McDowellian Therapeutics: Situating the Role of Wittgensteinian Skepticism

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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read McDowellian Therapeutics: Situating the Role of Wittgensteinian Skepticism by Julian Andrew Baskys, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Philosophy at San Francisco State University.

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Abstract

A divergence in Wittgenstein scholarship persists on the question of whether to read the central argument in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* as a skeptical argument or as an anti-skeptical one. Saul Kripke interprets a skeptical argument following from what is commonly referred to as the skeptical paradox, or rule-following paradox, and in contrast to this John McDowell offers his anti-skeptical reading of the *Investigations*. In Duncan Pritchard’s more recent writing on Wittgensteinian skepticism, Pritchard attempts to motivate the “philosophical importance” of Stanley Cavell’s notion of philosophical *vertigo*, and in doing so, Pritchard cautiously lends credence to a skeptical reading of the *Investigations*. Both Cavell and McDowell recognize that the radical skepticism of the *Investigations* can undermine itself by the same reasoning it invokes, but Pritchard seeks to accommodate what Cavell refers to as the “truth in skepticism.” To aid him, Pritchard seeks out Wittgenstein’s remarks in *On Certainty*, an even later work than the *Investigations*, and he incorporates Tamar Gendler’s concept of “alief.” *Philosophical vertigo* is ultimately regarded by Pritchard to be both a consequence of our experience—our awareness of our “hinge commitments” and their apparent lack of justification—and a spontaneous judgment with propositional content. Although McDowell is noted to have even admitted to having insufficiently addressed the topic of radical skepticism, we can still extrapolate from McDowell’s other writings a legitimate McDowellian objection to this account of *vertigo*. Following Mohammad Azadpur, we can see that McDowell views Wittgenstein’s private language argument as a rejection of a Sellarsian given, and a successful one, because it correctly incorporates the Kantian framework of rational constraint on judgment. Furthermore, Pritchard’s articulation of what he calls “alief” is apt to be deemed problematic and unnecessary for similar reasons to why Sellars’s notion of “sheer receptivity” is deemed unnecessary in McDowell’s lecture series, “Having the World in View.” On McDowell’s view, Wittgensteinian skepticism serves a therapeutic purpose, helping us to expose and correct our misaligned epistemic practices, rather than threatening to undermine them entirely.
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**McDowellian Therapeutics: Situating the Role of Wittgensteinian Skepticism**

A divergence in Wittgenstein scholarship persists on the question of whether to read the central argument in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* as a skeptical argument or as an anti-skeptical one. Saul Kripke interprets a skeptical argument in the text following from what is commonly referred to as the skeptical paradox, or rule-following paradox, and in contrast to this John McDowell offers his anti-skeptical reading of the *Investigations*. In Duncan Pritchard’s more recent writing on Wittgensteinian skepticism, Pritchard attempts to motivate what he calls the “philosophical importance” of Stanley Cavell’s notion of philosophical *vertigo*, and in doing so, Pritchard cautiously lends credence to a skeptical reading of the *Investigations*. As we will see, both Cavell and McDowell apparently recognize that the radical skepticism of the *Investigations* can undermine itself by the very reasoning it invokes, but Pritchard seeks to accommodate what Cavell refers to as the “truth in skepticism.” To aid him, he seeks out Wittgenstein’s remarks in *On Certainty*, an even later work than the *Investigations*, and he incorporates Tamar Gendler’s concept of “alief.” *Vertigo* is ultimately regarded by Pritchard to be both a consequence of our experience—our awareness of our “hinge commitments” and their apparent lack of justification—and a spontaneous judgment with propositional content. Although McDowell is noted to have even admitted to having insufficiently addressed the topic of radical skepticism, we can still extrapolate from McDowell’s other writings a legitimate McDowellian objection to this account of *vertigo*. 
Following Mohammad Azadpur, we can see that McDowell views Wittgenstein’s private language argument as a rejection of a Sellarsian given, and a successful one, because it correctly incorporates the Kantian framework of rational constraint on judgment. Furthermore, Pritchard’s articulation of what he calls “alief” is apt to be deemed problematic and unnecessary, at least in regard to Wittgenstein’s thought in *Philosophical Investigations* for similar reasons to why Sellars’s notion of “sheer receptivity” is deemed unnecessary in McDowell’s lecture series, “Having the World in View.” On McDowell’s view, Wittgensteinian skepticism serves a therapeutic purpose, helping us to expose and correct our misaligned epistemic practices, rather than threatening to undermine them entirely.

