

2. Epistemic Vertigo and Existential *Angst*

DUNCAN PRITCHARD

1. The Truth in Scepticism

Stanley Cavell famously remarked that there was a “truth in scepticism,” where the recognition of this truth was apt to prompt a kind of anxiety. Here is Cavell describing this putative truth:

An admission of some question as to the mystery of existence, or the being, of the world is a serious bond between the teaching of Wittgenstein and that of Heidegger. The bond is one, in particular, which implies a shared view of what I have called the truth of skepticism, or what I might call the moral of skepticism, namely, that the human creature’s basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing.¹

One natural way of responding to Cavell on this score is that he is simply courting mystery. After all, he takes a distinctly Wittgensteinian line on sceptical problems, and doesn’t Wittgenstein show, in a quietistic spirit, that such puzzles are merely the product of faulty philosophical theorizing? If so, then the sceptical puzzle is simply illusory and can hence be summarily dismissed. In particular, there is no truth that it might hold and no moral for us to extract (bar the general one about being wary of philosophical problems). Consequently, there are no legitimate grounds for any kind of anxiety arising in the wake of our resolution of this problem.

I want to resist this natural line of response. On the contrary, I want to suggest that this point about the truth in scepticism, and the anxiety that it generates, is a

1. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 241.

deep insight of Cavell's work, and thus that it is imperative that we capture what is at issue here. Relatedly, insofar as Cavell interprets Wittgenstein correctly on this score — as I think he does — then this will be important for our conception of Wittgensteinian quietism, and in particular to appreciating why it is not a straightforward form of philosophical quietism. Moreover, I will be arguing that understanding the source of this anxiety can help us diagnose the existential *angst* that arises when we ponder the question of the meaning of life.

2. Epistemic Vertigo

In order to understand what Cavell means by his remarks about the truth in scepticism, we first need to engage with the 'terror' that he says naturally arises in the context of what is pitched as being a fully adequate *response* to the sceptical problem. Consider this passage, where Cavell's concern is with rule-following scepticism, and thus the issue of projecting meanings into new contexts of use:

Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfilment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation — all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (because it is) terrifying.²

The general Wittgensteinian line of response to rule-following scepticism in play here will be familiar. There is nothing beyond the practice itself that can legitimate

2. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 52.

that practice because there could be no such external legitimization. The very philosophical demand that our practices stand in need of such an external legitimation is what needs to be unpacked and resisted, for it rests on a faulty philosophical picture. It is not my concern to defend this line here, but rather to note what Cavell goes on to say in the context of offering this Wittgensteinian anti-sceptical line, which is that the recognition that this is our situation is one that is “difficult,” where the difficulty concerns the fact that it makes our situation “terrifying.”³ But why should that be? If we reject the faulty philosophical picture that generates the sceptical puzzle, then shouldn’t that be the end of the matter? What would be the source of the terror?

Elsewhere I have followed other commentators in referring to this anxiety not as terror but as *vertigo*, and I will embrace this convention here too. As we will see, this word has useful connotations in this context which make it more fitting anyway. With this new terminology in play, the Cavellian thought is that in dissolving the sceptical problem one gains a recognition of one’s philosophical situation that naturally provokes this vertiginous anxiety. The truth in scepticism is not, then, that scepticism is true, but that in discovering that it is false (in the sense of illusory), one gains a new understanding of one’s situation that is nonetheless disquieting and thus leads to the vertigo.

In contrast, one might push back against this Cavellian thought by insisting that once the sceptical problem has been dissolved then there can be no truth to recognize nor, thereby, any legitimate grounds for succumbing to the target vertigo. One finds a particularly clear version of this putative debunking of Cavellian vertigo in remarks that John McDowell makes about Cavell. In discussing the quotation from Cavell that we just gave, McDowell offers the following gloss:

The terror of which Cavell speaks at the end of this marvelous passage is a sort of vertigo, induced by the thought that there is nothing but shared forms of life to keep us, as it were, on the rails. We are inclined to think that that is an in-

3. Cavell makes similar remarks elsewhere in his work about this “terror,” so his use of this term is not isolated. See, for example, this passage: “We begin to feel, or ought to, terrified that maybe language (and understanding, and knowledge) rests upon very shaky foundations — a thin net over an abyss.” (*The Claim of Reason*, 178).

sufficient foundation for a conviction that when we, say, extend a number series, we really are, at each stage, doing the same thing as before.⁴

Note that for McDowell the terror, or vertigo, that is arising in response to the Wittgensteinian response to rule-following scepticism is thought to be a reflection of the supposed *weakness* of this anti-sceptical line. This is important to understanding why McDowell is ultimately so dismissive of such vertigo. For while he grants that this vertigo might be a natural philosophical response to the Wittgensteinian diagnosis of rule-following scepticism, he contends that it reveals a failure to properly embrace the nature of the solution being offered:

