Wittgenstein on Scepticism and Certainty
AC Grayling

Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (hereafter OC) is a collection of provisional notes, recording a journey not an arrival. But it is not difficult to see an intended destination for the journey, nor is there anything obscure about the territory being travelled. Yet OC has some surprising and unexpected features. For one thing, it recapitulates certain old attitudes in Wittgenstein, harking back to, but making different use of, Kantian traces in the *Tractatus*, here in the form of a roughly sketched (and possibly naturalistic) anti-realism similar in striking respects to Kant's empirical realism. For another thing it appears to represent Wittgenstein's acceptance, at last, of philosophy's legitimacy as an enterprise. In all his earlier work he explicitly premissed the claim that philosophy is a spurious enterprise, arising from misunderstandings about language. In OC he takes a central, traditional philosophical problem—the problem of scepticism and knowledge—and tries to formulate a refutation of scepticism, and a characterisation of knowledge and its justification. And he does this by engaging with another attempt to do so, namely, Moore's.

In order to evaluate the ideas it contains I shall therefore take OC at face value—as an unfinished enquiry, the ideas in which nevertheless strongly indicate the finished theses it works towards—and proceed as follows.

First, there are two main themes in OC, which are, at the least, not comfortably consistent with each other. One is a reply to scepticism, and as such contributes recognisably to the theory of knowledge. Indeed it is a reinvention almost from scratch of views familiar, and usually more fully argued, elsewhere in philosophy, of a broadly foundationalist stamp. In this respect it carries forward, or unfolds, themes already suggested in the *Philosophical Investigations* (henceforth PI). Alongside the first theme—or more accurately, wrapped round it as a vine about a tree—is the other, not comfortably consistent, theme, a relativistic one which undermines the claims constituting the first theme. After stating each theme I discuss the tension between them, suggest the best way out of it, and indicate how OC itself, and materials from PI, affords Wittgenstein's own different basis—a fudged one—for resolving the tension.

Wittgenstein's conceptions of doubt, certainty and knowledge, his persistent conflation throughout OC of contingent propositions with those he identifies as 'grammatical' propositions, and his revealing conflation of scepticism with idealism, are central to understanding the themes of OC, and I discuss them in their due places, concluding with an overall evaluation.
My exegetical task is effected by suitably anatomising OC. The view I shall call OC1 and which constitutes a version of a foundationalist refutation of scepticism, and therefore a contribution to the theory of knowledge, has two components, the first of which is that scepticism is answered by appeal to the fact that beliefs inhere in a system, and the second of which is that this system of beliefs rests on foundations which give those beliefs their content. Here are some passages exemplifying the first component of OC1 (all emphases are Wittgenstein's):

83. The truth of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference (WR249).

88. It may be for example that all enquiry on our part is set so as to exempt certain propositions from doubt, if they are ever formulated.

94. But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false. 105. All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system ... The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which our arguments have their life.

162. I have a world picture. Is it true or false? Above all it is the substratum of all my enquiring and asserting (WR252).

341. 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 upon which those turn.

Here are some passages exemplary of the second component of OC1:

103. And now if I were to say "It is my unshakeable conviction that etc.", this means in the present case too that I have not consciously arrived at the conviction by following a particular line of thought, but that it is anchored in all my questions and answers, so anchored that I cannot touch it.

162. I have a world picture. Is it true or false? Above all it is the substratum of all my enquiring and asserting (WR252).

411. If I say 'we assume that the earth has existed for many years past' (or something similar), then of course it sounds strange that we should assume such a thing. But in the entire system of our language-games it belongs to the foundations. The assumption, one might say, forms the basis of action, and therefore, naturally, of thought.

512. Isn't the question this: 'What if you had to change your opinion even on these most fundamental things?' And to that the answer seems to me to be: 'You don't have to change. That is just what their being "fundamental" is.'

