that other minds do not exist, though a desire for certainty can easily lead the skeptic to such a conclusion.

9. Interrogating the "structure or nature of traditional epistemology" in *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell poses some helpful questions in understanding the Cartesian object of doubt as voiced early in *Meditations* – viz, skepticism of the material, or external, world that may include but is not limited to the existence and knowledge of other minds:

1) How can the failure of a particular claim to knowledge (seem to) cast suspicion on the power of knowledge as a whole to reveal the world?
2) Why are generic objects universally (apparently) taken as examples which traditional epistemologists investigate?
3) How can we reconcile such convincingness as traditional investigations have (which, I am assuming, depends upon the apparent ordinariness of their reflections about apparently ordinary problems) with the fact that in an ordinary (practical) context their question about generic objects would seem absurd?[17]

10. That the failure of a particular claim of knowledge casts suspicion on the power of knowledge as a whole to reveal the world relies on a best case, i.e. "a case of knowledge which we all recognize to exemplify knowledge at its *best*."[18] We might say that Descartes' best case is

[17] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 129.
[18] Ibid., 135.

the piece of wax he examines in his Second Meditation: it fits Cavell's description of the "best" meaning "a claim that a present generic object exists."[19] And to be able to doubt this claim does not entail showing it to be manifestly false; rather, it is enough to raise an "ordinary ground for doubt which shows the basis of the claim to be insufficient to establish it."[20]

What such ordinary grounds would there be to doubt something that lacks any clear reasons for suspicion? Descartes raises the possibility (and fact) of dreams; and he hypothesizes the possibility of a deceiving god, able to render the world as it appears to the senses as entirely an illusion. In the case of Descartes and his wax, there is nothing about the philosopher's perception of the wax's existence that is sufficient to establish the wax's existence. You can believe that the wax is there, but nothing about the wax provides a basis that you *know* for certain – i.e. without any doubt – that the wax you are holding really exists in your hand.

11. The skeptical attitude towards other minds in the example of pain is quite similar: we know of someone's pain through their pain-behavior, and yet one could always simulate such behavior. The pain – the subjective experience that prompts the behavior, is distinct from the behavior – is exclusively known by its sufferer. Thinking of pain in this way, only *he* knows.[21] The claim of pain based in his behavior is not sufficient to establish the sufferer's pain.

12. The philosopher sees the basis of the claim for the wax's existence to be insufficient to establish it; but is there a basis for putting into question the basis of such a claim? Cavell:

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 235.

"whence comes this sense of something amiss about the simplest claim of knowledge under optimal conditions, where there is no practical problem moving us?"[22]

13. Cavell's question holds the picture of language where the meaning of words emerge from their use – and so 'to what purpose are words being said' is always a pressing question.

14. Why does Descartes sit before his fireplace to devote himself "sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition of my opinions"?[23]

The philosopher does not hide his reasons: "Some years I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them."[24] We can only suppose at what such corrections of belief might have been, but they were clearly significant enough for him to devote "a clear stretch of free time" to work through an entirely new epistemic plausibility structure.

15. Why am I, or we, concerned with skepticism – with this extreme form of doubt? Isn't it absurd? And yet, if it had no value or appeal, then it would not be worthy of all this discussion. Nor would there be the plethora of thinkers convinced by this epistemological posture.

Cavell: "Disappointment over the failure (or limitation) of knowledge has, after all, been as deep a motivation to the philosophical study of knowledge as wonder at the success of knowledge has been."[25]

[22] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 139-140.
[23] Descartes, *Meditations*, 15.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 44.

16. But the complementary reason for why we find skepticism at the focal point of our discussion is that there appears to be something wrong with, it leaves me not quite sure how to find one's way about. How could it be that my investigation of the world, beginning in the world with language of the world, leads me to doubt that the very existence of that world?

The doubt itself is cause for doubt, and philosophizing begins again. To admit *a* failure of knowledge does not entail *the* failure of knowledge. What failure could possibly be so drastic as necessitate such a conclusion?

It appears that the skeptic "*begins* his investigation with the *sense* that, as I am expressing it, something is, or may be amiss with knowledge as a whole."[26] On the surface, it does not appear that there is anything necessary about beginning this way. Of course, one can begin here. The question remains of whether it is helpful to begin here: does this beginning provide us with a picture that helps us see clearly, or one that holds us captive?

17. What would it look like to begin differently? And how would one begin to reason the skeptic – "that is, the skeptic in yourself"[27] – out from his garret?

