The Transcendental 'Foundation' of Meaning in Experience: A Reading of Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*

Not empiricism and yet realism in philosophy, that is the hardest thing.

-Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*

I.

This paper presents a reading of the account of meaning and knowledge in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* in terms of transcendental philosophy, understood as the historical and philosophical method first announced by Kant which extends into the early twentieth century in the thought of many of Wittgenstein's contemporaries, both in the form of the neokantianism of Cohen and Natorp and in the “transcendental” phenomenology of Husserl. I will suggest that Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* invite a broadly “transcendental” reading in this sense, and furthermore that the conception of knowledge, meaning and experience expressed in that work should be understood *phenomenologically*, not in the sense of contemporary discussions of qualia and the explanatory gap, but in the sense of the phenomenology of the early 20th century, the attempt to describe the necessary structures of the phenomena of subjective human experience by heeding Husserl's admonition to return “zu den Sachen selbst,” a project which, like Wittgenstein's own philosophy, had its roots in late 19th-century mathematics and logic, and which took as its core problems of experience, representation, and meaning. In this short paper I will not present
detailed comparisons of Wittgenstein's philosophy to the specific theories of Husserl or his contemporaries, but only attempt to show how a phenomenological reading can shed new light on Wittgenstein's post-*Investigations* thought.

Transcendental philosophy as we use the term here can be defined in terms of the Kantian conception of ongoing *Critique* as the establishing of the limits of reason and knowledge in relation to experience. As David Carr notes in a recent study of this tradition, the transcendental Critical project...

...is based on a broader investigation of the conditions of the possibility—that is to say, of the general structures—of human experience and knowledge. It is not the purpose of this investigation to culminate in a metaphysical doctrine, whether idealistic, realistic, or otherwise. [...] the transcendental project is carried out under permanent suspension of metaphysical commitments. This is the meaning of what [Husserl and Kant] both call transcendental idealism. The transcendental investigation of experience becomes an end in itself, an ongoing project of reflection and critique. [...] The investigation reveals the transcendental subject as a necessary structural feature of human experience; but this subject is revealed not as an underlying substance or *hypokeimenon* that absorbs or overpowers the world by reducing it to its representations, but as a spontaneous and self-related subject of intentionality and meaning. (Carr 1999, 133-134)

Such a reading will at first seem odd and perhaps even antithetical to most readers of Wittgenstein, and yet it can offer us several important insights into what Wittgenstein is really up to in the late work, insights perhaps too-often covered over in the empiricist- or ordinary language-oriented interpretations of many of Wittgenstein's commentators and even translators. Indeed, according to one common story in the scholarship, Wittgenstein moved away from a distinct “early” position which considered logic transcendentally, as a condition for the possibility of meaning and as somehow mirroring the world, toward a “late” position which would deny in principle any claim to transcendentality, as an example of the wrongheaded attempt to step beyond the limits of our language. But close examination of the post-*Investigations* remarks in *On Certainty*, when seen in light of broader phenomenological concerns, suggest reasons to question this once prevalent view.

Unlike the Tractarian account of meaning, oriented toward a priori *formal* possibilities and,
according to Wittgenstein's own later assessment in the *Investigations*, “not meant to concern itself whether what actually happens is this or that” (Wittgenstein 2001, §89), meaning in the later work is considered in its relation to everyday practice, understood as *use* and *experience*. The *Investigations* insist, “it is difficult as it were to keep our heads up,—to see that we must stick to the subjects of our everyday thinking, and not go astray and imagine that we have to describe extreme subtleties, which in turn we are after all quite unable to describe with the means at our disposal” (Wittgenstein 2001, §§102, 106).

But Wittgenstein's subsequent unpublished writing on meaning and experience seem focused on describing at least some such underlying “subtleties.” Wittgenstein's use of metaphors and images such as riverbeds, grounds, and foundations signals a reexamination of the role of the transcendental, this time in light of a different, more mature conception of language, meaning, and—importantly—the immediacy of everyday experience. But whereas in the *Tractatus* meaning was analyzed to a level of atomic, transcendental-logical “objects,” the existence of which was not directly accessible to experience, in *On Certainty* that which makes knowledge possible is conceived in terms of the interrelated activities of our form of life—*the certainties about our experienced world that our language games reflect and presuppose*. These certainties can be considered transcendental, in that they are conditions for the possibility of a meaningful world, and thus at a level logically prior to any “actual” meaningful propositions that might refer to them. In his very last writings, Wittgenstein considers such “lived” certainties to make up the very core of our form of life.

