

*Wittgenstein and Scepticism*

Edited by DENIS MCMANUS

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Wittgenstein has been likened to a Pyrrhonian sceptic, one who employs dialectical skills to avoid rather than defend doctrine, but it is his role in exposing and excavating the sands upon which modern scepticisms have been built that is the subject of this new volume of largely original essays. The first three chapters, by Crispin Wright, Akeel Bilgrami and Michael Williams find inspiration in *On Certainty* for singling out key moves in the initial set-up of external world scepticism; the next four chapters, by James Conant, Denis McManus, Ilham Dilman and Jane Heal involve discussions of external world (Cartesian) scepticism, semantic (Kantian) scepticism, scepticism about language (linguistic idealism) and the factuality of the mental that are either commentaries on, or discussions inspired by, Wittgenstein's writings. The last five chapters focus on Stanley Cavell's important and under-appreciated work on other minds scepticism—a form of scepticism that, on Cavell's reading, is never far from the surface of *Philosophical Investigations*.

Responses to modern scepticisms can be broadly divided into two categories: (1) *Problem-Accepting Responses*: those that regard the sceptical problem as legitimate and seek an answer that takes the form of an appropriate justification for (what the sceptic characterizes as) our ordinary knowledge or beliefs; and (2) *Problem-Rejecting Responses*: those that regard the sceptical 'problem' as illegitimate (and so, not requiring an answer) because of hidden and contestable theoretical commitments or because it subtly transgresses conditions of sense-making. This is a volume devoted entirely to the second of these categories, responses that are directed to, as McManus puts it, "a layer in which our philosophical questions are constituted" (p. 4).

One of the principal virtues of this volume is the opportunity it provides to explore a diagnostic approach to a range of the most influential forms of modern scepticism. It is, furthermore, tempting to see the volume as dividing into two broad sections. The first section provides relatively familiar versions of the problem-rejecting (or quietist) approach that aims: (i) to undermine sceptical doubt by arguing for the falsity or implausibility of one or more of the sceptic's premises or presuppositions; and, (ii) apparently in tension with that, to try to do justice to the naturalness of scepticism. For this reviewer the contributors were better at satisfying the first rather than the second of these desiderata. Examples include: Wright's attempt to argue that we are entitled to some presuppositions not because we have reasons for them but simply in virtue of being rational agents involved in cognitive enquiry; Bilgrami's appeal to the pragmatist principle, 'Nothing makes a difference to epistemology, which does not make a difference to enquiry' to show that scepticism (which trades in unverifiable sceptical scenarios) is not properly seen as an enquiry at all; and Williams's argument that the ultimate source of external world scepticism is epistemological realism, the questionable view that there is a natural order of reasons according to which claims about experience are epistemically prior to claims about physical objects. The papers by McManus, Dilman and Heal also follow this pattern. The one exception is Conant (whose paper appears elsewhere in an expanded form), who instead offers a distinction between two kinds of modern scepticism, Cartesian scepticism about the *actuality* of

knowledge, and Kantian scepticism about the *possibility* of knowledge—the latter raising questions about the conditions for the intentional contents (or seemings) that the Cartesian sceptic takes for granted. Conant's further claim is that versions of these two kinds of scepticism are conflated by such luminaries as Putnam and Cavell.

The second section of the book—on Cavell's reading of (Wittgenstein's reading of) other minds scepticism—is, however, the most interesting. In part this is because, Cavell aside, contemporary philosophers have found it very difficult providing useful new terms of criticism for scepticism. In part it is a matter of this being the first extended treatment of Cavell's writings on scepticism and, although it only scratches the surface, it provides ample evidence of the fruitfulness of Cavell's approach. Cavell is unique in treating scepticism not as philosophical conundrum that must be overcome once and for all but as a model or touchstone for exploring certain extremities of the human condition, the human denial of the human: a sense of a lost intimacy with the world and oneself; failures of our acknowledgement of others thematized in Shakespearian tragedy and comedy; philosophy's attack on ordinary language evident in metaphysical theorizing as much as in scepticism itself. The centrality of scepticism in this explanatory framework lends Cavell's work a depth and ambition well beyond the confines of standard philosophical responses to scepticism whether in their standard problem-accepting or problem-rejecting forms.

Let me single out the exchange between Marie McGinn and Cavell for further comment since McGinn, like Cavell, has published important work on both Wittgenstein and his approach to scepticism. McGinn takes Cavell to task for claiming that there is a 'truth' in scepticism and that we 'live' scepticism about other minds. McGinn characterizes the 'truth' in scepticism, on Cavell's view, as the correctness of "the sceptic's image of the metaphysical separation of one self from another" (p. 244). But what Cavell means by the 'truth' of scepticism is not a truth—and most certainly not a metaphysical truth!—*in* what the sceptic thinks or imagines. It is a reinterpretation of scepticism according to which our natural relation to the world and others is closer or more intimate than is conveyed by the concepts of knowledge or belief. Ironically, it is Wittgenstein, on McGinn's reading, who holds a thesis that seems to border on the metaphysical, namely, that there is a constitutional or necessary uncertainty about the psychological. Far from endorsing this reading, according to which reason is found to withhold the notion of certainty quite generally from our psychological attributions, Cavell's Wittgenstein explores what certainty in the psychological realm comes to and why we tend to find it disappointing.

McGinn's idea of what it would be to 'live' scepticism also fails to track Cavell's thinking. For her, it is to live with philosophical doubts that impose "a logical gap between the state (the sensation, the emotion) itself and the outer evidence for it" (p. 245). For him, it is precisely the inability of the sceptic to provide any adequate grounds for such a logical gap that blocks a generalized other minds scepticism and makes room for the claim that we 'live' our scepticism. Since the other minds sceptic cannot find a best case required to draw a general conclusion ('If I don't know *this* then I never know'), he is left with something we can all bear witness to, the everyday possibility of a sense of unknownness, of another by oneself or oneself by another. That so astute a philosopher as McGinn can systematically misread Cavell reminds us once again of the saying 'God is in the details'. Furthermore, the exchange reveals the importance Cavell places on treating *Philosophical Investigations* as a complete and definitive expression of

Wittgenstein's philosophy, not a partial account needing to be supplemented and revised in the light of an independent gloss on his voluminous notebook entries, letters and so forth.

Although its treatment of the relation between Wittgenstein and scepticism is partial (e.g., no mention is made of Wittgenstein's relation to Pyrrhonian scepticism), this stimulating volume provides a welcome opportunity to explore the diagnostic approach to scepticism. Significantly, it begins the important task of making Cavell's work on scepticism available to a contemporary philosophical audience. And it provides an incentive to wonder anew about the intimacy of the connection between sceptical thinking and philosophy in a non-constructive key.

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

DAVID MACARTHUR