599. To say: in the end we can only adduce such grounds as we hold to be grounds, is to say
nothing at all.

OC1 thus states that scepticism gets no purchase because our beliefs inhere in a system (the first component) which rests upon foundations (the second component), which latter non-negotiably constitute the conditions upon which our beliefs have content and which therefore constitute the conditions even for doubting, which, therefore again, cannot take the foundations for their target. The justification for the foundations is thus effected by a "transcendental argument" : restated, it is that foundational beliefs (expressed by what Wittgenstein calls, in senses of 'logical' and 'grammatical' special to OC, logical or grammatical propositions; see e.g. 51, 56-8) are what make the system possible, and it is within the system that claims to knowledge and challenges of doubt are alone intelligible. A clever encapsulation of the transcendental argument is given at 248: 'I have arrived at the rock-bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house.'

The view I shall call OC2 and which is not comfortably consistent with—perhaps, indeed, undermines—OC1, is to be found in paragraphs 65, 95-9, 166, 174, 192, 211 (WR254), 253, 256 (WR257-8), 307, 336 (and compare 559)—and perhaps also in paragraphs 5, 33, and 607. Here are some exemplary passages:

65. When language-games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meanings of words change.

95. The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology ...

97. The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift.

99. And the bank of the river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited.

166. The difficulty is to realise the groundlessness of our believing.

256. On the other hand a language-game does change with time.

336. But what men consider reasonable or unreasonable alters.

OC2 is relativism. Relativism is the view that truth and knowledge are not absolute or invariable, but dependent upon viewpoint, circumstances or historical conditions. What is true for me might not be true for you; what counts as knowledge from one viewpoint might not do so from another; what is true at one time is false at another. Paragraph 97 arguably shows that the relativism implicit in this aspect of OC is of a classic or standard type. Its presence in OC is entirely consistent with its presence elsewhere in the later writings: one remembers the lions and Chinese of PI. What was left open in those earlier relativistic remarks was the degree of strength of the relativism to which Wittgenstein was committed. OC2 constitutes a claim that the framework within which claims to knowledge and challenges of doubt equally make sense is such that its change can reverse what counted as either. That is classically strong
relativism.

II

To get a good feel for the tension between OC1 and OC2, compare 103 (where a given belief 'is anchored in all my questions and answers, so anchored that I cannot shake it') with 97-9 ('the river-bed of thoughts may shift'); 494 with 256; both 512 and 517 with any of the relativistic remarks cited, for example 559; and any of the relativistic remarks with 317 and 599, which latter is worth repeating here: 'To say: in the end we can only adduce such grounds as we hold to be grounds, is to say nothing at all'.

At one level, OC1 and OC2 can of course be so interpreted as to make them consistent. One can postulate foundations that are historically and in other ways parochial to the discourse under consideration, consisting in beliefs and principles which are basic in the OC1 sense for a given discourse, and not justified independently of it; but which are not immutable or absolute but as vulnerable to change, even if more slowly and circumstantially, as any of the ordinary beliefs comprehended in the framework. This precisely seems to be the import of Wittgenstein's river-bed metaphor: the river-bed is only relatively stable with respect to the water flowing over it, because it is worn away with time, and shifts its course.

But a relativistic foundationalism renders OC1 superficial as a response to scepticism, because so construed it does not begin to meet the really serious problem scepticism poses, and of which Wittgenstein is perfectly aware (see e.g. 14-16). To see what that is, one must retrace some steps.

Let us simplify the model we are working with. A sceptic challenges us to justify a particular empirical belief, for example that there is a book on the table here before us. We respond, exploiting the same resource for doing so as OC does, by saying in effect that these circumstances are such and those words mean such that this is tantamount to a paradigmatic circumstance for using those words in these circumstances—that is, for claiming that there is a book on the table. The sceptic pushes his point, invoking considerations about non-standard perceptual phenomena and other psychological contingencies, including error; at which point we change gear and invoke countervailing considerations about the framework of the discourse (the system of beliefs constituting it; the 'conceptual scheme') by stating the assumptions upon which not just the claim, but also the challenge to it, make sense. And at this level of sceptical challenge, that has to be enough: justifications in ordinary discourse come to an end at this point.

