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## KNOWLEDGE OF LANGUAGE AND A RADICAL SCEPTICISM

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### ABSTRACT

According to Descartes, it is possible to doubt successfully that there is external world, all around us, yet still to have language, in place, without any complication. According to Wittgenstein, to doubt everything about the external world except language means nothing more than to doubt everything about the external world including language. Why? No speaker is more certain about the meaning of his words than about the external things he believes to be unassailable (for example, that he has two hands and two legs). Without this *constitutive connection* there would be no *communication of a definite sense*. Wittgenstein suggests that, after the author of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* adopts the hypothesis of evil deceiver, we are only under the impression that we deal with language (or that we read a text). We instead deal with symptoms of something rather different. The objective of this paper is to critically reassess Wittgenstein's criticism of the possibility of holding such a radical sceptical position.

**Keywords:** Cartesian doubt, certainty, Descartes, epistemology, Evil Deceiver, knowledge, scepticism, Wittgenstein.

In the first three *Meditations on First Philosophy*,<sup>1</sup> René Descartes presents himself in an extraordinary position. He is not sure whether or not he has two hands and two legs, or whether he has five fingers on his right hand and five fingers on the left, but, at the same time, he has no problem whatsoever to understand the language he uses. He precisely understands the meaning of the words he applies, for example, “two,” “hand,” “existence,” “certainty,” etc., while everything else about the external world can be considered doubtful.<sup>2</sup> Epistemology has since called this position the *Cartesian doubt*, or the universal doubt. The concept of this position has been also traditionally known as the *hypothesis of an evil deceiver*.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in: The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, vol. II., Cambridge University, London 2005, pp. 3–62.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 16.

Throughout the centuries, the idea of this position gathered a lot of attention, not only in epistemology and epistemic logic.<sup>3</sup> As is well known, the concept played a key role in the process of establishing the Cartesian doctrine. The relevance of a critical reconsideration of the position lies, for the most part, in the fact that the *first principle* of the paradigmatic doctrine—also known as the *argument of cogito*—was set up as an answer to it. (Without Cartesian doubt viewed as a *meaningful step in our game*, there would be no use for the famous dictum: *I am thinking, therefore I exist*.) In this context, it is hard to escape from mentioning the *internal connection* between the first principle of the paradigmatic doctrine, on the one side, and the concept of radical sceptical position, on the other.

The possibility of holding such a position became a matter for Ludwig Wittgenstein. In recordings, named by their editors *On Certainty*,<sup>4</sup> he attempts to remind us that it is impossible to apprehend a scenario in which I am not sure whether or not I have two hands and two legs, but at the same time understand the language I use. This idea is problematic, because of the fundamental way any system of linguistic signs works. If I understand a language, according to Wittgenstein, I have no doubt about how many hands and legs I have. There is no first without the second. Why? In any system of linguistic signs there is a constitutive—*unique*—connection between what competent users believe to be unassailable, or self-evident, and what the signs they apply mean.<sup>5</sup> As a result, Descartes could not find himself in the situation he claims to have had a personal experience with. The theoretical concept he applies during the first three of the *Meditations* is bizarre. Throughout the centuries, the concept has misled our understanding of such categories as *knowledge*, *certainty*, *mistake*, *doubt*, *justification*, etc.

The main objective of this paper is to critically reassess Wittgenstein's criticism of the possibility of holding such a radical sceptical position.

**1.** By the end of the *First Meditation*, the author finds himself in a peculiar position: it appears as though whenever he believes in something, whatever that is, he may be completely mistaken.

Two moments lead us to the radical position. In the opening sentences of the *Meditations*, there is an appeal from Descartes. He does not merely invite us to suspend statements on any belief that can be questioned; he wants us to proceed in an orderly way. In epistemology, his reaction to this appeal is called *the method of doubt*. He is neither a defender of senseless destruc-

<sup>3</sup> F. Suárez, *Metaphysicarum disputationum*, Mylius Birkmannus 1614; M. Montaigne, *The Essays of Michael Montaigne*, vol. II., G. Bell 1930; E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, Nijhoff 1960.

<sup>4</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, Harper and Row 1979.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, §126; D. Davidson, *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme*, in: *The Essential Davidson*, Clarendon, Oxford 2006, p. 198.

tion, nor a proponent of apathy. Quite contrarily, the motivation behind his invitation (to suspend the majority of our habitual opinions) is to end with something which can be said to be definitely true. Laurence Bonjour explains: "... the goal is to achieve certainty in our beliefs about the world, to establish that they are infallibly and indubitably true."<sup>6</sup> In fact, the method of doubt is a direct consequence of Descartes' attempt to rebuild our system of knowledge from the ground up. His real motivation is that by the end of process of doubting most of our habitual opinions will be eliminated and replaced with certainties.