Wittgenstein’s skeptical paradox is articulated most concisely in §201 with the pronouncement that “no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule” (§201). On the Wittgensteinian picture, language use necessitates the participation in social practices by means of following rules. Sets of rules and their corresponding practices are organized into what Wittgenstein calls “language games” (§8), and our participation in these language games is contingent upon our sharing the relevant “forms of life” (§19). When it comes to rule following, in any language game, if one is thought to have learned a rule, then one will be expected to apply the rule appropriately in novel contexts, such as when using the word “plus” to add together two numbers higher than one has ever added before. Rule-following, as it is understood, is not simply the repetition of the same behavior but the continuation of a procedure with the appropriate behavior. The characteristic
feature of rule following—what Stanley Cavell refers to as projection—is this extension of the rule’s application to a novel context.

The core of the problem, as Kripke once posed it, is that “there can be no fact as to what I mean by… any… word at any time” (Kripke, Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language, 21). What does this mean that there could be no fact about what one means? Kripke invites us to take seriously the possibility of a radical skeptic, who upon approaching a novel context, insists that the application of a rule proceeds otherwise than we would have intuited. The skeptic offers what strikes us as an alternative version of the rule to the one we offer and shows that every prior instance of the rule’s application we have experienced was actually in keeping with both versions of the rule. For instance, the skeptic might insist that we in fact had been following the rule for “quus” which is similar to the rule for “plus,” except in this way which is novel to our experience with the word. We can attempt to justify our rule-following attempts by appeal to other rules, but these rules would be subject to the same skeptical attack on our ability to know when to apply them, creating an endless regress. On this view of meaning, it would appear as though an infinite void hangs between every word, as no fact about the world can determine the norms inherent in the application of a rule.

Kripke considers the possible objection to the skeptic that one has confidence in the rule that they intended to follow, even if said rule comes into conflict with a prescribed social rule. On Kripke’s view, even the intention of what one means to say is taken to have been derived from a set of rules prescribed by a community, and he argues that the rejection of such claims as a conceptual possibility is the focal point of Wittgenstein’s “private language argument.”
It is in the context of this apparent paradox that Pritchard juxtaposes the thoughts of John McDowell and Stanley Cavell on the possible significance of this suggestion of radical skepticism. Both philosophers can be found disputing Kripke’s interpretation of the solution to the problem, though in differing ways, and as Pritchard’s work shows, a significant piece of their difference in view can be summarized by the extent to which they think that the skeptical paradox has the potential to undermine our fundamental beliefs or not. In order to understand their differing views on this significance, it is useful to examine the ways that Cavell situates his own view in relation to Kripke’s, as well as the ways in which McDowell is situated in relation to Cavell.

Pritchard situates McDowell and Cavell in opposition to one another on the basis of their treatment of Cavell’s notion of “philosophical vertigo.” The difference found between them can be demonstrated in Cavell’s characterization of skepticism as posing a “standing threat” in the following passage, which Pritchard pulls from “Contesting Tears”:

[Philosophical Investigations] is commonly thought to represent an effort to refute philosophical skepticism, as expressed most famously in Descartes and in Hume, and an essential drive of my book The Claim of Reason. . . is to show that, at least in the case of Wittgenstein, this is a fateful distortion, that Wittgenstein’s teaching is on the contrary, that skepticism is (not exactly true, but not exactly false either; it is) a standing threat to, or temptation of, the human mind—that our ordinary language and its representation of the world can be philosophically repudiated and that it is essential to our inheritance and mutual possession of language, as well as to what inspires philosophy, that this should be so (Cavell, 1996, 88–89).

Cavell’s treatment of Philosophical Investigations in the above passage quoted by both Pritchard and McDowell is consistent with his treatment of Kripke’s interpretations of Wittgenstein’s Investigations in his paper “The Argument of the Ordinary,” where he addresses how he situates his own view in relation to Kripke’s. Cavell takes explicit issue with the
“political solution” (Cavell, Argument of the Ordinary, 76) that he finds in Kripke’s “disturbing study” (Cavell, Argument of Ordinary, 65) on the ground that it gives no account of anything resembling what he refers to as the “sublime,” which for him would provide an account of our aspiration toward a more precise and accurate conceptualization of the world.

Cavell does not think that the skeptical paradox Wittgenstein introduces in the Investigations is necessarily “central” to the text. In fact, he thinks that Wittgenstein dismisses the paradox just as easily as he introduces it, or rather, “it is no sooner named than its significance is undermined” (68). Instead, Cavell thinks that Kripke’s over-emphasis on the concept of a rule underestimates Wittgenstein’s “preoccupation with the ordinary,” or the criteria by which we “articulate the ordinary.” Cavell defines “criteria” as “[the] means by which something is marked (say inscribed) and portioned out—its idea is that of differencing, selecting, sharing, as by a plowshare, dividing…” (Cavell, Argument of the Ordinary, 90).

