

A Wittgensteinian Vision of Knowledge: Moving Away from Cartesian Certainty

Geoffrey Karabin

*Department of Philosophy
Villanova University*

*But how does he know where and how he is to look up the word “red”
and what he is to do with the word “five?” – Well, I assume that he
acts as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere.
(Ludwig Wittgenstein Philosophical Investigations §1)*

1. Introduction: A Paradigm of Knowing

What does it mean to know? René Descartes’s Meditations offers an enduring and profoundly influential answer to this question. In this work, he provides a vision of knowledge which entails that clarity, distinctness, and certainty are *the necessary* attributes which constitute knowing. Generally science has adopted these criteria in its pursuit of fact and truth; one could equally say it is how the distinctions between opinion, faith, and knowledge are commonly understood. The profundity and influence of Descartes’s vision should not, however, mask the avalanche of negative responses developed in relation to it.¹

¹ These responses are extraordinarily varied and I will only mention a few here. Camus maintains that in its description of the world science ultimately comes to a limit in which the “quest for certainty...‘founders in metaphor’” (Issac 238). He uses the example of an atom, and argues that at some point science breaks down in its attempt to describe what it is really like; instead, it is forced to describe it *as like* a sphere. Jerry Gill, in an article entitled “Post-Critical Philosophy of Religion,” maintains that at a “fundamental level it can be argued that the primary linguistic mode for talk about God is the *metaphor*?” (84). Ergo, the “fundamental” way in which one knows something regarding God is via the imprecise language of metaphor. Gill also argues that knowing - within the fields of etymology, anthropology, and child development - is never able to rely on absolute certainty and clarity (80). Francoise Baylis maintains that there is a significant difference between “knowing that something is the case and knowing how to do things” (25). Baylis writes from the perspective of a health care ethicist and her point is that knowing how to care for a patient is never reducible to the standards of absolute precision and clarity. Equally, we will see that Wittgenstein extends this priority of nuance over precision to ethics as a whole. Feminism has severely criticized this Cartesian model as a male fantasy. This fantasy, because absolute clarity cannot be achieved in our lived bodily experience, thus “understand[s] ‘the body’ as so much inert matter, signifying nothing or, more specifically, signifying a profane void, the fallen state: deception, sin, the premonitional metaphors of hell and the eternal feminine” (Butler 164). Critical theory is also wary of the value of a knowing which necessitates its expulsion from embodied existence. Seyla Benhabib contends, through the critical tradition begun with Hegel and Marx, “that the Cartesian ego is not a self-transparent entity and that the epistemic self cannot reach full autonomy as long as the historical origin and social constitution of the ‘clear and distinct’ ideas it

This reflection seeks out one of these responses through the enigmatic but brilliant work of the early 20th century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. What will be argued is that Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations points philosophy toward a different model and highlights the inadequacy of restricting knowing to the austerity of what he calls the "crystalline purity" of logic. By reconsidering the Cartesian need for exactness we will find Wittgenstein offering a vision of knowledge which, I will argue, could be related to a notion of wisdom. It will consequently be seen that the need for knowledge is not always a need for exactness and that, in contrast, wisdom is the type of knowledge able to navigate the vagaries, or "tonality" (Soulez 128) of life without recourse to certainty and precision.

We can begin by asking: What is Wittgenstein attempting to show us in the opening quote? Here, as almost everywhere, his writing is suggestive, enigmatic, and visionary, and our attempt to work through it will center on a potential elucidation of what it means to say: "Explanations come to an end somewhere." The question we are immediately faced with then arises: Where do "explanations come to an end?" – In apodictic rationality, intelligibility subject to doubt, probability, incomprehensibility, or something else?² As we indicated, Descartes's answer frames the model of knowing upon the standard of indubitable certainty, while Wittgenstein's project attempts to think beyond such restrictions. First, therefore, let us say something more with regard to the paradigm of knowledge Wittgenstein attempts to free philosophy from.

