Subjectivity after Wittgenstein: Wittgenstein’s embodied and embedded subject and the debate about the death of man

Bax, C.

Citation for published version (APA):
5

Wittgenstein on community
in *On Certainty*

5.1 Introduction

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein can be said to try and come to terms with the fact that while he sympathizes with G.E. Moore’s opposition to the sceptic, he takes Moore’s arguments to be all wrong, or more precisely considers his wanting to give a knock-down anti-sceptical argument at all to be wholly misguided.\(^1\) Moore hoped to prove scepticism wrong by means of assertions such as “(I know) this is a hand,” and Wittgenstein devotes most of *On Certainty* to investigating the particularity of statements of this kind. Throughout the work he is struggling to find the right words to describe such statements,\(^2\) but they seem adequately referred to with the term “certainty”.\(^3\) One of Wittgenstein’s key insights concerning certainties is that, though they may seem to form a special class of superbly well-founded knowledge claims, they are in fact what makes ordinary or proper knowledge claims possible to begin with and should for that very reason be considered to be categorically distinct from these.

---

\(^{1}\) Much of the interpretational debate about OC revolves around understanding Wittgenstein’s exact position vis-à-vis the sceptic. As can be gathered from the above formulation, I take him to want to show scepticism wrong just as much as Moore does, but also take him to develop an entirely different strategy, such that “showing wrong” here no longer means “disproving” in the ordinary sense of the word. However, since I am consulting OC for its social ontological rather than its epistemological insights, I will not discuss my understanding its of challenge to the sceptic any further here. For more thorough discussions of Wittgenstein and scepticism, see e.g. McGinn 1989, McManus 2004 and Moyal-Sharrock 2004. (Also, cf. note 42 on page 57 on passing over the debate on Wittgenstein’s position vis-à-vis a very specific kind of scepticism, namely, other minds scepticism.)

\(^{2}\) Cf. Moyal-Sharrock 2004, p. 89.

\(^{3}\) Though the word “statement” is not completely appropriate when it comes to describing the nature of certainties; qua certainties, after all, certainties typically go unexpressed. Cf. Moyal-Sharrock 2004, p. 93, p. 97. She explains that verbalized certainties should accordingly be said to be the linguistic twins or *doppelgänger* of certainties.
Certainties for instance differ from knowledge claims in being exempt from doubt and disagreement, while the latter are in principle always open to dispute. This does not signal “hastiness or superficiality,”\textsuperscript{4} Wittgenstein explains, because our practices could not get off the ground without numerous things being taken for granted. Moore’s argument draws precisely on this “unconcerted consensus”\textsuperscript{5} characterizing certainty: “The truths which Moore says he knows, are such as, roughly speaking, all of us know, if he knows them.”\textsuperscript{6} We would even consider it a “piece of unreason”\textsuperscript{7} to doubt the truths Moore asserts (though normally we would doubt the sanity of someone feeling the need to make such assertions at all).

However, certainties are not exempt from disagreement because they have been (or can be) proven to be true beyond the shadow of a doubt. This is why Moore’s appeal to them ultimately fails to defeat the sceptic.\textsuperscript{8} While certainties form the very basis on which the justification of statements can take place, they are themselves unjustified, or in any case emerge from very different grounds than those that can be adduced to support knowledge proper. According to Wittgenstein: “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.”\textsuperscript{9}

On my reading of \textit{On Certainty}’s main arguments, it addresses at least two issues pertaining to socio-cultural membership, reflecting the two senses in which Wittgenstein finds that certainties are not purely individual possessions or accomplishments. Certainties, first of all, play the role that they do because they stand fast, not just for the individual, but for the entire community. As a result, they serve to distinguish those belonging from those not belonging to the community. Someone not taking the same things for granted may even not be considered to be “one of us” in the sense of not being considered eligible for participating in the community’s practices. Moreover, the individual can be said not just to share its certainties with other members of the community, but also to owe them to its fellow men. What stands fast for someone is the result of his or her upbringing within a particular culture and thus by no means a matter of individual achievement or choice.

The remainder of my reading of \textit{On Certainty} will discuss Wittgenstein’s social ontology in these two respects: first, the processes by means of which the child is initiated into the community, and, secondly, the kind of unity in which Wittgenstein takes these processes to result. For as I explained in the preceding intermezzo, I want to investigate what account of the social accompanies the contextualization of Cartesianism in Wittgenstein’s case, both in order to make his

\textsuperscript{4} OC 358.
\textsuperscript{5} Moyal-Sharrock 2004, p. 114.
\textsuperscript{6} OC 100.
\textsuperscript{7} OC 325; see also OC 155, OC 220, OC 252, OC 611.
\textsuperscript{8} Cf. McGinn 1989, p. 123, pp. 144-146.
\textsuperscript{9} OC 94; see also OC 144, OC 159, OC 279, OC 472.
voice in the subjectivity debate more fully explicit, and in order to examine the
exegetical validity of the political objections to the post-Cartesian development.
Indeed, not unlike the thinkers labelled “postmodern”, Wittgenstein’s non-
Cartesian view has been said to have highly conservative consequences, and of all
his writings it is perhaps On Certainty that appears to offer most ground for
claiming that Wittgenstein places social arrangements beyond the reach of
intervention. While he also has been charged with conservatism on the basis of
certain socio-biographical facts and his descriptive philosophical method,10 On
Certainty most firmly seem to guarantee his place among conservative thinkers,
apparently portraying human life itself as conformist to the core.11

As some remarks suggest, that is, certainties are transmitted to the novice by a
process of indoctrination, leaving full-fledged members of the community with
little reason to welcome changes in or deviations from their worldview. Wittgenstein
depicts the child as having to “swallow” its elder’s certainties “down”12 without further ado, describes certainties in general as being “there – like
our life,”13 and unapologetically explains that, were we to meet someone not
sharing some of our certainties, “we should not just not share his opinion: we
should regard him as demented.”14 One could take such remarks to indicate that
the main message of On Certainty is a conservative one, and that the political
objections to post-Cartesianism, whether or not they are based on solid
interpretations of other re thinkers of the subject, should be said to apply to the
Wittgensteinian variety in any case.

However, even if On Certainty suggests that Wittgenstein embeds the subject to
such an extent that it becomes pre destined to carry on the customs and
conventions of its community, his writings on religion indicate that he by no
means wants to deny the subject’s possibility to break with them. For as I
concluded in chapter 4, Wittgenstein subscribes to a highly individualistic view on

10 See Gellner 1963, pp. 59-65 and Marcuse 1964, pp. 170-199 for an exposition of (what they take
to be) the conservative implications of Wittgenstein’s method. (I will argue shortly that precisely
because what I take to be the Wittgensteinian approach, it is unlikely that OC can solely be read
conservatively.)

11 E.g. Nyiri and Bloor draw on several aspects of Wittgenstein’s life and work to argue for his
conservatism, but in both their analyses insights such as those expressed in On Certainty play a
holds that “all criticism presupposes [...] a tradition of agreement” and that as a result, “traditions
cannot be judged” (Nyiri 1982, p. 59). According to Bloor, Wittgenstein time and again “develops
the characteristic themes of conservative thinkers,” for instance when he encourages us “to
cherish what we normally take for granted.” (Bloor 1983, p. 161) Let me remark at this point that
taking things for granted as such is not yet conservative – that is to say, one could also take highly
progressive things to stand fast – and this chapter, moreover, is meant to show that Wittgenstein’s
observation that (most of) one’s certainties are inherited, is not accompanied by the claim that
what one inherits can never be questioned. For other commentators arguing that Wittgenstein was
not a conservative thinker, see Crary 2000 and Robinson 2006.

