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Description of Situations

An Essay in
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An Essay in Contextualist Epistemology

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ISSN 2211-4548 ISSN 2211-4556 (electronic)
SpringerBriefs in Philosophy
ISBN 978-3-030-00153-7 ISBN 978-3-030-00154-4 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00154-4>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018953298

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One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.

A. Pope, *An Essay on Man*, I, 294

To Inês, Sofia and Julieta

Preface

This book takes as its point of departure the fact that we are situated beings. Every single moment in our lives is already given within the framework of a specific context in the midst of which we understand ourselves and what surrounds us. In the majority of cases, we do not notice this for we are overly absorbed in our everyday practices. It is only when we think about what makes even the most unfamiliar ambiance so familiar that this circumstance becomes manifest. This recognition, far from leaving us unscathed, poses a series of epistemological problems. In effect, are our knowledge attributions dependent on things existing in the world or are they relative to contexts by means of which the world is construed? If the latter is the case, can we actually talk about *the world* or should we talk instead about *worlds* being construed by different individual and social perspectives? But if this is so, where is a solid ground to be found for what we call knowledge?

Contextualism has received a great deal of attention in contemporary epistemology promising to resolve a number of issues that traditional epistemological approaches have been unable to deal with. In particular, a contextualist view opens the way to an understanding of those cognitive processes that require situational information to be fully grasped. However, contextualism raises serious difficulties in regard to epistemic invariance, requiring a sophisticated explanation of what may and may not vary, both from a personal and from an interpersonal standpoint.

The normal way to proceed would be to examine the various accounts given by proponents and critics of contextualist epistemology in order to assess its merits and lacunae. After the seminal works of David Lewis and Stewart Cohen, complemented by those of Keith DeRose, the literature on epistemic contextualism has grown exponentially, including discussions by leading epistemologists such as Richard Feldman, John Greco, Duncan Pritchard, Ernest Sosa, Michael Williams, Timothy Williamson and Crispin Wright. In this book, I take stock of contributions made by these and other authors, but I follow an unconventional route. In a remark penned by Wittgenstein in the early 1930s, when he was drafting the text that would follow the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he said that his new work should depart from “the analysis of an ordinary proposition, for example ‘there is a lamp on my

table””, inasmuch as “we should be able to get everywhere from there”. This, Wittgenstein added, would be in agreement with a conviction he was forming in himself according to which his volume should proceed from “a description of nature”, something specified as “the description of a situation”, with this containing “the material for all the rest” (*Vienna Edition*, vol 3, MS 110: 243, my translation). Although his later writings exhibit traces of this methodology, possibly consisting of the first experiment in contextualist epistemology, there is no item in Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass* that corresponds specifically to the pathway proposed in that remark. In what follows, I take up Wittgenstein’s idea and carry out some descriptive exercises using as a starting-point what stands right before my eyes. In truth, this is not an innovative procedure in philosophy for it bears similarities with Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* and Russell’s constructions in the third lecture of *Our Knowledge of the External World*, not to mention Husserl’s phenomenological reductions. But I hope that the contextualism of my examination, which will address various epistemological positions in the philosophical tradition, may lead to a much more realistic view than those held by these authors.

I would like to thank the audience of a talk entitled “Situated Knowledge” that I gave on 2 November 2016 at the Mind and Cognition RIP Seminar of the Lisbon Mind and Reasoning Group at the NOVA Institute of Philosophy (IFILNOVA), organized by Robert Clowes. The feedback from various colleagues when this project was still in its early stages was very important leading me to believe that I should take it further. When the book was taking shape, some chapters were presented as invited talks at other events—at the 6th Wittgenstein Workshop “Cultura e Linguagem” held at the State University of Londrina from 10 to 12 August 2017, organized by Mirian Donat; in an open lecture for undergraduate psychology students at the University of the Azores on 3 October 2017, organized by Rui Sampaio da Silva; at the TeC Seminar of the Department of Philosophy I at the University of Granada on 19 October 2017, organized by Manuel de Pinedo; in a lecture within the framework of the project *Relativismo y racionalidad contextual ante una realidad pluralista: una aproximación desde el neopragmatismo* at the Complutense University of Madrid on 20 April 2018, organized by Ángeles Jimenez Perona; in a lecture within the series “Mente, Conciencia, Subjetividad” at the University of Seville on 25 April 2018, organized by Jesús Navarro; and at the Wittgenstein Workshop “Can we beat Epistemic Angst” held at the University of Reading on 29 May 2018, organized by Florian Franken Figueiredo. I am indebted to participants at these events for valuable comments as well as to the attendees of my NOVA masters module on Philosophy of Knowledge in Spring 2018 for stimulating debates. I am also grateful to Vanessa Boutefeu for her keen eye in reading the final manuscript.

Lisbon, Portugal
June 2018

Nuno Venturinha

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Language and Reasoning



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Keywords Cohen · Context · Knowledge attributions · Presuppositions
Relevant alternatives · Thought

1.1 Interrelatedness of Words—The Pronoun “I”: Its Systematicity—Personal Identity and Otherness as Proto-Beliefs

I am working at a table. There is a lot in these words: the pronoun “I”, the verb “to be”, here an auxiliary of the full verb “to work” in its present continuous form, the preposition “at”, the indefinite article “a” and, finally, the inanimate noun “table”. If the six words “I”, “am”, “working”, “at”, “a” and “table” had meaning in themselves, in isolation from other meanings, we would not be able to understand them. It is only because we go beyond what words actually say and connect apparent static elements with dynamic schemes that language operates.

To begin with, my recognition as an “I” involves an acknowledgement of other selves, who can be seen as individuals—the other—or collectives—the others. I am not the he or she I observe through my window nor anyone else in the world, though I recognize myself as similar to them, with it therefore making sense to talk about us all as human beings. What is more, the “I” I recognize is one that has accompanied me since I was born. I have certainly changed a great deal during my life but the person working at this table is the same person I was years ago. That we keep our identity throughout time and do not find ourselves alone in existence are two of the most fundamental beliefs we have, beliefs we do not really have to believe in, and that is why personal references are so natural to us. To assume that I might have begun to exist only a few seconds ago or that other people might be unreal would mean holding beliefs that are incompatible with our primary system of credence. When I say that “I am here”, my saying this necessarily includes not only the assumption that I—with the whole story of my life—am not elsewhere but also, and more importantly, that this body of mine exists alongside other bodies that also have minds like my own. The phrase “I am ...” is only understandable because we could turn it into “You are ...”, “He or she is ...”, “We are ...” or “They are ...” by adopting any subjective personal pronoun except “it”. This plasticity is presupposed in any instantiation, as if each time we were playing a card from our deck. More than an indexical, the pronoun “I” is in fact as systemic as the cards in the deck are.

1.2 Affirmative and Negative Sentences—The Infinity that Is Abstractly Excluded When We Affirm Something—Impossibility of a Representational Vacuum—What Context Allows Us to Conceive as Meaningful—Generalization of Descriptions: Our Multilevel Interpretative Schemes

Let us abandon for a moment the “I” and look now at the verbs “to be” and “to work”. One of the most important characteristics of verbs is that affirmation carries

with it the possibility of negation. I can only state that “I am ...” because I understand what it means to state “I am not ...”. The performativity of a sentence like “I am working ...” depends indeed on the admission that I could not be working and hence could be doing something else. We cannot conceive of simply *not working* for this (non-)activity is automatically replaced by a set of activities that potentially take its place. In an abstract way, everything that is thinkable is possible. But if someone comes to me and asks if I am working and I give a negative answer, she will immediately represent a plausible replacement for “working” in this situation, e.g. “tidying up the desk”. She will not think of an alternative that is absolutely out of context, like “swimming in the pool”. Thus there is more involved here than simple counterfactual cases. And “tidying up the desk” can obviously be taken as “working” if we generalize the description, especially if we do not take “working” to be the specific task of “writing philosophy”. We come to grasp the meaning of *W* not merely by contrasting it to that of *A*, *B*, *C*, etc., but by calculating what can count as *W* from a set of contextually acceptable instances of *W* ranging from W_1 to W_n . That explains why we do not indefinitely go on to stipulate what *W* is not (*A*, *B*, *C*, etc.). This negative infinity is not processed by us, who focus instead on a circumscribable number of positive possibilities that the context in question elects. An extraordinarily complex interpretation is made at all times and it is through this framework that we organize reality. There is nothing like “working” in itself. What counts as such is something we lay down in our multifaceted linguistic practices.

1.3 The Prepositions of Place, with Their Cross-Referentiality, as Illustrative of What the Logic of Thought Consents and Rules Out—Lewis’ “Rules of Accommodation”: What Is Permissible and Comparatively Near-Permissible

The preposition “at” also possesses a cross-referential, interrelated nature. In order to realize what it means, we need to know the meaning of other prepositions of place like “behind”, “next to”, “under”, etc. Each time we conceive a state of affairs, we implicitly project multiple possibilities of it not being so. It is the logic of thought that enables us to understand that to work “at” the table is only conceivable because it is part of what our language allows us to do. It would seem nonsensical to say, for example, that “I am working through a table”. What happens is that our brains calculate what is logically admissible and, by contrast, inadmissible in an instantaneous, unperceivable manner. We do not pause to think about what is legitimate and what is not at every new sentence that is formulated. David Lewis has aptly called attention to a series of “rules of accommodation” that we intuitively apply thereby keeping discourse fluid. Reflecting on the “rule of accommodation for permissibility”, he observes that in each situation “there is not only a boundary between the permissible and the impermissible, but also a relation of comparative near-permissibility between

the courses of action on the impermissible side” (1983: 235). Lewis is specifically interested in conversational rules that the speakers of any language can shift. If what I am doing is writing philosophy, the impermissibility of a sentence like “I am working through a table”—unless a tabular arrangement were meant—seems evident. Yet the same sentence could be comparatively near-permissible if I were an illusionist, with this circumstance imposing a re-accommodation of the situational data.

1.4 Definites and Indefinites: How the Latter Have a Representative Dependence on the Former—Kripke on “Indefinite” Definite Descriptions—We Do not Always Need to Deictically Specify the Characteristics of Objects

The interdependence so far discussed is equally characteristic of the indefinite article “a” but in a different sense. In fact, something indefinite is merely representable in relation to something definite. If I mention “a table”, I am not interested in stipulating the qualities of the object, namely how it can be distinguished from other objects of the same kind. But if I say “the table”, I clearly have in mind some specific property or properties that the object possesses which make *this* table a particular one. The use of indefinites can be seen as an economic form of talking about reality, with the indication being made in every case by reference to definite representations. I say *representations* and not *descriptions* because, as Saul Kripke has insightfully pointed out, there are “‘improper’ definite descriptions, such as ‘the table’, where uniquely specifying conditions are not contained in the description itself” (2011: 100). A description like “the table” is, in effect, an “‘indefinite’ definite description”, with the disambiguation of what is said requiring a specification of “the corresponding demonstratives” (2011: 123). I evidently know that “I am working at a table” that has such and such a colour and is made of such and such a material. But these deictic pieces of information are regarded as non-essential for the success of my utterance, that is to say, for its comprehensibility by other persons. What they will do, if they grasp the meaning of my words, is to imagine someone working at a familiar table, carrying out an activity, one of those usually done at a table.

1.5 Kinds of Beings: Natural and Technical—The Presuppositions that Our Picture of the World Requires—Dretske’s “Relevant Alternatives” Theory—Cohen on Defeasibility: Intersubjective and Subjective Evidence and Opacity—Integration of Beliefs—Acknowledging Context-Sensitivity in Our Knowledge Attributions Should not Mean Rejecting an Unambiguous Conception of Knowledge—Ontological Stratifications and the Role of Contextualization

What about the table? Aristotle in the *Physics* made an important distinction between natural beings (φύσει ὄντα) and those that exist by art (ἀπὸ τέχνης), artefacts or technical beings (1957: 192b13–19). When we look at a table, we instantly recognize its non-*physicality* even though we do not reflect on this circumstance. It is completely different to be in front of an inanimate object like a table than to be in front of an animate body. A network of beliefs situates us in experience and it is through sophisticated pre-reflective judgments that reality constitutes itself for us – by means of an ordered picture. “I am working at a table” works perfectly well because we know, for instance, that the table will not begin to move without any external cause.¹ If we adopt Fred Dretske’s definition of knowing something “as an evidential state in which *all relevant alternatives* (to what is known) *are eliminated*” (2000: 52), there seems to be no relevant alternative capable of defeating our presumption that a table will stay where it is except if some force is exerted on this object. It can be argued, however, that I may be unacquainted with a brand new genre of table that enjoys extraordinary capacities, including self-motion.

According to Stewart Cohen, “*S* has good reasons *simpliciter* to believe *q* just in case *S* has prima facie reasons for which he possesses no defeaters” (1986: 574; 1987: 4). In Cohen’s terminology, our self-moving table would not be a “‘subjectively evident’ defeater” but a “‘subjectively opaque’ one, with Cohen also mentioning defeaters that can be “intersubjectively evident” or “intersubjectively opaque” (1986: 576; 1987: 5). If a defeater is evident in both an intersubjective and subjective way, its recognition does not raise any problem. Likewise, if a defeater is opaque both intersubjectively and subjectively, no one can recognize it. The interesting cases are those in which the intersubjective and the subjective sides disagree. Indeed, something can be *intersubjectively evident* and *not subjectively evident*, with this resulting in it being *subjectively opaque*. On the other hand, something can be *intersubjectively opaque* and *not subjectively opaque*, the result here being that it is *subjectively evident*. The same applies the other way round. Something can be *subjectively evident* and *not intersubjectively evident*, with this resulting in it being *intersubjectively opaque*. And

¹What Aristotle considers peculiar to φύσει ὄντα is precisely that they “have within themselves a principle of movement” (1957: 192b13–14).

something can be *subjectively opaque* and *not intersubjectively opaque*, the result in this last case being that it is *intersubjectively evident*. To put it in a logical notation and using an exportation rule:

- (1) $((IE \wedge \neg SE) \rightarrow SO) \leftrightarrow (IE \rightarrow (\neg SE \rightarrow SO))$
- (2) $((IO \wedge \neg SO) \rightarrow SE) \leftrightarrow (IO \rightarrow (\neg SO \rightarrow SE))$
- (3) $((SE \wedge \neg IE) \rightarrow IO) \leftrightarrow (SE \rightarrow (\neg IE \rightarrow IO))$
- (4) $((SO \wedge \neg IO) \rightarrow IE) \leftrightarrow (SO \rightarrow (\neg IO \rightarrow IE))$

It is easy to see that cases (1) and (4) constitute a single case, the same occurring with cases (2) and (3). To begin with (1) and (4), suppose that I was experiencing delirium caused by a high fever. While those around me could evidently notice my feverish state, I would be unaware of my own delirious condition and bring this epistemic opacity to my utterances. This amounts to saying that while I could be unaware of my delirious utterances, others would not be blind to them as they were witnessing what was happening. A situation like this is clearly distinct from one in which other people might be acquainted with self-moving tables notwithstanding my ignorance of them. Whereas I have already experienced fever and observed similar states in others, the existence of self-moving tables would be a complete novelty to me, one that I could integrate into my belief system only after obtaining some instruction about how these objects work. This is not to deny that there are countless things that will be evident to many persons but remain opaque to me, even those I am aware of, such as the Bekenstein-Hawking formula or a sushi roll recipe. But if in either of these cases I could make an effort to acquire evidence about what they involve, my opacity about black hole entropy or Japanese cuisine would by no means conflict with what I believe in general. On the contrary, the belief that a table possesses self-motion enters into contradiction with many of my beliefs. We can ultimately conclude that our strange table is not the best candidate to illustrate the relationship between subjective opacity and intersubjective evidence precisely because it is the latter that establishes what is worthy of belief. As Cohen notes, “a defeater possessed by *S* undermines his knowledge only if the defeater is intersubjectively evident” (1987: 11–12).

To believe in something like that requires a relationship between subjective evidence and intersubjective opacity, as (2) and (3) entail. A sceptic could easily claim that while no one realizes that tables might move themselves, one should not rule out this possibility. Consequently, if the sceptic is conscious of something that is not perceived by the majority of people, this can simply be due to a massive opacity. Of course I could be in possession of some information that is unknown to anyone else. But if I were to share this information with other persons, they would no longer be in the dark about the subject. Quite a different thing would be to imagine the sceptic communicating her finding. “Does she have enough evidence for that claim?” we could ask. For if not, it is absolutely irrelevant. Cohen’s conclusion is exactly that “attributions of knowledge are relative to a context-sensitive standard of evidentness

for defeaters” and that “we can view defeaters as operating precisely by making alternatives relevant” (1986: 583).²

This knowing derives from a natural ontology—literally, a logic of being—that we all possess and continuously make use of. What exists is somehow departmentalized into ontological sections and subsections. Amongst φύσει ὄντα we do not just have exemplars of fauna and flora with all their biological diversity. Aristotle was already keenly aware that all beings that form part of φύσις, such as mountains and seas, count as φύσει ὄντα. And the technical domain is similarly stratified. A being like a table is ontologically distinguishable from a being like an aircraft because visibly they have different forms and, above all, because we can do quite different things with them. If I said “I am working on an aircraft”, the portrayal of my proposition would radically change in comparison to “I am working at a table” since a wholly new set of presuppositions is required to depict that situation. And, again, the components available to fill in the content of someone working on an aircraft are dependent on a contextualization of the message. If I were an aircraft engineer or a crew member, my working on an aircraft would give rise to very different representations than that of me as a passenger, which, as a matter of fact, could include “I am working at a table” if a drop-down tray table were meant.

²Although I agree with Cohen in many ways, the appeal to defeasibility is problematic. His point is that “social factors determine [“influence”] whether evidence one *does* possess undermines one’s knowledge” (1986: 574; 1987: 3). Thus, Cohen asserts, “one speaker may attribute knowledge to a subject while another speaker denies knowledge to that same subject, without contradiction” (1987: 3; 1988: 97). And Keith DeRose adds: “This lack of contradiction is the key to the sense in which the knowledge attributor and the knowledge denier mean something different by ‘know’” (1992: 920). But there is indeed a contradiction. Not only I myself but also some people could fail to notice that I was in a delirious state and consider that I *knew* such and such when this was not actually the case. They would disagree with those who had noticed my state and denied *knowledge* to me under these circumstances. It is clear that the former were wrong in their attribution and the latter could call attention to my peculiar condition making them correct their mistake. This is a typical instance of cases (1) and (4) above. In a similar manner, if I know something that no one else knows, everybody else could have good reason to claim that they *know* what is happening but clearly they would not *know* it. This is what cases (2) and (3) represent. For Cohen, “[b]ecause the attributions are context-sensitive, there is no contradiction” (1986: 579; 1987: 15) or “[t]here is no contradiction, since the contexts of attribution yield different standards” (1986: 580; 1987: 16). One can reject this account and not merely by means of what Ernest Sosa called a “contentual”, as opposed to a “contextual”, form of “relativity of knowledge to epistemic communities”, deriving from “a certain conception of intellectual virtue” (1988: 153). To put it in a nutshell, I do not think that acknowledging context-sensitivity in our knowledge attributions should mean rejecting an unambiguous conception of knowledge. I shall return to this issue later. For the time being, I am satisfied with Cohen’s view that in our knowing this or that “[s]keptical alternatives, although they cannot be ruled out [“although not known to be false”], fail to be relevant” (1986: 581; 1987: 18; cf. also 1988: 121, n. 36).

1.6 Language as Opposed to Languge—The Priority of Linguistic Rules Over Word Coining—Discourse as Involving Language and Reason—Why There Cannot Be Non-conceptual Thoughts: The Linguistic Basis of Sensation-Thoughts—Davidson’s Emphasis on the Correlation Between Language and Thinking—Our Awareness of Reality as Primordially Contextual—Rejection of Baumann’s View According to Which There Can Be “Non-linguistic Attributions of Knowledge”

We have therefore started with language. Language is not simply an expedient to facilitate communication between human beings, nor is it to be identified with a specific language. When a new word is introduced into our vocabulary, a set of rules must already be in place to accommodate the innovation. If there is anything we cannot do away with, it is language. We owe to language the structure of our reasoning. The Greek term *λόγος* comprises language and reason in a fascinating way, for we can only reason discursively. We may sometimes have the impression that some thoughts are entertained without language, namely those related to sensations we have difficulty in expressing. But if we think about what actually occurs, we realize that a thought involving a sensation of joy or pain is already conceptual. As Donald Davidson put it, “[a] primitive behaviourism, baffled by the privacy of unspoken thoughts, may take comfort in the view that thinking is really ‘talking to oneself’” (2001: 155), but what happens is that language and thinking “are, indeed, linked, in the sense that each requires the other in order to be understood” (2001: 156). We can only think, that is *be aware of the world*, linguistically—and that means contextually. I therefore cannot agree with Peter Baumann when he avows that “knowledge attributions need not be expressed in language” since “one can think the content of a sentence without uttering it and [...] one can make a knowledge attribution in thought without saying anything using a language”. Baumann’s assumption that “we need both an explanation of contextualism for non-linguistic attributions of knowledge and a more general explanation of contextualism covering both the linguistic and the non-linguistic case” (2016: 12) is, to my mind, confusing.

