

*Wittgenstein
and the
Myth of Hinge Propositions*

– I –

Historical-Philosophical Considerations

My main goal in this paper is to examine critically, in order to put an end to it once and for all together with all it has brought about, what from my point of view is a very harmful myth, ascribed to Ludwig Wittgenstein by several distinguished scholars,¹ viz., the myth of the so-called ‘hinge propositions’. From the point of view of the history of ideas, the effects of this myth just cannot be ignored. Indeed, based on this myth it now has become a sort of unavoidable fashion to speak of a “third Wittgenstein”, a thinker who apparently would have superseded or overcome his own *magnum opus*, i.e., the *Philosophical Investigations*. According to those who support this reading of Wittgenstein’s work, he would have left behind his own phase of grammatical analysis in order to enter a new field of philosophical speculation, a new kind of therapy (whose nature, by the way, has never been made quite clear), much more similar to the sort of rational adventure which is practiced in traditional metaphysics than to the kind of analysis which Wittgenstein painfully managed to develop and practice and which, last but not least, brought him so many good results. Now in order to count with more elements to carry out our examination it’ll be convenient to have at our disposal a simple but neat and well argued panorama, a global but a convincing one too, of the philosophical background in which Wittgenstein has recourse to the expression ‘hinge’, which so many headaches has already caused. We are thus forced to exercise ourselves in a task of reconstruction of ideas. Our starting point, therefore, can only be the following: if we contemplate his work *in toto*: how many Wittgensteins is it reasonable to think there are? To answering this question I’ll devote the first part of this essay.

To begin with, I’d like to present my approach: I face the issue of how many Wittgensteins there are not as a matter of exegesis of isolated texts, but rather as a matter of global understanding of the philosophical activity he deployed. So in accordance with the principle of charity, our main goal must be to offer a reconstruction which will make our philosopher first of all a **coherent** one. So it’ll

¹ Among the most important that should be mentioned are the following ones: G. P. Baker (*Wittgenstein’s Method: Neglected Aspects*), R. Harré (“Grammatical Therapy and the Third Wittgenstein” y “Wittgenstein’s Therapies: From Rules to Hinges”), John W. Cook (*Wittgenstein’s Metaphysics*), D. Moyal-Sharrock (*Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty y the Third Wittgenstein* (ed.) and A. Stroll, *Wittgenstein*).

be natural to think that if his ideas are so reconstructed that the outcome is a picture full of tensions and contradictions, then that picture of his writings is essentially wrong and should be rejected. Now my stance is that this is precisely what happens with the reading of those who tend to speak of a “third Wittgenstein”. I also hold that my general presentation of the systems of ideas built up by Wittgenstein is not vitiated by that defect. Obviously, I also feel confident that apart from our rendering Wittgenstein’s work a coherent one, my interpretation of Wittgenstein’s contribution will be convincing.

It is relatively clear nowadays that we can find in the results of Wittgenstein’s philosophical activity both constant as well as variable elements. In spite of huge differences and even radical discrepancies that can be found in the writings belonging to his main philosophical periods, it is plausible to hold that there nevertheless is something like a backbone, that there are some communicating vessels, certain threads of a skein which cross it from one end to the other. Thus I maintain that typical, constant or even defining features of **all** of Wittgenstein’s philosophies are at least the following ones:

- 1) his anti-foundationism
- 2) the conviction that philosophical problems are not genuine but rather the outcome of some kind or form of misunderstanding
- 3) the idea that philosophy is radically different from science, and
- 4) the idea that philosophy is first and foremost an activity.

Accordingly, my task will consist first in showing that as a matter of fact those “elements” can be traced throughout Wittgenstein’s work. I’ll try to make my point without quoting Wittgenstein for every thing I say, except in the cases for which I think it is indispensable.

a) *Anti-foundationism*. That an anti-foundationist perspective pervades the *Tractatus* is something which would be difficult to put into question. For instance, in open opposition to the Russellian approach, in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein rejects *in toto* the Fregean and Russellian project of founding mathematics on logic. For Wittgenstein, mathematics are simply a “logical method” that shows the logical structure of reality through its equations. Mathematics cannot be given any kind of foundation for the simple reason that they do not express thoughts, since they do not contain names. Mathematics are systems of identities which are worked out by means of the method of substitution. But mathematics are in need of foundations no more than logic is or, as Wittgenstein puts it, they take care of themselves. The truths of mathematics can be established without having to appeal to set theory. In the same vein, the idea of founding language is totally alien to the *Tractatus*. That

every possible language divides itself into propositions which in some sense are the last residue of analysis, that is, into their respective elementary propositions, is not a matter of founding language on anything, but of the logic of language. There are no elementary propositions which would be more fundamental than others.

In the philosophy that Wittgenstein develops from 1929 onwards, the foundationalist approach is not only absent, but is openly attacked. In the conception of language that Wittgenstein puts forward in the *Investigations* there is no place for a pyramidal view. Of course, there are language-games more primitive than others, more refined or sophisticated than others, but the development of language is accomplished in relation with practices and not as a purely symbolic extension, as when we expand a calculus by demonstrating new theorems starting from some axioms by means of a couple of rules of inference. Human practices need no justification at all. We reach the end of explanations when we acknowledge that a certain language-game is actually played and there is nothing else to say. Since definitions and explanations end at some stage and cannot go on *ad infinitum*, we reach the bottom when we are faced not with any kind of special truths but with spontaneous human reactions, with human action, *i.e.*, with praxis, for what could be more fundamental than that? Now, since there is no direct causal connection between spontaneous reactions and language-games, since grammar is not conditioned by any reality, the limit we speak about is not a foundational one, in the sense that starting from it we could logically derive the rest, but simply a platform on which language grows.

Naturally, it could be objected with respect to foundationism that I am just begging the question and that I am simply denying that which others have argued. However, and awaiting to say a bit more about it later on, I'd like to point out that the only thing I've done so far is simply to maintain in a purely abstract way that we don't have the least reason to think that so far as the issue of founding a practice is concerned, Wittgenstein modified his initial attitude. It is senseless to try to give language, music, religion, knowledge and so on a foundation. I hope this view will be confirmed or reinforced as we go forward.

b) *The non existence of genuine philosophical problems.* I really don't believe this could be a topic which would require much textual justification. From his very first confrontation with professional philosophy, Wittgenstein had the insight that there was something odd, lacking a proper articulation, something ill-built in a philosophical problem and that "insight" was kept untouched till the end. The only thing that changed was the diagnostic, which on the other hand is perfectly understandable. In the *Tractatus*, the explanation of the emergence of philosophical problems is given in terms of speakers' misunderstanding the logic of our language, while what we are informed in the second period of Wittgenstein's working in philosophy is that such problems arise when language "goes on holidays", that is,

when it is utterly idle, unplugged from all real, socially recognized as such activity (form of life). For the second Wittgenstein, a philosophical problem appears when a rule of depth grammar of the language-game being considered is violated, just as for the first or young Wittgenstein it happened when it was a rule of logical syntax, *i.e.*, of the Picture Theory, which was not respected. At any rate, in both cases it was essential to the Wittgensteinian way of thinking the rejection of **any** philosophical problem, in any branch of philosophy whatsoever, as something more than the result of a profound misunderstanding.

