Within a System

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Many of Wittgenstein’s late remarks *On Certainty* concern what he calls our ‘system of beliefs’. He says that these beliefs ‘form a system, a structure’ (OC 102). In speaking of this system he uses various kinds of images. These images are often highly metaphorical and not always easy to harmonize with each other or with Wittgenstein’s more straightforward observations. Two sets of images in particular seem to be in irreconcilable conflict with each other. The first group of images emphasizes the idea of foundations while the second group stresses the apparent connectedness and coherence of our beliefs and concepts. This way of underlining coherence could well be read as an attempt to present the whole notion of foundations as doubtful or misleading. On the one hand, Wittgenstein keeps talking about the foundations, the grounds and the bases of our judgements and beliefs. On the other hand, he points out that what we may want to regard as foundations are by no means independent of what they seem to support; that, indeed, they are worse than idle unless they are in their turn given support by what at first glance appears to rest on them.

This line of thought is epitomized by one of the most striking images Wittgenstein uses in *On Certainty*. He writes: ‘I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house’ (OC 248).

This remark outlines the conflict I have mentioned. On the one hand, Wittgenstein employs the idea of a last basis of belief, judgement and talk. He does say that by declaring that I have two hands, for instance, ‘I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions.’ But in his next sentence he suggests that it would not be wrong to see the structure apparently supported by that basis as something which actually carries its purported basis. But if that is so, then this purported basis does not really do what we expect it to do in ascribing to it a foundational role. That here we are
dealing with some kind of conflict is undeniable. Equally undeniable is the need to find some way of resolving this conflict.

I think that a way out of this conflict can be found; and it can be found by following up on an allusion implicit in Miss Anscombe’s rather free translation of Wittgenstein’s words. In the first sentence of my last quotation from On Certainty Wittgenstein says that he has arrived at the *Boden* of his convictions, and a more literal translation of that word ‘Boden’ would be ‘ground’ or ‘bottom’.

The *Boden* of a house is its floor (but, as it happens, the word ‘Boden’ can also mean the loft, that is the space directly under the roof). Miss Anscombe, however, chooses the word ‘rock bottom’, which may serve to remind readers of another famous metaphor formulated by Wittgenstein. He uses it in his *Philosophical Investigations*, where he speaks of reaching bedrock in such a way that his spade is turned (see PI 217). A correct understanding of this metaphor, I shall want to suggest, will help us see a way out of the seeming conflict between the foundationalist and coherentist images employed in *On Certainty*. The most useful way of arriving at this way out, however, is not by attempting to walk a direct route but rather by taking a fairly roundabout path, leading through a number of further metaphors developed in Wittgenstein’s late remarks.

The first of these metaphors can be found in the second of the five notebooks used by the editors of *On Certainty* to compile that collection of remarks. Here Wittgenstein writes (and I quote at length):

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid. (OC 96)

The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other. (OC 97)

But if someone were to say ‘So logic too is an empirical science’ he would be wrong. Yet this is right: the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing. (OC 98)

And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away or deposited. (OC 99)