12 OC 143.
13 OC 559.
14 OC 155.
religious belief. While he does not claim that believers can never be guided by the same stories or pictures, he insists that the person who makes her life into an unorthodox whole cannot for that reason be called unreligious, and at any rate holds that the believer should choose a direction in life wholly of her own accord. With these conclusions in the back of my mind, I will investigate whether and to what extent On Certainty truly presents the subject as having no option but to continue the patterns and practices in which it always already finds itself. For once again, I take the apparent inconsistency between different parts of Wittgenstein’s oeuvre to present an excellent opportunity for spelling out his exact contribution to the subjectivity debate. Rather than jumping to the conclusion that his take on religion stands in an outright contradiction to his writings in On Certainty, I will set out to see whether – and if so, how - these accounts can be reconciled.

But there is a different (though not wholly unrelated) reason for wanting to see whether On Certainty is perhaps not conformist all the way through, and this has got to do with Wittgenstein’s view on philosophy as I described it in chapter 2. In discussing the Investigations’ discourse on method, I argued that when it comes to determining philosophy’s goal, the choice a thinker faces is not necessarily that between either taking stock of linguistic facts or proving our grammar to classify the world correctly. Referring also to On Certainty, I suggested that Wittgenstein considers it to be the philosopher’s task to come to terms with our concepts or certainties in the first place. I did not elaborate on that suggestion any further, but Wittgenstein’s project (or his project in my understanding of it) can accordingly be explained in the terms used in On Certainty as well.

The question as to what, for instance, the mind or inner is, can after all be said to be a question about our world picture, or about of one of the things that always already stand fast for us. Trying to answer such a question then means looking into the many ways in which this certainty is manifested in our everyday lives, and bringing these observations together in a way that is perspicuous yet does not violate their multifariousness. Such an investigation need not lead to a rejection of what the community takes for granted, but it may still bring about a change in the way we look at certain things, for instance by explaining that the body does not have to be seen as a barrier between minds, or by showing that the comparison between a body and a machine does not hold.

15 Cf. page 37 of this study.
16 And to repeat one of my claims from chapter 2: this does not mean that such a question only concerns our certainties or concepts in strict distinction to what they refer to, so that philosophy cannot be said to deal with the world or with things themselves. Moreover, let me add that it also does not mean that philosophy is nonsensical for addressing things that normally go without saying. One could take the metaphilosophical entries that OC contains to argue for the latter, but I will shortly explain in more detail why these remarks – like the methodological remarks in PI – do not automatically support the reading that Wittgenstein is the antidote or antithesis to philosophy. For now, suffice it to say that addressing things that normally go without saying is not necessarily meaningless because our very familiarity with something might also be the cause of our failing to get a clear grasp thereof; cf. pp. 32-33 of this study; PI 129.
Now if Wittgensteinian philosophy can be explained as an exploration of certainties, and if *On Certainty* can solely be read along conservative lines, these writings would contradict his view on philosophy just as much as his take on religion. For in order to survey the many ways in which a certainty is manifested in everyday life, let alone consider alternatives to what one takes to stand fast – indeed, in order to raise a question about the things one takes for granted in the first place - a philosopher has to break or at least temporarily suspend the unconcerted consensus characterizing certainty. Philosophically exploring a world picture Wittgenstein-style (or Wittgenstein-style in my understanding thereof) entails disentangling oneself from what the community takes for granted, or of acknowledging that one, too, subscribes to these certainties while at the same time not fully identifying with them. Like his insisting that the true believer makes her own choice, this suggests that Wittgenstein does not take the subject to inevitably and unthinkingly reproduce the framework of its elders.

Hence, when it comes to the consequences of contextualizing Cartesianism, both Wittgenstein’s view on religion and his take on philosophy indicate that he does not embed the subject in such a way that it becomes unable to breach or bracket the conventions of its community. In this chapter, I will investigate how this can be said to be reflected in *On Certainty*, regardless of the conservatism it may appear to display.

One more thing needs to be explained, however, before I examine this more closely, because when it comes to Wittgenstein’s view on philosophy, it could be objected that nothing in *On Certainty* stands in the slightest contradiction to the ideas expressed in the discourse on method. That is to say, in so far as one takes Wittgenstein to contribute to philosophical discussions by showing them to be confused and by dissolving rather than answering philosophical questions, *On Certainty* only confirms that there are, on Wittgenstein’s view, certain things that cannot and need not be questioned. What is more, he precisely points out that Moore’s attempt to refute the sceptic rests on a misuse of language and repeatedly underscores the nonsensicality that results when philosophers try to make certainties explicit: “I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again “I know that that’s a tree”, pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: “This fellow isn’t insane. We are only doing philosophy.””

At the risk of repeating myself, I do not think that Wittgenstein’s anti-philosophical remarks, including those in *On Certainty*, necessitate the reading that he has no substantive contribution to make to philosophy. As I argued in chapter 2, Wittgenstein can be said to identify a tension rather than a mistake inherent in the attempt to answer philosophical questions, and incorporates this tension into the way he himself responds to them. My suggestion that he can be said to explore the things that always already stand fast for us in an attempt to answer questions

---

17 OC 467; see also OC 31, OC 347.
such as “What is the inner?” is not refuted by his taking Moore to task for infelicitously making some of our certainties explicit. The upshot thereof merely is that emphatically stating “I know this is a hand” does not refute the sceptic, and that it cannot be philosophy’s task to prove certainties to be true or false. Yet that philosophy is not in the business of corroborating world pictures does not mean that the philosopher cannot explore certainties and is prevented from trying to understand what it means that we always already take humans to be endowed with mind, say.

Moreover, even if one maintains that Wittgenstein is first and foremost intent on bringing words such as “knowledge”, “being”, “object” and “I” “back from their metaphysical to their everyday use,” some critical distance between the Wittgensteinian thinker and our concepts or certainties is required. For in order to see when and how the philosophical use of such words goes astray from everyday employment, one has to be able to make the things that normally go without saying explicit as well. Hence, seeing whether Wittgenstein allows for the possibility to disentangle oneself from a system of certainties is important even when one supports a less substantive reading of his approach. That said, let us have a closer look at the account On Certainty offers of what it means to become or be a member of a community – or the account that can in any case be extracted from Wittgenstein’s very last writings.

5.2 Initiation into the community

In the attention it devotes to scenes and processes of instruction, On Certainty forms no exception to Wittgenstein’s later work. And as is the case in, say, the Investigations’ assessment of Augustine’s recollections, many of its remarks can be said to oppose an overly individualistic and intellectualistic account of the child’s initiation into the (linguistic) community. As Wittgenstein points out, things come to stand fast for the infant, not by testing a host of quasi-scientific hypotheses or even by learning explicit rules, but by being “handed on” an unarticulated “body of knowledge”: “This system is something that a human being acquires by means of observation and instruction. I intentionally do not say “learns”."