But now the sceptic mutates; he becomes a different and bigger monster. He is no longer interested in hearing what we have to say about the book on the table, but in what we have to say about the framework, the system of beliefs. What justifies our acceptance of the framework, or (more weakly) our employment of it? What if there were another framework, or other frameworks, in which different assumptions led to different outcomes with these words and these circumstances? And so on. The sceptic, in other words, has adopted the habiliments of relativism. Relativism, indeed, is the ultimate form of scepticism, because it challenges us to justify, as a whole, the scheme within which mundane judgments get their content and have their life.
The answer which says: 'this is the scheme we have; it is a bare given that we have it', and which might— but this is a different thing—add, 'and of course there might be others', and—yet a further and a bigger step again—'we might never know what these other schemes are like or even that they exist', is unsatisfactory, at very least as the first response to relativism. One might end by responding with (in this emergency: preferably) the first step just described, after a long haul; but there are strong anti-relativist arguments to evaluate first, which, if they turn out to be plausible and stable in the face of challenge, provide a powerful way of blocking scepticism altogether. It would seem that for the argument of OC1 to work as a refutation of scepticism, this stronger recourse is required. Without it, knowledge and truth are concepts parochial to the scheme; they are not knowledge and truth but 'knowledge-in-the scheme' and 'truth-in-the scheme', as 599 says. (Think of being told that 'Jarndyce is a lawyer' is true "in" Bleak House' is the only kind of exemplification the concept of truth has.) There are good reasons for thinking that the assumptions constitutive of the framework have to be undischARGEABLE. These reasons are drawn from seeing how the notion of alternative frameworks collapses under direct pressure, the terminus of the argument being that anything recognisable as a framework has to be identical in fundamental respects with the framework from which it is so recognised. The argument is adapted from a familiar one offered by Davidson, who writes of "conceptual schemes" rather than frameworks, and individuates them as sets of intertranslatable languages.

The argument, familiarly enough, is as follows. The relativist proposal is that there can be languages which we might not be able to recognise as such—which, that is, we cannot translate. But how do you recognise a language as such if you cannot translate it? The problem can be stated in terms of what the only plausible candidate for a criterion of languagehood can be, namely, translatability into a familiar idiom. Since language-use involves 'a multitude of finely discriminated intentions and beliefs' which we could not attribute to someone unless we could understand his speech, we can only recognise the presence of such intentions and beliefs if translation is possible. Moreover, if it turns out that there are differences between our and the alien's beliefs, this will be courtesy of a shared background of beliefs which makes the differences apparent. Differences are more meaningful when there are fewer of them; when there are few against a shared background of belief, the differences are more of opinion than conceptualisation—they relate to variances in the scheme's superstructure, which tolerates conflicts of view in (for characteristic examples) politics and taste, while still locating them in the same world. Since the cognitive foundations of the scheme have to be shared for these more entertaining differences to be possible, the conclusion is that conceptual relativism is incoherent. (Davidson takes this to mean that the very idea of a framework is empty because it implies what the argument denies, namely, the possibility of real conceptual diversity.)

Underlying such arguments, very interestingly, is an implicit commitment to the controversial view that possibility is an epistemic notion, that is, that possibility is conceivable. Something is a possible state of affairs (a possible past fact, a possible language or scheme) only if it is constructible from actual states of affairs (from what we know, from the language we speak). The intended contrast is this: on the
idea that possibility is a purely logical notion, denoting mere absence of contradiction, the number of possible worlds there can be other than the actual world is infinite. But on the idea that possibility is an epistemic notion, denoting graspability in thought (or translatability into a familiar idiom), the number of possible worlds other than the actual world is limited by accessibility relations between them and it. But where there are such relations, the idea of a world being in some strong sense different from this one loses its grip. Standard ways of defining possible worlds involve redistributing truth-values over the propositions constituting the world-book of the actual, or increasing their number by adding other propositions consistent with them. But to do this is to redescribe this world, not—except by courtesy of the phrase—to create new worlds.