We cannot be whole-heartedly engaged in the relevant parts of the “whirl of organism,” and at the same time achieve the detachment necessary in order to query whether our unreflective view of what we are doing is illusory. The cure for the vertigo, then, is to give up the idea that philosophical thought, about the sorts of practice in question, should be undertaken at some external standpoint, outside our immersion in our familiar forms of life.⁵

McDowell is suggesting that to feel such an anxiety in response to this resolution to rule-following scepticism is to succumb to the very philosophical picture that was generating the sceptical puzzle, one according to which our practices require an external philosophical validation. If we properly embrace the Wittgensteinian line that no such external valuation is required, then the vertigo will disappear just as the sceptical puzzle itself did. Here is McDowell:

If we feel the vertigo [...], it is out of distaste for the idea that a manifestation of reason might be recognizable as such only from within the practice whose status is in question. We are inclined to think there ought to be a neutral external standpoint from which the rationality of any genuine exercise of reason could be demonstrated.⁶

4. John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” *Monist* 62, no. 3 (1979): 339.

5. *Ibid.*, 341.

6. *Ibid.*, 45.

So Cavell was wrong to think that there is any truth in scepticism left once the Wittgensteinian diagnostic story has done its work, and thus wrong to think that there is any cause for the feelings of vertigo that he describes. Instead, we just need to keep our nerve and follow through on the Wittgensteinian dissolution of scepticism.

Where McDowell goes awry in his treatment of Cavellian vertigo is in the initial gloss he gives of Cavell's thinking. McDowell treats the vertigo as arising out of a dissatisfaction with the Wittgensteinian response to scepticism. This entails that the envisaged truth in scepticism is thus a kind of concession to scepticism — i.e., that there is some truth in it, some reason that the sceptic has highlighted for being dissatisfied with our situation in the target domain. But I don't think that captures the source of Cavell's worry at all. Instead, what prompts the vertigo that Cavell has in mind is not the fact that there is nothing external validating our practices, which would suggest the 'dissatisfaction' reading that McDowell offers, but rather the *recognition* of this fact. This distinction can initially seem puzzling, for if there is nothing problematic about our practices lacking an external validation, then why should the recognition of this fact lead to anxiety? Nonetheless, I think there is a distinction to be drawn here and that it is one that Cavell is trying to capture. Moreover, as we will see, it is crucially important to understanding the existential dimension of the later Wittgenstein's thought.

3. Wittgenstein on the Groundlessness of Our Believing

The most straightforward way to elucidate the importance of the distinction just drawn, and its relevance for the later Wittgenstein, is to consider some of Wittgenstein's writings on scepticism that Cavell wasn't engaging with when he made these claims about the truth in scepticism. The writings I have in mind are Wittgenstein's final notebooks devoted to the topics of knowledge, certainty and scepticism, which were published posthumously as *On Certainty*.⁷ While there are significant overlaps in the ideas presented in these notebooks and in the other materials that make up

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. D. Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969). Henceforth I will refer to this text as *OC*.

Wittgenstein's later work — especially the *Philosophical Investigations*⁸ — there is also a new line of argument that is unique to this text.

This new line of argument is in support of the claim that it is necessary to the structure of rational evaluation — and thus to the very possibility that one is a rational subject at all, someone who occupies the space of reasons — that one has an overarching certainty in one's worldview. It follows from this proposal that this certainty must perforce be arational, since it lies behind all rational evaluations; it is the 'hinge' on which the door of rational evaluation turns.⁹ Accordingly, we will call this overarching certainty in one's worldview—roughly, the idea that one's worldview is not fundamentally in error—the *über hinge commitment*.¹⁰ It also follows from this proposal that the very idea of a fully general rational evaluation—of a kind that the radical sceptic attempts to undertake to undermine the rational standing of our beliefs, and of a kind that the traditional *anti*-sceptic attempts to undertake to validate the rational standing of our beliefs—is simply incoherent.

Wittgenstein's defends this claim by highlighting how inculcating a child into a worldview goes hand-in-hand with teaching them rational practices; one cannot have the latter without the former. One's acquisition of a worldview is thus not itself a fully rational process. That is, one might be taught elements of the worldview, and thereby given reasons to accept those elements, but the certainty in the worldview as a whole is not taught but rather 'swallowed down' in what one is taught.¹¹ Reasons are thereby internal to the worldview rather than directed towards the worldview as a whole. Similarly, certainty in the worldview is required in order to acquire it. As Wittgenstein puts it:

The child learns by believing the adult. Doubt comes after belief.¹²

That is, the rational practice of doubt presupposes that the worldview, and the certainty that infuses it, is already in place; there is no route to the acquisition of a

8. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, trans. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).