Cavell points out that, in §199, Wittgenstein considers the question of “whether obeying a rule could be something that only one man can do and only once in his life…” (Cavell, Argument of the Ordinary, 68), and Wittgenstein remarks that this is “a note on the grammar of the expression ‘to obey a rule.” It is this sense of grammatical investigation which Cavell regards as the elicitation of ordinary criteria. We are led to regard this elicitation of criteria as the establishment of an appeal to the ordinary use of a word, or the ordinary application of a rule. In reference to a context in which one confronts red apples, Cavell writes, “[N]othing, under ordinary circumstances, could in general carve out these things from all other things more perfectly than, ‘red apple’” (Cavell, Argument of the Ordinary, p.90). As we can see, he regards his notion of ordinary language as our most apt means for obtaining knowledge of the world—by
our ordinary ability to pick things in the world apart from one another, *perfectly*, as he would have it.

In Cavell’s discussion of the “scene of instruction” in Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* at §217, Cavell focuses his attention on an apparent discrepancy between Wittgenstein’s articulation of the scenario and Kripke’s. Wittgenstein is noted to have stated in §217, “if I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do,’” while Kripke on the other hand is taken by Cavell to say “If I have exhausted… [etc.] Then I am licensed to say: ‘This is simply what I am inclined to do’” (Cavell, *Argument of the Ordinary*, 70). Cavell disputes this notion of “license” by recounting the possibility that a teacher may find reason to avoid saying either thing, despite being inclined to do so. “The teacher’s expression of inclination in what is to be said shows readiness—(unconditional) willingness—to continue presenting himself as an example, as the representative of the community into which the child is being, let me say, invited and initiated.” A teacher’s proclamation that “this is simply what I do,” when correctly implemented, is taken by Cavell to accommodate the lack of common background between the teacher and the student, and the teacher serves to exemplify participation in something that to the student is novel.

Kripke does not think that the skeptical paradox, as he has formulated it, can be overcome. The practical, or skeptical, solution that Kripke offers, however, is according to Cavell, “more skeptical than the problem it is designed to solve” (Cavell, *Argument of the Ordinary*, 75). (In fact, he repeats this two more times.) While Kripke seeks to justify the application of rules by the correspondence of intersubjective ascent, Cavell points out the persistent need in ordinary language usage to challenge or reject the conventional criteria. To
accept the ordinary, for Cavell, is contingent upon our involvement in the “whirl of organism” by which we come to share an understanding of the meaning of language, but the skeptical view that Kripke introduces enables the rejection or dismissal of ordinary criteria. The need to challenge ordinary criteria results from our relationship with what Cavell terms “the sublime.” Cavell writes that, “to trace the disappointment with criteria is to trace the aspiration of the sublime—the image of the skeptic’s progress” (Cavell, Argument of the Ordinary, 92). This is where we see Kripke’s interpretation of Investigations playing a key role in Cavell’s, as Kripke’s line of argument is taken to channel that disappointment with criteria.

Cavell’s notion of “the sublime” is taken from Wittgenstein’s characterization of logical concepts as “sublime” articulated in the form of the question, “In what way is logic something sublime?” (§89), on which he then proceeds to elaborate. What makes something appear sublime, writes Wittgenstein, is that it seems to have “a universal significance… It arises neither from an interest in the facts of nature, nor from a need to grasp causal connections, but from an urge to understand the foundations, or essence, of everything empirical” (§89). The relationship between the “ordinary” and the “sublime,” for Cavell, is difficult to articulate. However, he addresses it directly when he states that “ordinary language will aspire to mathematics as to something sublime; that it can so aspire is specific to its condition. The idea of ordinary language as lacking something in its rule is bound up with—is no more nor less necessary than—this aspiration” (Cavell, Argument of the Ordinary, 92).

There is a tension Cavell interprets then in the thought of Wittgenstein, manifested by the two readings of the text— and he even once refers to this tension itself as “the argument of the ordinary,” determining that the actual intention of the Investigations seems to be to get out of this
argument. On Kripke’s view, he writes that “[he finds] nothing (internal) at all wrong with it” (Cavell, Argument of the Ordinary, 65), but that the two positions must equally seem to undercut one another. He portrays Kripke’s view as one which “[takes] rules as fundamental to Wittgenstein’s development of skepticism about meaning,” and therefore, “subordinates the role of criteria,” while the alternative conception Cavell introduces, he thinks, does the opposite, prioritizing criteria and thus subordinating the role of rules in the Investigations (Cavell, Argument of the Ordinary, 65-66).

