

SO YOU THINK YOU CAN TELL SENSE FROM NONSENSE, REAL DOUBTS FROM SCEPTICAL GAMES

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Abstract: In order to consider whether Wittgenstein's strategy regarding scepticism succeeds or fails, I will examine his approach to certainty. To this end, I will establish a comparison between different uses of language as mentioned in *On Certainty* and his distinction between meaningful, senseless, and nonsense statements in the *Tractatus*. This comparison has three advantages: first, it allows us to clarify the role of the so-called special propositions in *On Certainty*; second, it illuminates the relationship between some features of special propositions in *On Certainty* and the characteristics that define senseless statements in the *Tractatus*; and, finally, it shows the status of the so-called insight-ful nonsenses in the *Tractatus*. As a consequence of this argument, I believe in a halfway house between the so-called traditional and new interpretations of *Tractatus*.

1. Sense and scepticism

In his last text, *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein develops his ideas on scepticism and the limits of knowledge. At the end of his life, Wittgenstein sought to describe the structure of knowledge and derive epistemological conclusions from his linguistic analysis of epistemic terms. A good way to understand the epistemological entries that *On Certainty* contains, is to reflect upon Wittgenstein's analysis of the notion of doubt. His reflections on the notion of doubt, its role in our language, and the linguistic and action-based behaviours associated with its use allow him to distinguish knowledge from certainty, and to view scepticism in a new way.

In order to consider whether Wittgenstein's strategy in relation to scepticism succeeds or fails, I will examine his approach to certainty. As part of this general objective, I will establish a comparison between different uses of language that Wittgenstein mentions in *On Certainty* and his distinction between what has sense (is meaningful), what lacks it (is senseless) and what is absurd (is nonsense) in *Tractatus*. In my opinion, this comparison has three advantages: first, it allows to clarify the role of the so-called special propositions in *On Certainty*; second, it illuminates the relationship between some features that belong to special propositions in *On Certainty* and the characteristics that define what is senseless in *Tractatus*; and, last, it shows the status of the so-called insight-ful nonsenses in *Tractatus*. As a consequence of this argument, I believe in a halfway house between the so-called traditional and new interpretations of *Tractatus*. The results of this comparison support also the thesis that Wittgenstein's work, beyond its distinction in different periods, has a conceptual continuity.

2. Analysis of the notion of "doubt"

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein points out that the sceptical doubt is not, even if it seems to be, a radicalisation of daily doubt. On the contrary, it is something rather different. He emphasizes that in the process that goes from doubting a particular something to doubting anything in general, our doubt gradually loses its meaning. At some point, it even ceases to be intelligible:

For it is not true that a mistake merely gets more and more improbable as we pass from the planet to my own hand. No; at some point it has ceased to be conceivable. (C §54)

In my opinion, Wittgenstein's most interesting argument against global scepticism lies in his assertion that any doubt presupposes the command of a language game. That is, we can only doubt a proposition if we first understand what the proposition means. I can only deny that I know that this is a hand, if I have previously understood what it means to say that this is a hand:

"I don't know if this is a hand" But do you know what the word "hand" means? And don't say "I know what it means now for me". And isn't it an empirical fact — that this word is used like this? (C §306)

Wittgenstein states that understanding a proposition requires us to know how to use that proposition correctly. Hence, any doubt we may place upon a proposition must take into account the language game in which that proposition is embedded. In other words, we cannot deny a proposition independently of our linguistic practices:

"What right have I not to doubt the existence of my hands?" ... But someone who asks such a question is overlooking the fact that a doubt about existence only works in a language-game. Hence, that we should first have to ask: what would such a doubt be like? (C §24)

As a result of this approach, Wittgenstein concludes that doubting must always come to an end. A speaker who raises questions without stopping at some point, does not abide by the rules that govern our communicative praxis. The game of questions and answers has its own rules, and they must be observed. There comes a point when it makes no sense to raise further questions. Thus whoever perseveres in raising objections, does not play the game of doubting well. When the sceptic exercises his doubt without coming to an end, he places himself out of the language game that doubting consists in.