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Chapter 2

What the World Is Made of



Abstract 2.1 The external and the internal world—There is more in the universe than objects and states of consciousness—Animal and human certitudes—Sosa on “animal knowledge” and “reflective knowledge”—What is peculiar to man: cultural historicity as a meta-competence. 2.2 History as science versus history as worldview—Unreliability of our information sources—Distinction between strong and weak knowledge: how the immediacy or scientificity of strong knowledge contrasts with the testimonial character of weak knowledge—Differences to Malcolm’s view—Russell on the acquaintance with “historical knowledge” and the case of scientific testimony—Epistemological precision: Quine’s radical empiricism—Immediate, mediate and scientific knowledge as interconnected: their problematic heterogeneity—Personal perspectives and interpersonal praxis—The world primarily consists of states of affairs, which are independent of our subjectivity. 2.3 Relevance of the ontological intertwinedness suggested by the early Wittgenstein: the concepts of “case”, “fact” and “state of affairs”—Lewis’ understanding of what facts are—The difficulties posed by the Tractarian solipsistic-realistic representation—Looking for a halfway between extreme internalism and naïve materialism—Each event in the world necessarily exceeds the many possible representations (true or false) that construe it so-and-so—The world as depository of what exists or has existed—DeRose and the variable truth-conditionality that seems specific to a contextualist approach.

Keywords Historicity · Immediate knowledge · Scientific knowledge
States of affairs · Testimony · Wittgenstein

2.1 The External and the Internal World—There Is More in the Universe Than Objects and States of Consciousness—Animal and Human Certitudes—Sosa on “Animal Knowledge” and “Reflective Knowledge”—What Is Peculiar to Man: Cultural Historicity as a Meta-competence

What I affirm to be doing at this moment—working at a table—exists in the world with all its specificities, including those that surpass me. We often talk about the world as a stage where things happen and it truly is the reservoir of events. No surprise then that in philosophy the world is usually called the *external world* to emphasize its difference from the *internal world*, the life of consciousness. But this outer world is not made up solely of objects, which is how we normally see it.

First of all, to be in the world does not mean to be an inhabitant of this planet. If it were possible to live on other planets, we would keep on being in this same world, as it is tantamount to the universe, which offers itself in the form of a whole.¹ Animals instinctively live in accordance with an awareness of belonging to a space that is already there. When they run, they do not question whether the landscape they visualize is created by their imagination. They assume with fundamental confidence that something is as much there as they are. Like any other animal, human beings also act according to the certitude that there is a world we live in, a certitude that lies at the bottom of our mental activities. But we have gone a bit further than the other animals have for, besides adhering to what is given, we have the capacity to reason and in so doing to represent the historicity of this world with its art, politics, religion and science. That is what enables us to speak, among other things, about the Earth. Sosa’s distinction between “animal knowledge” and “reflective knowledge” can help us understand what is here under discussion. “Animal knowledge”, he explains, “is first-order apt belief” (2011: 11). “Reflective knowledge”, in turn, “is animal belief aptly endorsed by the subject” through what Sosa calls “one’s relevant meta-competence” (2011: 11–12).² What I am claiming is that historical perspectivism is one of our main meta-competences.

¹Baumgarten, in the part of his *Metaphysics* dedicated to cosmology, already conceives of the “world” (*mundus*) in terms of “the universe” (*universum*) or $\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu$ (2011/2013: § 354). Lewis (1986: 1–2) takes a similar view.

²Other treatments of this distinction can be found in Sosa (2007, 2009, esp. Chap. 7, 2015, 2017, esp. Chap. 6).

2.2 History as Science Versus History as Worldview—Unreliability of Our Information Sources—Distinction Between Strong and Weak Knowledge: How the Immediacy or Scientificity of Strong Knowledge Contrasts with the Testimonial Character of Weak Knowledge—Differences to Malcolm’s View—Russell on the Acquaintance with “Historical Knowledge” and the Case of Scientific Testimony—Epistemological Precision: Quine’s Radical Empiricism—Immediate, Mediate and Scientific Knowledge as Interconnected: Their Problematic Heterogeneity—Personal Perspectives and Interpersonal Praxis—The World Primarily Consists of States of Affairs, Which Are Independent of Our Subjectivity

History is often conceived as the field of humanities that aims to collect and process all the data that are relevant to access the truth of a certain event or period of time. But we do not need to be professional historians to do this. In our ordinary lives we are constantly collecting and processing data that are integrated into historical doctrines, even if these do not appear to be so. The image of the world that each of us produces and within which everything appears is largely dependent on crystallizations we make out of very distinct sources of information, many of them unreliable. What happens is that this *weak knowledge*—acquired by different kinds of testimony—is not something we sharply distinguish from *strong knowledge*—obtained in an immediate way or through scientific demonstration.³

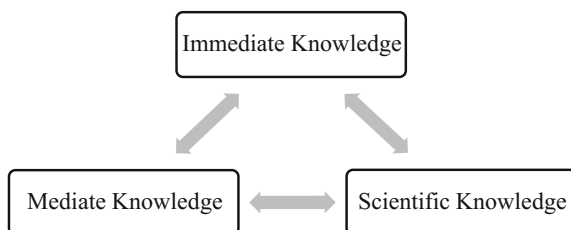
Although “historical knowledge” is also directly learned, in the sense that someone must learn it, as Russell has clearly made explicit (1992: 152 ff.),⁴ its epistemic value is incommensurably weaker than that of a perceptive act or a proof in science—with the obvious exception of scientific proofs that are obtained only by testimony. With knowledge by testimony, we are simply presented with facts that we trust to be true.⁵ Some of them are confirmed by us—Kant in the *Jäsche Logic* places “historical belief” within the field of (empirical) knowledge and not the field of belief because

³Norman Malcolm also talks about “strong and weak knowledge”, but his point is that “these two kinds of knowledge may be distinguished *within* a priori knowledge and *within* empirical knowledge” (1963: 71). I shall pass over that issue here.

⁴Before making the famous distinction between “knowledge by acquaintance” and “knowledge by description”, Russell had already made a “distinction between *acquaintance* and *knowledge about*”, which amounts to “the distinction between the things we have presentations of, and the things we only reach by means of denoting phrases” (1994: 415).

⁵For a useful account of the relationship between testimony and truth, see Audi (2006).

Fig. 2.1 Interconnections between immediate, mediate and scientific knowledge



it may have that status (1923/1992: 68)⁶—but there are many facts we take to be true though they are never subjected to examination. If we want to assume a pragmatic attitude, it must be so. Quine is totally right when, expressing his radical empiricism, he says:

We can know something, in a reasonable sense of the word, without having checked every instance by direct observation. If we have done a reasonable lot of sampling of instances, or if we have a plausible notion of an underlying mechanism that would account for the truth of the general statement in question, then we may reasonably be said to know the statement to be true. Sometime we may be surprised by a counter-instance, and compelled to conclude that we had not known the statement to be true after all; we only thought we did. This, however, is a risk we must run. (1976: 61)

More than a question of epistemological precision, the problem lies in the world assuming a shape that is projected in an interconnected manner (Fig. 2.1).

It is easy to see that we do not stratify for ourselves the different types of knowledge we have and that each acquisition—of which there are an uncountable number every day—takes place in the midst of a process that involves heterogeneous strata. When I boil water to make tea, I cannot forego that water—pure and at sea level—boils at 100 °C. I have never tested it, but I believe in what I was taught. I thus combine my perception with a scientific fact that I actually got by mediation, one that is nevertheless different from the mediation through which I learned the duration of the infusion or how to handle a teacup. The world is indeed the sum of transversal perspectives that each of us has and which are combined in intersubjective practice. These perspectives, however, belong first and foremost to the world, which exists by itself and, as said above, involves more than just objects. It is, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, mainly composed of relations between things, or states of affairs, which we can recognize but which are not dependent on us.

⁶References to Kant's works will follow the pagination of the Academy edition, which is given in the margins of the Cambridge edition.

2.3 Relevance of the Ontological Intertwinedness Suggested by the Early Wittgenstein: The Concepts of “Case”, “Fact” and “State of Affairs”—Lewis’ Understanding of What Facts Are—The Difficulties Posed by the Tractarian Solipsistic-Realistic Representation—Looking for a Halfway Between Extreme Internalism and Naïve Materialism—Each Event in the World Necessarily Exceeds the Many Possible Representations (True or False) that Construe It so-and-so—The World as Depository of What Exists or Has Existed—DeRose and the Variable Truth-Conditionality that Seems Specific to a Contextualist Approach

The first two propositional series of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* present the world as ontologically intertwined. The world appears there as “everything that is the case [*Fall*]” and as “the totality of facts [*Tatsachen*], not of things”, with Wittgenstein explaining that a *Fall* or a *Tatsache* corresponds to “the existence of states of affairs [*Sachverhalte*]” (1922: 1, 1.1 and 2).⁷ Each of these, we are told, “is a connection [*Verbindung*] of objects (entities, things)” or a “configuration of objects” (1922: 2.01 and 2.0272). Wittgenstein’s teaching is that the elements of the world stand in certain relations to each other, relations that build *conjunct figures* of the kind aRb , where an object a stands in relation R to an object b . Lewis is on the right track when he claims:

A Tractarian fact is not a proposition. It is not something true that might have been false. Rather, it might have not existed at all. (2001: 277)

It is not a proposition because the existence of a certain fact does not obviously require its propositional expression. If something is the case, in the Wittgensteinian sense, it remains true even if no proposition depicts its content—which includes its truth. That is why Lewis says that “it might have not existed at all” since the connections Wittgenstein alludes to incommensurably exceed what our propositions can capture.

But the *Tractatus* overstates the “form of representation” (*Form der Abbildung*) proper to the subject (1922: 2.15–2.151), which is responsible for the world being in effect connected thus and so. For Wittgenstein, although aRb , as a logical relation, is what it is independently of its being articulated by me or by anyone else, the fact remains that it is my *abbilden* that articulates it. The solipsistic “realism” vindicated by the early Wittgenstein (1922: 5.64), which expresses a *contradictio in terminis*, epitomizes the difficulties associated to a view that turns on an internalist axis. Apparently this focus is needed in order to overcome the naïve credence in a world

⁷Here and in other citations I have slightly modified the translation.

consisting of objects instead of relations, but the complete reverse of materialism is also troublesome.

The philosophical tradition has extracted very problematic consequences of the internal-external distinction. I shall come back to this later. For now I would like to stress the cumulative nature of the world when it is understood as a pool of events that does not bring with it the problems of subjectivism. My memories, for example, are in my mind but they belong in a certain way to the world, and not uniquely as long as this subject that I am subsists. Were this so, we would have to agree with the Spanish poet Agustín Fernández Mallo that “the sum of what is lived always equals zero” (2015: 292, my translation).⁸ Past events naturally exist in the minds of those who are able to reconstruct them, but the facts as such must lie somewhere. They are the source for the manifold individual representations that can be made out of them—be these representations precise or not. Even if there was no one to represent certain happenings, they must subsist *per se*. It might be granted that this could be so in regard to the present but has no application to the past. The argument would be that what is presently unobserved could be observed, something that is impossible to do with respect to the past. I am convinced that this is wrong. We have seen (Sect. 1.2–1.3) that “I am working at a table”, as a true proposition, excludes all other propositions that could be the case. But, what is more, it involves countless details that only the world, as a depository, can accommodate. I do not know when, where and by whom my table was manufactured, who designed it, and so on and so forth. This information belongs to the world and if I were to start an investigation into the matter, I would eventually be able to find it. Now, if I conjecture that my table was made this century, given that I have bought it recently, and assuming that I am right, I will be merely adhering to the truth that is behind my affirmation that “I am working at a table”. If I were wrong, with the table having been produced last century, the falsehood of my characterization would be extracted again from the very same fact, this time negatively. The truth I am talking about here can only lie in the world, coinciding with it. I have then two questions to answer. The first is: how can we gain access to something that does not seem to exist anywhere? And the second is: how does this fit into a contextualist theory, which, in the words of DeRose, “is a theory according to which the truth conditions of sentences of the form ‘S knows that p’ or ‘S does not know that p’ vary in certain ways according to the context in which the sentences are uttered” (1992: 914; cf. also 2009: 2)?

⁸The original runs thus: “*la suma de lo vivido siempre da cero*”.

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Chapter 3

The Correspondence Theory of Truth



Abstract 3.1 Bolzano’s understanding of the matter—Some classic views: Aquinas, Kant and Wittgenstein—Lewis’ criticism—Rapports between our cognition and the world: a question of justification—Rejection of an anthropocentric position—Varieties of intelligence. 3.2 The lack of a comprehensive perceptual apparatus or integration scheme in animals – Knowing and simple being acquainted with—Challenging the canonicity of the human intellect through an extended conception of knowledge: difference between knowledge proper and knowledge*—Sosa on metaphorical knowledge attributions—The manifold correspondences and truths that a multi-species perspective entails—Notion of agreement structure: parallels with Davidson’s “conceptual scheme”. 3.3 Correspondence and relativism—Kant on the “thing in itself”: its unknowability—Why correspondism is inconsistent: aspectual and full knowledge—Bolzano contra Kant—The shortcomings of transcendental schematism—Bolzano’s “propositions in themselves”: consequences of this view. 3.4 How a proposition in itself works—Our mental impressions include many more details than what is propositionally synthesized—The Aristotelian concepts of “substance”, “accident” and “form”: the circumstance of there existing accidents of accidents—Processes of differentiation—Phrasing and propositional instantiation—Helmholtz’s “unconscious inferences”—The primacy of the world over any subjectivism. 3.5 Bolzano’s “truths in themselves” and the performativity of our judgments—Knowledge as an acknowledgement of truth: the bedrock that resists all correspondences—Tragesser on Bolzano and Frege.

Keywords Anthropocentrism · Bolzano · Correspondism · Kant · Relativism
Truth

3.1 Bolzano's Understanding of the Matter—Some Classic Views: Aquinas, Kant and Wittgenstein—Lewis' Criticism—Rapports Between Our Cognition and the World: A Question of Justification—Rejection of an Anthropocentric Position—Varieties of Intelligence

When Bolzano introduced the notions of “propositions in themselves” and “truths in themselves” in his *Theory of Science*, he took a major step towards overcoming an idea of truth as correspondence.¹ Aquinas' famous definition in *De veritate* that “truth is the adequation of thing and intellect” (1970/1952: q. 1, a. 2, s. c. 2)² remained influential until modern times, with Kant holding in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that “truth consists in the agreement [*Übereinstimmung*] of a cognition with its object” (1911/1998: B 83). In effect, a form of *übereinstimmen* can still be found in the Tractarian ontology. Wittgenstein writes:

The picture agrees with reality [*stimmt mit der Wirklichkeit überein*] or not; it is right or wrong, true or false. (1922: 2.21)³

Among contemporary critics of the “correspondence theory of truth” we find Lewis, for whom the theory that “truth is correspondence to fact” does not go any further than “the redundancy theory”, failing to challenge “the coherence and pragmatic and epistemic theories” (2001: 276).

The classic correspondence thesis has the merit of explaining my knowledge of things as being justified by the very nature of the world, which necessarily agrees with the possibilities of my knowing it. That I could fail to know that “I am working at a table” is thus excluded and the same goes for everything that is immediately given to me. This obviously points in the direction of an anthropocentrism, with knowledge seemingly reduced to what intelligent creatures can know. But the concept of intelligence is a fluid one.

¹Cf. Bolzano (1985/2014: §§ 19 and 25, as well as § 29), where the correspondence view is more directly criticized.

²I have amended the translation to get closer to the Latin, which reads: “*veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*”.

³This idea is unfolded in 2.221–2.222 where “truth” is presented as an “agreement” that is established by the “sense” of our pictures. Further on Wittgenstein states: “The sense of a proposition is its agreement and disagreement [*Übereinstimmung und Nichtübereinstimmung*] with the possibilities of existence and non-existence of states of affairs” (1922: 4.2). Scholars diverge on the question of whether Wittgenstein subscribed to a correspondence theory of truth *stricto sensu*. Thus, while Brian Garrett argues that “[a] classic version of the correspondence theory finds expression in the Logical Atomism of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*”, insofar as he “takes the worldly items to be facts and takes correspondence to require that the arrangement of elements (names) in an elementary proposition mirror the arrangements of elements (objects) in the corresponding state of affairs” (2017: 134), Peter Hacker only accepts “a correspondence conception of sense” and notes: “The fact that Wittgenstein speaks of a proposition's agreeing with reality if it is true does not imply any commitment to a ‘truth-relation’ or ‘correspondence relation’ between propositions and facts, of which being true consists” (2001: 123, n. 89). I shall not take a stand on this issue here.

3.2 The Lack of a Comprehensive Perceptual Apparatus or Integration Scheme in Animals—Knowing and Simple Being Acquainted with—Challenging the Canonicity of the Human Intellect Through an Extended Conception of Knowledge: Difference Between Knowledge Proper and Knowledge*—Sosa on Metaphorical Knowledge Attributions—The Manifold Correspondences and Truths that a Multispecies Perspective Entails—Notion of Agreement Structure: Parallels with Davidson’s “Conceptual Scheme”

It is a fact that an animal’s perception, even if it accurately captures the form of the perceived object, does not possess what one might call the integration scheme that is needed for *actually* perceiving the object. That is why my cat is incapable of recognizing a computer when she looks at this thing on which I am doing something that she likewise does not interpret as typing. And if we take into consideration living beings with poorer perceptive skills, what becomes even more manifest is the discrepancy between what we consider to be knowing such and such and what are other forms of noticing the world we are aware of that involve merely an acquaintance with such and such. Hence the correspondence theory of truth claims that experience is ultimately conceived to be known by the human intellect and that our representation of it is neither accidental nor muddled. It is, on the contrary, necessitated and ordered.

However, if we seriously reflect upon the practices of other beings, it seems impossible to deny that they certainly *know* a number of things about the world. Do the seagulls I see on the beach represent a fish in the same way humans represent it? Of course not. But the framework through which they apprehend *their* experience cannot just be seen as below standard. They know the difference between a fish and another bird as they know how to distinguish between fishing and flying. Perhaps we should say that they *know in a particular sense* and refer to this as knowledge* to differentiate it from knowledge proper. Sosa suggests “viewing the attribution of ‘knowledge’ to such beings as metaphorical, unless we are willing to admit them as beings endowed with their own epistemic perspectives” (1988: 151). Yet had seagulls the same thought, they would describe what we know as something we simply know* in virtue of the aspects we lose sight of in comparison to them. So the problem with the correspondence thesis, from a multispecies perspective, is that one must admit as many *correspondences*—and consequently *truths*—as the existing cognitive modes.

To put it in a logical notation, for all x , if x has the intellectual capacity to know (K), then x can have knowledge of things (T), not because its intellect directly agrees with those things but by virtue of x possessing an agreement structure (S) that enables it to agree with them. Thus:

$$\begin{array}{c} (x)(K(x) \rightarrow S(x)) \\ (x)(S(x) \rightarrow T(x)) \\ \hline (x)(K(x) \rightarrow T(x)) \end{array}$$

We can see that the common term is the agreement structure itself—the “conceptual scheme” in Davidson’s terminology (2001: 183 ff.). This is a consequence of x having the intellectual capacity to know *in general* since one can only know something that is permitted, i.e. framed according to a specific perspective. And a thing can only be known if its knowledge falls within a certain structure that sanctions this knowing.⁴ The existence of the structural point of view *causes* the framing of a thing that is known thus and thus, whereas the *mise en force* of this perspectivism requires an act of knowledge.

3.3 Correspondence and Relativism—Kant on the “Thing in Itself”: Its Unknowability—Why Correspondism Is Inconsistent: Aspectual and Full Knowledge—Bolzano Contra Kant—The Shortcomings of Transcendental Schematism—Bolzano’s “Propositions in Themselves”: Consequences of This View

Taken in this way, the correspondence theory leaves us in a problematic relativism since truth utterly depends on the angle through which things are contemplated. More complicated than that, the sole criterion for assessing truth in general is this very same angle and one cannot go beyond the horizon it opens. This is what the Kantian problem of the *thing in itself* is all about. We cannot know it for we are condemned to have appearances, phenomena of things that are supposed to exist but that are never effectively known. This is the reason why Kant says that the thing *in itself* is unknowable. For him, the objects surrounding us are only partially represented and we do not have full access to them. So in the end the correspondence thesis contradicts itself. Things seem to surpass our cognition of them, which is our cognition of simple aspects, not the whole.

This is where Bolzano enters. He considers unacceptable Kant’s verdict that we cannot objectively reach things and should content ourselves with a subjective pro-

⁴ Aquinas himself claims that “*true* is predicated primarily of a true intellect [*de intellectu vero*] and secondarily of a thing conformed with intellect [*de re sibi adaequata*]” (1970/1952: q. 1, a. 2, ad. 1).

jection of them, one that would not *effectually* agree with how they really are.⁵ Where in fact is the point of intersection between what I, closed in myself, represent and what the object, closed in itself, possesses to be represented? This is what Kant’s transcendental schematism has unsuccessfully tried to solve by attempting to link two completely different spheres, a categorical one and an intuitive one. More than a relativistic position, we face the possibility of a solipsism. In Bolzano’s view, in turn, each proposition that can be enunciated or merely thought is implied by a *proposition in itself* that is already tangible though not in its entirety. The world for Bolzano is not a relation composed of objects and our cognition of them, which brings with it the problem of correspondence. Bolzano’s world is already *propositional in itself*. And this *equivalence in itself* can be extended to any form of contact with reality that another being may have, with this explaining the so-called irrational behaviour for which we, rational beings, cannot find justification. It is indeed a consequence of Bolzano’s proposal that, with the rejection of a correspondence theory, there must be a common ground—the reality—despite all differences between the multifarious accesses to it.

