THE NATURE OF CERTAINTY IN WITTGENSTEIN’S *ON CERTAINTY*
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Abstract

In this thesis I examine the concept of certainty in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, with a focus on the collection of remarks entitled *On Certainty*. In the first part I examine two essays of G.E. Moore that initiated Wittgenstein’s discussion of certainty and critique of Moore’s two essays. As I show, Wittgenstein believes that Moore misunderstood the use of the expression of I know in relation to the propositions of common sense. Instead, Wittgenstein believes that the common sense propositions stand for a certainty that belongs to the language-game itself, a certainty that stands fast for everyone who participates in the language-game, like hinges on which the rest of our knowledge and doubt turn. The rest of my thesis is spent examining three different interpretations of this notion of hinge certainty. The first is hinges as presuppositions to combat skeptical arguments, offered by the philosophers Crispin Wright and H.J. Glock. The second is that hinges are Wittgenstein’s version of foundationalism, serving as the foundational framework of human language, a notion primarily advocated by the philosophers Avrum Stroll and Danièle Moyal-Sharrock. I then examine the interpretation of hinges as learned norms of judging and acting that we must display certainty in if we are to learn a language. This is the interpretation of Rush Rhees and Meredith Williams, and is the position that I support. Finally, I show that contrary to some the remarks in *On Certainty* express a unified theme, rather than a series of disjointed and contradictory ideas.
Introduction

Throughout his philosophical work Ludwig Wittgenstein expressed a concern with the nature of language and meaning. As Rush Rhees wrote: “Wittgenstein’s earliest and last concern was: what does it mean to say something?”¹ This concern extends to certainty and its role in language. In later works, such as Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics, Wittgenstein investigated the role of certainty in mathematical proof. He says of mathematical proof: “The picture (proof-picture) is an instrument producing conviction.”² This conviction is a fundamental part of our mathematical activity and the goal of mathematical proofs is to produce such conviction. The series of remarks that has been collected under the title On Certainty is Wittgenstein’s most sustained discussion of the topic of certainty and its role in life and language.

On Certainty begins as a response to two of G.E. Moore’s essays “Defense of Common Sense” and “Proof of an External World”.³ In the first of these essays Moore defends a common sense view of the world against skepticism. In the second he attempts to provide a proof for the existence of the external world. Wittgenstein’s response is to challenge the idea that Moore’s ‘common sense’ views are a form of knowledge. Rather he believes that they stand fast as an ungrounded certainty that underlies language. This

certainty cannot be defended against skeptical doubts because it is a certainty where doubt loses all plausibility, where it no longer makes sense to speak of doubting. Wittgenstein’s contention is that Moore failed to grasp the distinction between knowledge that is based on grounds and the certainty which has no grounds because it is a certainty in judgments and norms that constitute our practices of giving grounds and producing evidence. This certainty precedes both knowing and doubting. Such concepts can only make sense within a language-game, where practitioners must actively display their certainty in making judgments and employing concepts.

In this thesis I hope to show what Wittgenstein believed this kind of certainty amounts to. In the first chapter I will begin by examining the two Moore essays that inspired Wittgenstein’s work. Then I will turn to Wittgenstein’s criticism of Moore on the issue of knowledge versus ungrounded certainty. Moore discovers in his defense of common sense that he cannot provide the evidence of how he knows that the common sense view is true. In his proof of the external world he admits that he does not know how he can provide a definitive proof for the premise of his argument. Wittgenstein believes that this shows that Moore’s claims do not form a body of knowledge, but constitute an ungrounded certainty that is part of the very fabric of our language-games. Because the common sense view is disconnected from any grounds, the common sense view is not known, although it stands fast for Moore and many others.

The main part of this thesis will deal with the nature of this kind of certainty and the role it plays in our acting and thinking. This certainty is embodied in something Wittgenstein calls ‘hinges’, seemingly empirical proposition that have come to stand fast,
like a hinge on which the rest of our thinking turns. The certainty we have in them is an expression of the role this kind of proposition plays in our language.