**II.**

But, as Joachim Schulte has noted, this “transcendental” level is no traditional, foundational bedrock in the traditional sense: “The foundations he speaks of are human actions—a much more mobile and changeable medium than that envisaged by the standard foundational model” (Schulte 2005, 66-67). This medium is transcendental and “foundational,” insofar as it must be logically prior to the
propositional knowledge it makes possible. But if such pure *praxis* is not within the purview of propositional knowledge, and not a fixed bedrock but a fluid system, how are we to understand it, and what are we to make of the underlying level of a form of life “prior” to knowledge and meaning? The key, I think, is to understand the focus of Wittgenstein's transcendental remarks not empirically, but phenomenologically. At the heart of the various certainties Wittgenstein alludes to lies a common—though ultimately variable—conception of experience [Erfahrung], and thus the recognition of certainty begins from a sort of *phenomenology*, in that its original object is unadulterated, non-theorized, immediate experience, logically prior to its being captured and presented in a propositional form and thereby treated as an explicit component in the system of propositional knowledge.

When I walk outside and it is raining, I do not experience the proposition “It is raining.” We do not *experience* propositions. We talk, write, and theorize about them. For Wittgenstein, meanings are analyzed at the level of facts and propositions—in the realm of language—but they are ultimately dependent upon activities of our lived experience. The fact that we almost always already have language to “account for” a given situation, and that upon reflection we can see that this has already given categorial structure to our experience, does not change the status of the most primary aspect of that experience, although it often makes it harder to see.

In his final writings on knowledge and certainty, Wittgenstein focuses upon this underlying, pre-linguistic level in an attempt to accurately describe the relation of (propositional) meaning to experience, a relation which, although fluid, nonetheless possesses a *general formal structure*. We do indeed constantly give form to our lived experience in language—putting it into propositions—but this does not mean that, as “naively experienced,” it was already a predicative form of knowledge. To consider it as such is, for Wittgenstein, to misunderstand the relationship of propositions to experience: “People... have always learned from experience; and we can see from their actions that they believe certain things definitely, whether they express this belief or not” (Wittgenstein 1972, §284). One important theme in the *Philosophical Investigations* is that meaning is, in effect, *always already there* in our everyday
language games: it is not something that must be uncovered. In *On Certainty*, while not rebuking that claim, Wittgenstein comes to think that there must be some logically prior certainty which guarantees this very “always already there” character. Thus he returns to what I have called a transcendental analysis, not to discover hidden or ideal meanings, but to make plain that which first makes propositional meaning possible. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein shows how we can heed the Investigations call “back to the rough ground” by acknowledging the raw experiences of our form of life that underlie the predicative schemata in which we categorize and talk about them.

III.

It might seem at first that such a move simply dodges the real question; that it amounts to naïve talk about experience in ignorance of Kantian categorial insights or some sort of return to a pre-Sellarsian “myth of the given.” I contend that this would be the case only if Wittgenstein were considering experience as the direct vehicle for meaning. But when we consider the remarks on the relation of experience to language in *On Certainty* transcendentally, we realize that such a direct content-providing relation is precisely what is being rejected. Experiences are not mere carriers for content expressed in propositions. The relation of experience to propositional meaning is not a matter of a “translation” of sufficient empirical components to be put together as a propositional whole in a linguistic register, but rather of a recognition of the phenomenological necessity of an experiential immediacy as a condition for the possibility of any meaning whatsoever. This is a transcendental grounding of language in the activities of a form of life, understood not empirically or semantically but in terms of its experiential immediacy, i.e., phenomenologically. Far from rejecting Kant's Copernican insight, this signals a recognition of the fact that, in William Brenner's words, “the solution to the problem [of the correspondence of language to reality] would have to be a broadly ‘Kantian’ one, in that the ‘correspondence’ in question would be transcendental rather than empirical – that is, not itself the sort of correspondence with reality that makes true thoughts true but rather the prior relationship to reality that makes true or false thoughts possible”
For Wittgenstein, this correspondence is something which makes knowledge possible, but which itself has no neatly enumerable content: “Now, can one enumerate what one knows (like Moore)? Straight off, I believe not.—For otherwise the expression 'I know' gets misused. And through this misuse a peculiar and extremely important state of mind [Geisteszustand] seems to be revealed” (Wittgenstein 1972, §6, translation modified). What is “revealed” here, on our reading, is something pre-linguistic, indeed pre-predicative, although this is a point we only recognize post-predicatively and upon reflection, not simply “straight off” [ohne weiteres]. But what is thereby recognized is nonetheless present directly in experience; it is not an object, and in recognizing it we recognize no thing, but rather our relation to the world, the structure of our experience. This is not a matter to be verified by empirical science, but a transcendental, logical necessity, and recognizing this is made all the more difficult in that for Wittgenstein there is only a shifting boundary between the structure and the structured:

