

A Plea for Rhees' Reading of Wittgenstein's On Certainty: is grammar conditioned by certain facts?



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Abstract

This paper is more than a plea for Rhees' reading of the work of Wittgenstein (particularly of *On Certainty*). My interest in Rhees' interpretation lies on its resemblance with my own reading, on the one hand, and on its being (surprisingly) unmentioned by other interpreters, on the other. The two core aims of this paper focus on Rhees' main ideas. First, I argue that although certain facts that are accepted beyond doubt belong to the method, which in turn is included in grammar, this does not mean that these facts are expressions of rules of grammar. Second, I argue that grammar is not conditioned by a certain class of facts (i.e. general facts of nature), but a language-game is possible because we do not call in question certain facts (i.e. grammar is not conditioned by something like ontology). The point is that those facts that are not called in question are beyond truth and falsity, but this does not mean that these facts *must* be true. The logical role these facts (and the sentences used to express them) play in a language-game is not that of being true or false. Moreover, grammar itself constitutes what is meant by 'object', 'fact', or 'general fact of nature'.

Keywords: *grammar, language-game, On Certainty, general facts of nature, Rhees, Wittgenstein*

1 Introduction

There is an interpretation of the entire work of Wittgenstein, and regarding *On Certainty* ([34], 1997, OC) in particular, that claims that grammar is conditioned by certain facts (see for instance [16], [17], [18], [19]). However, not all authors agree. One important author who disagrees is Rush Rhees. As is well-known, Wittgenstein conferred with Rhees about central parts or entries of OC, as Rhees himself tells us in his own work (see [26, p.105]). So, calling attention at Rhees' work

does not mean endorsing his interpretation of Wittgenstein's OC, or invoking some kind of *ad hominem* argument. Rather, my emphasis in his work is intended to show that his arguments have remained unmentioned or unnoticed by authors who argue in just the opposite vein. To my mind, authors like Moyal-Sharrock should have Rhees' remarks as a background for her own interpretation. One aim of this paper is to contrast the core remarks made by both authors in order to go further and discuss whether or not grammar is *conditioned* by certain facts, and what is meant by this.

Accordingly, the goal of this paper is twofold, as it were. On the one hand, it is my interest to show that the proposition 'grammar is conditioned by certain general facts of nature' has no metaphysical, absolute sense (i.e. that ontology does not condition grammar). By the expression "metaphysical sense" I mean expressions that refer to the essential, necessary, and universal features of reality. Thus, to say that grammar is conditioned by certain facts of nature may mean that there are essential and necessary features of reality such as general facts of nature, and that this is a truth about reality, which by way of different mechanisms, for instance by repeated exposure, condition our grammar. Furthermore, to say that grammar is conditioned by certain facts sounds as though there was an absolute conception of grammar, as though everything we call grammar was conditioned by facts. However, I do not read Wittgenstein as though he were relating a bit of language to a bit of the world. In other words, we are not relating a bit of grammar and a bit of the world as though they were ontological items. Rather, in the same sense that grammar tells us what kind of object a thing is, grammar tells us what is meant by fact. But this does not mean that facts condition our grammar, or that objects condition our grammar (see below for further discussion). So I am not rejecting that there is a relationship between grammar and facts, I am just saying that this relationship is not captured by speaking of facts as conditions.¹ However, when it is said that grammar is conditioned by certain general facts of nature it seems that it is the grammar as a whole that is conditioned, without focusing on concrete language-games. It seems that it is claimed that this class of general facts of nature is that on which the possibility of language itself depends. I think that this is a metaphysical illusion produced by projecting onto reality what should remain within grammar (i.e. grammar tells us what is a general fact of nature).

On the other hand, listing a class of facts – i.e. the class of the general facts of nature – is no more than playing another language-game, and

therefore it is misguided to say that these facts, those that constitute the list, are the facts on which the possibility of language itself depends.

The paper is organized as follows: in §2, I will be concerned with two core features of grammar, i.e. its autonomy and its arbitrariness. In §3, I will address what is meant when it is claimed that grammar is conditioned by certain facts. I will address Moyal-Sharrock's work in this regard. In §4, I will be devoted to the relationship between grammar and facts in earlier works than OC, in order to see the continuity in the *problems* Wittgenstein addressed, from his earlier works to his last work. §5 will be concerned with how Rhees interprets some core questions Wittgenstein addresses in OC, and, in doing so, I will contrast, in §6, Rhees' and Moyal-Sharrock's interpretations. Finally, in §7, I will present the final conclusions.

2 *The autonomy and arbitrariness of grammar*

I will begin by addressing some core questions regarding *On Certainty* (1997; OC). In doing so, I will go back to the autonomy of grammar, and hence to its arbitrariness. In this regard, Forster ([3, p.191]) claims that "Wittgenstein's very last work, *On Certainty*, is one of the richest sources for his thesis of grammar's arbitrariness".² I think that Wittgenstein was very clear regarding what is meant by the autonomy of grammar, or, in other words, in what sense language is autonomous. Wittgenstein, in his *Big Typescript* ([35], 2005, BT), offers a very insightful remark consisting in showing that the connection between language and reality "is made through explanations of words, which in turn belong to grammar, *so language remains self-contained, autonomous*" (BT, 43, title; emphasis added). Therefore, the autonomy of grammar has nothing to do with the idea that grammar is independent of reality. I think that this is a very important point. The *connection* between grammar and reality, or between language and reality for that matter, shows that the former is not independent from the latter, and to think so may lead to believe that facts, as independent ontological items, condition our grammar, our language. One very important point is to understand that the connection between both is not a relationship of conditioning or determination, i.e. facts do not condition or determine our grammar. In fact, it is the other way around: language itself, grammar itself, constitutes what is meant by fact, and hence by reality. This is why grammar is presupposed when we speak of facts. In other words, in order to speak about facts we already presuppose a grammar that constitutes what is meant by

fact. According to Wittgenstein, such connection remains or belongs to grammar. Moreover, grammar is autonomous in the sense that it is not accountable (or answerable) to any reality *in terms of correction*; and it is, in an important sense, *arbitrary*. This is the second feature mentioned above.

