Knowing Knowing

In *On Certainty*, Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that in order for UNDERSTANDING, KNOWLEDGE, and CERTAINTY to arise, there must be a grounded systematic structure present. Dr. Cory Wright notes that "…a total unification [of Wittgenstein's three periods] may not be possible[.]" However, there does seem to be some thematic coherence throughout his works regarding sensical epistemological goals. In the *Tractatus (1921)*, this foundation is Reality itself, and the facts must correspond with it. In the *Blue and Brown Books (1933-1935)*, the system is the rules of the Language Game. In *On Certainty (1969)*, the grounding is a systematically sound Weltanschauung being constructed in the mind of a person such that their knowledge is self-consistent with its own previous evidence, as well as with others who are within the same realm of possible certainty. Although Wittgenstein was "Often associated with different forms of relativism," *(O'Grady, 2004)* I will argue that he was not a relativist due to the nature of his position regarding knowledge and certainty.

RELATIVISM is defined as 'the doctrine that knowledge, truth, and morality exist in relation to culture, society, or historical context, and are not absolute.' Contrary to the very definition of relativism, *On Certainty* argues that a system must be grounded on particular types of propositions in order for certainty to arise: hinge propositions. According to Wittgenstein, if we align our certainties with a properly grounded system, and then "…compare our system of knowledge with [another's] then theirs is evidently the poorer one by far" *(OC §286)*. This is not to say that we would be correct in claiming theirs to be the poorer, but the possibility of one epistemological system to be considered superior to another is in direct opposition to the most basic claims of relativism. Although it has been argued that a Wittgensteinian system need only meet the standards of self-consistency in order to be knowledge-bearing, this is not the case. If it were, why would Wittgenstein assert presuppositions of certainty upon even one's ability to play '…the game of doubting' *(OC §114-115)*? By this measure, some knowledge is even required to doubt. Although some have interpreted Wittgenstein's epistemological claims to be relativistic, he offered the seminal concept that, "If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not

true, nor yet false" *(OC §205)*. This suggests that some ground which is external to one's system of knowledge is necessary for internal certainty to arise, and also that such a ground must in some sense be available for comparison to internal certainty. It is upon this truth-paradox that an understanding of a hinge proposition may be built:

> P1: An empirical proposition must be grounded to be true.
> P2: If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true*, nor yet false. *(OC §205)*
> P3: A hinge proposition is a special kind of proposition upon which an empirical proposition <u>must be grounded in order to be *true*</u>.
> C: A hinge proposition does not have a permanent or fixed bivalent truth-value.

The role of hinge propositions requires focus on the deliberate use of the word 'yet' in P2 above. This alludes to the ebbing and flowing of hinge propositions; the possibility for temporal shifts is one of the most pivotal properties by which these grounds for certainty can be understood.

Wittgenstein posited that, "The general form of [a] proposition [is]: Such and such is the case" *(Tractatus 4.5)*. If a proposition in this form must be grounded in order to be true, then whatever is the ground for that truth cannot be considered '*true*, nor yet false.' If it can be said of any proposition that it is true or false in some context, then an empirical proposition cannot rely solely on that proposition for its truth or falsehood. Thus, a ground cannot be said to have a bivalent truth value, and must be presupposed as certain in order for knowledge to arise. For Wittgenstein, these grounds, or hinge propositions, are at the most foundational level of UNDERSTANDING, KNOWLEDGE, and CERTAINTY. The question then becomes: How does one accurately identify a hinge proposition? In his earliest work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein cautioned that, "Whereof one cannot speak, one must be silent" *(Tractatus 7)*, and one ought to heed his words in attempting to list all necessary and sufficient conditions of a hinge proposition. To say of some proposition, for example, 'THIS is a hinge proposition,' can be true or false—it can only be true if it is grounded upon a certainty which cannot be misunderstood and only a deranged person would deny. Thus, 'THIS is a hinge proposition,' is not a hinge proposition. In order to show an example of a hinge proposition, we must look to Wittgenstein's remarks considering possible conditions under which a person can be 'mistaken,' or in contradistinction ought to be considered 'confused or deranged.'

Comparisons between conditions in which a person can be mistaken in their knowledge versus those situations when one ought to be considered confused or deranged are pivotal tools by which Wittgenstein showed to his reader the role of hinge propositions in any system of knowledge. A 'mistake,' for Wittgenstein, necessarily has a grounding. As previously discussed, an empirical proposition, or a statement about the way the world is, can be true or false depending on its adherence to a grounding proposition. To that end, an empirical proposition that might be true or false in accordance with a certain spatio-temporal moment of a system holds within it the possibility for a mistake to be made. For example: a patient (A) wakes up in a hospital bed, hands wrapped in bandages. They feel their hands there, in that they have been for the duration of their life. They feel their fingers move when they attempt to move them. A doctor asks them, 'Do you have hands?' They reply, "Of course, they are right here where they have always been!" Once the bandages are unwrapped, to their horror, they realize that their hands have been amputated.