It is evident to Descartes that before we rebuild the system of our knowledge, we have to reject a number of beliefs we accepted at a very young age. Amongst them are many unreliable beliefs. He was convinced that *demolishing everything* is the only way to discover those beliefs which are actually unquestionable. In attempting to achieve this goal, no alternative seems available to him.<sup>7</sup>

By applying this methodology, Descartes gave rise to the modern idea of our experience of the external world as consisting of two sorts of elements: a) those which are unassailable, b) those which always involve risk.<sup>8</sup> The key question behind this methodology is: *What does not admit the possibility of doubt?* Very quickly, after the first steps of doubting, Descartes concludes that, definitely, we can question the evidence provided by senses. All sensual evidence is undermined by his argument of *deception* and that of *dreaming*. The question remains, however, is the evidence provided by the senses all we can question? The answer is: definitely not! In this context, reason itself is put into scrutiny as well. For, even understanding is, under certain circumstances, able to let us down, not merely the senses and the imagination. To make this point imaginable, Descartes introduced the idea of the *omnipotent demon* who is trying to deceive him at every moment, and in every possible way.

**2.** How was such radical doubt introduced? Descartes only begins by questioning whether it is possible to imagine someone who doubts all the beliefs he would otherwise take—thanks to his parents, friends, teachers, etc.—for granted. After consideration, he discovers a method to imagine this:

"... firmly rooted in my mind is the long-standing opinion that there is an omnipotent God who made me the kind of creature that I am. How do I know that he has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended

<sup>6</sup> L. Bonjour, *In Defense of Pure Reason*, Cambridge University 1998, p. 84.

<sup>7</sup> R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> J. Conant, *Varieties of Scepticism*, in: Wittgenstein and Scepticism, D. McManus (ed.), Routledge, London 2004, p. 108; D. Davidson, *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Sggcheme*, op. cit., p. 201.

thing, no shape, no size, no place while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now?”<sup>9</sup>

Immediately, Descartes doubts the possibility of such a mistake. God is supposed to be a good, caring father, not a manipulative demon. Against this though, he realizes that God has no problem with us being wrong about the external world from time to time. If it is consistent with the idea of God being a good father that we are wrong from time to time, why should this be inconsistent with the idea that we are wrong constantly? Descartes is convinced that these two tenets are not so different. There should be an analogy between *being wrong from time to time* and *being wrong all the time*.

The first real move towards the hypothesis of an evil deceiver is already made when Descartes accepts the *longstanding opinion* that an omnipotent being exists. If we accept the opinion that there is such a being—and, definitely, there is such an idea in *our cultural vocabulary*—then we also have to accept the idea that there might be a demon that could cause me to be mistaken every time I count, for example, my five fingers and five fingers. The reason for the application of the term “could” is contained in the way the word “omnipotence” is used in everyday life. Simply, we can agree with Descartes that if the demon is omnipotent, then he could do whatever he wants. It looks as if the presentation of the concept of a radical sceptical position only made the reasons implicitly contained in the meaning of term “omnipotence,” explicit. It looks as if the philosopher did nothing more.

The recognition that we ourselves being constantly wrong can be consistent with the idea of God as a good father is, in a sense, a culmination of the method of doubt. Descartes realized that, since his own experience of the external world could be a deception, managed by the demon, all his beliefs about external world are, in fact, already successfully doubtful. Therefore, it is plausible to think that *nothing is as it seems!* This is, under given circumstances, enough:

“I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement ...”<sup>10</sup>

Suddenly it seems reasonable to suppose that everything about the external world that we believe might be in error. As James Conant concludes, “Under the pressure of the Cartesian investigator’s demand for certainty, we are led to the discovery that very little in our experience is invulnerable to

<sup>9</sup> R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 15.

such forms of doubt.”<sup>11</sup> It looks as if we are never to be sure whether or not external things—like fingers, hands, etc.—are as the mind presents them to us.

It is this extraordinary position that leads Descartes to an equally extraordinary conclusion, that *there is nothing in the world that is certain*. This *substantial conclusion* bestowed to us by the Cartesian voice is something we can all apprehend without problems. The act of demolishing everything seems to fit the criteria of a *meaningful step*. As a result, Descartes searches for a way to effectively block the possibility of such a wide-ranged deception. (That is the reason why Cartesian doubt is seen, even today, by many, as the *turning point* in the quest for real knowledge.)

**3.** One more feature of Cartesian doubt to emphasize: is that after Descartes adopted the radical sceptical scenario, only one classification of object seemed to make sense not to doubt, the class consisting of the meaning of basic terms.