In these chapters I will evaluate three interpretations of this hinge kind of certainty. By examining where interpretations go wrong we can gain a better understanding of how Wittgenstein saw this kind of certainty and its importance in the course of our practices. I will argue in chapter 4 that the interpretation of Rush Rhees and Meredith Williams provides the most accurate understanding of this certainty. In Rhees and Williams’ interpretation certainty functions as a background to our way of acting and speaking. It is a basic trust in a way of judging and speaking that is learned in becoming a member of a community. It is a certainty in a way of going on that we have without reason or ground. We can only carry on with language when we have a shared sense of the obvious embodied in our agreeing with certain judgments. Judging in conformity with others is necessary if we are to speak and communicate as a community. Learning to judge requires a basic trust in those who teach us such judgments. This means coming to have certainty in various judgments and adopting a background of implicit certainties in the course of learning a language.

This approach means certain kinds of doubt are excluded by the very nature of our language-games: “But when is something objectively certain? When a mistake is not possible. But what kind of possibility is that? Mustn’t mistake be logically excluded?”

Wittgenstein’s idea is that it is part of the logic of language that certain doubts are excluded.

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excluded, that they have no place. Wittgenstein shows that doubting is only coherent within a framework of certainty and that not all of our certainty is a form of knowledge in the normal sense. We can have certainty without justification or grounds. One of Wittgenstein’s key ideas is to show that this lack of justification is not an insufficiency, but the natural state of our lives. When we run out of justifications for our way of acting and speaking we are not lacking something that we need possess: “Somewhere we must be finished with justification, and then there remains the proposition that this is how we calculate.”

Finally I will examine the claim that On Certainty has no unifying theme and that it should be treated as a series of separate parts of unequal value, each containing a different perspective that actually oppose one another in certain respects. I hope to show that this is not the case and that On Certainty does express similar ideas and approaches throughout. Although On Certainty may not have been composed as a single, standalone work, Wittgenstein again and again revisits many of the same ideas in the course of the remarks, making them worthy of a single interpretation. This is what I hope to provide.

5 Wittgenstein, On Certainty, §212.
Chapter 1

Moore’s Arguments and Wittgenstein’s Criticism

In this chapter I will examine G.E. Moore’s essays, “A Defense of Common Sense” and “Proof of an External World”, which influenced Wittgenstein’s view of certainty. Then I will examine how Wittgenstein criticizes Moore on the basis that his common sense view of the world is not something that is actually known, as Moore had believed. Knowledge must be connected to grounds, but as we will see Moore’s common sense view and his proof of an external world are disconnected from any grounds which could make his claims into knowledge.

“A Defense of Common Sense”

This essay lays out two truisms of what Moore calls the common sense world view:

I am going to begin by enunciating, under the heading (1), a whole long list of propositions, which may seem, at first sight, such obvious truisms as not to be worth stating: they are, in fact, a set of propositions, every one of which (in my own opinion) I know, with certainty, to be true. I shall, next, under the heading (2), state a single proposition—each class being defined, as the class consisting of all propositions which resemble one of the proposition in (1) in a certain respect. 6

The first truism includes propositions such as:

There exists at present a living human body, which is my body. This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continuously ever

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since, though not without undergoing changes; it was, for instance, much smaller when it was born, and for some time afterwards, than it is now.\footnote{Moore, “A Defense of Common Sense,” 107.}

This list mostly includes propositions about the existence of Moore’s body, the existence of other bodies, the reality of perception, space and time. These are propositions that are fundamental to our sense of the world and being human. Every one of these propositions is one that Moore believes he knows with certainty to be true.

The second truism is about the knowledge other people have of corresponding propositions about themselves and their experiences:

In the case of very many (I do not say all) of the human beings belonging to the class (which includes myself) defined in the following way, i.e., as human beings who have had human bodies, that were born and lived for some time upon the earth, and who have, during the lifetime of those bodies, had many different experiences of each of the kinds mentioned in (1), it is true that each has frequently, during the life of his body, known, with regard to himself or his body, and with regard to some time earlier than any of the times at which I wrote down the propositions in (1), a proposition corresponding to each of the propositions in (1), in the sense that it asserts with regard to himself or his body and the earlier time in question (namely, in each case, the time at which he knew it), just what the corresponding proposition in (1) asserts with regard to me or my body and the time at which I wrote that proposition down.\footnote{Moore, “A Defense of Common Sense,” 109.}

So Moore is claiming that for each of the propositions that he claimed to know with certainty in truism (1), a large number of human beings know corresponding propositions in regards to themselves. This is why Moore labels this the common sense view, because it is a body of knowledge shared by a great number of people.

