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## Cavell and Philosophical Vertigo

Duncan Pritchard

My interest is the kind of philosophical vertigo that is a theme of Cavell's work on scepticism. This describes the anxiety that is elicited via philosophical engagement with certain kinds of sceptical questions (e.g., rule-following, other minds, external world scepticism). There is a standing puzzle about this notion of vertigo, however, forcefully pressed, for example, by McDowell. Why should a resolution of the sceptical problem, one that putatively completely undercuts the motivation for scepticism in that domain, nonetheless generate vertigo in this sense? I aim to resolve the puzzle, in a way that I believe underwrites this Cavellian notion, via consideration of Wittgenstein's remarks on the structure of rational evaluation in his final notebooks, published as *On Certainty*.

*Special Issue:* Recovering the History of Analytic Philosophy with Stanley Cavell

Edited by Edward Guetti and G. Anthony Bruno

# Cavell and Philosophical Vertigo

Duncan Pritchard

*'The difficulty is to realise the groundlessness of our believing'.*  
(Wittgenstein 1969, §166)

## 1.

Stanley Cavell famously talks of how our engagement with skeptical difficulties—indeed, with philosophical problems more generally—has a tendency to provoke a kind of deep anxiety. The anxiety arises out of the recognition that a philosophical underpinning of our practices is unavailable, such that they are in a sense self-sustaining. Thus even though Cavell follows Wittgenstein in treating skeptical problems as illusory, in that they trade on dubious philosophical claims masquerading as commonsense, there is nonetheless a 'truth in skepticism', as he puts it in an oft-cited passage:

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. (Cavell 1979, 241)

There is thus a mismatch between our expectations of what a philosophical response to skeptical problems should offer us, and what in fact a proper philosophical treatment of these problems presents. This is the source of the anxiety. Indeed, Cavell often describes it using much stronger language, as prompting a kind of *terror*: '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'. (Cavell 1979, 178) In keeping with a number of commentators, we will refer to this anxiety in the face of our philosophical treatment of skepticism as *vertigo*.<sup>1</sup>

The metaphor is apt, for it seems that this anxiety is specifically arising as a result of a kind of philosophical 'ascent' to a perspective overlooking our practices, and hence to that extent disengaged from them (as opposed to the ordinary pre-philosophical perspective in which one is unself-consciously embedded within those practices).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the metaphor captures the sense in which this anxiety involves a *phobic* reaction to our philosophical predicament, in the sense of being more akin to a fear that is not necessarily rooted in one's rational judgement (one can experience vertigo when up high even though one is fully aware that one is not in any danger). I will return to consider both these features of vertigo in due course.

There is something puzzling about this notion of vertigo as it appears in Cavell's work, however. For if skeptical problems do indeed trade on misunderstandings—for example, about how language works—then why should there be any truth in skepticism at all? And if there is no (literal) truth in skepticism, then why are we prompted to feel *any* anxiety in recognizing that a certain kind of philosophical resolution, one that promised to underpin our everyday practices with a philosophical justification, is unavailable to us? After all, once the skeptical problem has been disposed of, then surely it follows that there is nothing

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, McDowell (1979, 339) and Putnam (2006, 121). See also Pritchard (2015, part 4), Pritchard (2019a, 2020). Cavell has, of course, also written specifically about Hitchcock's films, including *Vertigo*. Interestingly, although this is only one theme in Cavell's work in this regard, the issue of scepticism does feature—for discussion, see Allen (2006).

<sup>2</sup>The metaphor trades on the fact that in contemporary parlance 'vertigo' is thought to name the fear of heights. Strictly speaking, the correct term to use would be 'acrophobia'.

amiss with our everyday practices on this front. Accordingly, why should they stand in need of a philosophical justification at all? Moreover, why should the lack of such a philosophical justification prompt anxiety on our parts, much less terror?

## 2.

This puzzle is given a very direct expression in remarks that John McDowell (1979) makes regarding Cavell's (1969) treatment of the problem of rule-following. Cavell explicitly grants that there is nothing beyond our practices that sustains our system of projecting meanings into further contexts of use. Here is Cavell, in a passage that McDowell (1979, 338–39) cites (and note that the anxiety in question is also described here in terms of a feeling of terror):

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. (Cavell 1969, 52)

While McDowell grants that one might be tempted to feelings of vertigo in this manner, he nonetheless disputes the idea that there is any need for it to arise. Indeed, he suggests that rejecting the skeptical reasoning which demands that one needs a philosophical justification of one's practices in this regard—i.e., such that it could underwrite our rule-following practices—should entail rejecting the coherence of the very philosophical perspective within which such vertigo might occur. Here is McDowell:

If we feel the vertigo discussed [above], 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. (McDowell 1979, 345)

That is, the vertigo arises precisely because one is still hankering for a philosophical justification of one's practices, where this in turn requires the coherence of a perspective without those practices from which that justification can be offered. But to concede the coherence of such a perspective is already to grant too much to the sceptic, as the kind of Wittgensteinian anti-sceptical considerations offered by Cavell demonstrate. It follows that the proper anti-sceptical moral to draw, argues McDowell, is that we should reject this perspective, which would hence undercut any impetus toward feelings of vertigo:

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. (McDowell 1979, 341)

The cure for vertigo is thus to dispense with the kind of detached philosophical perspective from which vertigo could arise; indeed, to recognize that such a perspective is simply impossible ('illusory').