3.4 How a Proposition in Itself Works—Our Mental Impressions Include Many More Details Than What Is Propositionally Synthesized—The Aristotelian Concepts of “Substance”, “Accident” and “Form”: The Circumstance of There Existing Accidents of Accidents—Processes of Differentiation—Phrasing and Propositional Instantiation—Helmholtz’s “Unconscious Inferences”—The Primacy of the World Over Any Subjectivism

In order to understand the idea of a “proposition in itself”, let us take as an example the proposition “A car is parked in the street”. I saw this car from my window and the thought came to my mind. My first mental impression, which gave rise to my propositional formulation, was not exactly “A car is parked in the street”. The picture I made included lots of minutiae that the proposition must inevitably preclude. The perceptive information I put together included, for instance, the colour of the car and the colours of various parts that accidentally form this substance, to use Aristotelian

⁵Cf. Bolzano (1985/2014: § 44), where the “*critical philosophy*” is equated with “scepticism”.

jargon.⁶ It also included a particular form, an εἶδος or a μορφή,⁷ which enabled me to differentiate, firstly, this car from all the other objects that are not cars and, secondly, this car from other cars, especially those more closely related to it, namely the same model but with different characteristics (e.g. a three-door or five-door model). When I had consciously formed the proposition, all this was synthesized in the words “A car is parked in the street”. But the various aspects that led to this thought are still fuelling it. That is what renders possible the articulation of the proposition in many different ways. I could change it to “My neighbour’s car is in front of his house” or “A utility vehicle is out there”, etc. etc. The initial proposition is replaceable by other propositions because they all depend on a proposition that is not thought or uttered by anyone.

Perhaps we can say, like Helmholtz, that we produce “unconscious inferences” (1867/1925: 430/4)⁸ by means of which sense data are collected, and that these inferential processes only become propositional when they become conscious. Then we can express the resulting propositions in the variety of forms that reality *in itself* permits. The tenet of Bolzano’s theory is that what can be said in regard to this specific state of affairs that authorizes me to say “A car is parked in the street” does not derive from me, from the cognizer, but from the contexture of reality. Even if there were no subject in the world, and therefore no one for whom the English language could make any sense, this thing we call “car” would be now in the state we call “parked” in what we call “the street”. And it would continue to have its own colour and size, even if these can be recognizable in a multitude of ways.

3.5 Bolzano’s “Truths in Themselves” and the Performativity of Our Judgments—Knowledge as an Acknowledgement of Truth: The Bedrock that Resists All Correspondences—Tragesser on Bolzano and Frege

When some feature of reality is recognized, what is recognized is its truth and so, according to Bolzano, truths in themselves constitute a quality of the propositions in themselves. As previously discussed (Sect. 2.3), if I wrongly believed that the car I saw was my neighbour’s car, the truth of the matter would not be minimally affected

⁶Aristotle’s concept of “accident” (συμβεβηκός) is flexible enough to transform itself in “substance” (οὐσία) when its own “accidents” (συμβεβηκότα) are considered. The lights of a car which by accident belong to its οὐσία—they can be replaced exactly because of that—they themselves form substantial entities possessing a number of συμβεβηκότα. This becomes particularly clear in the first book of *De anima* (Aristotle 1957).

⁷Aristotle uses these two terms interchangeably (cf., as mere examples, 1957: 407b23-24, 412a7-9 and 414a9). See in this regard Polansky (2007: 148–149).

⁸I have amended the translation of the expression “*unbewusste Schlüsse*”, originally rendered by “unconscious conclusions”. On this notion, see Hatfield (2002).

because this does not depend on my judgment to be what it is. I can simply recognize (bits of) this truth or not. And that is why I can have my propositions only apparently conforming to reality without capturing more than what my representing scheme, with all its projective structures, allows me to do. Of course this already is inscribed in the truth of the world, more specifically that a certain individual held this or that for true. But the most important point is that reality is there, independently of the accurate or misconceived representations that can be made out of its truth. It is there *by itself*, beneath all the *correspondences* that a creature can establish.

It can be said that this strongly realist view endorses, after all, a form of correspondism. Robert Tragesser, for example, writes that "Bolzano also maintains a correspondence theory of truth" inasmuch as "to every true proposition, there corresponds a state of affairs in the world, and to every state of affairs in the world, there corresponds a true proposition" (1984: 2). Tragesser observes trenchant parallels between the perspectives of Bolzano and Frege, but he points out a divergence, which has precisely to do with the correspondence thesis. Here is how Tragesser put it:

The difference between Bolzano and Frege amounts to a disavowal by Frege of the presumption of "the absolute point of view". We cannot grasp the structure of the world except by grasping true thoughts; whereas for a correspondence theory of truth an independent grasp of the structure of the world is essential. (1984: 3)

This "absolute point of view" or "independent grasp" is evidently equated with God, something that should come as no surprise since Bolzano, besides being a philosopher and mathematician, was also a theologian. The first question raised at the end of the previous chapter, "how can we gain access to something that does not seem to exist anywhere?", has thus received at least a partial answer. But it would be advisable to look for another, less metaphysical, response. Bearing in mind Tragesser's remarks, let us search for it in Frege before we make any attempt to answer the question of how this fits into a contextualist theory.

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Chapter 4

Reality in Itself



Abstract 4.1 Bolzano and Frege—The rejection of psychologism in logic—Can there be just “signs of signs”?—Frege’s notions of “sense”, “reference” and “representation”—Our images of things as psychological—Relativity of any representations: their problematic subjectivity. 4.2 The objectivity of Frege’s “thoughts”—Importance of context—Truth-values and verification as conditions of knowledge—True and false judgments. 4.3 Cases of “indirect reference”: truth and falsity of our beliefs—Frege on intersubjectivity—The social nature of language—The intrinsic non-truth of our thoughts—Inevitability of admitting a reality in itself that is independent from subjective perspectives—Frege’s “third realm”: objectivity as non-actual—The bankruptcy of correspondism—Popper, Dummett and Soames on the dangers of metaphysical realism or Platonism—Analytic and synthetic truths: the timelessness of both timeless and temporal thoughts—Pursuing solid epistemic standards not only for context-independent but also for context-dependent knowledge.

Keywords Frege · Intersubjectivity · Objectivity · Realism · Representation Subjectivity

4.1 Bolzano and Frege—The Rejection of Psychologism in Logic—Can There Be just “Signs of Signs”? Frege’s Notions of “Sense”, “Reference” and “Representation”—Our Images of Things as Psychological—Relativity of Any Representations: Their Problematic Subjectivity

Anyone who has read Frege will find a clear parallel between Bolzano’s “propositions in themselves” and Frege’s “thoughts”, as well as between Bolzano’s “truths in themselves” and Frege’s “laws of truth” or “being true” (*Wahrsein*). For Frege, like Bolzano, it was mandatory to ground the science of logic in eternal laws, rejecting any “psychological laws of takings-to-be-true” (*Fürwahrhalten*), as stated in the

Preface to the *Basic Laws of Arithmetic* (1893/1964: xvi/13), an idea that reappears almost *verbatim* in “The Thought” (1993/1956: 31/290). But Frege’s contribution is also extremely relevant for the understanding of situated cognition and, particularly, to overcome the possibility of our language consisting uniquely of “signs of signs” (*Zeichen von Zeichen*), to use a phrase from “On Sense and Reference” (1990/1960: 145/58). Here Frege not only introduces his famous notions of “sense” (*Sinn*) and “reference” (*Bedeutung*),¹ but he does so in connection with a re-evaluation of the traditional concept of “representation” (*Vorstellung*), most notably used by Kant. For Frege, the *reference* of a sign cannot coincide with my representation of the signified object since what is *referred to* must be of an objective nature as opposed to the “internal image” (*inneres Bild*) I form, which is always psychological (1990/1960: 145/59).

To give an example, the furniture of my house is inexorably replete with memories I have of arranging the various items. But it is plain that if I say to someone that I have a bookcase, she will not need to know the story of my bookcase to make a representation of it, which can be quite detailed indeed if I give this person enough information, namely about material, style and the like. In such circumstances, I would try to separate the sense from the representation in order to be as objective as possible. The representation, Frege avers, is always spatiotemporally relative and the sense is the intermediate point between the objectivity of the reference and our subjectivity. The main problem for Frege is that a representation, in all its subjectivism, can be mistakenly taken as an object, with this resulting in a referential vacuum. Frege then proposes adding to the triad of sense, reference and representation two other notions: “thought” and “truth-value” (1990/1960: 148–149/62–63). This is crucial for explaining the sense and reference of propositions or sentences.

4.2 The Objectivity of Frege’s “Thoughts”—Importance of Context—Truth-Values and Verification as Conditions of Knowledge—True and False Judgments

Thoughts, for Frege, own an objective status and they are to the sense as the truth-values, the true and the false, are to the reference. Consider the proposition “N has a bookcase for poetry volumes”. It consists of nouns but these form a unity, a propositional unity. Its intelligibility depends on our linking the various elements (viz. “N”, “to have”, “a”, “bookcase”, “for”, “poetry” and “volume”, taking the singular “bookcase” and the plural “volumes” into account). In addition, as Frege forcefully argued as early as in *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, we need to observe

¹I follow Max Black’s translation of *Bedeutung* as “reference” and not as “meaning”, which is the option for the third edition of Frege 1960, published in 1980. Russell has rendered *Sinn* by “meaning” and *Bedeutung* by “indication” (1937: § 476), also translating the latter as “denotation” (1994: 419).

the “context of a proposition” (*Satzzusammenhang*) (1884/1980: x/xxii). Were “N” standing for the name of a library then the representation of “bookcase” and “poetry volumes” would be significantly different from the one that could be made if taking “N” as someone’s name. In any case, the proposition is understandable because we can make sense of the different nouns that compose it and form a thought out of this sequence, a thought that can be shared with any speaker of English. No matter how the content of the sentence is subjectively represented, the thought it expresses is preserved in an objective manner.

What about the truth-valueness? This plays a decisive role if we want to determine whether the proposition refers to an existing state of affairs or not. The proposition at stake is perfectly conceivable, and referential, even if what it says would never take place in reality. If our references could not be verified, we would have no criteria for deciding about what is true and what is false. More than that, we would not even have an idea of truth in general. Without a connection between our thoughts and their reference, which can be true or false, knowledge would be absolutely impossible. It is only when a true judgment is made that knowledge occurs, with the contrary involving a false judgment. That is why judging, for Frege, constitutes more than simply *understanding* a thought. As Wittgenstein made clear in the *Tractatus*, a proposition can have a “sense” only when it projects a *possible* state of affairs, one that may or may not be the case. Judgments thus make the bridge between thoughts and truth-values.

4.3 Cases of “Indirect Reference”: Truth and Falsity of Our Beliefs—Frege on Intersubjectivity—The Social Nature of Language—The Intrinsic Non-truth of Our Thoughts—Inevitability of Admitting a Reality in Itself that Is Independent from Subjective Perspectives—Frege’s “Third Realm”: Objectivity as Non-actual—The Bankruptcy of Correspondism—Popper, Dummett and Soames on the Dangers of Metaphysical Realism or Platonism—Analytic and Synthetic Truths: The Timelessness of Both Timeless and Temporal Thoughts—Pursuing Solid Epistemic Standards not Only for Context-Independent but also for Context-Dependent Knowledge

Frege is aware that there are cases where we have what he calls an “indirect reference” (*ungerade Bedeutung*) for our proposition, with this lying in the thought itself (1990/1960: 151/67). The reference of a sentence like “I believe in God” is not the

truth or falsity of God but the truth or falsity of my believing in God. And Frege does not forget that our thoughts are not of the same level, with “On Sense and Reference” establishing a distinction between “main thoughts” (*Hauptgedanken*) and “subsidiary thoughts” (*Nebengedanken*) (1990/1960: 158–159/74–75). The latter, Frege claims, are not verbally formulated, but they can be reached by the receptor of our propositions, who will psychologically reconstruct them.

This is of the utmost importance because what is fundamentally at issue for Frege is how intersubjectivity comes about. His thesis is that the thoughts we communicate are not really *our* thoughts, but something of an objective nature that we, the speakers of a language, can grasp. It is because they are objective, and not simply subjective representations, that we can communicate them to others who, like us, will be able to discern what is objective from what is subjective in their projections. “I have a body” is an excellent illustration of a thought that comprehends much more than what I myself can represent about me. While I am in considerable ignorance of the workings of my physiological system, an expert in the field could not help but recognize that my having a series of biochemical processes is included in the proposition.

Here we can see the similarities between Bolzano and Frege. The “propositions in themselves” presented in the *Theory of Science* are also entities that exist in the world and can be captured by a subject. And the “truths in themselves”, as a feature of the “propositions in themselves”, assume the same *non-truth* of Frege’s *Gedanken* and their *Wahrsein*—a “being true” that can be neither true nor false as is the case with the laws of geometry or logic. As a result, not one of our thoughts is true or false in itself. As in Bolzano, despite some differences that I shall not address here, truth and falsehood are characteristics of the judgments we articulate on the basis of something that is already at our disposal. And this appears to be the only way to guarantee that what we say and think is not wholly a product of our subjectivity. This, however, requires the admission of a reality in itself that, by definition, is not given to anyone in particular, but must stand there, existing, in order to be known.

In “The Thought”, Frege calls this domain the “third realm”, contrasting it with the realms of “things”, in their objectivity, and “ideas” (*Vorstellungen*), which are intrinsically subjective (1993/1956: 43/302). He illustrates its existence by saying that

the thought, for example, which we expressed in the Pythagorean theorem is timelessly true, true independently of whether anyone takes it to be true [*ihn für wahr hält*]. It needs no bearer. It is not true for the first time when it is discovered, but is like a planet which, already before anyone has seen it, has been in interaction with other planets. (1993/1956: 43-44/302)

We had seen (Sect. 3.5) that, for Tragesser, this does not lead Frege to postulate an “absolute” perspective and that he rejects correspondism exactly to avoid a Bolzani-like view. But Frege’s rejection of a correspondence theory of truth is markedly reminiscent of Bolzano’s own rejection of it. Michael Dummett reminds us that “Bolzano had drawn a distinction between the subjective and the objective in almost the same terms as Frege” and that “he seems to have meant what Frege meant by speaking of thoughts and other objects as objective but not actual” (1993: 23–24). In “The Thought” we learn that “[a] correspondence [...] can only be per-

fect if the corresponding things coincide and are, therefore, not distinct things at all”, even though “it is absolutely essential that the reality be distinct from the idea”. As a result, “there can be no complete correspondence, no complete truth”, something intolerable in the eyes of Frege. His conclusion is that “the attempt to explain truth as correspondence collapses”, adding that “every other attempt to define truth collapses too” (1993/1956: 32/291). Tragesser is certainly right in suggesting that Bolzano’s conception is theologically grounded, with God appearing as the “complete correspondence” or “complete truth” mentioned by Frege. However, it is difficult to see how Frege’s realism can escape a metaphysical hypostatisation. We can say “It isn’t God who eternally thinks Pythagoras’ theorem, it’s logic”, but we can ask as well “Who is logic?”, “Where is it?”. Thus Karl Popper—who also put forward a “third world” but “man-made and changing” (1979: 122)—affirms that “although Frege, like Bolzano, asserted that his third realm is real, he was hardly more successful than Bolzano in substantiating this claim” (1994: 51). And Dummett has no qualms in saying that “Frege’s theory of the third realm is, plainly, a piece of philosophical mythology”, nevertheless remarking that “the extrusion of thoughts from the mind, initiated by Bolzano and so strongly insisted on by Frege, was a step of the first importance” (2010: 83). Scott Soames brilliantly describes what is here under discussion when he avers that

the only way out for Frege that I can discern requires embracing an ambitious Platonist epistemology about meanings/thoughts/propositions. What he needs is a convincing argument that, unlike the objects we encounter in everyday life, abstract Fregean senses of his postulated “third realm of being” are cognitively transparent and inherently beyond appearance – with essential natures fully, rigidly, and immediately graspable in the same way by every mind acquainted with them. If this could be shown, then we would know that to be acquainted with a sense *s* is to have access to a unique higher-level sense *s** that reveals the complete and true nature of *s*, and so puts us *en rapport* with *s*. [...] Because I don’t accept the robust Platonic epistemology required by this response, I don’t find the Fregean story plausible. (2014: 369–370)

One could perhaps be tempted to say that to grasp the “sense” which is *represented* by means of the definitions “in a right triangle the square of the hypotenuse equals the sum of the squares of the other two sides” or “ $c^2 = a^2 + b^2$ ” is to grasp “a unique higher-level sense” of the Pythagorean theorem since this expresses an analytic truth. In this kind of case the different notations we can employ would not really matter—they would be simply alternative ways of talking about one and the same thing. But the examples presented by Frege in “The Thought” contemplate also synthetic statements within the empirical domain, thoughts whose truth is equally regarded by him as “timeless”.² Here is a paradigmatic passage:

The thought we express by the Pythagorean theorem is surely timeless, eternal, unchangeable. But are there not thoughts which are true today but false in six months time? The thought, for example, that the tree there is covered with green leaves, will surely be false in six months time. No, for it is not the same thought at all. The words “this tree is covered with green leaves” are not sufficient by themselves for the utterance, the time of utterance is involved

²I shall not be concerned here with the attacks on the analytic-synthetic distinction, or the a priori-a posteriori distinction, made by Quine (1961) and Putnam (1975).

as well. Without the time-indication this gives we have no complete thought, *i.e.* no thought at all. Only a sentence supplemented by a time-indication and complete in every respect expresses a thought. But this, if it is true, is true not only today or tomorrow but timelessly. (1993/1956: 52/309)

The timelessness of true thoughts suggested by Frege leaves us in much the same quandary about the metaphysical status of Bolzano's doctrine. But, like that of Bolzano, "Frege's myth of the 'third realm'", in Dummett's phrase (1993: 25), still appears as a powerful instrument to explain not just invariable, context-independent knowledge but fundamentally variable, context-dependent knowledge. The only possibility of taking the thought "this tree is covered with green leaves" in a non-psychological way is actually to presuppose that its truth-conditions, which are relative to a specific context, subsist beyond the knowledge attributions, true or false, that can be made by someone. As previously indicated (Sect. 1.5), I do not subscribe to the view that epistemological contextualism necessarily brings with it an ambiguous conception of knowledge. Quite the opposite, I defend that a contextualist approach is required if we pursue solid epistemic standards. I shall elaborate on this further in the next chapter.

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Chapter 5

Unthought Thoughts



Abstract 5.1 Why a thought is invisible for Frege: Travis on the abstractedness that can be extracted from our “representing-as”—Thoughts and concepts: the “conceptual” as a referential domain, which does not possess the objectivity of the “non-conceptual”—The intermediation made by the “representing-as” as a form of judging—Travis’ rejection of any internalism—Reassessing psychologism: Russell’s criticism of Frege’s conception of thought—Travis’ suggestion of a Wittgensteinian view that takes into account the sociability of thinking. 5.2 Travis’ reluctance in admitting unthought thoughts beyond the workings of language—Problems of perception: perceptive presentations and representations—The case of analogical, non-perceptive representations—Language and thought reconsidered—Frege on fictional and real thoughts: a problem of modality—The anonymous character of thought. 5.3 Aquinas and the recognition that there are truths which escape our attention—Knowing and guessing: the transcendental impossibility of representing what we do not know—Scientific predictableness—Aquinas’ two kinds of intellection: “divine” and “human”—Distinction between actual and potential knowledge—The peril of determinism.