Moore believes that there are two positions that oppose the common sense worldview, both of which can be refuted. The first contradicts other things the people
who claim this view already know; the second is directly self-contradictory. Both views are incompatible with the second truisms and hence the first truisms as well, since the second truisms make reference to the first.

The first position is that none of the propositions in the second truisms are actually true. Moore writes:

If any of the classes of propositions in (2) is such that no proposition of that class is true, then no philosopher has ever existed, and therefore none can ever have held with regard to any such class, that no proposition belonging to it is true. In other words, the proposition that some propositions belonging to each of these classes are true is a proposition which has the peculiarity, that if any philosopher has ever denied it, it follows from the fact that he has denied it, that he must have been wrong in denying it. For when I speak of ‘philosophers’ I mean, of course (as we all do), exclusively philosophers who have been human beings, with human bodies that have lived upon the earth and who have at different times had many different experiences. If, therefore, there have been any philosophers, there have been human beings of this class; and if there have been human beings of this class, all the rest of what is asserted in (1) is certainly true too.

If there are philosophers who deny that the propositions in Moore’s second truisms are true, that means that there have been people who have had bodies and lived upon the earth (which all philosophers have), and therefore these very same propositions must actually be true because the only way they could be false is if no actual philosophers existed to deny them. Holding a view denying the truth of the propositions in (2) (which make reference to those in (1)) could only make sense on the condition that no human being, and therefore no actual philosopher, has ever existed to hold such a view. This

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means that the existence of philosophers who have denied the truth of these propositions cannot be regarded as: “having any weight at all against it.” Moore writes: “if I know that they have held such views, I am, *ipso facto*, knowing that they were mistaken.”

The second skeptical position is that we cannot *know* that the second common sense truism is actually true. Moore explains that this view is self-contradictory:

Now the remarkable thing which those who take this view have not, I think, in general duly appreciated, is that, in each case, the philosopher who takes it is making an assertion about ‘us’—that is to say, not merely about himself, but about *many other human beings as well*. When he says ‘No human being has ever *known* of the existence of other human beings beside myself’, and ‘There have been many other human beings beside myself, and none of them (including myself) has ever known the existence of other human beings’.

Moore believes the skeptic, in saying no one can know these propositions to be true, accepts that other human beings exist and therefore that we do know that the common sense view is true. To allow that there are ideas of common sense is to admit that we do know that they are true because the very existence of common sense beliefs: “logically entails the proposition that many human beings, beside the philosopher himself, have had human bodies, which lived upon the earth, and have had various experiences, including beliefs of this kind.” Moore actually contends that all philosophers agree with his common sense position:

*all* philosophers, without exception, have agreed with me in holding this: and that the real difference, which is commonly expressed in this way, is only a difference between those philosophers, who have *also* held views

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inconsistent with these features in ‘the Common Sense view of the world’, and those who have not.\footnote{Moore, “A Defense of Common Sense,” 118-9.}

All philosophers, according to Moore, implicitly accept the common sense view, and therefore are always inconsistent when they deny its truth or say we cannot know that it is true.

However, Moore accepts that there are propositions in the common sense worldview that we can deny knowledge of without contradiction. His response to the argument that he does not know such propositions to be true is captured in the following: “In answer to this question, I think I have nothing better to say than that it seems to me that I do know them, with certainty”.\footnote{Moore, “A Defense of Common Sense,” 118.} His counter to the argument that he does not know the truth of these propositions is the reassertion that he does know. What he says next is even more important:

It is, indeed, obvious that, in the case of most of them, I do not know them \emph{directly}: that is to say, I only know them because, in the past, I have known to be true other propositions which were evidence for them. If, for instance, I do know that the earth had existed for many years before I was born, I certainly only know this because I have known other things in the past which were evidence for it. And I certainly do not know exactly what the evidence was. Yet all this seems to me to be no good reason for doubting that I do know it. We are all, I think, in this strange position that we do know many things, with regard to which we know further that we must have had evidence for them, and yet we do not know how we know them, i.e., we do not know what the evidence was.\footnote{Moore, “A Defense of Common Sense,” 118.}

Moore thinks that the common sense view is true only because he knows other propositions to be true, but he no longer knows exactly what these propositions were. We
can know the truth of the common sense views even if how we know it is no longer accessible to us. The question of how we know the truth of these views is separate from the question of whether we do know them to be true in the sense that one’s answer to the latter is not dependent on having an answer to the former. That is, I can justifiably say that I know $x$ even if I now lack knowledge of any of the evidence for $x$’s truth. This effectively separates knowledge from the grounds that we can produce in support of that knowledge. This particular kind of ignorance (of the evidence for our knowledge claims) is consistent with our knowledge of all the things Moore has claimed we know and is also true of our relationship with much of the rest of our knowledge.

