“Feckless Prisoners of Their Times”
Historicism and Moral Reflection

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Language is, after all, not a cage.

-- Ludwig Wittgenstein

But which particular universe this is [the philosopher] cannot know for certain in advance, he only knows that if he makes a bad mistake the cries of the wounded will soon inform him of this fact.

-- William James

1. Introduction: The Historicist Predicament

I should probably begin by saying something about the title of my talk. The source is not a work of philosophy or literature, but a piece of popular journalism, an article published several months ago on the online site, The Daily Beast.¹ The article concerned the pervasiveness of racism in works of children’s literature often deemed to be “classics” of the genre (the author cites a number of works dating from the 19th Century, but examples can be found well into the 20th Century, as can

¹ Malcolm Jones, “The Unbelievably Racist World of Classic Children’s Literature,” The Daily Beast, 01.30.16 12:00 AM ET.
be seen in many of the *Tintin* titles, as well as Disney films and other stories and cartoons). We are all probably familiar with such works (they are, I am ashamed to say, especially common in America, for fairly obvious reasons), which typically involve slow-witted, servile, or savage black characters (all the Little Black Sambos, tar babies, and headhunters), but also Asian characters, such as are found in the still-popular *Jungle Book* and *Peter Pan*, and tribe after tribe of Native Americans.

While not wishing to excuse the authors of these works – and the original audiences that consumed them and first secured their popularity – the author emphasized the *commonplace* character of these depictions. What I mean here is that the use of such stereotypes was, for the authors and the original audience, entirely unremarkable. After all, these were not works designed to be racist screeds, written to forward explicitly or self-consciously a white supremacist agenda (compare works that are written and circulate today for that purpose). Such an “agenda” was not even that, but simply part of the prevailing *Zeitgeist* in which such works emerged. While we can see – and very often wince at – the cruelty of these depictions, and so appreciate the injustice of them, those who lived in the time when these works emerged were, in the author’s words, “feckless prisoners of their times.”

The author’s choice of the adjective *feckless* is an interesting one, as it can be understood as an ethically charged characterization, but not always. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides the following definition:

> Of a thing: valueless, futile, feeble. In later use chiefly of a person (or a person’s actions or attributes): lacking vigour, energy, or capacity; weak, helpless; (now more usually) irresponsible, shiftless.
Notice that the definition follows a historical trajectory, tracking the shift, first, from things to persons, but then to different attributes or characteristics of a person. The second shift is more interesting for our purposes, as the characterization takes on more ethically charged connotations as we move into the present. It is one thing to be weak or helpless, neither of which need involve any kind of blame or censure, but quite another to be irresponsible (which is different from simply not being responsible) or shiftless. The latter pair more than suggests a morally blameworthy attribute. But the combination, feckless prisoners, would appear to cut against the more morally charged and more current meaning, as the idea of being a prisoner pairs more naturally with the idea of being weak or helpless: being held captive is not something one is typically in a position to do something about. The idea of being an irresponsible prisoner strikes me as a more difficult notion, requiring a much more complicated story about how someone could be held responsible for her own imprisonment. (One might imagine rather clumsy criminals, who act in ways that make it easy for them to be caught.) So by being paired with “prisoners,” the notion of being feckless seems to lose much of its moral weight, or, at least, what moral weight it carries becomes more difficult to determine. The indeterminacy or instability in the pairing mirrors how our judgments about the past are themselves unstable, oscillating between forthright moral condemnation and a more lenient attitude fueled by the idea that “things were different back then.” For now, I only note the instability, which will prove important in our discussion as a whole.

To tease out a bit this image of imprisonment, the thought about the historical case goes something like this: the people who lived then treated various things that
we would now regard as morally repugnant (such as minstrel shows) as perfectly ordinary and acceptable forms of entertainment and literature, including literature deemed suitable for children. They did not, and perhaps could not, see anything objectionable in such things owing to a network of deep-seated assumptions about race and racial differences. These assumptions functioned like bars on a cage, only they were invisible to those confined within it. What the historical case is meant to motivate is the idea of *invisible bars*, a way of being confined where those who are imprisoned do not – and maybe even cannot – recognize this to be their predicament. It takes later generations to see the bars for what they are and in that way see past them.

Applied to past generations, the author’s characterization of such literature’s original audience is apt to sound condescending and in some ways it surely is. In calling the people of those earlier times “feckless prisoners,” the author thereby depicts *us* – those who read *The Daily Beast*, for example – as *liberated* from the prejudices and biases that imprisoned earlier writers and their readers. *They* suffered from various moral “blind spots” from which we, who have a *superior* vantage point or perspective, no longer suffer. Such judgments might seem to license a feeling of smug self-satisfaction, as we congratulate ourselves for having attained a more enlightened, morally superior perspective. I should note, however, that the author’s standpoint is a bit more sophisticated than I have yet made it out to be. That is, the author does not shy away from a further thought that rescues the view from a simple and condescending contrast between them-as-prisoners and us-as-liberated. That further thought involves the reflexive application of that figure of
imprisonment to us, denizens of our current times. Just as those earlier
promulgators of racist stereotypes were feckless prisoners of their times, so too are
we feckless prisoners of ours. Here is the relevant passage from the article:

[T]he authors in question were almost surely clueless about their casual or
unthinking racism. They were the feckless prisoners of their times, and much
as we’d like for people in the past to share our enlightenment, especially
people we otherwise admire, it’s just not going to happen in an unfortunate
number of cases. And a couple of centuries from now, when people look back
at us, they too surely will be thinking, how could they?