Descartes likens his methodology to "that normally employed by geometers" (Meditations 9) and this entails his discovery: "I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true" (Meditations 24). Clarity and distinction thus become the criteria which knowledge has to meet if it is to count as knowledge. Here, Descartes's methodological affinity with geometry is not incidental. This is because the clarity and distinction Descartes envisions is akin to mathematical precision, which requires "set[ting] out all the premises on which a desired proposition depends, before drawing any conclusions about it" (Meditations 9). Gill describes this methodology as requiring any knowledge claim to be "'reversible,' i.e. every step analyzed and precisely stated" (Post 77). Thus, when we say knowledge must meet the criteria of clarity and distinctness, we are thinking in terms of an analytic

contemplates remain a mystery" (207). Through these examples, there arises the notion that a multiplicity of scientific fields and intellectual orientations are united in finding something suspect in the attempt to define knowledge fundamentally and/or exclusively within the bounds of clarity and precision.

² In "Tacit Knowing and Religious Belief," Jerry Gill highlights this Wittgenstein quote, "At the end of reasons comes *persuasions*" (79). This thought plays upon the intuition that our intellectual and cognitive acceptance of some proposition or argument may, in the end, rest on persuasion - perhaps even violence – and not, as Descartes would have it, on sound, precise, and clear reasoning.

meticulousness that, having analyzed each moment of its reasoning, is secure in the knowledge it arrives at.³

Yet the present portrait of knowledge is not strong enough. For not only must knowledge be “very clear and distinct,” but it must also entail the complete elimination of doubt. Descartes writes, “Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false” (Meditations 12). Knowledge, if it is worthy to bear the name, will attain a state of certainty so secure that it is, as regards its truth, theoretically impossible to doubt. Descartes’s image of the evil genius is both profound and haunting in this regard.⁴ That is, when Descartes supposes “that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me” (Meditations 15), he sets an extremely powerful antagonist against the possibility of knowing. Henceforth, knowing must overcome this antagonist; it must meet a standard that is capable of overcoming a near absolute power of deception.

I say the image of the evil genius is haunting. This is so because since Descartes, it is philosophically tempting to assume that knowledge which does not eliminate the potential for doubt, based on an encounter with a near infinite power of deception, is not truly knowledge. Rudolf Haller supports this perpetually present suspicion of deception: “At least since Descartes the epistemological turn derived its impetus from the skeptical challenge to provide a justification for all knowledge claims” (335). Gill equally lends credence to the intuition: “Doubt remains the touchstone of critical philosophy” (Post 77). The premise in both quotes is that doubt and skepticism become, in modern philosophy, inextricable companions to knowledge. Or, to say the same, one can not really speak of

³ We are given a vision of mathematical precision and while certain forms of knowing are suitable to such a context, others are not. We witnessed this in the first footnote and Wittgenstein’s critique stems, at least in part, from the impossibility of reducing these other forms of knowing to the exactitude Descartes demands. In the Investigations, Wittgenstein’s own examples of such intractably imprecise knowledge include the essentially blurred edges surrounding ethical concepts (§ 77); these different forms of knowing – “how many feet high [is] Mont Blanc – how the word ‘game’ is used – how a clarinet sounds” (§78); the difficulty of definitively setting down requirements for what counts as knowledge (§145). Gill also uncovers this Wittgenstein thought, “I may recognize a genuine loving look, distinguish it from a pretended one ... But I may be quite incapable of describing this difference” (Tacit 76). The point is that if knowing must be formatted along the lines of exact and universal precision, then other forms need be excluded, e.g., the impossibility of giving a clear and distinct account of “how a clarinet sounds.” The key, for Wittgenstein, seems to be that our knowledge of certain realities escapes definitive articulation; that while we know what a clarinet sounds like, our knowledge is not reducible to something like a mathematically precise awareness of its tone ranges. Rather, we may know it as the sound of tranquility, i.e., a soft and soothing resonance.

⁴ This paper will utilize a number of images in its argumentation. This is due to the fact that Wittgenstein himself is fond of imagistic writing, as well as the nature of the present investigation. This essay seeks to draw out the inadequacies of knowing defined exclusively in terms of “crystalline purity.” Therefore, images, which generally are incapable of being set in terms of absolute precision and delineation, are helpful in pointing both toward the inadequacy of pristine clarity, and toward a form of knowing other than pure perspicuity.

knowledge without having shown how that knowledge has been safeguarded from doubt. The implications are profoundly captured in this Cartesian admonition: “It is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once” (Meditations 12). Philosophically, a primordial relation to reality is portrayed as resting on suspicion, rather than something like trust, or faith, or acceptance. The Cartesian definition of knowledge eliminates the possibility of such trust, faith, or acceptance and instead demands the assumption of deception – “never trust completely.” Correspondingly, the task and success of philosophic endeavor rest upon an articulation of a form of knowledge which is absolutely immune to doubt.⁵