The term “two,” for example, Descartes uses, claiming he is not sure whether or not he has two hands and two legs. This term is presented as something obviously reasonable to any reader. The meaning of this term is something, it is suggested to us, we can grasp without difficulty. It is possible to doubt successfully that there is external world, all around us, yet still have the meaning of the term “two”, in place, without any complication. How is this possible? From the Cartesian perspective, without taking the process of the understanding of such basic terms *for granted*, there would be no thinking whatsoever. Without language there would be no rationality, no discussion, no questioning, nothing at all. Therefore, language itself must be accepted by any participants in this discussion. According to Descartes, the meaning of basic terms must be accepted even by a defender of radical scepticism. It seems that it is almost impossible to escape from the result of this transcendental argument.

In the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes openly confesses that when denying that there is an external world, by the end of the *First Meditation*, he did not doubt the meaning of the words he was using. Instead, he counted on them. “And when I said that the proposition *I am thinking, therefore I exist* is the first and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way, I did not in saying that deny that one must first know what thought, existence and certainty are ...”<sup>12</sup>

Descartes calls these basic meanings “common notions” and presents them as *deliverances of natural light*. In the first three of the *Meditations*, these *notions of greatest simplicity* are, of course, supposed to be fully

<sup>11</sup> J. Conant, *Varieties of Scepticism*, op. cit., p. 108.

<sup>12</sup> R. Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, in: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. I., Cambridge University, London 1985, 196.

engaged with in the process of destruction as well as in the process of construction. They are expected to work even in the situation in which everything else is thought to be unreliable. Simply, they are there. As if there were no doubts about the coherence of the substantial conclusion that *there is nothing in the world that is certain*, given that the meaning of such basic terms is, in fact, absolutely certain. And, after all, as if there were no problem, under such extraordinary circumstances, with applying the very idea of *communicating a definite sense*.

For the follower of the paradigmatic doctrine, it is not a problem to apprehend the position, as described by the first three of the *Meditations*, as conceivable. Without question, it is reasonable for the Cartesian to imagine circumstances, under which he rejects everything he believes in, except the meaning of terms he uses. It is an activity we can all engage in, according to him, if we choose to. (In fact, we *should*—at least once in a lifetime—try to take part in this activity. This is a kind of experience by which a true philosopher is made.)<sup>13</sup>

According to the view of most scholars, the confession from the *Principles of Philosophy* is important. Now, it is clear that after adopting the hypothesis of the evil deceiver, Descartes did not doubt everything. He counted on the meaning of basic expressions and basic principles.<sup>14</sup> It seems that this explicit recognition makes this *exotic* position a bit less exotic.

4. There are different opinions on the way out of the given situation: From Descartes' perspective, our strategy should be to set out something that is true, no matter what the demon can achieve: *a demon-proof point of certainty*. In this situation, while everything about the external world we believe in is in question, no other reaction seems reasonable to him. Our target should be to find something that is unassailable: a necessary truth that can block the demon. He himself produces this in the famous dictum: *Cogito, ergo sum*.

If I am wrong about the external world all the time then I also exist. It seems that there is nothing the demon can do about it. If I did not exist, who would be the producer of all the mistakes and the victim of manipulation? Doubting does not make sense, here. According to Descartes, as far as I am mistaken, there are no questions possible about the statement that I do exist! In this recognition consists the first principle of the Cartesian doctrine: the *argument of cogito*. From this very point, the construction of the modern world-view began.

<sup>13</sup> E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> A. Kenny, *Cartesian Privacy*, in: Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G. Pitcher (ed.), Doubleday and Company, New York 1966, p. 361; W. Röd, *Die Philosophie der Neuzeit 1, Von Francis Bacon bis Spinoza*, Verlag C. H. Beck 1998.

Another author concerned with the traditional philosophical concept, albeit with very different results, is Wittgenstein. First of all, he seriously asks: “So is the hypothesis possible, that all the things around us don’t exist?”<sup>15</sup> As a consequence of a resolute negative answer to this, Wittgenstein denies that the strategy promoted by Descartes is correct—or even reasonable. On the contrary, when facing this particular vulnerability, he finds absolutely nothing worth answering.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the transcendental argumentation from part **3**, in reality, nobody can be sure what the words Descartes uses mean, when he doubts that there is external world, all around him. Nobody can grasp the meaning of his words with the level of certainty that is necessary for the successful act of communication. Why? Wittgenstein reminds us that, “If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either.”<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the hypothesis of evil deceiver represents only an empty threat. There is no reason to answer it. This theoretical challenge represents rather a kind of abnormality that should be treated as such. It seems as if it were impossible to take the traditional philosophical concept seriously.

**5.** Wittgenstein’s critical analysis of the traditional concept is concerned with four main areas of interest: A) the concept of *understanding*, B) *believing*, C) *doubt*, D) *mistake*.

A) The author repeatedly suggests that a solution to the problem of evil deceiver lies, metaphorically said, *in our terminology*. This problem is not about what the omnipotent being could or could not do. (There is no need for help from theology, therefore.) This question is about what we are able to understand.