9. Wittgenstein, *OC*, §341.

10. I introduce this terminology in *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), part 2.

11. Wittgenstein, *OC*, §143.

12. *Ibid.*, §160.

worldview by being globally circumspect of what one is taught. Indeed, Wittgenstein observes that one's certainty in the worldview is evident in our actions, which reveal our complete conviction. (He approvingly quotes Goethe in this respect: "In the beginning was the deed."¹³). More generally, one does not acquire a worldview, and the certainty that permeates it, by it being made plausible to one, as that would imply that there can be reasons in support of the worldview as a whole. Our über hinge certainty is thus not a grounded certainty at all, but rather something brute: it is "animal," visceral, "primitive."¹⁴ It is neither reasonable nor unreasonable, but simply there "like our life."¹⁵

Although this presentation of the role of (what we are calling) the über hinge commitment in our practices is novel to *On Certainty*, especially in terms of its epistemological focus, it clearly dovetails with previous themes in Wittgenstein's work, not least the idea that there is nothing external that justifies one's practices as a whole. What is also innovative about *On Certainty* is the way that Wittgenstein describes how the über hinge commitment manifests itself in our ordinary practices.

G. E. Moore¹⁶ famously discussed the special kind of certainty we have in our most mundane everyday commitments.¹⁷ Moore thought that these quotidian certainties amounted to knowledge, but Wittgenstein offers a more radical line in this regard. At least as regards some of the certainties that Moore listed — i.e., the ones that really are features of our commonsense worldview, rather than being, for instance, philosophical claims that Moore smuggles in under this guise — his suggestion is that they are

13. Ibid., §396.

14. Ibid., §§475 and 359.

15. Ibid., §559.

16. E.g., George Edward Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense," in *Contemporary British Philosophy* (2nd series), ed. J. H. Muirhead (London: Allen & Unwin, 1925) and "Proof of an External World," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 25 (1939).

17. Moore is often taken to have been the first to identify this particular issue regarding our everyday certainties. As I've argued elsewhere, however, he is in fact responding to a common philosophical theme of his time, one that goes back at least as far as John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979 [1870]). As Newman makes clear, the underlying issue here arises out of Locke's epistemology, which demands, quite plausibly, both that our epistemic support should be proportionate to our level of commitment (so optimal certainty demands optimal levels of epistemic support), and that we should be able to make explicit what this epistemic support is and how it performs this role. For discussion, see my "Quasi-Fideism and Virtuous Anti-Evidentialism: Wittgenstein and Newman on Knowledge and Certainty," in *Newman and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. J. Milburn and F. Aquino (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

expressions of the über hinge commitment.¹⁸ That is, our overarching certainty in our worldview — our conviction that this worldview is not in fundamental respects in error — manifests itself in a similarly brutish certainty in particular everyday certainties that are core nodes of that worldview. Our über hinge commitment thus generates *hinge commitments* to specific propositions. Examples include such claims as that (in normal circumstances) one has hands,¹⁹ what one's name is,²⁰ and the language that one is speaking.²¹ These are all propositions where error would call the worldview as a whole into question, such that a doubt here would “drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos.”²² Accordingly, expressions of doubt of these hinge commitments are either to be understood as merely performative (as when a philosopher claims to doubt everything they believe) or as an indication of a severe mental disturbance.²³

As expressions of the über hinge commitment, our specific hinge commitments inherit the same properties as the über hinge. We might suppose, as Moore does, that these commitments are rationally grounded just as our ordinary beliefs might be, and relatedly that they are propositional attitudes that can be rationally evaluated just like our other beliefs. In fact, however, they play a very different role in our rational practices. In particular, as with our über hinge certainty, their hinge status means that the certainty here is brute and arational; it is rooted in our actions rather than in our reasons.

Similarly, Wittgenstein is not suggesting that it is incidental to our rational practices that they presuppose these arational hinge commitments, any more than it

18 In keeping with one of the guiding themes of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues in the first notebook that makes up *On Certainty* that philosophical claims, such as “There is an external world,” are not (contentful) mundane certainties but rather contentless sentences whereby philosophers attempt to say something profound and end up saying nothing at all. For more on this point about the first notebook, see Michael Williams, “Wittgenstein’s Refutation of Idealism,” in *Wittgenstein and Scepticism*, ed. D. McManus (London: Routledge, 2004), “Illusions of Doubt: Wittgenstein on Knowledge and Certainty,” in *Skepticism: from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. D. Machuca and B. Reed (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) and my *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*, part 2. As I argue in “Hinge Commitments and Common Knowledge,” *Synthese* 200, no. 3 (2022), Wittgenstein also distinguishes in *On Certainty* between everyday certainties that function like—to use Greco’s helpful phrase in his “Common Knowledge,” *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 6, no. 2-3 (2016) — background ‘common knowledge’ and those arational everyday certainties that represent the über hinge commitment. This is important to reading *On Certainty*, since it entails that not every certainty that Wittgenstein discusses is a hinge certainty.

19. E.g., Wittgenstein, *OC*, §1.

20. *Ibid.*, §425.

21. *Ibid.*, §158.

22. *Ibid.*, §613.