2. The Temptation of the Ideal

The Cartesian ideal of absolute clarity *is* tempting, and in the Investigations Wittgenstein considers his philosophic methodology to be a therapeutic response to it.⁶ Before discussing his therapy, it will, therefore, be helpful to understand Wittgenstein’s notion of the ideal’s seduction. He writes, “A philosophical problem has the form: ‘I don’t know my way about’” (Investigations §123). I start with this because the seduction of absolute certainty can draw its power from the image of its opposite. That is, if we lack certainty we might be philosophically tempted to think ourselves lost, not knowing our way about.⁷ If, consequently, we are able to rediscover a path to certainty, then we have saved knowledge; humanity can again rest in the security that it can know. Wittgenstein beautifully envisions the matter thus:

It may easily look as if every doubt merely *revealed* an existing gap in the foundations; so that secure understanding is only possible if we

⁵ In light of this, it should not be surprising that Descartes’s philosophy begins “from a *solipsistic self*, whose existence is assured to him because he cannot doubt it ... Philosophy then seeks to establish what *such a self* can know, establish it in the face of difficulties which threaten it with skepticism” (Sorell 55). This solipsistic point of isolation thus provides an ideal basis on which to found a new and secure knowledge; for no longer does knowledge have to begin outside a realm of certainty. Yet this equally entails a fundamental loss of trust in that which is outside the self. Ergo, a lingering suspicion now essentially inhabits our dealings with other people, with the world, and with the Divine.

⁶ It is important to remember that Wittgenstein is not simply attempting to make a logical argument against the precedence of clarity and precision in knowing. Rather, his effort is closely linked with a philosophic standpoint that “is concerned with healing the human mind” (Sen 609). That is, he is attempting a reorientation of perspective that is no longer driven by the need and obsession for clarity. In this sense, his work is therapeutic because it is meant to heal the mind, rather than prove or argue a point to the mind.

⁷ Descartes encapsulates this when, after embarking upon his project of radical doubt, he realizes that nothing seems applicable to the demand for utter certainty. He writes, “It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top” (Meditations 16). This Cartesian image orients us to a kind of chaos which would ensue should knowledge fail to gain an absolute point of certainty. Haller echoes this thought: “Some foundationalists also defend the thesis that without the ultimate and solid base of the immediately evident, we would not find another foundation upon which to build a system of reliable knowledge” (337). The despair of these “foundationalists” arises from the intuition that if knowledge fails to find something absolutely certain, then the whole epistemological project is doomed: One can never know if one can never be sure that one knows.

first doubt everything that *can* be doubted, and then remove all these doubts (Investigations §87).

The image of knowledge as impenetrable is set as the ideal, which is correspondingly compromised and may begin to disintegrate if doubt is allowed to crack its solidity. *Eo ipso*, we are seduced by philosophy's potential to, in the words of Descartes, "start again right from the foundations" (Meditations 12). We rebuild and are seduced by the potential that what we rebuild will forever secure a knowing transparent to itself and certain of its conclusions.

With good reason we might critique the preceding on the grounds that it presents an artificial either/or, i.e., either absolute clarity or the despair of groundlessness and confusion. Yet this drive toward certainty also arises from the fact that knowledge, when it abides within the parameters of clarity and distinction, is often quite successful in attaining definite and utilizable results. One need only glance toward the achievements of science and technology to confirm this truth. As a general statement regarding knowledge, Wittgenstein helps us to see the power of the present seduction:

We eliminate misunderstandings by making our expressions more exact; but now it may look as if we were moving towards a particular state, a state of complete exactness; and as if this were the real goal of our investigation (Investigations §91).

The point is that greater clarification can successfully dispel many misunderstandings and confusions; it seems to offer an increasing base of viable knowledge. The implication is that confusion, uncertainty, misunderstanding, etc. appear as preliminary states which will eventually be overcome via the progression of clarification.⁸ Hence, philosophy and knowledge are tempted by the utopian culmination of this progression; for in its realization the philosophical problem would have its solution and we would know our way about exactly.