McDowell in effect charges Cavell with a failure of nerve. If one follows through on the kind of diagnostic treatment of skeptical difficulties that Wittgenstein offers, and which Cavell endorses, such that these difficulties trade on dubious philosophical claims that we should abandon, then it seems that there is no need for any kind of anxiety in the face of skeptical challenges thereafter.

In a nutshell: there is thus no truth in skepticism at all.<sup>3</sup> That line of argument certainly looks persuasive. And yet it also seems that Cavell has hit upon something important in delineating the vertigo that does appear to naturally arise even once we have disposed of the skeptical problematic. Should we then treat this as a kind of pathology, something to be analysed by psychologists rather than philosophers? Alternatively, if there is something genuine underpinning this reaction, then what could possibly motivate it?

### 3.

I want to argue that the Cavellian notion of vertigo captures something of philosophical importance. I think that we can usefully engage with these issues by considering a Wittgensteinian line on skepticism that doesn't feature very much in Cavell's writings. Cavell's work on skepticism focusses on the [Wittgenstein \(1953\)](#) of the *Philosophical Investigations*, and hence tends to concern such issues as rule-following and other minds that loom large in those works. I want to instead consider the anti-skeptical remarks that we find [Wittgenstein \(1969\)](#) making in his final notebooks, published as *On Certainty* (OC). Although there are many common themes in these two key works by the later Wittgenstein, OC offers a distinctive take on a certain influential form of skeptical reasoning. Moreover, as we will see, examining this Wittgensteinian line will help us to better understand how it could *both* be true that Wittgenstein offers a response to the skeptical problem that completely undercuts that difficulty

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<sup>3</sup>Interestingly, [McDowell \(1995, 888\)](#) elsewhere famously describes his own treatment of skepticism as 'not well cast as an answer to skeptical challenges; it is more like a justification of a refusal to bother with them'. The suggestion is thus that once one has adequately diagnosed the skeptical problem, and thus disposed of it, then we can thereafter ignore this difficulty with impunity, as there is no longer anything to be gained from philosophical engagement with it.

and yet that there is nonetheless a sense in which vertigo should naturally arise even once one is in possession of such a response. If true, this would validate Cavell's conception of vertigo.<sup>4</sup>

In OC Wittgenstein makes explicit how our epistemic practices of rational evaluation essentially turn on there being certain fundamental commitments in place, in the sense that rational evaluations, whether positive or negative, could only occur if one already had these fundamental commitments. These fundamental commitments are thus one's *hinge commitments*, in that in order for the 'door' of rational evaluation to turn, one's hinge commitments must stay put (OC, §§341–43). As such, these hinge commitments cannot themselves be rationally evaluated, but are instead arationally held.

Our hinge commitments are not mere assumptions on our part, however, as if they were merely hypotheses that we are obliged to entertain (but which we might be broadly agnostic about). Instead, we are optimally certain of our hinge commitments. Indeed, our certainty in our hinge commitments is not the product of any kind of ratiocination (OC, §475), as an hypothesis might be. It is rather something that is simply there 'like our life' (OC, §559): visceral, 'animal' (OC §359). Relatedly, we are not explicitly taught our hinge commitments; they are rather core nodes in the picture of the world that is presupposed in what we are explicitly taught. One is not taught that one has hands, for ex-

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<sup>4</sup>As part of a wide-ranging and trenchant critique of Cavell's interpretation of Wittgenstein, [Moyal-Sharrock \(2017, §5\)](#) has argued that OC in particular provides a decisive challenge to Cavell in this respect. In particular, she maintains that the upshot of OC is precisely that there is nothing in the sceptical problematic that could provide the basis for what we are here calling vertigo. As will be clear in what follows, I disagree with Moyal-Sharrock on this front (where this undoubtedly reflects a broader disagreement over how best to understand the main ideas of OC—contrast, for example, [Moyal-Sharrock \(2004\)](#) and [Pritchard \(2015, part 2\)](#)). Since writing this piece, I have been made aware (by an anonymous referee for the *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy*) of [Bax \(2013\)](#), which offers an account of the relationship between Cavell and OC that is more amenable to the line that I take here.

ample, but rather to do things with one's hands (OC, §153). As such, we unreflectively 'swallow' them down with everything that we are taught (OC, §143).