Descartes thinks that he is able to understand the situation, in which he is wrong in every moment, he believes in something. For example, he admits that he might be wrong about how many hands and legs he has. Wittgenstein replies: “If I am wrong about *this*, I have no guarantee that anything I say is true.”<sup>18</sup> In such a case—if I have no guarantee that anything I pronounce is true—I have no system of linguistic signs. I am only under an impression that I use a language. In fact, this is what a collapse of communication looks like.

Perhaps, it is useful to add a few remarks, here. It is useful to add that, according to Wittgenstein, our judgments and attitudes—those we ordinarily

<sup>15</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, op. cit., § 55.

<sup>16</sup> M. Koeber, *Certainties of a World-picture: The Epistemological Investigations of On Certainty*, in: The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein, H. Sluga, D. Stern (eds.), Cambridge University, Cambridge 1996, p. 411; D. Moyal-Sharrock, *Wittgenstein on Knowledge and Certainty*, in: A Companion to Wittgenstein, H. J. Glock, J. Hyman (eds.), Blackwell, Gichester 2017, p. 550.

<sup>17</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, op. cit., § 114.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, § 69.

hold and are prepared to defend—form a system. It does not matter whether I am—as a *cogito*—aware of it. Important is that what I know—or what I am justified to know—is always a part of the broader structure in which *consequences and premises give one another mutual support*. The structure our judgments and attitudes form is the space in which our categories, hypotheses and arguments *have their life*. Without it, there is no criterion, no argument, no statement, no experiment, etc.<sup>19</sup> The reason we have the system, however, is not that we find it convincing, or acceptable, or reasonable. In fact, the broader structure, in which consequences and premises give one another mutual support, is something given to us long before we are able to evaluate anything.

It is also useful to add that in our system, there is a constitutive—*unique*—relationship between the *unassailability* of certain judgments, on the one hand, and the *understanding* of them, on the other. As a result, there is a sum of statements which are, so to say, *exempt from reasonable doubt*. Wittgenstein suggests that, as the process of justification must have an end somewhere, our convictions and reasons have the *bottom*. We can find the bottom, for example, in situations in which we are—after a certain amount of irritating questions—forced to exclaim: *Simply, this is what I do!* What are those situations like? In such a situation, we usually feel sure that our action is reasonable; however, we also feel that we are unable to provide a good, that is, satisfying answer to the interlocutor (mostly, our own child).

These strong convictions *without good reasons* are playing a constitutive role in our game: they are playing a role of foundations for action and scientific research. According to Wittgenstein, these *foundation-walls* are said to be *unconditionally true*, yet the real role they play consists in that that they are never called into question, and, in many cases, never even explicitly formulated. “The child learns to believe a host of things. I.e. it learns to act according to these beliefs. Bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed, and in that system some things stand unshakeable fast and some are more or less liable to shift. What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it.”<sup>20</sup>

The structure our judgments and attitudes form is not in place because it has unquestionable foundations. From the new perspective, the foundation-walls for action and scientific research are carried by the whole system; it is not that they are carrying the system by their self-evidence or something of that kind. (That is also a reason behind the lack of good reasons we always feel when we deal with questions about the bottom of the process of justification.)

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, § 105.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, § 144.

It means that, in some cases, when I accept a statement to be unconditionally true, or self-evident, it sends others a signal that I am, in fact, a competent user of the language. Sometimes, this is what our statements do. In Wittgenstein's words, "The truth of my statements is the test of my understanding of these statements."<sup>21</sup> This means that I cannot say that, for example, *I am not sure how many hands I have*, and present it as a true statement. In the same way, I cannot say that *I am sure I have senses*, and present it as a false statement. To make such moves, in Wittgenstein's view, is not even a mistake. Why? It is not certain, whether I understand what I say when I make such moves.

The author points out that if someone gives signs of doubt in situations in which others never do, the others cannot understand his signs of doubt as such.<sup>22</sup> The person, who says that he is not sure whether or not he has two hands, does not, in fact, play the same game as we do. His moves are not from our structure. It is unclear to us, what the practical effects of these moves would be. (This is also why we do not know what it would mean to try to convince him that he has two hands. We have no idea, from Wittgenstein's perspective, how to accomplish that.) We would not understand such a human being, because we would not be sure what he would still allow to be counted as *evidence* and what he would refuse. It seems that he should have to doubt all sorts of things that *stand fast* for us.<sup>23</sup>

Based on this, we come to the conclusion that we cannot be sure whether we understand the meaning the sceptic's terms possess or do not. We may think that by the term "hand," for example, he means the organ we all do, but, easily, it can turn out that he has in mind something different. He may mean by it, for example, what we mean by "yellow." We may think that by "plus" he means the function we all mean, but it can turn out that he has in mind the one Saul Kripke calls "quus."<sup>24</sup> Here, these possibilities simply cannot be ruled out.