These considerations rule out relativism. They therefore rule out OC2. There is no other way of taking OC2 than as a seriously strong relativist argument ('the river-bed of thoughts may shift' ... 'a language-game changes with time'). In the ideal state of things, therefore, OC1's offer of a response to scepticism is elected to stand, and OC2 is ditched. But as the text of OC was left to us, Wittgenstein was developing arguments for both, so the next question is: is there any way they could be made to reconcile, further up the road where their parallels meet?

III

The destination available to Wittgenstein in the light of the tension between OC1's need for an anti-relativistic resource, and OC2's undermining of this, is one made familiar by his treatment of the request for justifications in PI. It is to say: justification must come to an end: "my spade is turned". In PI this seemed to offer a form of foundationalism in which the basis—the given, that which justifies itself by being what it is— is practice: and moreover shared practice, which in its essentially mutual character is constitutive of the content (so, in the case of language, the meaning) of what is based upon it. This indeed is Wittgenstein's resource: see 7, 92, 110, 116, 196 (WR253), 229, 559; and perhaps also 232, 219, 344 and 378. Does this do, as a somewhat fudging way out of the problem?

I think not, because the PI turned-spade thesis is considerably weakened in OC by the degree of relativism OC2 constitutes. Of course there are relativistic noises in PI: such claims as that we would not understand a speaking lion if we met one, and that we no more understand Chinese facial expressions than words, have that tendency, because they are premised on the lack of the shared form of life which makes understanding possible. But these relativities could be reducible—nothing implies that we cannot gain entry to the alien forms of life, that is, that we can find ways of translating lionese remarks and Chinese expressions upon doing so. Reducible synchronic relativities look very like familiar cultural differences, and hence are superficially relative only. But the idea that the foundations of sense are themselves merely relative—that the bed and banks are in constant process of erosion—implies a greater insecurity. Consider a relativist thesis like Feyerabend's, say, in which change in assertion-conditions entails change of sense. A different way of calibrating thermometers on his view changes the meaning of "temperature". If the bed and banks of discourse were shifting over time,
meanings would change with them. But we would be in the position of a speech community whose meanings are shifting without our realising the fact, because agreements remain. (The rules change, but we all keep observing them in common as they do so. This falls foul of Wittgenstein's own rule-following considerations. The whole community is in the dilemma of the solitary would-be language user, who cannot tell the difference between following the same rule again, and only thinking he is doing so.)

A different and better way out of the problem is to suppose that Wittgenstein might have developed his conflicting lines to the point where the conflict became intolerable—I would say: where he recognised the unhealthy mixing of contingent and framework propositions in his examples, which constantly seduced him into thinking relativistically: more on this shortly. And then he just might have preferred the strong anti-relativist argument available in the line he was himself taking in OC1 on the grounds of sense. For in that aspect of his discussion he in effect reinvented the strategy, as noted, of employing a transcendental argument to show that sceptical challenge is defeated by appeals to the framework. Why not therefore see that the transcendental argument militates equally against relativism?

But if one does not supplement the response to scepticism (OC1) by some such strategy, the exercise in OC is at best partial, at worst self-defeating, with the self-defeat stemming from acceptance of OC2. As OC stands, it stands defeated in just this way, for it only deals with scepticism at the lower, less threatening level, and fails to recognise that scepticism in its strongest form is, precisely, relativism.