The reflexive application the author suggests here would appear to be relatively
straightforward: just as people of the past were confined by invisible bars, so too
are we currently confined in a similar manner by a network of biases and
assumptions. These biases are so deep-seated that we do not feel ourselves to be
assuming them, and so the idea that there might be something morally problematic
or compromised about them cannot even begin to register. But again, later
generations may succeed in bringing those biases to light and giving them the
criticism they deserve. The danger of such thoughts is that they may appear to
encourage a kind of moral complacency. The thought, “I am confined in ways that I
cannot recognize to be morally repugnant,” invites a kind of inertia. Since I do not
see the “bars” that imprison me, i.e. since I do not feel myself to be imprisoned in any
way, the idea that I can in some way ferret out and eliminate these biases is in
danger of fading away into nothing, and that is what encourages a sense of
complacency. Notice that in the historical case, there are specific failings we can
recognize and articulate so as to give content to the idea that these earlier people
were indeed “feckless prisoners of their times.” Now if I begin to wonder about that
charge when applied to my own case, I might ask, "What are the problematic assumptions and biases that confine me so as to restrict and contaminate my moral judgment?" If I take seriously this trope of invisibility, so that I cannot see what these might be, the idea that I am genuinely confined doesn't afford me much traction for doing anything. If there is nothing I can specify or point to in a manner analogous to the way I can specify what holds in the historical case, then I am confined by I-know-not-what and my gesture toward some kind of limit does not point in any particular direction.

Despite the difficulties of this last idea, I do not want to dismiss out of hand as simply confused this idea of “invisible bars.” There is, I think, something right and important about such a notion, insofar as it points to the idea of a background understanding as playing a fundamental role in our making sense of things. As background, such forms of understanding are typically unnoticed or not attended to, and so in that way can be understood to be invisible. Consider, as a prime example of a philosophically sophisticated development of this idea, the work of Hubert Dreyfus. A cornerstone of Dreyfus’s reading of Heidegger is the latter’s radical reworking of human understanding in terms of background practices that are to a large extent beyond the reach of discursive articulation. What is radical here is the subversion of what Dreyfus sees as the guiding ideal of the Western tradition, wherein the most fundamental conditions of intelligibility may themselves be made fully intelligible. For Dreyfus’s Heidegger, by contrast, the understanding of being operative in the existence of Dasein is not something that can be brought fully into view:
We can to some extent *light up* that understanding, that is, point it out to those who share it, but we cannot *spell it out*, that is, make it understandable even to those who do not share it. Moreover, what we can get clear about is only what is least pervasive and embodied. Heidegger has the sense that the more important some aspect of our understanding of being is, the less we can get at it. (Commentary, pp. 21-2)

The idea that we cannot “get at” these more important aspects of our understanding of being is linked to Heidegger’s conception of what that understanding is, or, perhaps better, what that understanding *is not*, since what makes up this background understanding is not anything like a set of beliefs or principles.

Dreyfus gives us a more developed account not just of the idea of being a prisoner of one’s times, but of the accompanying idea of being a feckless one, at least in one sense of the word. Each of us is historically conditioned, but in ways that we cannot get clear about: what conditions us is beyond the reach of reflection, and so must remain out of view. What we get in Dreyfus is thus an explication of what I referred to above as “invisible bars” that confine us. Moreover, we can appreciate from what Dreyfus says just how and why that lack of awareness – that inability to make explicit – will be especially pronounced in one’s own case or when it comes to one’s own culture.

Dreyfus’s notion of the background as something we cannot “get at” invites a kind of pessimism about our general capacities for any kind of reflective criticism. Any such criticism would require our somehow getting “outside” our background understanding, so as to see “it” as a whole and in that way subject it to critical scrutiny. As Dreyfus understands the development of phenomenology in the 20th Century, this was Husserl’s ambition, and a signal achievement on Heidegger’s part.
is his squelching of that project. I do not in what follows want to consider the merits of Dreyfus’s reading of Heidegger, nor do I want to evaluate the prospects for resuscitating Husserl’s grand ambitions. Rather, I want to try to rescue the idea of reflection from this kind of general pessimism, while keeping in place the notion of an ineliminable background. I want in what follows to show how a commitment to the idea of a background nonetheless allows for the possibility of a kind of moral reflection that allows for genuine self-criticism. But I want to suggest more than just this kind of bare possibility: while the idea of confinement appears to encourage a kind of moral complacency or inertia, the effect should really be just the opposite. Reflection on the historical case, along with extrapolation to our own situation, serves to make vivid both there being a kind of background understanding that is operative in ways that go unnoticed and the morally fraught dimensions of that idea. Rather than encouraging inertia, such an insight creates instead a kind of obligation to look harder to figure out what those things I do not currently see might be. If that is so, however, then I may still be in some way confined or even imprisoned, but I am not fecklessly so. Rather, I am enjoined by the historical analogy to develop my capacities of reflection to a greater degree.