“Proof of an External World”

In this essay Moore attempts to give a definitive proof of the existence of an external world. He first analyzes what types of things are external to our minds, differentiating between things ‘presented in space’ like after-images but which are not ‘to be met with in space’ and are not ‘external to our minds’, with things that are ‘to be met with in space’ and are ‘external to our minds’, such as our bodies. Objects which can be met with in space are not necessarily objects presented in space. To say an object might be met with in space implies: “that a ‘thing’ might be perceived; but from the fact that a ‘thing’ might be perceived, it does not follow that it is perceived; and if it is not actually perceived, then it will not be presented in space.”18 The list of items that can be met with

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in space includes “bodies of men and of animals, plants, stars, houses, chairs, and shadows”\(^\text{19}\). If you prove that any of these types of objects exist, you will have proven that there are objects to be met with in space. If, for example, we could show that at least two chairs existed we will have successfully shown that at least two objects are to be met with in space because the chairs’ existence might be perceived but do not depend on being perceived.

Not everything that is external to our mind, such as another person’s pains, can be met with in space, but if something can be met with in space then it must be external to our minds because to be met with in space is to be an object whose existence that does not depend on any mind perceiving it.\(^\text{20}\) If Moore is to prove that there is an external world he must show that there are objects that can be met with in space, because by definition this would mean that there are objects external to the mind. This is exactly what he sets out to do in the last part of “Proof of an External World.”

His proof is the existence of his hands: “By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, ‘Here is one hand’, and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, ‘and here is another’.”\(^\text{21}\) He believes that this demonstration constitutes a perfectly rigorous proof of the external world. The existence of his hands does not depend on his or anyone else’s perceiving them therefore they can be met with in space and are external to his mind. However, as E.D. Klemke notes, Moore’s demonstration with his hands cannot be the complete proof. Klemke notes many

\(^{19}\) Moore, “Proof of an External World,” 157.
\(^{20}\) Moore, “Proof of an External World,” 164.
\(^{21}\) Moore, “Proof of an External World,” 166.
additional premises (20) must be added from Moore’s analysis of what constitutes an external object to reach the conclusion that an external world exists. The analysis of objects that can be met with in space provides the extra premises implicit in his demonstration with his hands that allows him to reach the desired conclusion.22

Moore lists three conditions which any legitimate proof must satisfy: the premises must be different from the conclusion, the premises are something which he knows and not merely believes, and finally the conclusion really does follow from the premises. Moore’s contention is that his proof meets all three conditions. First the premise is different from the conclusion:

The conclusion was merely ‘Two human hands exist at this moment’; but the premiss was something far more specific than this—something which I expressed by showing you my hands, making certain gestures, and saying the words ‘Here is one hand, and here is another’. It is quite obvious that the two were different, because it is quite obvious that the conclusion might have been true, even if the premiss had been false.23

It is entirely possible that two human hands may exist at this moment, even if Moore’s hands did not exist when he made his gestures, thus the premise is not synonymous with the conclusion, satisfying the first condition. The second condition, that the premises must be known, is more problematic. How can Moore know that his hands are in front of his face at the time he claims? He is certain that his hands are in front of his face when he holds them up and says ‘here is one hand’ and states that it would be ‘absurd’ to suggest that he did not in fact know this. Finally the third condition is satisfied because the

22 Klemke, A Defense of Realism, 329.
23 Moore, “Proof of an External World,” 166.
conclusion really does follow from the premise. With all three conditions satisfied Moore believes he has given a successful proof of an external world.