Cavell does not, however, completely commit himself to this alternative, and he does not therefore reject or dismiss the impact of the skeptical argument. He wants it to have the potency to remove us from our ordinary perspective, so that we might be able to look back on our ordinary perspective after having been removed from it. “The familiar as unfamiliar,” he remarks, or as he attributes to Freud, “the uncanny.” One confronts the ordinary in this way when one comes to the realization that Wittgenstein illustrates with a turned spade, stating that “this is simply what I do.” Though Wittgenstein would go on to encourage us not to get worried by our apparent lack of further justification, the appeal to ordinary criteria, seems to remain, at least according to Cavell, susceptible to the disappointment with criteria, leaving room always for the skeptic’s attack.

Though McDowell does not seem to root his disagreement with Kripke in the notion of the sublime as Cavell seems to have. Both Cavell and McDowell seem to think that language usage can, in the right circumstances, get us in touch with objects in the world. Both seem to also view skepticism to be playing a role for us in our ability to realign our understanding with the world. But although McDowell’s critique of Kripke’s treatment of the Investigations has some
McDowell can be found in “Virtue and Reason” making an almost entirely opposite characterization of the work in Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*:

The argument is not meant to suggest that we should be in a state of constant trepidation lest possibilities of the 1004, 1008, … type be realized. We are confident that they will not: the argument aims, not at all to undermine this confidence, but to change our conception of its ground and nature. (McDowell, *Virtue and Reason*, 59-60).

McDowell refers here to the example offered by Wittgenstein in which an individual may have been tasked with following the rule “add 2,” and at a certain point, some individual’s behavior may appear to diverge from what was the expected application of the rule. Wittgenstein’s paradox invokes the possibility that we may come adrift in our rule-following endeavors at any time. But as Pritchard seems to notice about McDowell’s position, the Wittgensteinian doubt cannot even really get off the ground in a way that could pose such a significant threat to our ordinary epistemic practices. The foundations of our ordinary epistemic practices cannot all simultaneously be called into question without relying in some way on those epistemic practices.

“We cannot be whole-heartedly engaged in the relevant parts of the ‘whirl of organism’,,” writes McDowell, “and at the same time achieve the detachment necessary in order to query whether our unreflective view of what we are doing is illusory. The cure for the vertigo, then, is to give up the idea that philosophical thought, about the sorts of practice in question, should be undertaken at some external standpoint, outside our immersion in our familiar forms of life.
Pritchard takes McDowell’s rejection of radical skepticism to be reflected primarily by these points. McDowell does not see a need for this threat to ever arise, as it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding which cannot itself challenge our epistemic situation—the misunderstanding being that we can ever perform philosophical reflection from the idealized external point of view from whence originate the radical skeptic’s charges.

As noted previously, Cavell refers to this feature of rule-following whereby we extend the application of the rule to a novel context as “projection.” Pritchard and McDowell both draw from Cavell’s description of the phenomenon, where he articulates its precarious status:

Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing… all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls ‘forms of life’. Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (because it is) terrifying. (Cavell, Must We Mean What We Say?, 52)

In general, we recognize the kind of fear discussed here in situations when we are uncertain. In the case of philosophical vertigo, it may be our ordinary sense of certainty that becomes the very thing we are uncertain about. Again we find that Cavell seems to agree with the picture afforded by Kripke, at least in this passage, which holds that nothing can possibly guarantee our successful grasping of rules since nothing but our ordinary exchange of reasons can serve to demonstrate that we have actually done so.

Pritchard notes about McDowell’s view: “[McDowell] suggests that rejecting the skeptical reasoning which demands that one needs a philosophical justification of one’s practices in this regard—i.e., such that it could underwrite our rule-following practices—should entail
rejecting the coherence of the very philosophical perspective within which such vertigo might occur” (Pritchard, 9).

And Pritchard quotes McDowell:

If we feel the vertigo discussed [above], it is out of distaste for the idea that a manifestation of reason might be recognizable as such only from within the practice whose status is in question. We are inclined to think there ought to be a neutral external standpoint from which the rationality of any genuine exercise of reason could be demonstrated. (McDowell, Virtue and Reason, 70)

Pritchard’s reading of Wittgenstein’s Investigations leaves open the possibility for a skepticism which is not resolved until Wittgenstein’s even later work, On Certainty. Pritchard draws support from On Certainty to provide an explanation of philosophical vertigo which attempts to overpower McDowell’s dismissal. On Pritchard’s account, human rationality involves the reliance on what are termed hinge commitments, which Wittgenstein introduces in On Certainty. Hinge commitments are described by Pritchard as “core nodes in the picture of the world that is presupposed in what we are explicitly taught” (Cavell and Philosophical Vertigo, 10). Certain commitments, on Pritchard’s account of Wittgenstein, remain implied by the way our accepted beliefs are structured, without our ever being explicitly committed to them. The notion of a hinge commitment can be thought of as the hinge on which a door turns, with the act of inquiry like the act of opening a door. That the hinge stays put is what enables us to engage in our ordinary epistemic practice of doubting. Something must be assumed.