---

18 PI 116.
19 Cf. my earlier reflections on the kind of distance an overview of grammar requires, n. 70, p. 33.
20 See PI 1, PI 32.
21 See OC 140, OC 152, OC 159, OC 167, OC 472.
22 OC 288. Obviously, Wittgenstein contradicts himself here by using the word “knowledge”, and my using “unarticulated” may not fully suffice to counter this inconsistency, as certainty is distinct from knowledge of any kind. Yet as stated, OC forms an ongoing struggle to come to grips with what certainties are, and formulations such as these can be said to be indicative thereof.
23 OC 279.
Wittgenstein is unwilling to speak of learning or education in this context, since none of the certainties that the child acquires need ever be taught to him or her explicitly. Not surprisingly given that certainties “simply [get] assumed as a truism, never called into question, perhaps not even formulated”\(^24\) by the adults themselves, their instruction mostly takes place in an implicit manner that rules out questions of truth and justification. “Children” for instance “do not learn that books exist [...] - they learn to fetch books”\(^25\) and thereby come to take the former for granted. Indeed, if children were to raise questions as to whether such objects exist or endure at all, their inquisitiveness could only be greeted with impatience.\(^26\)

Not yet initiated into the community’s practices of questioning and answering, the child still has to learn what questions can legitimately be raised to begin with.

Hence, on Wittgenstein’s view, infants acquire a world picture by gradually being led, not always expressly but not therefore any less forcefully, to incorporate the certainties of their elders.\(^27\) As he himself explains his reluctance to use the word “learning”: “After [the child] has seen this and this and heard that and that, he is not in a position to doubt whether...,”\(^28\) say, the earth already existed before his birth. Even though (or perhaps precisely because) caretakers do not deliberately and systematically convey their particular picture of the world, children more or less automatically make the community’s certainties their own.

Moreover, Wittgenstein is adamant that the fact that the child does not undertake proto-scientific investigations and is unable to question what its caretakers impart, need not be deplored. Doubt and justification have no place in the process of initiation because they presuppose beliefs of precisely the kind that instructors are in the process of conveying.\(^29\) According to the analysis offered in *On Certainty*, and paradoxical as it may sound, by basically imposing their picture of the world parents and teachers enable the infant to develop its critical capacities rather than forever holding it back from employing them. For only by acquiring their system of certainties can the child become a full-blown participant in the community’s practices of debate and critique.

However, this also means that in so far as Wittgenstein points to the preconditions for the child’s ability to raise doubts and questions, rather than its inability to ever engage in such activities, *On Certainty* argues that the evaluative powers the child is enabled to develop are fundamentally dependent on and

\(^{24}\) OC 87.

\(^{25}\) OC 476.

\(^{26}\) See OC 310-317.

\(^{27}\) Cf. Medina 2004, pp. 82-84; he argues that communal norms become second nature to the child because it internalizes them. Cf. Moyal-Sharrock 2004, p. 106; she points out that the fact that certainties are acquired does not make them no less automatic and thus no less instinctive in that sense of the word. (It should be noted that both Medina and Moyal-Sharrock explain that some certainties are not acquired or are only acquired on the basis of other instinctive behaviour; I will discuss this shortly.)

\(^{28}\) OC 280; see also OC 128, OC 143, OC 206, OC 288.

\(^{29}\) See OC 105, OC 115, OC 150, OC 343, OC 375, OC 392.
constrained by the frame of reference it inherits. By conveying a world picture caretakers enable the infant to eventually put up numerous things for discussion but at the same time inevitably safeguard a host of other, not exactly trivial matters from similarly being discussed. Wittgenstein seems to explain the subject’s certainties and critical capacities to be the product of a socialization process - which would not only make him susceptible to the objections raised by thinkers such as Frank and Benhabib, but would also mean that *On Certainty* conflicts with both his view on religiosity and his perspective on philosophy. For both in order to choose one’s own direction in life and in order to explore what is always already taken for granted, a person must be able to disentangle herself from the framework she has inherited. Yet that seems to be precluded beforehand because of the way she is prepared to participate in pre-existing practices.

Put differently, by making the subject’s evaluative powers dependent on a process of socialization, Wittgenstein appears to presents us with an impasse. To the extent that other parts of his oeuvre indicate that the subject is not predestined to unthinkingly carry on the conventions of its community, the account of the infant’s initiation in *On Certainty* seems to rule out the possibility of breaching or bracketing what one, as a full-fledged member of a community, has come to take to stand fast. In the next section I will say more on the prospects for difference and divergence when it comes to full-blown certainties. For now it should be noted that - regardless of the opportunities one thinks such a perspective offers, or the dangers one feels it presents - the claim that the subject is a social construction cannot be ascribed to Wittgenstein without reserve.\(^{30}\) According the account offered in *On Certainty*, infants inherit their certainties from their elders, but this inheritance does not proceed from scratch and is itself facilitated by factors that are not of a socio-cultural kind. In the chapter on his philosophy of psychology I already pointed out that Wittgenstein takes a natural process to underlie the acquisition of communal patterns of behaviour.\(^{31}\) In the context of *On Certainty* it is similarly because of his naturalism that Wittgenstein cannot be said to explain the subject as socially constituted all the way through.\(^{32}\)

The later Wittgenstein’s interest in scenes and processes of instruction is noticeably accompanied by an interest in natural, instinctive or primitive behaviour,

---

\(^{30}\) This is for instance suggested at several points in Schatzki 1996; see e.g. p. 70, p. 83, pp. 86-87. While his account is not diametrically opposed to the one I am developing, and Schatzki for instance also points to the importance of primitive reactions (see pp. 52-53), he nonetheless chooses to describe the Wittgensteinian subject as socially constituted, which I do not think is wholly correct.

\(^{31}\) Cf. p. 76 of this study.

\(^{32}\) Cf. Medina 2004. Dromm 2003 on the other hand contends that Wittgenstein cannot be attributed a naturalistic view on the child’s (linguistic) development. However, he does so on the basis of an understanding of Wittgenstein’s method from which I have already distanced myself in chapter 2.
both in infants and instructors. Wittgenstein for instance argues, as was discussed in chapter 2, that adults render the child capable of both refining and enhancing its repertoire of psychological phenomena, precisely on the basis of “the primitive, the natural, expressions” of sensations such as pain. In On Certainty Wittgenstein can be said to identify, in addition to such specific natural reactions, an another type of instinctive behaviour, one that enables the acquisition, not just of particular psychological verbs, but of language or of world pictures more generally. For he not only points out that doubt is logically excluded from the conveyance of certainties, he also observes that children as a matter of fact do not question the instructions of their elders: “As children we learn facts; e.g. that every human being has a brain, and we take them on trust. [...] The child learns by believing the adult.”

According to Wittgenstein, in other words, it comes natural for the infant to believe or trust its parents and teachers. This trust can be said to be basic in the sense of being unacquired or instinctive, but also in the sense of not concerning anything specific. That is to say, while certainties can themselves be characterized as a kind of trusting - a trusting that $2 + 2 = 4$, or that my name is CB, for instance - the trust that children display cannot be specified in that manner. It amounts to a readiness to partake in and go along with whatever their parents and teachers do and say. If it were not for this instinctive and unrestricted openness, instructors would be unable to teach infants that every human being has a brain, or what the word “pain” means - indeed, if infants were indisposed to go along with them, instructors would be unable to impart anything whatsoever.