23. *Ibid.*, §§71-75.

is incidental to our rational practices that they presuppose the über hinge commitment. Instead, he is quite explicit that the point he is making is one of “logic.”²⁴ That is, it is in the very nature of what it is to have a system of rational evaluation that it presupposes a backdrop of arational certainty in the worldview, and thus in the commonsense nodes of that worldview. This is important to understanding why this proposal is meant to dissolve the radical sceptical problematic.²⁵

It can seem as if the radical sceptic is presenting us with a genuine paradox, in the sense of a deep inconsistency in our own natural ways of thinking within this domain. In fact, however, they are trading on a faulty philosophical picture that is completely divorced from our ordinary rational practices; indeed, completely divorced from any plausible conception of what those ordinary rational practices could be. Not only are our ordinary rational practices essentially local in nature, but the very idea of a fully general rational evaluation is simply incoherent, as all rational evaluation presupposes an arational hinge certainty. As a result, there is no paradox here, but merely a puzzle that arises within a faulty philosophical picture, one that we should dispense with.²⁶ Notice too that on this diagnosis of radical scepticism, traditional forms of *anti*-scepticism that attempt to respond to the sceptical threat by offering a global rational validation of our beliefs are just as problematic as radical scepticism, as they also implicitly buy into the faulty philosophical picture that is generating the illusory paradox.

Such is the distinctive account of the structure of rational evaluations that Wittgenstein offers in *On Certainty*.²⁷ One might initially think that such a definitive response to radical scepticism would not allow for there to be any ‘truth’ in scepticism of the kind that Cavell is gesturing toward. In fact, however, in these remarks on our

24. E.g., *ibid.*, §342.

25. At any rate, that version of the radical sceptical problematic that trades on the coherence of universal rational evaluations. See my *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*, part 1, for discussion of a distinct version of the contemporary radical scepticism problematic that trades instead on the supposed ‘insularity’ of reasons.

26. The conception of contemporary rational scepticism as a putative paradox is usually credited to Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

27. Naturally, this presentation of Wittgenstein’s views in this regard is my own—see my *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*, *passim* for further defence of these claims. For some of the main alternative readings of *On Certainty*, see Peter Frederick Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), Marie McGinn, *Sense and Certainty: A Dissolution of Scepticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), Avrum Stroll, *Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), Daniele

hinge commitments Wittgenstein offers the most explicit endorsement of what Cavell has in mind. Consider this remark, which I think is central to understanding Wittgenstein's line of thought in *On Certainty*:

The difficulty is realising the groundlessness of our believing.²⁸

What is significant about this passage is that the difficulty in question does not concern the groundlessness of our believing but rather our recognition of this groundlessness. That is, if we understand Wittgenstein's line on the structure of rational evaluation, then it is clear that our hinge commitments cannot be rationally grounded, and hence must be unknown. This is because there is simply no such thing as a rational basis for one's worldview as a whole, but only for elements within that worldview. Rationality gains no purchase on such global rational evaluations. Taking this point seriously means recognising that in saying one's worldview as a whole is groundless, and thus that one's hinge commitments are unknown, is not to concede anything to the radical sceptic, as if one were granting that the sceptic has identified an important cognitive limitation on our parts. We can see this by realising that while our hinge commitments are unknown, it is not as if we are ignorant of them, as they are simply not in the market for knowledge.²⁹ Our failure to know our hinge commitments is thus no more a cognitive limitation on our parts than our failure to conceive of a circle-square reveals an imaginative lacuna.³⁰

Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein's On Certainty* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), Crispin Wright, "Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free)?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (supp. vol.) 78, no. 1 (2004), Annalisa Coliva, *Moore and Wittgenstein: Scepticism, Certainty, and Common Sense* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), *Extended Rationality: A Hinge Epistemology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and Genia Schönbaumsfeld, *The Illusion of Doubt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). For a recent survey of this literature, see my "Wittgenstein on Hinge Commitments and Radical Scepticism in *On Certainty*," in *Blackwell Companion to Wittgenstein*, ed. H.-J. Glock and J. Hyman (Oxford: Blackwell, 2017).

28. Wittgenstein, *OC*, §166.

29. That one doesn't count as ignorant of a proposition that is not in the market for knowledge reveals that there is more to ignorance than merely a lack of knowledge. For further discussion of this point, including other cases where ignorance comes apart from lack of knowledge, see my "Cavell and Philosophical Vertigo" and "Ignorance and Inquiry," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2021).

30. Despite this point, it is in fact quite common for commentators on *On Certainty* to regard Wittgenstein as highlighting a cognitive limitation on our parts in just this way. See, for example, Crispin Wright, "Hinge Propositions and the Serenity Prayer," in *Knowledge and Belief, Proceedings of the 26th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, ed. W. Löffler and P. Weingartner (Vienna, Austria: Holder-Pickler-Tempsky, 2004) and "Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free)?" I offer an extended critical discussion of such concessive readings in my "Hinge Commitments and Trust," *Synthese* 202, no. 5 (2023).