This is why our hinge commitments are very different from the kind of basic epistemic commitments that are usually the subject of epistemological investigation. Rather than being theoretical theses that arise in the context of a philosophical inquiry, such as the *cogito*, they are instead utterly mundane everyday claims, such as that (in normal circumstances) one has hands (OC, §250), or that one has never been to the moon (OC, §327). Our everyday epistemic practices thus reveal a kind of inversion of traditional foundationalism—instead of our most basic commitments enjoying a special kind of rational standing, they enjoy no rational standing at all.

Thus far these observations might be thought to be grist to the skeptic's mill. If our rational practices turn on commitments that are themselves essentially arational, then in what sense do any of our beliefs genuinely enjoy a positive rational standing? But Wittgenstein is highlighting to us what is being presupposed in such a claim, which is a picture of our rational practices such that everything is open to rational evaluation; indeed, where all our commitments could be rationally evaluated at once. Relatedly, it is not an incidental feature of our epistemic practices that they turn on hinge commitments in this way. As Wittgenstein emphasises repeatedly (e.g., OC, §342), it is in fact part of the 'logic' of rational evaluation that we have hinge commitments. The idea that we can rationally evaluate any commitment, and that therefore our commitments can be rationally evaluated *en masse*, might seem like a harmless extension of our ordinary epistemic practices, but in fact it presupposes a faulty picture of what a practice of rational evaluation could be, one that we ought to reject.

Insofar as we do reject such a picture, then it follows that there is a sense in which our hinge commitments are neither known nor unknown. It is not as if we are ignorant of them, which would imply that they are in the market for knowledge in the

first place.<sup>5</sup> In particular, it is not as if our failure to know them reflects an epistemic lack on our parts, in that if only we were smarter, gathered more evidence, or were more conscientious in our inquiries, then we could know them. They are thus not unknown in the way that an ordinary proposition, such as concerning the whereabouts of one's car keys, could be unknown. Aspiring to know a hinge commitment is like aspiring to draw a circular square.

A certain form of radical skepticism is thus entirely *undercut*, in the sense that the very impetus for the skeptical argument is removed.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, radical skepticism is troubling precisely because it appears to show that there is something paradoxical about our knowledge. The radical skeptic seems to appeal to nothing more than our ordinary epistemic practices in showing that they generate contradictory conclusions, in that those same practices both generate knowledge ascriptions while also offering considerations that would suggest that knowledge is impossible. If Wittgenstein is right, however, then no such paradoxical conclusion is in the offing. Rather than being the result of commonsense, skepticism is in fact arising out of a faulty philosophical account of our everyday practices, according to which the scope of our rational evaluations can be indefinitely extended at will. Reflection on our actual epistemic practices in fact reveals that all rational evaluation is instead in its nature local, as our hinge commitments are non-optional. There is thus no deep contradiction in our ordinary epistemological concepts at all, *contra* the skeptic.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>I discuss this point in more detail in Pritchard (2021), where I relate it to a more general claim about the nature of ignorance.

<sup>6</sup>A 'certain form' of radical skepticism because this only undermines varieties of skepticism that trade on the possibility of universal rational evaluations. As I explain elsewhere—see Pritchard (2015, part 1)—there are other varieties of skepticism in the general vicinity that do not appear to be making appeal to this sort of claim (and so require a different diagnosis).

<sup>7</sup>I discuss undercutting responses to putative philosophical paradoxes and their import to the problem of radical skepticism in particular in Pritchard (2015, part 1). For two key discussions of this general idea, see Williams (1991,

Notice that this point does not merely undermine radical skepticism but also traditional forms of *anti*-skepticism too. The radical skeptic attempts to *negatively* rationally evaluate all our commitments at once and find them wanting, but we have found this very project to be incoherent. Similarly, the traditional anti-skeptic proposes to *positively* rationally evaluate all our commitments at once and find them in good order, but this project is no more coherent than that attempted by the radical skeptic. By rejecting the erroneous philosophical presuppositions that drive radical skepticism Wittgenstein is thus also undermining a certain kind of philosophical project devoted to responding to radical skepticism, but which in the process buys into the same faulty philosophical presuppositions. As we will see below, it follows from this last point that in a certain sense the Wittgensteinian response to skepticism, while completely undercutting the problem in hand, nonetheless does not *refute* radical skepticism, at least to the extent that a refutation involves a wholesale philosophical justification of our epistemic practices.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4.

As we would expect, Wittgenstein's treatment of skepticism appeals to our ordinary usage of epistemic terms. Notice, however, that Wittgenstein's point is not merely that the skeptic (and, for that matter, the traditional anti-skeptic) is employing epistemic

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ch. 1) and [Cassam \(2007, ch. 1\)](#). Undercutting responses are to be contrasted with *overriding*, or revisionary, responses. While the former demonstrates that what looks like a paradox is in fact nothing of the sort, since it imports dubious theoretical commitments that we should jettison, the latter grants that the paradox is genuine, but argues nonetheless that there are compelling grounds for embracing one of the horns of the paradox so posed.