The *arbitrariness* feature, an aspect of the autonomy of grammar, does not mean that it is unimportant, capricious, or even discretionary; it means, and this point is crucial, that it cannot be said that grammar is correct or incorrect, right or wrong, by appealing to how things are in reality (cf. [5]). In the same vein, Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations* ([29], 1953, PI), claims that grammatical rules can be called arbitrary if that means that the purpose of grammar is the same as the purpose of language (cf. PI, §§372, 496, 497), and points out in *Zettel* (1967, Z) that cookery rules are not arbitrary because cookery is defined by its *purpose*, while grammar – or language – is not (cf. Z, §320). Thus, “[d]ifferent grammatical rules, unlike different cookery rules, are not right or wrong, but rather determine different concepts” ([4, p.193]).³ However, and according to Wittgenstein (Z, §358), grammar is akin to what is non-arbitrary. I interpret this remark as claiming that once a grammar is adopted we cannot say what we want. For instance, according to Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Grammar* ([31], 1974, PG, §133), the choice of a unit of measurement is arbitrary, that is, such a choice is not considered true or false (correct or incorrect) by the length of the objects to be measured (cf. [4, p.193]). But once such a unit is chosen, this system of measurement must be applied in order to express our measurements if we wish to communicate them to others who have adopted the same unit of measurement.⁴ This is an example of a form of life.

However, as is common regarding Wittgenstein’s work, there are very dissimilar interpretations on this matter. For instance, [18] presents a variety of agreements and disagreements with Hacker’s [6] interpretations. Thus, while both agree in the core aspects (for instance in that there is no fundamental change in 1937, or indeed later, in the salient features of Wittgenstein’s conception of grammar), Moyal-Sharrock ([18]) believes that the notion of grammar is further elaborated in *On Certainty*, and finds evidence in different works of Wittgenstein. This evidence will be analyzed in §4.

But before moving on to the following section, I would like to say that, according to Rhees – and this is an example of his relevance regarding these issues – Wittgenstein, in his PI, “spoke of rules of grammar which

we find in the use of various language-games. But in *On Certainty* we have a new development, namely, that in this use we accept certain facts as beyond doubt, not simply as true" ([25, p.109]; original italics). I find this remark very insightful in order to fully understand that the new development we find in OC is not concerned with the notion grammar itself, but with Wittgenstein's realization that in the use of a language-game we accept certain facts as *beyond* doubt. As this remark has to do with Rhees' reading of OC, I will come back to it and will further develop it in §5.

3 *What is meant when it is said that grammar is conditioned by certain facts?*

According to authors like Moyal-Sharrock, grammar is conditioned by certain general facts of nature, but what does this mean? It means, following Moyal-Sharrock ([18, p.364]), that these facts non-inferentially or non-ratiocinatively influence them, i.e. our concepts, our grammar. This latter claim can also be expressed as follows: a fact can be transformed into a rule by way of conditioning, as opposed to reasoning; that is, *repeated exposure* will have transformed the fact into a foundation of our thought (see [19], for more details). Moyal-Sharrock ([18, p.364]) offers several examples of what she is speaking: "Human beings are normally susceptible to pain", "Tables and chairs do not feel pain", "There is psychological pain as well as physical pain". She regards these expressions as grammatical rules, which express some structures of the concept of pain. Moreover, Moyal-Sharrock observes that human beings are normally susceptible to pain as a *paradigmatic fact*. Therefore, "such sentences are expressions of fact-conditioned grammatical rules, inasmuch as they underpin or determine our concept of "pain"" ([18, p.364]).

First of all, we must bear in mind that a sentence is *just* a sentence, and hence that the same sentence might be used in a wide range of different ways. So any *general claim* about sentences like 'Human beings are normally susceptible to pain' or 'Tables and chairs do not feel pain' is bound to be wrong. In other words, it is forgotten that the same sentence can play *different* roles in different language-games; that is, 'saying something' does not mean the same thing in every context. Thus, for instance, a sentence like 'this is a hand' (more often regarded as a Moore-type proposition or also as hinge proposition) might be used in a wide range of different ways, among them the following: in order

to explain the meaning of the word ‘hand’ to a French speaker, or to identify a mangled piece of flesh after an explosion (and, of course, there is Moore’s use of this sentence).⁵

On the other hand, Moyal-Sharrock’s argument regarding fact-conditioned rules of grammar may be split into two parts. Firstly, I am in agreement with her in that ‘Human beings are normally susceptible to pain’ is a sentence that can be used to show how we apply the concept of pain, or how we use the word ‘pain’. In such a way this sentence determines our concept of pain. However, I am not as sure as Moyal-Sharrock is in characterizing such sentences as a fact-conditioned grammatical rule. It may well be that, as this sentence determines or constitutes our concept of pain, then this grammatical rule constitutes what we call a paradigmatic fact. In other words, instead of saying that the paradigmatic fact conditions the grammatical rule, it is the grammatical rule itself that states or determines what we call a paradigmatic fact. Therefore, the claim that human beings are normally susceptible to pain is a paradigmatic fact may be just an adherence to a form of expression, a rule of grammar. Thus this sentence may be used as putting forward a rule for the use of language, disguised as a factual statement about a paradigmatic fact. The latter is only the former projected onto reality.

In my current arguments, I am assuming that there is a relationship between grammar and facts. But I do not conceive facts as constituents of reality capable of conditioning our grammar. This is the metaphysical assumption I am rejecting from the very beginning. Rather, I am arguing for a kind of connection between grammar and facts that is constituted within grammar, i.e. it is made through explanations of words, but such explanations belong to grammar, “so language remains self-contained, autonomous” (Wittgenstein, BT, 43, title). Therefore, it is language itself that constitutes what is meant by a general fact of nature.