It is thus not the groundlessness of our believing that is the difficulty, at least provided we properly understand what that claim amounts to. But how then can the recognition of the groundlessness of our believing be problematic? The reason for this lies in how recognising such a truth entails an unnatural perspective on one's ordinary practices, one that by its nature involves a degree of alienation from them. I've noted that our ordinary rational practices essentially involve local rational evaluations. That this is so, however, is not something that is explicit within those practices; all that is explicit is that they, in fact, only concern local rational evaluations, but the necessity of this feature is not made explicit in the practice itself. Indeed, it requires a philosophical investigation to draw this feature up to the surface.

Relatedly, we are not aware of our hinge commitments *qua* hinge commitments within our ordinary practices. Indeed, they are in sense hidden from us, albeit in a fashion whereby their disguise consists in being so in front of our view that we don't see them. There is, for example, no ordinary line of inquiry that would raise an issue about our hinge commitments. One simply does not ordinarily even consider the question of whether one has hands. As Wittgenstein puts it, such questions regarding one's hinge commitments "lie apart from the route travelled by inquiry."³¹ This is the sense in which our ordinary practices, even if they do not involve universal rational evaluations, do not make explicit the groundlessness of our believing either. This is important, since it means that becoming aware of our hinge commitments *qua* hinge commitments does involve learning something new and thereby becoming aware of a truth. This is the truth that scepticism reveals, but which is obscured from view when one is fully attuned to one's ordinary practices, that our believing is ultimately groundless (because our worldview as a whole is groundless). As Cavell puts it in his famous 'truth of scepticism' passage that we quoted above, what we come to realise is that our relationship to the world as a whole is not one of knowing.

It is important to emphasise that this truth is distinct from the truth that the radical sceptic advertises. The putative sceptical truth is a claim about how our beliefs are epistemically problematic because they are ultimately groundless. In contrast, the truth that is revealed by recognising our hinge commitments as hinge commitments is one on which our ordinary practices, and the localised rational support that they

31. Wittgenstein, *OC*, §88.

generate for our beliefs, are perfectly in order as they are. The radical sceptic thus does not succeed in establishing her intended truth. Nonetheless, something new is learned by recognising one's hinge commitments as hinge commitments, as one is not ordinarily aware, when one is fully attuned to one's day-to-day practices, that one's worldview as a whole is groundless. (Which, note, is not to say that when one is fully attuned to one's day-to-day practices that one implicitly supposes that one's worldview as a whole is rationally grounded; rather, the issue simply doesn't arise).

The notion of attunement — Cavell's favoured phrase for our being fully immersed in a practice — is important here. Just as radical sceptical theorising involves a kind of alienation from one's ordinary practices, in that it involves adopting an unnatural perspective on them, so resolving the sceptical problem also involves a kind of estrangement from those practices too.³² This is crucial to understanding Wittgenstein's brand of philosophical quietism. In dissolving philosophical paradoxes and thereby showing that one's practices do not require an external validation (in this case of a specifically rational kind), one does not simply return to one's ordinary practices as before. Indeed, there is, and can be, no return to Eden. For in resolving the paradox by dissolving it one is nonetheless led to a perspective on those practices which is also unnatural, and thus involves a degree of estrangement from them, even if it is a perspective on which the paradox no longer arises.³³

This relates to a core theme in Cavell's work, which is the uncanny nature of the ordinary. That is, that which is most ordinary, when one becomes aware of it as such, can strike one as eerie and strange. This is because of the feature of the (most) ordinary that we have noted, in which it is in effect obscured from our vision by being completely in front of us. It thus takes a peculiar kind of inquiry to make it vivid, and in doing so it becomes strange. Recognising our hinge commitments as hinge commitments necessarily involves a degree of alienation from, and thus lack of attunement to, one's ordinary practices. This is why an engagement with radical scepticism,

32. As Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 161 puts it, the sceptical line of reasoning is neither 'fully natural' nor 'fully unnatural.'

33. For further discussion of Wittgenstein's particular brand of philosophical quietism, see John McDowell, "Wittgenstein's 'Quietism'," *Common Knowledge* 15, no. 3 (2009) and my 'Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* as Pyrrhonism in Action," in *Wittgensteinian (adj.): Looking at Things from the Viewpoint of Wittgenstein's Philosophy*, ed. N. de Costa and S. Wuppuluri, (Dordrecht, Holland: Springer, 2019) and "Pyrrhonism and Wittgensteinian Quietism," in *Ancient Scepticism and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. L. Perissinotto and B. R. Cámara (Milan: Mimesis International, forthcoming).

even of a kind that involves dissolving the putative paradox in play, does not leave things as they were. Here is Cavell:

The return of what we accept as the world will then present itself as a return of the familiar, which is to say, exactly under the concept of what Freud names the uncanny. That the familiar is a product of a sense of the unfamiliar and of the sense of a return means that what returns after skepticism is never (just) the same.³⁴

It is apt to refer to the Cavellian anxiety in the face of scepticism as a form of vertigo, where the word is used in its colloquial (if strictly inaccurate) sense as referring to a fear of heights.³⁵ It conveys the idea that the anxiety in question is phobic, and thus is in tension with one's beliefs rather than an expression of them. It is, to use Tamar Gendler's terminology, an *alief* rather than a belief.³⁶ For example, one might know, when high up, that one is perfectly safe and yet feel the fear from being so high regardless. The fearful reaction here is the alief. The same goes for our Cavellian anxiety when we come to recognise the ultimate groundlessness of our believing, for even if we fully endorse the Wittgensteinian diagnosis of why it is incoherent to even expect one's worldview to be rationally grounded we might still be subject to the fearful alief.