Keywords Fiction · Frege · Perception · Psychologism · Representing-as · Travis

5.1 Why a Thought Is Invisible for Frege: Travis on the Abstractedness that Can Be Extracted from Our “Representing-as”—Thoughts and Concepts: The “Conceptual” as a Referential Domain, Which Does not Possess the Objectivity of the “Non-conceptual”—The Intermediation Made by the “Representing-as” as a Form of Judging—Travis’ Rejection of Any Internalism—Reassessing Psychologism: Russell’s Criticism of Frege’s Conception of Thought—Travis’ Suggestion of a Wittgensteinian View that Takes into Account the Sociability of Thinking

Commenting on Frege, Charles Travis has underlined the “invisibility of thoughts” (2013: 269–270), considering that each thought we have “is a kind of abstraction from concrete acts or episodes of representing-as” (2014: 19), which is the way he renders Frege’s general idea of *vorstellen*.¹ What Travis remarks is that, contrary to propositions, which can be listened to or read, thoughts are not perceived by the senses. He also highlights that the field of the “representing-as” is the only one where talk about truth can take place since what happens with thoughts is that “they are simply true or false” (2014: 23). Consequently, Travis alludes to a priority of these thoughts over our concepts, whose truth or falsity, he argues, depends on the objects themselves with the “conceptual” belonging, in the end, to the “domain of reference” and not to that of “sense” (2014: 26). This leads Travis to talk of the “non-conceptual”, viewed as the objective world, with no subjective interference, but at the same time to state that “representing-as is a relation that crosses the two domains—the conceptual and the non-conceptual” (2014: 31). The “fundamental logical relation” for Frege, according to Travis, is exactly “that between the non-conceptual and the conceptual where the first instances the last” (2013: 190). Travis clarifies:

A capacity to judge *must* be, *inter alia*, a capacity to relate the conceptual to the *non-conceptual*, to recognize the instancing relation to hold between what it does. Its work *cannot* be confined *within* the conceptual. To take something to be so is to acknowledge the fundamental relation to hold between a denizen of the one realm and a denizen of the other: between things being as they are, on the one hand, and some way *for* things to be on the other. In one place in the relation, something which lacks generality, has no reach; in the other, a generality, something to be instanced. Recognition here draws on acquaintance with both domains. (2013: 247)

Travis’ suggestion seems reasonable enough for if we had no access to the “non-conceptual”, the “conceptual”, which is anchored to concepts, would be entirely psychological. But on the other hand, if the “non-conceptual” is already given within

¹The term “representing-as” also appears copiously in Travis 2013. Citations from Travis 2014 are my retroversions.

a representation, then we can always question whether there is really something other than the mere “conceptual”. Travis goes on to say:

The reach of the conceptual to the non-conceptual is not fixed by any structure internal to the conceptual. It is not fixed independent of that to which it reaches. (2013: 249)²

Were it otherwise, we could not talk about *knowledge*, which is a form of being acquainted with *something*. As Travis writes, “[w]hat we are given in receptivity—the non-conceptual, presented in a given way—must permit knowledgeable responses” (2013: 255). Yet it is hard to see how to sidestep the problem of psychologism that Frege has desperately tried to eradicate. Russell was probably the first to have seen this, with the concept of *Gedanke* appearing to him, as he writes in a letter to Frege dated 12 December 1904, as “a private psychological matter” (1976/1980: 250–251/169).³ Nothing could be more against Frege’s intent, who takes a “thought” to be “not the subjective performance [*Tun*] of thinking but its objective content, which is capable of being the common property of several thinkers” (1990/1960: 148/62). Travis recognizes that “a thought cannot be a representation” (2014: 58) and, in the spirit of the later Wittgenstein, he looks at the sociability of thinking as the touchstone for rejecting a cognitive closure. Travis takes the “sense” alluded to in “On Sense and Reference” as applying to sentences only, whereas in “The Thought” it would apply to thoughts. But, as noted (Sect. 4.1), this application is already central in “On Sense and Reference”, which also explains the truth-value as being of the propositions as long as these express thoughts.

5.2 Travis’ Reluctance in Admitting Unthought Thoughts Beyond the Workings of Language—Problems of Perception: Perceptive Presentations and Representations—The Case of Analogical, Non-perceptive Representations—Language and Thought Reconsidered—Frege on Fictional and Real Thoughts: A Problem of Modality—The Anonymous Character of Thought

What Travis apparently does not want to admit is what might be called *unthought thoughts*, which are not only evoked when *we* represent this or that but that lie in the world by themselves in order to be evoked when we evoke them. One can argue that

²In a previous work, Travis had already observed, amongst other similar passages: “The non-conceptual for the conceptual to reach to is just that which the world supplies” (2011: 276).

³Russell’s 1905 “theory of denoting” is a consequence of this criticism, with Russell rejecting the endorsement of Frege’s view in the first appendix to *The Principles of Mathematics*, originally published in 1903, and stating that “denoting phrases never have any meaning in themselves”, that “there is no *meaning*, and only sometimes a *denotation*” (1994: 416 and 419, n. 10).

they are only noticeable in a representational process—and this is precisely Travis’ point. Here is an illustrative passage:

The *world* – the nonconceptual – must furnish the opportunities for such identification that there are. Without them there is no more such a question than there would be thoughts about *Frege* without Frege. (2011: 292)

But one can rebut that argument claiming, as suggested (Sect. 4.3), that what is brought to our representation must have existed and must continue to exist *by itself*. The thought expressed through the proposition “Some of my books may have become damp” is a possible thought, one that is not authored by me—I cannot claim any right to it except the right to use it. Whether this proposition, when it assumes the role of a judgment, is true or false is unimportant for the thought it contains, which is totally shareable with another person. It is relevant that Travis discusses above all Frege’s impact on perception. We would not be tempted to say that perception was one of Frege’s primary concerns. Yet Travis’ *Grundgedanke* is that the possibility of representing such and such is ultimately of a perceptive nature. A sentence like “Some of my books may have become damp” definitely includes perceptual information. I have seen books and that sometimes they get damp. Even if I am not perceiving all of my books now, I can admit that, if the humidity level is high, they may become damp. Apart from what can be called *perceptive presentations*, given by our senses, a great amount of our experience comes to us by means of *perceptive representations*, which involve memory and imagination. So far so good for the person who articulates the proposition. But what can another person do to represent this thought if she has never had perceptive presentations of my books and consequently cannot form perceptive representations of them? Could we argue that she represents the propositional content *by analogy* to her perceptive history? We must bear in mind that a huge number of contexts are not conceivable merely by appealing to perceptive representations but require other, non-perceptive representations. Are they purely analogical? If it were so, we would be absolutely closed in our subjectivity—and that is exactly Frege’s point about the psychological character of our *Vorstellungen*. A thought, for him, is not a representation; it is more than that. Let us imagine a tribe for whose members the word “book” does not belong to their vocabulary. The object referred to by the word “book” is absolutely unknown to them. Would they be able to conceive the utterance “Some of my books may have become damp”? Not at all. Thoughts have their life only within a language. However, this language can be taught. If I can think that “Some of my books may have become damp”, then anyone can understand this thought and it is not because some people do not master the language in which it is expressed that the thought will vanish.

This seems to coincide with at least Travis’ Wittgensteinian reading of “The Thought”, but the account offered by Travis of Frege’s understanding of fictional thoughts, as occur in poetry, in their difference to real thoughts reveals a clear resistance to admitting any autonomy for Fregean thoughts. Travis declares that, while for Frege a thought would remain the same if its reference were transferred from the plan of fiction to reality, he himself would see a difference in regard to the “meanings of the sentences” (2014: 66). I agree that the reference is different if the subject is aware

that a certain thought is not real but fictional. That is what happens with fictional cinema or literature. But the only difference, as Frege saw it, is one of modality, in the Kantian sense, which does not hinder the thoughtful content. That is why we would easily believe that an apparently fictitious story was veridical if we were just told that it was, or the opposite. That a group of men can hide themselves inside a wooden horse to attack their enemies unexpectedly is not a thought of Homer. Anyone can represent that and no one really knows whether it happened or not. The big question is: who thinks Fregean thoughts? Not who participates in these thoughts, but for whom do they exist?

5.3 Aquinas and the Recognition that There Are Truths Which Escape Our Attention—Knowing and Guessing: The Transcendental Impossibility of Representing What We Do not Know—Scientific Predictableness—Aquinas' Two Kinds of Intellection: "Divine" and "Human"—Distinction Between Actual and Potential Knowledge—The Peril of Determinism

In answering the puzzles posed by the correspondence theory of truth, Aquinas asserts that "truth which is in the soul but caused by things does not depend on what one thinks [*non sequitur aestimationem animae*] but on the existence of things" (1970/1952: q. 1, a. 2, ad. 3). He recognizes indeed that "many things exist that are not known by our intellects" (1970/1952: q. 1, a. 2, ad. 4), a claim that seems to be sanctioned by the myriad of scientific discoveries. But the transcendental philosopher could always contend against this and defend that these things remain unknown until they are *known* by someone. As we have seen, this is, *mutatis mutandis*, what Travis' account of the "representing-as" amounts to. For example, I do not know what is now taking place on Mars, but I can conjecture that some dust storm is swirling around a rock formation. I can only make this conjecture because I know that there is a planet called "Mars", that there is an atmospheric phenomenon called "dust storm" and that there are mineral aggregates called "rocks". I then use my imagination to portray a possible state of affairs, one that can be totally illusory. Science departs from hypothetical scenarios to arrive at concrete facts and in a certain sense these facts are what exists for we cannot represent what we do not know. True, any discovery is immediately integrated in our perspectival background or overall *aestimatio*, to use Aquinas' term. Yet the very possibility of scientific progress implies the admission of a number of truths of which we do not have the slightest idea. Aquinas' solution is an Aristotelian-theological one. He writes that "[t]here is nothing, however, that the divine intellect [*intellectus divinus*] does not actually [*in actu*] know, and nothing that the human intellect [*intellectus humanus*] does not know potentially [*in potentia*]" (1970/1952: q. 1, a. 2, ad. 4).

Interestingly enough, the difference between knowing *in actu* and *in potentia* does not differ substantially from what both Bolzano and Frege suggest. No matter what is taking place on Mars at this moment, what is taking place, if anything, must be true independently of there being a recognition of its truth—by the *intellectus humanus*, in a *logistic* way, or by anyone else, we should add. Be it the domain of the *intellectus divinus*, of the truth in itself or of the being true, there must be an extrinsic order that any creature who can make a representation of the world is capable of matching. Without the admission of an ontological independence of this order, we can make no objective claims whatsoever.

For those who believe in the inexorable power of the human mind to arrive at a complete knowledge of who we are, it will not be very exciting to notice that we are constantly lagging behind. We are behind the biological viruses, geological processes and logical laws we try to cope with. Still, Travis raises an important point: does this apply to creativity as well? For if it is so, then our quest for objectivism seems to bring us to a determinism.

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Chapter 6

Determinism and Possible Worlds



Abstract 6.1 There is an apparent freedom of the will—Our actions presuppose free decisions—Is there a natural necessity in the world?—Feldman’s rejection of a contextualist solution to the problem of free will: determinism and scepticism—Wright on even-handedness and factivity—Contextualism at work: Lewis’ infallibilist view and Williams’ concerns. 6.2 Aristotle’s structural account of the actualization of potentialities in contrast with Aquinas’ totalitarianism of the “divine intellect”—Is creativity at risk?—Our making in general as necessitated. 6.3 The question of possible worlds: Lewis’ modal realism—What does it mean for a possibility to be unactualized?—The lack of a hierarchy of importance among *possibilia*—Idea of interdependency of choices—Does it make sense to talk about alternatives to the actual world?—Infinite variations comprise both infinite actions and infinite reactions—Inoperability of a unique source of causation—The need for the right multiplicity, which nevertheless results in an abstract possibility.

Keywords Factivity · Free will · Infallibilism · Lewis · Modal realism
Scepticism

6.1 There Is an Apparent Freedom of the Will—Our Actions Presuppose Free Decisions—Is There a Natural Necessity in the World?—Feldman’s Rejection of a Contextualist Solution to the Problem of Free Will: Determinism and Scepticism—Wright on Even-Handedness and Factivity—Contextualism at Work: Lewis’ Infallibilist View and Williams’ Concerns

What I am doing here and now is writing this. I could be taking a walk or riding my bicycle, but I have chosen to remain indoors. That the decision I took had already been taken by the world, in its necessity, is something difficult to accept. And that

the structure I am giving to this book and the words I am using in it are something necessarily dictated by some cosmological order is similarly unacceptable. It was me who decided to focus on the topic of determinism in the present chapter by virtue of the difficulties posed by the previous one. All my acting is based on this presupposition. The tricky thing about determinism, however, is that what has happened, has happened—and this is the reason why it is unshakeable. A certain demiurge could have wanted me to concentrate on determinism making me sit at my table to work on this subject. While I can believe that I am freely thinking about these issues, my reflection on them, which results in these sentences, may well be *the* concretization of what *must be* rather than an actualization of a potentiality.

Richard Feldman, who sees little advantage in taking a contextualist approach to solve sceptical difficulties, has a point when he calls attention to “striking similarities between the debate about freedom and determinism and the debate about knowledge and scepticism” (2004: 255).¹ As the applicability of a verb like “to know” varies according to the different contexts in which it can be used, so too the sentence “I am free” responds to contextual standards of application. This would explain why someone in an ordinary context may well say that he or she has freely taken this or that decision even if in a philosophical context the same person could question whether free will really exists. Against authors such as John Hawthorne with his “species of compatibilism” (2001: 63),² Feldman rejects that there is no incompatibility between attributing freedom—or knowledge—in one case and eventually denying it in the other. What he claims is that, strictly speaking, none of our actions can be said to be free until we reach a complete causal explanation. It would be incoherent, in the eyes of Feldman, to state that “I am free”—or “I know”—works in an everyday context but not in a philosophical one thus accepting that the free will denier—or the sceptic—may be justified. What we need, according to Feldman, are powerful arguments to beat determinism as a form of scepticism. Ironically enough, Feldman suggests that “the contextualist solution to skeptical problems is to concede that the skeptics are right” and concludes that “[a]s a ‘solution’ to the problem of skepticism, this is hardly edifying” (2004: 268; cf. also 262). In a similar vein, Crispin Wright affirms that “[t]he basic contextualist response to scepticism is thus, in intention at least, *even-handed*” (2005: 240–241). He specifies:

The idea was not to controvert scepticism, or charge it with blinkered ignorance, or irrationality, but to acknowledge the power of the sceptical arguments and allow their correctness, and that of their conclusions, albeit in context. [...] This is the promise which contextualism about knowledge cannot keep. (2005: 242)

Wright then draws the following conclusion:

The problems for even-handedness all flow from the factivity of knowledge. Knowledge ought to be factive in whatever context, subject’s or ascriber’s, it is at issue: whatever the context, if *p* is known in that context, or if an ascription of knowledge is true in that context, then even if only very relaxed standards of justification are required in the context in question,

¹Earlier critiques of contextualism are found in Feldman (1999, 2001).

²As Feldman notes, “Hawthorne’s proposal is modeled on David Lewis’s version of contextualism in epistemology” (2004: 263).

that should entail that p is true. I take this to be a non-negotiable feature of the concept of knowledge. (2005: 242; cf. also 248–249)

This “factivity of knowledge”—in Baumann’s definition, that “whenever somebody knows something then what he knows is the case” (2008: 583–584)—is the big issue,³ as I have indicated right at the beginning of this book (Sect. 1.5). But factivity is not always within reach. Whilst I agree that we are either free or not free, that we either know or do not know at all, I think, *pace* Feldman and Wright, that contextualism provides a satisfactory basis to answer the difficulties at stake.⁴ If we adopt Lewis’ perspective, an infallibilism can be defended without leading us inevitably to scepticism. Lewis articulates his epistemological position by saying:

Subject S knows proposition P iff P holds in every possibility left uneliminated by S ’s evidence; equivalently, iff S ’s evidence eliminates every possibility in which not- P . (1999: 422)

And he humorously adds to this definition:

– Psst! – except for those possibilities that we are properly ignoring. (1999: 425 and 444)

It is a crucial element of my evidential situation that I am moving my fingers at will. I know that there could be forms of coercion or mechanisms that would deprive me of that freedom, but I act on the presumption that no external factors of that kind are present. Have I examined all possibilities of it not being so? Absolutely not. I could not do that, but, even if I could, there is no need to do it. This is exactly the requirement that Lewis tries to abolish with his “*sotto voce* proviso” as the result of our applying a series of rules. As previously pointed out (Sect. 1.2), what makes a situation intelligible in general is our understanding of a limited number of possibilities that the context authorizes. More than impracticable, it would be completely unreasonable to aspire to considering each “possibility in which not- P ”. The free will denier or the sceptic could easily argue that what “we are properly ignoring”—viz. not yet rejecting—can decisively matter in the full cognisance of the situation. That is why Lewis’ approach, for a contextualist like Michael Williams, is “a shallow contextualism”, one that “cannot cope with deep forms of scepticism” (2001: 22). The Lewisian answer seems pretty sound though: despite the fact that epistemology, more than anything else, provokes the elusiveness of knowledge, “we know a lot” (1999: 418 *et passim*).⁵

³On the fact that “‘know’ is factive”, see also Williamson (2001: 26).

⁴This does not mean that the standard contextualist answer cannot be enhanced, as I try to show in this book.

⁵As Michael Blome-Tillmann elucidates: “Obviously, Lewis’s metaphor of knowledge vanishing or being destroyed by epistemology is to be taken with a pinch of salt. Surely, Lewis’s view does not entail that one’s knowledge about the external world ever literally vanishes or ever is destroyed when one begins examining it. [...] it is the satisfaction of ‘knows’ rather than knowledge itself that is, on Lewis’s approach, elusive” (2014: 52–53). For another discussion, see Ichikawa (2017a: 3–4).

6.2 Aristotle's Structural Account of the Actualization of Potentialities in Contrast with Aquinas' Totalitarianism of the "Divine Intellect"—Is Creativity at Risk?—Our Making in General as Necessitated

Aristotle's distinction between "potency" or "potentiality" (δύναμις) and "actuality" (ἐνέργεια, ἐντελέχεια) does not involve the problem of determinism.⁶ What Aristotle has in mind is the actualization of something that is merely possible. I can hear voices in the street only because I have the possibility of hearing in general. The actualization of my capacity to hear does not imply that I will hear voices outside. I can also actualize this capacity to hear Grieg's Peer Gynt Suite No. 1 or a dog barking. The same applies to all other possibilities I have. I can actualize my possibility of reading in general and of reading Greek in particular, but the actualization of it will not impose on me any particular thing to be read. It can be a verse by Archilochus or the modern word ἐξοδος in a subway station in Athens. This potentiality is only structural.

Something quite different is the actuality that Aquinas ascribes to the *intellectus divinus*, one that would correspond to the totality of thoughts that an *intellectus humanus* can have. This totality then must include not only the discoveries of the various sciences but also the whole set of creative acts that shape the history of humanity. So when Aquinas affirms that "one can place in the definition of a true thing its actually being seen by the divine intellect, but not its being seen by a human intellect—except potentially" (1970/1952: q. 1, a. 2, ad. 4), he is making two claims: the first is that Archilochus' poems or Grieg's compositions were already known by God before their authors produced them; the second is that any of us could have created them, even though necessity made Archilochus and Grieg actualize their possibilities. It is easy to conclude, according to this view, that all the works of art that will be created until the end of time are not only already known by God but could potentially be authored by anyone, albeit they will definitely be authored by those who are able to reproduce God's intents. As Michelangelo wrote in one of his rhymes:

With so much servitude, with so much boredom
and with false concepts and great danger
of soul, sculpting but divine things. (2006: 282, my translation)⁷

And we can extend the creation of works of art to all productive endeavours that a being can carry out. As a matter of fact, for the Ancient Greeks, what is done, whatever it may be, is a ποιητόν since it inscribes itself in an act of doing, of ποίησις. The ποίημα as poem is only one of the multiple concretizations of a larger activity of making, of ποιεῖν.

⁶This distinction is central in the second book of *De anima* (Aristotle 1957).

⁷The Italian original reads as follows: "Con tanta servitù, con tanto tedio/ e con falsi concecti e gran periglio/ dell' alma, a sculpir qui cose divine".

6.3 The Question of Possible Worlds: Lewis' Modal Realism—What Does It Mean for a Possibility to Be Unactualized?—The Lack of a Hierarchy of Importance Among *Possibilia*—Idea of Interdependency of Choices—Does It Make Sense to Talk About Alternatives to the Actual World?—Infinite Variations Comprise Both Infinite Actions and Infinite Reactions—Inoperability of a Unique Source of Causation—The Need for the Right Multiplicity, Which Nevertheless Results in an Abstract Possibility

Another way of looking at these puzzles is by examining the idea of possible worlds. There are various versions of this but here I shall be concerned with Lewis' "realism about possible worlds". He stated his view as follows:

Among my common opinions [...] are not only my naive belief in tables and chairs, but also my naive belief that these tables and chairs might have been otherwise arranged. Realism about possible worlds is an attempt, the only successful attempt I know of, to systematize these preexisting modal opinions. (1973: 88)

The thesis put forward by Lewis is ingenious. Philosophers have long considered counter-instances in order to better explain what is the actual case. But Lewis' originality lies in his forceful defence of the reality of these counter-cases. More than metaphysical, the thesis of "modal realism" is eminently logical. He writes that "absolutely *every* way that a world could possibly be is a way that some world *is*" (1986: 2; cf. also 5 and 86). What Lewis does is to explain man's capacity to calculate alternatives by appealing to the existence of these very same alternatives, which would be part of some other world while remaining unactualized in our own. Since Lewis rejects overlaps between possible worlds, the actualization of each one would be guaranteed in spite of its unactualization within the others.

Even the common-sense man feels that his life could be very different if he had taken other decisions at crucial moments. But, if we follow Lewis' doctrine, the fairly mundane decision of biting my nails echoes a world where I would not bite my nails—and where everything that is so in our world could be entirely different. In fact, the metaphysics behind the *computation* of a possible world requires that we consider much more than a slight difference. I am working on this book not simply because somewhere in the past I chose to study philosophy and later applied for a job that gave me the opportunity to write. The series of events that led to this situation is enormously intricate and, what is more, does not depend exclusively on my own choices. Had my *n*th great-grandparents never met, then not only would I never have existed but neither would my descendants. The idea of possible worlds, viewed as the various possibilities of something being the case, is therefore problematic. There is no alternative order to what is actually the case that can be coherently

projected by us since a mere change of certain aspects in the situation is not at stake. The butterfly effect in chaos theory works exactly on a minimal basis. If someone sneezes, this can cause, due to an unpredictable chain of events, a Third World War. The only difference between chaos theory and a deterministic framework is that its determination is chaotic, that is, not foreseen by God. But for someone who rejects randomness, God will have foreseen all the possibilities and decided on what *was*, *is* and *will* be the case. We have just seen that, from a Lewisian perspective, these *possibilia* are not merely adumbrated in our projections but their logical perfection requires that they actually exist. Like divine thoughts, as soon as they are conceived, they acquire existence. However, it is one thing to consider that they might exist in the mind of God and quite a different thing to state that they are all actual in their respective worlds. God's apparent impossibility to choose *the* actual world out of all possible worlds turns out to be a paradoxical limitation.⁸ But even Lewis recognizes that we live in the actual world on the basis of which any other can be (incoherently) imagined.⁹ Infinite variations would have to be contemplated by the possible worlds (w_n) for the infinite actions of an agent (a_n), which are in principle controllable, and for the infinite *re-actions* of what the agent is interacting with, the natural and social environment (e_n), which is not in principle controllable. It would be too simple to conceive of possible worlds only if our own actions were causally relevant as the following implicative scheme, where a stands for our actual choices and w for the actual world, indicates:

$$\begin{aligned} a &\rightarrow w \\ a_1 &\rightarrow w_1 \\ a_2 &\rightarrow w_2 \\ a_3 &\rightarrow w_3 \\ a_n &\rightarrow w_n \end{aligned}$$

Table 6.1 gives us an idea of the infinite possibilities that this metaphysical theory must assume in order to do justice to the multiplicity it implies.