Another example is found in Moyal-Sharrock ([20, p.159], translated into Spanish). There, Moyal-Sharrock claims that nature is such that some persons have the same parents and this fact is sufficiently important to be the foundation of a concept: the concept of family. However, when one says that nature is such that some persons have *parents*, here the concept of family is presupposed. So it is not the fact that some persons have the same parents that *generates* the concept of family. It sounds as if one can go outside our grammar and say: these facts, but not these others, are those that condition our grammar. In this work, Moyal-Sharrock also claims that the formation of our concepts is influ-

enced by the existence, by nature, but this influence takes the form of facts, i.e. very general facts of nature. Such basic and contingent facts inform our classifications of what is human and what is not. However, one may ask: is the classification of general facts of nature human-made? I think it is. Moreover, what does it mean that the existence influences the formation of concepts? It also sounds as a metaphysical claim. There is no criterion of existence independent of our language, of our grammar: the pre-established harmony between language and reality, as whatever is claimed to be metaphysical, is found in the grammar of the language (see Wittgenstein, BT, 43). I will continue with this discussion in the following section, taking into consideration the connection between grammar and facts in previous works to OC.

4 Grammar and facts before On Certainty

According to Rhees ([24, p.55]), there is nothing by which our grammar is determined. Here, Rhees is referring to what Wittgenstein calls in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP, [28]) “logical syntax” or “logical grammar” (cf. 3.325). To think that our grammar is determined by something is, by the time of TLP, to think that a symbolism is determined by ontology.⁶

In this regard, Kuusela has argued that “the book is concerned to introduce and spell out syntactic concepts and principles by speaking in a metaphysically sounding manner” ([11, p.9]). The syntactic concepts Kuusela is referring to are formal or logical concepts such as ‘object’, ‘fact’, ‘function’, ‘number’, etc. (cf. Wittgenstein, 1922, 4.1272). The point, according to Kuusela ([11, p.9]) “is that what looks like a metaphysical account of the nature of reality and representation is really a way to explain the principles of a notation or a logical system”.⁷ According to authors like McGinn ([12],[13],[14]) or [15], Kuusela seems to state that formal concepts are not ontological categories. If he does, then I am in full agreement.

On the other hand, and according again to Rhees ([24, p.63]), a formal concept is a form, and ‘form’ and ‘construction’ go together. What does it mean to say that a formal concept is a form? It means that a formal concept is a logico-syntactic (i.e. a grammatical) feature: to be an object, a fact, a number, etc., is not a property of a language-independent entity; rather, it is a feature of the symbol, which is manifested in its role, in its use, within the symbolism. Therefore, and according to Ishiguro ([8]), the logical syntax, understood as logical grammar, provides rules

in virtue of which things symbolize; that is, it constitutes their use (cf. [14]).

With regard to what I have just said concerning the TLP, I think that we can find continuity rather than rupture in later works of Wittgenstein. Thus, for instance, in the *Philosophical Remarks* (PR, 1975) Wittgenstein says: “I will count any fact whose obtaining is a presupposition of a proposition’s making sense as belonging to *language*” (PR, §45; original italics). This claim is taken by Moyal-Sharrock ([18, pp.362-363]) as stating that grammar not only includes objects such as samples and tables, but also facts. Therefore, following this author, “there is no reason why such ‘facts’ should not be called ‘expressions of rules of language’” ([18, p.363]).

However, Wittgenstein is not claiming that such ‘facts’ should be called ‘expressions of rules of grammar’ (at least not in PR, §45). Thus according to Wittgenstein (BT, 12), grammar *not only consists of rules* that determine the sense, but also includes all conditions (the method) necessary for comparing the proposition with reality; that is, all the requirements for understanding; for sense. These two claims are different: one thing is to say that such ‘facts’ should be called ‘expressions of rules of language’, and another very different thing is to claim that I will count any fact whose obtaining is a presupposition of a proposition’s making sense as belonging to *language*. Why are they so different? Because grammar, as I have just mentioned above, *not only consists of rules* that determine the sense, but also includes all conditions (the method) necessary for comparing the proposition with reality; that is, all the requirements for sense. The point is obvious: such facts are not necessarily *rules*.

So, one may agree with the claim that such facts do not express a rule of grammar, though it conditions our grammar as it belongs to the method. But such a claim is circular. Suppose we say: given that grammar tells us what kind of object a thing is (cf. PI, §373), such object conditions our grammar. In analogy with this, as grammar tells us what counts as a fact then grammar is conditioned by such fact. This is not what Wittgenstein says, at least to my mind. The relationship or connection between grammar and objects or facts is not of being determined or conditioned by them. The connection between grammar and objects or facts is one that remains within grammar itself (cf. Wittgenstein, BT, 43). We have to think of grammar as including the method (all conditions necessary for the comparison between propositions with reality); the method is, then, constituted by grammar, and therefore

such conditions, such method, do not determine or condition, in turn, grammar.

Interestingly, the following paragraph found in the *Remarks of the Philosophy of Psychology Vol. I* (1980, RPP I) is also used in order to defend the claim that grammar is conditioned by general facts of nature. However, I do not find such a claim justified by this paragraph. There, Wittgenstein (RPP I, §46; cf. PI, §XII), says the following:

If the formation of concepts can be explained by facts of nature, should we not be interested, not in grammar, but rather in that in nature which is the basis of grammar? Our interest certainly includes the correspondence between concepts and very general facts of nature.

But this paragraph has other very interesting parts:

But our interest does not fall back upon these *possible* causes of the formation of concepts; we are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history – since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes.

Here Wittgenstein makes a very interesting suggestion: “we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes”. In doing so, we invent a variety of *facts* which enter into this fictitious natural history. Such invented facts can also be part of the method, but such facts need not to be general facts of nature, as they are invented. The main question is the logical role the propositions expressing these facts play in our language-game, rather than whether they are general facts of nature or not. But Wittgenstein adds some paragraphs later on, such as the following (RPP I, §49):

I am not saying: if such-and-such facts of nature were different people would have different concepts (in the sense of a hypothesis). But: if any one believes that certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones, and that having different ones would mean not realizing something that we realize – then let him imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become natural to him. ‘Natural’, not ‘necessary’.