But he recognizes that many philosophers may not be satisfied by his proof. He gives us what he believes to be the reason why:

Some people understand ‘proof of an external world’ as including a proof of things which I haven’t proved. It is not quite easy to say what it is that they want proved—what it is that is such that unless they got a proof of it, they would not say that they had a proof of the existence of external things; but I can make an approach to explaining what they want by saying that if I had proved the existence of external things, but, in the absence of such a proof (which, of course, I have neither given nor attempted to give), they will say that I have not given what they mean by a proof of the existence of external things. In other words, they want a proof of what I assert now when I hold up my hands and say ‘Here’s one hand and here’s another; and, in the other case, they want a proof of what I assert now when I say ‘I did hold up two hands above this desk just now’. 24

What other philosophers want is a proof to establish that he does know that his hand is there when he claims it is. Actually they want a more general proof showing how any such proposition can be known. For these philosophers, absent this additional proof, his proof cannot be complete. Moore’s reply to this is that he has neither tried to provide such a proof nor does he believe that any such proof can be given. Why does he think that he cannot provide such a proof? For example, in order to provide such a proof he would have to prove that he is not at that moment dreaming. He is certain that he is not dreaming and claims to have conclusive reasons for thinking that he is not dreaming, but this is not the same as having an actual proof, which he claims not to have. One problem is that in

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order to establish such a proof he would have to give all of the evidence that he is not
dreaming, which he cannot do.25

But his contention is that this deficiency is not a reason to reject his proof. He
believes he can know things for which he has no proof:

I can know things, which I cannot prove; and among things which I
certainly did know, even if (as I think) I could not prove them, were the
premises of my two proofs. I should say, therefore, that those, if any, who
are dissatisfied with these proofs merely on the ground that I did not know
their premises, have no good reason for their dissatisfaction.26

Again Moore is suggesting that he can know things without being able to demonstrate
how it is that he knows. He is certain that his hands are in front of his face but he cannot
give us any proof to definitively show how he could know such a thing. Once again this
separates the question of knowing how we know from the question of whether we do
know, such that we do not need an answer to the first question to give an affirmative
answer to the second. Moore feels that he can know p (in this case, the premise of his
proof) is true with certainty, even if he is ignorant of how to prove that p is true. In
“Defense of Common Sense” Moore claimed that he did not need to remember the
evidence for the common sense worldview to still know that it is true. In both cases
Moore is making the claim that ignorance in how one could establish that one knows, of
the evidence or proof for our claims, is compatible with actually knowing that something
is the case with certainty. With his proof of an external world, Moore wants to say that he
knows with certainty that his hands are in front of his face without establishing a proof of

how he could know any such thing. The premise is unproven in the way Moore thinks would satisfy other philosophers, but this is consistent with his knowing the premise is true. As Annalisa Coliva writes, for Moore: “it doesn’t matter if one doesn’t know how one knows that here there are two human hands, or, more precisely (cf. 7), if one can’t prove that one knows it. For such ignorance is entirely consistent with the fact that one does know such a thing.”

Moore believes the skeptic thinks the following relationship must hold: “(1). If you can’t show how you know that \( p \)—that is, prove that you do know it—and can’t, therefore, rationally redeem your claim to knowledge, you don’t know that \( p \).” This seems to be the kind of relationship that Moore wants to deny in claiming to have knowledge of many things without being able to demonstrate how he knows them or how he could establish them through a proof. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, reaffirms this relationship between knowledge and proof. As Coliva writes, part of Wittgenstein’s strategy will be to deny that affirming this relationship must lead to a skeptical conclusion:

> the epistemological lesson that can be elicited from Wittgenstein’s reflections in *On Certainty*, which proceeds from taking scepticism quite seriously, will capitalize on the sceptical point——while putting forward considerations which would block the unwanted consequences of that view: namely, that we can’t know any of the ordinary empirical propositions we usually take ourselves to know.

In the remaining chapters we will see how Wittgenstein attempts to work this out, but first we will begin by examining his criticisms of Moore.

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The meaning of language-games

On Certainty starts with Wittgenstein examining the use of ‘I know’ in the two Moore essays we have examined. A major part of this criticism is his objection to the way Moore has used the term ‘I know’. Wittgenstein says at proposition 11 of On Certainty: “We just do not see how very specialized the use of ‘I know’ is”.30 His belief is that Moore missed the specialized role that ‘I know’ plays in our language and conflates knowledge with the certainty that belongs to the language-game.