It becomes evident that the intersections between the different choices of an agent and the different environments would not give rise only to " $w_{1,1}$ ", " $w_{2,2}$ " and " $w_{3,3}$ " but also to many other possible relations between them. Imagine that I had chosen to

⁸I am aware that this argument can be turned the other way round, with the impossibility to actualize *all* possibilities appearing as an objectionable limitation of God's power, even if, I dare say, it sounds less paradoxical.

⁹DeRose's contextualist use of the idea of possible worlds illustrates the point I am trying to make. He writes: "An important component of being in a strong epistemic position with respect to P is to have one's belief as to whether P is true match the fact of the matter as to whether P is true, not only in the actual world, but also at the worlds sufficiently close to the actual world. That is, one's belief should not only be true, but should be non-accidentally true, where this requires one's belief as to whether P is true to match the fact of the matter at nearby worlds" (2017: 26). However, what are these "nearby worlds" but meagre counterfactuals? For other discussions of DeRose's appeal to possible worlds, see Pritchard (2001: 332–336), Zalabardo (2009: 67–72), Luper (2012: 217–218) and Ichikawa (2017b: 29–30).

Table 6.1 Infinity of possible worlds

	a_1	a_2	a_3	a_n
e_1	$w_{1,1}$	$w_{2,1}$	$w_{3,1}$	$w_{n,1}$
e_2	$w_{1,2}$	$w_{2,2}$	$w_{3,2}$	$w_{n,2}$
e_3	$w_{1,3}$	$w_{2,3}$	$w_{3,3}$	$w_{n,3}$
e_n	$w_{1,n}$	$w_{2,n}$	$w_{3,n}$	$w_{n,n}$

be a painter instead of a philosopher. My actions as a painter, say “ a_1 ”, would have caused a set of possible re-actions from those who would interact with me and from nature itself, namely “ e_1 ”, “ e_2 ”, “ e_3 ”, “ e_n ”. with this leading to “ $w_{1,1}$ ”, “ $w_{1,2}$ ”, “ $w_{1,3}$ ”, “ $w_{1,n}$ ”. Note that “ e_n ” integrates the re-actions, so to speak, of those who would not interact with me anymore, for example the students I have supervised, who would follow other paths in their lives causing, and being themselves caused by, different events that would belong to the alternative worlds.

But when we think about the course that this world has taken, we cannot *really* figure out an alternative to the way things are. These alternatives form *impossible worlds*, not because there are logical impossibilities in these worlds—which is what the expression normally indicates—but because the possibilities they represent are completely abstract, with the concreteness of *this* world being the only actual possibility—in the words of Leibniz in his *Theodicy*, “the best (*optimum*) among all possible worlds” (1885/2014: 107/168). A world where I would be a painter does not infringe the law of contradiction nor any other logical law. I could perfectly well live in that world. But the fact remains that it is from this world, in its actuality, that all other possibilities can be abstractedly hypothesized.

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Chapter 7

Seeking Evidence



Abstract 7.1 Theoretical fragility and natural solidity of our situation—Evidence as immediate—Does it make sense to seek for a justification of evidence?—Wittgenstein and the indefeasibility of our “system of evidence”—Two kinds of doubt: their local and global epistemological effects—Certainty and security—Greco on the epistemic status of “contextually basic beliefs” in Wittgenstein’s later writings—Hinge propositions: what they are and what they are for—Idea of natural ontology—Wittgensteinian contextualism and the thereness of our evidence. 7.2 Gil on common and scientific evidence—The non-discursiveness of what presents itself to us as evident: idea of “hallucination”—Evidence as transpositional in regard to all perceptive content: the status of this primordial modality—Why evidence is groundless. 7.3 Primary and secondary evidence—Gil on assent: reminiscences of Zeno—The difficulty of invalidating the feeling of reality prompted by our acts of assent. 7.4 Gil’s effort to avoid a transcendental deduction: an evidence that does not depend on us—The phantasm of a modal categorization—Similarities between Husserl and Gil apropos of the genesis of evidence—Pritchard on “epistemic angst” and “epistemic vertigo”: the phenomenological basis of the latter—Williams’ dismissal of “knowledge-specific scepticism”: beyond the sceptical problems of typical contextualist analyses.

Keywords Assent · Certainty · Gil · Hinge propositions · Pritchard · Wittgenstein

7.1 Theoretical Fragility and Natural Solidity of Our Situation—Evidence as Immediate—Does It Make Sense to Seek for a Justification of Evidence?—Wittgenstein and the Indefeasibility of Our “System of Evidence”—Two Kinds of Doubt: Their Local and Global Epistemological Effects—Certainty and Security—Greco on the Epistemic Status of “Contextually Basic Beliefs” in Wittgenstein’s Later Writings—Hinge Propositions: What They Are and What They Are for—Idea of Natural Ontology—Wittgensteinian Contextualism and the There-ness of Our Evidence

The reflection undertaken so far has led us to a consideration of an essential feature of our condition: its fragility. As soon as we begin to question our situation, we see that the natural perspective we have of ourselves and the world is grounded on evidence that did not result from an inquiry. It is precisely a natural evidence, one that was acquired, as the later Wittgenstein would have it, in the “practice of language” (1974a: §§ 501 and 524; 1974b/1978: I, § 17; 2009: §§ 21 and 51).¹ But such an immediate evidence does not correspond to the ideal of clearness that accompanies the meaning of the word “evidence” as we normally use it. As a matter of fact, we employ more often the adjective “evident” than the noun “evidence” in ordinary speech. Take the phrases “That’s evident!” and “What’s the evidence for that?”. Whereas the former dispenses with any justification, the latter points to a position in which something can become manifest to us by mediation. If a case or a theory is backed by some pieces of evidence, we say its defence will be much stronger. But what is immediately backing the evidence we already have at our disposal? What evidence do I have to take things for evident?

In his writings on certainty, Wittgenstein speaks of a “system of evidence” as an axis around which everything turns. Here is how he presents it:

It would strike me as ridiculous to want to doubt the existence of Napoleon; but if someone doubted the existence of the earth 150 years ago, perhaps I should be more willing to listen, for now he is doubting our whole system of evidence. It does not strike me as if this system were more certain [*sicherer*] than a certainty [*Sicherheit*] within it. (1974a: § 185)

This remark contrasts two very different kinds of doubt. The first challenges a certain testimonial knowledge. We learned in school who Napoleon was and what his deeds were. As Wittgenstein suggests, it could be discovered that this historical figure was “a fable” (1974a: § 186) and that it had been forged to serve surreptitious political interests. One could indeed find out that all of Napoleon’s public appearances were

¹I have adopted the translations of § 501 of 1974a and § 17 of Part I of 1978. I do not think that “linguistic practice” (2009: § 21) or “practice of the language” (1974a: § 524; 2009: § 51) entirely capture Wittgenstein’s expression “*Praxis der Sprache*”.

made by men purporting to be him and that the portraits we have that allegedly represent Napoleon were of other persons. The Emperor Napoleon might never have existed nor his letters and despatches. Confronted with credible evidence that things happened that way, we would withdraw our old version of the history of the First French Empire replacing it with a new one. The invalidation of our previous belief in the existence of Napoleon would be *epistemologically local*. The world would go on just the same. But the other case Wittgenstein discusses is much more peculiar. What reasons could someone give to doubt that the Earth existed 150 years ago? We know that calculations to determine the age of the Earth have yielded various results throughout the history of geology and we are used to accommodating differences of several million years. Yet the replacements required by the cancellation of our assumption that the Earth is incalculably older than 150 years are themselves incalculable. The effect of a breakdown of that supposition would be *epistemologically global*, undermining our more elementary evidences. How could we understand the beginning of life on Earth, the formation of the Earth's continents, the evolution of the human race, etc.? Even an uneducated person would be puzzled if she were told that her ancestry goes back only 150 years. The picture of the world that we share, despite all variances in content, cannot be changed so drastically. That is why Wittgenstein calls attention to the systematic character of this evidence, which offers itself, more than *certain*, as *secure*. It is the self-evidence of the system that legitimates what can count as an admissible element within it.

John Greco ascribes to the later Wittgenstein the view according to which “contextually basic beliefs are *not* knowledge” (2000: 121). For Greco, the main question

is whether contextually basic beliefs must have some sort of positive epistemic status to play their grounding role. Whatever we call it, it seems that there would have to be some feature of contextually basic beliefs that makes them fit to serve as reasons or evidence or justifications for other beliefs. (2000: 122)

I disagree with Greco that the Wittgensteinian perspective should be seen as “implausible” by virtue of this “basicity” lacking “positive epistemic status” (2000: 123). Quite the opposite, I am convinced that this marks exactly its epistemological strength. But Greco’s emphasis on Wittgenstein’s contextualism deserves some attention. Although his philosophical position can justifiably be regarded as a contextualist one,² Wittgenstein does something quite different than full-blooded contextualists do when they seek for evidence. He sees the evidential bedrock of each situation as materializing in *hinge propositions* which, for him, should constitute a new field of epistemological inquiry.³ He explains that “the *questions* that we raise and our

²For other attributions of contextualism to the later Wittgenstein, see Sosa (1988: 139–141), Fogelin (1994: 208–210) and, particularly, Williams (2007).

³The idea of a “hinge epistemology” still remains relatively unexplored. See Coliva (2015) and the collective volume of Coliva and Moyal-Sharrock (2016). In a recent work, Sosa writes: “Our approach suggests a promising way to understand the appeal to ‘relevant alternatives’ seen in responses to skepticism of years ago. At that time the notion of relevance was left in some darkness, whereas the present approach may now shine its light. Our *background conditions*, and their generalization to human performance generally, seem also interestingly related to Wittgenstein’s *hinge propositions*, though this must be left here as a topic for later study” (2017: 220, n. 5).

doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges [*Angeln*] on which those turn” (1974a: § 341). A hinge cannot be learned in isolation. It is assimilated by us in practice—in the practice of the varied “language games” we play, to use a key notion of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. That all living organisms breathe to survive is not something we have just noticed in a biology class. Much before hearing about processes of respiration in animals and plants, a primitive idea already formed part of our worldview. We can learn scientific theories about the matter because these fit into a natural ontology (see Sect. 1.5). Hinges produce the necessary evidence to situate us in experience regulating what is and is not subjected to doubt. They immediately exclude any far-fetched sceptical possibility of global epistemological impact, not because we have provided grounds for its exclusion but rather because evidence already imposes that the situation turns around its own axis. Contrary to professed epistemic contextualists, Wittgenstein is not interested in laying down the truth-conditions of our variable knowledge ascriptions. For him, the most important contextual work to be done in epistemology is to shed light on the *thereness* of our evidence.

7.2 Gil on Common and Scientific Evidence—The Non-discursiveness of What Presents Itself to Us as Evident: Idea of “Hallucination”—Evidence as Transpositional in Regard to All Perceptive Content: The Status of This Primordial Modality—Why Evidence Is Groundless

Clearly influenced by Wittgenstein, Fernando Gil’s *Treatise on Evidence* is a remarkable investigation into the workings of evidence, contributing, as it does, to an understanding of what makes common experience evident and, on the basis thereof, to a re-evaluation of scientific evidence. One of the key notions Gil employs is that of “hallucination”, which is taken by the author to mean more than the psychic state of illusoriness normally associated to it. Gil argues that “the intelligibility of evidence” does not come out of anything “discursive”. What constitutes this *intelligere* is, he says, “a hallucination, but not in the sense of a percept of the unreal *in place of* the perception of the existent”. Gil immediately goes on to clarify that

it means in turn the transposition *of the* perception in another thing. It is a hallucinatory operation that, with the irrecusable force of the real, changes perception and signification into truth. (1993: § 139)⁴

The word “hallucination” derives from the Latin *alucinatio*, with the verb *alucinor* being commonly translated as “to dream” or “to wander in mind”. Yet, in the same way as *luceo* means “to become visible” or “to shine”, it is the idea of lacking “light”

⁴All translations are my own.

(*lux*), i.e. *lucidity*, that is at the origin of those words. Gil is therefore suggesting that when we recognize something as evident, there is an absence of lucidness towards what appears before us, which is taken straightaway to be a *true* content. The main point that Gil is making is that when, for instance, I look at the objects around me, I do not have first a perception of them, which I could qualify as being so and so, but I immediately have these objects appearing to me *with* the status of evidence. This, for Gil, as he explains in the same section, is “an *Urphänomen*”, one “of self-donation”, in the sense that we are not called upon to do something about it. He also speaks of a “modality *princeps*” in connection with the hallucination, comparing this to “attention”, “ostension”, “intuition” and “imposition”, all of them possessing a “performative” nature (1993: § 142).

The primitivity at issue leads Gil to sometimes use the expression “*hallucination originaire*”, which “gives the represented as *existent*”, in what is “the primitive *mode* of the representation” or, evoking Husserl, “a *proto-proto-doxa*” (1993: § 144). It is so because my “judgment”, or “opinion”, say, about the distance I have walked today can only be based on a series of $\delta\acute{o}\xi\alpha$ that ground that judgment, such as the $\delta\acute{o}\xi\alpha$ that I can walk or the $\delta\acute{o}\xi\alpha$ that the roads do not collapse while I walk. Were my physical condition or the road maintenance condition different, then that could no longer be presupposed. And here we can see that the evidence behind my assumption that I have walked a few miles is in fact from a deeper level. It works in such a way that makes me not bring into question the various aspects that, on reflection, could be observed. Evidence thus appears as the last epistemic resource we have in the analysis of experience. It is not anchored to anything else—it is groundless.⁵

7.3 Primary and Secondary Evidence—Gil on Assent: Reminiscences of Zeno—The Difficulty of Invalidating the Feeling of Reality Prompted by Our Acts of Assent

It has been pointed out that our usage of the word “evidence” includes an ideal of clarity that is typically associated with proof (Sect. 7.1). Gil is not interested in these proofs but in the *demonstration* of a *primary* kind of evidence, one that is so present in our lives from the beginning that we do not recognize it. What we recognize as manifestly evident is therefore a *secondary* kind of evidence. And what is at stake is to arrive at an *evidence of the evidence*. If I present my passport to produce evidence of my identity, an extensive field of primary evidence will keep on working beneath that proof. It is this horizon of *prima facie* evidence that is under scrutiny. In the same way, the “existent” and the “truth” Gil refers to are not empirically contingent but transcendently necessary. What is at issue is not the verifiable existence or truth of a certain thing—e.g. my passport—but what allows me to hold a certain thing—again, my passport—to exist or to be true.

⁵And this means that it does not need a foundation. See Wittgenstein (1974a: § 166). See also Pritchard (2012, 2016). I shall return to this groundlessness later on.

It is thus not surprising that Gil puts evidence and assent together. His own word is “*assentiment*” and he uses it in the sense of Zeno’s *συνκατάθεσις* (1993: § 31), which is also translatable as “agreement” or “concord”. But more than our doing this or that “according to the concurrent view”, the *συνκατάθεσις* hints at a “concomitant view” or “synthesis”. This is exactly what happens with evidence, which comes before us completely and all at once. Gil gives the example of the “unity of the self” as “a modality of the *assent obliged* to the indeterminate intuition (*Anschauung*) of a *real*” (1993: § 163). That I am the unified self I assume to be in my praxis is, as noted above (Sect. 1.1), one of the most basic beliefs we have, a belief that furnishes, in an inexplicit way, existentiality to a life replete with events, many of them existing only for myself. “This unification must be real,” could I now say, but not even my pondering about the possible unreality of this invalidates the *feeling of reality* that is given by my assent that it is so.

7.4 Gil’s Effort to Avoid a Transcendental Deduction: An Evidence that Does not Depend on Us—The Phantasm of a Modal Categorization—Similarities Between Husserl and Gil Apropos of the Genesis of Evidence—Pritchard on “Epistemic Angst” and “Epistemic Vertigo”: The Phenomenological Basis of the Latter—Williams’ Dismissal of “Knowledge-Specific Scepticism”: Beyond the Sceptical Problems of Typical Contextualist Analyses

Gil’s approach to evidence is a notable attempt to avoid the circularity prompted by any transcendental deduction. He tries to conceive of evidence as independent of us and only dependent on the real. But he cannot help referring to “hypostases” or “transcendental illusion” (1993: § 139) for he is aware, as we have seen (Sect. 7.3), that our assent is an expression of a modal categorization of reality. Gil makes this clear when he states:

Belief, truth, existence have only one root of which originary hallucination is the ontogenetic metaphor. Phenomenologically, its name is *assent*. (1993: § 163)

And he admits:

Under what conditions does hallucination seem to transform itself into necessity, the question remains open. (1993: § 157)

Gil’s programme inevitably faces the same problem faced by what he himself called “the Husserlian programme of the genesis of evidence” (1993: § 139), namely the insurmountable difficulty of deriving objectivity from subjectivity. Be it deeply

rooted and working in a non-discursive way or not, the fact is that evidence is a result of our taking something to be true. And there is nothing more fragile than existence, in its apparent solidness, being only the counterpart of the modal category of non-existence.

In *Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*, Duncan Pritchard considers that the “combination of epistemological disjunctivism and the Wittgensteinian account of the structure of rational evaluation” (2016: 184) can bring a solution to the problem of radical scepticism and consequently eliminate the epistemic angst associated to it. Yet, Pritchard admits, an “epistemic vertigo” may subsist after the loss of our “epistemic innocence” (2016: 184–188).⁶ He explains that “the phenomenon of epistemic vertigo is more psychological than philosophical, in that it describes the particular phenomenology involved when one has resolved the skeptical puzzle” (2016: 186). The conclusion just drawn from Gil's approach to evidence illustrates Pritchard's point well. What is at issue is not one of the problems typically posed, to borrow a phrase from Williams, in “knowledge-specific” sceptical scenarios (2001: 5–6). We are not struggling with mules cleverly painted to look like zebras in a zoo (Dretske 2000), nor with barn facades apparently indistinguishable from real barns (Goldman 1992), nor with banks that might change their hours unexpectedly (DeRose 1992, 2009; Wright 2017), cases that contextualists are prone to discuss. Like Pritchard, Williams claims that “scepticism is clearly a problem only if it is radical as well as general”, namely when it is formulated in the form of “Descartes's Evil Deceiver or a brain in a vat” (2001: 6–7).⁷ It is then to the Cartesian conundrum that I shall now turn.

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Chapter 8

Radical Scepticism



Abstract 8.1 Cartesian foundations: the role of doubt—The assumption of the *ego cogito* as minimal evidence—Why our faculties, including the sensitive one, can be reduced to mental faculties—Descartes’ goal: justifying the internal experience through an external order—God’s qualities: significance of existence—Difference between “formal reality” and “objective reality”. 8.2 Descartes on essentiality and existentiality—The scholastic tradition: in what way can there be in generated beings a “metaphysical distinction and composition between essence and existence”?—Beyond the mere impossibility of self-generation: actuality as non-essential—Two ways of looking at compositionality—Heidegger’s view of the problem. 8.3 Ontic and ontological statuses—The kind of existence we attribute—Physical and metaphysical worlds: why the seeming materiality of things is not enough to objectify them—Descartes on dreaming: its context-saturation—Modal uncertainty as unrestricted: analogy with astrophysical black holes—Imagination and necessitation—Flaws of Descartes’ conclusions—Sosa’s understanding of dreaming—Greco and Williams on Cartesian contextualism—The trouble with bringing formality and objectivity back together.

Keywords Descartes · Doubt · Dreaming · Essence · Existence · Uncertainty

8.1 Cartesian Foundations: The Role of Doubt—The Assumption of the *Ego Cogito* as Minimal Evidence—Why Our Faculties, Including the Sensitive One, Can Be Reduced to Mental Faculties—Descartes’ Goal: Justifying the Internal Experience Through an External Order—God’s Qualities: Significance of Existence—Difference Between “Formal Reality” and “Objective Reality”

It is difficult to find an author for whom modality is more central than it is for Descartes, particularly in the *Meditations*. In his attempt to demonstrate “God’s existence” through a “distinction of the soul from the body” (1996b: 17), in the midst of which an alleged divine part of man could become manifest, Descartes brings into doubt everything that can be revoked, as the title of the first meditation makes plain.¹ While he is also interested in contributing to the possibility of a foundation “in the sciences” (1996b/2008: 17), he takes a shortcut to arrive as quickly as possible at occasions of “stupefaction” or, in Descartes’ own word, “*stupor*” (1996b/2008: 19). The fallible processing of our sense data opens the door to a generalized mistrust of experience that finds its methodological key in the “evil genius” (1996b/2008: 22).² Contrary to what is sometimes claimed, it is obvious that Descartes does not have as his goal a definitive doubt, a “*suspensio iudicii sceptica*”, but simply a “*suspensio iudicii indagatoria*”, to use Kant’s terminology in the *Jäsche Logic* (1923/1992: 74).