Contrary to what partisans of a supposed “third” Wittgenstein hold, *On Certainty* does exemplify what I’ve just said. Regardless of there being or not throughout the book some ideas which would induce us into thinking about a new and spectacular third philosophical project, the fact is that the central preoccupation of the conglomerate of notes collected under the form of a book (incidentally, a book of a remarkable unitary character) is the demonstration that both the skeptic (say, Bertrand Russell) and he who literally accepts what he holds and tries to refute him (for instance, G. E. Moore) are prey of a grave and profound error, that both of them make the same conceptual mistakes and that both of them make and discuss assertions which are just senseless. To put it briefly, the theory of knowledge too contains nothing else than pseudo-problems. Naturally, I’ll return to this in the second part of the essay, but for the moment I think that it suffices to point out that not even in his last writings did Wittgenstein seriously think of abandoning his mission as a destructor of philosophical myths. If apart from that he set upon himself new goals, that is something which demands to be shown.

c) *Philosophy as something radically different from science.* The *Tractatus* explicitly states that philosophy cannot be viewed as something which could eventually compete with science. Metaphorically: it’s something which is either over or under science, but not at the same level. This is so because it is not the business of philosophy to describe reality, to discover new facts, regardless of their nature (mental, logical, physical, etc.). In his second and great period, Wittgenstein reinforced and radicalized this point of view. It is also true that from his new perspective the only thing we cannot do in philosophy is to theorize. There are no philosophical theses. The only thing we can (and should) do is to carry out grammatical analyses of philosophical assertions: to make the relevant reminders, to raise the adequate questions and so on in such a way that it becomes manifest that the philosophical assertion in question arouse out of a background of nonsense not acknowledged as such. It is evident that the methods for philosophical research developed by the second Wittgenstein are much richer, varied, ingenious, etc., than what is suggested in the *Tractatus*, but this is explained by the fact that the views about language, thought, reality, knowledge, etc., that Wittgenstein developed after 1929 are considerably more complex than those we find in his first book. Nevertheless, essentially the same stance is advocated or argued for. If this is so,

then our suspicion that something must be radically wrong in the interpretation which culminates in the invention of a “third” Wittgenstein, a neo-philosophical Wittgenstein, must be correct. Such an interpretation would be tantamount to holding that at his very last moment Wittgenstein got rid of what had so far been his fundamental insight. The least we can say is that this way of looking at his work is rather paradoxical and highly implausible

d) *Philosophy is above all an activity.* In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein explicitly ascribes to philosophy the task of logically clarifying our thoughts. A way of achieving it is by pointing out what the limits of meaningfulness are, something that from the first Wittgenstein’s perspective could only consist in the tracing of references, given the theory of meaning advocated in the book (meaningfulness and factuality coincide). Concerning his second philosophical period, it is equally undeniable that philosophy for Wittgenstein continued to be conceived above all as an activity. The latter is understood as a kind of therapy. The therapy in question is not mental in character but rather, to call it some way, ‘praxiological’,² since it is seen as an investigation about the application of words, the tracing of uses, with all it involves. Never, therefore, did Wittgenstein set for himself the goal of transforming philosophy into something different, that is, into a sort of research that would aim at the establishing of truths, of whatever kind they could be. What philosophy aims at is the kind of understanding which comes from the descriptions of the uses of words and from the stating of their respective rules of depth grammar, something that requires as well a description of the contexts in which words are employed. What I maintain is that it is impossible to perceive such a change in Wittgenstein’s writings after 1929.

Although no doubt in a rather superficial way, nevertheless I think I’ve offered some reasons to hold that there are lines of thought which were kept alive from the beginning till the end of Wittgenstein’s philosophical activity. Obviously, these links didn’t prevent Wittgenstein from enduring an evolution and that slowly but firmly he articulated a new “way of thinking”. In the *Preface* to the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein suggests that for a better understanding of his book it should be published together with the *Tractatus*, for then his results “could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of **my old way of thinking**” (emphasis mine. ATB).³ It is evident that in speaking of his “old way of thinking” Wittgenstein doesn’t have in mind different ways of reasoning, deducing, etc., but to his old way of practicing philosophy. What has to be done is to contrast that “old way of thinking”, that is, the carrying out of logical analysis, with the new one, *i.e.*, the practicing of grammatical analysis, embodied in the *Investigations* as well as in subsequent writings. But it would be absolutely

² It was G. H. von Wright who first used this term in relation with Wittgenstein’s philosophy. As he makes it clear himself, he borrows the term from the great Polish philosopher, T. Kotarbiński.

³ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), *viii*.

fantastic if it turned out that Wittgenstein had invented a “third way of thinking”. Really, the suggestion is almost grotesque. If this is so, then the idea of a “third” Wittgenstein begins to look as something rather artificial and incredible.

Thus we do acknowledge two great periods of Wittgensteinian philosophizing which are, on the one hand, radically different from each other but which, on the other hand, contain some common elements which in turn do indicate a certain continuity in Wittgenstein’s thinking. Having emphasized the second ones, I would like now to state some points concerning the drastic differences which prevail between both periods. My observations will be general in character and so I’ll limit myself to consider the relevant differences between the above mentioned periods from the point of view of global perspectives, philosophical lexicon and methods and strategies adopted in each of them. What I want now to show is that although there certainly are dramatic changes between the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* and the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, there are no such changes between the latter and the Wittgenstein of *On Certainty*.

a) *General perspective*. One of the most notorious changes between the two great periods of Wittgenstein’s philosophical activity concerns his global perspectives and their respective priorities. The philosophy of the *Tractatus* is marked by logic (we could even say, to be more precise, by Russell’s logic). The book is a study of the logical features of the world, of language, of experience, of knowledge and so forth. Everything is subordinated to logic, although never separated from it but always in intimate connection with it. Logic is always the logic **of** reality, **of** language, **of** scientific theories, etc. It is this perspective which gives the book its purely formal character. Accordingly, there is a sense in which everything is subordinated to it, language in particular. The Picture Theory is nothing but the logical theory of language, a theory from which absolutely any empirical consideration was expelled. All this explains why regarding the *Tractatus* we speak of a formal ontology, of a formal conception of scientific theories, of the formal theory of truth (by the way, the antecessor of Tarski’s famous “semantic theory of truth”), and so on.

In the second Wittgensteinian period roles are inverted and what acquires priority above anything else (for strictly philosophical goals, of course) is natural language. From the new perspective, logic is seen as nothing more than a bunch of calculi, all of them illuminating from different points of view (propositions, adverbs, etc.) the functioning of our language. The foundation of everything which formerly was constituted by logic is now replaced by praxis, by human reactions and activities. Individual action, coordinated with others’ actions thanks to the brute fact of nature consisting in our agreeing in reactions, is the ultimate basis of language and thought beyond which it makes no sense to look for explanations. So it would have been difficult indeed to find greater differences than those which hold between the two periods’ perspectives.

b) *Philosophical vocabulary*. Although quite originally, during his first period Wittgenstein in general expresses himself by means of categories and expressions which were already in circulation. He even borrows from Russell and Moore some typical expressions of theirs, like ‘internal relations’. His originality is nonetheless present, as the very name ‘Picture Theory’ makes it clear.⁴ Other Wittgensteinian expressions in the *Tractatus* are, for instance, ‘nets’, ‘logical space’, ‘formal concept’ and ‘tautology’, to mention just a few. However, his coining some new terms doesn’t cancel the fact that he also used traditional philosophical vocabulary.

When we turn to his second period we contemplate a completely different phenomenon, for what we find is a **totally** new philosophical lexicon, that is, a set of expressions that have no antecedent in the history of philosophy. Indeed, for several years Wittgenstein went on building his own linguistic tools, that is, the tools which would enable him to carry out his grammatical analyses. Probably the most prominent elements of this lexicon are ‘language-game’, ‘perspicuous representation’, ‘form of life’, ‘seeing as’, ‘grammar’, ‘grammatical proposition’, ‘criterion’ and ‘family resemblances’. This is the second Wittgenstein’s basic technical vocabulary. Now, he also employed many other expressions, which nonetheless it is not difficult to perceive that strictly speaking do **not** belong to his technical vocabulary. ‘Hinge proposition’ is a good example of this. ‘Bedrock propositions’, ‘hinge propositions’, etc., are useful metaphors which Wittgenstein occasionally employs in order to complete, to colour, to illustrate his descriptions and his analyses but which do not constitute technical terms, unavoidable expressions for the task of analysis. To transform ‘hinge’ into a technical term just because Wittgenstein uses it on a couple of occasions is like holding that ‘fly’ too is a technical term since he affirms that philosophers are like flies that can’t get out of the bottle. Equally absurd is the thesis that because Wittgenstein employed in several occasions (three, to be precise, in *On Certainty*) the expression ‘hinge proposition’, then it has been established beyond any doubt that he was elaborating a new theory, a third way of thinking. This is just absurd, but I’ll reserve the expounding of my arguments for the second part of the essay.

c) *Strategies and methods*. From what has been said up to now it can be inferred that the first and the second Wittgenstein’s philosophical approaches and tactics had to be completely different. For the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, once the fundamental ideas had been outlined philosophical work just boiled down to the searching of references for names to determine whether or not a picture was meaningful and eventually to ascribe to it a truth-value. The method in this case was the method of logical-semantic analysis. For the second Wittgenstein, given his rejection of the Augustinian conception of language, nothing could be more futile and sterile than

⁴ This could seem debatable, for it would be easy to point out that the expression comes from H. Hertz, who employs it in his *The Principles of Mechanics*. However, the way Wittgenstein uses the expression ‘Bild’ is certainly quite different from the way Hertz does.

that. It is true that in both cases the ultimate goal was to separate off sense from nonsense, meaningful assertions from those which are so only apparently, but the method to achieve that had to be completely different. Actually, in the case of the second Wittgenstein we cannot speak of a single method, but rather of a whole variety of them. In fact the list is an open one, since new methods can be devised at any time and added to the list. Regarding this, section 133 of the *Investigations* is particularly relevant. I quote it *in extenso*: “It is not our aim to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our words in unheard-of ways.