<sup>8</sup>For some of the key discussions of OC, see [McGinn \(1989\)](#), [Williams \(1991\)](#), [Moyal-Sharrock \(2004\)](#), [Wright \(2004\)](#), [Coliva \(2010, 2015\)](#), and [Schönbaumsfeld \(2016\)](#). I summarize my own views about OC in [Pritchard \(2015, part 2\)](#). For a recent survey of Wittgenstein's treatment of radical scepticism in OC, see [Pritchard \(2017\)](#).

terms in a way that is different from how we ordinarily employ them. That contention would be compatible with the idea that the skeptic is working with a *purified* version of our epistemic practices—namely that they are using our epistemic terms in a way that is thorough-going and consistent, rather than how we usually employ them in quotidian contexts, where we are constrained by familiar factors such as lack of time, imagination, interest, and so forth. If the skeptic's employment of our epistemic terms were a purified version of our ordinary practices, however, then the skeptic could contend that their skeptical usage was rooted in those ordinary practices, and hence not in conflict with them, even though it issues such radically different results.<sup>9</sup>

Significantly, however, it is crucial to how Wittgenstein motivates his claim about the structure of rational evaluation that he is seeking to illustrate how skeptical (and traditional anti-sceptical) epistemic practices are completely distinct from anything licensed by our ordinary epistemic practices. In particular, while the transition from localized doubt to universal doubt might initially look like a mere difference in scope, Wittgenstein is emphatic that we have instead shifted from a viable rational evaluation to attempting an impossible rational evaluation. For example, here he is comparing doubt that a planet exists and doubt (in ordinary circumstances) that one's hand exists: 'For it is not true that a mistake merely gets more and more improbable as we pass from the planet to my own hand. No: at some point it has ceased to be conceivable' (OC, §54). Wittgenstein's point is that the skeptic's epistemic practices are not merely very different to ours, but they are also in an important sense *discontinuous* with our practices.

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<sup>9</sup>I take this insight about how radical skepticism could appeal to our ordinary epistemic practices in a purified way to be due to [Stroud \(1984, ch. 2\)](#), who uses it as part of his critique of the ordinary language response to radical skepticism that he takes to be typified by, for example, [Austin \(1961\)](#). For further discussion of this point, see [Pritchard \(2014\)](#).

This way of thinking about skeptical practices allows Wittgenstein to grant that there can be legitimate deviations from our ordinary epistemic practices without them thereby collapsing into incoherence, even though what the skeptic, or traditional anti-skeptic, is trying to say is meaningless. Moore's claims to know these hinge commitments are compared, for example, to saying 'good morning' in the middle of a conversation, in that this is not merely the assertion of something 'superfluous, though true' but rather a claim that is so mysterious and out of context that we can't fathom what is supposed to be meant by it (OC, §464). It is not an incidental fact about our ordinary language that we do not enumerate the Moorean claims that we are optimally certain of, much less that we do not claim to know them. To do so would imply an occasion of use whereby we could make sense of a rational evaluation of our commitments as a whole. But Wittgenstein is highlighting that there is no such occasion of use, and that's why we cannot understand him.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, however, Wittgenstein goes on to point out how an appropriate occasion of use could be formulated to make sense of even surprising assertions of this general kind: 'In the middle of a conversation, someone says to me out of the blue: "I wish you luck". I am astonished; but later I realize that these words connect up with his thoughts about me. And now they do not strike me as meaningless any more' (OC, §469). Wittgenstein is thus emphasising that while we can in principle depart from ordinary usage in new and surprising ways, such that we aren't simply a slave to our everyday practices in this regard, there are nonetheless limits to this. Incremental departures from these practices are possible precisely because we are able to contextu-

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<sup>10</sup>This way of reading Wittgenstein's views about meaning is these days most associated with the occasion-sensitivity account that is defended by Travis (1981, 1989, 2001, 2005, 2006, 2008). For an interpretation of Cavell along these specific lines, see Williams (1991, ch. 4), and Putnam (2012). See also Conant (1998) for the presentation of a similar idea in the context specifically of the work of the later Wittgenstein.

alise them and thereby make sense of them. What the skeptic (and the Moorean) is trying to do, in contrast, is not an incremental departure at all, but rather a dramatically different way of employing these expressions, one where there can be no plausible occasion of use since that would presuppose the coherence of the kind of universal rational evaluations that are simply impossible. Moore makes it seem as if he is using an ordinary epistemic term like 'knows' in a familiar way, but in fact his usage of it is so detached from our ordinary linguistic practices as to fail to pick out any content at all. The difference between his claims to know the Moorean certainties and the surprising good luck claim just noted in the above quotation is thus a difference of kind rather than degree, just as skeptical doubts differ from localized doubts, even relatively general localized doubts, as a matter of kind and not merely degree. That it is possible to coherently stretch the contours of our ordinary epistemic practices makes such radical departures from our ordinary practices seem much more benign than they actually are.