It might be imagined that some sentences, of the form of experiential sentences [Erfahrungssätze], were hardened and functioned as channels for such experiential sentences as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid sentences hardened, and hard ones became fluid. …the riverbed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other. But if someone were to say ‘So logic too is a science of experience’ he would be wrong. Yet this is right: the same sentence may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing. (Wittgenstein 1972, §§96, 98, translation modified)

What makes knowledge and meaning possible is not itself a type of knowledge, and this is not an experiential claim, despite the fact that when we attempt to capture this insight, we refer to the very same objects treated by the empirical scientist. The general insight, however, is a transcendental and logical one, based on experience but not equivalent to the objects which that experience presents [vorstellt], a distinction Kant notes (in a slightly different context) already in the first Critique: “the difference between the transcendental and the empirical therefore belongs only to the critique of cognitions and does not concern their relation to their object (Kant 1998, A56-57/B80-81).
What is at issue in *On Certainty* are thus not so much “empirical propositions” (the standard English translation for *Erfahrungssätze*) in the sense of reports of empirical scientific observation, but linguistic, expressible certainties in relation to human experience: “My life shows that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on...” (Wittgenstein 1972, §7, my emphasis). Such certainties are a part of our form of life, and must be logically prior to propositional knowledge, because the ultimate justification for a proposition cannot come from yet another proposition: “It needs to be shewn that no mistake was possible. Giving the assurance “I know” doesn't suffice. For it is after all only an assurance that I can't be making a mistake, and it needs to be objectively established that I am not making a mistake about that” (Wittgenstein 1972, §15).

IV.
As suggested above, I take the underlying issue in this and similar remarks in *On Certainty* to be not semantic, not empirical, but transcendental and ultimately phenomenological in its orientation. For Wittgenstein, we can only describe certainties by putting them in propositional form. But when we do so we tend to assimilate the transcendental point to an naturalistic one—a tendency reflected (to my ear, at least) in the English translation—when what is really at issue is not something registered through third-person empirical observation, not something which can be judged true or false, but our own, first-person doing: “Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game” (Wittgenstein 1972, §204).

To illustrate, let us turn to one of Wittgenstein's own examples of this everyday acting. “My difficulty can also be shewn like this: I am sitting talking to a friend. Suddenly I say: 'I knew all along that you were so-and-so.' Is that really just a superfluous, though true, remark? I feel as if these words were like 'Good morning' said to someone in the middle of a conversation” (Wittgenstein 1972, §464, my emphasis). What is expressed in the superfluous remark in this hypothetical example is not something I
would normally consider a bit of meaningful “knowledge” at all. It is rather part of the very framework that allows me to engage in a particular language game where meaningful statements occur. This framework is not itself something about which we ask questions of justification or truth value, but *not* because it is not “real” or not a part of my experience; rather because it is *so intimately* a part of my everyday experience that it is never subject to doubt: it is part of the basic and *immediate* system of activities and everyday practices upon which all language games, including doubting, must be based. Thus, Wittgenstein claims, “One might say, "I know" expresses comfortable certainty, not certainty that is still struggling.’ Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as (a) form of life. […] But that means I want to consider it as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were *also gleichsam*, as something animal” (Wittgenstein 1972, §§357-359, translation modified).