Pritchard makes use of Wittgenstein’s explanation of the concept with reference to the belief that one has hands, where Wittgenstein comments that we are not taught that we have hands but rather we are taught to do things with our hands. Here, Wittgenstein can be taken to be disputing Moore’s claims to have proof of the external world by showing that the existence of
the external world can be deduced from those claims of which we can be said to be “optimally certain” (Cavell and Philosophical Vertigo, 13). Those things in which we have optimal certainty, however, as Wittgenstein and Pritchard would have it, will only ever be our hinge commitments. It is not clear whether something with propositional content can be taken to be one’s hinge commitment and at the same time be doubted.

But Pritchard then attempts to show that our ordinary epistemic practices can make apparent our hinge commitments to us in a way that causes us to realize their lack of support. This is likely the most significant challenge for Pritchard, because on his account, our hinge commitments are not explicitly known by us, only implicitly conveyed. Our hinge commitments would have to be explicitly conveyed if it is taken to be possible for them to be explicitly doubted. Once our ordinary epistemic practices are at play, Pritchard wants to say, we could very well come to express things which we ordinarily take for granted. These things would be true but in at least some cases, unprovable, such as in the case that there is an external world. When expressing those truths, we expose them to the possibility of invoking the need for ordinary justification. There is no proposition which could not be rationally doubted in this way, including those which serve to enforce the logic of our ordinary epistemic practices. In using our ordinary ability to seek justification for the things we seem to be committed to, we naturally arrive at paradoxes like Wittgenstein’s. We are thought by Pritchard to notice the lack of foundations for the hinge commitments that underly our ability to use language meaningfully, and so we are inevitably forced into the aforementioned trepidation. Or as Pritchard often quotes Wittgenstein’s way of putting it, the “difficulty is realizing the groundlessness of our believing” (Wittgenstein,
On Certainty, §166). When this happens, we begin to project our ordinary epistemic practices into an unordinary context.

Pritchard employs Wittgenstein’s claims that Moore has been stepping out of bounds, making a leap from knowledge of hinge commitments in particular instances to generally articulable beliefs in a broader categorical sense. So in this way, Pritchard can allow that the radical skepticism has a place in undermining the kind of knowledge we are apt to seek, universal or general knowledge in the Cavellian sense of the sublime, while still leaving the majority of our knowledge, which is made apparent in particular instances, intact.

In addition to this, Pritchard attempts to demonstrate some commitment to a state of epistemic innocence, from which one is removed once one becomes aware of the perspective of the Wittgensteinian skeptic, as would be in keeping with Cavell’s discussion on a departure from and return to “the ordinary.” But on Pritchard’s account, it is also by following our ordinary epistemic practices that we obtain this awareness. So our ability to doubt or recognize our hinge commitments in particular instances is necessarily built into the structure of our logic as much as our ability to doubt and embrace our ordinary commitments. In fact, Pritchard refers to the radical skepticism employed by Wittgenstein as “just a purified version of one’s everyday epistemic practices” (Pritchard, 14). And so our ordinary epistemic practices are taken by Pritchard to hold the possibility of undermining their own legitimacy, but only, as we have noted Cavell and McDowell agreeing, while also undermining the grounds on which those practices could have possibly been taken as illegitimate. In this way, Pritchard tries to set up a picture of philosophical vertigo as some kind of error, but an error that is nevertheless built into our rational understanding of things.
Pritchard writes, “isn’t the recognition that our most basic convictions are entirely groundless in this fashion bound to prompt intellectual anxiety (even if one also recognizes that they can be nothing other than groundless)?” (Pritchard, Cavell and Philosophical Vertigo, 15).

In other words, it seems that doubting our ordinary epistemic practices can easily become a valid move in the language games that we play, and it becomes unclear as to what the corresponding move ought to be. And if the radical skepticism that is induced by Wittgenstein’s rule-following paradox can be dismissed on the grounds that it is self-defeating, why shouldn’t our ordinary ability to clarify facts about the world be dismissed with it?

Pritchard writes of hinge commitments:

If we feel the vertigo discussed [above], it is out of distaste for the idea that a manifestation of reason might be recognizable as such only from within the practice whose status is in question. We are inclined to think there ought to be a neutral external standpoint from which the rationality of any genuine exercise of reason could be demonstrated (McDowell, Virtue and Reason, 70).

Pritchard marks a discrepancy between one’s behavior and the apparent meaning of one’s words. If one’s behavior simply reflected visceral certainty, would there be any remaining grounds to speculate that an individual might be subjected to vertigo? This will be challenging to get past McDowell, since McDowell recognizes in Wittgenstein the priority of the practical application of one’s words in determining meaning.