For the clarity we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear.

The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to.— The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question.— Instead, we now demonstrate a method, by examples; and the series of examples can be broken off.— Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem.

There is not *a* philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies”.⁵ It would be difficult to be more explicit than that: the general goal is just to exhibit the hidden nonsense of philosophical assertions, regardless of their content or of the branch of philosophy to which they belong, while the methods Wittgenstein employs are most diverse. Nowhere did he intend to give an exhaustive list of methods. It is our task to get them from his work, discerning them out of philosophical exercises. Here are some of them:

- 1) to replace questions like ‘what is *x*?’ by questions of the form ‘under what circumstances do we say that someone knows what “*x*” means?, ‘what should happen in order for us to be able to say that something is an *x*?’ , etc.
- 2) To ask: how is this word used in its original language-game?
- 3) Why is it absurd or grotesque to say of *a* that it is an *x*?

Wittgenstein has no perfectly well ordered list of questions (in fact, I’m convinced that he frequently improvises, that is, as he advances he offers new suggestions about how to approach in a fruitful way a given philosophical problem), but when we study his writings we become aware of the fact that certain questions are recurrent, that certain ways of approaching issues repeat themselves, which on the other hand is perfectly understandable: whether we speak of the moon or of natural numbers, in both cases what we deal with is the same thing, that is, concepts, (“moon” and “natural number”). So the treatment is *prima facie* always the same, although obviously there will be questions which are more appropriate for certain subjects than for others. Hence for the Wittgensteinian kind of grammatical analysis dialogue and discussion are crucial for, as it happens with Socratic maieutics, the

⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, sec. 133.

goal is to contribute to the birth of elucidating thoughts and to untangle conceptual knots. To achieve that, Wittgenstein allows himself to use all sorts of examples, similes, images, comparisons, etc.; he speaks of rivers, of myths and so on and, among other things, of hinges. Now what is undeniable is that for Wittgenstein such exercises are not carried out for the sake of themselves, but because they are indispensable for the dismantling of the philosophical puzzle one is dealing with.

As can easily be confirmed, *On Certainty* does contain a number of questions and reminders concerning the use of expressions that exemplifies what I have been saying. In that book what Wittgenstein does is, as I have already stated, to carry out grammatical analyses of central epistemological notions by means of his own conceptual apparatus. There is not a single terminological change to be pointed out. What happens is that as he makes progress in his grammatical investigation, he gets and accumulates important conclusions about our propositional and belief systems. In fact in *On Certainty* he does reach the *Tractatus*' ideal: to have the right view of his subject without putting it into words.⁶ For the time being I'll limit myself to point out that all of Wittgenstein's remarks derive one way or another from the kind of philosophical exercises he actually invented and could not possibly have been formulated independently of them. Therefore, they could hardly constitute an independent philosophy from what could be called the 'philosophy of grammatical analysis', which is just the second Wittgenstein's philosophy.

If I have not deviated too much from the truth, it is clear that the content of *On Certainty* is a paradigmatic case of what can be referred to as the 'second Wittgenstein's thought'. If this is really so, then the idea that we can only speak of **two** Wittgensteins is doubly reinforced: there is on the one hand the Wittgenstein who exalts logic and the Wittgenstein who degrades it and puts natural language in its place. Practically **everything** he wrote after 1929 belongs to one and the same block of ideas, without denying of course that we can also speak of evolution, refinement, transitions and so on. And if this is so, then we can no longer doubt that to speak of a third Wittgenstein does represent a dangerous historical distortion.

Without even trying to consider the issue in all its details, it surely is possible to get an overall picture of the second Wittgenstein's philosophical contribution. To have it is important, for how shall we later read what he does in *On Certainty* depends upon the general picture we have of his work. From my point of view, the situation is the following:

after his return to the world of professional philosophy, in 1929, Wittgenstein, already vexed by a series of doubts and worries concerning his former point of view and feeling invaded by a multitude of new ideas, ideas he would

⁶ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 6.54 (b).

elaborate little by little, initiated his work of cutting off links with the philosophy of *Tractatus*. Thus starting from the criticism of the central notion of elementary proposition, Wittgenstein went on forging a wholly new conception of language, for the sake of which he had to get rid of all the notions usually employed in philosophy (“*a priori*”, “possible world”, “substance”, etc.). He obviously felt the need to operate with a set of fresh concepts in order to articulate his new thoughts. What was being submitted to a fierce attack and was about to be threatened as a whole was no more and no less than Western philosophy, that is, the whole set of trends of thought, problems, theses, prejudices, etc., and whose more brilliant presentation was to be found precisely in the *Tractatus*. Now once this first task was finished, once again Wittgenstein could have stopped doing philosophy. He was not forced to develop his new attained philosophical views: he had formulated a new conception of language which was a real alternative to all other theories in circulation. The *Tractatus* had been refuted. However, for Wittgenstein it was obvious that his task just couldn’t finish at that stage: the rejection of the Augustinian conception of language and the construction of his new point of view in terms of language-games and forms of life was purely propaedeutic. From then onwards the goal was to demonstrate the superiority of the new approach showing that, when properly applied, it enables us to dissolve any philosophical puzzles one would analyze. In order to do that, Wittgenstein went on designing, as I already said, a variety of methods and tactics for philosophical debate thanks to which he was in a position to dismantle, one after the other, the philosophical theses and doctrines he decided to tackle. Classical philosophical enigmas like the mind-body issue, the problem of universals, the puzzles concerning meaning, all the philosophical difficulties around logical and mathematical truth, the question of the existence of God, and many others, were dismantled (some of us would have thought that once and for all, but this turned out to be an illusion). Now for purely contingent reasons, the last problem Wittgenstein came to face was a problem belonging to the theory of knowledge, that is, the problem of scepticism. In other words, once his basic conception and methods of work had been introduced, Wittgenstein passed to the next phase, that is, the phase of **application** of what had been established in, say, the first 135 or 140 sections of the *Investigations*, to concrete philosophical problems, regardless of the area or branch of philosophy. From the moment in which Wittgenstein approaches the issue of the nature of understanding, to pass to those of reading, rule-following, private languages, mental states and so on, what he does is to demonstrate in practice the superiority of his new way of thinking. As a matter of fact, all the problems he approached just vanished. So far as I am concerned, I wholeheartedly acknowledge that I am unable to point to a theme or a subject Wittgenstein dealt with which was not sufficiently elucidated by him, at least to the extent that we don’t have to take care of it again.

If what I’ve so far stated is basically right, it follows that the most absurd thing that could be done would be to suggest a proliferation of Wittgensteins,

specially if the only grounds to do that is the fact the on a couple of occasions he employed some expression not previously introduced. This is the case of the so called ‘hinge propositions’. Let’s review this a bit more in detail.

Probably the first question to be asked is: Where does the idea of a “hinge proposition” first appear, where does Wittgenstein actually use that expression? The answer is: in *On Certainty*, where he uses it three times. Let us then quote what in fact is our source:

- 1) “That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn”⁷.
- 2) “But it isn’t that the situation is like this: We just *can’t* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the things must stay put”⁸.
- 3) “The mathematical proposition has, as it were officially, been given the stamp of incontestability. I.e.: ‘Dispute about other thing: *this* is immovable – it is a hinge on which your dispute can turn”⁹.