The fact is that, when dealing with the radical sceptic, *we can never be sure*. Due to this, Wittgenstein asks a fundamental question: "How do I know that he uses the words *I doubt it* as I do?"<sup>25</sup> Honestly, I do not think that there will ever be a constructive answer to this metalinguistic question.

B) Descartes is sure that it is possible *to believe a single sentence*. At the beginning of any special science, what we believe in is a single statement (or a few statements). According to Wittgenstein, this metaphor is seriously

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<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, § 80.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, § 157.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, § 247.

<sup>24</sup> S. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Blackwell 2002, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, op. cit., § 127.

misleading.<sup>26</sup> When we believe in something, whatever it is, we are already in a whole structure in which consequences and premises give one another mutual support. In other words, we are always dealing with far-reaching connections between different sentences. “When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)”<sup>27</sup>

It is also useful to add that what is a justification for a belief—for example, that *I have two hands*—is never anything I can decide, myself. (A sight of my hands, therefore, cannot be taken as a justification for this belief.) In contrast to Descartes, Wittgenstein suggests that it is not up to me—as an individual—to decide, what is telling ground for a belief. This has nothing to do with my individual—mental—life. If there is anything like justification for a belief, it does not depend upon any individual.<sup>28</sup>

To decide whether something is a justification for a belief or not, is, under normal circumstances, rather a matter of the rest of our proceedings, actions and characteristic manifestations. Most importantly, it is a matter of our normal manner of making judgments.

C) Descartes is sure that there is a way how to imagine a human being who doubts all the beliefs he otherwise takes—thanks to his parents, teachers, etc.—for granted. Wittgenstein doubts the conventionality of this metaphor. He is convinced that, there is no way in which to imagine someone who doubts all criteria his making judgments relies on. To imagine this would mean to imagine a thinking person without any system, in which consequences and premises give one another mutual support. However, it is not easy to achieve. Such a person, if similar to us, would be unable to differentiate between the right and wrong way. (If not completely different from us, he would be without any criterion, to start from, and also without any clear idea of something being a criterion for something.) This person would be unable to communicate even with himself.

As already said, what we know—or what we are justified to know—is always a part of a broader structure. What we doubt we are justified to know must also fit into the rest of our proceedings, actions and characteristic manifestations. Characteristic manifestations of what we call “doubting” are only characteristic of it in particular circumstances, not always. For example, I cannot participate in what the Cartesian voice is performing at the end of the *First Meditation: I cannot be in doubt at will*. In fact, even the logical possibility of doubt alone is not a reason for doubting. Any doubt we bring

<sup>26</sup> A. Ayer, *Can There Be a Private Language?*, in: Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G. Pitcher (ed.), Doubleday and Company, New York 1966, p. 259.

<sup>27</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, op. cit., § 141.

<sup>28</sup> M. Williams, *Wittgenstein's Refutation of Idealism*, in: Wittgenstein and Scepticism, D. McManus (ed.), Clarendon, Oxford 2004, p. 93.

in must have a place in our structure. For instance, any reason for doubt presupposes the intelligibility of reasons against it. That is a reason why doubting all the statements about the external world we are prepared to defend is just not what we call “doubting”. (This scenario rather demonstrates that we have no problem to give ourselves a completely false characteristic of what we are concerned with.)

Descartes takes for granted that doubting everything is the only way how to find those beliefs which are unquestionable. Wittgenstein tries to remind us that this model of doubt does not fit into the rest of our normal activities. The theoretical intention behind the method of doubt does not, in fact, fit into the rest of what we are able to understand. As already stated, we do not have an idea what the sceptic’s statements mean. (In case we seem to have an idea, we could not apprehend their practical effects on us.) We could not even successfully reconstruct the system from which the sceptic operates. The truth is that when dealing with someone who doubts our own existence, we can *never* be sure. Wittgenstein’s reaction is strikingly resolute: “The reasonable man does not have certain doubt.”<sup>29</sup>

D) Descartes is sure that there is an analogy between being wrong about the external world, from time to time, and being wrong about it constantly. According to Wittgenstein, it is not true that mistakes merely get more and more improbable as we pass from being mistaken, from time to time, to being mistaken all the time. It seems to him that the Cartesian voice is under an influence of *false grammatical analogy*. At some point, this activity has completely ceased to be a normal activity. As a result, it is not correct to label radical doubt as a *mistake*. At the end, the position falls under different category: “Not every false belief of this sort is a mistake.”<sup>30</sup> To be wrong about the external world constantly is a *mental disturbance*, rather than a wrong move.