## 5.

If the moral of Wittgenstein's response to skepticism is that we should reject the philosophical presuppositions that underpin skeptical claims, such that the problem is completely undercut, then that would seem to suggest that with the problem entirely disposed of there should be no reason to be tempted towards feelings of vertigo in light of one's dealings with this difficulty. That would thus appear to favour the McDowellian line on these matters over the Cavellian approach which takes such vertigo seriously. In fact, however, if we look a little more closely at what is going on in Wittgenstein's remarks on our hinge commitments, we can find considerations that work quite definitively in Cavell's favour.

At one point in OC Wittgenstein remarks that the 'difficulty is realizing the groundlessness of our believing' (OC, §166). This

passage is vital to understanding OC for our purposes. For while Wittgenstein is again emphasising the point that our rational practices are fundamentally groundless (one cannot realise that  $p$  if  $p$  is false), it is quite clear in this remark that the 'difficulty' in question doesn't relate to this fact. Instead, it specifically concerns our *realizing* this fact about the nature of our believing. That is, Wittgenstein is alerting us to how the response to radical skepticism that he is presenting, far from offering us unqualified intellectual comfort, will also inevitably generate intellectual anxiety, or vertigo.

What is key here is to recognize that in ordinary contexts of inquiry our hinge commitments are essentially hidden, at least *qua* hinge commitments, albeit hidden in plain view. I noted earlier that we are not explicitly taught our hinge commitments. It is also true that even once acquired we ordinarily do not even consider them; they rather lie 'apart from the route travelled by inquiry' (OC, §88). So while there is nothing obscuring our view of our hinge commitments—nothing preventing us from recognizing them as such—it is nonetheless the case that when we are embedded within our everyday epistemic practices that we tend to be completely unaware of them.

Indeed, it usually takes a specific kind of inquiry, one of a broadly philosophical nature, to bring these commitments to the fore. There is, for example, no ordinary context of inquiry in which, in normal conditions, one genuinely wonders whether one has hands. Becoming aware of them *qua* hinge commitments will undoubtedly prompt intellectual anxiety, since they actively seem to invite radical skepticism. How can one be so certain of these everyday claims and yet lack any rational basis for their truth? But even once we understand why there must be hinge commitments as part of any system of rational evaluation, a source of anxiety remains.

For notice that it is not as if, after one has recognized one's hinge commitments and the role that they play in one's epistemic practices, one thereafter returns to a state of epistemic

innocence where one's hinge commitments are hidden as they were before. One cannot unlearn what one is now aware of (one might over time forget, of course, but that is also very unlikely). Insofar as one is aware of one's hinge commitments *qua* hinge commitments, however, then one is inevitably in an unnatural position with regard to one's everyday epistemic practices. To be completely embedded in, and thus fully attuned to, such practices is for the hinge commitments to not be the focus of attention, and hence one's awareness of them necessitates a certain degree of alienation from those everyday practices.

Notice too what it is that one is recognizing when one sees the hinge commitments for what they are. While our quotidian epistemic practices involve local rational evaluations, there is nothing in them that indicates that this is an essential feature; it is rather just that rational evaluations of the hinge commitments, much less universal rational evaluations, never arise. This is why it can seem as if the skeptic's appeal to universal rational evaluations—and, for that matter, the anti-skeptic's appeal to this notion too—is entirely natural. As we noted above, on the face of it this is just a purified version of one's everyday epistemic practices—i.e., what they would look like if we consistently applied our epistemic standards and were not constrained by limitations of time, imagination, ingenuity, and so on. What we discover once we understand how hinge commitments are central to our epistemic practices, however, is precisely that there are hidden limitations on the extent to which one can expand the scope of one's rational evaluations, such that after a certain point they become impossible (since they are attempts to rationally evaluate one's hinge commitments). Relatedly, this is why it is a surprise to discover, as Cavell put it in the quotation from above concerning the 'truth' in scepticism, that our fundamental relationship to the world is not one of knowing. This is not because the opposing claim is manifest in our everyday practices, as no claim of this general kind is manifest in our everyday practices, but rather because there is nothing explicit to

those practices that indicates that universal rational evaluations are impossible.

There is thus a sense in which this limitation is both rooted in our everyday epistemic practices while also at the same time something that one could not become aware of when unreflectively embedded in those practices. Becoming aware of the hinge commitments and the role that they play in those practices is thus a philosophical discovery, albeit of a negative variety. That is, it is not a positive philosophical thesis that goes beyond what is found in our everyday practices; it is rather something that we discover, in the context of a philosophical inquiry, concerning the nature of those practices. It is also a negative philosophical discovery in another sense, in that it is concerned with exposing how philosophical inquiry has led us astray, by manufacturing a philosophical puzzle by failing to properly attend to the nature of our epistemic practices. (I will return to these points about 'negative' philosophy below, when we consider what is involved in Wittgensteinian quietism).