That is, if certain facts of nature were different, then the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become natural; *natural*,

not necessary. Wittgenstein here is not saying that given these (general) facts (of nature) you *necessarily* have these concepts. According to Rhees, to the question “can the formation of concepts be explained by the facts of nature?” Wittgenstein’s response is that he “would not be ready himself to say that they could be explained by facts of nature. He is not saying: given different facts of nature you will have these different concepts” ([25, p.12]). The emphasis lies on the fact that Wittgenstein is saying that “if you can imagine that certain facts of nature were different, you could imagine how the formation of concepts could be different” ([25, p.12]). However, this should not be taken as meaning that different facts *necessarily* lead to different concepts; at least this is not what Wittgenstein says.⁸

This remark is related to what Wittgenstein says in Z (§352). There Wittgenstein points out that it is an empirical fact that people change their concepts, transforming them into others, if they get to know new facts. Such a change becomes *natural*, but it is not *necessary*, as it is just an *empirical* fact. On the other hand, it may be claimed that there are facts that are favorable to the formation of concepts, but this is not to say that such facts condition our formation of concepts in the sense that these facts determine such a formation, or even that they generate it. A web of facts is not the same as our form of life. That is, a form of life is much more than a web of facts. On the other hand, language itself constitutes what is meant by reality, so it constitutes such a web. In this sense, it is a form of life, constituted by a grammar, that determines what is meant by reality and hence by a web of facts. If different people have different concepts it is not just because they live under different general facts of nature, but because they have a different form of life (i.e. a different *vision*). The relationship between different concepts and different facts is not that of a necessary change (it sounds, again, metaphysical), but just a natural change; so there may be people who change their concepts and people who do not. I will come back to this issue in the following section.

5 A reading of *On Certainty with Rhees*

As shown above, Rhees is not only an interesting author concerning OC, but also regarding other works of Wittgenstein, as the TLP. In fact, Phillips both in his *Introduction to Rhees*’ ([26]) *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse* and in his *Preface to Rhees*’ ([25]) *Wittgenstein’s On Certainty. There – Like Our Life*, acknowledges the relevance Rhees

has in order to offer an interpretation of Wittgenstein's work. On the other hand, Rhees' work contains illuminating remarks and a novel perspective that remains unmentioned by [6] and Moyal-Sharrock ([18]) in their otherwise interesting discussion (see the *Introduction* above). Thus, in order to fully understand that 'say something' does not come to the same thing in every context, we have to take into account that in his early work, "Wittgenstein wanted to determine the nature of a proposition, to find out its general form. What 'saying something' amounts to, he argued, cannot vary from context to context" ([23, II, p. xxvii]). This is so because there is a general form of a proposition that language must correspond to. However, by the time Wittgenstein wrote the *Investigations*, his position moved away from that maintained in his TLP. "Instead of claiming that logic determines what *can* and what *cannot* be said, he asks us to look at the logic, or the grammar, as he puts it, of what is said" ([23, II, p. xxvii]; original italics). In doing so we see then that 'saying something' does not come to the same thing in every context (something that I have discussed above). Despite this moving away from the TLP, Rhees has been an author who has seen the *connections* between different aspects of Wittgenstein's work. For Rhees, Wittgenstein's work shows a *continuous* inquiry into human discourse, and hence into the central question: What does it mean to say something?⁹ On the other hand, that 'say something' does not come to the same thing in every context (i.e. in every language-game) should also be applied to the claim that grammar is conditioned by certain general facts of nature. This is the main issue I will focus on in this section. First, I will be concerned with what Rhees says regarding Moore-type propositions (also known as hinge propositions), and secondly I will address what Rhees has to say to those that claim that grammar is conditioned by certain general facts of nature.

Before moving on to different interpretations one can find in the literature regarding Moore-type propositions, I would like to present Rhees' reading of such propositions. First of all, Rhees observes that Moore-type propositions *are not rules of grammar*, but empirical propositions. According to Rhees ([25, p.14]) "[i]n *On Certainty* Wittgenstein is exploring the role played by the kind of empirical propositions mentioned by Moore". So, what is the *logical status* of these propositions? Following Rhees ([25, p.149]), we are not simply taught the grammar of our concepts, but also certain facts that are not questioned; that is "we accept certain facts as beyond doubt, not simply as true" ([25, p.109]). In this regard, Rhees points out that the peculiar logical role of certain

empirical propositions is what chiefly interests Wittgenstein about those propositions of Moore's.¹⁰ Thus, according to Rhees ([25, p.104]):

Wittgenstein speaks of these propositions as 'not accessible to doubt', 'beyond the reach of the doubt' (and other similar phrases). If he called them 'facts which we never doubt', this would suggest that we might have some idea of what it would be to doubt them, even though we regard such doubting as preposterous. It would treat them as though they were pieces in the game. Whereas they are the table on which the game is played.

I think that what Rhees is pointing out here is how these propositions are *used* and hence what their *function* is; this is to my mind the main concern. And it is important to recall in this point that a sentence can be used differently in different contexts (i.e. language-games). So this is the reason why Wittgenstein is interested in their logical role. This logical role is to be the table on which the game is played, that is, such propositions have been withdrawn from doubt, what in turn means that they are not asserted or denied, because we do not say that they are true or false (i.e. they are not pieces to be moved). On the other hand, such propositions are fundamental in the sense that if "I were to doubt any of them this would bring an earthquake in the foundations of acting and thinking" ([25, p.104]). For instance, Wittgenstein distinguishes between these two cases in OC (§613). The first case is as follows: "If I now say 'I know that the water in the kettle on the gas-flame will not freeze but boil', I seem to be justified in this 'I know' as I am in *any*. 'If I know anything I know this'" (original italics). This is the second case: "Or do I know with still *greater* certainty that the person opposite me is my old friend so-and-so? And how does that compare with the proposition that I am seeing with two *eyes* and shall see them if I look in the glass?" (original emphasis). Wittgenstein recognizes that there is a difference between both cases:

If the water over the gas freezes, of course I shall be astonished as can be, but I shall assume some factor I do not of, and perhaps leave the matter to physicists to judge. But what could make me doubt whether this person here is NN, whom I have known for years? Here a doubt would seem to drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos.