What would it mean to speak of a certainty that belongs to the language-game?

Wittgenstein’s description of language-games in the Philosophical Investigations gives us a clue:

We can also think of the whole process of using words in (2) as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games “language-games” and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game. And the processes of naming the stones and of repeating words after someone might also be called language-games. Think of certain uses that are made of words in games like ring-a-ring-a-roses. I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven, a “language-game”.31

A language-game is the practice of using words and the activities in which the use of words is interwoven. It is a form of life in which language is a part. By placing importance on language-games, Wittgenstein is placing priority on the wider practices and contexts in which he believes language has meaning. A certainty which belongs to the language-game is a certainty that any person who participates in these practices must

exhibit. It is an absence of doubt in how we are to proceed in the practice. In the example of the builders that Wittgenstein references in the passage I quoted, having a certainty that belongs to the language-game will be a certainty not just in the meaning of words but also in how to respond to them, the kind of actions that must be undertaken, the type of object that a word references. To have doubts about these things would indicate that one has the status of a novice in the language-game.

This kind of certainty raises a distinction between the subjective sense of certainty that an individual may have and the certainty that belongs to the nature of the language-game. From remark 391 of On Certainty we see the following: “Imagine a language-game ‘When I call you, come in through the door’. In any ordinary case, a doubt whether there really is a door there will be impossible.”\(^{32}\) A doubt about the existence of the door is impossible if the language-game is to be meaningfully played. If we are to continue this simple language-game a doubt about the door can have no place. This is what it means to have a certainty that belongs to the language-game, rather than the personal feeling of certainty an individual possess about their beliefs.

\textit{Wittgenstein on the use of ‘I know’}

A major focus of Wittgenstein’s criticism is Moore’s use of ‘I know’ in his two essays. Moore argues in both essays that he has knowledge of many things (the common sense propositions, the existence of the external world) even though he cannot remember what his evidence is (“Defense of Common Sense”) or cannot provide a proof for the

premise of his own argument that the external world exists (“Proof of an External World”). Moore says in “A Defense of Common Sense” that his not knowing the evidence for the common sense propositions is “no good reason for doubting that I do know it.” Wittgenstein believes that Moore’s use of ‘I know’ is problematic in this context and in fact ignores the logic for the correct use of ‘I know’.

Wittgenstein’s contention is that certain commitments follow from the assertion ‘I know’. When one uses the term ‘I know’ they are making a claim about their ability to give grounds that could establish that they know. Wittgenstein examines the meaning of ‘I know’ at remark 18:

“I know” often means: I have the proper grounds for my statement. So if the other person is acquainted with the language-game, he would admit that I know. The other, if he is acquainted with the language-game, must be able to imagine how one may know something of the kind.”

Wittgenstein is specifically connecting the meaning of the phrase ‘I know’ to something one possesses in support of a claim to know. Knowledge must be objectively established apart from the claim to know: “It needs to be shewn that no mistake was possible. Giving the assurance ‘I know’ doesn’t suffice. For it is after all only an assurance that I can’t be making a mistake, and it needs to be objectively established that I am not making a mistake about that.” Because any claim to know must be established apart from the claim itself, the claim that I know on its own cannot prove that I do know. We cannot take

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33 Moore, “A Defence of Common Sense,” 118.
the assurance ‘I know’ as evidence that the person has the knowledge they claim, rather it
is the ability to give good reasons which serves that function:

If I don’t know whether someone has two hands (say, whether they have
been amputated or not) I shall believe his assurance that he has two hands,
if he is trustworthy. And if he says he knows it, that can only signify to me
that he has been able to make sure, and hence that his arms are e.g. not still
concealed by coverings and bandages, etc. etc. My believing the
trustworthy man stems from my admitting that it is possible for him to
make sure. 36

Here we see Wittgenstein once again frame the concept of knowledge specifically in
terms of an ability to make sure and give reasons. The use of ‘I know’ is framed as a
signifier of something the speaker can do. As Thomas Morawetz writes the relationship
between knowing and acting is logical, not causal; it is not a matter of knowing causing
me to act in a certain way, but the ability to act in a certain way providing the logical
criterion for saying ‘I know’. 37 It is this logical criterion that makes ‘I know’ meaningful,
as Coliva writes: “the fact that in general our use of ‘to know’ in the first person present
be made on the basis of grounds—whatever they contextually happen to be—is a criterion
for saying that the use of ‘I know’ was meaningful though, perhaps, mistaken.” 38 We see
Wittgenstein make the connection between meaningful expressions of ‘I know’ and the
ability to give grounds at remarks such as 175, 378, and 484.