The inheritance of a world picture as Wittgenstein describes it, then, starts from the infant’s unconditional readiness to go along with its caretakers and results in a more sophisticated but no less unhesitating being-at-home in the world at large. To the extent that full-blown certainties form an inherited kind of trusting, they form an extension of a more basic type of trust naturally present in infants. To be sure, children cannot be said (to be willing) to trust in the exact same sense that adults can, but Wittgenstein does not rule out the ascription of basic psychological phenomena to infants, as witnessed by his remarks on pain. Moreover, although

33 Cf. Malcolm 1995, pp. 66-75. In the remainder of the paper Malcolm argues that certainties are just as instinctive as, say, crying when in pain. Here, however, he can be said to fail to distinguish between instinctive and acquired (but therefore not less automatic) certainties (cf. Moyal-Sharrock 2004, pp. 104-107) or between first and second nature (cf. Medina 2004, pp. 82-84). This possibly explains Rhees’ reluctance to grant Malcolm the instinctive nature of certainties (see Rhees 2003).
34 PI 244.
35 OC 159-160; see also OC 34, OC 161, OC 170, OC 263.
37 Cf. Moyal-Sharrock 2004, pp. 193-198; she also argues that some certainties are instinctive (see pp. 107-108), but I want to distinguish the child’s instinctive trust from certainties as such, whether acquired or innate.
38 As I will explain shortly, the infant’s trust can in fact not be said to be entirely unrestricted.
this instinctive trust does not have the same natural expressivity as a sensation like pain, we do grant infants trust, which perhaps comes out most clearly when we notice their reluctance or refusal to interact with people they are unfamiliar with. That this absence of trust strikes us goes to show that we take their trusting attitude to be default.40

It should also be noted that Wittgenstein’s appeal to basic trust does not contradict his criticism of Augustine’s overly intellectualistic and individualistic take on the infant’s initiation.41 Whereas Augustine presupposes too much of the child in effectively ascribing it a fully developed innate language,42 Wittgenstein merely attributes it an unrestricted responsiveness that does not proceed from any deliberation. And while this responsiveness is to be ascribed to none other than the child itself, it does not make the infant into a self-enclosed and self-sufficient entity. Quite the contrary, for its instinctive trust is always already directed towards its caretakers, on whom it moreover still depends for developing this natural, outward orientation beyond its basic state.

However, that infants basically follow their elder’s every lead does not mean that they are the passive and infinitely malleable recipients of their caretakers’ certainties, which would effectively still mean that Wittgenstein takes the individual to be entirely socially produced, in spite of his naturalistic observations. Indeed, in so far as he thinks children are predisposed to go along with whatever their caretakers do and say, Wittgenstein cannot be said to take their trust to be wholly unrestricted or to have no content whatsoever, and my preceding claims need to be modified accordingly. For although On Certainty does not mention this explicitly, certain restrictions follow from the fact that infants always already put trust in their caretakers. Augustine may presuppose too much of the child in ascribing it a full-blown innate language, he seems to be right in the sense that the child can be attributed some very basic certainties.

In their following their elders’ every lead, namely, infants can be said to already show their acceptance, in however minimal sense of the word, of the existence of (these specific) others as at the same time distinct from and similar to themselves.43

41 Cf. Lagerspetz 1998, pp. 96-102. Lagerspetz argues (against Hertzberg) that it makes no sense to ask whether or not trust is innate because the ability to trust is not a faculty. However, saying that it comes natural for the child to trust its caretakers does not amount to ascribing it a complex mental state; Lagerspetz seems to be objecting to a more intellectualistic notion of basic trust than the one I am using.
42 See PI 32.
43 Cf. Gallagher 2005, pp. 65-85. Gallagher argues that neonate imitation behaviour (as documented by the experimental psychologists Meltzoff and Moore) implies at least a pre-reflective awareness of one’s own body, a differentiation between self and other and a recognition that the other is of the same sort as the self. Similarly, Rochat & Hespos, observing that newborns respond differently to self-stimulation and to stimulation by others, contend that there is an innate sense of self as a differentiated and situated entity (see Rochat & Hespos 1997). Decety & Sommerville even argue that the fact that social interaction requires both an ability to identify with and an ability to distinguish oneself from others, is reflected at brain level, observing a partial overlap between the
Their trusting behaviour perhaps points to the possession of other beliefs as well, but it minimally implies that children take for granted that there are others to go along with in the first place, and that the infant thus always already distinguishes self from other and other from self. Without such differentiation, no going along could get off the ground, for were the child to live in a state of undifferentiated confusion, it would be unable to engage in any imitating or following behaviour. However, it is also essential to the infant’s basic attitude that the others it puts its faith in, lead a full-blown human life of precisely the kind the infant is in the process of developing. The resemblance it bears to its caretakers explain why they are the object of the child’s instinctive trust; without such identification, the infant’s going along would not get off the ground either. At the same time as the child can be said to distinguish self from other, it can be said to presuppose basic similarities between them as well. Its unrestricted openness requires both identification with and differentiation from its caretakers.

Hence, the infant’s instinctive trust entails that it takes the existence of self and other as both similar and different to be non-negotiable from the very start, even if it cannot be said to possess a fully developed world picture and even if all the other things it will come to take for granted are adopted from its caretakers without further ado. In addition to or as a prerequisite for their natural willingness to go along, children already possess a rudimentary sense of self as well as of other. They can accordingly not be said to owe all their certainties to their elders.

For other reasons, too, caretakers cannot be said to be the sole and unbridled source of the infant’s world picture. Apart from the fact that the child already possesses some basic certainties, the “general facts of nature” Wittgenstein mentions elsewhere can be said to place restrictions on the certainties that elders are able to impart on the basis thereof. As I argued in chapter 2, albeit for different reasons, Wittgenstein’s pointing out that the world does not enforce one particular grammar or world picture does not yet imply that he thinks concepts or certainties can be imposed on the world at will. On his view, a world picture is rather something human beings develop in practical interaction with the world around them, and the latter can accordingly be said to have a say in the way world pictures take shape. Brought to bear on the conveyance of certainties, this means that it is...
not entirely up to their elders what children will come to take for granted, simply because human beings cannot randomly choose their world picture at all.

But facts of nature can also be said to play a restricting role in the conveyance of certainties in another sense. Such facts namely include man’s own biological make-up and the different (dis)inclinations and (in)abilities that are part and parcel thereof. These not only put general constraints on possible world pictures like facts about non-human nature do, to the extent that certain dispositions and capabilities may differ from person to person from the very start, they influence the handing on of world pictures with every single child.

Though it is by no means impossible to expand and improve upon the various abilities with which one is born – indeed, each process of instruction is premised on that possibility – certain differences in bodily, mental and social skills, for instance, may never be overcome. Such differences are likely to affect the manner and pace in which a world picture is conveyed to a particular child, but they might also have an effect on the exact certainties it will eventually incorporate. A naturally blind person, to give one very conspicuous example, may after all come to possess a different world picture from that of a person with normal eyesight. The way and degree in which variations in these and other capacities affect what infants end up taking for granted, probably varies with the capacity and degree of divergence at issue, but in this sense, too, Wittgenstein’s naturalism appears to prevent him from maintaining that the subject is socially constituted all the way through.

To recapitulate my reading of *On Certainty* so far, the conveyance of certainties as it portrayed in these writings crucially depends on the child’s instinctive willingness to follow its caretakers’ every lead. Wittgenstein may therefore make the subject’s critical capacities conditional upon a socialization process, he makes this process itself conditional upon factors that are of a natural rather than of a socio-cultural kind. Moreover, that Wittgenstein takes the child to basically go along with whatever its caretakers do and say, does not mean that he takes it to be malleable by its elders without constraint. The infant’s basic trust implies that it takes the existence of self and other to be non-negotiable from the very start. In addition, general facts of nature restrict what one can come to take for granted in the first place, the conveyance of which is also influenced by natural facts in the sense of the different skills and capacities with which persons are born.