For Wittgenstein, this would be a *mistake*. The totality of their and all others' epistemological systems which—up to that moment—could have accounted for their having hands or not can incorporate either outcome. In this claim, there is no *derangement* that they have hands when they do not, as all of their absolute certainties allow for either to be the case. In a contrasting scenario, a different patient (B), born handless, wakes up in the same predicament. They, their parents, the doctor who delivered them, and everyone else who has ever interacted with them knows that they do not have hands. They are asked the same question: 'Do you have hands?' They don't feel their fingers that have always been there, as they were never there to begin with. If they were to answer that they did have hands, everyone that has ever known them not to have hands would be hard pressed to believe that they were absolutely certain that they did now. As Wittgenstein remarked, "Can we say: a *mistake* doesn't only have a cause, it also has a ground? I.e., roughly: when someone makes a mistake, this can be fitted into what he knows aright" *(OC §74)*. This 'knowing aright,' or the total system of one's certainties, has at its foundation a glut of hinge propositions. For patient (A), in the ambiguous moment before their bandages are unwrapped, they are at the threshold of a truth determination. Either outcome could be incorporated into their system of knowing

with no alteration of any major certainties supporting that system's totality. A false claim in this respect is considered a *mistake*. The claim that could not be incorporated into their system with such ease (that they now have hands, where they never did before) is considered a *mental derangement*. If hinge propositions do not 'yet' have a truth value, the patient's handless-ness is an occurrence wherein a hinge proposition *becomes* an empirical proposition, and a truth value is obtained. Many other certainties will be 'hinged' on this throughout the rest of their life. Not having hands will affect the totality of all new certainties regarding 'hand-having.' No matter how great their sense of denial, they cannot continue to use their hands as though they were still connected to their wrists.

Once a grounding proposition can be recognized, sensical epistemological goals can be acknowledged at the most basic level. In some ways, it is simply the self-consistency of systems of understanding that give way to being certain of some fact. In contrast, it is the consistency of a collective understanding of certain facts that allows for individual certainty. A proposition such as, "It is the case that we all experience the world the way it appears to us as individuals" has this kind of collective certainty. As an individual, one cannot deny that the world appears to them as it does. Moreover, if the world appears to all others in some way, then that is the way in which it appears to them. This kind of proposition is a statement upon which one relies for many certainties held about the individual experiences of others.

As Wittgenstein remarked, "The truths which Moore says he knows [when he says he knows that 'Here is one hand, and here is another,'] are such as, roughly speaking, all of us know, if he knows them. —Such a proposition might be e.g. 'My body has never disappeared and reappeared again after an interval'" *(OC §100-101)*. Though these remarks are separate and not to be taken as a contiguous statement, they nevertheless reflect a sentiment common to many hinge propositions: It is our individual certainty in both cases that allows us to claim, 'we know,' yet, it is also the conceptualization of everyone's ability to be simultaneously certain that gives rise to the knowledge of the individual. In neither case, however, can the exclamation 'I know…' lead necessarily to *knowing* that which one claims to know. When making a proposition about the world as it appears, doing so without the antecedent 'I

4

know…' is likely to be a superior method of transmitting that understanding. An empirical statement about the way the world appears to an individual is, after all, hinged on the proposition 'the way the world appears to me is the way it appears to me…'. This allows for certainty to arise, should it cohere with a properly grounded individual and collective epistemic system. Individual knowledge is required for the possibility of collective certainty to arise. In juxtaposition, collective knowledge is required for individual certainty to obtain. This is only one possible method of seeking understanding; it is unnecessary to think that there is only one way in which certainty can be had. Nor, should every method of pinpointing certainty be said to necessarily lead to being certain in every case at every time. As the target moves, the rifleman must adjust his aim.