From a purely textual point of view, this is everything there is. Of course, there is also the whole discussion developed throughout *On Certainty* concerning the propositional and belief background that **each** assertion we make brings with it, but the truth remains that as far as textual support of the idea of a third Wittgenstein is advocated the stuff is rather meagre. This hasn’t prevented scholars like D. Moyal-Sharrock, G. Baker and R. Harré from ascribing on that basis speculative aims to a supposed “third Wittgenstein”. I think that, regardless of how fine exegesis and analyses in favour of such an idea could be, the project itself is from the start utterly misguided and makes Wittgenstein incoherent. To show that let us now examine the issue in dispute itself.

– II –

Philosophical Considerations

I) *Background: propositions and moves in the language-game.*

It is slightly worrying to be forced at this stage to recognize that, after half a century of obsessive exegeses and intense debates, it is still the case that the most important lessons of the *Philosophical Investigations*, in particular those concerning

⁷ L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), sec. 341.

⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, sec. 343.

⁹ L. Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, sec. 655.

Wittgenstein's discussion and rejection of the Augustinian conception of language, have not yet been duly assimilated. It was reasonable to think that practically all dogmas related to language and its functioning had once and for all been eliminated: the idea that the meaning of a word is an object, the thesis that the fundamental function of language is to describe reality, that by means of predicates we point to essential features of things, and so on. Now in connection with this there is a topic which is particularly relevant for our theme, namely, the nature of propositions. For several reasons, Wittgenstein felt forced to acknowledge **two** notions of propositions:

a) Firstly, the notion of a proposition which emanates from the Augustinian conception of language, that is, a purely formal one, which we can describe simply as the sense of a sentence. The Augustinian conception doesn't recognize differences between kinds of sentences, so that any sequence of signs or well formed formula from the point of view of surface grammar expresses a proposition. The fundamental feature of propositions is that they are systematically connected to the notions of truth and falsehood. In the early Wittgenstein's terminology, their defining feature is bipolarity. Now this notion of proposition is not totally discarded by Wittgenstein for as a matter of fact it is a useful one, both in terms of analysis and in terms of exposition.

b) Secondly, Wittgenstein replaces the old notion of a proposition by the notion of "move in the language-game". From this new point of view, the determination of the sense of a sentence is given not in terms of truth and falsehood, of possible situations in virtue of which it is true or false, but in terms of the utility it lends, what it enables us to say or do. Contrary to the uniform character of traditional propositions, what we have here is an open class of elements, that is, linguistic moves, since we have an open set of language-games and practices (forms of life) associated with them.

Keeping this distinction in mind, the first thing we have to ask now is: What sort of relation links propositions and moves in the language-games? The answer seems to me rather obvious: not all propositions allow for a genuine move in the language-game. For instance, if in the middle of a conversation on irrational numbers someone abruptly asserts: "And of course bears are vegetarians too", the speaker did construct or manipulated a proposition (the proposition "bears are vegetarians too"), but he certainly made no legitimate move in the language, that is, he didn't contribute with anything to the conversation, he didn't say anything

relevant, etc.¹⁰ Therefore, there are more propositions than genuine movements in the language-games, for the only thing needed in order to speak of propositions is to have syntactically and semantically well formed sentences. Within language-games other criteria are relevant.

With respect to what I have just said there is something which is quite important to perceive, to highlight and to have in mind and it is that language is **simultaneously** a collective tool and a tool to be used individually, that is, to be used by each speaker in particular. Obviously, the individual use of the collective tool is viable just because it involves no spurious or philosophical notion of privacy. On the other hand, when we speak we make different sorts of assertions and, accordingly, we express different kinds of belief. For example, if I say ‘I am hungry’, I make a move in language which allows me to inform others about it, to get food, to announce that I’m about to eat something, etc. At the same time, however, I construct a proposition, for the sentence does belong to a natural language. What matters to me as a speaker is the linguistic move itself, not the proposition, since the sentence I use is nothing but a linguistic tool which has an immediate, prosaic, momentary utility; I use it for a concrete purpose and for nothing else. Now this linguistic tool which I use, that is, the sentence, is at my disposal as well as at other speakers’, for any time any of them can also say ‘I am hungry’. In traditional philosophy, in all variants of the Augustinian conception of language, the individual or particular character of the assertion immediately becomes problematic and is in general “explained” in terms of complicated theories about indexicals, logically proper names, temporal operators and so forth. Plainly we are never given a coherent and convincing explanation of why we all can say the same thing and understand what others say when what each of us speak about is what happens to the speaker in turn. From the Wittgensteinian perspective this phenomenon doesn’t represent a problem.

The distinction “proposition-move in the language-game” is, therefore, decisive to understand Wittgenstein’s general stance and, in particular and above all, what he maintains in *On Certainty*. To begin with, it has to be understood that sentences automatically give rise to propositions and something important about the latter is that they form **systems**. When such systems are constituted by merely circumstantial propositions, by moves in the language-games like ‘I am hungry’, the propositions in question are disposable linguistic tools: nobody is interested in keeping in memory, either personal or collective, all the propositions which could possibly be built concerning passing situations. Now there are truths which lack this ephemeral or fleeting character, for they describe or point to situations, phenomena, facts, etc., which simply just don’t vanish but remain or endure. For instance, I can

¹⁰ It’s interesting to notice that this point of view which I’m ascribing to Wittgenstein somehow corresponds to P. Grice’s so-called “Clause (maxim) of Relation”. See his *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, Mas.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

assert that Paris is the capital of France and in saying this I both make a legitimate move in some language-game (*e.g.*, to answer a question during an exam, to inform someone about it, etc.) and I also build a proposition which can serve me as well as others in a variety of circumstances. It is crucially important, therefore, to distinguish between propositional **roles**: there are sentences for the moment and sentences which possess a recurrent utility. ‘I am hungry’ exemplifies the former, ‘The Earth existed before I was born’ the latter.

On the other hand, given the vital character of the Wittgensteinian conception of language in terms of language-games, it had to be expected that we should be given a dynamic view of assertions. Wittgenstein calls our attention to this in an interesting remark in the *Philosophical Investigations* where, after discussing Russell’s Theory of Descriptions he says: “The fluctuation of scientific definitions: what to-day counts as an observed concomitant of a phenomenon will to-morrow be used to define it”.¹¹ In other words: we witness every day what could be called ‘propositional transitions’, that is, changes in propositions’ different *statu*. Disposable propositions belong to the surface or, to employ Quine’s very similar metaphor, to the shore, whereas there are propositions which are rather fixed, the famous “bedrock propositions”, propositions that in general experience leaves untouched. But what should not be passed unnoticed is that there is nothing fixed once and for all: in principle, propositions from the bottom may disappear and others, which at a certain moment were on the surface may become more important, become indispensable and locate themselves in the bed of the propositional river. This is the way language functions, not to say ‘lives’.

Thus, sentences are tools which may give rise to propositions of a completely different nature. Needless to say that non well formed, elliptic, etc., sentences may nevertheless give rise to genuine moves in the language-games. So strictly speaking it could be the case that communication among speakers does take place without our being forced to talk about propositions at all, for sentences would be ill-formed. On the other hand, there are circumstances in which a sentence like ‘I’ve never traveled to Mars’ would allow me to make a legitimate move in the language-game, but given its content it is highly probable that, **although true**, it would generate a proposition which more often wouldn’t be usable, that it would accomplish no purpose, it would convey nothing. In such cases what we have is a proposition that because of its not being false simply hides in the propositional background in such a way that it doesn’t interfere with the speakers’ moves and that is just there, until one discovers it and states it, if one finds it suitable.

¹¹ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, sec. 79.

II) *Language, beliefs, propositions and truth.*

What we have been saying is relevant to our subject for, regardless of how what we say is interpreted, that is, either as propositions or as moves in the language-games, what we have are beliefs. Naturally, the first criterion for the detection of a belief is what the speaker himself says. The Wittgensteinian approach immediately makes us realize that we have to divide our beliefs into two main groups:

- a) those associated with propositions
- b) those associated with moves in the language-games

What has just been said has important and easily predictable implications, since the notion of a belief is linked at least to four other crucial epistemological notions, namely, the notions of truth, knowledge, doubt and certainty. Let us consider first the concept of knowledge.