This has important consequences for Wittgenstein’s version of the claim that the individual and its critical capacities are the product of a socialization process. Given that both general facts of nature and his or her own biological make-up affect what a person can come to take for granted, the subject cannot be said to be the mere effect of its upbringing in the sense that this upbringing does not have the only word. Moreover, given that full-blown certainties form an extension of a more basic type of trust that comes with it its own basic presuppositions, the subject cannot be considered to be the simple product of its rearing in the sense that this rearing does not proceed from scratch. Indeed, since the child’s innate
trust already requires a rudimentary sense of self, subjectivity can, at least in this minimal sense of the word, not be said to be produced at all.\footnote{Cf. Zahavi 2007, pp. 185-194. He argues (though he does not put this in ontogenetic terms) that the narrative construction of individuals presupposes the notion of a minimal self.}

What follows from Wittgenstein’s naturalism is therefore not so much that the obtaining of a world picture cannot be said to be a social affair. According to my reading of On Certainty, a basic sense of self is always already given, but the infant’s directedness to and dependence on others is thereby not ruled out\footnote{Wittgenstein can accordingly only be ascribed a version of naturalism that does not prevent him from considering humans to be social by their very nature; cf. Medina 2004, p. 86. Medina explains that Wittgenstein blurs the distinction between nature and culture.} - that is, on the contrary, precisely explained and safeguarded by the child’s basic subjectivity. The implication of Wittgenstein’s naturalism accordingly rather is that the process by means of which the child is initiated into the community, is not (or not entirely) one of construction or production. For instead of being created \textit{ex nihilo}, each child comes with its own perspective from the very start. Rather than owing all its certainties to its elders, the infant always already takes some things for granted. Thanks to its otherwise unconditional openness, these basic beliefs can be refined and enhanced to correspond with the community’s certainties, but the child’s inborn capacities may prevent complete conformity from ever being reached.\footnote{As I will argue below, a community’s world picture need not make for a uniform whole and there accordingly need not be a rigid and fixed standard for members to conform to to begin with.} Handing on a world picture is, in other words, more a matter of enhancement and attunement that occurs within certain bounds than a matter of unbridled construction or production.\footnote{Cf. Luntley 2003, p. 168.}

\section*{5.3 Certainty, unity and divergence}

This brings me to the second aspect of socio-cultural membership I announced to investigate when introducing On Certainty. As I explained, these writings do not only explore the processes by means of which certainties are conveyed, they also point out that the possession of particular certainties serves to distinguish those belonging from those not belonging to the community. Or in Wittgenstein’s less exclusionary terms: “‘We are quite sure of it’ does not mean just that every single person is certain of it, but that we belong to a community which is bound together by science and education.”\footnote{OC 298.} In the context of On Certainty, in other words, it is by taking the same things for granted that a particular group of people makes up a socio-cultural unity.\footnote{Cf. Schatzki 1996, pp. 208-209. He defines the notion of “being one of us” in terms of participation in the same set of practices.} It is the nature of this unity to which I will now turn.
The nature or rigidity of the unity that certainties create still waits to be explored because my findings in the previous section have not yet made clear whether *On Certainty* accommodates the possibility of disentangling oneself from an inherited frame of reference - and thus whether it is consistent with both a Wittgensteinian take on religiosity and a Wittgensteinian view of what philosophy can do. By pointing to the naturalism underlying the account in *On Certainty*, I argued that Wittgenstein does not take the subject and its certainties to be entirely socially produced, but that does not alter the fact that, on his view, the greater part of one’s world picture is acquired rather than innate, and that this world picture is, moreover - as that which makes debate and critique possible in the first place - itself excluded from being questioned or discussed. That Wittgenstein does not present the subject as the simple product of its upbringing by itself does not imply that he allows for the possibility of breaching or bracketing what one, as a full-fledged member of a community, has come to take for granted.

What is more, several remarks in *On Certainty* suggest that after being initiated into a particular community, one not only unthinkingly takes numerous things to stand fast but can also only respond with rejection to the suggestion that things could also be seen differently. On Wittgenstein’s account, those who raise questions or doubts about the community’s world picture may appear to be silenced beforehand. He for instance observes: “When we say that we know that such and such..., we mean that any reasonable person in our position would also know it, that it would be a piece of unreason to doubt it.”

Pointing out that one’s world picture determines what one considers to be normal or sensible in the first place, Wittgenstein seems to give one little reason to even take someone endorsing a different outlook seriously: “One might simply say “O, rubbish” to someone who wanted to make objections to the propositions that are beyond doubt. That is, not to reply to him but to admonish him.”

Indeed, that dissent and even divergence is precluded in advance is the main conclusion of the conservative readings of *On Certainty* I mentioned earlier. On these readings, Wittgenstein holds that “while one can very well imagine” societies or tribes with different certainties, one cannot “entertain a liberal attitude as regards irregularities in [one’s] own society,” thus providing a theoretical justification for “[deploring] any movement away from the order and organic unity” that a community is supposed to form.

However, in spite of the entries suggesting that being a member of a community means subscribing to a fixed and rigid set of certainties, *On Certainty* does not conclude that what men consider reasonable is immune to change, or that

---

53 OC 325; see also OC 93, OC 108, OC 155, OC 254.
54 OC 495. It should already be noted that Wittgenstein presents this as a possible but not as a necessary reaction. I will come back to this below.
people can never be brought to look at the world differently. Wittgenstein famously compares certainties to a river-bed, part of which “may change back into a state of flux,?57” and according to this metaphor, moreover, it is precisely because of movements in the water, or changes at the level of the knowledge claims people make, that certainties might shift.58 This points to the possibility, not just of passive change, but of active intervention in an inherited frame of reference too.

What is more, On Certainty itself can be said to show that unconcerted consensus characterizing certainty can be breached or at least temporarily bracketed. Wittgenstein’s remarks demonstrate that even though philosophical explications of certainties sometimes go awry, it is possible to stop and meaningfully think about statements such as “I have a hand” nonetheless. For as one of the remarks on certainty explains, one may not “explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast,” one can still “discover them subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates.”59 And as On Certainty indicates, such a discovery can subsequently lead to an exploration of one’s world picture (or, in this case, of world pictures more generally) that might eventually even bring about a change in the way in which we look at certain things (such as, in this case, certainties themselves).

Hence, in On Certainty, similar to in his philosophy of religion and his discourse on method, Wittgenstein can be said to hold that the subject is able to disentangle itself from the world picture it has inherited. The question is: How does this chime with the remarks claiming that as a full-blown member of a community, one has incorporated a world picture that rules out questions from being asked about it and divergence from being welcomed? In order to answer this question, it is instructive to first of all return to the findings of the previous section, for that the infant’s initiation is more a matter of attunement than of production also has consequences for the world picture of the community as a whole, or for the kind of unity in which this upbringing results.