The second element of the vertigo metaphor that is useful for our purposes is the connotation that one has ascended, in this case ascended above one's ordinary rational practices in order to view them from an unnatural vantage point. This ascent is only possible at the expense of a lack of full attunement in those practices. Full at-

34. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 166. For further discussion of Cavell's treatment of the ordinary, see Gordon Bearn, "Wittgenstein and the Uncanny," *Soundings* 76 (1993), Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), David Egan, "The Authenticity of the Ordinary," in *Wittgenstein and Heidegger*, ed. D. Egan, S. Reynolds and A. J. Wendland, (London: Routledge, 2013) and *The Pursuit of an Authentic Philosophy: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Everyday* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), Peter Stanley Fosl, "Cavell and Hume on Skepticism, Natural Doubt, and the Recovery of the Ordinary," *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies* 3 (2015), and Avner Baz "Stanley Cavell's Argument of the Ordinary," *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 7, no. 2 (2018).

35. The correct term for a fear of heights is acrophobia, but 'epistemic acrophobia' doesn't have quite the same ring to it.

36. In her "Alief and Belief," *Journal of Philosophy* 105, no. 10 (2008).

tunement doesn't allow for philosophical anxiety, and that's because such anxiety arises out of a lack of attunement.

Putting these thoughts together, the idea becomes that epistemic vertigo captures a phobic relation — an alief — that we are naturally inclined to form in response to the epistemic ascent that we undertake when we become, through philosophising, estranged from our ordinary rational practices in such a way as to recognise the ultimate groundlessness of our believing.³⁷ That this captures what Cavell has in mind with the truth of scepticism is brought out in an off-hand remark he makes about this notion in his 1996 APA Presidential Address. He notes that his treatment of the later Wittgenstein's response to scepticism was not as a refutation of it but rather as being concerned with discovering “the causes of philosophy's disparagement of, or its disappointment with, the ordinary, something I have called the truth of skepticism.”³⁸ The problem is thus the ordinary, or at least the conception of the ordinary that one gains from engaging in the sceptical problematic. It is this conception that generates the *angst*.

Cavell claimed that the proper response to scepticism involves acknowledgment rather than knowledge.³⁹ In particular, what needs to be acknowledged is the sense in which, as he puts it, our relationship to the world as a whole is not one of knowing. As he expresses the point, “scepticism is not the discovery of an incapacity in human knowing but of an insufficiency [*of acknowledgement*].”⁴⁰ The truth in scepticism, which we must acknowledge, is a disturbing one, which is why it prompts epistemic vertigo, but it is not a sceptical truth.

37. I have developed this notion of epistemic vertigo in a number of places. See, for example, *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*, part 4, “Wittgensteinian Epistemology, Epistemic Vertigo, and Pyrrhonian Scepticism,” in *Epistemology After Sextus Empiricus*, ed. J. Vlasits and K. M. Vogt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), “Epistemic Vertigo,” in *The Philosophy and Psychology of Ambivalence: Being of Two Minds*, ed. B. Brogaard and D. Gatzia (London: Routledge, 2020), “Religious Vertigo,” in *Religionsphilosophie nach Wittgenstein (Philosophy of Religion after Wittgenstein)*, ed. E. Ramharter (Stuttgart, Germany: Metzler/Springer, 2024). For further defence of the application of this notion to Cavell, see my “Cavell and Philosophical Vertigo.” See also Rico Gutschmidt, “Scepticism, Metaphors and Vertigo: Wittgenstein and Cavell on the Human Condition,” *Wittgenstein-Studien* 7, no. 1 (2016).

38. Cavell, “Something out of the Ordinary,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 71, no. 2 (1997): 26.

39. For example, consider this passage: “*The Claim of Reason* suggests the moral of skepticism to be, that the existence of the world and others in it is not a matter to be known, but one to be acknowledged.” (*In Quest of the Ordinary*, 109). One might think that Cavell is echoing the following remark from *On Certainty*: “Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgment.” (Wittgenstein, *OC*, §378). Cavell, “Reply to Four Chapters,” in *Wittgenstein and Skepticism*, ed. D. McManus (London: Routledge, 2004), 284 maintains, however, that he developed this approach prior to reading *On Certainty*.