As mentioned, Pritchard ends up with the view that one cannot actually doubt one’s hinge commitments but can only pretend to doubt them. This is because what one doubts when one experiences philosophical vertigo is not what one actually believes. His writing on this topic is also found within the book The Philosophy and Psychology of Ambivalence, Being of Two Minds. In his paper, “Epistemic Vertigo,” Pritchard writes that it is best to conceive of
vertigo in terms of what he refers to as “aliefs,” a concept suggested by Tamar Gendler. Pritchard describes aliefs as “spontaneous judgements that are (at least typically) in tension with what one actually believes” (Pritchard, Epistemic Vertigo, 121). Pritchard writes that in cases where one can be thought to experience actual vertigo, in the sense that one takes on an additional fear of falling upon realizing one’s height, one “alieves that one is subject to epistemic risk… even while believing that there is no epistemic risk” (Pritchard, Epistemic Vertigo, 121). What is most puzzling about Pritchard’s particular notion of aliefs as they are exemplified, at least in the case of philosophical vertigo, is that they are necessarily taken to have propositional content which is in direct contradiction with something one is taken to believe—namely, that one does not have the capacity for knowledge—and yet they are taken to play some kind of conceptual role in one’s reasoning. Pritchard and Gendler both take it that this is not an essential feature of all aliefs, but in the case of philosophical vertigo, we find that it may be.

One thing that can be said is that the attribution of propositional content to aliefs, their delegation to a particular spontaneous judgment about the world, is slightly suspicious on account of the fact that they are taken to be about our implicitly held hinge commitments. In the case of actual vertigo, or the feeling commonly associated with being high up, it is not uncommon for those who acquire a greater familiarity with the practices to adopt a somewhat more precise vocabulary. For instance it is not uncommon for rock climbers familiar with the experience of vertigo as it has been described so far in this paper, that is in the context of some kind of fear of a perceived height which apparently contrasts with one’s confidence in the security of their position, to describe their experiences using different terminology than Pritchard and Gendler might assume. A 1945 newsletter on rock climbing explores the term exposure:
“Exposure—The existence of a formidable amount of empty space along a line drawn between the climber and the center of the earth. Similarly, a climb possessing exposure is said to be ‘exposed,’ Exposure is the spice of rock climbing. On an exposed pitch a beginner is likely to be needlessly frightened; The experienced climber, however, with many years of experience to steady his nerves, will be calm and level headed throughout the proceedings—until he is asked to try the climb himself.”

While the judgment that one is at greater risk of falling is incompatible with the belief that one is at no greater risk, the judgment that one is experiencing a greater degree of exposure is not necessarily incompatible with one’s rational understanding of the safety of one’s situation. In this way, and others, being inducted into a practice can equip one with a conceptualization of events in which these apparently conflicting experiences do not actually entail any contradictions. One who finds themselves experiencing a sense of exposure might be pretending to believe that they might fall, or as Pritchard would have it, they exhibit evidence of the alief that they will fall, but only until they are able to reconcile their conflicting judgments with one another, perhaps upon participation in new practices. But is this same kind of reconciliation possible in the case of philosophical vertigo? We will now take a closer look at some of McDowell’s views on rationality and we will see that it is unlikely to actually be the case. One cannot reconcile one’s radical doubt with the rest of one’s ordinary experiences in this way, and part of the reason is that the radical doubt is contingent upon the employment of concepts which we simply do not have.

On John McDowell’s various readings of Wittgenstein and Wilfred Sellars, Wittgenstein is thought by McDowell to correctly apply a Kantian notion of external constraints on rationality, while Sellars is argued by McDowell to have misinterpreted this feature of Kant’s philosophy. Recognizing this difference helps to elucidate the perspective with which McDowell views Wittgenstein’s Investigations, the perspective from which Wittgenstein is applying this feature of
Kantian philosophy toward linguistic meaning. McDowell elaborates in his work (“Having the World in View”—Lecture I: Sellars and Perceptual Experience; Lecture II: The Logical Form of an Intuition; Lecture III: Intentionality as a Relation) that Sellars’s notion of sheer receptivity may be an unnecessary introduction once we have corrected our understanding of the Kantian picture. McDowell’s emphasis in this critique is on the Kantian notion that sensation must first be actively conceptualized prior to its impact on our reasoning, and interestingly, it is also this aspect of Kant’s philosophy which McDowell finds to have been reflected in Wittgenstein’s philosophy in Investigations. To infer how McDowell might respond to Pritchard’s account of philosophical vertigo, we may do well to look at McDowell’s understanding of the Kantian philosophy and its influence.