Not only does the philosophical perspective from which one recognizes the hinge commitments *qua* hinge commitments involve a degree of alienation from one's quotidian epistemic practices, but it also exposes a striking feature of them. As we've just noted, it's not that we ordinarily suppose that our commitments are grounded all the way down, as the question simply doesn't arise. But equally we don't ordinarily suppose that they are *not* so grounded either. That's why it can come as such a shock to discover the groundlessness of our most fundamental convictions. As Wittgenstein puts it at one point: 'I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house' (OC, §248).<sup>11</sup> That's at least a surprising conclusion to draw, even if one is at the same time satisfied of its correctness. It should

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<sup>11</sup>See also this remark: 'What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it' (OC, §144).

remind us of Cavell's remarks about meaning above whereby there is nothing external to our practices underwriting our projections of meanings; there is rather just the practices themselves. Isn't the recognition that our most basic convictions are entirely groundless in this fashion bound to prompt intellectual anxiety (even if one also recognizes that they can be nothing other than groundless)? As Cavell (1988) has memorably put the point, to become aware of one's practices in this fashion, whereby one attends to the most ordinary elements of them that are hitherto outside of one's usual frame of concern (even while being right before one's eyes), and in particular to become aware of the fact that there is nothing underpinning one's everyday practices, can make the everyday appear *uncanny*.<sup>12</sup>

## 6.

Does allowing for the naturalness of vertigo involve conceding anything to the radical skeptic? McDowell clearly thinks so, which is why he is so resistant to this notion. But nothing we have said so far need entail any kind of concession. To begin with, remember that vertigo is only a natural response for one who has become aware of her hinge commitments *qua* hinge commitments. There is nothing at all amiss with one's everyday epistemic practices on this view; they are entirely in order as they are (on this skeptical front, at least). Accordingly, one who has never engaged with the skeptical problematic, and who has accordingly remained embedded in those practices, would have no reason for feeling the vertigo.

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<sup>12</sup>Consider this passage, where Cavell is describing our relationship to the world after passing through the skeptical ordeal: 'The return of what we accept as the world will then present itself as a return of the familiar, which is to say, exactly under the concept of what Freud names the uncanny. That the familiar is a product of a sense of the unfamiliar and of the sense of a return means that what returns after skepticism is never (just) the same' (Cavell 1988, 166). There are interesting overlaps here with Heidegger's (e.g., 1962, 277/322) notion of *Unheimlichkeit*. See Egan (2013) for discussion.

Moreover, even one who has become aware of her hinge commitments *qua* hinge commitments, and who now is experiencing the vertigo from a perspective that is alienated from these everyday epistemic practices, is not thereby engaging in any activity of doubt. Indeed, one *cannot* doubt one's hinge commitments as one is optimally certain of them. One can, at most, pretend to doubt them, as when a philosopher professes their skepticism. Nonetheless, this is not real doubt; one's behaviour reveals one's visceral certainty in these propositions, and which thus belies one's words. The propositional attitude in play in vertigo is rather different, and this reflects its phobic aspect, as described above.

In particular, vertigo is an *alief* rather than a belief, in the sense that it is a propositional attitude involving an instinctive reaction, one that can be in tension with one's beliefs. Consider the phobic reaction one might have to being high up. One could have such a reaction even though one knows perfectly well that one is not in any danger. In such a case one does not believe that one is in danger (one knows that one isn't), but one does *alieve* that one is in danger, in that one can have an instinctive reaction (in this case a negative one) with this propositional content.<sup>13</sup>

The same is true of philosophical vertigo. The fear in question might have the same propositional content as a doubt (e.g., concerning the truth of one's hinge commitments), but it cannot be itself a doubt for the reasons just noted. It is instead a gut negative reaction to one's epistemic predicament, one prompted by the detached perspective on one's everyday practices offered by philosophical reflection. Rather than being a doubt, the alief in question is in conflict with what one believes, one's body of commitments. This is why one can know full well that the skeptical challenge is illusory, and thus that there is nothing amiss in one's hinge commitments being groundless, while nonetheless experiencing this philosophical vertigo.

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<sup>13</sup>The notion of alief is due to Gendler (2008). I discuss the idea that philosophical vertigo is an alief in more detail in Pritchard (2020).

We can also explain why this reaction might be prompted. Ordinarily, discovering that one's ordinary, non-hinge, commitments lacked grounds would prompt intellectual insecurity, and thus would lead us to seek out a grounding for them (or else to revise them accordingly). It is natural, then, that discovering that one's most basic commitments are groundless—and hence that our fundamental relationship to the world is not one of knowing—should likewise prompt a heightened feeling of intellectual insecurity. This is especially so given that, unlike the ordinary commitment, one cannot either revise this commitment or seek out the grounding that is absent. What one is recognizing is not an incidental point about one's epistemic condition, but rather a deep truth about its fundamental nature.

## 7.

Let's review where we are. I've been claiming that vertigo is a natural response to becoming aware of the fundamentally groundless nature of one's everyday epistemic practices, even when one is also at the same time aware that there is nothing thereby amiss with those practices. Vertigo is thus a consequence of a philosophical discovery one makes about the nature of the rational support that one's beliefs can enjoy. This discovery does not concern a positive philosophical thesis, however, but a negative one. It is concerned with spotlighting a feature of one's ordinary practices that is ordinarily out of view (as opposed to going beyond those practices), and in the process it also highlights how philosophical inquiry has hitherto led us astray. I take this to be a truth that is revealed via one's engagement with the skeptical problematic, albeit it is not itself a skeptical truth, much less is it a concession to skepticism, since it forms part of the explanation for why this problematic is illusory.