In the course of this investigation, the extension of incertitude from sense data to memory that occurs in the second meditation accentuates the problem that Descartes clearly wants to pose rather than face: the problem that “nothing is certain” (1996b/2008: 24). He then arrives at the proposition “I am, I exist” (1996b/2008: 25 and 27),³ which is regarded as a minimal expression of apodicticity. Everything I am aware of could be illusory except the fact that I am thinking it, even if I am dreaming. Thus, Descartes concludes, there is at least one evidence, that “thought

¹The title and subtitle that accompany the heading of the first meditation are not translated in Descartes 2008. They are: *Meditationum de Prima Philosophia: In quibus Dei existentia, & animae a corpore distinctio demonstrantur*. Apart from the nominative plural *Meditationes* and the adjective *humana* in front of *anima*, this is the same title and subtitle of the book, which Michael Moriarty translates as *Meditations on First Philosophy: In which the existence of God and the distinction of the human soul from the body are demonstrated*. The first meditation is headed “*De iis quae in dubium revocari possunt*”, which Moriarty renders as “Of those things that may be called into doubt” (2008: 17). This pagination refers to that of the Adam and Tannery edition, which appears in the margins of the Oxford translations.

²I have here amended Moriarty’s translation of “*genius malignus*” as “evil spirit” even though “evil genius” is also used in his translation.

³Descartes’ expression is “*Ego sum, ego existo*”, a cognate of the famous “*ego cogito, ergo sum*” employed in the Latin translation of the *Discourse on the Method* as *Dissertatio de Methodo* (1996a: 559). The original French “*je pense, donc je suis*” is translated by Ian Maclean as “I am thinking therefore I exist” (1996a/2006: 33).

is”, and it is within this deduction that what I am as a human being must be reduced, in the eyes of Descartes, to “a thinking thing” (*res cogitans*), “a mind” (*mens*), “a soul” (*animus*), “an intellect” (*intellectus*) or “a reason” (*ratio*) (1996b/2008: 27).⁴ All my faculties, be they the dubitative, intellective, affirmative, negative, volitive, resistive, imaginative or even sensitive, are regarded as mental faculties. As he puts it:

But what therefore am I? A thinking thing. What is that? I mean a thing that doubts [*dubitans*], that understands [*intelligens*], that affirms [*affirmans*], that denies [*negans*], that wishes to do this [*volens*] and does not wish to do that [*nolens*], and also that imagines [*imaginans*] and perceives by the senses [*sentiens*]. (1996b/2008: 28; cf. also 34)

These characterizations cannot be seen as simple indications of human rationality. Descartes’ rationalism is indeed very different from the Aristotelian conception of man as a rational animal. It is the *spiritual* element that matters in the discovery of my *cogitare* given that it alone can provide evidence for “that part of myself, whatever it is” (1996b/2008: 29).⁵ If the “faculty of judging” (*judicandi facultas*) exists “in my mind”, to which the body is subordinated (1996b/2008: 32), our justification must be attained by reference to something *external*. The *internal* experience of deducing this is merely an indispensable step towards justification.

The idea of God, with all its attributes, presented in the third meditation functions then as an anchor that sustains mankind. Among these attributes, existence is the crucial one. Descartes’ view is that, as creatures of God, we participate in God’s being at the same time as God, projected in our own being, is demonstrated. The existence that belongs to the nature of God therefore constitutes much more for Descartes than a theological determination. It invades the whole being with its force, which is of an ontological kind. Only ontologically can the difference traced by Descartes between “formal reality” (*realitas formalis*) and “objective reality” (*realitas objectiva*) make sense (1996b/2008: 41). If, as said, existence and non-existence are but the two sides of the coin that modality is (Sect. 7.4), we could put it in a Cartesian way and say that *realitas formalis* is the negative of *realitas objectiva*.

⁴I do not think that Descartes’ words “*Cogitare? Hic invenio: cogitatio est*” are adequately rendered by Moriarty in terms of “What about thinking? Here I do find something: it is thought”. What Descartes is saying is that at least “thought is” or “exists”.

⁵Margaret Dauler Wilson’s suggestions for translating Descartes’ “*istud nescio quid mei*” as “that I know-not-what of me” or “that [unspecified] part [or aspect] of me” (2005: 69 and 203, n. 40) constitute valid options.

8.2 Descartes on Essentiality and Existentiality—The Scholastic Tradition: In What Way Can There Be in Generated Beings a “Metaphysical Distinction and Composition Between Essence and Existence”?—Beyond the Mere Impossibility of Self-generation: Actuality as Non-essential—Two Ways of Looking at Compositionality—Heidegger’s View of the Problem

After insisting, in the fourth meditation, on the need to regard our *judicandi facultas* as true as a result of our peculiar position “between the supreme being and non-being” (1996b/2008: 54), Descartes redefines, in the fifth meditation, the modal question, introducing the distinction between “essence” (*essentia*) and “existence” (*existentia*) (1996b/2008: 63 ff.). To be true, this is a distinction that goes back to the scholastics. In *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Heidegger debates two classic theses and introduces some interesting nuances. The first thesis applies to God whereas the second applies to human beings. They are:

In ente a se essentia et existentia sunt metaphysicae unum idemque sive esse actu est de essentia entis a se. In a being which is from itself, essence and existence [in Kant’s language, *Wesenheit* and *Dasein*] are metaphysically [that is, ontologically] one and the same, or being actual belongs to the essence, derives from the essence, of a being which is in itself and is from its own self.

In omni ente ab alio inter essentiam et existentiam est distinctio et compositio metaphysica seu esse actu non est de essentia entis ab alio; in every being which is from another, that is, in every created being, there is an ontological distinction and composition between whatness and way-of-being, or being actual does not belong to the essence of the created being. (Heidegger 1989/1988: 124–125/88, my italics)

That the essence and existence of God are one and the same thing, a thing that is only metaphysical, seems fairly reasonable. But the “metaphysical distinction and composition” that constitutes us is much more complicated. The second thesis does not simply say that we cannot create ourselves but need to be created by God. What the thesis declares is that “being actual” does not belong to our nature for we are able to metaphysically separate, or make a *com-position* of, essence and existence. That is to say, we can go through experience and either extract existence from an essence or combine them together again. It is a purely modal operation. This is well captured by Heidegger when he first translates *existentia* by “*Dasein*”, adding in parentheses “in Kant’s language”, and qualifies the adverb “metaphysically”, also parenthetically, as “ontologically”. The emphasis on modality is also perceptible when he renders *essentia* not only as “essence” (*Wesen*) but also as “essentiality” (*Wesenheit*)⁶ and “whatness” (*Washeit*) and, finally, when he presents the options “being actual” (*Wirklichsein*) and “way-of-being” (*Weise-zu-sein*) for *existentia*.

⁶Albert Hofstadter does not make a difference between the words *Wesen* and *Wesenheit* translating both as “essence” (Heidegger 1988: 88).

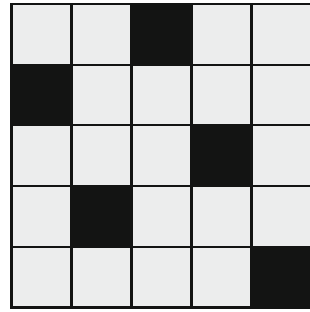
8.3 Ontic and Ontological Statuses—The Kind of Existence We Attribute—Physical and Metaphysical Worlds: Why the Seeming Materiality of Things Is not Enough to Objectify Them—Descartes on Dreaming: Its Context-Saturation—Modal Uncertainty as Unrestricted: Analogy with Astrophysical Black Holes—Imagination and Necessitation—Flaws of Descartes’ Conclusions—Sosa’s Understanding of Dreaming—Greco and Williams on Cartesian Contextualism—The Trouble with Bringing Formality and Objectivity Back Together

The distinction between *essentia* and *existentia* is metaphysical—or ontological—because it does not lie in the physical world—where things possess only an ontic status. It lies in our innate capacity to attribute existence, i.e. objectivity, to beings whose essence could be simply formal. The essence, or the form, of my chessboard is the same in the physical and in the metaphysical world. The only difference is that in the physical world the materiality of the chessboard is the sole requisite for its existence, whereas in the metaphysical world the chessboard appearing as a material thing is not enough to affirm its effectiveness. Descartes’ argument that reality could have the same texture as a dream is invincible because in dreams things—I myself included—also appear as being material. I could perfectly well dream that I am writing this book, remembering in the dream that I went for a coffee a couple of hours ago and having the perception in the dream that it is raining heavily outside. In this dream of mine I could identify myself as the person I am, who has the family and interests I have, etc. One of the most interesting features of dreams is that they come with contextualizations of each situation. We can find these bizarre when we wake up, but during the dream they are fully informative. Descartes’ *Gedankenexperiment* is then the following: why should we not suppose that my awareness of writing this book, my memory of having gone for a coffee a couple of hours ago and my perception that it is raining heavily outside are lacking *existence*? Much more than the possibility of waking up from a dream, what Descartes seriously questions is whether there is a mode to hold these essences as existent. In a situation like this, it is out of the question that some things maintain their status of existing beings whereas other things would lose it. There *cannot* be localized modal uncertainties, black holes so to speak, around which experience could still take place, as in Fig. 8.1.

Like in galactic space, modal black holes push everything around them towards uncertainty. What we realize is that there is a lack of necessity in our representation of the world and that our “imaginative faculty” (*imaginandi facultas*) can be excessively creative (1996b/2008: 71).

Descartes’ refusal, in the sixth meditation, of radical doubt, provided that experience must be trusted as real, is therefore artificial. To begin with, the argument that in dreams there would be a disconnection with a context of action is not sound, as

Fig. 8.1 Localized modal uncertainties



we have just seen. Here I disagree with Sosa when, alluding to “Descartes’ idea that dreams are insufficiently coherent”, he writes that “[t]he dreamer’s experience may be fragmentary and indistinct, so that his sensory basis may not be quite the same as that of a normal perceiver” (2007: 30).⁷ Greco has a point when he stresses that Descartes’ foundationalism implies a contextualism *tout court*. He writes:

Descartes thinks that whether something is known immediately depends on contextual features such as prior training, degree of attention applied, the influence of prejudices, and the presence of distractions. What this shows is that the real issue is not *whether* there are contextual factors involved in the determination of basic beliefs, but *which* contextual factors are involved. (2000: 126)

However, the peculiarity of Cartesian radical doubt is that it makes *any* context epistemically irrelevant. Williams points out that “a thoroughgoing contextualist understanding” depends on the recognition that “our capacity for knowledge can vary with our situation”, that each “actual situation in which a claim is entered may be important independently of the content of the claim” (1996: 168). But he accurately observes that Descartes “takes his actual, worldly situation to be irrelevant to his ‘epistemic position’”, that the “epistemic situation” as such would not be *essentially* different “whether we are normal human beings or brains in vats” (1996: 168–169).

Secondly, and more importantly, Descartes’ metaphysical deduction that God would not induce us in error does not really eradicate the problem he himself poses for I cannot deduce God from myself. One could argue: if God cannot be deduced from a creature, where is an alternative to be found? Bolzano offers one when he avers that what God is or is not does not depend on whether there will be someone capable of taking this or that proposition about God for true. He is already affirmed by “those propositions which nobody holds to be true [*für wahr hält*] or even conceives of or will ever conceive of” (1985/2014: 104/59). The main merit of the Cartesian programme is that it shows how the *compositio* is extraordinarily difficult to *re-in-state*. As we shall see in the next chapter, this difficulty will lie at the core of Kant’s theory of knowledge.

⁷See in addition Sosa 2017, Chap. 2.

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Chapter 9

Transcendentalism



Abstract 9.1 Kant’s correspondence theory: the sensitive nature of cognitions that must be assumed—Space and time as fundamental intuitions—Our spatial and temporal representations do not come about by the sum of the different spaces and times we experience: their apriority—Why this does not mean, for Kant, to advance any metaphysical thesis. 9.2 The aprioristic character of our “predicaments”—Between innatism and empiricism: the acquisition of pure concepts—Their difference regarding object-concepts and relation-concepts, which aposterioristically belong to the empirical world—Kant and the particular function of modality within the judicative and categorical scheme—Classes of judgments and categories—The threefold arrangement of modal predication: arbitrariness, necessity and the middle way offered by assertoriness—Fragility of the latter even if the assertive content remains unaltered. 9.3 Kant’s reassessment of the matter in terms of our “holding for true”: its three modes—The overarching processes of “opining”, “believing” and “knowing”—Spheres of belief—The modes of taking to be true as correlative to the modes of predicating—Certainty and uncertainty as instances of necessity and contingency, respectively—Scientific versus doxastic and credential ascriptions—The twofold structure of certainty: “rational” and “empirical”—How the latter divides itself into “immediate” and “mediate”, possessing but an “assertoric” force—Truth viewed from an alethic and an anthropological perspective—Why, for Bolzano, acts of knowing should be excluded from holding true as long as this involves confident beliefs—Unconfident beliefs constitute no more than opinions—The weaknesses of transcendentalism: Greco on transcendental arguments.

Keywords Belief · Bolzano · Kant · Modal categories · Modal judgments
Taking to be true

9.1 Kant's Correspondence Theory: The Sensitive Nature of Cognitions that Must Be Assumed—Space and Time as Fundamental Intuitions—Our Spatial and Temporal Representations Do not Come About by the Sum of the Different Spaces and Times We Experience: Their Apriority—Why This Does not Mean, for Kant, to Advance Any Metaphysical Thesis

Kant's transcendental philosophy is the most ambitious attempt to metaphysically justify the correspondence thesis. Already in his 1770 dissertation *On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and the Intelligible World*, Kant makes an effort to demonstrate that experience can only take place thanks to subjective operations constitutive of our minds. These operations work at two levels, a sensible level and an intelligible one, which continually interact with each other. One of the most forceful points made by Kant is that "cognitions must always be treated as sensitive cognitions" (*cognitiones semper habendas esse pro sensitivis*) (1912/1992a: 393), i.e. that our knowledge necessarily has a sensible origin. This is by no means a defence of empiricism but the laying down of a prerequisite: that what is given *is given*. The subject simply organizes it according to constituent schemes, which render the world noticeable.

Lying at the bottom of these schemes are the intuitions of space and time. Kant's revolutionary idea is that the space occupied by the objects of the world is not simply out there but depends on a projection of the totality of space, a totality that, as can easily be seen, was never experienced as such. Without this a priori projection, I would not be able to represent, as I do, *any* space of the world filled in by whatever it may be. As the *Critique of Pure Reason* puts it, space is not a "*compositum*" of spaces but a "*totum*" given that "its parts are possible only in the whole, and not the whole through the parts" (1911/1998: B 466). It is not because I have experienced spaces S_1, S_2, S_3 , etc. that I can put them together to conceive of space in general. This must be projected in its entirety, vague as it is, in order to make possible the experience of S_1, S_2, S_3 , etc. The same happens with time. It is just because I aprioristically project not only the present moment but also the entire past and future, in all their vagueness, that it becomes possible to find myself and the world in a successive duration of instants. Thus Soames:

It is in the nature of our minds to perceive events as temporally ordered, and objects as arranged in Euclidean space. It is because no other experience of objects is possible, or even perceptually imaginable, that the truth of Euclidean geometry is guaranteed, a priori, to be true of the world *as we experience it*. (2014: 43)

For Kant, this is not to advance metaphysical theses about space and time but to expose *our* transcendental constitution. That is why a "critique of pure reason" must distinguish, as the Transcendental Aesthetic does, between a "metaphysical exposition" and a "transcendental exposition" of these two concepts (1911/1998: B 37–49).

9.2 The Aprioristic Character of Our “Predicaments”—Between Innatism and Empiricism: The Acquisition of Pure Concepts—Their Difference Regarding Object-Concepts and Relation-Concepts, Which Aposterioristically Belong to the Empirical World—Kant and the Particular Function of Modality Within the Judicative and Categorical Scheme—Classes of Judgments and Categories—The Threefold Arrangement of Modal Predication: Arbitrariness, Necessity and the Middle Way Offered by Assertoriness—Fragility of the Latter Even if the Assertive Content Remains Unaltered

From an intellectual point of view things work in a similar way. As the *Dissertatio* says, metaphysical concepts like “possibility, existence, necessity, substance, cause, etc.”, not only taken in themselves but also “together with their opposites or correlates”, cannot be found in experience (1912/1992a: 395). The possibility of a bird landing on my balcony is not to be found in any empirical data for these do not come with an indication of what is possible and impossible. Also “existence” and “non-existence”, “necessity” and “contingency”, as well as “*substantia et accidens*”, “cause and effect”, etc. are all κατηγορήματα, “predicaments” we make of reality (1911/1998: B 106–107). In his *Dissertatio*, Kant keenly emphasizes that these concepts are not “innate” but rather “concepts abstracted from the laws inherent in the mind” and consequently “acquired concepts” (1912/1992a: 395). This *acquisitio* is not therefore of an empiricist kind since it is processed “out of the nature of the mind” (*e mentis natura*) (1912/1992a: 387). But, in Kant’s view, there is no innatism either since I was not born with a static concept of possibility that would give me the idea that it is possible for a bird to land on my balcony. What happens is that I apply the concept of possibility *undeterminably*, as is the case with any other “pure concept of understanding” (1911/1998: B 105). Pure concepts govern the empirical, such as those of “bird”, “landing” or “balcony”—which distinguish themselves from each other as long as the concepts of “bird” or “balcony” refer to objects whereas the concept of “landing” refers to a relation. Contrary to pure concepts, which are a priori, empirical concepts are a posteriori and can only be categorically arranged to form the world we know in a transcendental manner.

It is worth noting that the above-mentioned examples of metaphysical concepts that Kant gives in the *Dissertatio* include the three positive poles of a particular class of category: modality. The Transcendental Analytic of the First Critique begins by dividing our judgments into four classes, viz. “quantity”, “quality”, “relation” and “modality” (1911/1998: B 95). Whereas the first three classes are responsible for “the content of the judgment”, the latter class, Kant avows, is peculiar for it “concerns only the value of the copula in relation to thinking in general” (1911/1998: B 100).

Modal judgments divide themselves into three kinds: “problematic”, “assertoric” and “apodictic”. The first “are those in which one regards the assertion or denial as merely *possible* (arbitrary)”, the second “are those in which it is considered *actual* (true)” and the third “are those in which it is seen as *necessary*” (1911/1998: B 100). The presentation of the Kantian categories (1911/1998: B 106) adopts the same division into four classes, with modality, as observed, holding a positive and a negative pole, namely:

Possibility—Impossibility
Existence—Non-existence
Necessity—Contingency

What all this implies is that my judgments are much more “problematic” than what they would normally seem to be because in many cases what speaks in favour of asserting something is not enough to reject its contrary. Take the judgment “My shoes are in the closet”. I am absolutely convinced they are there even if I do not see them. However, following Kant, I cannot hold the judgment as apodictic given that my shoes being in the closet is an absolutely contingent matter. The fact is that they could be somewhere else. With this in mind, I can re-equate my judgment to be assertoric in the sense that I actually consider that my shoes are in the closet. But to turn my judgment into a problematic one is only a small step further. Is it not possible that I can be mistaken? If I realize how fragile my assertion can be, a judgment that seemed so evident may now appear as completely problematic. It is important to say that “the content of the judgment” remains unaltered. My shoes and my closet conserve all their attributes framed from a quantitative, qualitative and relational point of view. What is under question is the modal status of my judgment, which drastically affects its content.

9.3 Kant's Reassessment of the Matter in Terms of Our "Holding for True": Its Three Modes—The Overarching Processes of "Opining", "Believing" and "Knowing"—Spheres of Belief—The Modes of Taking to Be True as Correlative to the Modes of Predicating—Certainty and Uncertainty as Instances of Necessity and Contingency, Respectively—Scientific Versus Doxastic and Credential Ascriptions—The Twofold Structure of Certainty: "Rational" and "Empirical"—How the Latter Divides Itself into "Immediate" and "Mediate", Possessing but an "Assertoric" Force—Truth Viewed from an Alethic and an Anthropological Perspective—Why, for Bolzano, Acts of Knowing Should Be Excluded from Holding True as Long as This Involves Confident Beliefs—Unconfident Beliefs Constitute no More Than Opinions—The Weaknesses of Transcendentalism: Greco on Transcendental Arguments

The relationship between modal judgments and modal categories is of crucial importance within the Kantian system. In the Transcendental Doctrine of Method of the First Critique, Kant presents three modes of our wide-ranging operation of "taking something to be true" (*Fürwahrhalten*): these are "having an opinion" or "opining" (*Meinen*), "believing" (*Glauben*) and "knowing" (*Wissen*)" (1911/1998: B 850).¹ It is interesting that the title of the section where this occurs presents the three modes in a different order, with knowing appearing before believing. This is an indication that although knowing is decidedly the highest epistemic mode, believing can, in practice, supersede it. In fact, as Kant makes clear, there is no space for opining in the field of "pure reason", which, like that of "morality", is a priori, and believing can play a role where knowing can not (1911/1998: B 850–851). That is the reason why Kant centres his attention in this section on three kinds of "belief" (*Glaube*)—not "opinion" (*Meinung*) or "knowledge" (*Wissen*)—that actually match the three modes of *Fürwahrhalten*. They are the "contingent" or "pragmatic", which stands for opining, the "doctrinal", which stands for knowing, and the "moral", which stands for believing itself (1911/1998: B 852–856).