There are hints in OC of an alternative better way out: namely, some version of naturalism—in Hume's, not Quine's, sense; that is, as appealing to natural facts about our psychological make-up (not, as in Quine, as appealing to the deliverances of current theory in natural science: although the latter form of naturalism takes itself to absorb the former). See 287: 'The squirrel does not infer by induction that it is going to need stores next winter as well.' This hint is strengthened by 505: 'It is always by favour of Nature that one knows something' and the paradigmatically Humean 277: "I can't help believing ....". If one re-reads the practice-cum-form-of-life entries in the light of these—a twist of the kaleidoscope—a plausibly naturalistic thesis comes fully into view.

Strawson brackets Wittgenstein with Hume as a naturalist because of 'resemblances, even echoes' in OC, but says that Wittgenstein does not make 'explicit appeal to Nature'. As we have just seen, this is not so; the appeal is explicit enough. Strawson goes on to cite passages constituting the foundationalist component of OC1 as 'echoes' of naturalism. I think one should keep these two –isms clearly apart; they are not the same thing, and do not entail each other. The naturalistic streak in OC is not as strong as Strawson claims; it is a mere echo indeed, much muffled, as things stand, by OC2. But it suggests a genuine alternative, suitably worked up, as a way of protecting OC1 from OC2.

IV

What explains Wittgenstein's inability to shake off OC2-type views is his muddling together contingent
or empirical propositions with those he calls 'grammatical propositions'—see e.g. 57, 58, 136:
Wittgenstein somewhat vaguely describes these latter as propositions which have the "peculiar logical role" of fixing the framework—giving the meaning, setting the conditions of intelligibility—for ordinary discourse; they cannot be called into doubt without thereby impugning the whole discourse for which they stand as foundational. This is the fatal flaw that generates the OC1-OC2 conflict. It is simply demonstrated: inspect 93-4, 106-111, 128-9, 143, 159, 167, 234, 273-4, 449, 505, and 614. Here are examples:

93. Everything that I have seen or heard gives me the conviction that no man has ever been far from the earth. Nothing in my picture of the world speaks in favour of the opposite.

106. If now the child insists, saying perhaps there is a way of getting [to the moon] which I don't know, etc. what reply could I make to him? ... But a child will not ordinarily stick to such a belief and will soon be convinced by what we tell him seriously.

234. I believe that I have forebears, and that every human being has them. I believe that there are various cities, and, quite generally, in the main facts of geography and history. I believe that the earth is a body on whose surface we move and that it no more suddenly disappears or the like than any other solid body ... If I wanted to doubt the existence of the earth long before my birth, I should have to doubt all sorts of things that stand fast for me (WR255).

These are offered as examples of beliefs 'standing fast', but one notices that in 93 and 106 the beliefs mentioned are contingent (true when Wittgenstein wrote them, but false if uttered now), while in 234 grammatical beliefs (everyone has forebears) and contingent ones (there are cities) are mixed together indiscriminately. There are examples of what might uncontroversially be called foundational beliefs—('there are physical objects', 51)—and when Wittgenstein addresses the problem at 318-323 ('But there is no sharp boundary between methodological propositions and propositions within a method' 318, and see 319) he does not resolve it, but turns directly to a claim about rationality that forms part of his positive account of knowledge, as if, whether or not a proposition is grammatical or contingent, its sense-giving foundational role is conferred on it by its being what 'the reasonable man believes' (323).

The rationality view is, indeed, unexceptionable, in having it that one of the marks of systematic propositions is the epistemically normative authority they exercise. Both grammatical and contingent propositions can be systematic in this way, for among the latter there can be propositions of a high degree of generality which key given areas of discourse, the sense of which presupposes the truth of the proposition: and the proposition is contingent. One can pluck from history examples of such propositions which have since been shown false, with the consequent withering of the discourse, as if its artery had been pinched closed.