40. Cavell, “Something out of the Ordinary”: 26.

4. Existential Angst

One might naturally wonder at this juncture what all this has got to do with existential questions about the meaning of life. The explanation lies in a certain way in which the question of life's meaning can seem paradoxical. At root, the problem of the meaning of life is an axiological problem. A meaningful life is a life properly devoted, in fundamental ways, to finally (i.e., non-instrumentally) valuable goods. This is why a life devoted to trivialities, like money or fame, is usually thought to be without meaning, as such goods are not finally valuable.

On this conception of the meaning of life, there are certain external conditions that need to hold for life to be meaningful. For one thing, the goods that we fundamentally and finally value need to in fact be worthy of such valuing. If value nihilism is true, for example, and nothing is valuable, much less finally valuable, then life is meaningless. Moreover, even if there are finally valuable goods, we might be mistaken about what is valuable in this way, and also in error about which of them we should be fundamentally concerned with. Someone who regrets, on their deathbed, spending time at the office at the expense of neglecting their family is presumably coming to recognize, too late, an error of valuing that they made. They fundamentally and finally valued certain goods when they were not worthy of it.

Moreover, most of what we value incorporates certain success conditions. For example, it is plausible that a good life is a life rich in achievements. Roughly, these are successes that are attributable to one's skillful agency.⁴¹ So construed, however, there are numerous ways in which one's achievements can be frustrated. For example, one's successes might be Gettierized, such that luck intervenes to ensure that one's success is not attributable to one's skillful agency. Furthermore, given that a meaningful life depends upon one valuing in a certain way, then anything that is a threat to such valuing would thereby undermine the goodness of one's life. This is the sense in which, for example, having free will is a precondition for a meaningful life.

41. At any rate, they are successes that are attributable to one's skillful agency where, in addition, there is a higher than normal level of skill on display or one is overcoming significant obstacles to that success. For discussion of this account of achievements, see my "Achievements, Luck and Value," *Think* 9, no. 25 (2010). For further discussion of achievements in general, see Gwen Bradford, *Achievement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

There are many other ways in which circumstances can undermine the meaningfulness of one's life, at least on an axiological conception of life's meaning anyway. Such potential barriers are to be expected: the idea that living a meaningful life is guaranteed, whatever one elected to do, does not even seem to be as much as coherent. There is, however, one kind of challenge to the meaning of life that is different from these piecemeal concerns in that it is structural in nature. Indeed, it is structurally akin to the sceptical problems that Wittgenstein engaged with, whether concerned with meaning or knowledge. The idea is that there needs to be an external validation of one's fundamental values, for without such a validation they are merely arbitrary and parochial — mere products of one's particular cultural milieu — and hence without value.

We can find a compelling statement of this existential concern in Thomas Nagel's magisterial treatment of absurdity.⁴² Nagel treats the problem of the meaning of life as being one of avoiding the charge of absurdity. For Nagel, the source of absurdity is a discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality. To take one of his examples, imagine that your trousers fall down just as you are being knighted. The particular kind of absurdity that he claims is relevant to the meaning of life concerns the "collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt."⁴³ It thus becomes important to show that our lives, which we hold to be of utmost importance, are fundamentally different from the pointless existence of someone like Sisyphus, who is condemned to push a boulder up a hill for eternity. For if there is not, then the discrepancy between pretension and reality will kick in and our lives will be absurd (and thus meaningless). Nagel's dramatic claim is that there are always grounds for believing that there is such a discrepancy.

Notice that the problem that Nagel is presenting is essentially epistemological in nature, as he acknowledges.⁴⁴ The idea is that there is always a perspective avail-

42. Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," *Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20 (1970).

43. *Ibid.*, 718.

44. Indeed, he contends that this problem concerning the meaning of life is structurally analogous to the problem of radical scepticism. See Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," §5. For a critical discussion of Nagel's specific presentation of this analogy, see my "Absurdity, *Angst* and The Meaning of Life," *Monist* 93, no. 1 (2010).

able from which it is reasonable to doubt that the things that we fundamentally value in our lives really are deserving of this value. Consider this passage:

We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet we have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd. It is absurd because we ignore the doubts that we know cannot be settled, continuing to live with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of them.⁴⁵

Notice that the concern here isn't that the things that one fundamentally value in one's lives have been shown to be undeserving of being valued in this way, but only that there is a perspective on which it is reasonable to doubt their value and we have no way of settling these doubts. Note too how Nagel characterizes this perspective that generates these doubts, as one that is "outside the particular form of our lives." As he expresses the point, this is a perspective that is 'external' to our form of life; it is a 'universal viewpoint' rather than one's particular viewpoint.⁴⁶ In later work, Nagel would famously express this notion in terms of a 'view from nowhere.'⁴⁷

Nagel's presentation of the problem can make it seem compelling. Isn't one important source — if not the overarching source — of our existential *angst* this inability to assuage the doubts we might have about whether what we fundamentally care about warrants this concern? And don't those doubts arise within a peculiarly detached perspective where we step outside of our form of life and attempt to evaluate our deepest values in a detached manner?