3. Giving into the Temptation

We can rightly ask: What are the consequences should we give into this temptation? I would like to introduce a Wittgensteinian image which will be

⁸ The powerful presupposition which grants life and plausibility to the Cartesian project is that reality is amenable to such interpretation. If we remember our leading quote, the matter could be stated thus: Reality is ultimately constituted in terms of clear and determinate intelligibility; ergo, reality would "come to an end" in exhaustive and rational description. Sorell describes this as Descartes's denial "that any propositions lie out of the reach of reasons of some kind or other" (74). Wittgenstein agrees and comments that "the modern system tries to make it look as if *everything* were explained" (Tractatus §6.372). For our purposes, the point is that the ultimately real is conceived as determinately intelligible, and this implies that true knowing need correspond to this intelligibility.

helpful both in highlighting the inadequacies of perfect clarity, as well as pointing us toward a different kind of knowledge. Wittgenstein draws this picture:

Our language may be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses (Investigations §18).⁹

The vision which is offered grants philosophy access to a wisdom of life,¹⁰ rather than a knowing restricted to purified intellectual clarity. In contrast, this dichotomy of life and knowledge will ultimately prove to be the consequence of giving into the temptation of perfect clarity.

Wittgenstein describes this ancient city in terms of a maze and it is conceivable to think Descartes would interpret it much the same. However, where for Wittgenstein this maze points to the intimate intertwining of life and knowledge, for Descartes it would represent a confused façade overlaying clarity and determinacy. He famously opens the Meditations with this observation, “Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them”(Meditations 12). It is important to recognize that it is not merely sensory perceptions which prove dubious, but the entire event of incarnation. Knowledge based in life – cultural tradition, familial upbringing, childhood education, and sensory perception – is the foundation for this edifice of deception, or, as Sorell calls it, “the unthinking beliefs of a lifetime” (57). Therefore, the philosophic task of true knowing, via perception “by the mind alone,” entails that it be different than a knowledge grounded in such suspect origins. The task of philosophic thinking consequently resides in penetrating this façade in order to arrive at the clarity of its underlying structure. With regard to

⁹ An anonymous reviewer helpfully pointed to Freud’s use of a similar metaphor. In Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud compares the composition of the mind to “the history of the Eternal City” (17). Freud is speaking of the history of Rome and finds the point of similarity between it and the mind as follows, “In the realm of the mind ... what is primitive is so commonly preserved alongside of the transformed version which has arisen from it that it is unnecessary to give instances as evidence” (16). The ancient Rome thus exists alongside, within and obscured by the ever developing modern Rome. Both Wittgenstein and Freud give us an image in which human existence is never able to be extricated from its past. Thus, if human existence is this whole, then it seems resistant to any fundamental partitioning. That is to say, our ambiguous past co-exists with this “clarified” Cartesian present and neither will be able to claim the whole or true reality of human life for themselves alone.

¹⁰ Terms such as “life” and “incarnation” will appear throughout the remainder of the paper. In this investigation, they are always to be thought in relation to their interconnection with knowledge and in contradistinction to Descartes’s separation of life and knowledge. Yet by this interconnection we do not mean a knowledge which is simply able to fulfill the daily practicalities of life and the needs of physical survival. Rather, we are thinking of an interconnection whereby knowledge aids our living the good, fulfilling, and meaningful life. Ergo, the terms “life” and “incarnation” carry this broader sense of meaningful and valuable existence.

the image of the city, it will not, for Descartes, be enough simply to penetrate the maze of sensual confusion and the error of preconceived opinion. Rather, the philosophic project necessitates the demolition of its ancient subdivisions. It does so because we must always keep in mind that philosophic success has its terminus in absolutely certain knowledge. Giving into the temptation for clarity thus entails that the “maze of little streets and squares” must be leveled and replaced “with straight regular streets and uniform houses.”

4. Can We Live in This Rebuilt City?

Descartes’s path to certainty is an austere vision, and it must be asked whether he believes one could live in this pure city comprised only of “straight regular streets and uniform houses.” Theoretically the answer seems to be yes¹¹ and he encapsulates it in this vow:

I shall unquestionably reach the truth, if only I give sufficient attention to all the things which I perfectly understand, and separate these from all the other cases where my apprehension is more confused and obscure. And this is just what I shall take good care to do from now on (Meditations 43).

Descartes’s methodology, which consists of a rigid intellectual discipline that only attends and assents to that which it can “perfectly understand,” is what he promises to adopt “from now on.” For both philosophy and knowledge in general, it would seem to be the case that if they want to achieve truth, then they must equally take this path to certainty and “from now on” live in the borough of clarity.