Although radical skepticism is completely undercut on this view, there is also a sense in which it is not thereby refuted, at least on a certain conception of that term which aligns with how

Cavell employs it. That is, to 'refute' skepticism, in this sense, would be to transcend one's epistemic practices and provide a philosophical justification for them as whole. To recognize our hinge commitments and the essential role that they play in our epistemic practices, however, is thereby to recognize that such a philosophical justification is not only unavailable but fundamentally incoherent. There is nothing external to our practices that is legitimating them, nor could there be. And yet we are naturally inclined, at least once we have begun to engage with our everyday practices from a philosophical perspective, to seek such a justification, and to be disappointed by its unavailability, even when we understand why it is impossible (such that our inability to offer such a justification does not expose a philosophical lack on our parts). Hence, the vertigo.

This last point about the unavailability of a 'refutation' of skepticism is crucial to understanding the following passage where Cavell returns to the question of the 'truth in skepticism':

[*The work of Austin and the later Wittgenstein*] is commonly thought to represent an effort to refute philosophical skepticism, as expressed most famously in Descartes and in Hume, and an essential drive of my book *The Claim of Reason*. . . is to show that, at least in the case of Wittgenstein, this is a fateful distortion, that Wittgenstein's teaching is on the contrary that skepticism is (not exactly true, but not exactly false either; it is) a standing threat to, or temptation of, the human mind—that our ordinary language and its representation of the world can be philosophically repudiated and that it is essential to our inheritance and mutual possession of language, as well as to what inspires philosophy, that this should be so (Cavell 1996, 88–89).

As is clear from this passage, the Wittgensteinian treatment of radical skepticism is not meant as a refutation in the sense that we have just articulated, whereby skepticism is 'philosophically repudiated', such that one is able to offer a wholesale philosophical justification of our quotidian practices. This is why he maintains that skepticism is 'not exactly false'. The Wittgensteinian line

treats this problem as illusory, but does so in such a way that a straightforward anti-skepticism would be as incoherent as skepticism. As a result, it is not as if it is being shown that we have the wholesale knowledge that the radical skeptic maintains is lacking (and thus that we have knowledge of our hinge commitments). The 'truth in skepticism', however, relates to the 'temptation of the human mind' to seek such a philosophical refutation, and to be disappointed by its absence. As we have seen, what prompts this disappointment is specifically the awareness of the lack of an external legitimation of our practices, something that is ordinarily hidden from our viewpoint, just as our hinge commitments are not normally in view. Cavell is highlighting that one's recognition that such a philosophical justification is a chimera—both in the sense of being impossible and unnecessary—does not thereby remove the skeptical temptation that he has in mind.

Moreover, in order to understand why, for Cavell, this temptation remains, we need to recall our earlier point about how resolving the skeptical problem does not return one to a state of philosophical innocence prior to one's engagement with skepticism. Indeed, there is no such return available. Once one is aware of one's hinge commitments and the special role that they play in one's epistemic practices, then this feature of the everyday will thereafter take on the aspect of the uncanny. This is a point that I think is often overlooked by Cavell commentators. In discussing Cavell's account of the truth in skepticism, for example, Sanford Shieh argues that for Cavell the 'task of philosophical criticism is to restore the traditional philosopher to attunement with the ways of ordinary human beings' (2006, 159). But this is not realistically in the offing, nor is it a plausible way to read what Cavell is up to in this regard. Instead, once we have succumbed to the temptation that drives skepticism, and thereby viewed our practices in a way that makes explicit the features that were hitherto hidden from view (albeit in plain view), such that we are now aware of the lack of a philosophical justification for those practices, then complete attunement with 'the ways of

ordinary human beings' who have not undertaken this journey is no longer an option.

Recall that McDowell decries that the fact that taking vertigo seriously means accepting the coherence of an 'external standpoint, outside our immersion in our familiar forms of life', something he rejects (and he believes Cavell ought to consistently reject too). But this objection seems to trade on an ambiguity in what might be meant by an 'external standpoint'. There is nothing in the notion of vertigo that implies a perspective altogether disconnected from our everyday practices (as 'outside our immersion in our familiar forms of life' might suggest), much less a perspective from which we might seek an external justification for those practices. It is rather a phenomenon that arises from within one's practices, albeit by becoming aware of features of those practices that are normally out of frame. This does mean occupying an unnatural standpoint on those practices, and hence it also entails that one is not fully immersed within them, but it does not entail that one somehow achieved the miraculous feat—which both Cavell and McDowell would regard as impossible—of disconnecting oneself from one's everyday practices entirely.