To try to make good on this claim, I want to turn away from *The Daily Beast* (as well as Dreyfus’s Heidegger) toward Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*. Doing so will help

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2 Dreyfus himself appeals to Wittgenstein as a kind of intermediate case between Husserl’s aspiration to full reflective transparency and what he sees as Heidgger’s conception of the background. He does not develop the more Wittgensteinian model in any detail, as both his interests and his sympathies lie with Heidegger. I do not know if the way I develop Wittgenstein’s ideas in this section would be consonant with the kind of intermediate position he envisions.
us both to develop in a philosophically more sophisticated way this idea of a potentially feckless form of imprisonment and find the means for its overcoming.

2. Wittgenstein and Moral Certainties

Consider the following remark from Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*:

> But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false. (OC, § 94)

As with Dreyfus in my opening remarks, Wittgenstein’s invocation here of the idea of an “inherited background” again suggests a way of developing the idea of confinement at work in this talk of being “feckless prisoners.” I want to try to develop this suggestion with the aid of other things Wittgenstein says in *On Certainty*. As is well known, this very late work of Wittgenstein’s is devoted to probing G. E. Moore’s attempts to refute skepticism and defend “common sense.” Moore’s attempts involve adducing what he characterizes as commonplace pieces of knowledge – that *here is one hand*, for example – which may serve as premises for an argument whose conclusion contravenes the skeptic’s questioning our knowing that there is an external world. What Wittgenstein finds puzzling here is Moore’s appeal to these commonplaces as instances or examples of *knowledge*. That is, Wittgenstein contends that it is not at all clear just what Moore *means* when he says, holding up his hand, “I know that this is my hand” or, standing before a tree in the garden, “I know that this is a tree.” It is not clear what the point of saying some such
thing would be because it is not clear what it would mean to claim otherwise. There is no room for doubt in such cases, and so no room for such related notions as finding out, making sure, confirming, and disconfirming. Since I don’t know what it would be like seriously to doubt that, for example, I have two hands or the earth’s existence predates my own, then the sense of saying that I do know such things is attenuated, at best. What Moore appeals to are certainties, but this would appear to exclude them from the “language-game” of knowing. Playing that game involves the possibility of making various kinds of “moves” – questioning, challenging, proving, disproving, and so on – that are not available when it comes to Moore’s examples.

Moore’s efforts to disarm the skeptic serve to draw our attention to the presence and role of such certainties with respect to what it does make sense to claim to know and doubt:

When Moore says he knows such and such, he is really enumerating a lot of empirical propositions which we affirm without special testing; propositions, that is, which have a peculiar logical role in the system of our empirical propositions. (OC, § 136)

Wittgenstein continues in the subsequent remark by noting that “Moore’s assurance that he knows ... does not interest us.” What interests Wittgenstein instead are the propositions that “Moore retails as examples of such known truths,” and they are interesting “not because anyone knows their truth, or believes he knows them, but because they all have a similar role in the system of our empirical judgments.” (OC, § 137) Just how to characterize this “peculiar logical role” is a delicate – and controversial – matter, but we might start by saying something like this: what Moore is onto, whether he realizes it or not, is a range of things that everyone
accepts – or we might say “just knows” – but without much (or anything) in the way of explicit instruction and certainly without any testing, investigating, or justifying. But even saying “everyone” is not quite right and for a number of reasons: first, what is accepted in this manner will vary from person to person. There are, for example, indexical elements involved in these propositions. One example that recurs throughout On Certainty is, “My name is Ludwig Wittgenstein,” which is a certainty for Wittgenstein, but not for anyone else (unless they also happen to be named Ludwig Wittgenstein). But also what individuals accept in this manner – what “holds fast” for them – varies depending on their “world picture.” Second, there is also a historical-cultural dimension to this kind of acceptance, such that different propositions will have this status for different peoples and at different times: “But what men consider reasonable or unreasonable alters. At certain periods men find reasonable what at other periods they found unreasonable. And vice versa.” (OC, § 336) One thing this variation shows is that there is nothing intrinsic to these propositions that serves to explain their “peculiar logical role.” Although Wittgenstein appeals to logic frequently in On Certainty, these propositions are at the same time empirical in form, so there is nothing like the notion of analyticity, for example, at work here, nor any notion of these propositions being self-evident or irrefutable.

So what interests Wittgenstein is not a project of trying to delineate a determinate and unique set of privileged propositions – there is no such set\(^3\) – but

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\(^3\) This is a point emphasized by Rush Rhees. Indeed, Rhees refers to the idea that there is such a determinate set that Wittgenstein in On Certainty either tries to
instead following out the idea that there must be some such set in order for there to be a life with epistemic concepts such as know, doubt, confirm, disconfirm, and so on: “One cannot make experiments if there are not some things that one does not doubt.” (OC, § 337) As Wittgenstein notes shortly after this remark:

That is to say, the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. (OC, § 341)

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in deed not doubted. (OC, § 342)

The dependence Wittgenstein notes here is a kind of logical dependence, which he illustrates in mythological terms with his famous image of the riverbed. In order for water to flow in definite directions, rather than slop any which way (an image of madness, perhaps), there must be a riverbed that serves to channel it. The riverbed need not have just one set of contours, but there must be some such bed.