In his own gloss of this passage in relation to language games and form(s) of life, Schulte remarks,

>This “as it were something animal” of the comfortable certainty in the riverbed of our form of life should however not lead us to think—or at least not only to think—of the biological or natural-historical. […] That which “lies beyond being justified or unjustified” is instinct in the sense of that which is fundamental, but ungrounded, since its part is to support our reason giving. (Schulte 1999, 163, my translation)

The condition of “comfortable certainty” is not considered knowledge by Wittgenstein, because it is rather something prior -something which ultimately *supports* [stützt] our system of reasons. Such immediate certainty cannot itself be further justified, however, since if I could be wrong about it in ordinary circumstances, I could no longer trust my experience at all, and my entire system of knowledge would collapse: “in order to make a mistake, a man must already judge in conformity with mankind” (Wittgenstein 1972, §156); “if you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty” (Wittgenstein 1972, §115). Although I am

1 “Dieses 'gleichsam Animalische' der beruhigten Sicherheit im Flussbett unserer Lebensform sollte uns aber nicht —oder zumindest nicht nur—an Biologisches oder Naturgeschichtliches denken lassen. […] Was 'jenseits von berechtigt und unberechtigt liegt' ist der Instinkt im Sinne des Fundamentalen, aber Unbegründeten, weil es seinerseits unsere Begründungen stützt.”
of course capable of asserting “I knew all along that you were so-and-so,” my assertion would take the form of a meaningful proposition—a knowledge claim within a specific language game—whereas the importance behind the claim is not a matter of its propositional content, but of the structure of immediate experience which makes language games as such, and thus any such content, logically possible.

Thus it cannot be correct to think of *Erfahrungssätze* as propositional reports on some set of empirical facts. As the conditions of possibility which first support our system of meanings, the actions and immediate experiences of our form of life are “beyond being justified or unjustified,” despite our tendency, like Moore, to consider these most fundamental aspects of our experience at the same level as empirical facts in need of further justification in some language game or another.

Certain occurrences would put me into a position in which I could not go on with the old language game any further. In which I was torn away from the sureness of the game. Yes, is it not obvious that the possibility of a language-game is conditioned by certain facts? In that case it would seem as if the language-game must *show* the facts that make it possible. (but that's not how it is.) Then can one say that only a certain regularity in occurrences makes induction possible? The 'possible' would of course have to be 'logically possible'. (Wittgenstein 1972, §§617-618)

That which makes language games and thus propositional meaning possible for Wittgenstein cannot be a fact; a fact, as a propositional claim with truth value, can only be determined insofar as it has a specific meaning-content to be verified. But we have suggested that, for Wittgenstein, the underlying certainties of our form of life have no such propositional content, since they do not function as direct vehicles for meaning-content but only as transcendental conditions for the possibility of meaning. Wittgenstein's strict limiting of the realm of the meaningful to that of language games means that that which makes language games possible is—properly considered—neither propositional nor factual, although when we express this in a sentence we inevitably draw attention to a proposition which then appears to us to represent a certain fact. The objects of such empirical facts, of that which is referred to in the *Erfahrungssätze* in which we report our experience, do not refer to something different than our lived experience. In Kant's words, “the difference between the transcendental and the empirical ... does not concern their relation to
their object”. But the grounding, transcendental character of that experience remains logically distinct, and unassimilated to the reports we make about it: “The difference between the transcendental and the empirical therefore belongs only to the critique of cognitions.”

Wittgenstein’s conception of certainty, I have suggested, is best conceived as based upon the structural correlation of our pre-predicative practices as immediately experienced. But this transcendental level does not play a direct, content-providing role in the formation of meanings, and should not be assimilated to a set of pre-existent empirical-scientific “facts.” Though certainty is transcendently necessary for meaning, propositionally expressible meanings go no deeper than language for Wittgenstein, and thus at the pre-predicative level, at the “bedrock” which underlies our language games, there is quite literally nothing left to be questioned. As Wittgenstein maintains in the Investigations, there is a point at which my justifications are exhausted. And this point is the unjustifiable immediacy of first-person experience” “this is simply what I do” (Wittgenstein 2001, §217). We are apt to confuse these transcendental observations regarding experience with “straightforward” scientific-empirical reports of facts, but On Certainty seeks to remind us that what lies at the heart of our language games is not just language and meaning, but action and experience; that what ultimately makes life meaningful is not reducible to the propositional meanings which express it.