For Wittgenstein, it seems to be the case that it is neither possible nor philosophically desirable to restrict knowledge to such a realm. In reference to desirability, we can first turn our attention to the idea that this model of clarity does not always help us much. That it *must* help us is tied to our discussion of seduction. Wittgenstein writes,

To say, however, that a sentence in (b) is an “analysed” form of one in (a) readily seduces us into thinking that the former is the more

¹¹ I say theoretically because it appears at the close of the meditative process that the mundane demands of life persistently intrude upon the ideal of pure and uninterrupted intellectual contemplation. Descartes concludes the Meditations with this thought: “Since the pressure of things to be done does not always allow us to stop and make such a meticulous check, it must be admitted that in this human life we are often liable to make mistakes about particular things, and we must acknowledge the weakness of our nature” (62). What is important to note is that the inability to live in the unremitting clarity of disciplined reflection is due to a weakness of nature. This is also to say; we may occasionally leave the borough of “straight streets” due to the practical demands of incarnation, but it is not desirable to do so, nor is it the fault of the constitution of knowledge, rather, it is due to “the weakness of our nature.” For this investigation the pertinent point is that knowledge should strive to reside ever present in that which is most properly its home - pure clarity.

fundamental form; that it alone shows what is meant by the other (Investigations §63).

This quote plays upon the intuition that an exhaustive knowledge of something is superior to a vague or general apprehension of that same thing. For example, if we know every single component of an atom, then this knowledge is taken to be superior to that which only grasps the atom as the basic component of matter. In Wittgenstein's quote, sentence (a) refers to a language in which names refer to composite objects – We refer only to the atom and not the object which consists of a nucleus, electrons, protons, quarks, etc. Sentence (b) is set in a language in which “only the parts are given names and the wholes are described by means of them” (Investigations §60) – We refer to the atom via the enumeration of its parts. To draw this comparison out, Wittgenstein uses the image of a broom and brings to the fore the notion that we do not necessarily gain something by referring to a broom in terms of (b): “‘Bring me the broomstick and the brush which is fitted on to it.’! – Isn't the answer: ‘Do you want the broom? Why do you put it so oddly?’ – Is he going to understand the further analysed sentence better” (Investigations §60)? To give into the seduction for pure clarity would mean that we would have to think that the analysed sentence is superior. For it would seem that we attain greater clarity in reference to simple and identical parts, as opposed to the potential ambiguity of a composite whole.

Yet Wittgenstein's story of the broom allows us to pick up the intuitive inadequacy of the mantra which would hold the further analysed as always fundamentally better.¹² The inadequacy is that there is nothing wrong with the first form (a). We know perfectly well what we mean by the broom and our knowledge in (a) is not, therefore, an imperfect or inadequate state which awaits or overlays the perfect clarity of (b). In the pursuit of the analysed knowledge of (b), the natural flow of life is lost without life gaining any advantage by the analysis. Wittgenstein gives us a sense of the import of this thought; “If I am supposed to describe how an object looks from far off, I don't make the description more accurate by saying what can be noticed about the object on closer inspection” (Investigations §171). The central tenet is that there are forms of knowledge which function perfectly and are constituted adequately in the context in which they are

¹² It should not be thought that Wittgenstein is imploring knowledge to give up analysis completely or incessantly refuse a “meticulous check” of details. These forms of analysis are, in certain contexts, both possible and beneficial. As to a goal of the Investigations, Wittgenstein writes, “We want to establish an order in our knowledge of the use of language: an order with a particular end in view; one out of many possible orders; not *the* order” (Investigations §132). Science, logic, and other forms of more or less definitive knowing are some “of many possible orders.” In the image of the city, the borough of clarity is able to co-exist in relation to its ancient antecedents. The central point is that the Wittgensteinian project does not appear to be a drive to strip knowledge of clarity and distinctness. Rather, it seems to be a project which denies that these standards, especially in their pristine form, should or could dominate all discourse as to the nature of what it means to know.

set, i.e., the flow of life. It is not as if we must regret, like Descartes at the end of the Meditations, the fact that life sometimes forces us to forgo a “meticulous check” of details. Wittgenstein’s thesis is that there are many situations in which such a “meticulous check” not only does not better the knowledge we had previous to it, but fragments the knowing it was to aid.¹³