We might exploit Wittgenstein’s river imagery and his talk of hinge-propositions as a way of cashing out our guiding idea of “feckless prisoners,” in that it invites us to develop both the idea of captivity and the accompanying notion of fecklessness. To do so, let us start with what might seem to be a conclusion we can delineate or at the very least encourages us to try to determine as the “most commonly made” misunderstanding of the work. Rhees explains:

‘When Wittgenstein says there are certain propositions which have the form of empirical propositions, which never called in doubt; and that unless this were so we could not speak with one another, we should not have a language – he is saying that there is a specific set of propositions (with the form of empirical propositions) which cannot be doubted.’

Of course he is not saying this. He is denying it. This is the chief point of his discussion. (Rhees, p. 92)
draw from Wittgenstein’s remarks: A hinge-proposition is one that I cannot be mistaken about. Wittgenstein says as much in § 425 of *On Certainty*: “And this too is right: I cannot be making a *mistake* about it.” However, he goes on to remark: “But that does not mean that I am infallible about it.” How are we to understand this sequence? If I *cannot* be mistaken about something, then that would appear to render me infallible with respect to that thing. To find our way here, first consider a point made earlier: when it comes to hinge-propositions, there is nothing intrinsic to them that serves to explain their special status (when they have it). For pretty much any hinge-proposition, we can imagine a set of circumstances both where it makes sense to say that one knows it *and* where it makes sense for someone to be mistaken. If we consider Moore’s central example, it is easy to construct scenarios where it makes sense for someone to say, “I know this is my hand,” for example when someone is emerging from anesthesia and wants to reassure himself that his hand has not been amputated. Similarly, we can imagine someone in that situation suffering from phantom limb, who has his feelings of reassurance undermined by the sheet’s being withdrawn to reveal the stump at the end of his arm. In those special circumstances, the notion of a mistake – albeit a devastating one – comes into view. So there is nothing special about “This is my hand” in and of itself; what is important instead is its being entertained in circumstances that are decidedly *not* special. That is, it makes no sense for me, here and now, to entertain the idea that I might be mistaken about “This is my hand.” There are no supporting reasons, whose epistemic strength, so to speak, is superior to the proposition in question, and so nothing I might investigate so as to shore up or assure myself of its
credentials ("This is my hand" doesn’t have credentials in that sense). If it were, somehow, to turn out that I am indeed wrong, that would be indicative of something other – and more serious – than a mistake. I should not know what to think in that case. To use Wittgenstein’s metaphor, I would have become unhinged.

As holding fast, hinge-propositions have this peculiar status of being immune from challenge or any kind of serious questioning, but without our being entitled, on the basis of such immunity, to assert their truth. I cannot take seriously the idea of being mistaken about any such hinge-proposition – that is what marks them out as certainties – but it does not (just like that) make sense to say that I know them. At the same time, these hinge-propositions make up the background – the Weltbild – that gives shape to my making sense of the world in ways that involve making inquiries, providing justification, possibly knowing, but also being mistaken. We might vary the image of hinges, and instead think of these certainties as making up the bars of my cage, as they define and constrain the epistemic space in which I move about. I am in this sense not just a prisoner, but a feckless one, helpless in my lack of responsibility for the background I have inherited.

I think Wittgenstein is often read in something like this way, as can be seen when Michael Kober states that the account he develops out of On Certainty “shows why everyone is obliged to obey the epistemic and moral norms of the community

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4 Alice Crary refers to readings of this kind as “inviolability” interpretations of On Certainty in her “Wittgenstein and Ethics: A Discussion with Reference to On Certainty.” As Crary notes, the attribution of this idea of inviolability to Wittgenstein is bound up with the idea that he espouses some kind of conservatism. I have discussed the issue of Wittgenstein and conservatism elsewhere. See my “The Limits of Conservatism: Wittgenstein on ‘Our Life’ and ‘Our Concepts,’” in Cressida Heyes, The Grammar of Politics.
he or she was brought up in." (p. 365) Kober’s reading of Wittgenstein is important to me for two reasons: first, he gives voice to a more sophisticated way of understanding this idea of confinement; second, he extends Wittgenstein’s ideas in *On Certainty*, which are oriented almost entirely toward epistemic concerns, to apply to moral concerns as well. Let me say something about this extension and then return to the idea of confinement. Kober’s paper is at the leading edge of an attempt that several readers of *On Certainty* have made to apply his remarks about knowledge, doubt, and certainty to the ethical domain. Very roughly, the idea is this: just as there are certainties in the epistemic realm – things that hold fast, are accepted – that are not themselves the topic of inquiry but in some way serve to make inquiry possible, so too there are moral certainties that provide a framework in which moral discourse and moral evaluation take place. We might think of these moral certainties as basic moral norms that we appeal to, and try to apply, in evaluating actions and settling particular disputes about the moral worth of some course or kind of action. But those basic norms themselves are not ones that we try to justify, nor would we know how to justify them were we asked to do so. A typical example from these discussions is: “Murder is wrong.” We don’t know what it would be like, the thought goes, were someone seriously to challenge this claim, just as we wouldn’t know what to make of someone challenging us to prove that we have

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hands or that the earth did not come into existence with her birth. While we have a considerable number of open questions in ethics, just as we have in the natural sciences, in order to pursue those questions, something must hold fast ethically. Just as a scientist does not question that she sees her laboratory equipment as she conducts her experiments and records her specific observations, so too do we not question or challenge basic moral certainties while wondering about, or arguing over, the value of a particular course or kind of action. The analogy is not perfect: while people do not exactly deny such moral certainties, just as they do not typically deny that they have hands, it is a sad fact of human life that such basic moral norms are violated with considerable frequency. Defenders of this extension note, however, the way violations of these basic norms tend toward the characterization of those who do so as in some way pathological. So, just as someone seriously doubting whether she had hands, just like that, would be a sign of madness, so too with someone who flagrantly defies these kinds of basic moral norms. (This idea of madness will prove important in what follows.)