Hence, Wittgenstein appeals to our linguistic practices and the way we learn them, to show that we can doubt particular facts in particular circumstances, but that we cannot doubt them all at the same time. In this manner, he shows that sustaining global? sceptical doubt implies rejecting our linguistic practices. But this is just not a possibility. It is important to clarify here that Wittgenstein does not refer to a mere incapacity on our part, but to an essential feature of what judging is:

"We could doubt every single one of these facts, but we could not doubt them all. Would not it be more correct to say: "we do not doubt them all". Our not doubting them all is simply our manner of judging, and therefore of acting. (C §232)

A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt. (C §450)

What would it be like to doubt now whether I have two hands? Why can't I imagine it at all? What would I believe if I didn't believe that? So far I have no system at all within which this doubt might exist. (C §247)

In the above paragraphs we have seen that doubts presuppose a language game. When we introduce a doubt within a language game, it has sense. But if we try to construct a doubt out of the language game in which we are embedded, or if we try to build a doubt against the language game as a whole, then our doubt will lack any sense. Wittgenstein's arguments show that any doubt presupposes the existence of something that cannot be doubted, that is, doubts are possible only because certainty exists. The game of doubting presupposes certainty:

If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting presupposes certainty. (C §115)

Thus we arrive to the end of Wittgenstein's critique of scepticism. The core of his argumentation lies in asking the following: What kind of doubts does the sceptic raise? To what extent is it valid to insert those doubts in the language game in which we live? His answer to these questions emphasizes that some aspects of our thoughts cannot be doubted, since they are that which allows the formulation of doubt. Thus the analysis of the sceptical doubt —its premises and consequences— allows him to prove that any doubt presupposes the existence of a domain of certainty and hence, that scepticism must be mistaken.

Of course, Wittgenstein's acceptance of the existence of certainty forces us to clarify what he understands by that term. I turn to this point now.

3. The realm of certainty

3.1. *Special* propositions

Wittgenstein appeals to our common reaction against sceptical doubts to conclude that the sceptic's use of daily language is mistaken. We realize that something goes wrong with sceptical doubts when we are unable to sustain them. Sceptical doubt ceases to be meaningful to us as soon as we cannot support it anymore.

This remark involves a great discovery. At some point in the process of questioning whether a claim is valid, we notice that we have touched ground level. We find then that some propositions of our language stand so firmly in front of us that they are no longer questionable [in the following, we will refer to these propositions as *special* or *privileged* propositions]:

That is to say, the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. (C §341)

The reason why there can be neither doubt nor proof of these special propositions, is that any

question or argument we may try to develop, must start from the assumption of their validity. Thus any inquiry about the extension of our knowledge is built upon the validity of these special propositions, since everything we judge as being knowledge presupposes them. To accept their validity is just the way we inquire about the limits of our knowledge.

It is important to stress that, according to Wittgenstein, these privileged propositions are not empirical. They lie at the foundations of our discourse, and support all the other propositions we utter, which belong to the specific language game for which they provide the foundations. Hence they are not the result of an empirical investigation, but they make that very inquiry possible. This means that whilst any other empirical proposition measures its validity in relation to the privileged propositions, the latter do not require further justification:

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid. (C §96)

At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded. (C §253)

In effect, our language allows us neither to prove nor to review issues like, for example, the existence of our hands or of the earth –except on very few occasions that we will mention later. Since every time we raise doubts about these facts "language goes on holiday", to use the famous metaphor of *Philosophical Investigations* (PI §38). In brief, the language game in which we are immersed presupposes the existence of a set of propositions that are certain. This set of propositions governs our communicative practices as rules of discourse whose function is not so much to pass on information about the world as to organize our linguistic exchanges. In this sense, we can say that the special propositions we are talking about constitute the grammar of our language, [thus they can also be named *grammatical* propositions]:

Now might not "I know, I am not just surmising, that here is my hand" be conceived as a proposition of grammar? (C §57)

3.2. Meaningful, nonsense and senseless

These reflections suggest that in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein constructs a tripartite classification of the propositions of our language [that is, of the applications of sentences or, what is the same, of the sentences in certain uses], as follows. First, empirical propositions, whose meaning and truth value depend upon the context in which we use them. That is the case of the sentence "I know this is a hand" when the victim pronounces it. Second, propositions which we may call philosophical, that lack meaning in any related context. This is the case of a sentence like "There are physical objects" when introduced in a philosophical discourse. [To be sure, we can imagine a perfectly legitimate application of this latter sentence. Let us just imagine two astronauts travelling in the void, who looking through the window of their spaceship, say: "Look, there are physical objects" pointing at small rocks passing them. In this case, it will be a meaningful proposition in an

empirical context. It is thus particular [philosophical] applications of it that are nonsensical.] Third, propositions that seem to be empirical but that, in certain contexts, become grammatical propositions. Such is the case of the above sentence when we introduce it in a discussion with the sceptic.