More instructive for our current purpose is the account given in the *Jäsche Logic*, where Kant associates the three modes of opining, believing and knowing to the

¹This has been a long-neglected topic in Kant-related scholarship, but there are some recent works bringing it to the fore. See Chignell (2007a, b), de Jong (2010), Stevenson (2011, Chap. 6), van den Berg (2011), Pasternack (2014) and Venturinha (2015).

three kinds of modal judgments: problematic, assertoric and apodictic (1923/1992b: 66). Connecting these with the three kinds of modal categories, we can conclude the following: (1) when we take something to be true in the mode of opinion, that is problematically held because it appears as no more possible than impossible; (2) when something is taken for true in the mode of belief, we hold that assertorically because we assert that it exists even if we are aware that it might not be so; (3) finally, to take something to be true in the mode of knowledge is to take it apodictically because we recognize it as necessary and not as contingent. The categories of necessity and contingency are pivotal in the sense that they separate the domain of certainty from that of uncertainty in our *Fürwahrhalten*. The modes of opining and believing yield both contingent and uncertain results, whereas only knowing is necessary and certain. Given that apodicticity, such as found in mathematics, is not compatible with experience, Kant is forced to admit another genre of certainty besides the “rational” or “apodictic” one: it is what he calls “empirical certainty”, which, strangely enough, possesses only an “assertoric” force at either its “immediate” or “mediate” levels (1923/1992b: 71, translation slightly modified).

The *Critique of the Power of Judgment* rounds off the discussion establishing a difference, with the help of Aristotle, between two perspectives: one “in itself” (*an sich*), which is according to the truth (κατ’ ἀλήθειαν), and another “for us” (*für uns*), which is according to man (κατ’ ἀνθρώπου) (1913/2000: 462–463). The corollary of Kant’s doctrine is that our *Fürwahrhalten*, as an anthropological perspective, can be fundamentally applied to the plan of the “*mere credible*”, not to the plans of the “*opinabile*” and “*scibile*” (1913/2000: 467), where its performativity, from a transcendental point of view, is admittedly insufficient. One can understand why Bolzano excludes the sphere of knowledge from the domain of *Fürwahrhalten*, which requires an epistemic decision not only at the beginning but also during the maintenance of that belief, with the beliefs we hold with less confidence being regarded by him as simple instances of opinion (1990/2014: § 321). The price of substantiating a correspondence between our subjectivity and the world, even by means of a transcendental deduction, is, paradoxically, to lose contact with truth.

I have told this whole story to highlight the failure of Kant’s epistemological program when it comes to wiping out the ghost of radical scepticism. Kant seems even more attached to the problem of modality than Descartes was² and the transcendental argumentation promotes, as Greco put it, nothing but “ineffective responses” (2000: 73). As Greco sharply remarks, sceptical arguments

do not claim that the truth-condition on knowledge is not fulfilled. Rather, they claim that we lack appropriate evidence for our beliefs. According to these arguments, even if our beliefs are true, they do not amount to knowledge. (2000: 74)

In fact, my believing that I am working at this table, that I have a body and am surrounded by material objects, etc., though contextually justified, is not immune to

²Like Conant (2012), Pritchard also considers that “Cartesian and Kantian forms of skepticism are related in important ways” (2016: 189, n. 1).

a question about its evidentness. A classic form of epistemic contextualism would not help here. Can a Wittgensteinian-type of contextualism do better? I am convinced it can. But the story I have been telling since Chap. 8 will be incomplete if I do not add a final episode, one in which Husserl plays the leading role.

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Chapter 10

Bracketing Modality



Abstract 10.1 Husserl's version of transcendental subjectivism—Challenging the self-evidence of Descartes' *ego*—Factual recognitions and ontological claims: suspending all non-self-evident claims, including modal ones—Being as an appearance of validity—The decisive maintenance of the phenomenological suspension—Our natural connectionism seems to undermine a complete bracketing. 10.2 Beyond the Cartesian-Kantian “I think”: phenomenology as the study of the stream of consciousness—What distinguishes it from a contextualist epistemology—The Husserlian insistence on modality—The notion of “as if” applied to perceptive, retentive and recollective states—Explaining as-if experiences by means of faults and fictionalizations—Modal issues at the core of Husserl's concerns: “certainty of being” as stubbornly present. 10.3 Intentionality—How awareness is impregnated by otherness—The world and our intentional activities—Is an interdependent relationship sound?—External things as things meant—The spectrum of Husserl's self-repudiated psychologism. 10.4 Imaginative and suppositional capacities: Husserl after Aristotle on phantasy—The rationale of our thinking through images that are anchored to a hypoleptic background—Aquinas' misunderstanding of the Aristotelian doctrine of supposition—Pros and cons of Husserl's immanent philosophy—Hermberg's and Beyer's readings: a “lifeworldly” contextualism?

Keywords As if · Husserl · Intentionality · Phantasy · Phenomenology
Self-evidence

10.1 Husserl's Version of Transcendental Subjectivism—Challenging the Self-evidence of Descartes' *Ego*—Factual Recognitions and Ontological Claims: Suspending All Non-self-evident Claims, Including Modal Ones—Being as an Appearance of Validity—The Decisive Maintenance of the Phenomenological Suspension—Our Natural Connectionism Seems to Undermine a Complete Bracketing

The discovery of transcendental subjectivity is not, for someone like Husserl, properly due to Kant but to Descartes. Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*, as the title makes plain, depart from Descartes' analyses to explore a field of transcendental experience that, in the opinion of Husserl, was only adumbrated by the arrival at the *cogito*. In his search for an "apodictic evidence", which must not presuppose anything but must bring with it the seal of being so, Husserl promptly questions the apparently self-evident character of the Cartesian *ego* (1950/1960: 56 ff.).¹ True, that I am thinking these things does not prove anything except the fact that I am thinking them. No ontological claim can be made out of this recognition, which is purely factual. The Husserlian strategy consists then in bracketing all claims that do not possess self-evidence, beginning with modal claims.

Husserl's first meditation immediately invites us to suspend our quest for definitive answers and to concentrate instead on an exhaustive investigation of what consciousness discloses. To enter into the transcendental constitution of man is not thus a *terminus ad quem*, as it was for Descartes, but the *terminus a quo* of epistemology. It is an absolutely new space of elements that opens itself to the consideration of the transcendental philosopher, who, Husserl maintains, cannot be first and foremost interested in modal issues. These issues are obviously there, but we must learn to carry out philosophical examinations while suspending them until finding clear justifications. What follows is that the "being of the world" (*Sein der Welt*), which has always been taken as evident, becomes now an "acceptance-phenomenon" (*Geltungssphänomen*), that is, something that *appears to me as valid* (1950/1960: 58). The *phenomenal* character of the world then comes associated to a "claim to actuality" (*Wirklichkeitsanspruch*) (1950/1960: 59). When I attempt to do a phenomenological reduction of this thing called experience, I do not cancel my credence in the externality of things or the authenticity of my memories and anticipations. But all this suffers a modification that is provoked by the interruption of "the natural believing in existence [*Seinsglaube*] involved in experiencing the world" (1950/1960: 59). What Husserl urges us to do is to keep the "phenomenological" or "transcendental", which for him means the same, mode of suspension (*ἐπιλογή*) (1950/1960: 61). This is the

¹References are to the *Husserliana* edition, the pagination of which is given in the margins of the English translation.

actual meaning of the Husserlian “parenthesizing” or “bracketing” (*Einklammern*), in the midst of which we can analyse, without prejudice, the horizon we project (1950/1960: 60). Of course the radical ἐποχή that Husserl proposes seems amazingly difficult to achieve since our presuppositions would have to be *totally* suspended, even at the more remote levels, to not interfere with the results of the inspection. What happens is that our experience is based on a connectionist structure in which no item is useless.

10.2 Beyond the Cartesian-Kantian “I Think”: Phenomenology as the Study of the Stream of Consciousness—What Distinguishes It from a Contextualist Epistemology—The Husserlian Insistence on Modality—The Notion of “as if” Applied to Perceptive, Retentive and Recollective States—Explaining as-if Experiences by Means of Faults and Fictionalizations—Modal Issues at the Core of Husserl’s Concerns: “Certainty of Being” as Stubbornly Present

Husserl is not interested in the Cartesian *ego cogito*—or in the Kantian *Ich denke*—but in the torrent of *cogitationes* that are transcendently produced and that form “my own pure conscious life” (1950/1960: 60). Phenomenology has indeed the merit of seeking a description of the given without endorsing any metaphysical theory about it. It is a methodically descriptive approach to the real that aims to reveal the judgments presupposed in each situation. At first sight, there seems to be much in common with a contextualist epistemology. But there is an important point that divides the two efforts.

Husserl brackets the modal problem but keeps it persistently in sight, as the second meditation attests. He speaks of concrete empirical modes of “perception” (*Wahrnehmung*), “retention” (*Retention*) and “recollection” (*Wiedererinnerung*), and opposes them to those of an “as-if experience” (*Erfahrung als ob*), namely “as-if perception” (*Wahrnehmung als ob*), “as-if retention” (*Retention als ob*) and “as-if recollection” (*Wiedererinnerung als ob*) (1950/1960: 66). An easy way to interpret these oppositions would be to say that while I can truly perceive my lamp, I could also perceive something that I could mistakenly take for my lamp. Analogously, while I can passively retain the physiognomy of a person, I could also passively retain it wrongly, including in it physiognomic aspects that the person does not actually have. Thirdly, while I can actively remember some person, I could actively remember her in a disproportioned manner. There is another way of interpreting the Husserlian notions, which is to look at them as real experiences, on the one hand, and fake experiences, on the other, with the latter having the sole purpose of enriching the

phenomenological analysis with counter-examples. Yet none of these interpretations are correct. What Husserl has in mind with the idea of *als ob*—which had been popularized by Vaihinger in his *The Philosophy of “As If”*—is modality. This becomes clear when he states that the “pure possibility” (*reine Möglichkeit*) of the empirical is grounded on a “pure representativeness” (*reine Vorstellbarkeit*) or “imaginableness” (*Phantasierbarkeit*) (1950/1960: 66).² In fact, Husserl’s third meditation opposes the notion of “actuality” (*Wirklichkeit*) to that of “phantasy” (*Phantasie*) or “as-if actuality” (*Wirklichkeit als ob*) (1950/1960: 94). It is the problem of the “certainty of being” (*Seinsgewißheit*) that is resolutely at stake and thus we find the “modes of consciousness of positionality” (*Bewußtseinsmodi der Positionalität*) alongside those of the “quasi-positionality” (*Quasi-Positionalität*), which is conceived by Husserl in the mode of the “as if” or in the form of “phantasying” (*Phantasieren*) (1950/1960: 94). This “positionality” comes evidently from Kant, who does not see “being” as a “real predicate” but as “merely the positing [*Position*] of a thing or of certain determinations in themselves” (1911/1998: B 626). It is still an inheritance of the scholastic *com-positio*, something that is definitely not on the agenda of epistemic contextualism.

10.3 Intentionality—How Awareness Is Impregnated by Otherness—The World and Our Intentional Activities—Is an Interdependent Relationship Sound?—External Things as Things Meant—The Spectrum of Husserl’s Self-repudiated Psychologism

One can argue that Husserl’s emphasis on the intentional structure of our consciousness, which occupies an important part of the second meditation, solves the whole question. Is the recognition that there cannot be an inner experience without an outer world being meant not already an answer? Following Brentano’s lead, Husserl acutely observes that there is no point in admitting a closure of the *ego* for this is never *in itself* but always directed to other entities. Everything that falls within my visual field, for example, is treated by me as *external to myself*. The same holds for my thought that I should go for a coffee in a minute. When I idealize the possibility of walking to the coffee shop, I by no means represent this possible situation as coinciding with me. Quite the contrary, it is projected as a possibility of mine exactly because I could stay at home or do something else. What intentionality reveals, in Husserl’s view, is that our awareness is indisputably an awareness of something other than ourselves. But there is the other side of the coin and that is the inexorable dependence of what exists in the world upon our “intentional performance” (1950/1960: 104). Contrary to the natural conception of knowledge, according to which this seems to be formed

²Dorion Cairns does not make a distinction between the expressions “*reine Vorstellbarkeit*” and “*Phantasierbarkeit*” translating both as “imaginableness” (Husserl 1960: 66).

in the subject while caused by the objects themselves ($O \rightarrow S$), and equally contrary to the Cartesian-Kantian conception, which gives prominence to the subject ($S \rightarrow O$), intentionality defends a mutual relation ($S \leftrightarrow O$). What this amounts to is that the things I have before me and the coffee shop at the corner of the street require my intentional projection of them, as *cogitata*, to be what they are. Consequently, without an admission of their complete independence of subjective conditions, the modal impasse is maintained. Little wonder that Frege had always regarded Husserl's views with distrust,³ even if Husserl himself had eagerly sided, ever since his *Logical Investigations*, with Frege's anti-psychologism.⁴

10.4 Imaginative and Suppositional Capacities: Husserl After Aristotle on Phantasy—The Rationale of Our Thinking Through Images that Are Anchored to a Hypoleptic Background—Aquinas' Misunderstanding of the Aristotelian Doctrine of Supposition—Pros and Cons of Husserl's Immanent Philosophy—Hermberg's and Beyer's Readings: A "Lifeworldly" Contextualism?

The capacity to phantasize is one of the most powerful of all human capacities. We usually take phantasy to be a creative endeavour of whose nature we are completely aware. I can phantasize, for instance, that one day I will be visiting Tokyo. What I do in this circumstance is to imagine myself surrounded by huge buildings with luminous advertisements of famous companies, crossing a street alongside thousands of people, the majority of them Asian, who speak mostly an Asiatic language that I identify as being Japanese, etc. This picture is provided by the mental faculty that Aristotle had already called φαντασία.⁵ But, for Aristotle, I cannot relate all those aspects by merely activating that function.

If I did not have a massive number of suppositions criss-crossing my mind, I could not produce any instances of imagination. This fundamental supposition is called by Aristotle ὑπόληψις and it is much more present in our lives than we would expect. In truth, it is not only when we deliberately phantasize that we create guiding images for ourselves—and this is what lies at the core of Husserl's treatment of phantasy. These images, the Aristotelian φαντάσματα, are fully necessary to carry out our most banal activities. We could do nothing without them and, a fortiori, we could do nothing without the hypoleptic background that supports them. This has been neglected since the time of Aquinas, who in his commentaries on Aristotle's *De anima* interprets the

³This becomes noticeable in a letter to Husserl dated 30 October to 1 November 1906 (Frege 1976/1980: 101–105/66–70).

⁴See in this regard Husserl (1975/2001: 172, n. **/318, n. 6).

⁵This is a key notion in the final part of Aristotle's *De anima* (1957: 427b15 ff.)

concept of ὑπόληψις as “opinion” (*opinio*) and “judgement” (*acceptio*) (1984/1951: 191/§§ 632–633 and 636).⁶ But Aristotle himself avers that the “supposition” can assume different forms, with these including “knowledge, opinion, prudence, and their opposites” (1957: 427b25). What Aristotle is doing, like Husserl, is calling attention to the extremely delicate texture of our experience, which is based on a combination of suppositions that we rarely identify as such.

The great virtue of Husserl’s phenomenology was its insistence on looking at our intentional processes not only as involving a *cogito* and a *cogitatum* but as constituting themselves a *cogitatum*. It clearly brings us to a field of immanence, where a myriad of relations can be perceived. However, the universalistic project of a “solipsistically reduced egology” (solipsistisch *beschränkte Egologie*) (1950/1960: 181) as the epistemological foundation of a phenomenological intersubjectivism seems bound to fail from the start. As Kevin Hermberg recognizes:

What is left after the reduction seems to be merely the subject and its experience, i.e., consciousness. Everything else seems to have been excluded from the interrogation. With his phenomenology, then, Husserl found presuppositionless certainty but seemingly at the expense of being able to say that anything or anybody exists—that is, at the expense of the world. It is easy to see, then, [...] why he would be accused of falling into solipsism’s trap. (2006: x)

It is exactly where the Husserlian proposal gets tangled up that the Wittgensteinian one can be fully appreciated. Differently from Christian Beyer, who has sketched “a version of contextualism about knowledge” partly based on what he termed “the lifeworldly background of epistemic justification, an idea originating from Husserl and Wittgenstein” (2007: 291), I argue in the next chapter that Husserl’s “life-world” is problematic and that only Wittgenstein’s “background” can be usefully taken in by epistemic contextualism.

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⁶In the same vein, W. S. Hett translates Aristotle’s ὑπόληψις as “judgement”.

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Chapter 11

Social Dependency



Abstract 11.1 The outer world as an ingredient of the inner world—Reconsideration of what must be naturally assumed: levels of belief—Husserl’s retrieval of Leibniz’s concept of “monad”—A plain admission: monadic otherness—Influence of Heidegger’s philosophical anthropology—Limitations of the Husserlian idea of an “open community of monads” for a social epistemology. 11.2 Wittgenstein’s “language games” and the acquisition of language—Learning a word implies mastering epistemic fundamentals that are needed for disambiguation according to the context in question—Wittgenstein and contextualism—Contextual and extra-contextual standards: a pragmatic view of knowledge requires that we relax our epistemic demands—Cohen on social groups and reasoning abilities—Objectivity reconsidered—The relativistic character of a contextualist view and Wittgenstein’s notion of “inherited background”—Epistemic fundamentals are not socially determined—Distinguishing between ontological and social dependency as a form of conciliating objectivity and context-sensitivity. 11.3 Wittgenstein on certainty and Moore’s misinterpretation of the sociability of language—The grammar of “to doubt” and “to know”—How the bipolarity of propositions including these verbs works in some contexts but not in others—Ontological suspicions as illusive: they constitute merely violations of logical grammar—Radicalizing the scenario: a closer look at radical scepticism—Pritchard and the Wittgensteinian “groundlessness of our believing”—Why an “epistemic angst” only makes sense at a second-order level of consideration, which presupposes a first-order assimilation of the world: our “arational hinge commitments”—Assessing Pritchard’s problem of the “epistemic vertigo”: Moyal-Sharrock’s interpretation—A moral-epistemological way-out?

Keywords Epistemic angst · Epistemic vertigo · Otherness · Pritchard
Social epistemology · Wittgenstein

11.1 The Outer World as an Ingredient of the Inner World—Reconsideration of What Must Be Naturally Assumed: Levels of Belief—Husserl’s Retrieval of Leibniz’s Concept of “Monad”—A Plain Admission: Monadic Otherness—Influence of Heidegger’s Philosophical Anthropology—Limitations of the Husserlian Idea of an “Open Community of Monads” for a Social Epistemology

It has been pointed out at the beginning of this book (Sect. 1.1) that knowledge of situations depends, among other aspects, on positing the others as inclusive of experience. Otherness is not consciously postulated but naturally assumed, in the same way as the rest of the outer world is assumed. We were never taught while still a babe in arms that other persons exist. More than that, we were never instructed to believe that they have minds and are not robots or zombies. To conceive of the possibility of robots or zombies existing is something that occurs at an ancillary level of belief, one that was acquired on the basis of a primordial belief. It is only because the latter allows us to comprehend other human beings that we can think of alternative ways of living that could quite easily resemble our own. But the philosophical *readmission* of otherness is demanding.

Husserl’s analyses in the *Meditations* restore the Leibnizian idea of “monad” to illustrate the closure that constitutes us even if the space of our consciousness is populated by other selves. For Leibniz, independently of the presence of others in my life, I am this “unity” (μονάς), which has “no windows through which anything could enter [it] or depart from [it]” (1885/2014: 607/15). From a metaphysical point of view, like that of the *Monadology*, this is beyond question. Otherness is something that appears within my projective horizon, which is all-embracing. But I do not cease to attribute to others a similar monadic projection, something that even the most vigorous solipsist would have difficulty in rejecting. Thus we find in Husserl’s fifth meditation some bizarre notions like those of “*thereness-for-me* of others” (Für-mich-da *der Anderen*) or “*thereness-for-everyone*” (Für-jedermann-da) (1950/1960: 124). He also speaks of “belonging to the surrounding world for everyone” (*Umweltlichkeit für jedermann*) (1950/1960: 127) as well as of “existence” or “being-there” (*Dasein*) and “being-there-too” or “coexistence” (*Mitdasein*) (1950/1960: 151). The influence of Heidegger’s philosophical anthropology in *Being and Time* is patent, although Husserl is original in introducing themes such as the phenomenology of the body and others’ “subjective processes” or “experiences” (*Erlebnisse*), which take place in a “life-world” (*Lebenswelt*) replete with socio-cultural determinations (1950/1960: 157 ff.). However, the “open community of monads” (*offene Monadengemeinschaft*) vindicated by Husserl (1950/1960: 158) does not seem to be the best way to guarantee an epistemological foundation for the sciences in general. *Pace* authors such as Hermberg (2006, 2011) and Beyer (2007), who see Husserl’s later work as disentan-

gling the issue of solipsism, we can look with suspicion at the attempt made in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* to combine what appears from a phenomenological-transcendental perspective to be irreconcilable: immanentism and social epistemology.