6 See OC, § 92, wherein Wittgenstein asks us to imagine Moore’s encountering the king of a tribe, who has been brought up to accept that the earth came into existence with his birth. Wittgenstein allows that Moore may be able to “convert” the king, but this would not be the same as proving to him that the earth has existed for a very long time.

7 Violation of these basic moral norms, as Kober notes, leads to an individual’s exclusion from the community:

Sharing more or less the same moral certainties constitutes (among other things) both the possibility of a community’s social life and the ‘ideological’ identity of a community. It is therefore indeed important for the proper functioning of a community’s social life that those who break the common moral certainties will be excluded from the common practices. That the exclusion of a person from social life may severely damage this person’s identity and health is a price communities obviously accept. (p. 376)
Thus, on Kober’s extension of *On Certainty*, “moral language games rest on constitutive rules” in much the same way as epistemic language games. Such norms, according to Kober, “constitute the very possibility of acting morally or talking about moral issues.” (p. 373) In developing these ideas out of *On Certainty*, Kober emphasizes the *tacit* character of these constitutive moral norms, as well as the *communal* nature of the moral language games they enframe. The first of these ideas helps to spell out the trope of *invisibility* I’ve been emphasizing: we move within a moral space without actually seeing what gives it its shape. As Kober puts it, “Agents do not need to be consciously aware of which moral norms they obey; rather it may be part of their acquired active and passive skills to act in accordance with them.” (p. 374) With respect to the second idea, although Wittgenstein himself often emphasizes the *personal* character of the certainties that interest him, Kober’s model is exclusively *social*: the constitutive moral norms he postulates serve to enframe the evaluative life of particular communities, where different communities will possibly adhere to different norms. For Kober, this means that such norms are fundamentally *restricted* to the communities that adhere to them as moral certainties:

The social aspect of moral certainties and claims qua education indicates why members of a community feel committed to obey them: they are the constitutive norms of the community’s practices. Nevertheless, the manifest universality of moral norms or values is restricted to the members of that community only. As our moral certainties are the moral certainties of the community in which we were raised, we cannot deliberately choose both the moral norms which we want to acknowledge and follow and those which we want others to acknowledge and follow: there is no culturally ‘neutral’ point
of view, and we have already acquired a competence in obeying constitutive moral norms before we start reflecting philosophically on them. (p. 375)

The absence of what Kober here calls “neutrality” severely restricts the possibility of moral criticism. While particular actions – or kinds of actions – may be evaluated with respect to a set of basic moral norms, evaluating those norms themselves is not possible within the language game they constitute. To try to challenge them, one must adopt the perspective of another language game where the sentences expressing the moral norms in the first language no longer function as such. But if this is so, the sentence expressing a certainty in one language game undergoes a change in meaning when expressing a genuine claim in the other, and so it is unclear how the second language game affords a critical perspective on the first.

While Kober emphasizes sentences, which he treats like tokens in a game (here a king, there a pawn), his insular conception of language games cannot readily accommodate Wittgenstein’s emphasis not on sentences, but on judgments. In order for some judgments to be the topic of inquiry, other judgments must hold fast. Any judgment that holds fast can become the topic of inquiry, given a change of circumstances, without thereby undergoing a change in meaning. Wittgenstein writes at OC § 517:

But might it not be possible for something to happen that threw me entirely off the rails? Evidence that made the most certain thing unacceptable to me? Or at any rate made me throw over my most fundamental judgments? (Whether rightly or wrongly is beside the point.) (my emphasis)

Wittgenstein’s talk here of being thrown “entirely off the rails” is difficult to square with Kober’s insular conception of language-games, where any kind of shift involves
a move from one language-game to an entirely new one. What is at issue in such a disruptive experience, which may come in response to evidence but may have other sources as well, is what Wittgenstein calls “fundamental judgments.” Such disruption is not a matter of a particular sentence taking up a new position within a different language-game constituted by new rules, but of that very judgment losing its grip. In keeping with Wittgenstein’s river imagery, there is a degree of fluidity that allows room for questioning or challenging something that holds fast without thereby, or automatically, moving to a new language game in a way that would deprive the criticism of any bite.