18. There are two ways in which philosophy after Wittgenstein begins this *quest for knowledge* differently. The first concerns the quest, which then shapes what it is that we consider as "knowledge".

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[26] Ibid., 140.

[27] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 221.

19. Wittgenstein: "What is the relation between name and a thing named? – Well, what *is* it? Look at the language-game (2) or at some other one: that's where one can see what this relation may consist in."[28]

Wittgenstein imagines the working of language in terms of "language-games." The meaning of words are given by the language-game, and it is for the person concerned to get clear on what game you are in. The kinds of language-games are as broad as the kinds of games, themselves all called games – not because of something essentially common between them, but because of their likeness to each other. We consider chess and football and backgammon all games because of their resemblance to each other, possibly each in a different aspect – akin to the resemblance between cousins and siblings and parents. ("And I shall say: 'games' form a family."[29])

20. Imagining language (and with it, communication) in this way – "Look at the language game" – greatly depends on the judgment of the users of language. For what else can reveal the game to us but our intuition, our understanding of what we see?

21. Wittgenstein describes how one can come to know what 'the king' is in a game of chess. There are several ways in which the statement 'this is the king' can be used (and meant), but one is particularly helpful in outlining how it is we learn.

One such explanation of the piece of the king in chess is to say: "This is the king; it can move in this-and-this way." But, for Wittgenstein, this would only make sense to the learner is he already 'knows what a piece in a game is' – which he would have gathered from observing and

[28] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 22e.
[29] Ibid., p.36e.

understanding other games.[30] To be able to ask what a piece is called is to already know how to make use of the name when you do learn it.

22. Where does this intuitive understanding come from? Our understanding is a product of our training – in language and life.

Wittgenstein: "The word "language-*game*" is used here to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or a form of life."[31]

23. Cavell: "We learn language and learn the world *together.*"[32]

24. The concept of 'criteria' becomes important in Wittgenstein's understanding of meaning in language. Criteria are the circumstances and cases that we investigate to discern how are word is being used; they govern the use of a word.[33]

Criteria are shared. Equating a word's meaning to its use does not mean you can use a word any which way you like. Your words will "misfire", as Austin puts it, if you do not consider the circumstances where that word is appropriate.

But what determines appropriate versus misappropriate use? Meaning emerges from use in language that is itself enmeshed in a community's form of life. With this picture of semantics and language in mind can Cavell say, "The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search

[30] Ibid., p.19[e].

[31] Ibid., p.15[e].

[32] Stanley Cavell, "Must We Mean What We Say," *Must We Mean What We Say*. Up. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 19.

[33] Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 52.

for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community."[34] That is, our use and our understanding of that use are dependent upon a language that is only sustained by a community's form of life.

We can return to Wittgenstein's observation: "What is true or false is what human beings *say*; and it is in their *language* that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in forms of life."[35]

25. The criteria for knowing pain is noticing pain-behavior, under certain circumstances. (For example, we would not presume an actor feigning an injury for a theatrical production to be in pain, nor a friend trying to get our attention through dramatic means worthy of our attention.) And yet there was some circumstances where the criteria for pain are satisfied – somebody looks or sounds injured and there is no circumstantial reason to doubt that they are *not* in pain – but there is no existing pain; the supposed sufferer feels nothing.

Here is the voice of Cavell's inner skeptic in "Knowing and Acknowledging" – I am locked out, sealed off from my neighbor's experience; however he is acting, I can never know his pain.[36]

Has the criteria for pain failed here? And why?

26. Cavell: "there is nothing to explain; there is no failure."[37]

[34] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 20.
[35] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 94[e].
[36] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 241.
[37] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 44.

27. Cavell notes that both proponents and critics of Wittgenstein have taken his concept of 'criteria' to be the means by which we can establish the certainty of something – in particular, how we can know that another is in pain.[38] They imagine criteria as an antidote to skeptical malaise.

28. Cavell: "Criteria are "criteria for something's being so", not in the sense that they tell us of a thing's existence, but of something like its identity, not of its *being* so, but of its being *so*. Criteria do not determine the certainty of statements, but the application of the concepts employed in statements."[39]

29. Criteria of an object does not guarantee its existence, but it does identify "our attunement with one another" – that we understand each other when we use this word to refer to this thing, case, emotion in this circumstance. It does not ensure, nor require certainty – and is therefore disregarded by the skeptic.