Wittgenstein also suggests that there is no similarity between what we call a *wrong move*, on the one hand, and *mental disturbance*, on the other. Quite the opposite, there is a significant difference between them. “But what is the difference between mistake and mental disturbance? Or what is the difference between my treating it as a mistake and my treating it as mental disturbance?”<sup>31</sup> If I am wrong about an age in which I live—if I, for example, believe that I live in the age of Louis XIV—that could hardly be called a mistake. If I seriously believe that I write this text in Chinese that should also not be called a mistake. According to Wittgenstein, a wrong move is always possible to make a part of what we already understand; an expression of mental disturbance is not possible to make part of it.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, op. cit., § 220.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, § 72.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, § 73.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, § 75.

A wrong move has a place in our structure. When someone is wrong, sooner or later, we always understand what is the problem. In this regard, the situation is much more complicated, when we deal with a mental disturbance. “If I believe that I am sitting in my room when I am not, then I shall not be said to have made a mistake. But what is the essential difference between this case and a mistake?”<sup>33</sup> The answer is: mental disturbance does not have a *ground*, it only has a *cause*; mistake, on the other hand, has always both of them. This is a main reason why there is no need to answer the challenge from the *Meditations*. There is no reason to feel excited about the theoretical challenge the sceptical position represents. The position, however *exotic and attractive*, does not have a ground, it only has a cause.

6. In attempting to critically reassess Wittgenstein’s criticism of the traditional philosophical concept we can look at a few typical reactions to it.

On the one hand, there are authors who agree with Wittgenstein. Crispin Wright, for example, claims: “This reflection ... delivers a modest but successful coup against one kind of scepticism.”<sup>34</sup> Daniele Moyal-Sharrock is more explicit: “... Wittgenstein elucidates the concept of doubt in two ways: he shows that universal doubt is impossible, and he shows that not everything that has the appearance of doubt is doubt ...”<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, there are authors who either do not agree with Wittgenstein’s presentation of the sceptical threat, or do not see the outcome of the presentation in terms of the *metalinguistic dissolution* of the threat. Here, I try to analyse three selected objections.

I) The sceptic is using his words not in accordance with their normal use intentionally. There is no sense in pointing this out to him in the way *On Certainty* does.

II) Wittgenstein does not understand that, during the process of doubting, we have to presuppose the meaning of basic terms. Therefore, his criticism is not connected with the process itself.

III) It is possible to formulate the sceptical position in a way that is not affected by the criticism. We all understand the re-formulation of the position.

In what follows, I try to deal with these objections, step by step. By doing so, my intention is to outline a real impact of the metalinguistic criticism.

I) The initial objection can be associated with Michael Koeber. According to him, the sceptic’s use of words is not in accordance with their ordinary—or normal—use. Evidently, there are shifts and changes. Koeber could without problem agree with Wittgenstein that Descartes’s dealing with linguistic

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, §195

<sup>34</sup> C. Wright, *Intuition, Entitlement and the Epistemology of Logical Laws*, *Dialectica*, 58, 2004, p. 165.

<sup>35</sup> D. Moyal-Sharrock, *Wittgenstein on Knowledge and Certainty*, op. cit., p. 551.

signs detaches him from our structure, and from the ordinary criteria we use. Nevertheless, he would not agree that this represents a problem for Descartes. He claims: “His sceptical question therefore belongs to a purely theoretical undertaking and does not involve concerns about any practical needs.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, there is no sense in attacking Descartes on the basis that he does not follow our everyday practical criteria; it does not have a sense to point out that *his words are not from our structure* in the way *On Certainty* does.<sup>37</sup> Descartes’s words are not from our structure, because this was exactly his intention: *to step up from it*. He cannot be criticized for what was his explicit intention, can he?

At first sight, it does seem that Koeber is, in his criticism of Wittgenstein’s treatment of the traditional concept, correct. As already stated, the remarks from *On Certainty* do point out that the sceptic’s moves with words are not from our structure. Is Wittgenstein’s criticism finished, then?

Firstly, if anything really does not make a sense, it is an attempt to present A), B), C), and D), as if the analysis was a part of the *ordinary language philosophy* movement: as if the analysis was part of the criticism of past metaphysical ideas as misuse of our everyday practical language. However, as can be verified, the quotations from *On Certainty* in parts 4 and 5 are not about any practical issue. On the contrary, these are metaphysical remarks about the background of a metaphysical issue *par excellence*. In another words, Descartes’s statements about *demolishing everything* belong to a purely theoretical undertaking in the same way as Wittgenstein’s statements about the *role of certainty* in demolishing anything. The second author detaches himself from the ordinary use of language when writing *On Certainty* (see his using of the term “grammar”), in exactly the same way as the first when creating the *Meditations* (see his using of the term “thinking”). There is no difference between these two *theoreticians*, in this aspect.