Kober’s way of building upon *On Certainty*, which encourages insularity, conceives of language as consisting of language-games, which are constituted by certainties that function as rules (he calls them constitutive rules or norms at several junctures). The direction of sense, we might say, flows from rules to utterances in the same way that moves in a game are determined by the rules making up the game. But this would appear to be the exact opposite of what Wittgenstein offers in *On Certainty*. Consider what Wittgenstein says at OC § 144:

> The child learns to believe a host of things. I.e. it learns to act according to these beliefs. Bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed, and in that system some things stand unshakeably and some are more or less liable to shift. What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; *it is rather held fast by what lies around it.* (my emphasis)

The last bit of this remark is what interests me, especially as it gives us a different perspective on Wittgenstein’s river imagery. In working through *On Certainty*, we tend to think of that imagery in a way that gives priority to the riverbed – the
bedrock – as serving to channel the water in a specific direction. This is not wrong, exactly, but it overlooks the way the riverbed is itself determined by the flow of water. Flowing water is at least part of what serves to cut the riverbed in the first place and the exact contours of the bed are susceptible to change as water flows at varying rates and at different levels (and those rates and levels are in many ways not determined by the riverbed). The point here is that this shift of emphasis serves to disrupt the simple picture of the sense of our explicit judgments being constrained and determined – held in place – by a set of underlying certainties. What those underlying certainties are is beholden to the judgments we find ourselves inclined – for various reasons – to make; as those inclinations change, what had been underlying certainties get loosened up, to the point sometimes of breaking free of the riverbed altogether.8 They can become a topic of reflection – of discussion and criticism – that can mark a significant bend in the river.9

3. Excursus on Feminism

8 My appeal here to inclinations is inspired by, and meant to be consonant with, Anne-Marie Søndergaard Christensen’s appeal to the importance of interests in motivating us to reflect critically on our Weltbild. See her “‘What Matters to Us?’ Wittgenstein’s Weltbild, Rock and Sand, Men and Women.” I should also here note my considerable debt to Christensen’s paper more generally for helping me to navigate On Certainty and thinking about its application to ethics.

9 To return to Wittgenstein’s image of hinges, it seems to me that Kober’s understanding of our situation is of a kind that Wittgenstein denies:

But it isn’t that the situation is like this: We just can’t investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (OC, § 343)

My discussion in the following section will attempt to sketch out what it might it look like no longer to “want the door to turn,” or at least no longer swing in quite the same manner.
All of this is, of course, highly metaphoric and imagistic. At this point, I want to try to make good on this imagery by exploring something by way of a real-life example of the kind of reflection that I think Kober’s reading of *On Certainty* cannot really accommodate, but which is compatible with the kind of alternative reading I’ve been suggesting. Consider a practice that emerged in the heady days of late-1960s feminism, namely, *consciousness-raising*.\(^{10}\) As the terminology suggests, the function of this practice is to make those who engage in it aware (or more aware) of something. That bare description does not get to what is distinctive about it, however, since consciousness-raising is not *simply* drawing something to one’s attention that had gone unnoticed: pointing out a fact – or range of facts – that one had been unaware of, initiating someone into a new skill, and so on are not examples of consciousness-raising, even if one is aware of something afterward that had been unknown before. (For this reason, consciousness-raising is to be distinguished from another late-1960s phenomenon, the teach-in.)

The structure of consciousness-raising does not hew to the standard pattern of learning, since what is discovered is something already there, but operative until then below the level of awareness. Operative in this way are the fundamental and pervasive attitudes and assumptions that orient members of a culture toward the

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\(^{10}\) Dreyfus, despite his pessimism about “getting at” the background practices, allows for the notion of consciousness-raising: “The most a Dasein can do is ‘raise its consciousness,’ that is, clarify the interpretation in the culture. For example, feminists try to become conscious of what it means to be feminine in our culture in order to modify our practices.” (Commentary, p. 24) As his wording indicates, Dreyfus thinks that consciousness-raising only serves to reveal the tip of what is for the most part a vast and hidden iceberg. My contention here is that “the most a Dasein can do” is more than enough to mitigate the charge of fecklessness.
world, one another, and themselves, including ones about what it means to be a man or a woman, the relative status of men and women, the proper ways for men to treat women (and vice-versa), and so on. By endeavoring to bring such attitudes to the surface, consciousness-raising conceives of itself as a radical activity. Kathie Sarachild, one of the early leaders in the consciousness-raising movement, explains what “radical” means here:

[“Radical”] is a word that is often used to suggest extremist, but actually it doesn’t mean that. The dictionary says radical means root, coming from the Latin word for root. And that is what we meant by calling ourselves radicals. We were interested in getting to the roots of problems in society. You might say we wanted to pull up weeds in the garden by their roots, not just pick off the leaves at the top to make things look good momentarily.

We can thus vary the contrast between foreground and background with that of surface and depth: consciousness-raising aims to get to the roots of a problem that might only be vaguely intimated in the lives of women (and not even experienced as a problem, especially in the lives of men).

In terms of its basic shape, the activity of consciousness-raising is relatively straightforward. Here is a typical description from writings of that period, this time from Carol Hanisch:

We’ve mostly picked topics by two methods. In a small group it is possible for us to take turns bringing questions to the meeting (like, Which do/did you prefer, a girl or a boy baby or no children, and why? What happens to your relationship if your man makes more money than you? Less than you?). Then we go around the room answering the questions from our personal experiences. Everybody talks that way. At the end of the meeting we try to sum up and generalize from what’s been said and make connections. (Notes from the Second Year, p. 76)
We can glean from this description a number of features of the practice of consciousness-raising. First, it is by and large a communal activity, typically involving a small group of women. While there is nothing that prevents engaging in this activity in solitude (one can, after all, ask oneself these sorts of questions), working in a group setting helps individuals to engage in reflection by pondering questions they may not have thought of – or gotten very far thinking about – on their own (that consciousness-raising is collaborative is important for other reasons that I’ll consider shortly). Moreover, working communally allows for the kind of summing up and generalizing Hanisch mentions in the last sentence of the passage: idiosyncratic experiences or ideas can be discarded, whereas overlapping experiences allow for further exploration and (cautious) generalization. Second, in keeping with its communal nature, consciousness-raising is a conversational activity (with an internal dialogue serving as a limiting case). The conversation is oriented around questions that encourage participants to reflect on various aspects or dimensions of their own lives and experiences, some of which may never have stood out as particularly significant or momentous. The questions are not simple yes-no questions, nor are they factual questions exactly. Rather, they are open-ended in that any response to any particular question allows for further questions. As open-ended, such questions allow for further “digging” toward the “roots” of what is experienced as problematic in the lives of the women who are conversing.

