Hinges, philosophy and mind: on Moyal-Sharrock's certainty in action

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Abstract

Certainty in Action is an invaluable collection of Danièle Moyal-Sharrock's papers appeared after her seminal *Understanding Wittgenstein's* On Certainty (2004). It focuses on the centrality of action and claims that this is the distinctive trait of "the third Wittgenstein" – the one that, after the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* and the one of the *Philosophical Investigations*, wrote the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, the *Remarks on Colour* and *On Certainty*.

Keywords Hinges · Mind · Moyal-Sharrock · Wittgenstein

There is so much I agree with in *Certainty in Action* that it is difficult to add anything to what Moyal-Sharrock (2021) writes so eloquently and elegantly. Focusing on the last chapter, "Beyond Hacker's Wittgenstein", I think Moyal-Sharrock is right, against Peter Hacker, in stressing the importance of Wittgenstein's (1969) *On Certainty* – a fact that, by now, thanks to Moyal-Sharrock's and others' work, is indisputable for most Wittgenstein scholars. She is also right in stressing the fact that, contrary to the *Philosophical Investigations* or indeed the middle-period writings, in *On Certainty* the notion of grammar is expanded to comprise propositions that have the appearance of empirical ones but that, at least in context, play a normative role, such as "The Earth has existed for a very long time", "There are physical objects", "Nobody has ever been on the Moon" (at the time), "Here is a/my hand" (in Moore-like circumstances). These propositions play a normative role not so much about meaning, as about what needs to stay put for justification and knowledge to be possible, especially in the empirical realm.

I am not utterly convinced, however, that Wittgenstein was entirely clear about the status of what, by now, are known as "hinges" or "hinge propositions" (or even "hinge certainties" or "hinge commitments"). Such clarity and univocity are much more an aspect of Moyal-Sharrock's rational reconstruction of Wittgenstein's

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position than an element of Wittgenstein's third masterpiece. Surely, some important passages in *On Certainty* suggest that hinges are neither true nor false (OC §§ 94, 205); yet several other passages suggest that they are true, albeit in a minimalist, non-correspondentist and non-evidentialist sense (OC §§ 80, 83, 100, 108, 203, 206, 514–515); while quite a few more are neither here nor there (OC §§ 138, 193, 197, 199–200, 204, 222). Consequently, I am not convinced that any time the issue of hinges' truth becomes salient we would *ipso facto*, though inadvertently, be considering their doppelgangers (Moyal-Sharrock, 2021, 141) – that is, sentences which look the same as hinges but are descriptions and therefore genuinely empirical propositions rather than hinges. The idea of a doppelganger is nowhere to be found in *On Certainty*. What is found is the idea that *the same proposition* may be treated as a rule of testing, in some cases, and as something to be tested in other cases (OC § 98). Furthermore, since the *Philosophical Investigations* and the observations on family resemblance, which are only deceptively just about "game", "proposition", for Wittgenstein, is an umbrella term and propositions that – at least in context – fail at bipolarity, like hinges and avowals, may indeed be considered to fall into that category. Moyal-Sharrock and I have debated at length these issues. Thus, here I will not insist further on these points.

Moyal-Sharrock emphasizes the "animal" and the "enacted" as the *sui generis* resting point of the regress of justifications and takes this to be the revolutionary message of *On Certainty*. Surely, drawing attention to the fact that we act with a certainty that knows no doubt with respect to physical objects in our surroundings, or with respect to the deliverances of our perceptual and cognitive functions, such as memory (at least by and large), or that we unreflectively rely on others, as well as on textbooks and epistemic authorities is an important element of *On Certainty*. Yet, even Hume recognized that Nature is stronger than Philosophy and that we cannot but help live as we normally do and simply forget, or ignore the findings, produced in the philosophical study, that show that we cannot provide justifications – either empirical or a priori – for our most basic beliefs about the existence of an external world. Thus, if there is a new and revolutionary message in *On Certainty* with respect to skepticism, it cannot just be that – i.e. that reasons bottom out in enacted certainty and certainties.

I think that the important lesson for epistemology – which far exceeds the boundaries of Wittgenstein scholarship – is that reasons are so much as *possible* only by taking for granted at least some of what Wittgenstein lists as hinges in *On Certainty*. Hence, hinges, that may or may not be displayed *qua* hinges only in action, are not just the end point of justification. Rather, they are conditions of possibility of reasons and therefore are *constitutive* of epistemic rationality (Coliva, 2015). Hence, doubting them would not be the most rational of moves – *pace* Hume – but would be *impossible*, yet not because of a categorial mistake, as Moyal-Sharrock maintains, since doubt cannot be raised with respect to an action but only with respect to a proposition. Rather, it would be impossible because to doubt them we should have *reasons* to do so, while such reasons would be possible only by taking them for granted. This, together with the insistence that doubts are real and legitimate only if they can be backed up by reasons, and that Cartesian, global skepticism would deprive us of meanings and reasons which would be needed to formulate

and rationally sustain it, are – to my mind – Wittgenstein's most fundamental contributions to epistemology. Thus, while Moyal-Sharrock emphasizes the animal and enacted aspect of hinges and takes that to be the revolutionary message of *On Certainty*, I take their being constitutive of reasons for or against empirical propositions to be the groundbreaking message of Wittgenstein's third masterpiece.