Our discussion of Cavell and epistemic vertigo offers us a way of responding to this existential *angst*. Primarily, it does so by presenting us with a diagnosis of what is problematic about the disengaged perspective that Nagel is appealing to. Our fundamental values permeate and structure our worldview. As such, while they can of course change over time, they are not dispensable features of the worldview, still less

45. Nagel, "The Absurd": 719.

46. Ibid., 720 and 725.

47. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

are they incidental to it. To doubt our fundamental values is to doubt the worldview, which is why our über hinge commitment in the worldview manifests itself in a corresponding visceral certainty in our fundamental values. The very manner in which our fundamental values are embedded in the heart of our worldview can make it seem as if the only proper perspective from which one should assess one's fundamental values is from outside of one's worldview, as any justification of them from within it will seem bootstrapping in nature. We are thus led towards the idea that to properly validate one's fundamental values it is necessary to rationally evaluate one's worldview as a whole.

Nagel maintains that when we try to undertake this radical form of rational evaluation, we find that our doubts cannot be resolved, and this leaves us with the existential *angst*. Where Nagel goes wrong is in supposing that the kind of rational evaluation that he is envisaging can be coherently undertaken. As we have previously noted, it can seem harmless to suppose that we can extrapolate from our ordinary rational practices to a kind of purified rational practice that is in principle universal in application. It is this kind of abstraction from our ordinary rational practices that Nagel is attempting when he considers a perspective from which one might rationally evaluate one's worldview as a whole, and thus the fundamental values that permeate that worldview. What Wittgenstein's discussion of the structure of rational evaluation reveals, however, is that this is not a harmless extension of our ordinary rational practices at all but rather incorporates a dubious philosophical picture that ignores the necessity of the über hinge commitment. If that's right, then the appropriate response to the challenge that Nagel raises is not to concede that these radical doubts that arise in the context of the disengaged perspective are unanswerable but to argue that they are not even coherent. There simply is no disengaged perspective from which we can rationally evaluate our worldview as a whole and that means that there is no mechanism for rationally evaluating our fundamental values from such a perspective.

If Nagel's existential *angst* is unwarranted, then does that mean that there is nothing here that could provide genuine intellectual anxiety? That would be the counterpart thought to the McDowellian line we discussed above. Just as the McDowellian line missed something important in Cavell's discussion of radical scepticism, so our Cavellian notion of epistemic vertigo can explain why Nagel's discussion

of absurdity is capturing a genuine philosophical issue, even if Nagel's own rendering of it misdescribes it in fundamental ways. Just as before, the source of the anxiety is not the nature of our epistemic situation but rather our recognition of it. As Nagel's own presentation of the problem indicates, we are not led to sceptical doubts about our fundamental values when we are fully attuned to our ordinary practices; such doubts simply do not arise. This is because of the hinge nature of our fundamental values. Crucially, however, just as we are not aware that our everyday commitment to having hands is an arational hinge certainty — i.e., we are not aware of our hinge commitments *qua* hinge commitments — so we are also unaware of the hinge role that our fundamental values play. In particular, from within our ordinary practices we are not aware of the ultimate groundlessness of our worldview, and thus our believing as a whole, and that means that we are not aware of the groundlessness of our hinge commitments, including our axiological hinge commitments.

Just as the recognition of one's hinge commitments in general leads to epistemic vertigo, so the same applies when it comes to recognizing one's specific axiological hinge commitments. If Nagel's proposal were correct, then our inability to answer the doubts about our fundamental values would constitute a cognitive limitation on our parts.⁴⁸ If Wittgenstein is right, in contrast, then there is no such cognitive limitation here as our hinge commitments are not even in the market for rational evaluation. Nonetheless, while we are unaware of the groundlessness of our hinge certainty when attuned to our everyday form of life, the kind of philosophical investigation that Nagel entertains can make this groundlessness explicit. It achieves this through a degree of estrangement from one's ordinary practices to a sufficient extent to enable us to recognize features of those practices that are normally hidden from view (albeit in plain sight). Our existential difficulty is not caused by our fundamental values being shown to be illegitimate, still less by our commitment to those values being shown to lack a necessary form of rational support, but by our recognition of the ultimate groundlessness of our worldview.

As Cavell has highlighted, this recognition is a natural source of anxiety, but it is entirely distinct from the anxiety that the radical sceptic — in this case the existen-

48. Indeed, Nagel explicitly casts his point as revealing such a fundamental cognitive limitation — see, for example, his “The Absurd,” 727.

tial sceptic — is attempting to demonstrate. Just as Cavell has shown that there is a truth in radical scepticism that is distinct from the truth of radical scepticism, so there is a truth in existential scepticism that is distinct from the truth of existential scepticism. Properly understood, it is not the groundlessness of our fundamental values that is problematic but rather our recognition of this fact. It is this that prompts our existential vertigo, but we should be careful to recognize that taking such vertigo seriously is not thereby to concede anything of substance to the existential sceptic.⁴⁹

49. This paper was written while a Senior Research Associate of the African Centre for Epistemology and Philosophy of Science at the University of Johannesburg.