To tie this in with the conceptual landscape afforded by our examination of On Certainty and its extension beyond the epistemic domain, I want to suggest here that this kind of reflection and speculation is directed toward revealing what we might
call *ethical-political certainties*. What I mean here is that consciousness-raising brings into the foreground ethically and politically charged judgments that are operative in the lives of the women engaged in this practice, but without necessarily having been explicitly formulated. They are things that “hold fast” in the community in which these women find themselves. They are very rarely explicitly formulated, and when such judgments are formulated, they appear as authoritative despite their never having been justified and despite their lacking any clear procedure for justifying them. Consider the following quick sketch, based on one of Hanisch’s sample questions:

Q: What happens to your relationship if your man makes less money than you?

A: Things would get difficult.

Q: Why would that be?

A: He would feel embarrassed or maybe hostile toward me.

Q: How come?

   A: Because the man is the head of the household, which means he’s supposed to make more money.

The italicized bit at the end of this sketch is a simple example of the kind certainty that consciousness-raising aims to bring into view. It is clearly not a logical proposition in any standard sense, but it is not a straightforwardly empirical proposition in the sense of its having been considered and adopted on the basis of evidence or argument. It is something that “everybody knows,” and for that reason, no one bothers to question or challenge it.
Two points about consciousness-raising should be emphasized at this point.

First, I think we need to be careful not to over-intellectualize the transformational process envisioned by radical feminism. That is, the kinds of change feminism advocates need not be motivated by, nor brought about solely through, a process of deliberative reflection. Although, if consciousness-raising in its conversational mode is to play a role, there must be some place for explicit reflection, that is not, or is not likely to be, the entire story. The shift in consciousness these practices seek to cultivate is often initiated in more informal, spontaneous ways. Consider the way Vivian Gornick begins her essay on consciousness-raising. She begins not with a description of a group meeting or structured dialogue, but with a trio of vignettes, quick sketches of episodes in the lives of three women. Here is the opening sketch:

In a lower Manhattan office a legal secretary returns from her lunch hour, sinks into her seat and says miserably to a secretary at the next desk: “I don’t know what’s happening to me. A perfectly nice construction worker whistled and said, ‘My, isn’t that nice,’ as I passed him and suddenly I felt this terrific anger pushing up in me…. I swear I wanted to hit him!” (Radical Feminism, p. 287)

The second and third follow a similar pattern: in the second, a casual conversation gives way to anger over the way a woman and her husband have divided educational, career, and child-raising duties; in the third, a woman bristles after being asked at a lunch counter, yet again, to wait while the men on their lunch-hour get served first. About these three women, Gornick remarks: “Each of them, without ever having attended a consciousness-raising session, had had her consciousness raised.”
That consciousness-raising can be initiated through such episodes brings me to the second point, which is more directly tied to *On Certainty*. Recall Wittgenstein’s claim that the judgments that stand fast are held in place by their surroundings, the various ways of acting and talking that make up our ongoing lives. Consider again the certainty cited above, that the man is the head of the household. Insofar as this is indeed a certainty, it is held fast by what surrounds it in that myriad practices and relations serve to express and reinforce it: the structure and routines of family life, the division of labor, courtship and marriage practices, sexual relations, and so on. If something in those surroundings begins to be experienced as a *problem* – as causing anger or resentment, for example – that can initiate the sort of reflection consciousness-raising encourages,\(^{11}\) thereby bringing a certainty – something that until then held fast – into view and perhaps beginning to dislodge it.

If we keep in mind these experiences ranging from discomfort to rage, we can see that the questioning of what typically have the status of ethical-political certainties is not, for radical feminists, in any way arbitrary or capricious, as wondering aloud about a decade-old earth would likely be. Rather, the radicality of consciousness-raising can be understood – and so makes sense – as a response to the genuine suffering of women in their own culture or community. Through the collective activity of consciousness-raising, that suffering is revealed to be shared (and so non-idiosyncratic) and founded upon, bound up with, many of the shared certainties in the prevailing culture: as one feminist from the era puts it, “I’ve been

\(^{11}\) For a good account how of taken-for-granted aspects of our lives can come to be experienced as a problem, especially by oppressed groups, see Terri Elliott, "Making Strange What Had Appeared Familiar," in *The Monist* 77 (4), pp. 424 – 433.
forced to take off the rose-colored glasses and face the awful truth about how grim my life really is as a woman.” This linkage between suffering and what had been commonplace assumptions, barely worth asserting but rigidly enforced through an array of practices and institutions, provides the motivation for challenging them.