If what we assert when we make a move in some language-game is right, what we give expression to is a true belief. In accordance with our classification of propositions, what we now have to say is that the belief in question may be either an immediate or a mediate one, a useable or (to put it another way) a rather ornamental one. Differences between propositions are obviously a matter of degree. If I say ‘Yesterday it rained copiously’ my belief is circumstantial, it concerns a particular, short-lasting event, etc. We can hold that practically my belief disappeared together with the event in question: when I asserted it I believed it, I stopped being interested in it, it endured no more and in a sense my belief just vanished with it. These are beliefs which have, so to speak, a biography, birth and death certificates and their lives are rather short but, once again, what we have here is a gradation. We can, if we insist, keep it and say (with Frege, for instance) that it is eternally true that on such and a day such and such event took place. This of course is nothing but a philosophical extravaganza which we don’t have to accept, but it is worth noticing that it reintroduces the Augustinian conception of a proposition and as a consequence the conception of a proposition associated to language-games stops being functional. Since we don’t want this, we have to draw other distinctions and classifications. Now in contrast to ephemeral, immediate or circumstantial beliefs we have others which are not like that, which resemble more classical propositions, that is, they are enduring, stable, etc., and which I’d describe as belonging to the background. As far as daily verbal intercourse is concerned they are not particularly required, but they are nevertheless there and we can have recourse to them any time. These beliefs are often expressed by propositions that we accept, although they can also often be expressed by legitimate moves in the language-games. Thus if I say that ‘The solar system existed long before I was born’, I am expressing a proposition and therefore a belief which although only occasionally may be of practical utility and accordingly only occasionally gives rise to a genuine move in the language-

game, in the majority of cases in which it is used it shows itself as useless, as an unemployable proposition, which keeps engraved in the background of my assertions of a more immediate character; it is a proposition that I only slowly discover or retrieve, since it is not false, but I practically never use it. The Moore-type of propositions which Wittgenstein examines in *On Certainty* are in general of this kind.

A particularly important point which I wish to make is that what is at stake with this classification of beliefs is a matter of classes of knowledge, of truths and falsehoods, of objective doubt and certainty, but **not** of meaning. Contrary to what has been held, for instance, by D. Moyal-Sharrock,¹² bedrock propositions like ‘I’ve never traveled beyond the solar system’ or ‘I had parents too’ do not **determine the meaning of any sentence whatever**. The issue has nothing to do with meaning, with the bounds of sense, with definitions, etc., but with classes of beliefs, with kinds of knowledge. The whole discussion is epistemological, not semantic. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein labors upon the platform conformed by secure meanings. The problems he deals with belong to the theory of knowledge, for in the *Investigations* he had already settled those belonging to the philosophy of language and they just don’t reappear. Naturally, if this is true then the advocates’ interpretation of “hinge propositions” turns out to be completely misguided, an absurd position resulting from a profound misconception of Wittgensteinian thinking. We need now to reinforce this view.

III) *Language, beliefs, logic and knowledge.*

The elements we have introduced so far enable us to infer that what follows from the Wittgensteinian treatment of epistemological concepts is that we have at least **two** concepts of knowledge, linked with each other in a rather complex way. On the one hand, there is collective knowledge, connected in a straightforward way with propositional systems and, on the other hand, individual knowledge, expressed through moves in the language-games and the speaker’s beliefs. Unfortunately, the question of classes of knowledge and beliefs and the relations which hold between them are neither as simple nor as neat as we would like them to be. Let’s review this in some detail.

As we already pointed out, the speaker’s linguistic goals are first and foremost of a practical and immediate character. For them to be begot, the linguistic moves he makes have to take shape in well formed sentences of our language. While being used true sentences generate knowledge and what this kind of knowledge

¹² See, for instance, his “Logic in Action: Wittgenstein’s *Logical Pragmatism* and the Impotence of Scepticism” (*Philosophical Investigations* 26, April 2003), where she argues *in extenso* in this sense.

comprehends is everything which is related to the speaker's direct or immediate experience: his goals, his plans, his actions, his feelings, his achievements, his memories, etc. I know for instance that yesterday it rained because I got wet and now I'm sick, I know that I'm going to enjoy a dish because I was invited to dinner, and so on. However, it is obvious that this personal, immediate "knowledge" is of very little interest. Practically, it concerns only its possessor, a concrete event, the environment, etc. Nevertheless, moves in the language-games are produced and therefore beliefs are expressed, which are true or false and, accordingly, knowledge or error arises. Naturally, in all these cases propositions are also involved but, given their nature, they are disposable: as soon as they are used they are thrown away.

We, however, often make assertions which have a slightly more stable character, but that doesn't prevent them from being useful. For example, I can say that I am Mexican. This is not something I constantly say here and there, to my neighbours, parents, pupils, colleagues, etc., but it is clear that there are countless occasions in which it may prove useful to say it, and even unavoidable. For instance, I would say 'I am Mexican' to a police agent of another country if I am questioned about my nationality. The truth involved, however, is not as recurrent as 'I am hungry'. That is, I don't need to say so many times 'I am Mexican' as I may be induced to say 'I am hungry', but that makes it neither improper nor ill-formed nor absurd. It simply is less employed. To put it simply, it has more the *status* of a proposition than the *status* of a "move in the language-game", but it certainly may serve to convey information and be useful.

Something we should not lose sight of when we consider our sentences as generating propositions is the fact that a characteristic feature of propositions is that they **form systems**. Once we are dealing with propositions, what matters is **logic**, in the widest sense of the word. So if I say 'I am Mexican', somehow I logically imply or presuppose or assume or whatever the logical relation it is that holds between them that I am a person, that I had parents, that I was born somewhere on this planet, that I don't breath by means of branchiae, that I don't eat trees, etc., etc., that is, I imply or presuppose (or both things) an infinity of sentences which can't be rejected for they are not false but are such that, even if I never use them, they are nonetheless there, as a matter of "logic". For a variety of reasons, the truth is that users of language little by little become aware of the fact that, in saying something, automatically propositional systems are built, systems which as a matter of fact are simply irremovable. Once again, the panorama here is rather complex, since there are two senses of 'propositional system'. On the one hand, there is the system of propositions created by logic as soon as something is said; on the other hand there is the collective or shared propositional system which is presupposed or implied by **any** assertion whatsoever. And what is fundamental to understand is that there are no clear cut, stable, fixed borders between some propositional groups and others, but rather unperceivable transitions, constant subtle changes, etc. Let's give an example.

Let's suppose that I affirm that Warsaw is the capital of Poland. In certain contexts, to say such thing would be even ridiculous, as for example if I said it during a congress of history or geography. In such a case, it could even be understood as if I were making fun of someone. However, if the very same linguistic tool (that is, the English sentence 'Warsaw is the capital of Poland') is used during a lecture of geography for children, it is the appropriate instrument and what I say is relevant and true. Thus, the same sentence may both give rise to a genuine move in the language-game as generate a proposition which is incrustated in the more or less stable set of propositions with which it is logically connected and is left there. It is evident that however stable it might seem, it doesn't reach the *status* of a "truth" of arithmetic, for it is perfectly possible to imagine that tomorrow Warsaw will no longer be the capital of Poland whereas it is impossible for us to visualize a situation in which 2 plus 2 doesn't equal 4. At any rate, propositions do form a structure, a sort of net which the less it is constituted by immediate propositions the more it tends to stabilize. Our propositional net, therefore, comprehends both propositions which so to speak either can be more or less quickly consumed (moves in the language-games) or more or less stable propositions which in general are not used to make linguistic moves of any kind. Naturally, there is a wide variety of propositions maintaining between them no fixed or precise limits.

We can now start joining together our results and getting some conclusions. Whenever we speak of sentences we have to emphasize the utility they lend, on the one hand, and their truth and falsity, on the other. Several combinations may be formed between these propositional qualities and any sentence 'p', but those that really matter are basically the following:

- 1) the sentence 'p' is true and enables one to make a move in the language-game, that is, it is useful, and
- 2) the sentence 'p' gives rise to a truth but in fact it doesn't enable one to say something particularly useful, for it is only presupposed or implied by what is being said, it has a purely ornamental character, etc. Now the fact that it is not usable doesn't imply that it is rejectable. In order to be rejectable it has to be false. 'The Earth existed long before I was born' may be useless, but it is not false.

Related to this double possibility, we can speak of knowledge in two senses:

- 1) genuine knowledge, reachable through valid mechanisms acknowledged as such, as when I say in a history class that Napoleon was Corsican, and
- 2) knowledge in a broad or elastic and almost pejorative sense, therefore almost or totally useless, as when I affirm that I have never

left the solar system, for what sort of knowledge do I convey if I say that to someone?