According to the account offered in On Certainty, as I explained, an infant without a fully developed world picture but with a rudimentary sense of self is invested with the certainties that the full-blown members of a community already share. Yet precisely because this process proceeds on the basis of a minimal form of subjectivity, the child’s upbringing can, from the perspective of the community itself, be said to be as much a matter of modification as it is of confirmation. Not unlike the child expands its basic trust by (quite literally) incorporating the community’s certainties, the community can be said to incorporate the (rudimentary yet ineliminable) perspective of this new-found member, and thus to

57 OC 97; see also OC 96, 98-99, OC 211, OC 256, OC 336.
58 Hence, that Wittgenstein employs a “natural” metaphor does not mean that he takes change to occur only naturally or without human intervention; cf. Nyiri, according to whom Wittgenstein maintains that “new rules would have to emerge from the old ones organically” (Nyiri 1982, p. 61). I will shortly discuss the possibility of a deliberate distancing.
59 OC 152.
undergo a certain transformation in the process too. Moreover, given that children may be born with different bodily, mental or social skills, as I pointed out, it is by no means guaranteed that all of them will come to hold exactly the same certainties that their elders subscribe to. Differences in inborn abilities may eventually be reflected in the things infants come to take for granted. Put differently, with the conveyance and reinvestment of a world picture, the possibility of divergence is always already present too. 60

What is more, if the way in which children are initiated cannot rule out that they grow up to possess (somewhat) different world views, the world picture that is conveyed to them by full-blown members of the community need not make for a homogeneous unity to begin with. These full-blown members need not have come to incorporate exactly the same certainties themselves, be it knowingly or accidentally. 61 This only reinforces the possibility of transformation inherent in the conveyance of certainties. For as Wittgenstein observes, what stands fast for someone not only concerns numerous and highly diverse things - from mathematical to biological to historical facts - the sources through which one acquires them are likewise numerous and diverse: *On Certainty* mentions implicit as well as explicit instructions, by both parents and teachers, and refers to text books as well as one’s own observations 62 - the list can probably be expanded. If the senior members an infant encounters on its way to full-blown membership do not automatically share the exact same certainties, and no child, moreover, has the exact same mentors to guide the way, this may also have (somewhat) diverging world pictures as a result. The possibility of divergence inherent in the process of initiation, and the possible differences already present among the members of a community, both explain and reinforce each other.

So while some of *On Certainty*’s entries suggest that deviation from the community’s world picture is precluded in advance, Wittgenstein does not presuppose that there is a rigid and homogeneous unity to conform to or diverge from in the first place. A system of certainties has to be reconfirmed with every new member, and every instance of reinvestment brings the possibility of transformation with it, partly due to and possibly reflected in (bigger or smaller) differences in the things that full-blown members take for granted. Undergoing a process of sedimentation as well as modification at all times, a community’s frame of reference should be considered to make for an open and dynamic rather than an inflexible and monolithic whole. When Wittgenstein states that “Our ‘empirical propositions’ do not form a homogeneous mass,” 63 he can accordingly be said to underscore, not just that certainties concern many different things, but also that

---

61 I will shortly say more on the possibility of knowingly distancing oneself from what other members of the community take for granted. And as I will point out, this is not wholly unrelated to the fact that differences in certainties may arise naturally or accidentally.
62 See e.g. OC 138, OC 161, OC 162, OC 263, OC 275, OC 281, OC 310-315, OC 600.
63 OC 213.
the world picture of a community may show variations between one member and the next.⁶⁴

Indeed, this also means that it may be difficult to say precisely where one world picture ends and another begins. If the members of a community do not necessarily take exactly the same things for granted, the difference between members and non-members may not always already be clear either. Rather than excluding divergence in advance, Wittgenstein’s analysis in effect implies that it cannot be stated beforehand where the line between “same” and “different” or “normal” and “abnormal” should be drawn.⁶⁵

Yet even though the fact that *On Certainty* allows for such conclusions already alleviates the conservatism it may appear to display, and a full-blown conformism seems to contradict Wittgenstein’s views on religiosity and philosophy in any event, my explorations have still not made clear how *On Certainty* accommodates the possibility of disentangling oneself from the frame of reference one inherited. The foregoing may have shown that the possibility of transformation is inherent in the process by means of which certainties are conveyed, but it has only shown that divergence can occur naturally or accidentally; how the subject might consciously come to suspend, let alone leave behind, what it and its community take to stand fast, is thereby not explained. What is more, the claim that *On Certainty* explains world pictures as in principle open and dynamic rather than fixed and rigid may sound quite vacuous in the light of the entries describing how divergence from certainties is dealt with in practice. According to Wittgenstein, it seems, the mere thought that there are alternatives to one’s frame of reference can only be greeted with rebuke. Let me deal with these points one by one, starting with the latter.

For it should be noted that, regardless of what the remark I quoted earlier might suggest, Wittgenstein does not maintain that the only right response to a question about one’s world picture or to a person who sees things differently is “O, rubbish.”⁶⁶ He does not take rebuke to be the only possible or warranted response, for if one’s fundamental attitudes are contradicted one might simply, as he states elsewhere, “have to put up with it.”⁶⁷ Moreover, to the extent that Wittgenstein considers it appropriate to admonish a diverging voice, he does so because he feels that it would be incorrect to try and provide grounds or evidence in support of one’s outlook.⁶⁸ “Where two principles really do meet which cannot

---

⁶⁴ Cf. Kober 1993, p. 372. He points out that inconsistencies within a world picture are possible. This can be said to hold for a community’s as well as an individual’s world picture: given that someone may have been exposed to very different and sometimes even opposing certainties on the way to full-blown membership, the frame of reference she comes to rely upon may also contain incongruities. This is a possibility Moyal-Sharrock does not seem to acknowledge (see Moyal-Sharrock 2004, pp. 111-112), yet a system of beliefs need arguably not be entirely consistent in order to function as such.

⁶⁵ Cf. Cavell 1979, p. 22, p. 27.

⁶⁶ OC 495.

⁶⁷ OC 238.

⁶⁸ See OC 498, OC 611-612.
be reconciled with one another” the problem precisely is that there is no (or not enough) shared ground on the basis of which the truth or falsity of these principles can be determined. Indeed, delineating what (and how) things can be proven to be true in the first place, certainties cannot be said to be true or false themselves, and it is for this very reason that it might actually be more fitting to respond to a diverging voice with admonishment rather than with arguments. It is crucial, Wittgenstein maintains, “to realize the groundlessness of our believing.”

Yet if there are strictly speaking no grounds for belief and no grounds for subscribing to one world picture instead of to another, there are no grounds for rebuking someone questioning one’s certainties either. In case of conflict one might, as stated, just as well decide to just put up with it – but one might also try and come to see things the way the other person does. For if one cannot be faulted for holding fast to one’s belief in the face of other possibilities, one cannot be faulted for letting go of it either. The groundlessness of our believing means that it cannot be stated beforehand how to deal with diverging certainties, when such differences can and when such differences cannot be overcome. Similar to On Certainty’s implying that it cannot be stated beforehand where the line between “normal” and “abnormal” is to be drawn, Wittgenstein should be said to underscore that it is undecided how difference and divergence are to be greeted.

