

Wittgenstein's epistemology

Wittgenstein's contributions to epistemology are contained mainly in his last, posthumously published work, *On Certainty* – a collection of notes written in the last eighteen months of his life, between 1949 and 1951. Occasioned by the visit to his former student Norman Malcolm, at Cornell University, they contain Wittgenstein's critique of G. E. Moore's "A defence of common sense" (1925) and "Proof of an external world" (1939). (For the relations between Wittgenstein, Moore and Malcolm, see Coliva 2010, Ch. 1, 2). They also go significantly beyond the criticism of Moore's position and contain the seeds of what, since Coliva (2015) and Coliva&Moyal-Sharrock (2017), has become known as "hinge epistemology".

In his papers, Moore had claimed that certain commonsensical truisms, like "I am a human being", "I have two human parents", "I have never been too far from the surface of the earth", as well as the premises of his celebrated proof – "Here is one hand, and here is another", from which Moore inferred that there is an external world via the further premise that hands are mind-independent physical objects – are empirical propositions, which are true and known for certain. He had also claimed that these propositions could be used to rebut idealist and skeptical theses. While idealists deny the existence of mind-independent physical objects, skeptics deny that we know that they exist. According to Moore, both go against common sense, or what is entailed by it, such as "There is an external world" and that we know that much. Thus, they hold something false or even contradictory (see Coliva 2010, Ch. 1).

Wittgenstein, in contrast, withholds attributions of knowledge to these propositions. For, in his view, knowledge depends on possessing stronger and independent reasons in favor of the proposition known. In the case of Moorean propositions this isn't the case, for Wittgenstein. In normal circumstances, my having two hands is as certain as anything I could adduce as evidence for it. "That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it" (OC 250). Our occurrent sensory evidence, encapsulated in the proposition "I have a visual impression as of a hand", isn't on epistemically stronger grounds than the "Here is my hand", for Wittgenstein (OC 90, 426). Moreover, if used as a starting point of a proof such as Moore's, it could provide evidence for "Here is a hand", only by already taking for granted the conclusion. A proof of "There is an external world" would thus be epistemically circular and thereby defective (Wright 1985, Coliva 2015, Ch. 3).

Still, for Wittgenstein, we shouldn't follow skeptics in doubting that we know Moorean propositions. For doubt too requires reasons and nothing in our experience speaks against those propositions. As Wittgenstein puts it in OC (93):

The propositions presenting what Moore 'knows' are all of such a kind that it is difficult to imagine why anyone should believe the contrary... Everything that I have seen or heard gives me the conviction that no man has ever been far from the earth. Nothing in my picture of the world speaks in favour of the opposite.

In fact, nothing in our experience *could* speak against them for, as we will presently see, they need to stay put for us to have evidence for or against ordinary empirical propositions. That is, meaningful doubt presupposes reasons, and these can only be produced if some propositions are taken for granted. As he writes, "the game of doubting itself presupposes certainty" (OC 115).

Contrary to Descartes, and similarly to Charles Sanders Peirce, Wittgenstein reverses traditional foundationalist projects that start with the suspension of belief in propositions about physical objects by insisting on the fact that without taking for granted many of them we could neither produce reasons for or against ordinary empirical beliefs, nor assign a meaning to many of our terms. As he writes, “I really want to say that a language-game is only possible if one trusts something. (I did not say “can trust something”)” (OC 509).

Connectedly, Cartesian skeptical scenarios, involving lucid and sustained dreams, are utterly nonsensical, for Wittgenstein. Anticipating a semantic strategy which would become popular with Hilary Putnam’s “Brains in a vat” (1981), Wittgenstein writes, in OC (383, 676):

The argument “I may be dreaming” is senseless for this reason: if I am dreaming, this remark is being dreamed as well – and indeed it is also being dreamed that these words have any meaning.

I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming. Someone who, dreaming, says “I am dreaming”, even if he speaks audibly in doing so, is no more right than if he said in his dream “it is raining”, while it was in fact raining. Even if his dream were actually connected with the noise of the rain.