Once again, we have to dwell upon the fact that we are not dealing here with two neatly distinguished groups. We are just pointing to the ends between which there is a whole propositional gradation and therefore, a cognitive one too.

IV) *Doubt and certainty.*

As is well known, in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein recognizes at least two concepts of certainty, namely, subjective and objective certainty. The former is simply a high or intense degree of conviction, but it doesn't guarantee the truth of what is believed. I may be totally convinced, *i.e.*, I may have subjective certainty about being the son of the couple who say they are my parents, but it is perfectly imaginable that I would be mistaken. In fact, this is something that has actually happened to lots of people: they had always believed that they were the genetic offspring of those who presented themselves as their parents and they later discovered that it was not the case. Subjective certainty, therefore, is not infallible. Naturally, a discovery such as the above mentioned carries with it drastic changes in our basic systems of beliefs (and probably not only in them). Psychologically, the person whose subjective certainty is put into question just breaks down. One has to establish a completely new order to find a place for the new belief, for the new truth. On the other hand, however, there is something like objective certainty. Contrary to what happens with subjective certainty, to try to put into question objective certainty is something that only someone mentally deranged might try to do, for it is tantamount to rejecting the propositional system that his own moves in the language-games would have created. This is precisely what the skeptic tries to do. Now it is peculiar of Wittgenstein's philosophy that the classification of certainties and the corresponding classification of beliefs and pieces of knowledge are not drawn in formal terms, that is, for instance, in terms of propositional categories ("synthetic", "analytical", "contingent", etc.). What is determinant is the **role** actually played by sentences. This role is not defined by means of fixed or ultimate categories. Roles change. The same sentence, as we saw, one day expresses a contingent proposition and next day a necessary one. It is because of their role within the propositional system that certain propositions turn out to be irremovable. These propositions which are taken for granted are not put into question any more. What they give is objective certainty. Obviously, they are not like those other propositions which are more directly linked to experience, but their difference doesn't arise from differences of logical or grammatical form, but from their location within the system and therefore from their respective roles. Once more, the differences between propositions are a matter of degree and we pass without noticing from propositions which generate certainty but that enable us to make no legitimate move in the language-game ("I am a living

creature”) to propositions which do enable us to say something, but which no longer give us that class of certainty.

Something similar to what I’ve just described happens with doubts. Doubt can legitimately fall upon propositions which can be eliminated. However, the more we get down towards the bed of the propositional river the more doubts become suspicious, ridiculous, absurd. To put it briefly, we simply can’t put into question propositions which by logic underlie propositions which we actually state and which, so to speak, automatically appear as soon as we say something. If I say to someone ‘Please, take a chair and have a sit’, both the person in question and I assume that the chair is a physical object, although we just don’t even dream of stating it. To make clarifications in this sense would be something very odd and under certain circumstances it would most probably have negative consequences.¹³ On the other hand, it is a fact that if we are ever asked whether or not we believe that the chair is a physical object we’ll unanimously say ‘yes’, even if the question seems trivial or childish or silly or vacuous to us. But it is very important to realize that the answer is **not** false. We should dwell upon the fact that what Wittgenstein does in *On Certainty* is something like outlining the map of knowledge, not a semantic map. The latter is plainly not at stake, it’s not something discussed in that book. To sum up: I can’t doubt that the chair is a material object in case I affirm of something that it is a chair. The chair’s being a material object is part of my linguistic background. I refer to such background when I need it, but most of the times it is just there, giving support to my moves in the language-games. Obviously, what happens in this example happens with any other sentence. This, however, has nothing to do with foundationalism.

As was to be expected, our concept of knowledge is correlative to the concepts of doubt and certainty. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein made it clear that it is only when we deal with genuine knowledge that we can speak of doubt and that if what we have is objective certainty, then we speak of knowledge in a rather loose, not strict sense. Better: it makes no sense to speak of knowledge at all. The trouble, obviously, is that it just can’t be maintained that ‘I’ve never traveled to the center of the Earth’ doesn’t give any kind of knowledge, for to do that we should have to deny that the proposition is true and we just can’t do that. What has to be done is to employ the Wittgensteinian terminology and point out that although the proposition is true, in fact with it we make no genuine move in the language-game and therefore we convey no knowledge at all. Thus, the concept of knowledge enables us to allude to quite different things. I’ll try to make this a bit clearer.

¹³ Just imagine, for instance, that someone asks Caesar or Napoleon or Stalin to have a sit and that immediately after that he points out the any of them that the object he will sit on is a physical object. Such a joke could have rather unpleasant consequences. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same would happen in any other linguistic context (father-son, teacher-pupil, doctor-patient, police man-citizen, etc.).

First of all, we've got the paradigmatic, prototypical individual sort of knowledge, that is, the knowledge I report: what I see, I remember, I imagine, etc. This is immediate individual or personal knowledge. Now this knowledge carries with it all those propositions which automatically the speaker generates as soon as he says something. This is a derivative sense of the first sense of 'knowledge'. For instance, if someone says that the lion is about to catch a zebra, he automatically generated the proposition that both the lion and the zebra are animals, that the lion eats meat, etc. The point is that these propositions, in the linguistic context in which they are located, are completely useless for the speaker. They are simply implied or presupposed or whatever is the epistemological relation that holds between them and the actual linguistic move. It is important to observe, on the other hand, that the same linguistic move made by another speaker generates a different propositional system, although it is probable that their respective systems will contain lots of common propositions. It is highly plausible that from all the propositional systems that speakers generate when they say something we could eventually form one which would be "complete", that is, it would contain all the propositions which are common to all speakers' propositional systems. That propositional system would give all speakers objective certainty and in relation to it doubt would be simply absurd. More or less the same holds for each propositional system generated by each linguistic move by each particular speaker.

Secondly, we have the knowledge that required observation, measurements, calculations, specific methods of research, etc. This is collective (scientific) knowledge. In this case we've got a variety of propositions. Some of them may be put into question, but not all. Scientific knowledge tends to form propositional systems which aim at total rigidity, even if that ideal is never attained. Now what we assert is epistemologically legitimate as long as it doesn't conflict with the body of scientific propositions. The problem, naturally, is that normal speakers are not in contact with scientific propositional systems and that's why very often people make assertions which strictly speaking they don't have the epistemological right to make. For instance, someone can feel entitled to assert that beings from other galaxies have visited us for he just ignores that astrophysics has already discarded that possibility (because of the number of years that they would have to travel, the speed concerned, for biological reasons, etc.). But I must insist that the problems that might arise are epistemological or cognitive, but not semantic.

What has so far been stated gives us, I think, a more or less acceptable *aperçu* of the panorama that, patiently through his grammatical analyses, Wittgenstein outlines in *On Certainty*. Let's quickly see now what consequences or implications this panorama has for some classical philosophical discussions.

V) *Scepticism and Moore-type propositions.*

In my opinion, scepticism shares certain features with common-sense. Neither of them constitutes any “school” or philosophical trend, they are not sets of theses, etc. Rather they are something like mechanisms of reasoning one can appeal to at any time. They are obviously opposed to each other, that is, they cancel each other out: he who advocates a point of view on behalf of common-sense just can’t advocate a sceptical position, and the other way around. Scepticism is, therefore, the opposite mechanism to common-sense. In this sense, G. E. Moore was certainly right in opposing scepticism by taking sides with common-sense. In fact, the best way to understand each of these views is by contrast with the other one. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, showed that there is a sense in which both Moore and the skeptic are wrong.

Scepticism means a challenge for all those who consider that it is obvious that there is something like “human knowledge”. The sceptic’s strategy is founded on two premises:

- 1) the purely formal and exclusive notion of a proposition
- 2) the possibility of systematically denying any sentence whatever, based on the principle that we do not pass from a meaningful sentence to a senseless one just by adding or eliminating the negation sign.

Briefly, what the skeptic argues is that since it is logically possible to deny any sentence whatever and that all meaningful sentences express propositions, then we can question absolutely anything we are told. It follows that even the most elementary or natural claim to knowledge gets cancelled since it can be shown that any proposition, that is, any bearer of truth, can be denied. And naturally the skeptic in turn affirms that nobody can refute him. The sceptical stance can be presented in different ways. Perhaps the most ingenious of all forms so far suggested is that of a malign god, that is, an all-powerful, omniscient, eternal, etc., being but one who is also bad and is amused by fooling me making me believe that I know lots of things when in fact I know nothing. There is also the dream hypothesis. However, I will not go into the details of the skeptic’s strategies, for it would take me too far from what are my present purposes.