I think these two cases illustrate the different logical role these propositions have. On the one hand, we have the case that the water over the

gas freezes, and this is a question that may be asserted or denied, i.e. an empirical question. However, the second case, i.e. to doubt whether this person here is NN, plays a different logical role, the logical role of the table in a game, not that of pieces. This second case is not a movement in the game, because if it were, then a doubt here drags everything with it and plunge it into chaos. It is in this sense that Wittgenstein speaks here of propositions of the form of empirical propositions, though they are not used as such.

The second point mentioned above that I will address is what Rhees has to say to those who claim that grammar is conditioned by certain general facts of nature. This second point is closely related to the previous one. To support the claim that general facts of nature condition our grammar the following paragraph is often quoted (OC, §617):

Certain facts would put me into a position in which I could not go on with the old language-game any further. In which I was torn away from the sureness of the game.

Indeed, doesn't it seem obvious that the possibility of a language-game is conditioned by certain facts?

According to Rhees ([25, p.90]), "Wittgenstein says this after imagining that I observe a multitude of facts and events which force me into doubt certain things which in fact I never call into question". It is important to relate this quote with what I have pointed out above, i.e. with the case in which Wittgenstein imagines to doubt whether this person here is NN. So, following Rhees, "[i]f we say that the possibility of this is determined by certain facts, Wittgenstein's point is still, I think, that it is determined by our *not calling in question* certain facts" ([25, p.91]; original italics). That is, and this is the main point regarding Rhees' interpretation: "[w]hat makes a language-game possible is not 'certain facts' but *our never calling in question* certain facts" ([25, p.91]; original italics). Thus, the crucial point is that there is not a specific class of facts (for instance, general facts of nature) which cannot be doubted; that is, "what makes a language-game a language-game is not certain facts which are basic to it" ([25, p.166]). In other words: "[w]e are not saying that there is certain class of propositions or facts which cannot be doubted" ([25, p.66]). In fact that is just the point. What does it mean that there is a special class of things, propositions, or facts, which cannot be doubted? That means that it makes sense to ask what they are. It means that we might have some idea of what it would be to doubt them;

but this is precisely the crucial issue: I do not doubt *not* because I have convinced myself, but because the question *just never arises*.

So, following Rhees ([25, p.91]):

‘Depends on’ or ‘is determined by’ or ‘is conditioned by certain facts’ can too easily invite the misunderstanding: ‘There are certain facts on which the possibility of language depends’ – as though we could the justly ask: ‘And which facts are these? What *are* the facts on which the possibility of language depends?’

As Rhees ([25, p.92]) suggests this “is the misunderstanding which is most commonly made by people who read *On Certainty*”;¹¹ that is, the misunderstanding which is most commonly made by people who read OC is to think that the relationship between grammar and facts is captured by speaking of facts as conditions.

6 Two readings of Wittgenstein’s last period: a discussion

In this section, I will discuss two different readings of Wittgenstein’s last period: one that asserts that there is something like a third Wittgenstein (see [16]), and one that interprets Wittgenstein’s last period as a work that is not new at all, since it reflects worries Wittgenstein had since 1930 at least (see [25]). These two readings, as shown above, also differ in their conception of Moore-type propositions and the relationship between grammar and facts. Here I will discuss further their differences.

As regards Moyal-Sharrock’s work, she presents a classification of Moore-type (i.e. hinge) propositions divided into four categories (see [17, pp.148,173] for more details): (a) linguistic, (b), personal, (c) local, and (d) universal hinge propositions. According to Whittaker ([27, p.294]), there are authors to whom this classification sounds “very un-Wittgensteinian” (to use Whittaker’s expression). Certainly, Rhees ([25, p.78]) points out that “[o]ne misunderstanding people make about the propositions which Wittgenstein says cannot be doubted is *to try to classify them*, or to find out what they all have in common” (my emphasis).¹² Moreover, Rhees ([25, pp.74,76,80,89,109]) has made some remarks against the claim that there are universal hinge propositions, which conform a universal system of reference. In this sense, Rhees ([25, p.99]) has suggested that “[t]here is no reason to think that there are any gestures which *must* (logically?) be understood by anyone who sees them” (original italics); and insists that “[t]here is no specific class

of indubitable propositions, the foundations of all our language" ([25, p.109]), given that "what is a foundation in one way of living needn't be that in another". Such Moore-type (i.e. hinge) propositions belong to what Wittgenstein calls 'world-picture' (cf. [25, p.87]), and there are many different world-pictures; for instance the world-picture of people who are guided by experimental sciences is different from that of people who consult oracles. I think that an example may help.

If we look at OC (§92), Wittgenstein offers an imagined scene where Moore is met with a king who believes that the world (or the earth, for that matter) began with him. According to Perissinotto ([21, p.157]; original italics):

In acquiring the belief that the earth began with him, the king acquires that which, in the language of *On Certainty*, we may call a "world-picture", which manifests itself in his actions, in the concepts and words he uses, in his feelings and emotions and also, obviously, in his beliefs.