But such propositions are not transcendental or grammatical. They are scepticism-rebutting only with respect to challenges to the less general propositions which assume them, and themselves lie open to sceptical challenge of that same internal variety. Their defence against it is supposed to rest on appeal to the system they belong to, that is, to genuinely grammatical propositions. But Wittgenstein at times
accords them a status indistinguishable from genuinely grammatical propositions; at 136, for example, he speaks of 'a lot of empirical propositions which we affirm without special testing; propositions, that is, which have a peculiar logical role in the system of our empirical propositions.' The difficulty is clearly apparent here: for these 'special empirical propositions' turn out not to be empirical in the ordinary sense: 'We don't, for example, arrive at any of them as a result of investigation' (138). So they are a priori; and therefore to explain the sense in which they are also 'empirical' we must suppose them akin to Kant's synthetic a priori propositions. But these latter are transcendental in the way Wittgenstein's grammatical propositions are, when he describes them with more care; and as 318-9 shows Wittgenstein is alive to the difference. So the problem remains.

I have no brief here to reconcile Wittgenstein's views in this connection; I simply point out the conflation to explain the presence in OC of OC2. The explanation is that if one includes among the foundations of the system propositions which are in fact contingent even if they have some kind of special status in their language-games, one is bound to accept that their status might change. Hence OC2; and hence the inconsistency in OC as it stands.

V

The well-known, and persuasive, central tenet of OC is its view that claims to knowledge only make sense where the possibility of doubt exists. Knowledge and doubt are correlative notions, and both knowledge claims and expressions of doubt get their content from their inherence in a framework of assumptions stable both for claims and challenges to them. We take from this the idea the thought that were matters otherwise we would be disabled from grasping that such-and-such a doubt relates to such-and-such a claim to know—that they compete, so to say, over the same epistemic territory. Knowing and doubting are internal to a framework (a language game, a practice), and the framework is its own court of appeal. All this depends on OC1 (and is threatened by OC2).

Many passages in OC urge this view. Among the key paragraphs are 121-3 (WR249), 317, 341-2, 354, 450, 519, and 625. Here are exemplary passages:

354. Doubting and non-doubting behaviour. There is the first only if there is the second.

450. A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt.

519. Doubt itself rests only on what is beyond doubt.

I take as key passages those that focus on doubt because what Wittgenstein's theory of knowledge responds to, taking its cue from Moore and via him the tradition of debate, is scepticism. He offers the other barrel of the shotgun too, in the long debate he has with himself from 483 until the end on 'I know' ('I know that my name is Ludwig Wittgenstein'). Getting his central tenet from those paragraphs requires the complete disentanglement of the contingent and grammatical levels of knowledge, which Wittgenstein here thoroughly mixes; yet the underlying work is already done by the respective
components of OC1 described in I above.

As in Moore and the tradition of debate that sees scepticism as sharpening the point of epistemological concerns, the resolution of the crux about doubt yields the required account of knowledge. The thesis of OC, resting on its principal OC1 theme, is clear (and cogent). Of course it only sketches a kind of view; it amounts to recognising that theories of knowledge like, say, Kant's–framework-invoking theories–are on the right lines. Now one would like to see the hard detail of such a theory.

The role of certainty in Wittgenstein's view invites comment. A response sometimes offered to the familiar traditional Cartesian quest in epistemology is to point out that certainty is the wrong goal, because it is a psychological state one can entertain with respect to falsehoods: you can be certain that Red Rum will win next week's Derby, yet lose your shirt. One might accordingly argue that the goal should instead be knowledge, so understood that it is definitionally something more than the psychological states (believings) an epistemic subject has to be in as a necessary condition for entering the richer, truth-constrained, relation in which 'knowing' consists. However: Moore followed his predecessors in the Cartesian tradition by seeking to forge a connection between enjoying, as an epistemic subject, a particular kind of certainty, with the unsustainability of scepticism about what that attitude addresses. One can make 'being certain' the criterion of knowledge when the proposition one is certain of is entertained as such without option, that is, at risk of incoherence or loss of meaning. Wittgenstein, in his turn, follows Moore in adopting this strategy, but offers a deeper explanation of why there is no option: he in effect plays Kant to Moore's Hume.