G. E. Moore thought that he had refuted the skeptic by enumerating a series of beliefs that satisfy all the conditions which can be imposed upon them in order to speak legitimately of knowledge. The class in question is an open one, that is, new beliefs can be added at any time. Examples of true and **indubitable** beliefs are: the universe existed before I was born, I’ve always lived on the surface of this planet, I have a body, I have had a variety of experiences since I was born, and so forth. Now it is through or by means of propositions of this sort that Moore thinks that he can

formally refute the skeptic, for since these propositions are certainly true, then he knows something with certainty. His line of argument is much more subtle and complex than what a crude presentation of his general stance could reveal, but for our purposes what we have said suffices.

Wittgenstein takes part in the discussion and shows that although Moore is in some sense right, anyway there is another, philosophically important sense in which what he maintains is wrong, the reason being that he simply can't be said to **know** what he affirms he knows. On the face of it, Wittgenstein's point of view is strange, not to say 'paradoxical', but I'm convinced that if we have recourse to the categories we introduced above we shall be in a position to state his view more clearly and to show why he is right.

Wittgenstein's stance with respect to the "sceptic-Moore" controversy is more or less the following: *vis à vis* the sceptical thesis to the effect that knowledge is either impossible or unreal, Moore answers pointing to propositions which are true and which generate certainty; more than that: they are certain in the sense that it is plainly absurd (*i.e.*, contrary to common-sense) to deny them. The problem is that those propositions are such that in normal linguistic contexts they do not serve to make genuine moves in the language-games. But Moore, almost without noticing it, achieves something quite interesting, namely, he shows that any assertion we make automatically turns out to be like the peak of a propositional iceberg: there are a large and indefinite number of propositions underling the linguistic movement and which are indispensable to affirm or negate what is being asserted or negated. The speaker, so to say, doesn't see those propositions, he may even ignore their existence, but they nevertheless are automatically produced by relations of cognitive presupposition, even if they are neither made explicit nor used in any sense whatever. Thus if I inform someone that I am Mexican, I am automatically committed to propositions like 'I am a person', 'I was born in the country called "Mexico"', 'I come from North America', etc., etc. In other words, my movement in the language-game brings with itself the truth of everything that **has** to be given for me to say what can be true. Again, it is particularly important here to insist that the relations between what is expressed by a linguistic move and its underlying propositions are **not** semantic in character. We are not saying that in order for what I say to be meaningful the corresponding propositional system has to be true. **It's not about meanings that we are talking, but about truth and falsehood.** Now since we are dealing with true and not with false propositions, somehow these convey some kind of knowledge, but since it is so to speak useless knowledge, what they convey is not **strictly speaking** knowledge. Therefore Moore just can't say that he knows what he says he knows. Likewise, since we, however vaguely, can speak in relation to those propositions of truth and knowledge, we can also speak of beliefs, but since we don't have in mind beliefs we arrive at by the usual ways of acquiring beliefs, the beliefs in question are so only in a derivative sense; we could almost

speak of a “belief simulacrum”. In other words, if I am seriously and explicitly asked whether I believe that I have a body I’ll reply that I do, but it’ll seem to me such a platitudinous or vacuous belief that I don’t even care to formulate it. The reason is that it is a belief which emanates from an assumed proposition, not from a genuine move in some language-game.

Wittgenstein does offer different independent lines of argument against the sceptical position, but I won’t consider them in this essay. What I was interested in was in offering a plausible reconstruction and present his general outlook with respect to propositions, beliefs and pieces of knowledge. From his perspective, both Moore and the skeptic make the same mistake: one says that he doesn’t know anything while the other affirms that he knows a lot of things while both of them misuse the verb ‘to know’. Their discussion is a typical pseudo-philosophical discussion. Once we have seen this, we can finally pass to consider “hinge propositions” themselves which, according to some, unambiguously point to a radical change in the general outlook of the second Wittgenstein.

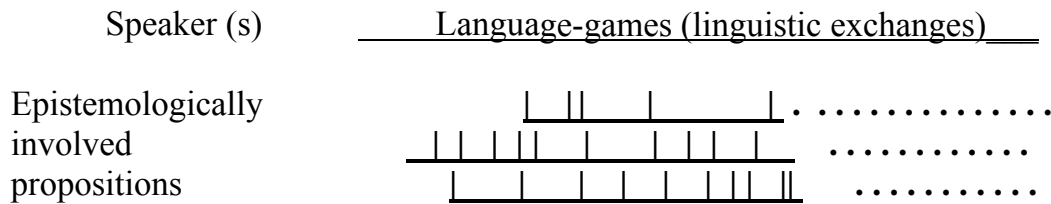
VI) *Hinge propositions: a diagnostic.*

Before ascribing Wittgenstein any theory about hinge propositions we should perhaps ask: what is a hinge? What does it serve? It should be easy to provide answers to such simple questions because it is evident that Wittgenstein is simply using here a metaphor to indicate something, but he’s not introducing a new technical term, one more element of his conceptual apparatus. What matters is what the metaphor indicates, what by its means he wished to convey, not the metaphor itself. So then what is it that the metaphor helps to say?

A hinge is a small tool which serves to keep two pieces together, in general made of wood but not necessarily (they could be made of steel, plastic, etc.), *viz.*, the door and the framework. As Wittgenstein says, in order for the door to open or to close the hinge must be fixed. Here the question is: how does this metaphor apply to propositions? The answer doesn’t seem to be terribly difficult to find: there are propositions which have to be fixed in order for others to be applied, to be used. ‘To be fixed’ in this case means simply that they cannot be put into question, that they are not subject to doubt, for if they were they would no longer function as hinges. A mobile hinge is not a hinge. Now what propositions are like that? What propositions play in the realm of propositions a role similar to the role played by hinges in the realm of doors?

First, there are “propositional systems”, like those of mathematics, which are such that once they are accepted by the community they remain untouched, that is, nobody even tries to modify or reject them. Indeed, only someone totally crazy

would intend to refute Pythagoras' theorem. Secondly, we have the propositional systems which are automatically generated as soon as the speaker says something. For instance, if I affirm that 'John is my neighbour' I am implicitly but automatically committed to propositions like 'John is a human being'. It just couldn't possibly be the case that John is my neighbour and that he's not a human being (that is, speaking seriously, knowing the meaning of words and so on). It is fixed propositions, propositions by which we stand, which stand fast for us, which "justify" our moves in the language-games. Perhaps a simple diagram could help to make this clear:



Each ']' represents an epistemologically "presupposed" or "assumed" or "implied" proposition by the linguistic move carried out by the speaker. Let's call Δ the totality (finite or infinite) of involved propositions. It takes us some effort, time, opportunities to discover the elements of Δ , which support the linguistic moves. Indeed, the situation is very similar to what P. Strawson held in his polemics with B. Russell: if there are no kings in France, the issue of whether or not the King of France is bald simply doesn't arise. In Strawson's case, however, the point was to exhibit the propositions which are both necessary and sufficient for the **meaningfulness** of a sentence. In the case of Wittgenstein's discussion, the issue concerns knowledge, our "general picture of the world", our conception of reality, not the meaningfulness or the nonsensicality of our expressions and sentences. In fact Wittgenstein doesn't criticize the skeptic for making semantic mistakes, something he certainly accuses Moore of doing for misusing the term 'to know'. Wittgenstein's arguments against the skeptic are strictly epistemological in character, they tend to point to holes in his lines of argument, argumentative vicious like circularity, etc. For example, against the argument from dreaming Wittgenstein points out that if I am dreaming, then also the remark that I am dreaming is dreamt and the meaning of what I say is dreamt too. The skeptic's argument is thereby demolished, but the argument itself is not semantic or linguistic, because it is not the theory of meaning what is being examined by Wittgenstein. It is important to notice that Δ will change from user to user, since their respective assertions or moves will be different. Nevertheless, the more we get down in the hierarchy of involved propositions the more universal the latter will be and therefore the more shared among speakers. When we've got at such propositions what we arrived at are basic elements of our conception of reality, of our implicit picture of the world. The fact

remains however that normally we, speakers, lack a clear idea of how we actually see the world, of what we in fact hold about it, for in general language has for us a purely practical utility. Thus the propositions which stand fast for us, which are never modified, which practically never change their *status* seem so obvious to us that we just never deign to consider them. With respect to this I'd like to say a few words.