Following Perissinotto ([21, p.164]), what Wittgenstein suggests in OC (§92) is that "what distinguishes (or contrasts) the king and Moore is not the single belief about the age of the earth but, rather, the (different) ways in which they look at the world, their (different) views". Thus, many Moore-type propositions like 'The world has existed for many years' *are* determinant of concepts. What does it mean that such propositions are determinant of concepts? It means that they constitute the meaning of some expressions, the way in which they are used. Thus, for instance, "the expression "a long time ago", the adjective "ancient", or the noun "history" will not have the same meaning for Moore that they do for the king" ([21, p.164]). With regard to this last point, Wittgenstein says (OC, §190): "what we call historical evidence points to the existence of the earth a long time before my birth", so what we call 'historical evidence' is not what the king would call 'historical evidence'. Therefore, many Moore-type propositions are determinant of concepts.¹³

Following with the case of the king, he was brought up in the belief that the world began with him. According to Perissinotto ([21, p.157]), "imagining such a king with such a belief means imagining many other and different things about him, about his environment and about the course of his life". That is to say, we cannot imagine a king as such, who believes that the earth is as old as he is, without attributing many other beliefs to him. The main point here is that ([21, p.165]):

In his kingdom, his birth and the beginning of the earth are celebrated on the same day; that the earth began with his birth is taught by the wisest of his teachers and is recalled in the ceremonial formulas and can be read in the books that narrate the kingdom's history.

This scene reinforces the idea that although both 'the earth has existed for a long time' and 'the earth began with my birth' are hinge (i.e. Moore-type) propositions, we are in fact concerned with hinges on which different doors turn, so that we cannot speak here of something like *universal* hinges.¹⁴

This reading contrasts with Moyal-Sharrock's interpretation. Indeed, she points out that after the PI, "Wittgenstein no longer considers grammar as merely rules for the use of constituent words" ([18, p.365]). Thus, many hinge – Moore-type propositions – like 'The world has existed for many years' are not determinant of concepts.¹⁵ As shown above, Wittgenstein, in his BT, a previous work to OC, says that grammar not only consists of rules, but it includes the method for comparing propositions with reality (all the requirements for understanding); so from this work at least Wittgenstein does not consider grammar as merely rules for the use of (constituent) words. This "no longer" used by Moyal-Sharrock in the quotation above justifies the introduction of the so-called Third Wittgenstein. However I am not quite sure about this. I am in full agreement with Whittaker ([27, p.288]), when he claims that it is not entirely accurate to support that the so-called *Third* Wittgenstein implies "a significant change in his thinking occurring in his later life". Whittaker ([27, p.289]) concludes that "the question of whether or not there is a third Wittgenstein is more a question of emphasis and words than it is of substance".

To my mind, Moore-type propositions are not determinant of concepts by themselves. What happens is that they are part of grammar, given that, as stated above, grammar not only consists of rules that constitute the sense, but also includes the method necessary for comparing the proposition with reality. However, Moore-type propositions are not used as rules of grammar.¹⁶ In other words, if (many) Moore-type propositions constitute the meaning of some expressions, they do that to the extent that they belong to the method, and as such they are part of grammar. It is in this sense that we accept facts beyond doubt; it is in this sense that in the kingdom mentioned above the sentence 'the earth began with king's birth' belongs to the method of teaching kingdom's history. The method (i.e. grammar after all) constitutes a form of life;

how we live is our world-picture. The main point here is that within the kingdom's grammar, that the earth began with the king's birth is not considered a matter of fact. This form of life, this way of acting, is not grounded on a very general matter of fact. Harré ([7, p.119]) claims that "hinges [i.e. Moore-type propositions] have an empirical foundation in the sense that they are grounded in actual ways of acting". However, I am not in full agreement with that way of putting things. To my mind, Moore-type propositions are fundamental in the sense that they belong to the method and hence they *constitute* a way of acting. So they *are not grounded* in actual ways of acting, it is just the other way around.¹⁷ Moreover, Harré ([7, p.119]) says that "if a hinge proposition turns out to be false, the practice, the foundation or foundations of which it expresses must be abandoned". This is just the point: the logical role a hinge – Moore-type – proposition plays is not that to be true or false. Hinge propositions are withdrawn from doubt (we do not say that they are true or false); we do not make movements in our language-game with them.

Another important point is that Moore-type propositions are not taught explicitly. Recall what Perissinotto says regarding king's birth and the beginning of the earth. That the earth began with his birth is taught by the wisest of his teachers and is recalled in the ceremonial formulas and can be read in the books that narrate the kingdom's history. It is in this way that such propositions are taught; they are swallowed down with what we are taught (OC, §143; see also [25, p.166]). Here "swallowed down" means that there is no explicit teaching at school, as when one is learning addition, for instance. Moore-types propositions are thus taught at school by telling tales, for instance, but not as something that must be investigated.¹⁸ Here doubt is excluded. This is the logical role the proposition "the earth began with king's birth" plays in this language-game, in this form of life (cf. PI, §§19, 241).

I may illustrate these remarks with another example, this time based on "what happens when missionaries convert natives" (OC, §612). Very briefly, missionaries do not convert natives by proving to them that their beliefs are false; rather, it is when natives have been converted, i.e. when a practice has been established, that their beliefs appear to them to be false.¹⁹

Please contrast what I have just said with this other very different language-game: imagine two geologists who are engaged in a discussion regarding the correct dating of the earth. Here, if one geologist shows the other one that there is a measurement that is wrong, then the wrong

geologist takes this to be a fact that shows the correct dating of the earth. Accordingly, this geologist will change his practice in order to accept that he was wrong. Or it may happen that this geologist designs another instrument or another experiment to show that the first geologist was wrong, rejecting the idea that his own measuring procedure was wrong. This is scientific practice. The conception of the world that geologists have *is based on a given practice* (constituted by a given grammar), and it is on this basis that a notion of the world is *construed*. In other words, how they behave towards each other shows their conception of the world. So the moral in this case is what Rhees ([25, p.149]) correctly says:

If we are inclined to think that a practice gives us an absolute conception of the world, that the world, for example, forces us to have a scientific interest in it, Wittgenstein asks us to imagine a people with no such interest. They have no physics. They consult oracles.