As Azadpur points out about McDowell’s initial rejection of the skeptical reading of Investigations, Kripke becomes committed to the view that the meanings of words are limited to an “intersubjective and normative space of reasons” (Azadpur, Experience and the Space of Reasons, 20), situating Kripke’s predicament within a Sellarsian framework that distinguishes between a “space of reasons” and a “space of causes.” This conceptual distinction is also found in Wittgenstein’s writing in Investigations (217), when he writes of the question as to how one is able to follow rules, “[i]f this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my acting in this way in complying with the rule.” On Kripke’s reading of Wittgenstein, the meaning of words becomes entirely a matter of interpersonal justification, and for this reason, McDowell scrutinizes the interpretation. McDowell’s motivation is to develop an account for how objects in the world can have an impact on thought without committing to the supposition of what Sellars refers to as “the myth of the given.” In his book Mind and World, McDowell
characterizes this as the attempt to avoid “frictionless spinning in a void,” an epistemological position from which the causally operative objects of the world have no impact on the meaning of our words, and thereby no impact on the truth of our propositions. This is further reflected in McDowell’s position that Wittgenstein’s private language argument actually rejects the possibility that “bare presences” can serve to ground any “judgments of inner sense” at all, “[giving] up the idea of a private language, by applying the general moral: a bare presence cannot be a ground for anything” (M&W, 19). Let’s resolve then that McDowell takes Wittgenstein’s point not to be that which leaves open the lingering threat of skepticism, but one which reorients us towards a more practically suitable means of justifying our participation in ordinary epistemic practices.

To fully understand the role of aliefs, as Pritchard has described them, from within a McDowellian frame of view, it may be useful to elaborate on McDowell’s rejection of what Sellars calls “sheer receptivity.” On McDowell’s reading, Sellars erroneously interprets Kant’s philosophy so as to entail the need for a revision, which Sellars introduces in the notion of “sheer receptivity.” This feature of human experience, on McDowell’s interpretation of Sellars’s view, is intended by Sellars to bridge the gap between our subjective judgments and the causal bearing of the world, and McDowell finds that the perceived need to do this is already indicative of a misunderstanding. Sellars’s confusion is due to a misunderstanding of the unity with which Kant (and McDowell) view the faculties of the mind to operate in the formation of experience. And Azadpur writes of McDowell’s and Kant’s account of the unified processes of the mind:

McDowell, therefore, takes a proper understanding of Kant’s point – that experience is the product of the joint action of the faculties of sensibility and understanding—to allow for a way of overcoming Rorty’s dualism. On this view, intuitions are rescued from the status of mere Givens
in that the faculty of sensibility is receptive (not to the causal impact of the noumenal world but) to the rational bearing of the empirical world. The conceptualizations of the faculty of understanding, on the other hand, figure in an account of how the world can be so (Azadpur, Experience and the Space of Reasons, 7).

Azadpur follows McDowell in his identification of private concepts with the formation of a private ostensive definition, in the Wittgensteinian sense. Wittgenstein’s version of the given is represented by Azadpur to be concerned with an individual’s inner receptivity to private experiences, the possibility of which Wittgenstein rejects on the grounds that the receptivity to private experiences would itself require those private experiences to have already been made conceptually available from within the shared conceptual framework into which an individual has been inducted. “We can know our experiences,” writes Azadpur, putting the matter concisely, “because we are affected by empirical particulars as already conceptually determined” (Azadpur, Experience and the Space of Reasons, 16).

When it comes to the previous distinction between aliefs and beliefs that Pritchard wants to establish, it is important to remember that Pritchard wants our aliefs to contain propositional content. On the McDowellian picture, we can easily see how such experiences might be instigated, but it becomes unclear on what grounds Pritchard might distinguish aliefs from beliefs. That which emerges with propositional content is thought to be fully integrated already into our conceptual scheme.

McDowell is concerned in this work with developing a more satisfying and comprehensive account of intentionality—that is, what it means for concepts or propositions to be taken as being about something. At the beginning of his lecture series, “Having the World in View,” McDowell takes note of the apparent parallel between Sellars’s “logical space of reasons,” and Kant’s “realm of freedom.” For Kant, the realm of freedom is the realm in which
judgments occur. Judgments are understood by McDowell as the active application of reasons, which are conceptual, in the process of justification.

On p. 453 of “Lecture II: The Logical Form of an Intuition,” McDowell quotes Sellars’s “Science and Metaphysics,” where Sellars writes:

Kant’s use of the term ‘intuition’, in connection with human knowledge, blurs the distinction between a special sub-class of conceptual representations of individuals which, though in some sense a function of receptivity, belong to a framework which is in no sense prior to but essentially includes general concepts, and a radically different kind of representation of an individual which belongs to sheer receptivity and is in no sense conceptual (Sellars, Science and Metaphysics, 7). The intuition, however, on the McDowellian account, already involves an actualization of concepts in an involuntary fashion. So by the time that information reaches the level of awareness of a conscious subject (or enters our experience), it has already been shaped and organized by the concepts that are available within the scope of the individual’s conceptual capacities. Sellars is still right about the need for some kind of constraint on thought, and in order for us to make sense of our experience as some kind of meaningful knowledge, with which we can navigate environment, the particular quality of our experiences needs to be left open in some way by our conceptual capacities such that, upon encountering particular features of the world, only then is our mind filled with content.