Without grounds the normal meaning of ‘I know’ gets distorted. This distortion is
at the heart of what Wittgenstein sees as problematic with Moore’s use of ‘I know’: “The

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37 Thomas Morawetz, “The Contexts of knowing,” Readings of Wittgenstein’s On
Certainty, eds. Danièle Moyal-Sharrock and William H. Brenner (Amherst: University
38 Coliva, Moore and Wittgenstein, 62.
wrong use by Moore of the proposition ‘I know...’ lies in his regarding it as an utterance as little subject to doubt as ‘I am in pain’.”39 Wittgenstein’s suggestion is that Moore’s use of ‘I know’ without grounds renders it an expression of his own personal state, as with ‘I am in pain’, rather than an objective claimed based on grounds. In doing so, Wittgenstein believes Moore conflates ‘I know’ with concepts such as ‘believe’, ‘surmise’ and ‘doubt’:

Moore’s view really comes down to this: the concept ‘know’ is analogous to the concepts ‘believe’, ‘surmise’, ‘doubt’, ‘be convinced’ in that the statement “I know...” can’t be a mistake. And if that is so, then there can be an inference from such an utterance to the truth of an assertion. And here the form “I thought I knew” is being overlooked.—But if this latter is inadmissible, then a mistake in the assertion must be logically impossible too. And anyone who is acquainted with the language-game must realize this—an assurance from a reliable man that he knows cannot contribute anything.40

If knowledge is no different than believing, surmising or doubting, then we should always be able to infer from the statement ‘I know’ that the person does know. But this forgets the expression ‘I thought I knew’.

If I believed \( p \), and \( p \) turns out not to be true, it is not necessarily true that I did not actually believe \( p \), one could say that I only believed \( p \) wrongly. If I mistakenly doubt that \( p \) that does not mean that I did not doubt that \( p \). The same cannot be said of knowledge. The statement ‘I thought I knew’ shows that a person could at one time have asserted ‘I know’ but then realize they did not know. That is to say a person could realize that they were mistaken in their assertion of ‘I know’. But this possibility is ruled out by treating ‘I

know’ as equivalent to ‘I believe’ or ‘I doubt’. This would have the consequence that ‘I know’ could never be used incorrectly. Asserting ‘I know’ would always be appropriate. But someone giving us an assurance alone that they know, even if they are trustworthy, cannot contribute anything to the question of whether that person does know.

If we are to grant that a person does in fact know it must be on the basis of objective proof. The difference between ‘I believe’ and ‘I know’ that Wittgenstein believes Moore has obscured directly relates to the criterion for the correct use of ‘I know’, as Coliva says: “Hence, while belief is subjective—that is to say, it doesn’t need to satisfy public criteria of justification—knowledge is objective: the fact that a subject knows something must be decidable on the basis of intersubjective criteria.”41 This distinction needs to be made if we are to avoid falling into what Wittgenstein sees as a mistaken understanding of the role that ‘I know’ typically plays.

Knowledge and Mental States

We have seen that Wittgenstein believes there is an important difference between the statements ‘I know’ and ‘I believe’. The distinction between the two expressions is one that he thinks is obscured by Moore’s use of ‘I know’. Wittgenstein wants to show that such a distinction cannot be made by any mental state. No distinct mental state must correspond to ‘knowledge’ and ‘belief’. Our mental state when we say ‘here is my hand’ cannot be the difference between knowing it and merely believing it. Wittgenstein makes this point at remark 42:

41 Coliva, Moore and Wittgenstein, 60.
One can say “He believes it, but it isn’t so”, but not “He knows it, but it isn’t so”. Does this stem from the difference between the mental states of belief and of knowledge? No.—One may for example call “mental state” what is expressed by tone of voice in speaking, by gestures etc. It would thus be possible to speak of a mental state of conviction, and that may be the same whether it is knowledge or false belief. To think that different states must correspond to the words “believe” and “know” would be as if one believed that different people had to correspond to the word “I” and the name “Ludwig”, because the concepts are different.\(^{42}\)