Thus, the logical role the proposition ‘the earth began with king’s birth’ is by no means to express a general fact of nature, as though this fact were a language-independent entity, an ontological item, captured by our language or mode of expression. This is the main point I want to defend here: it is not the case that a language-game is possible because there is a class of general facts of nature that makes it possible. What makes a language-game possible is our never calling in question certain facts. And these ‘certain facts’ refer to those facts like ‘the earth began with king’s birth’, those that belong to the method necessary for comparing the proposition with reality. But “in order to recognize what is meant *these facts* must be recognized which are not rules of grammar” ([25, p.109]). So these facts should not be called expressions of rules of grammar – i.e. of language.

7 Conclusions

To end this paper, I would like to say that it is not just a plea for Rhees’ interpretation of Wittgenstein’s work and of OC in particular. I think that Rhees offers an alternative way of interpreting that we should take into account in order to, at least, challenge other interpretations.

The main point in order to understand that grammar is not conditioned by certain general facts of nature is the following, split into 5 subpoints. First, grammar itself constitutes what is meant by fact (and

also by general fact of nature). Second, the connection between grammar, or language for that matter, and reality remains within grammar (a point that is derived from the first one). Third, grammar not only consists of grammatical rules that determine or constitute the meaning and hence the use of words. Grammar includes the method for understanding, and this means that certain facts are part of the method. However, it does not mean that they are rules of grammar. Fourth, the logical role played by these facts is a core point in *On Certainty*. The logical or grammatical role is to be beyond doubt and hence beyond truth and falsity. This 'to be beyond' does not mean that these facts *must* be true (a relapse to metaphysics). They are accepted beyond doubt, something that is shown in the form of life. Fifth, this logical or grammatical role of facts, together with what I have said in the first subpoint, shows that grammar and facts are connected, but that this relation is not captured by taking facts as conditioning our grammar. Of course, we can make this paragraph larger and say that the possibility of a language-game rests upon not calling in question certain facts (i.e. facts with the logical or grammatical role mentioned above), but I think that the main point is clear.

It is crucial to bear in mind what is meant by saying that these facts are beyond doubt. This does not mean that they are necessarily true (in fact they may be false). The truth or falsity of the fact is not the point here. 'To be beyond doubt' reflects their grammatical role. This is the core point. For instance, Hacker ([4, p.190]) claims that we *do* apply our concepts "against a context of normality conditions consisting of very general regularities of nature"; thus "our concepts can be said to rest upon such normality conditions, not in the sense of being made true or correct by them, but in the sense of having a point only in such contexts". However, such normality conditions and the very general regularities of nature cannot be separated from – i.e. are not independent of – our form of life. The method applied to compare propositions with reality provides the means by which we look at nature and understand what nature is. We have not a conception of nature independent of such method. Our grammar, our method, constitutes the way Hacker speaks of nature as he does. In other words, a form of life reflects a vision of the world, a method to distinguish between truth and falsity, and living in it. However, it may well be that in such a method there were facts that were accepted as true, despite being false (this is not new at all). But this is the point: the crucial aspect is that these facts are *beyond* doubt; this is the logical or grammatical role they play.

The main problem is the insistence in looking for something on which our language depends and hence our practices, and finally our form of life. Recall what Wittgenstein says in OC (§94):

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. On the contrary, it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.

Here the *inherited background* is the given, i.e. the form of life (and not nature itself). “What has to be accepted”, Wittgenstein says in his PI (XI, §345), “the given, is – so one could say – forms of life”. This is the reason why Wittgenstein wants us to imagine people with different interests (i.e. physics, oracles, etc. . . see above for details). We must resist, Wittgenstein seems to tell us, to elaborate a philosophical or psychological theory to further explain the nature of our form of life that somehow uncovers what lies *behind* our practices. This means that we must resist to elaborate a theory concerning a mechanism of *conditioning*, as though it explained something.²⁰

The world does not force us to have these practices and not others, and, of course, the world does not force us to have some language-games and not others. Here there is an important confusion: we believe that a practice gives us an absolute conception of the world, in analogy with the idea that a proposition has an absolute use. We see the world through our practices; that is, our ways of acting and thinking constitute our conception of the world (our world-picture). The main confusion comes when we tend to believe that this is how the world *must* be.²¹ There is not an absolute sense in which we can say that the world determines our practices; if we believe that there is, then we are captive to a metaphysical illusion. Kuusela ([9, p.101]) points out the following: “according to Wittgenstein, the metaphysician is merely caught up in an illusion, mistaking the reflection of his own concepts on reality for a truth about reality”; or a truth about what reality (or even nature) consists in, I add. To say that grammar is conditioned by certain general facts of nature sounds as claiming that ontology conditions our grammar. I think that this really is a misguided interpretation. There is no such a thing as ontology conditioning our grammar. Our concepts about reality remain *within* grammar, grammar constitutes, determines, them. This metaphysical illusion consists of conflating what is just an adherence to a form of expression (i.e. speaking of objects, facts, etc., without being aware that grammar itself constitutes what is meant by them) with a

truth about reality (i.e. consisting of objects, general facts of nature, etc.).

Finally, Rhees writes in his *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse* that “you cannot say that it is because they have a common life that they are able to engage in conversation” ([26, p.155]). Professor Cockburn ([2, p.87]) analyzes this claim as follows:

[T]he fact that two people speak the same language is itself a central aspect of the similarity between their lives: any attempt to characterise a life independently of the place that language has in it will leave out, perhaps, almost everything that marks it out as a human life.