It seems that the crux of this puzzle of receptivity lies in what Sellars refers to as the “mongrel” of sense datum, a concept that he fears has been used to denote both “non-concept-involving sensory episodes,” and simultaneously, “non-inferential knowings that such and such is the case” (p.437). This mongrel is not unlike the way that one’s relationship to vertigo inducing circumstances seem to be discussed, as though we were able to isolate particular aspects of our experience in absence of the content of our experiences, while simultaneously
deriving those experiences from a fully conceptualized view of the world. As McDowell points out: for Sellars, the latter (“non-inferential knowings that such and such is the case”) ought to be encapsulated within Sellars’s space of reasons, while the former (“non-concept-involving sensory episodes”) ought to be excluded from it. The same would follow in the case of Wittgenstein’s Investigations if we were not to read it as a successful rejection of the given. But as McDowell notes, the Kantian framework, which Wittgenstein adopts, entails that the entirety of our experiences are first mediated by the processes of our intuitions before being delivered in the form of concepts. Experiences do not even reach the conscious level without being structured within the concepts available to us. McDowell writes about the discrepancy he finds in the role that sheer receptivity plays in terms of what he calls apperception, a process by which we locate the role of an experience within our experience:

The visual impressions or sensations in question are not apperceived when they are playing their transcendental role. That is not to say that they are not apperceivable. It is just to say that if they do get to be apperceived—if they do become objects for consciousness—they can no longer be playing their transcendental role, that of enabling episodes of “outer sense,” episodes that “contain” claims about the environment. One can focus one’s attention on the manifold of “sheer receptivity” that was, a moment before, enabling one’s attention to be directed toward the ostensibly seen environment. But in doing so—in bringing it within the scope of one’s apperception—one ensures that it ceases to perform that function (McDowell, “Having the World in View,” 447).

So we might come to consider apperception, as it is being described by McDowell, to pertain to a kind of abstraction performed by the attention. Though no element of what can be apperceived comes to us in the absence of the full range of our conceptual experience, from our conceptual experiences, we can nevertheless isolate particular features of our experience and contemplate them independently, or maybe abstract them, from the context they appear in. We
might come to profess a concept such as the “sensation of blue” despite never being exposed to a mere sensation of blue in isolation or of blueness in the absence of blue objects. In this way we might also abstract, a sensation of vertigo, though no such sensation truly appears in isolation for us. The “transcendental role” of our experiences then, according to McDowell, is to direct our thought content so as to somehow pertain to the world. However, upon isolating our experiences in such a way so that we can view them abstractly, they no longer will appear to play this role directly for us. We can expect that this would apply to experiences such as vertigo and other supposed aliefs as well.
Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown that Pritchard seeks to motivate a skeptical reading of Wittgenstein’s Investigations in contrast with McDowell’s anti-skeptical reading. In order to make sense of the obvious self-defeating nature of Wittgensteinian skepticism while still endorsing a skeptical reading, Pritchard’s notion of philosophical vertigo, which he claims to have inherited from Cavell, is lent support from Gendler’s notion of “alief.” Gendler’s notion of “alief,” however, is not as specific or as understood as Pritchard would have it. In particular, Pritchard introduces to the notion of “alief” the possibility that an “alief” may both contain propositional content and at the same time be causally induced by our rational judgments. Pritchard seems to blur the lines here between the space of reasons and the space of objects in a way that McDowell would likely find unsuitable for a reading of Wittgenstein’s Investigations.

It is important to emphasize the therapeutic role of skepticism when we take into account McDowell’s perspective. While both Cavell and McDowell view the kind of doubt that demands justification and induces skepticism to play a role in our ordinary epistemic practices, Cavell emphasizes the possibility that this need for justification may always threaten to challenge our currently held beliefs. Meanwhile, McDowell’s view also recognizes skepticism to play a role, but rather than a threatening role, it plays a therapeutic role by enabling us to navigate the apparent contradictions we’ve come up with. McDowell’s view is that the ordinary demand for justification simply cannot be applied to our epistemic practices as a whole, and for this reason, there sense of vertigo that Pritchard seeks to motivate is after all based on some kind of
misunderstanding, rather than a legitimate threat. When it comes to the charge that vertigo takes
the form of an alief, rather than a belief, we see that the significance of this difference diminishes
once both have been saddled with propositional content, since both would have then come to us
fully integrated already within our system of belief.
Works Cited