Consider 8, 30, 42, 193, 194, 308. Wittgenstein acknowledges the difference between knowing and being certain, and offers an account of why the latter is sufficient for the former in the optionless cases: namely, that the certainty is (not identical to, but) a function of indubitability, which in turn is a function of the framework. Certainty is not identical with indubitability because it is a psychological state whereas indubitability is a property of a sense-constituting propositions of a definable class, viz. the grammatical propositions.

Note that Wittgenstein's apparent inability to hold apart genuinely grammatical and contingent propositions destabilises this thesis too, for relative indubitability will not do for certainty, as the remarks in the cited paragraphs clearly show. So this is indeed an aspect of OC in need of housekeeping.

Is there a lost opportunity in OC? Its argument is rooted in the same intuitions as the private language argument and its related rule-following considerations, in rejecting the 'I'-perspective of the Cartesian tradition, accepted without question or even awareness by Moore, in which the quest is for radical agent-certainty, without a backdrop of publicity constraints on the articulation of thoughts, and arguing in its place for a perspective which admits its debts to a 'we' perspective, in which, that is, the speaking and knowing agent is indebted for his capacities in these respects to the resources of an epistemic-linguistic community (see 440). But this makes it all the more striking that Wittgenstein does not use the private language argument against scepticism, for this argument at very least suggests that the
existence of a public realm of referents is a condition of the existence of language, and hence of sceptical doubt itself being articulated. And this goes precisely in the direction he sought.

VI

Apart from the vitiation of Wittgenstein's thesis threatened by OC2, there are other difficulties in OC, of which I here mention one: his conflation of scepticism with idealism. It is not fatal to the OC1-based account of knowledge, but that account needs to be shrived of it.

Wittgenstein identifies scepticism with idealism in 19, 24 and 37 (WR247). In 37, moreover, he shows that he takes realism to be the thesis opposed to idealism. This is an error which many besides Wittgenstein make. Realism and idealism are not opposed theses; they are not competitors for the same territory, for realism is an epistemological thesis and idealism a metaphysical one. There is no entailment from the truth of either to the negation of the other. Moreover, the chief varieties of idealism are intended to show that, in an associated epistemological sphere, scepticism gets no grip. Consider Berkeley; it was the avowed aim of his construction of an anti-realist epistemology and (what is a different and further matter) idealist metaphysics, to refute scepticism.

Idealisms form a various family of theses about the nature of reality, but it is safe to say that their characteristic common thesis is the metaphysical one that the universe is mental. Their chief historical opponent is materialism, the metaphysical thesis that the universe is material, that is, ultimately consists of 'material substance', a view that should not be confused with physicalism, which claims that the universe consists of what can be described by physics. (What can be described by physics is not only not coterminous with matter, but might well entail that there is no such thing as matter.)

Idealism is not the same thing as anti-realism. This latter is an epistemological thesis which denies that the relations between thought and its objects, perception and its targets, experience and the realms over which it ranges (these are different, though related, relations) are external or contingent relations. There are realistic forms of idealism (see, for example, Sprigge), and there is no reason in principle why there should not be anti-realist forms of materialism or—even more plausibly—physicalism. I take it that quantum theory under the Copenhagen interpretation is an anti-realist physicalism.

The claim that the relations between thought and its objects (etc.) is internal is far from the claim that all objects of thought are causally dependent upon thought (or, more generally, experience, or sentience) for their existence. Certain forms of idealism (for example, Berkeley's) put matters this way, and doubtless this is why some confuse idealism with anti-realism. Rather, anti-realism is at most the claim—until more is said; as to which, there can be much variety—that no complete description of either relatum can leave out mention of the other.