I also agree with much of Moyal-Sharrock's rendition of Wittgenstein's "metaphilosophical" insights, from the *Philosophical Investigations* onwards. That is, that what is so obvious and embedded in our ways of operating with language and thought as to go without saying may become "invisible" to, if not altogether "hidden" from, our – philosophers' – gaze. Hence, Wittgenstein's remarks are not intended as theses and theories – that is, inferences to the best explanation, which may eventuate in positing unobserved entities, as is customarily done in the sciences and (problematically, for Wittgenstein) in metaphysics. Rather, they are intended as elucidations, reminders, and rearrangements of facts – about meaning, mind, reasons, etc. – that are so inherent in our practice as to have become invisible to us.

Yet, I think it is important to stress, first, that these reminders and re-arrangement are in the service of doing philosophy – that is, of seeing things aright *sub specie philosophiae*. We saw before an example with hinges and their role with respect to reasons, justification, knowledge and Humean and Cartesian skepticism. Seeing things as Wittgenstein proposes does allow one to tackle skepticism – an eminently philosophical issue – in a new light and to respond to it, by showing both what is right in it – reasons for our most basic beliefs cannot be produced – and what is wrong about it – asking for such reasons thinking that otherwise neither those beliefs nor the epistemic practices that hang on them would be rationally legitimate.

Second, it is important to acknowledge that these elucidations, reminders, and rearrangements may not strike every other philosopher as obvious or correct, without thereby entitling the convinced to accuse the perplexed of either speaking nonsense, or, more mildly, of missing Wittgenstein's revolutionary message altogether. That is, even though Wittgenstein did not conceive of his as philosophical theses, this does not mean that others cannot treat them as such, at least when they are doing philosophy as opposed to history of analytic. I, for one, am convinced that many ideas proposed or inspired by Wittgenstein will stand scrutiny and that we – contemporary Wittgensteinian philosophers – should not acquiesce in Wittgenstein's own professed attitude towards his own ideas. (In fact, it seems to me that Wittgenstein was the first to constantly raise possible objections to his way of looking at things to show its merits and limits as well). This, to me, is the approach that has the best chances of avoiding being dogmatic and of showing the relevance of Wittgenstein's ideas for several present-day philosophical debates (and even some non-philosophical ones). It is also the approach that sees Wittgenstein as a starting point for doing philosophy rather than the end point of philosophy – the author in which all answers to – or dissolutions of – philosophical problems or perplexities can be found. Furthermore, it is the approach that allows one to keep doing philosophy (with Wittgenstein as an alley), instead of forcing one to stop doing it. Whereas Wittgenstein may have professed otherwise, he never stopped doing philosophy as the last entry in *On Certainty* about Cartesian skepticism, written a week before

his death, shows. Nor was he convinced of having hit the mark all the time and solved or dissolved the initial problem. Why should we think otherwise, if not out of deference or intellectual laziness? Conversely, when he did hit the mark, argument will show to the unconvinced, if free from bias, that things are so.

In this respect, I think Moyal-Sharrock does a great job, especially in chapter 2, "Universal Grammar: Wittgenstein versus Chomsky", at engaging in detail with research programs, such as generative linguistics, to bring out the relevance of Wittgenstein's observations about language and rules, with potentially devastating effects on said program, by showing specifically where it goes wrong.

I wonder, however, if to bring Wittgenstein to bear onto contemporary debates at the interface between philosophy of mind and cognitive and neuroscientific studies, one needs to deny the existence of subpersonal representations altogether, as Moyal-Sharrock seems to do in the chapter on "Wittgenstein and the Memory Debate". For it seems to me that what goes by that name, at least in some empirical research, for instance about the study of perception, is not problematical. I am no expert on memory so I will not discuss that case directly, arguing by analogy – *if* there is an analogy – with the case of perception I am more familiar with. We know, for instance, that the light entering the eye is elaborated to produce in us a conscious – for the most part – layout of outer reality, which allows us to navigate the environment, engage in various kinds of action and that can prompt beliefs and judgements (in conceptually endowed creatures). A similar process takes place in infants and mammals (without belief and judgement, or at most with very rudimentary beliefs), and in many other creatures in the animal kingdom – albeit often without consciousness (Burge, 2010). How that process *causally* takes place is a complex computational problem, the understanding of which does posit – in our most advanced science – the existence of more or less complex representations (see Marr's theory of vision).

Of course, there is more to seeing. Yet I don't see how or why a philosopher who reads Wittgenstein's remarks on seeing and seeing-as, for instance, and finds them important – philosophy-wise – should or could object to that, or to the possibility that vision can largely occur unaided by concepts. What is important, to my mind, is to look at the details – to distinguish between levels of explanation, kinds of question raised, and at the role that posited entities, such as subpersonal representations, play in context. Depending on these details, the recourse to subpersonal representations may turn out to be problematic (like in generative linguistic and, according to Moyal-Sharrock, in the memory debate) or not (like in empirical studies on vision, in my opinion). Yet, the issue cannot be decided purely a priori, and I am curious to know if Moyal-Sharrock agrees with me on that, or whether she concurs with enactivists about dispensing with subpersonal representations all the way down.

Be that as it may, Moyal-Sharrock's unfailing and passionate defense of Wittgenstein's ideas for present-day research on language, mind and epistemology makes one at least remain hopeful that Wittgenstein's thought won't be relegated to the history of analytic closet and will in fact prompt others – philosophers and non-philosophers alike – to think for themselves.

Declarations

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