A second perspective, which also argues against the desirability of the demand for perfect clarity, regards the impoverished existence we get as a result. As we saw, the Cartesian project requires the ability to withdraw from any potential source of ambiguity. This resulted in the drive for disincarnation. Here the impoverishment seems striking and immediate - We have to give up life in order to access certainty. In his initial work, the Tractatus, Wittgenstein, much like Descartes, places philosophic knowing within the logical bounds of “crystalline purity.” Yet unlike Descartes, his realization of perfect clarity “shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved” (Tractatus 4). Wittgenstein’s early intuition of the impoverishment of purified knowledge then develops into the therapy he offers in his later philosophy. That is, it *seems* that the real need of knowing and philosophic endeavor center on the ability to gain a “crystalline purity.” In turn, this purity is thought in qualitatively superior terms, whereas the incarnate realm is portrayed as “vacuous, false, and worthless” (Meditations 24). The therapy Wittgenstein offers is, at least in part, in turning away from the perceived necessity for purity and the concomitant degradation of the incarnate.¹⁴ He suggests that the Investigations differ from the Tractatus in that “the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need” (Investigations §108). If our interpretation is true to Wittgenstein’s intentions, then the real need might here be thought in terms of the need to live. That is, in the Tractatus we gain knowledge only by passing over the entrenched

¹³ Further examples of the pernicious effects of such meticulousness include a passage from Churchill’s “Wittgenstein on Faith and Wisdom.” He writes, “Rather than the work of a first rate historian we have in the gospels a ‘mediocre’ account. ‘What you are supposed to see,’ [Wittgenstein] writes, ‘cannot be communicated by even the best and most accurate historian; and *therefore* a mediocre account suffices, is even to be preferred.’ The mediocrity of the ‘letter’ keeps us from being distracted, for ‘The Spirit puts what is essential, essential for you life, into these words’” (416). Wittgenstein and Churchill here contend that the key to *knowing* the gospels has nothing to do with a precise or clear historical account. Such details, while giving us a “better” knowledge of the specifics of the text, actually pervert us from focusing on its message. The drive for precision thus results, in the present case, in the loss of meaningful knowledge. In Sorell’s article, the Wittgensteinian argument is made that Descartes’s immense intellectual effort to find an absolutely sure proof for the existence of the outside world, ultimately results in a knowledge no better than that which we had previous to such proof. That is, we perform a “meticulous check” of the world and the arguments for its reality, and, in the end, we remain as sure of its existence as we did prior to this “check.”

¹⁴ Gill writes that “this means that not only should we admit that complete objectivity is impossible, but that we should cease to worship it as an ideal, viewing the knower’s relationship to the known as a form of ‘contamination’ or as a necessary evil” (Post 82).

ambiguity of lived experience. Hence we gain perfect clarity, but “little is achieved.”¹⁵

If in contrast the Tractatus, the Investigations orients knowledge toward its real need, then we are equally placed before a knowing which has the potential to be at home within the ambiguities of life. Wittgenstein gives us an image which might help bring out the point: “A rule stands there like a sign-post ... Does it [show] which direction I am to take when I have passed it; whether along the road or the footpath or cross-country” (Investigations §85)? At another point, Wittgenstein speaks of knowledge pointing to a general area without drawing strictly delineated boundaries. Additionally, Churchill brings out Wittgenstein’s understanding of the nature of religious belief: “Rather than doctrines or explanatory theories ... we have simple *descriptions* in which we can (or perhaps cannot) immediately recognize our own inner lives” (415-416). The key to all these ideas seems to be that restriction to perfect clarity requires a step-by-step definitiveness that closes off the fullness which existence offers. In contrast, Wittgenstein asserts that knowledge need not travel in universal lockstep, but is granted the possibility of “the road, or the footpath or cross-country.” If we drive home the point with the image of the city, we can say this: Wittgenstein attempts to free knowledge from its confinement to the realm of unrelenting precision and allow it to partake in the richness of the “maze of little streets and squares.”

An example of what we have just been discussing is found in what Wittgenstein calls “family resemblances.” He illustrates this idea in reference to the various difficulties encountered when one would attempt to define the concept of a game,

Is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball-games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared ... Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared (Investigations §66)!

This passage illuminates the fuzzy borders which surround the concepts of our understanding, as well as highlights the impossibility of reducing them to single, univocal definitions. “Family resemblances” are thus akin to Wittgenstein’s notion whereby knowledge points to an area without strictly delineating its boundaries.