It is important to be clear about what this means. Realism is the view that the relation between thought and its objects is contingent or external, in the sense that description of neither relatum essentially involves reference to the other. This is the force of saying that realism asserts the independence of
things from any mental or perceptual acts that might intend them. Call this the 'independence thesis'. Anti-realists argue that this thesis is incoherent. A simple way of showing why is afforded by the idiom of relations already adopted. A little reflection shows that the independence thesis, understood as the claim that the relations between thought and its objects are external, is a mistake at least for the direction object-to-thought, for any account of the content of thoughts about things, and in particular the individuation of thoughts about things, essentially involves reference to the things thought about—this is given by the least that can be said in favour of notions of 'broad content'. So realism offers us a peculiarly hybrid relation: external in the direction thought-to-things, internal in the direction things-to-thought. It is an easy step for the anti-realist to show that thought about (perception of, theories of) things is always and inescapably present in, and therefore conditions, any full account of the things thought about. The poorly-worded 'Tree Argument' in Berkeley, aimed at showing that one cannot conceive of an unconceived thing, is aimed at making just that elementary point. The best statement of such a view is afforded by the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory alluded to, in which descriptions of quantum phenomena are taken essentially to involve reference to observers and conditions of observation. Such a view does not constitute a claim that the phenomena are caused by observations of them. No more does anti-realism claim this. However, a moment's thought shows that if this claim—that the relations between thought and things is internal—is correct, then one needs to think again about truth, objectivity, the modalities and knowledge.

One often sees an opposition posed between realism and idealism, as if the labels marked competitors for the same terrain. As the foregoing shows, this is a surprisingly common, simple, but serious mistake.

Wittgenstein makes this mistake. But he also makes the mistake, or seems to, of confusing idealism and scepticism. This mistake stems from the crude view that idealism consists in the denial of the existence of the external world, and that this is what scepticism denies too. But as we see, idealism is the metaphysical claim that the world is ultimately mental in some sense, and scepticism is an epistemological challenge to us to justify our beliefs and our methods of acquiring them. In view of this one is sometimes puzzled as to what exactly Wittgenstein takes scepticism to be. It has already been noted that he confuses the 'grammatical' and the contingent as targets of sceptical attack; here he seems to imply that a sceptic claims something (viz. that the world is ideal). But it is obvious that scepticism had better not be an agnialogy. The scepticism that consists in challenges to justify our beliefs and epistemic practices, rather than claims that (weakly) we lack or (more strongly) cannot have knowledge in some domain, is the scepticism most worth addressing.

Strip away all but OC1 as characterised in section I above, and it can be seen as addressing scepticism thus conceived. So protection of the central insight of OC is possible: it requires no more than selective pressure on the 'delete' key.

VII
OC is uncharacteristic of Wittgenstein in at least one striking way: that it is straightforward workaday philosophy of just the kind he earlier thought his views demonstrated to be fly-in-the-bottle. Perhaps this is evidence of a third turn; had Wittgenstein lived we might have seen him engaging even more with the problems of the philosophical tradition, thus tracing a journey from, first, thinking he had solved all its problems, to, secondly, articulating a different vision of how we misunderstand the workings of our language and thereby generate spurious problems, to, thirdly and finally, seeing that philosophical problems are real ones after all, amenable to investigation—and solution.

Wittgenstein makes a contribution to solving the central problem in epistemology in OC. His contribution is to insist on the internal connection between the concepts of knowing and doubting. This is useful to the work of showing that epistemic justification is provided by the conceptual scheme within which it alone gets content. The provisional character of OC leaves much hanging: OC2, the grammar-contingency matter, and the unworked conception of scepticism are examples. One of the most serious of the matters left hanging was recognised by Wittgenstein himself as such: the vague and generalised appeal to practice and a ‘form of life’ as the basis of the scheme, carried over from PI: ‘Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life. (That is very badly expressed and probably badly thought as well)’ (358). (Read this remark with e.g. 94, 105 and 162 [WR252] open before one.) But even as a provisional and sketchy view OC offers convincing support for a set of possibilities—admittedly, familiar ones—debated elsewhere in the epistemological tradition, namely, the framework-invoking or ‘conceptual scheme’-invoking refutation of scepticism.