11.2 Wittgenstein’s “Language Games” and the Acquisition of Language—Learning a Word Implies Mastering Epistemic Fundamentals that Are Needed for Disambiguation According to the Context in Question—Wittgenstein and Contextualism—Contextual and Extra-Contextual Standards: A Pragmatic View of Knowledge Requires that We Relax Our Epistemic Demands—Cohen on Social Groups and Reasoning Abilities—Objectivity Reconsidered—The Relativistic Character of a Contextualist View and Wittgenstein’s Notion of “Inherited Background”—Epistemic Fundamentals Are not Socially Determined—Distinguishing Between Ontological and Social Dependency as a Form of Conciliating Objectivity and Context-Sensitivity

In his later philosophy Wittgenstein describes our social practices in terms of “language games”. His view is that language is not acquired by means of an instruction that is independent of life. Even infants are already in the midst of a certain activity when they learn their first words. Learning the meaning of words is, indeed, but part of an extraordinarily complex process that involves the grasping of key epistemic operators. A child learns the word “horse” at the same time that she learns, or has learned, many other things. For example, she learns that the same word is used for *real* horses and *decorative* or *toy* horses. But she also learns that decorative or toy horses are *real*, in contrast with *non-real* decorative or toy horses, as when they are drawn or imagined. She learns that she can touch the horse, if it exists, and feel a surface because it has a body, be it a living or an inanimate body, with the differences already pointed out (Sect. 1.5). She learns that the distance to that body can be changed through some movement of hers. And she starts to integrate all these data into a coherent whole, according to and by means of which she acts. We can understand why Wittgenstein takes up Frege’s context principle (see Sect. 4.2). It would be of little use to consult the dictionary in order to learn the meaning of words if we were not familiar with innumerable meanings allied to them. He writes in the *Philosophical Investigations* that

with the mere naming of a thing, nothing has yet been done. Nor *has* it a name except in a game. This was what Frege meant too when he said that a word has a meaning only in the context of a sentence [*im Satzzusammenhang*]. (2009: § 49)

This is where Wittgenstein and contextualists converge more strongly. Knowledge can only be explained in a situated manner for it responds to epistemic demands that are context-dependent. I know that my table is heavy but that, unlike my house, I can move it around. I know that it is made of wood, not of concrete. I know that because I know what wood and concrete are, that they are different solid materials and that, unlike other things in the world, they are not in a liquid or gaseous state. Now, consider the following dialogue between me and an impertinent student in a philosophy class¹:

Me I know this is a table.
Student Do you?
Me What do you mean?
Student Do you know what the object's made of?
Me It's made of wood.
Student What kind of wood?
Me Plywood, I suppose.
Student Do you suppose?
Me I know it isn't made of concrete.
Student Have you tested samples of the object in a lab?
Me No.
Student Do you even know what plywood and concrete really are?
Me (angry) Does that matter?
Student I guess you don't know.

This embarrassing position results from my student introducing in the discussion *extra-contextual* standards. It is plain that to say “I know this is a table” I do not need to know the material of the object, I do not need to chemically examine samples of it nor do I need to specify what scientifically corresponds to the definition of the various materials I can conjecture as plausible possibilities for its constitution. My student is asking me *too much* given the context—or maybe not. What happens is that if we raised standards so high, knowledge would be almost unattainable. Therefore, following Quine's lesson mentioned above (Sect. 2.1), we need to relax our epistemic demands if we want to say that we *know* such-and-such in a pragmatic way. Both contextualists and Wittgenstein agree on that. But there are differences between their views.

For a contextualist like Cohen, “the standards in effect in a particular context are determined by the normal reasoning powers of the attributor's social group” (1986: 579; 1987: 15). And he admits:

This raises the question [of] *which* social group of the attributor (A) is the relevant group [relevant one]. Is it the society at large in which A lives? ... his professional circles? Perhaps

¹This dialogue is inspired by the lawyer's interrogation presented in DeRose (1992: 925–926).

the standards that apply are determined by *A*'s own reasoning ability (in which case they are not intersubjective at all). I am not sure how to decide this. (1986: 579; 1987: 15)

That I can rightly assert that a table is made of wood depends on nothing else than its being in fact made of wood. I may ignore many aspects involved in my own assertion, but I am already reaching some truth. Imagine then someone who has never seen a table made of wood since she lives in a society that is only acquainted with tables made of synthetic materials such as plastic. Would we grant that, according to her social group, this person can make a *knowledge* attribution about our table? She can certainly make it, but it will be wrong. Similarly, would we concede that someone with no training in chemistry and thus with no reasoning ability in the field can venture to *know* what the composition of plastic is? True, knowledge is a human thing but, as I have reiterated in the first half of this book, an objectivist perspective must be assumed if a robust epistemology is sought. Nonetheless, is not epistemic contextualism, in which "the knowledge account of assertion naturally takes a relativized form" (DeRose 2009: 99), Wittgensteinian in nature? I do not think so. What interests Wittgenstein most is not the understanding of human knowledge in analogy with our use of an adjective like "flat", as is recurrently stated in contextualist literature. A passage from Cohen is again worth quoting:

Even for (relatively) uncontroversial cases of predicates whose application depend on context-sensitive standards, e.g., "flat", it is very difficult to say exactly how the context determines the standards ["how the standards get set"]. I am not proposing a semantic theory for predicates of this kind. I am just proposing that we view the knowledge predicate as a predicate of this kind ["we add the knowledge predicate to the list"]. (1999: 61; 2000: 98)

Wittgenstein's contextual approach to knowledge is very different indeed. As previously suggested (Sect. 7.1), what he investigates in his later writings are those hinges that in each case form the "inherited background" (*überkommene Hintergrund*) to which we appeal to distinguish "between true and false" (1974: § 94). The acquisition and use of what I have called key epistemic operators are for him subordinated to the natural course of our lives and not to any social determination. That even babies apply modal categories when they take an object as existing, looking at it or touching it, is not something caused by our socialization. Some animals do exactly the same at a basic level. What this shows is that our social dependency, with its rule-following, lies within a deeper form of ontological dependence which matches the very idea of human nature. This opens the way to conciliate the contextualism that must be conceived in order to render a situation epistemologically intelligible with the objectivism that a contextualist perspective seems to challenge, with sceptical paradoxes appearing in an entirely new light.

11.3 Wittgenstein on Certainty and Moore’s Misinterpretation of the Sociability of Language—The Grammar of “to Doubt” and “to Know”—How the Bipolarity of Propositions Including These Verbs Works in Some Contexts but not in Others—Ontological Suspicions as Illusive: They Constitute Merely Violations of Logical Grammar—Radicalizing the Scenario: A Closer Look at Radical Scepticism—Pritchard and the Wittgensteinian “Groundlessness of Our Believing”—Why an “Epistemic Angst” Only Makes Sense at a Second-Order Level of Consideration, Which Presupposes a First-Order Assimilation of the World: Our “Arational Hinge Commitments”—Accessing Pritchard’s Problem of the “Epistemic Vertigo”: Moyal-Sharrock’s Interpretation—A Moral-Epistemological Way-Out?

Wittgenstein’s reflections in *On Certainty* extend semantic contextualism to a rejection of scepticism. He criticizes the response given by Moore to the sceptic as involving a misunderstanding of the social character of our language. When Moore’s sceptic observes a tree and claims that he cannot be sure about the tree he sees, Moore is obviously right in affirming that he must *know* it. But Wittgenstein’s insightful point is that Moore’s argumentation presupposes the intelligibility of the claim made by the sceptic, as if it could be a question of truth or falsehood. As said above (Sect. 7.1), what Wittgenstein makes clear is that such a claim does not admit to be true or false like other claims. When I observe something and have doubts about it, I definitely need to have sufficient reasons for that. Maybe I am observing it at a considerable distance or I have been medicated in such a way that I recognize my perceptive faculties may be affected. In these situations it would make sense to say that I doubt seeing what I effectively see. But in a normal setting this cannot happen. Wittgenstein’s strategy is to ask how it would be if the sceptic were right in his doubt, something we cannot represent at all. One thing is to mistrust our perception, conceding that an object observed may have been misinterpreted. In this case the object will remain there, in itself, and the problem is only one of interpreting it. Quite a different thing is to evoke an existential doubt, with what is in front of us becoming ontologically suspicious. Wittgenstein argues that this ontological suspicion is illusory. His lesson is that the sceptic only pronounces it but cannot assimilate what it involves in his own life. And this happens because a suspicion of this kind violates logical grammar, which, more than constituting a theoretical framework, is practically or societally based. What counts as grammatical, as logical in this sense, is what human beings *do*.

Yet the most forceful sceptic could still riposte that my certainty of there being a tree, as part of a communal background of certainties, is something *I* merely assume, and even if it does not seem possible to deny this, I cannot ultimately go beyond the simple admission of my *belief* in it. In fact, I cannot prove that I did not take drugs and am currently in such a medical state that I do not even notice that I may be wrong about what I see. That is why, as already noted (Sect. 7.4), Pritchard highlights Wittgenstein's recognition of "the groundlessness of our believing",² considering that our epistemic angst can be remedied if we realize the maintenance of various "arational hinge commitments" (2012: 258; 2016: 69, 89, 102–103 and 174–175). This offers a way to deal with the problem of scepticism that is incomparably firmer than the typical contextualist solution, with the limitations we have identified (Sect. 6.1). But we saw that Pritchard also calls attention to an "epistemic vertigo" (2016: 184–188; also Boulton and Pritchard 2013: 33–34), a residuum of scepticism that, even against our will, we cannot dismiss. Danièle Moyal-Sharrock writes that "[i]f vertigo is experienced, it is only by the epistemologist who assumes knowledge—justified true belief—to be the highest possible form of certainty" (2016: 36). But I agree with Pritchard. As seen in Chaps. 8–10, scepticism has a corrosive strength that cannot be eliminated once and for all by means of any theoretical argumentation. The only way to override vertigo is, I shall argue in the last chapter, by taking a moral-epistemological attitude.

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²Wittgenstein's expression is "*die Grundlosigkeit unseres Glaubens*" (1974: § 166).

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Chapter 12

Moral Matters



Abstract 12.1. Ricœur and the distinction between ethical goodness and moral normativity: how one does not imply the other—The intimacy of ethics contrasts with the publicity of morality—Acquiring moral norms and ethical principles: both work in a context-sensitive way—Ethical formality as empty: morality provides the content for an application of ethics—Actions are reflected in the world—The dispelling of epistemic vertigo: moral commitments as hinges—The question of deriving moral norms from ethical principles. 12.2 Rawls’ contextualist “veil of ignorance” in political philosophy—A parallel thought experiment in morals: the disclosure principle (DP)—If nothing of what I did were concealed, would I care about it?—The Epicurean dilemma—Pragmatism and shame—Refusal of any sensible interferences with one’s actions when it comes to moral responsibility. 12.3 The peculiarity of akratic actions—Doing *w* instead of *r* as resulting from a conflict of reasons, not from ignorance—Impossibility of knowing how to act—Our legitimations are of equal value. 12.4 Is there a randomness of practical justification?—Positive and negative ethical experiences: the satisfaction for having done *r* and the dissatisfaction for having done *w*—Applying DP to each case: peace and torment—The Socratic involuntariness of ignorant choices collides with the impracticality of moral knowledge—How DP goes along with the context-sensitivity of our rational decisions being itself context-sensitive—Recognizing the fluidity of *r-w* standards.

Keywords Akratic actions · Context-sensitivity · Disclosure principle · Ethics
Morality · Moral knowledge

12.1 Ricœur and the Distinction Between Ethical Goodness and Moral Normativity: How One Does not Imply the Other—The Intimacy of Ethics Contrasts with the Publicity of Morality—Acquiring Moral Norms and Ethical Principles: Both Work in a Context-Sensitive Way—Ethical Formality as Empty: Morality Provides the Content for an Application of Ethics—Actions are Reflected in the World—The Dispelling of Epistemic Vertigo: Moral Commitments as Hinges—The Question of Deriving Moral Norms from Ethical Principles

In the last chapter of this book, I would like to concentrate on practical issues. Paul Ricœur made an important distinction between “ethics” (*éthique*) and “morality” (*morale*), using the first term to capture the pursuit of the good in our lives—what he calls “the *aim* of an accomplished life”—and the second for what is mandatory in a society—“the articulation of this aim in *norms*” (1990/1992: 200/170). At first sight, there seems to be no difference between these two views since my striving for a “good life”, as “the ethical aim”, does not seem possible without a commitment to obeying the norms that I recognize exist (1990/1992: 202 ff./171 ff.). But the question is not so simple. It is perfectly possible to pursue the good while disrespecting societal norms, namely if these norms themselves disrespect fundamental rights as in dictatorial political regimes. And it is also perfectly possible to follow all the rules and yet not encompass the good, as happens with those who are exemplary citizens but horrid persons in their relationships. What Ricœur, joining an old school of ethicists, points out is that there is a space of intimacy that is not permeable to the public space where our lives evolve. This inner space concerns what I, as an individual, do, not others’ estimation of me. A life played solely in the public realm can actually be said to be unethical.

Now, we have all been taught rules of conduct—at home, at school, by the media. But how did we learn an ethical principle? Take the example of “you shall not kill”. We immediately need to specify that this principle applies to killing human beings, not to killing animals that are part of our diet or that annoy us, like insects, and that cases of self-defence and war are excluded. Context is equally determinant in this sphere.¹ But without pondering about what a situation of killing someone really means to you, the domain of the ethical will remain inaccessible. Ethics, one could say, is my own business; morality is communitarian. However, if the ethical life does not have a connection with the moral one, it will be empty. Whereas ethics is formal, morality provides the content, the field of application. When my conscience tells me that I should not do, or should not have done, such and such, I am never

¹On moral contextualism, see, among others, Timmons (1999), Montminy (2007), Brogaard (2008), Greco (2008: 435–436) and Evers (2014).

alone in existence, as if I were making use of a private language. Here we can see that in a moral scenario there is no room for an epistemic vertigo. Not even the deepest modal uncertainty dissolves my moral conscience. Like hinges, our moral commitments prevail. I cannot be fair or unfair only to myself given that my actions have repercussions in the world. What I do, right or wrong, in good will or in bad, I do to other people, to the planet, etc. That is why in the end it is morality that matters. The question is then: can ethical principles be developed in such a way that moral principles would simply follow on from them?

12.2 Rawls' Contextualist "Veil of Ignorance" in Political Philosophy—A Parallel Thought Experiment in Morals: The Disclosure Principle (DP)—If Nothing of What I Did Were Concealed, Would I Care About It?—The Epicurean Dilemma—Pragmatism and Shame—Refusal of Any Sensible Interferences with One's Actions When It Comes to Moral Responsibility

John Rawls' "veil of ignorance" became notorious in political philosophy by inviting us to reflect upon what a decent society would look like without any biased contribution of our own (1999: 118–123). His idea is that if we were to pick what principles should guide society and had no knowledge of our future situation, we could arrive at impartial decisions. I would like to propose another thought experiment with an application to morals, which comes as a consequence of the previous reflection. I shall call it *The Disclosure Principle* (DP for short). What is behind DP is the following exercise: imagine that whatever you do, even the things that only you know about, can be seen and would be seen by those you most care for. That strangers would know what you have done is not at issue here. The tenet of the experiment is that those who really matter to you would have your life completely disclosed to them. And the crux of the argument is: are you prepared to change your life in the face of that? One of Epicurus' most famous sayings is one cited by Plutarch:

Will the wise man [ὁ σοφός] do things that laws forbid, knowing that he will not be found out? A simple answer is not easy to find. (1926: 120–121; cf. also 388)

There are many interesting points in this saying, especially the normativity of these "laws" and the "knowing" what will inevitably take place. Someone who answers "Yes" will be considering the Epicurean scenario simply at a moral level. This person has good reasons for that since Epicurus' "wise man" seems to be solely infringing the law, not what his conscience precludes, and he knows that no one can find him guilty. The Epicurean character could become a national hero if he were to murder a dictator in order to set his people free. But Epicurus mentions precisely a "wise man", one for whom the apparent innocuousness of the situation cannot obscure the

fact that *he himself* would know it. “Yes, he’d know it, no one else,” the pragmatist could shout! The problem is that while he knows it, the world shares this knowing with him. What I have done, including what only I myself know, is carved in the history of being. My conscience speaks to me because the fact is out there and, even remotely, it can become known to others. I feel ashamed because I cannot erase and rewind that piece of my life. It is there, in existence, forever, and I am the sole person responsible for that. No externalities made me err. Strangely enough, it was a consciously deliberated choice for otherwise I would not despair about it. Dispositions, feelings, passions, sensations—these are all secondary elements that our reason, more or less aptly, is able to deal with. Petronius does not seem to be on the right track when he affirms “There is less guilt in a poor man’s sin” (1913: 133.2).² To wash one’s hands of moral responsibility by appealing to these factors is the lowest to which a human being can descend.

12.3 The Peculiarity of Akratic Actions—Doing *w* Instead of *r* as Resulting from a Conflict of Reasons, not from Ignorance—Impossibility of Knowing How to Act—Our Legitimations are of Equal Value

That an agent can choose to do what she judges to be wrong instead of what she judges to be right, experiencing ethical qualms as a consequence, is, in the philosophy of action, a problem of “akrasia”—from the Greek ἀκρασία, which literally means “lack of power”. Contrary to the Socratic perspective, according to which evil is only done by ignorance, unintentionally, the existence of akratic actions depends on the admission that they are intentional. It is exactly because the akratic agent can find sufficient reasons for doing *w* that she thought it would be better for her not to do *r*, even if she recognizes the latter as what should ultimately be done. What is at stake is a conflict of reasons. The Socratic argument is that the agent was ignorant when *w* was contemplated as a possibility and that under closer scrutiny *r* would have appeared as the rational decision. It is not my aim here to contribute to the debate on akrasia, which raises many other questions.³ My view is that the agent does not feel herself weak but divided. It is not because she definitely wanted to do *r* but is not strong enough to decide to do it that she does *w*. She does *w* for the simple reason that she is not absolutely sure about the value of *r*. She may be more inclined to believe that doing *r* is better than doing *w*, but she does not *know* it. In fact, no one can ever claim to *know* something in this realm. The ignorance Socrates talks about can be identified but cannot be dispelled. As long as the agent has a good reason for her action, its legitimation is as good as any other.

²Here is the Latin original: “*Quisquis peccat inops, minor est reus*”.

³See in this regard, besides Davidson (2001), Mele (1987) and Berkich (2007).

12.4 Is There a Randomness of Practical Justification?—Positive and Negative Ethical Experiences: The Satisfaction for Having done *r* and the Dissatisfaction for Having Done *w*—Applying DP to Each Case: Peace and Torment—The Socratic Involuntariness of Ignorant Choices Collides with the Impracticality of Moral Knowledge—How DP Goes Along with the Context-Sensitivity of Our Rational Decisions Being Itself Context-Sensitive—Recognizing the Fluidity of *r-w* Standards

If my account is right, then it seems as if no action could be considered essentially wrong for there would always be a reason to justify it, the reason that led the agent to decide that way. Had the agent no reasons to present, we could not talk about an *action* at all. Unintentional “actions” are therefore excluded. Of course what looks like a rational decision can include, and generally does include, affective features. The problem of human agency is that it takes place, to use Kant’s words, in “a pathologically affected will” (1913/1996: 19). But the presence of pathological elements in our decision-making does not cancel out the presence of rational elements—and these are those that turn an action into an action. It is here that DP can be of help. What is indeed the benchmark of our ethical experiences? There are two kinds, one positive and one negative. A positive ethical experience is one in which we have done *r* and are satisfied at having done what was the *right* thing to do. In a negative ethical experience we have reasons for having done *w* but cannot help feeling that it was *wrong* to have done it. DP works both ways. In the positive setting, I can project myself as being observed by the world in my *rightness* and feel that even if no one can appreciate my conduct, I am at peace with myself. In the negative setting, I feel constantly tormented by my deeds and cannot stop imagining that my *wrongness* now forms part of the world. Was Socrates therefore correct in that I should have reflected upon my action and decided for *r*, having been ignorant in deciding for *w*? I would not say so. Again, there can be no such thing as moral *knowledge*. The positive and negative poles of the ethical experience simply indicate a momentary state of consciousness that is context-sensitive. The heuristic advantage of DP is that it accompanies this context-sensitivity crystallizing what human beings, in their erratic nature, *believe* each time to be the best or worst picture they want to eternalize of themselves.

There is a provocative verse of Herberto Helder’s that synthesizes two diametrically opposed pictures we can make of someone, in this case the poet himself. It says “To you children are nothing, the flesh of your flesh are your poems” (2014: 717, my translation).⁴ That a father is able to repudiate his children only to serve poetry

⁴The Portuguese original reads: “filhos não te são nada, carne da tua carne são os poemas”.

seems morally unacceptable and we can form a horrible picture of this person for ourselves. However, we can also form a glorious picture of the poet who sacrifices his whole life for the sake of his oeuvre. I do not want to suggest that this decision should be classified as right. I am firmly convinced that it is wrong. But the example shows how fluid the application of *r-w* standards can be.

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