The above distinctions about the way a sentence can have meaning or lack it, play an essential role in Wittgenstein's argument. Empirical propositions present no problem of interpretation when they are pronounced in the appropriate circumstances, since then they make full sense. Philosophical sentences can also be straightforwardly evaluated, since according to Wittgenstein they are completely absurd. The real difficulty arises, however, in relation to the so-called grammatical propositions.

Thus to understand the way Wittgenstein solves the question of meaning to their respect, I suggest we turn to a classification that appeared already in *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein distinguished there between three types of propositions: meaningful (*sinnig*), nonsensical (*unsinnig*) and senseless (*sinnlos*). I think that this distinction can be useful when applied to the special propositions of *On Certainty* in question.

For Wittgenstein meets the sphere of certainty when he reflects upon the conditions of intelligibility of some propositions. He then discovers that the same sentence can have different conditions of intelligibility, depending on the context in which the sentence is uttered. Thus whether a proposition like "I know this is a hand" makes sense or not, depends upon the circumstances in which it is pronounced. If we introduce this sentence in a daily conversation as an empirical observation—for example, if a victim utters these words after opening a package containing a bomb—, then it will be meaningful (*sinnig*), and will have a truth value ascribed to it. However, if we pronounce the sentence "I know this is a hand" in a philosophical discussion and interpret it as if it were an empirical proposition—as the sceptic and G. E. Moore do—, the proposition becomes a nonsense (*Unsinn*). Finally, if we use the sentence in the context of a philosophical discussion and we interpret it as a grammatical rule—as Wittgenstein does—, then—according to my thesis—it will become senseless (*sinnlos*).

Following this interpretative hypothesis, some features that define special propositions in *On Certainty* are shared by the definition of senseless propositions in *Tractatus*. We must then explore further this approach. To that aim I will draw a comparison between the role of grammatical propositions in *On Certainty* and the role of characteristically senseless propositions in the *Tractatus*, namely, logical propositions.

3.3. Comparison between the role of grammatical propositions and the role of logical propositions

In *Tractatus* Wittgenstein explained that logical propositions did not have sense. But in relation to them he introduced the important distinction between being nonsensical (*unsinnig*) and being senseless (*sinnlos*). Logical propositions are not absurd, but senseless, that is, they lack meaning at all. This assertion becomes clear when we remember his definition of logical

propositions as tautological (TLP 6.1) and certain (TLP 4.464). The description implies that nothing of what may happen in the world can ever affect them, neither to confirm nor to refute them (TLP 6.1222). He thus sustains that logical propositions do not convey any information and they say nothing (TLP 6.11). He also claims that they lack semantic content or have zero content. [A parallel analysis is to be applied to contradictions.]

We can now apply the definition of logical propositions to our understanding of grammatical propositions in *On Certainty*. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein claims that logical propositions are certain and tautological, lack semantic content, do not convey any information, and must be therefore considered meaningless. In a similar way, in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein considers that grammatical propositions form a certain and unchangeable structure, do not transmit any information either, and can therefore be also considered meaningless. [It should be remembered, nevertheless, that their being meaningless ultimately depends on the context in which they are being uttered.]

Nonetheless, we must be very careful at this point. These reflections could make us believe that the role of grammatical propositions in *On Certainty* is similar to the role that logical propositions played in a former period of Wittgenstein's intellectual development. However, we should not put too much trust in the advantages of this identification, since there are important differences between both types of sentences. In my opinion, these differences exhibit precisely the extent to which the propositional treatment of the realm of certainty poses insurmountable difficulties.

One of the differences is Wittgenstein's emphasis that the fact that grammatical propositions are certain, does not imply either that they are true or false. This assertion implies that grammatical propositions in *On Certainty* are not tautologies in the sense in which logical propositions in the *Tractatus* are. At the end of his life, Wittgenstein is convinced that a discussion about truth or falsehood does not apply in the case of grammatical propositions. But —and this is my point— if we rule out the idea that grammatical propositions are true or false, it will not be possible to consider them "propositions" in a strict sense, since according to the classical definition a proposition is a linguistic expression that can bear a truth value.