But can he avoid criteria? If the intelligibility of any argument depends on the faith that what is being said can be, even needs to be understood, and the possibility of such understanding rests on the agreement in forms of life and judgment, then one must rely on the shared understanding of how a word is used – and the basis for the skeptic's claim (viz., language) is insufficient to establish it.

[38] Ibid., 7.
[39] Ibid, 45.

30. The skeptic is like the journeyman who departs from one town and upon arrival at his destination completely denies his point of departure.

31. Let us return to Cavell's additions to the uses of the word 'know' in (4): to become acquainted with ("I know New York"); to confess or acknowledge ("I know I'm late"); and to agree or confirm what has already been said ("I *already* knew that").[40] Each of these examples focus on the first-person use of 'know' – as is much of the discussion surrounding skepticism – but later in this essay Cavell wants to bring our attention to the skeptic's repudiation of the third-person. And here lies the skeptic's fundamental insight (for Cavell): "that certainty is not enough."[41]

32. To know what pain is involves a response from the sufferer and the bystander. "It is not enough that I *know* (am certain) that you suffer – I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what "(your or his) being in pain" means. Is."[42]

To know, or fail to know, in this way reveals the knower's judgments and insights in relation to all of the variables of the situation. Subjectivity is no longer a limitation to knowing but its very conditions– and the "quest for knowledge" construed as "the sum (or product) of true statements" falls apart. Though you might make a statement in your acknowledgment, acknowledging is not (only) a statement; it is an action, an activity and practice.

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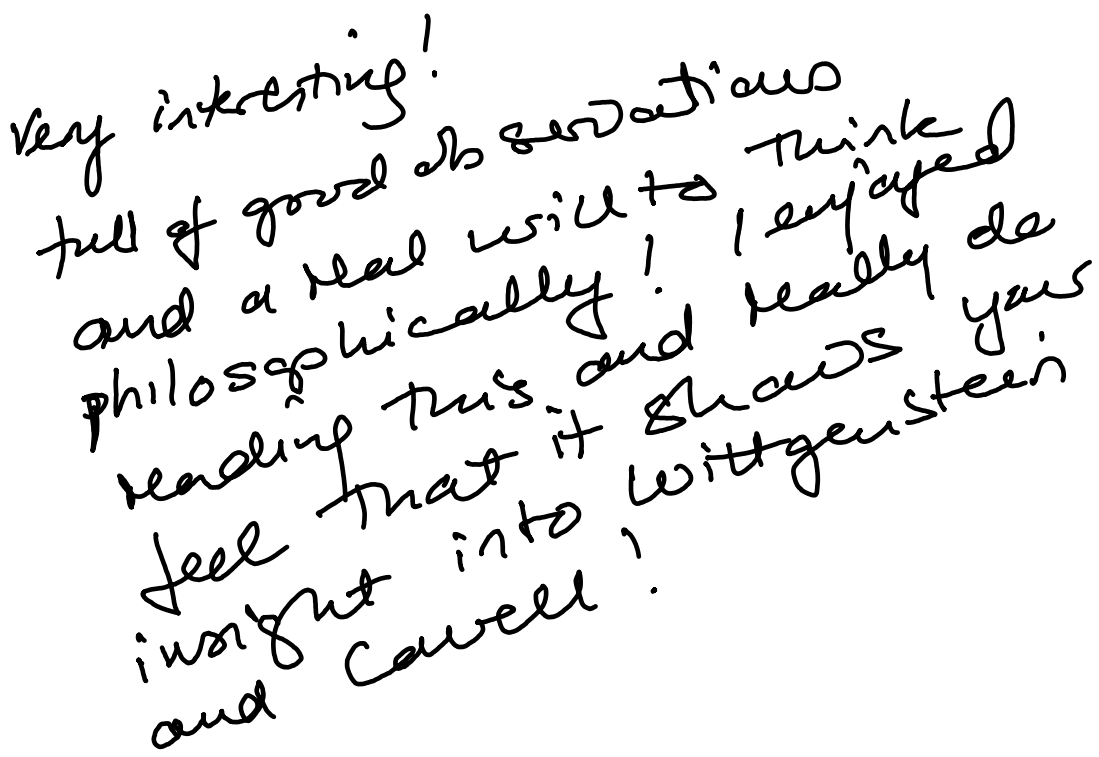
[40] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 236.
[41] Ibid., 238.
[42] Ibid.

33. The skeptic's concern in (11) is that there are no criteria for the existence of pain itself.

34. Cavell: "I might ask what "the pain itself" is."[43]



[43] Cavell, *Claim*, p.44.

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