That is, even if we were dreaming, we couldn’t meaningfully assert “I am dreaming” for those words too would be dreamt of. Just as we couldn’t meaningfully assert “It’s raining” while dreaming of the rain, even if it were raining outside, we couldn’t meaningfully assert that we are dreaming, even if we were. Thus, the very dreaming hypothesis couldn’t be meaningfully asserted. Far from raising a powerful skeptical challenge, Cartesian scenarios are illusory, and we can therefore discount them. (For opposite appraisals of this line of argument, see Coliva (2010, Ch. 3); Schönbaumsfeld (2017)).

If neither knowledge nor its denial or doubt are appropriate with respect to Moorean propositions, then what role do they play for us? According to Wittgenstein, and this is his positive contribution, they, and many other propositions about physical objects, are like ‘hinges’, which stand fast for us, and constitute “the inherited background” (OC 94) against which we produce reasons for or against ordinary empirical propositions. As he writes (OC 341-343):

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.

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are indeed not doubted.

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.

Thus, hinge propositions are about physical objects, and need to stay put, for us to be able to acquire evidence for or against ordinary empirical propositions, as well as to assign meaning to our words. For instance, we need to take for granted that there are physical objects if we want to use our sensory evidence as a reason for or against an ordinary empirical proposition such as “The cat is on the mat”. Similarly, we need to take for granted the long existence of the earth if we want to take fossils and

other findings as reasons for or against specific geological and historical statements. Likewise, we need to take for granted “Here is my hand” to assign its meaning to “hand”.

If we still talk of knowledge in their connection, we should specify that “I know”, with respect to them, would play a grammatical (OC 58), rather than an empirical role, which could be better rendered by other turns of phrase, such as “I can’t be wrong” (OC 8), “There is no such thing as a doubt in this case” or “The expression ‘I do not know’ makes no sense in this case” (OC 58), “it stands fast for me and everyone else that ...” (OC 116, 151), “a mistake is logically impossible” (OC 25-26, 155, 194, 454), etc. (See Coliva 2021 and Schönbaumsfeld 2021).

The certainty such hinge propositions enjoy for us, moreover, isn’t of a psychological nature. It isn’t because we find it psychologically impossible to doubt them that they stand fast for us (OC 194, 273, 494). This would be subjective certainty, whereas Wittgenstein is interested in objective certainty (OC 194, 203, 273). The latter isn’t to be equated with necessity, in his view (as we shall see). Rather, hinges are certain because they need – logically – to stay put for us to be able to acquire reasons for or against any ordinary empirical proposition (OC 245). Thus, they are certain because of the role they play with respect to our empirical inquiries and the determination of linguistic meaning. Without the former, the latter wouldn’t be possible either (OC 341-343). Yet, hinges are kept fixed by what rotates around them, not because they correspond to mind-independent facts (OC 152).

Wittgenstein denies that these propositions are the content of belief properly so regarded – i.e. belief that is knowledge-apt in being supported by evidence (Pritchard 2016). Wittgenstein mostly characterizes our attitude towards them as acceptance, assumption (OC 87, 134, 146, 171, 228, 343-344, 411, 429, 659), or trust (OC 125, 133, 150, 159, 337, 509), which require no evidence.

At places, Wittgenstein also claims that Moore’s truisms and premises are neither true nor false. By the time of *On Certainty*, he had abandoned a theory of truth as correspondence (OC 191, 199, 200, 203) – a thesis he had held in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (4.063) – in favor of an epistemic conception of truth (OC 200, 205). But if hinge propositions cannot be supported (or rebutted) by empirical reasons for they themselves are necessary for those reasons to be possible, then they are neither true nor false. As he writes, in OC (205, cf. 94, 162) “if the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not true, nor yet false”.

This has led some interpreters, most notably Moyal-Sharrock (2005), to deny that for Wittgenstein hinges are genuine propositions, as they are neither true nor false. Rather, *qua* hinges, they would be manifest only in our acting with no hesitation (OC 360), by relying on our hands, or by taking for granted that objects don’t appear and disappear out of their own accord.