The following is a second difference that should act as a caution when comparing notions that belong to different periods of Wittgenstein's career. While logical propositions are not usually employed in the context of learning, some grammatical propositions can be used to that purpose. Thus, while it does not make sense to tell a child "It rains or it does not rain" to teach her something about rain¹, we can teach her something if we say "This is a hand". Before we have supposed that grammatical propositions are meaningless and do not convey any information. As we see it now, the role of these propositions is to govern our language games, that is, to establish the meaning of the set

¹ Of course, saying to a child "Either it is raining or it is not raining" could be part of inculcating her into the practice of classical logic. (Adrian Moore once pointed me a delicious footnote on page 308 of Brian McGuinness's biography of Wittgenstein. In the main text he writes: "In Wittgenstein's example, I know nothing about the weather when I know that it is either raining or not raining". Then in a footnote, after giving the reference, he adds: "He had been out of England for some time when he wrote this". Wonderful!)

of propositions in our language. From this perspective, grammatical propositions do not lack sense nor are they meaningless, but they carry information about the way we use certain terms. Again, this difference points out a key role of grammatical propositions which does not fit well with their characterization as "propositions".

A third factor to take into account is that Wittgenstein uses grammatical propositions in *On Certainty* to build the syntactical skeleton of our language. Given how the *Tractatus* works, however, logical propositions are not, strictly speaking, the formal framework of the world: rather, simple objects are. Tautologies and contradictions are not that which renders the world possible, rather language is possible because objects are simple. But the *Tractatus*' proposition "Objects are simple" is nonsensical, not senseless. If we follow this train of thought, should we then consider grammatical propositions also as nonsensical?

As a consequence of these three difficulties, the next section explores an alternative interpretative hypothesis, namely, to consider grammatical propositions as absurd (*unsinnig*).

3.4. Traditional vs. New interpretations of Wittgenstein: a middle path

The non-propositional character of certainty is shown by the idea that the so-called special propositions do not depict facts about the world but regulate the rules of our language. They say something about how we think, about our symbology. This idea helps to deepen the comparative analysis between the different uses of language in *On Certainty* and the types of propositions in *Tractatus* which I am proposing. In the above section we have seen which aspects special and senseless propositions share and which ones divide them. In this section we will approach the relation between the special and the nonsensical propositions.

In recent years, a fierce dispute among scholars on the nature of nonsense in *Tractatus* has arisen. The mainstream [defended paradigmatically by Gordon Baker and Peter Hacker] sustains that there are two types of nonsense: absolute nonsense (or, with other words, incorrect nonsense, insight-less nonsense, gibberish nonsense), and interesting nonsense (also named, correct nonsense, insight-ful nonsense, or non-gibberish nonsense):

(i) Propositions belonging to the first type, gibberish or absolute nonsenses, violate the rules of logical syntax and the boundaries of sense: they are thus conceptual impossibilities. Among the examples of this group are, of course, sentences like "Err to ja", but also philosophical propositions that talk on aesthetics, ethics or personal identity, like for example "No one can have my thought". Wittgenstein accepts that the term nonsense is used to exclude different things for different reasons. "The only difference between ordinary and philosophical nonsense is that between *patent* nonsense which causes no confusion since we recognize it immediately by the "jingle of words" and, *latent* nonsense, "where operations are required to enable us to recognize it as nonsense" (AWL 64; PI §464, 524; LWL 98).

(ii) Propositions belonging to the second type, interesting or insight-ful nonsenses, are not based on misunderstandings of logical syntax, they rather express insights into the workings of logical syntax.

In that respect, they convey important insights about what makes language possible, in other words, they express something important about what underpins it. The *Tractatus*' statements fall under this heading, for example, "Objects are simple". They are pseudo-propositions that try to say what can only be shown. In *Tractatus* interesting or insight-ful nonsenses are correct unsayables, but correct nonetheless. (TLP 4.12ss., 5.534s., 6.54s.; NB 20.10.14).

The alternative position, defended by the group of *new Wittgensteinians* (among others, Cora Diamond or James Conant), maintains that nonsense never conveys insight. There is thus no useful or important nonsense. [It is not possible to be in the external point of view: the ladder cannot cross the border.]

In our case, the analysis of the extent to which special propositions resemble nonsensical and senseless propositions, leads me to adopt the following conclusions. I have argued, firstly, that the propositions that are certain to us are important or valuably correct. This thesis captures the idea that in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein points out that special propositions do not say anything about the world [they do not bring knowledge of the world], rather they regulate the rules of discourse as well as our behaviour in the world [they bring understanding of the world]. I think this description of special propositions in *On Certainty* helps to illuminate the status of insight-ful nonsenses in the *Tractatus*. The latter express insights on the workings of logical syntax, the show something on how we think, on our symbology; they show something about how language is possible, and about what underpins it. According to my interpretation, hinge propositions are nonsensical but convey valuable insights on what makes language possible. Thus the role of such special propositions in *On Certainty* could therefore be related to the role of insight-ful nonsenses in the *Tractatus*. On the status of philosophical propositions, *On Certainty* closes the circle open in the *Tractatus*. [This connection supports the idea that Wittgenstein's theory, at least to this respect, is a continuous, against the standard interpretation according to which the first and late Wittgenstein are radically different.]