The role of a hinge proposition in any system of judgment, by Wittgenstein's assessment, is crucial and particular. It is not a state of the world as-it-is that provides for its ability to ground empirical propositions as true, nor is it our knowing them. If "The utterance 'I know…' can only have its meaning in connection with the other evidence of my 'knowing'[,]…[a]nd a philosopher could only use the statement ['I know…'] to show that this form of speech is actually used…[,]" *(OC §432)* but not to show that he has true knowledge of the thing which follows the statement, we can at least eliminate the possibility that any proposition which begins with the utterance 'I know…' is a hinge proposition by necessity. In other words, 'I know…' does not necessarily ground a claim which follows it as true. If a proposition beginning with 'I know…' is not a statement which grounds the claim as true, then how can Wittgenstein have been asserting any relativistic claims about what ought to be considered truth? If RELATIVISM is a 'theory that knowledge is relative to the limited nature of the mind and the conditions of knowing,' how can an argument that rejects one's 'claiming-to-know' as a sufficient condition for knowledge be a relativistic one? The role of truth-grounding mechanisms throughout Wittgenstein's work places him firmly outside the boundaries of relativism. Although there does seem to be a vague flirting with concepts that appear prima facie relativistic, Wittgenstein is considered by some scholars, such as Michael Williams, to be a 'Contextualist.'

Contextualism, according to Williams, deals in finding "…the cure for all skeptical temptations *that ought to matter to us*[,]" *(Williams, 2007: 93)* and this is exactly the kind of mental therapy that Wittgenstein applied himself to. Norman Malcom credits Wittgenstein with having noted that:

> "What I give is the morphology of the use of an expression. … Furthermore, I made you see that it was absurd to expect the concept to conform to those narrow possibilities. Thus your mental cramp is relieved, and you are free to look around the field of use of the expression and to describe the different kinds of uses of it" *(Malcom, 1948: 43)*.

It is these multiple ways of viewing the usage of expressions and propositions by which Wittgenstein cemented his Contextualist attitudes. Williams argues that certainties in a Wittgensteinian system rely on particular METHODOLOGICAL NECESSITIES, or, "…standing presuppositions such that questioning them would lead one to question the competence of the form of inquiry they enable (*Williams, 2007: 102)*". According to Contextualism, the role of hinge propositions in any reasonable epistemological system is the inexorable grounding which leads to certainty. This is similar to the role of the rules of a language game. The rules may not necessarily describe the language, but the possible usage of it in a given context.

If one was to say, 'The sky is green,' and was color-deficient—perhaps all blue sensations appeared to them as green—and someone else was to respond that, 'No, the sky is blue,' they would be playing the same type of game—the game of observing the sky—but with different rules. A rule, in this case, can be thought of as a function of sensation. That is, some sensations come in, and in a 'normal' perceiver, some perception occurs. This function does not describe what it is like to *have* or *perceive* that sensation, but in order for the perception to occur, the rule must be followed. This situation, according to the Wittgensteinian argument, is completely acceptable. The totalities of both systems have the necessary mechanisms to correct the discrepancy between the two players. Person A need only explain to Person B that they see what everyone else sees as 'blue' as 'green,' and Person B can correct their beliefs regarding the other person's color-perception abilities. The possibility for this correction to obtain at all hinges on many other certainties that Person B holds to be absolute: that there are people; that people perceive the world through sight; that part of vision is interpretation of colors; that some people have the possibility to perceive colors abnormally; et cetera. According to Michael Williams, inquiry towards certainty requires

an open-endedness, or a potential for revisions. If a system requires a revision in order to reach towards a superior certainty to that which it currently holds, it cannot be said to be equally valid amongst all epistemic systems. These inequalities ought to dissuade curious minds from seeking Wittgenstein under the banner of Relativism.

In conclusion, in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein developed a CONTEXTUALIST approach to epistemology, not a RELATIVISTIC one. This approach requires a properly grounded systematic structure in order to be knowledge-bearing. For Wittgenstein, KNOWLEDGE, CERTAINTY, and UNDERSTANDING are grounded upon a particular type of proposition: hinge propositions. These grounds allow for and require revisions for reconcilability of knowledge between individuals within a collective. This set of groundings form a support that is required for CERTAINTY, KNOWLEDGE, and UNDERSTANDING to occur. An empirical proposition can be true or false only if properly grounded, and not solely because it fits neatly within the system of an individual, or a collective, but both. The concept that a self-consistent individual's claim to knowledge can be either a mistake or an absolute confusion suggests that the epistemological system proposed by Wittgenstein cannot be a relativistic one, even if the context of a certainty can change from time to time. Any argument which concludes that Wittgenstein was a Relativist ought to be dismissed on the grounds that the claimant has either made a 'mistake' (or is 'deranged!'). Surely, by Wittgenstein's suggestion, they ought to revise their system of knowledge to account for an understanding of hinge propositions as proper grounds for certainty; after all, even their potential to doubt his epistemological system relies on them.

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