At the same time, the difficulties inherent in mounting such a challenge should not be underestimated. Recall that something’s having the status of a certainty renders it immune from doubt, not because it is guaranteed to be true but because it is not clear what it would mean to call it into doubt. One indication of the difficulties here is the kind of resistance feminists from this era report. At the time, the push-back to consciousness-raising efforts did not typically take the form of rational dialogue, of attempts to prove or justify the notions brought to the level of reflective awareness via these discussion groups. Instead, efforts at consciousness-raising were met with attempts to derail, dismiss, or denigrate such discourse: “Whole areas of women’s lives were declared off limits to discussion. The topics we were talking about in our groups were dismissed as ‘petty’ or ‘not political.’” Sarachild writes further:

Some people said outright they thought what we were doing was dangerous. When we merely brought up concrete examples in our lives of discrimination against women, or exploitation of women, we were accused of “man-hating” or “sour grapes.” These were more efforts to keep the issues and ideas we were discussing out of the realm of subjects of genuine study and debate by defining them as psychological delusions.

That the claims, conjectures, and suggestions emerging via consciousness-raising were dismissed as “psychological delusions” is indicative of the depths such procedures can manage to reach. Recall a basic feature of judgments associated
with the notion of hinge-propositions, both in the epistemic and moral cases: it is not at all clear what sense it makes to question or challenge such judgments, such that appearing to do so is deemed pathological, a serious deviation from normalcy and even sanity. Someone who, just like that, wondered aloud about the earth’s being more than ten years old would be understood as, at best, making a joke. Were the wonderment to persist, we would generally think he or she was devolving mentally, perhaps seriously. If that did not “hold fast” any longer, then what else would come into question? Outside of philosophy discussions, there can be something deeply unsettling about a challenge to what plays the role of a certainty: the challenge is apt to appear nonsensical, or at least dismissed as such, since seriously questioning a certainty throws so much else into question.

The fundamental claim on behalf of feminist consciousness-raising is its power to reveal the underlying misogyny of the prevailing culture. That its claims are dismissed as madness goes toward proving that point insofar as this misogyny consists of the acceptance of a raft of certainties, whose disturbance is perceived as a (misguided) threat that must be suppressed. Consider what Joreen Freeman says in “The Bitch Manifesto” about the threat posed by a Bitch: “Neither men nor women can face the reality of a Bitch because to do so would force them to face the corrupt reality of themselves. She is dangerous. So they dismiss her as a freak.” (Notes from the Second Year, p. 6) We can see in this tendency to demean and belittle the efforts of consciousness-raising another reason for the importance of consciousness-raising being a group endeavor, since participants can at least have

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12 OC passage about trees and “we’re just doing philosophy”
the reassurance of making sense to one another (or at least trying to without inviting immediate censure or, worse, threats of violence). Individually, the temptation to question a certainty is apt to be treated as merely a crazy thought, even by the person so tempted, but dialogue allows for the discernment of patterns of complaint and dissatisfaction, thereby lending coherence to the urge to question and a greater ability to withstand gestures of dismissal.

The point of the example of consciousness-raising is to suggest that where it makes sense to think in terms of confinement, it also makes sense to think about ways of finding out, of revealing both the fact and source of that confinement. Insofar as it makes sense to think of ourselves as “prisoners of our times,” then it also makes sense to ponder and probe the character of that confinement, as well as its overcoming. Consciousness-raising makes vivid the idea of what I have been calling invisible bars, but also the possibility of bringing them into view, as well as the motivation for doing so.

4. Reflections on the Reach of Reflection

By way of conclusion, I want to return to Kober’s understanding of the lesson of *On Certainty* when it comes to moral norms. What Wittgenstein shows, on his reading, is “why everyone is obliged to obey the epistemic and moral norms of the community he or she was brought up in.” If this were really so, then we would be not just prisoners of our time, but feckless ones where “feckless” carries the older sense of suggesting that we are feeble or helpless. On Kober’s reading, there is something we cannot do: we “cannot deliberately choose both the moral norms
which we want to acknowledge and follow and those which we want others to acknowledge and follow.” Since “we have already acquired a competence in obeying constitutive moral norms before we start reflecting philosophically on them,” there can be for Kober “no culturally ‘neutral’ point of view” from which such deliberation might proceed. The problem here, it seems to me, is the linkage between the possibility and efficacy of reflection and the idea of a culturally neutral point of view. Connected in this way, the implication is that in order really to reflect on our moral norms – to consider whether we really want to “acknowledge and follow” them – we would have in some way to step entirely outside our culture and then deliberate on the question of our allegiance to them. The lesson of On Certainty is its having shown that – and why – this requirement cannot be met.

What I have tried to show in this paper is that reflection need not aspire to the kind of neutrality Kober demands in order to be effective. “Working from within” – to use Quine’s famous slogan – can work well enough to bring to light, examine, and question what have until then functioned as certainties in one’s own life and in one’s society more broadly. Such an examination may be inevitably piecemeal and selective, but that is not enough to discredit its workings altogether. In § 344 of On Certainty, Wittgenstein writes: “My life consists in my being content to accept many things.” It does not follow from this that such contentment cannot give way to discontent. I may be content to accept many things, but then again, I need not be. I may be a feckless prisoner of my times, but then again, I need not be.