¹⁵ Wittgenstein contends that matters and thoughts pertaining to the meaning of life and death do not enter into the purely logical investigation he takes up in the Tractatus. Such matters would seem to be orientations to the world ultimately resting in ambiguity. It is matters such as these which we then “must pass over in silence” if perfect intelligibility is to be achieved. Yet, since these matters are critical to the actual meaning of our lived existence, Wittgenstein realizes that the pursuit of perfect clarity passes over the important and leaves us with a nearly superfluous or empty knowledge.

Our understanding of a game is thus situated in a kind of region, in which are found many events of a similar sort. Many seem to be amusing, many seem to have winners and losers, many are athletic, and yet many are also intellectual. The point is that the area in which we understand the word game is a field of similarity or resemblance, which does not contain the possibility of reduction to any single similarity. With this, we can understand how this passage fits well with our discussion regarding the impoverishment of existence. If the demand for absolute clarity and distinction enters the discussion, then we may arrive at a single definition, e.g., games are contests which can be won or lost. Yet Wittgenstein helps us see what would be given up in such a definition - ring-a-ring-a-roses and patience and playing catch with yourself. Again, the point is that we may gain clarity, but in doing so we need expel some of the richness and fullness of life. A kind of wisdom of life, on the other hand, *knows* that these are all games and does not need to approach them in terms of the problem of how to reduce them from this confusing flux to a state of clarity, to a single definition.

We may now be in a position to answer the question which has largely framed this section: Should philosophy and knowledge *even attempt* to live within the borough of clarity? If we take the last argument as valid and posit the impossibility of ever attaining such absolute purification, then holding onto the desire for perfect clarity becomes a source of philosophic disillusionment and despair.¹⁶ Wittgenstein reiterates this, “When we believe that we must find that order, must find the ideal, in our actual language, we become dissatisfied with what are ordinarily called ‘propositions’, ‘words’, ‘signs’” (*Investigations* 105). Holding this paradigm of knowing, demanding that absolute clarity be achieved, creates, for Wittgenstein, the unhappy life. It is a life which cannot accept reality as it is; it demands that it *should* be other. To again take the image of the city; it is as if Cartesian knowledge looked beyond the borders of its borough of clarity and became embittered by the persistence of those old crooked streets.¹⁷ In contrast, knowledge thought in terms of wisdom is able to navigate these crooked streets and partake in the fullness, richness, and meaningfulness which they offer.

¹⁶ It is important to remember that for Descartes it is not enough for knowledge simply to occupy a space of clarity. Rather, clarity must be complete and ambiguity obliterated. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, is not arguing that clarity cannot be achieved within certain contexts, but that we cannot reduce all knowledge to it. In this way, despair and disillusionment plague the Cartesian, as opposed to the Wittgensteinian philosophic perspective. This is because Descartes’s demand for total clarity equally necessitates that we are not simply given a region of it. If we are given only a region, then the totalizing project seems to have failed and philosophic despair may set in.

¹⁷ The source of such bitterness could be justifiably linked with this Gillian thought; “The value system inherent in the critical posture makes it ‘immoral’ to believe beyond what can be explicated, whether in concepts or reasonings” (*Post* 82). The Cartesian philosopher, being in the “right” or “moral” position, would then view those as immoral who do not adhere to their strict standards. That some would not be bothered to seek out certainty and precision, and would not be driven by the moral imperative of clarity, could thus prove a source of bitterness.

5. Concluding Remarks: Explanations End Somewhere

As has been said, Wittgenstein's philosophy is therapeutic and the illness it attempts to treat is this demand for absolute clarity. If "explanations end somewhere" other than transparent rationality, then Wittgenstein seems to reassure philosophy, knowledge, and himself that all is not lost – despair need not dominate.¹⁸ He does this both by offering a vision of knowledge which differs from perfect clarity, as well as assuages its seductive force. The image of the city again appears as an ideal metaphor in which to express his vision.