Yet, interpreters have noted that bipolarity was no longer a mark of propositionality for the later Wittgenstein (Coliva 2010, Ch. 4). Not to mention the fact several times Wittgenstein talks of hinges as truths (OC 80-83, 100, 193, 206, 403, 514-515). In that case, though, their truth should be understood in a minimalist sense (Williams 2004 a, b, Coliva 2022, Ch. 6) – i.e., not as consisting in any substantive property – whether correspondence with mind-independent facts, or undefeated support by empirical evidence – but, rather, in a series of syntactical, and disquotational platitudes. Only in this sense, would our taking for granted certain propositions without subjecting them to further control, be tantamount to considering them true (OC 203-206, 212). This should not be

equated with a wild form of conventionalism, though, for (as we shall see) it is a product of our inherited and well-entrenched form of life (OC 105).

Nevertheless, the key point is that hinge propositions play a normative (OC 95, 98, 309, 319) rather than a descriptive role, for Wittgenstein (Wright 1985, McGinn 1989, Moyal-Sharrock 2005, Coliva 2010). Whereas they are about physical objects, their function isn't to provide a representation which needs to be verified. Rather, the representation they provide stands fast for us and allows us to acquire reasons for or against ordinary empirical propositions (OC 83, 96, 136, 167, 213, 273, 308, 401). Furthermore, very much like mathematical propositions, which stand fast in the face of contrary evidence, hinge propositions too are resistant to empirical revision. That is, just as we don't revise "2+3=5" if, after buying two apples and three oranges, we find out that we have only four fruits in the bag, the putative evidence we may have against hinge propositions is typically explained away and ascribed to deviant causes. For instance, if suddenly, a family member denied that they are called such-and-so, we would not consider it a good reason to start wondering what their name is. Rather, we would impute their strange behavior to a perhaps momentary lack of memory, due to a stroke, or to intoxication, etc. Thus, these hinge propositions constitute our "picture of the world" (OC 93-95). They remain fixed and characterize our "interpretation of experience" (OC 145).

A further innovative aspect of Wittgenstein's position is that hinge propositions aren't all on a par and aren't metaphysically necessary. As he writes in some of the most famous passages of *On Certainty* (OC 96-99):

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.

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.

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.

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.

Thus, some hinge propositions are more easily revisable than others (OC 167, 213, 273). "I have hands" may be a hinge in what would be considered "normal circumstances", but it may become an ordinary empirical proposition, subject to verification, after a car accident. Likewise, "Nobody has ever been on the Moon" was a hinge at the time Wittgenstein was writing (OC 106-111), and it is no longer one for us. By contrast, "The earth has existed for a very long time" is much less negotiable, as doing so would overturn disciplines such as history and geology. "There are physical objects" is similarly central to all our empirical inquiries and we couldn't give it up without thereby abandoning all of them too.

Thus, the greater stability of certain hinges isn't ultimately guaranteed by their correspondence with mind-independent facts, but by their role with respect to the epistemic practices that rotate around them. In this sense, "the propositions describing [our] world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology" (OC 95, 97). For they are fixed only as long as we engage in certain epistemic practices which presuppose them. Yet, they are essential to us as any mythology is to its believers. As Wittgenstein writes in OC (105):

All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system. And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments: no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life.

Finally, our world-picture may evolve, and some propositions, which were initially "removed from the traffic" (OC 210), may be re-immersed in it. What distinguishes Wittgenstein's position from its later Quinean kin (Quine 1951), however, is that it doesn't abolish the distinction between synthetic (empirical) and analytic (normative) propositions, by denying the legitimacy of the latter (OC 98). Even though the boundary between empirical propositions and rules isn't sharp (OC 309, 319), we can still draw such a distinction. For many propositions of the form of empirical ones (OC 97) do in fact play a normative rather than descriptive role, for him. Yet, they can sometimes cease to play it, thereby returning to function as ordinary empirical propositions, as other originally empirical propositions are turned into norms (OC 98-99).

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Abstract: This entry presents the main tenets of Ludwig Wittgenstein's contribution to epistemology. It focuses on his *On Certainty* with special attention to so-called "hinge propositions", their role within

our epistemic practices, their epistemic and semantic profile, as well as their resistance to skeptical doubts.

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