Secondly, my argument locates which aspects of special propositions remind us of the nature of gibberish or complete nonsenses, and which other features instead make them closer to senseless propositions. As a consequence, I believe in a halfway house between the traditional and the new interpretations of the *Tractatus* on this matter. For I accept, on the one side, that there are two types of nonsense, while I also think, on the other side, that one group of propositions, the special propositions that are central to Wittgenstein's concern in *On Certainty*, share features with both types.

3.5. Facticity and understanding

When Wittgenstein reflects upon the nature of the grammatical propositions, he realizes that what is truly important about them is not so much that they look like propositions, but that they contain the norms that govern our discourse and behaviour. We must therefore conclude that what we have called special propositions do not, in fact, belong to our language as an additional element, but rather constitute what hangs language together. This supports the idea that, in the final instance, Wittgenstein favoured a non-propositional characterization of certainty.

It is at this stage that he appeals to a set of different phenomena that constitute the foundation of our thoughts, expressions and actions. He refers to them with different names such as, for example, the inherited tradition, the community of origin, our behaviour, our animality, and even our mythology. All of which are non-intellectual phenomena that can perhaps be subsumed under the head of "facticity". Thus his inquiries led him to the verification of the existence of a sphere beyond language which includes an enormous variety of elements. Wittgenstein will use the term "certainty" to refer to that which supports all our thoughts, expressions and actions. The exploration of the rules of language refers us to a realm beyond language which can't be further analysed. The inquiry comes to an end when we understand that the field of certainty exists and constitutes us, but that we cannot make its nature explicit. At the end, what is certain and why it is certain, remains beyond our understanding.

4. Evaluation of the sceptical position

The conclusions we have reached above can help us understand Wittgenstein's answer to scepticism. As we have seen, Wittgenstein rejects the validity of the sceptical claim "I doubt whether the world exists because I don't know whether I am dreaming that the world exists". His argument shows that the sceptic's use of the terms "doubt", "know", "dream", and "world" is completely different from the normal use of the terms in the sceptic's community of origin. Wittgenstein's analysis reveals the extent to which the propositions that the sceptic tries to attack, function as certainties in our language. Through this criticism, Wittgenstein denies that an individual could state sceptical doubts about a particular use of language since this use is legitimised by the community of speakers as a whole.

Wittgenstein's argument in this respect is convincing. As a result, it is generally believed that his linguistic analysis demonstrates that the sceptical challenge is no longer dangerous for epistemology. In my view, however, this conclusion is rather superficial and too optimistic, since Wittgenstein's approach to knowledge contains gaps which leave room for doubt. Wittgenstein succeeds in his *reductio ad absurdum* of scepticism when it is introduced at an individual level within daily practice. I cannot say meaningfully that I do not know whether this is a hand, while I am using it to type this paper. But it is less clear whether Wittgenstein's position can confront successfully a more severe type of scepticism. By this I mean the kind of scepticism which does not involve certain linguistic practices, but the system of language itself.

Wittgenstein discovered the importance of this second type of scepticism when he realized that its specificity is not grasped when the sceptical attitude is described as a mere generalization of empirical doubt. On the contrary, the peculiarity of scepticism lies in the way it forces us to enquire about the rules of use of our language. This type of questioning of the use of language within a community appears, for example, when we ask ourselves how to identify the propositions that are certainties in that community. Despite his efforts to reject scepticism at this level, Wittgenstein was eventually obliged to admit that, in the final instance, it is impossible to identify these propositions.

The reason behind this conclusion is Wittgenstein's thesis that the same expression can have meaning in certain circumstances, whereas it has none in others. Thus it makes sense to say "I know

that I have a hand" after opening a package containing a bomb, but most of the time the proposition "I have a hand" has an ascription of certainty. From this fact we can conclude that any questioning about whether a proposition is meaningful, about whether it can be known, and also about whether it is certain, demands further exploration of the circumstances in which the proposition is uttered. Therefore, the problem that the thesis of the diversity of senses raises is how to know in which circumstances it is or is not appropriate to immerse oneself in a lively discussion about the meaning of a proposition or about its description as certain or as knowledge.