The 'truth in skepticism' is thus not to be interpreted as a true claim that the sceptic makes. It is rather to be understood in terms of how we are inclined to seek philosophical justifications of our practices, and to be disappointed by the realization that they are not forthcoming. It is this realization that ensures that one's engagement with the skeptical problem does not leave everything as it was, even if it fails to show that there is anything amiss with our ordinary epistemic practices. For it leads us to be aware of features of those practices that are naturally disturbing, and to that extent it also makes us somewhat alienated from those practices; not fully immersed.

## 8.

Cavell's claim about the 'truth in skepticism' is usually interpreted through the lens of a claim about meaning, and for good reason, as Cavell himself often puts the point that way too.<sup>14</sup> If the skeptic's claims are not meaningful, as a Wittgensteinian treatment of them would suggest, then in what sense can there be any truth remaining in what the skeptic is proposing? Does granting such a possibility entail that Cavell thought that we could almost make sense of the skeptic, enough to give skepticism some degree of truth?

If the foregoing is right, however, then I think this approach to the question is largely a red herring. Skeptical claims are meaningless because they attempt to use our everyday terminology in ways that are completely disconnected from our ordinary practices. But that's not really what's amiss with such claims, as our discussion of hinge commitments reveals. For what is more important in this regard is the fact that such claims trade on a picture that is simply incoherent, in this case regarding the possibility of universal rational evaluations. Understanding this point is what is key to undercutting skepticism; the claim about meaning is rather secondary in this regard.

Moreover, if we view the issue purely through the lens of meaning then we will be apt to miss out on important features of the skeptical problematic that Cavell was clearly alert to. Wittgenstein famously endorsed a kind of philosophical quietism, whereby philosophical problems are themselves the result of faulty philosophical theorizing, such that the goal of philosophy is to in a sense undo the damage caused by philosophy itself. Philosophy, done properly, is thus in the business of deriving the kind of negative philosophical conclusions that we noted above, whereby one sets out the junctures at which faulty philosophical theorizing led one astray.

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<sup>14</sup>For two subtle discussions of Cavell in this regard, see [Mulhall \(1994, part 2\)](#) and [Shieh \(2006\)](#).

This is not quite the full story, however, as someone like Cavell, as acute a commentator as any philosopher could hope for, was sensitive to. Indeed, there is a sense in which a Wittgensteinian quietism isn't ultimately very quietistic at all. For it is not as if undoing the errors of faulty theorizing thereby returns one to a state of philosophical innocence, whereby one is completely attuned once more with one's ordinary practices. The skeptical impulse that Cavell describes could well be described as the flipside of the philosophical impulse. What unites them is the general desire to transcend one's practices and either provide a philosophical justification for them or else show that such a justification is unavailable.<sup>15</sup> But once one is prompted to investigate along these lines, then returning to a state of full immersion in those ordinary practices is highly unlikely, even if one recognizes that those practices were perfectly in order as they were (and hence did not stand in need of a philosophical justification). And that is because such engagement with skeptical, and thereby philosophical, questions makes one aware of features of one's practices that were hitherto out of frame, and which hence loosens one's attunement with those practices, thereby leading to the vertigo. Wittgensteinian quietism does not return us to a prelapsarian state (which would be quietism of a pure variety), but rather enables us to understand our predicament from one step removed from our everyday practices after the philosophical diagnosis is complete. It is thus not ultimately a pure form of quietism at all, in that what it delivers is a kind of intellectually stable disquietude rather than quietude proper.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>And note that for Cavell at least what underlies that drive is entirely natural, in that one doesn't need to be driven by the kind of theoretical concerns that motivate skepticism in order to be drawn down skeptical lines of inquiry that lead to the kind of disengagement from our practices, and hence vertigo, that we are describing here. This comes out most vividly in Cavell's (2000) 'skeptical' readings of Shakespeare's plays. See also his discussion of Thoreau in Cavell (1972).

<sup>16</sup>I think this aspect of Wittgensteinian quietism is related to the Pyrrhonian themes that one finds in Wittgenstein's work. See Pritchard (2019a,b, Forth-

The Cavellian treatment of skepticism is in this vein. Skeptical claims are meaningless, and the skeptical challenge rests upon dubious philosophical presuppositions, but that does not mean, *contra* McDowell, that there is no source of vertigo. The source rather lies in how it is possible, through philosophy, to become aware of features of one's practices that are ordinarily out of focus, like our hinge commitments, and thereby be led to seeing those practices from an unnatural, and unsettling, vista. The standing temptation towards skepticism is a temptation towards the very kind of philosophical inquiry that leads to this lack of attunement with one's everyday practices, and thus to an anxiety that is not removed by the recognition that skepticism is amenable to an undercutting diagnosis. Cavell is not simply courting mystery in articulating philosophical vertigo, but rather highlighting an important aspect of the human condition.

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coming). See also Gutschmidt (2016, 2020), who has explored similar themes. For more on Wittgensteinian quietism, see McDowell (2009).

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