A form of life cannot be conceived independently of the place language has in it, and hence independently of the method, the grammar, applied by such form of life.²²

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Notes

- ¹ I would like to thank Professor Oskari Kuusela for inspiring me through personal correspondence this way of expressing myself.
- ² Hacker's ([6]) work is an excellent analysis of what is meant by expressions such as ‘the autonomy of grammar’ and ‘the arbitrariness of grammar’ (cf. also [4]).
- ³ In this very insightful work, Wittgenstein ([35], 2005) says that language is not defined as an instrument which satisfies a definite purpose. In this sense, to the extent that it is pointless to speak of the purpose of language, it is also pointless to speak of the correctness of grammar; i.e. grammar is not correct because language satisfies this purpose. It is not that by using these rules of grammar this purpose is fulfilled, and hence that this is the correct grammar in order to achieve this purpose. By contrast, we can say that a cookery rule is correct or incorrect if it is adequate to obtain a good result (this result is an independent test for the rule); but if we are guided by rules which are not those of chess, we simply are playing another game (or none).
- ⁴ Of course, to follow another rule does not mean to say something necessarily incorrect. For instance, if we are guided by rules which are not those of the metrical system we are simply in other system or none.

- 5 I would like to thank Professor David Cockburn for his help with regard to this point.
- 6 The author Rhees is criticising is Black [1]. This author points out that in order to have an adequate symbolism to describe reality, “we must have some view of what reality is like” ([24, p.51]). This is the ontology of the TLP. However, if we ask what Wittgenstein means by an adequate symbolism, we have to look at the relationship between a sign and syntax, because what it meant by an adequate symbolism depends on such relationship. In this regard, Wittgenstein says: “A sign does not determine a logical form unless it is taken together with its logico-syntactical employment” (TLP, 3.327). Here there is no mention to an independent reality.
- 7 This interpretation departs from the so-called metaphysical or realist or ineffability reading. See [10] for a discussion.
- 8 Rhees offers the following example (see [25, p.12] to read the complete example):

‘But measurement *depends* on the behaviour of rods, etc. ...’ But what does ‘depend on’ mean? Would it be impossible to measure if rods were not rigid? Could we weigh cheese if rods suddenly diminished or expanded? No, but we might still go on doing with them what we do. We might get results that we now call crazy, but we could go on.
- 9 According to Phillips, “Rhees’s insistence on the continuity in the *problems* Wittgenstein addressed, from his earliest to his last work, is another instance of stressing these connections, and is one of the valuable aspects of the present work” ([22, p.vii]; original italics). Here the expression “the present work” refers to Rhees’ book.
- 10 Rhees claims that OC is a work on *logic* (cf. [25, pp.48–51]), not on epistemology (cf. [25, p.135]). So everything descriptive of a language-game *is part of logic* (OC, §56), and a logical proposition describes the conceptual (linguistic) situation (OC, §51).
- 11 According to Rhees ([25, p.92]) another version of this misunderstanding is: “When Wittgenstein says that there are certain propositions which have the form of empirical propositions, which are never called in doubt; and that unless this were so we could not speak with one another, we should not have a language – he is saying that there is a specific set of propositions (with the form of empirical propositions) which cannot be doubted.”. “Of course [Rhees adds] he is *not* saying this. He is denying it. This is the chief point of his discussion.”
- 12 In this sense, Rhees ([25, p.66]; original italics) says that:

Naturally, we could not give a list of sentences and say, ‘These are the foundations without which no language-game would be possible’. We could not *look* for ‘the principles of the possibility of language-games (or of the practice of speaking)’. That says nothing. Because of this it is important to recognize that we are concerned here with *empirical propositions*.
- 13 Another author who claims that hinge propositions are determinant of concepts is Forster ([3]). Indeed, he claims that “in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein says that our apparently-empirical principle that the earth has existed during the last hundred years may involve “the determination of a concept” (in other words, may be grammatical), and he then goes on in elaboration of this suggestion to argue that

“if I speak of a possible mistake here, this changes the role of. . . ‘truth’ in our lives” (OC, §138). ”

- 14 Our form of life and king’s “do not differ because [our] measurements give different results but, rather, because [we] have different units of measurement” ([21, p.164]). In other words, we have *different methods* for comparing propositions with reality; i.e. different grammars.
- 15 According to Moyal-Sharrock ([18, p.365]), other examples are: “I am called L.W.” (OC, §470), or “I live at address A” (OC, §70).
- 16 Recall that Moyal-Sharrock says that “there is no reason why such ‘facts’ should not be called ‘expressions of rules of language’” ([18, p.363]). It seems to me that there are reasons, and they have to do with the role within grammar of such expressions, they do not work as rules, though they are part of the method.
- 17 According to Wittgenstein (OC, §559) “You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there – like our life”.
- 18 In doing so, “[n]ot only rules, but also examples are needed for establishing a practice” (OC, §139). As Rhees ([25, p.85]) suggests, “the emphasis is on ‘not just rules, *but* examples’ – for the reason that examples are *applications* of the rules, or are *judgments*”. Such examples are offered by means of ceremonial formulas, for instance.
- 19 According to Perissinotto ([21, p.167]):

What the missionary will do or will have to do is to enter into the life of the natives, living among them, sharing their joys and sufferings, treating their sickness or relieving their pain, helping them in times of famine or other calamities, etc. At a certain point, it may happen, then, that the natives begin to pray with the missionary, that they ask him the name of that being to whom they are praying and whom they are thinking, that they want to hear and repeat the stories about him, that they carefully conserve his image, etc. At a certain point they may even accuse the old priest of imposture and brand the old beliefs, rites and practices as nothing but superstition. It is at this point that we may, perhaps, speak of “conversion”.

- 20 According to Rhees ([25, p.141]):

Wittgenstein is arguing that what brings the clarity we need is not explanation, for example, attempts to show that our language-games are determined by something called the structure of the world, or are dependent on something called the nature of the human constitution. What we need is description, by which he means an elucidation of the place a concept occupies in our language-games.

- 21 As Rhees ([25, p.149]; original italics) points out: “It is important to note that Wittgenstein is emphasizing what practices do say, not what they must say”.
- 22 Indeed, in OC (§36) Wittgenstein says that the instruction “A is a physical object” is given to someone who does not yet understand the meaning of ‘A’ or of ‘physical object’. So it is an instruction about the use of words, i.e. it is a grammatical rule.

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