This brings me to the point that earlier in this chapter only the possibility of natural or accidental divergence from a community’s world picture was discussed, leaving the prospects for knowingly distancing oneself from inherited certainties yet to be established. The preceding observations go to show that On Certainty’s allowing for accidental variation among the certainties of fellow subjects in fact already points to the possibility of conscious divergence too. For as I explained, an encounter with a person subscribing to (somewhat) different certainties might bring about a change in the way one looks at things, or might at least lead to the awareness that things could also be seen differently. This is not altered by the fact that one might also respond with “O, rubbish,” for the appropriateness of admonishment over arguments is precisely due to the fact that a confrontation with a different framework is at the same time a confrontation with the groundlessness of one’s own certainties, or with the groundlessness of holding fast to one thing instead of to another. Encountering persons with a (slightly) different set of certainties might accordingly bring one to conclude that, perhaps, one’s own frame of reference is not that self-evident after all, and thus to breach or at least bracket what one has come to take for granted.

69 OC 611.
70 See OC 94, OC 199, OC 205, OC 403.
71 OC 166.
72 See OC 610.
73 Cf. Plant 2005, p. 64, p. 98.
74 See e.g. OC 497, OC 512, OC 619.
75 See OC 257, OC 326, OC 420, OC 642.
Hence, that *On Certainty* explains world pictures as open and dynamic does not only mean that it allows for difference and divergence to occur naturally and accidentally - it also indicates what opportunities there are for knowingly disentangling oneself, if only temporarily, from the world picture one inherited. Given that variation can also occur among the members of the same community, a person might be confronted with diverging certainties quite close to home.\(^76\)

But it is not only an encounter with someone holding different certainties that might lead to an insight into the relative groundlessness of one’s world picture. This can be brought about in other ways as well. Given that certainties are historically variable, as Wittgenstein emphasizes on several occasions,\(^77\) one could also come to realize that things can be seen differently by noticing that the certainties of one’s community have changed over time. In addition, Wittgenstein points out that it is possible for “certain events” to put one “in a position in which [one can] no longer go on with the old language game.”\(^78\) Recurring unexpected and inexplicable results of scientific investigation might put one in such a position,\(^79\) but so could, say, suddenly being struck by the predicament of a group of people that is commonly accepted without a thought.\(^80\)

Put differently, what ultimately accounts for the possibility of disentanglement in *On Certainty* is not so much that one might encounter different certainties, as that one might be confronted with the fact that it is to some extent arbitrary what one takes to stand fast. According to Wittgenstein, a world view is always already mine but at the same time never entirely mine – one has, after all, inherited it on the basis of a pre-existing trust – and this means that the unconcerted consensus characterizing certainty can, in principle, always be broken or suspended. It belongs to the very essence of world pictures that they are man-made and invested in people, rather than god-given and set in stone, and though this basic characteristic may usually go unnoticed, it need not always remain unseen, with the possibility to stop and think about or even try and change the things one takes for granted as a result.\(^81\)

---

\(^76\) Not to mention the fact that a person does not necessarily belong to only one group or community, as well as that one’s society might accommodate several communities or groups.

\(^77\) See OC 96-99, OC 211, OC 256, OC 336 (though remarks like OC 117, OC 226 and OC 286 unwittingly demonstrate this too).

\(^78\) OC 617; see also OC 517. Elsewhere Wittgenstein claims that no matter what one is confronted with, no matter how “much the facts bucked,” one *could* always “stay in the saddle”. (OC 616; see also OC 497, OC 512, OC 657). Yet that one *could* stay in the saddle does not mean that one *must*. Moreover, see OC 368 and OC 641, explaining that when evidence faces evidence, it is a matter of decision what is to give way, and that the choice to stay in the saddle is not an irreversible one.

\(^79\) Cf. Kuhn’s 1996 description of the transition from normal science to crisis and the emergence of new paradigms (as well as his explanation in the Postscript of why this perspective on science does not amount to full-blown relativism, as both critics and enthusiasts have argued).

\(^80\) Cf. Plant 2005, p. 98 (and his subsequent fleshing out of this point with Levinas and Derrida).

\(^81\) Man-made only to an extent, though. As I mentioned earlier, Wittgenstein takes world pictures to be constrained by general facts of nature; on his view, human beings do not one-sidedly impose their certainties on their surroundings. I will come back to this point in the concluding section.
5.4 Concluding remarks

In this chapter I turned to *On Certainty* to investigate with what account of community Wittgenstein accompanies his rethinking of subjectivity. As I explained in the preceding intermezzo, commentators such as Frank and Benhabib take the claim that the subject is always already contextualized to jeopardize notions such as agency and autonomy, and thereby to jeopardize the possibility of changing pre-existing political arrangements. I argued that this conclusion does not follow automatically, even if the underlying reading of post-Cartesianism is correct, but I proposed to investigate whether it is exegetically warranted nonetheless because the question as to what the embedded subject can and can no longer do, is valid and interesting enough. Moreover, examining the implications of the claim that the subject is essentially social is also vital if one wants to make Wittgenstein’s contribution to the subjectivity debate fully explicit: I pointed out that Wittgenstein’s take on religiosity, as well as his approach to philosophy, may seem to be at odds with that particular insight. Or to be precise, they would be at odds with that insight if it would be accompanied by the claim that community is a static and uniform totality to which all human affairs are effectively subservient, leaving no room for divergence or disentanglement. The preceding explorations have shown that Wittgenstein does not subscribe to such a view on the relationship between individual and community, in spite of the remarks that seem to warrant an outright conservative reading of *On Certainty*.

That is to say, conservative interpretations of these writings have a point in that Wittgenstein shows a person’s evaluative powers to be dependent on and constrained by the certainties she acquires through a socialization process in which critical activities have no place. However, such readings are wrong in that Wittgenstein does not take the subject’s world view to be entirely socially construed: he holds that natural factors underlie this socialization process. An infant is only able to swallow its elders’ certainties down on the basis of an instinctive trust that comes with its own basic presuppositions. Each child thus brings in its own perspective from the very start. In the process of initiation, this perspective gets refined and enhanced to correspond to the community’s certainties, but Wittgenstein’s naturalism also implies that the child’s inborn capacities may prevent complete conformity from being attained. Conformist interpretations of *On Certainty* are therefore inaccurate, too, in the sense that while it has a naturalistic outlook – indeed, precisely because it has a naturalistic outlook – it does not deplore irregularities in a society. The possibility of transformation is inherent in the process by means of which certainties are conveyed, which also means that the world picture that is conveyed to children need not make for a homogeneous unity to begin with.
What is more, that Wittgenstein allows for such natural or accidental variation also indicates how a person might knowingly come to breach or bracket inherited certainties: it provides (one kind of) opportunity for realizing that other perspectives on the world are possible. For while conservative readings of *On Certainty* correctly observe that Wittgenstein holds neutral or rational grounds to be lacking when confronted with a diverging world view, they miss the mark in concluding the he feels one should always hold fast to one’s framework for lack of such grounds. On Wittgenstein’s view, a confrontation with a different outlook is at the same time a confrontation with the groundlessness of what one takes to stand fast. So while *On Certainty* considers world pictures to largely be a matter of convention – indeed, precisely because it considers them to largely be a matter of convention – it does not claim that the subject is unable to suspend or shed the customs and conventions it always already finds itself entangled in.

That is not to say, to be sure, that certainties can be subscribed to or discarded at will, nor that if and when one realizes that other perspectives are possible, there is a clear and simple choice to make - if it can be called a choice in the ordinary sense of the word at all. When a person takes a step back from what he or she has come to take for granted, she precisely suspends the criteria she normally employs in making a choice. More akin to a leap of faith than to a rational decision, Wittgenstein likens a change in one’s certainties to a process of conversion. The world picture a person has come to incorporate over the years, moreover, is not something she disposes of and replaces like she would an old and worn-out coat. One cannot completely step outside of one’s frame of reference to begin with, and some of one’s certainties may be so firmly entrenched that they can never be abandoned at all. Whether it is possible to leave a certainty behind and how radical a change that entails, should be said to depend on the certainty in question. And even if (part of) one’s world picture can be altered or abandoned, a true change of perspective can arguably not be accomplished overnight. Like acquiring a full-blown world picture in the first place, incorporating new or different certainties is a process that will take time and the exact consequences of which cannot be known in advance.