Secondly, it is obvious that Descartes does not want to follow the criteria of his day. Definitely, he wants to detach himself from the late-scholastic world-view given to him as a child. However, at the same time, he wants to be interpreted as an intelligent being by his readers. I am absolutely sure that this is a part of his intention: he does not want to detach himself completely. At a minimum, he intends to be readable. From Wittgenstein’s perspective, he failed. The statements about a situation in which *nothing is as it seems*, are not, for example, readable. Despite the fact that Descartes’ motivation was to step up from the late-scholastic structure of his day and to rebuild it, in trying to do it—at the very beginning—he applies something

<sup>36</sup> M. Koeber, *Certainties of a World-picture: The Epistemological Investigations of On Certainty*, op. cit., p. 437.

<sup>37</sup> J. Conant, *Varieties of scepticism*, op. cit., p. 110; D. Moyal-Sharrock, *Wittgenstein on Knowledge and Certainty*, op. cit., p. 550.

bizarre: *an unintelligent concept*. (Due to this, the first principle of the modern world-view represents an answer to an unintelligent question.)

Thirdly, it is not at all evident whether Descartes really wants to detach his sceptical question from the everyday normal use of language, as Koeber suggested. In the text, we see rather the opposite tendency: to connect the question by all possible means to our ordinary thinking. For example, the presentation of the sceptical position itself is designed in such a way; as if the concept of the position only makes reasons which are implicitly contained in the meaning of word “omnipotence,” explicit. As already suggested in part 2, it looks as if Descartes did nothing more when introducing the extraordinary position. Evidently, his intention was not to detach himself from the everyday—normal—criteria we use. In contrast to Koeber’s view, his intention was to present the scenario as unproblematic consequence of our everyday beliefs. (There are, of course, other examples of this tendency.)

These are the main reasons why I believe that the metalinguistic criticism of the traditional concept is not finished, thanks to I).

II) The next objection to Wittgenstein’s criticism of the traditional concept can be associated with Wolfgang Röd.<sup>38</sup> According to him, there is, in fact, only a limited discussion between Wittgenstein’s remarks and the process of establishing the Cartesian doctrine, because Wittgenstein fails to realize that the process presupposes the *common notions*, the meaning of basic terms. Wittgenstein misunderstands the fact that the author of the *Meditations* does not, even when claiming: *there is nothing in the world that is certain*, doubt the notions of greatest simplicity he applies. For, he realized very well, centuries before the remarks from *On Certainty*, that it would be impossible to claim anything without these notions. Wittgenstein is presented, therefore, as somebody who took the hypothesis of evil deceiver too seriously. In fact, according to Röd, it was not meant to be taken in such an absurd manner (as if we could question literally *everything*). If taken in this radical way, it seems entirely natural that it would only lead us to failure.

Is this objection correct? Definitely, there can be found statements, in which Wittgenstein declares that such a doubt, in which *we question everything*, could not even successfully establish itself, in reality. If there were no other remarks, containing other arguments, Röd would be in II), most probably, right. However, there are statements, which are containing significantly different lines of criticism of possibility of that doubt.

Wittgenstein is reminding the sceptic that to doubt everything about the external world except common notions means nothing more than to doubt everything about the external world including common notions. There is no other possibility, no matter what kind of system we use. The meaning of

<sup>38</sup> W. Röd, *Die Philosophie der Neuzeit 1, Von Francis Bacon bis Spinoza*, op. cit.

basic terms could not be an exception from all other entities of the external world. Quite the opposite, it is evident that if there is no shared certainty about the external world, then there could be no meaning of a word!

When creating the *Meditations*, Descartes probably could not realize that he, in fact, cannot know, what his basic terms mean, when he questions everything external he believes in. He does not see that, under such circumstances, he would be simply unable to communicate a definite sense. In any language, there is a *constitutive* connection between the *self-evidence* of certain beliefs, on the one side, and the *meaning* of certain signs, on the other. According to Wittgenstein, there is no second without the first. No speaker is more certain about the meaning of his words than about the external things he takes to be unassailable (for example, that he has two hands and two legs). Without this *unique connection*, there would be no *communication of a definite sense*.

At the end, Röd's pointing out that the Cartesian voice does not doubt everything, because he is not questioning common notions, is pointless. It looks as if Röd did not identify one crucial, i.e. metalinguistic dimension in the philosophical content of Wittgenstein's remarks. As a consequence, there is only a limited discussion between his criticism and the analysis from A), B), C), and D).

III) The last point of criticism can be associated, again, with Koeber. According to him, there is a significant re-formulation of the mentioned sceptical position, which seems not to be affected by the remarks from *On Certainty*. The new formulation does not, surprisingly, consist in denying the existence of external world. It consists in asking a single question: "Granted that you are now in circumstances which are from an epistemic point of view the most favourable ones in which we can actually be, how do you know that you are not dreaming?"<sup>39</sup> From Koeber's perspective, no criticism from the *On Certainty* does show that asking this question is a misuse of language. On the contrary, this question seems perfectly understandable: "... we all take this extraordinary doubt to be grounded in reasonable considerations."<sup>40</sup> In other words, we all have an ability to acknowledge the possibility of this doubt. Is this a problem for Wittgenstein?