In the city, knowledge need not tie itself to the either/or of chaos or clarity; whereas for Descartes it seems that if clarity is not achieved, then chaos reigns and knowledge would tumble about in the whirlpool of confusion. In contrast, Wittgenstein offers us a vision in which intelligibility remains despite being outside the borders of the borough of clarity. That is, the maze of "little streets," and the "houses with additions from various periods," is not an image of utter disorder, but of a different order.¹⁹ In being a different order from the "straight regular streets and uniform houses," this ancient city may not meet the standard of precise clarity, yet that is not to say it is unintelligible or that it represents an edifice of deception. The point is that knowledge need not encounter reality with the stakes which would present it as either utterly clear or hopelessly chaotic. By refusing this dichotomy, Wittgenstein offers knowledge and philosophy the opportunity to stroll those ancient and crooked streets. Restoring the connection between knowledge and the fullness of life; reconnecting it with the worth of all the various parts of the city and its offerings, consequently appears to be the remedy Wittgenstein is pointing us toward.²⁰

¹⁸ For those interested in further pursuing Wittgenstein's thought on this matter, one could investigate On Certainty. The "main contention" of which, Gill claims, "is that there necessarily must be an epistemological 'bedrock' – truths which are beyond rational question – if there is to be any truth at all" (Tacit 76).

¹⁹ A full discussion as to the nature of knowledge, which is distinct from the paradigm of pure clarity, was too complex to be taken up in this paper. Yet we received glimpses of it in what we have been calling wisdom. That is, it is a knowing attuned to, rather than distinct from the subtleties of life, e.g., "how a clarinet sounds." Equally, it partakes in the event of incarnation, and, as intertwined with incarnation, it is a knowledge which need not found its validity or worth in opposition to materiality or community. Finally, as lacking a foundation in perspicuous rationality, knowledge takes form in orientations toward the world, what Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." There are, no doubt, other ways in which this knowing that is other to absolute clarity could be thought and further work to be done in an articulation of what is meant by wisdom. Yet these enumerations hopefully point toward a general area in which we might get a sense of what this type of knowing would mean.

²⁰ I would like to thank Professor James Wetzel for inspiring many of the ideas found in this essay, as well as his insightful comments regarding its original form. I would also like to thank Dr. Paul Wright who gathered reviewer comments and helped guide this paper through the process of review and submission. Finally, I would like to thank all those who reviewed this reflection and helped to greatly improve it.

Works Cited:

- Baylis, Francoise. "Health Care Ethics Consultation: 'Training in Virtue.'" Human Studies: A Journal for Philosophy and the Social Sciences. Vol. 22 no. 1. pp. 25-41. January, 1999.
- Benhabib, Seyla. Situating the Self. Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics. New York, NY. Routledge, 1992.
- Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York, NY. Routledge, 1990.
- Churchill, John. "Wittgenstein on Faith and Wisdom." Southern Journal of Philosophy. Vol. 23. pp. 413-430. Winter, 1985.
- Descartes, René. Meditations on First Philosophy: With selections from the Objections and Replies. Trans. & Ed. John Cottingham. New York, NY. Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Freud, Sigmund. Civilization and Its Discontents. Trans. and Ed. James Strachey. New York, NY. W.W. Norton & Company, 1961.
- Gill, Jerry. "Post-Critical Philosophy of Religion." International Philosophical Quarterly. Vol. 22. pp. 75-86. March 1982.
- . "Tacit Knowing and Religious Belief." International Journal for Philosophy of Religion. Vol. 6. pp. 73-88. Summer, 1975.
- Haller, Rudolf. "Justification and Praxeological Foundationalism." Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy. Vol. 31. pp. 335-345. September, 1988.
- Isaac, Jeffrey. Arendt, Camus and Modern Rebellion. New Haven, CT. Yale University Press, 1992.
- Livingston, Paul. "'Meaning Is Use' in the Tractatus." Philosophical Investigations. Vol. 27 no. 1. pp. 34-67. January, 2004.
- Sen, Joseph. "On Slowness in Philosophy." Monist: An International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry. Vol. 83. no 4. pp. 607-615. October, 2000.
- Sorell, Tom. "Cartesian Method and the Self." Philosophical Investigations. Vol. 24 no. 1. pp. 55-74. January, 2001.
- Soulez, Antonia. "Conversion in Philosophy: Wittgenstein's Saving Word." Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy. Vol. 15 no 4. pp. 127-150. Fall, 2000.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. On Certainty. Ed. G.E.M. Anscombe & G.H. von Wright. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe and Denis Paul. Oxford, England. Basil Blackwell, 1969.

- . Philosophical Investigations. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford, England. Blackwell Publishers, 2001.
- . Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. Trans. Routledge & Kegan Paul. London, England. Routledge Classics, 2001.