But there is another sense in which a person is not able to pick and choose what certainties to subscribe to. As I already mentioned, human beings cannot randomly choose their world view at all because the world can be said to have a say in the way world pictures take shape. General facts of nature – including basic facts about human life - place restrictions on the certainties that are available to man, and world pictures can consequently not be said to be entirely arbitrary. That a

---

82 OC 92, OC 612; see also OC 578; cf. my earlier remarks on pp. 153-154 on the difference between religious belief and certainty – judging by this comparison, Wittgenstein should be said to file certainty under the category of belief instead of the other way around.

83 Cf. Moyal-Sharrock 2004, p. 100, p. 106. She explains that while some certainties are “giveuppable”, others are “ungiveuppable”.
person bleeds when cut or stabbed, for instance, or needs food and shelter in order to survive, cannot be left unaccounted for in any frame of reference.

However, that human beings cannot unreservedly impose just any system of certainties on the natural and human world does not mean that there is, on Wittgenstein’s analysis, a neutral ground for making a choice (or quasi-choice) between world pictures after all. While natural facts have a say in the way world pictures take shape, they can make their way into a frame of reference in very different manners. The actual existence of different world pictures testify to this fact, as do the historical changes that existing world pictures have gone through. Moreover, what one person considers to be a natural fact – that men are made to rule over women, say, or that love can occur between people from the same as well as between people from the opposite sex - need not be taken for a fact by another person at all. Wittgenstein’s naturalism, therefore, may suggest what a person could highlight or appeal to in the case certainties clash, it does not provide a fix-all, cure-all solution that will solve any perspectival gridlock with one simple spell.

Even so, Wittgenstein’s suggestion that human beings develop their world pictures in interaction with their surroundings, rather than one-sidedly imposing certainties thereon, does set his account apart from straightforwardly constructivistic or relativistic ones. Contrary to the idea that the natural and human world only come into being with one's frame of reference, so to speak, Wittgenstein’s account implies that it is not entirely immaterial what frame of reference one subscribes to. For if there is something outside of or preceding our conceptualizations, there is also always the chance that one’s certainties can from a certain perspective be said to distort, simplify, inflate or downplay these things, even if there is not one correct way of representing them. According to Wittgenstein, as I also argued in chapter 2, our concepts or certainties simultaneously shape and reflect the world around us. Indeed, if this implies that it matters what frame of reference one subscribes to, even if different perspectives on the natural and human world are possible, Wittgenstein could even be said to identify a necessity or desirability to sometimes step back from what one takes to stand fast. In *On Certainty*, at any rate, he does not claim that the subject is destined to leave the frame of reference it inherited forever unquestioned. Wittgenstein’s outlook is neither outright relativistic nor thoroughly deterministic.

This brings me back to my main reason for consulting *On Certainty*. Contrary to the worries expressed by post-Cartesianism’s critics, and in line with what is suggested in other parts of his *Nachlass*, Wittgenstein does not dispel or dissolve the subject by embedding it. This can be said to be due to the fact that he does not take the relationship between individual and community to be one in which the latter fabricates the former as a mere cog or bolt in a virtually self-perpetuating machinery, or to use a more organic metaphor, in which the subject is to the community as a limb or cell is to the human body, owing its existence solely to its function in this larger entity. For on Wittgenstein’s view, as became clear in the
previous sections, becoming a member of a community is only possible on the basis of a rudimentary, pre-given form of subjectivity and does not require complete conformity to the world picture of full-blown members, who need not be bound together the exact same frame of reference to begin with.

Put differently - and at the risk of seeming to use this concept as a panacea for all the puzzles Wittgenstein is dealing with - the world pictures of the members of a community stand in a relation of family resemblance to each other. Just as Wittgenstein argues that the different things we call games do not have some one thing in common but hang together through “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing,” he can be said to show that what fellow subjects share is not a clear and distinct whole. The certainties of one person resemble those of the other subjects but possibly resemble them in a different way each time. This also points to a different metaphor that can be used to convey how Wittgenstein envisions the relationship between individual and community if he cannot be said to consider it akin to the way a machine is built up out of its components or a body is composed of its parts. In the family resemblance passages, Wittgenstein describes the flexibility of our concepts by means of the fibre and the thread analogy, but this analogy can also be used to explain how he embeds the subject without dispersing it. I already mentioned the remark about fibres and threads in chapter 2, but let me rehearse it here as well.

In response to an interlocutor complaining that the Investigations nowhere explain what the essence of language is, Wittgenstein does not only point out that many of our concepts do not refer to phenomena with a pure and precise essence, but also contends that the fact that most words have fuzzy edges is exactly what makes them fit for use. In order to illustrate this point, Wittgenstein compares the use we make of concepts such as “game” to the spinning of a thread: “[We] extend our concept […] as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.” To be sure, Wittgenstein adds, although a concept like “game” is not “closed by a frontier” prior to all use, “[you] can draw one” at any point. That is, however, always a choice one makes for a specific purpose. It is at any rate not enforced by one essential characteristic that defines what a game is once and for all.

This same analogy can be said to express how On Certainty takes individual and community to interrelate. For just as a thread does not consist of one single fibre but derives its strength from the overlapping of many fibres, individual subjects contribute to the community’s world picture, not by dissolving into a fixed and

---

84 PI 66.
85 Others have used Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblance to develop a non-essentialist notion of (personal and collective) identity as well (see Medina 2006, pp. 84-100; Munro 2006), but these commentators do not draw on the fibre and thread analogy.
86 PI 67.
87 PI 68.
rigid whole but by bringing in their own perspective that may be both like and unlike that of other members in several respects. Moreover, just as one can extend a thread by twisting fibre on fibre, it cannot be stated beforehand which persons with what certainties belong to a particular community and which ones do not. To be sure, a frontier can always be established but drawing a line must to some extent always remain arbitrary. That a community’s world picture does not make for a static and homogeneous unity means that, on Wittgenstein’s view, change and divergence is by no means precluded out of hand.

This in turn means, to bring my investigations in this chapter to a close, that Wittgenstein’s embedded account of subjectivity neither conflicts with his perspective on philosophy nor with his take on religious belief. To the extent that my explorations in chapter 4 raised the question how Wittgenstein’s religious perspective can be reconciled with his overturning of the Cartesian self-other schema, my reading of *On Certainty* has shown that it need not be reconciled at all. For if the claim that there is no subjectivity without community does not imply it is impossible to diverge from the customs and conventions one always already finds oneself entangled in, there is nothing contradictory in maintaining, both that subjectivity is essentially social, and that the religious believer should choose a direction in life irrespective of his fellow men. Moreover, given that establishing the (in)compatibility of these different parts of Wittgenstein’s oeuvre is also a way of establishing the exegetical validity of the arguments levelled against the rethinking of Cartesianism, both the ethical and the political objections of commentators such as Murdoch and Benhabib can now be said to be unwarranted when it comes to Wittgenstein.