Since Wittgenstein is not concerned with language from a formal point of view, the classifications of propositions that he draws are classifications of roles. Therefore, traditional categories as applied to propositions, like "analytic" and "synthetic" become in this framework simply worthless. But then, apart from their roles: what features do propositions like 'space is real' or 'there are animals' or 'I've have a wide range of experiences' or 'my life has a temporal dimension' possess?

To begin with, from the point of view of their internal constitution they certainly are **synthetic**. It is evident that they had to be so, for an analytic proposition would make no contribution to my picture of reality, since it says nothing, lacks content, is vacuous and results from a stipulation. On the other hand, given the role they play and the way we have access to them, there is a sense in which the most fundamental of bedrock propositions are neither *a priori* nor not *a priori*. They are *a priori* in the sense they are neither confirmed nor refuted by experience and they are not *a priori* for in a sense they were discovered empirically. Thus such categories simply don't have a clear-cut application here. This is understandable: in a sense, those propositions are not established by us. As we saw, in so far as they simply underlie all our moves in the language-games, it is language itself which automatically establishes them.¹⁴ What we can do is trace them, although 'trace' here doesn't mean just 'deducing' them. It is not an axiomatic system that we build when we get the propositions from the bed of the propositional river. In fact we learn such propositions, we get in touch with them, **after** we learnt how to speak, much later in our development as speakers. That is, even though there is a sense in which we can say that they are assumed or presupposed, in the everyday practice of language they are not required at all. They simply serve to complete a picture. It is in this sense that what we say epistemologically depends on them. It is not the case that for what we say to be meaningful they have to be true; it is rather that for what we say to be **understandable** and not be a simple brushstroke on a canvass that they have to be there. The propositions of our linguistic background are indispensable in so far as they make our conception of reality coherent, they enlarge it and in this sense it is just impossible to question them. It's only when we do philosophy that we may have doubts about them, which shows that Wittgenstein was perfectly right when he spoke about the utterly otiose and incongruous character of conventional philosophical theories. For normal speakers,

¹⁴ About this I say below something else which I consider is important.

such propositions do provide subjective certainty simply because they are bearers of objective certainties. They are indispensable to such extent that they look like tautologies, propositions which the speaker immediately grasps they just couldn't possibly be false, but at the same time propositions he doesn't know exactly what to do with. That is precisely why they do not contribute to the making of moves in the language-games. This doesn't mean, however, that they never allow us to say something, that is, to make some real move in some language-game. After all, they are propositions. However, their role is not an empirical one, but rather systemic or structural. Apart from the fact that they at least in principle can move and be replaced, their number is indeterminate. It would be impossible (or rather absurd) to try to say something in this sense. One feature which makes the bottom propositions of our language look somewhat strange is simply that they are hidden and that only from time to time, so to speak, their heads come out. In this sense, Wittgenstein could even be seen as the Freud of language: he makes us aware of the fact that language has its own Unconscious, that is, a large group of elements (propositions) which in one way or another make themselves felt but that only rarely we are prepared to bring them to light. Just as in psychoanalytic therapy, where it's only through a slow process that we obtain the data for the overcoming of our neurosis, so too in the Wittgensteinian kind of therapy we pick up the propositions which lie at the very bottom of our linguistic background only through slow grammatical analyses.

In view of the discussions it has given rise to, I dare to think that, once we have a grasp of the overall panorama of *On Certainty*, the hinge metaphor probably turns out to be the least fortunate of all metaphors Wittgenstein ever coined (and there are lots of them). Through it the idea of foundation was reintroduced, a totally alien idea to the Wittgensteinian way of thinking, to account for the very last phase of Wittgenstein's production. This amounts to a grave distortion of his thought.

So far I've tried to discredit the idea of a "third Wittgenstein", a Wittgenstein who would no longer be interested in carrying out grammatical analyses, but who would rather be engaged in some new sort of foundationalist work. However, I should perhaps make an exception, although it concerns not *On Certainty* but texts like *Remarks on Colour*. It is worth observing that when the nature of his philosophical investigation changes, Wittgenstein is the first to warn us about it and he actually points out explicitly that he's doing something different from what he usually does. So for example, in his *Remarks on Colour* he says that "there is no such thing as phenomenology, but there are indeed phenomenological problems"¹⁵ and what he goes on to do makes it clear that he's not carrying out a purely logical or grammatical investigation. Now that doesn't mean that his philosophical aim

¹⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *Observaciones sobre los Colores*. Translated into Spanish by Alejandro Tomasini Bassols (Barcelona: Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas/Paidós, 1994), I, 53.

changed into a completely different one. Let us ask: what is a phenomenological problem? It's a problem connected with or derived from "immediate experience". It would seem at first sight as if Wittgenstein were interested in carrying out some sort of quasi-factual analysis of some sort. But to think that would be a sheer mistake, for Wittgenstein understands the phenomenological task as an analysis of the descriptions we make of our visual experience with respect to colours. So the study of the phenomenological problems that Wittgenstein deals with boils down to an analysis of colour concepts. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that we reach here the limits between a purely grammatical research and what would be an empirical study of visual experience. Wittgenstein, however, never crosses that limit. His phenomenological research lacks completely causal content. It is certainly **not** causal explanations what Wittgenstein provides when he examines, for instance, white colour. Now it is important to keep in mind that there are indeed texts in which Wittgenstein works philosophically in a way slightly different from the way he proceeds in other places, but the reason is simply that the difference comes from the subjects themselves, for it is evident that in the case of colours both introspective and behavioural analysis of visual experience become unavoidable. Now such a deviation, to call it such, by Wittgenstein with respect to his own standard writings, although understandable in the case of colours, is impossible to detect in *On Certainty*. In this book, what Wittgenstein carries out is a standard, grammatical analysis of epistemological notions ("knowledge", "belief", "doubt", "certainty" and so on). That is, in this collection of remarks Wittgenstein's goal went on being the same he always had, namely, the dismantling of diverse philosophical enigmas; more precisely, the dismantling of the venerable philosophical puzzle of scepticism, a subject that already in the *Tractatus* had been declared absurd. It's difficult to see, therefore, that in relation to the issue of the nature of philosophy an essential change in the very last phase of Wittgenstein's production took place.

Before ending, I'd like to highlight one more connection between the first and the second Wittgenstein's thoughts. In my view, the idea of a "picture of the world" which emerges from the remarks of *On Certainty* has an important antecedent in the *Tractatus*. The *Tractarian* idea which seems to have anticipated what would come many years later is the idea of formal concept. Concepts like object, person, number, etc., are formal concepts. That's why to say that John is a person is to say nothing: if I know that 'John' is a proper name for persons, to say that is simply to repeat what we already know. On the other hand, as soon as I say 'John is nice', I automatically generate the proposition 'John is a person'. 'To be nice' is a proper or genuine concept, it can be ascribed truthfully or falsely of someone, etc., but it just makes no sense to say either that John is a person or that he is not. Here we find a *liaison* between the two great phases in Wittgenstein's thought, a connection which deserves to be carefully examined. As in many other cases, Wittgenstein's insight seems to be the same in both periods and what changes is the approach which moved from logic to grammar. About this, however, I'll say nothing here.

VII) *Conclusions*

I have argued against the idea of a “third Wittgenstein”, with all it implies. I hope to have shown that nothing would be more damaging as to invent a cut in the second Wittgenstein’s philosophical production. I must admit that I left out lots of interesting subjects. For instance, I didn’t consider the relations that hold between rules of grammar and “hinge” propositions. There are those who have maintained that they are the same. In my view that is a serious mistake. The subject is certainly worth investigating and debating, for lots of questions would be solved depending upon how we see the issue. Regardless of this, the reward we get from our discussion is the idea of a new diagnostic for at least some philosophical puzzles: we are now in a position to understand that they are not the result of a violation of rules of grammar (in the Wittgensteinian sense, of course), but rather of the confrontation between what is being said and the fundamental propositions which constitute our conception of the world, *i.e.*, our *Weltanschauung*, which underlies our discourse in all spheres of life.