Now —and this is a delicate point— when we try to clarify which circumstances correspond to which language games, a serious obstacle appears. The setting requires us to pay attention to the conditions of use of our sentences or, what is the same, to appeal to "normal circumstances" as the framework into which our declarations fit. At this point, however, Wittgenstein recognizes that we do not possess —and even more significantly, that we cannot possess— any method to distinguish under which circumstances a claim to knowledge or certainty is correct:

If, however, one wanted to give something like a rule here, then it would contain the expression "in normal circumstances". And we recognize normal circumstances but cannot precisely describe them. At most, we can describe a range of abnormal ones. (C §27)

The proposition itself tells us neither when its insertion in some contexts is pertinent, nor when it is superfluous. Besides, any rule we may conceive to determine the context of use will have, according to Wittgenstein, an open character. If the "normal circumstances" under which we may use our sentences cannot be specified, that is, if there are no rules to use our propositions, then it is not possible to identify which propositions are certain.

These considerations lead us to conclude that Wittgenstein's position cannot reject a type of scepticism whose objective is to warn us of the impossibility of understanding our own position in the world. This raises an interesting issue, that is, Wittgenstein's recognition of the limits of philosophical reflection. In this sense, one consequence of his analysis of epistemic terms is his thesis that it is impossible to justify the logic behind our language, and hence, we can only assume its facticity.

Now it is precisely on this issue that Wittgenstein gives the definite and certainly most polemical turn of the screw in his argumentation. He argues that the temptation to seek the foundations of our language games by looking for their finality or their essence is mistaken. Linguistic analysis comes to an end when we recognize the existence of propositions that are certain. This means that it is not necessary to justify their certainty, on the contrary, it is sufficient to understand that they exist. In fact, this is the only movement which is valid philosophically. Ultimately, the idea that we cannot justify our system of meanings does not imply, according to Wittgenstein, that we can pose doubts about it. It makes no sense to think it might be false, in the same way that it makes no sense to think it might be true.

5. The limits of language and the philosophical task

Wittgenstein's assertion that first philosophy or metaphysics is impossible, and that we do not need to worry about this fact, inspires two different considerations about the possibilities of the success of global scepticism. On the one hand, one could consider that the substratum of certainty shapes us in such a way that we lack the necessary perspective to grasp it from the outside. This approach would define global scepticism as unintelligible because no sceptical doubt would be able to eliminate our certainties.

On the other hand, I claim that to suppose that there is an unattainable and irrefutable core of certainty implies, precisely, that we are begging the question against scepticism. From this perspective, the postulation of a field of certainties would be a debatable strategy that cannot meet its objective of refuting scepticism.

The above dilemma leaves us with the problem of deciding which of the two positions is correct. In my opinion, once we have arrived at this point, any decision we might make implies begging the question. In other words, the reasons behind our decision do not need to be accepted by the two parties involved, i.e., the sceptic and his opponent. Thus the playing field is no longer a rational discussion, but the discussion takes place in a sphere prior to it. In accordance with a recurrent feature of Wittgenstein's thought, one might venture the hypothesis that the nature of this problem is, in fact, ethical [in the sense of being related to a choice of life or an attitude].

To conclude, I would like to highlight a feature that has traditionally defined the philosophical task, i.e., the fact that the philosopher sometimes asked a question without awaiting a response, or without aspiring to achieve it. In the eyes of the traditional epistemologist, the discussion about scepticism showed that the inquiry about knowledge was legitimate, even if there was no definite answer to it. Wittgenstein belongs to that same tradition in which, while the philosopher is well aware of the limits of human knowledge, he still takes seriously the possibility of inquiring. In relation to this point, we must recall the important category of nonsense (*unsinnig*) but valuable of *Tractatus*. [Maybe the problem of scepticism belongs to the same field of reality he used to call the mystical.]

In any case, Wittgenstein's discussion about scepticism shows, in my opinion, that philosophical questions are worth researching. Our last reaction may be silence but to arrive at this conclusion it is necessary to cover beforehand a long argumentative path.

6. Closing the circle

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein develops a logical analysis of language, and concludes by showing that language cannot account for its last premises, namely, the facticity of the world. The path that the late Wittgenstein covers puts into practice his thesis that philosophy is not a theory, but an activity. In other words, philosophy cannot bring knowledge about the facts of the world; through the method of connective analysis, it can rather bring understanding of our logical, grammatical and thought structures.²

² This paper has a distant ancestor in chapter five of my PhD thesis (Villarmea 2003). I would like to

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