In fact, the new formulation of this sceptical question is based upon an ambiguity of the term "knowledge" as it is used in ordinary language as well as in the language of special science. In *On Certainty*, we are frequently warned about this ambiguity.

Amongst other things, the philosophical remarks are driving our attention to the fact that there is a difference between two categories: *knowledge*

<sup>39</sup> M. Koeber, *Certainties of a World-picture: The Epistemological Investigations of On Certainty*, op. cit., p. 437.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem.

and *certainty*.<sup>41</sup> They possess different places in our structure and play different roles in our activities. As a result, I do not have, in fact, a knowledge that I am not dreaming. (I do not have the verified knowledge that I am not under the influence of an evil deceiver.) Here, the adequate approach consists in claiming something different: *I am certain that I am not dreaming*. I do not know that. Definitely, I do not know that in the same way I know that, for example, *tomorrow will be sunny, in Paris*. Why? I have no justification for believing that I am not dreaming, right now.

In fact, I have no good reasons to give to an interlocutor. On the other hand, I have good and persuasive reasons to provide to a sceptic, who doubts my statement that tomorrow will be sunny, in Paris. Here, the question: “How do you know that?” is not a surprise. I know very well how to handle such a sceptic.

In what was just said consists, in fact, an essential difference between the two categories: between *knowing* that tomorrow will be sunny, in Paris, and *being certain* that I am not dreaming, right now. What is going on? From Wittgenstein’s perspective, it always makes perfect sense to ask for a justification of what we know. However, it does not make a lot of sense to ask for the justification of what we are certain about. In our structure, that is exactly what it means *to be certain about something*.

Based on this, we come to the conclusion that the re-formulation of the sceptical question does not at all represent a problem for the metalinguistic criticism of the traditional concept. How do I know that I am not dreaming, then? Wittgenstein’s answer is: I do not know that. *I am certain about it!*

**Conclusion:** What are the concrete results of the metalinguistic criticism of the hypothesis of evil deceiver? Are there any? From my perspective, the critical analysis of the traditional concept represents an indirect assault on the intelligibility of the important—and, in a sense, unifying—story of modern philosophical thinking. (The story, on accepting of which Bertrand Russell could without problem agree with Edmund Husserl, for example.)

The remarks from *On Certainty* suggest that, after the Cartesian voice adopts the hypothesis of evil deceiver, we should stop reading the text. As a result of A), B), C), and D), we should stop reading the *Meditations on First Philosophy*—one of the most influential works of metaphysics, epistemology and philosophy of mind—right at the end of the first chapter. And we should not continue in this activity. Meaningful content of the book ends, in fact, there. Why? Because we are not certain what the words Descartes uses mean, nor are we certain whether they play the role of *word*, at all. After he adopts the philosophical hypothesis, we are only under the impres-

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<sup>41</sup> F. Stoutland, *Wittgenstein: On Certainty and Truth*, Philosophical Investigations, 21, 2002, pp. 204–208; D. Moyal-Sharrock, *Wittgenstein on Knowledge and Certainty*, op. cit., pp. 547–549.

sion that we are dealing with language (or that we are reading a text). From Wittgenstein's point of view, we are instead dealing with symptoms of something rather different.

In any case, *we cannot be sure whether we understand the Cartesian voice or not*. This is the single most important result of the critical analysis.

## **ZNAJOMOŚĆ JĘZYKA A RADYKALNY SCEPTYCYZM**

### **STRESZCZENIE**

Według Kartezjusza, możliwe jest skuteczne zwątpienie we wszystkie aspekty świata zewnętrznego, poza językiem. Według Wittgensteina, zwątpienie w cały świat zewnętrzny z wyjątkiem języka nie jest niczym więcej niż zwątpieniem w świat wewnętrzny włącznie z językiem. Dlaczego? Otóż żaden użytkownik języka nie jest bardziej pewny znaczenia swoich słów, niż pewny jest bytów zewnętrznych, które uważa za niepodważalne (np. że ma dwie ręce i dwie nogi). Bez tego *powiązania konstytutywnego*, nie byłoby *komunikacji sensu definitywnego*. Wittgenstein sugeruje, że kiedy autor „Medytacji o pierwszej filozofii” przyjmuje hipotezę „złośliwego demona”, odnosimy tylko wrażenie, jakobyśmy mieli do czynienia z językiem (albo czytali tekst). W istocie mamy do czynienia z symptomami nieco innego zjawiska. Celem tej pracy jest zbadanie Wittgensteinowskiej krytyki możliwości przyjęcia tak radykalnie sceptycznego stanowiska.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wątpienie kartezjańskie, pewność, Kartezjusz, epistemologia, zły zwodziciel, wiedza, sceptyzm, Wittgenstein.

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