That knowledge is a separate concept from belief does not guarantee that there is any difference in the mental state corresponding to the two words or that any distinct mental state must correspond to the two words at all. Annalisa Coliva believes that Wittgenstein relates this criticism directly to Moore’s own writing:

On Wittgenstein’s view, Moore therefore conflates the *psychological* impossibility of doubting them with their *logical*—that is to say, *objective*—certainty and treats both doubting and knowing with certainty as two mutually exclusive mental states. That is to say, from the fact that he can’t doubt his truisms, Moore infers that he knows them with certainty. Hence, from realizing that he isn’t—in fact that he finds it psychologically impossible to be—in the mental state of doubting them, Moore concludes that he thereby knows them with certainty. By so doing, he conceives of knowledge along the lines of the misleading image that, in Wittgenstein’s view, is so captivating. For one’s own knowledge will then be a mental state, which is introspectively available to one.\(^{43}\)

We see such a model of knowledge described by Wittgenstein at remark 90:

“*I know*” has a primitive meaning similar to and related to “*I see*” (“*wissen*”, “*videre*”). And “I knew he was in room, but he wasn’t in the room” is like “I saw him in the room, but he wasn’t there”. “*I know*” is supposed to express a relation, not between me and the sense of a proposition (like “*I believe*”) but between me and a fact. So that the *fact* is taken into my consciousness. (Here is the reason why one wants to say that nothing that goes on in the outer world is really known, but only what happens in the domain of what are called sense-data.) This would give us a

\(^{42}\) Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §42.

picture of knowing as the perception of an outer event through visual rays which project it as it is into the eye and the consciousness. Only then the question at once arises whether one can be certain of this projection. And this picture does indeed show how our imagination presents knowledge, but not what lies at the bottom of this presentation.\textsuperscript{44}

Coliva writes what this image of knowledge entails:

The model of vision at the basis of this picture of knowledge entails that just as one can’t fail to see what is present in one’s visual field, similarly one can’t fail to see what is present in one’s conscience. However, on this model, the external world isn’t the primary object of knowledge; rather sense data are. Hence, when I say ‘I see red’— where ‘red’ is the name of the sense datum— I can’t be mistaken (bar forms of linguistic impropriety or of inattention). Of course I can be mistaken about the colour of the physical object responsible for my sense datum, but not about the latter. If, then, knowledge is modelled after the paradigm of vision, it will have to preserve such a certainty and infallibility. Hence, on the one hand, the content of one’s knowledge must be transparent to the subject and infallibly known to him and, on the other, one’s awareness of knowing such a content will have to be immediate.\textsuperscript{45}

As we can see, on this particular model of knowledge, outer events get projected into the mind in the form of sense-data, where they can be transparently and infallibly known by our consciousness. One can become immediately aware of whether one knows simply by introspecting into one’s consciousness. But as Coliva notes there are two major problems with such a view. First:

\begin{quote}

it doesn’t account for our use of ‘to know’ with respect to all empirical propositions we say we know. For if, strictly speaking, we know only what is given to our conscience, but nothing can be said to be known with respect to the objects or states of affairs, which should stand in a causal relation with the sense datum, then our claims to knowledge with respect to empirical objects and states of affairs will be inappropriate.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{44} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §90.
\textsuperscript{45} Coliva, \textit{Moore and Wittgenstein}, 57.
\textsuperscript{46} Coliva, \textit{Moore and Wittgenstein}, 58.
This problem is mentioned by Wittgenstein at remark 90 when he writes that this model of knowledge leads us to think that we cannot know what is happening in the external world, but only in the realm of sense-data. On this model of knowledge, the sensory data are projected into our consciousness, such that we only have knowledge of what is inside of our consciousness, not the things that supposedly cause the sense-data. Since the actual empirical world does not appear to our consciousness, we do not have knowledge of this world but only of the sense data that are projected into our minds. But now it seems as if this does not account for our statements of ‘I know’ about the empirical objects that we take ourselves to know.

Secondly, as Coliva details this model of knowledge also does not account for the expression ‘I thought I knew’. As Coliva writes:

For if knowledge is a mental state, which is infallibly known to the subject who has it, then there can’t be mistakes in recognizing it. Hence, I can’t be mistaken about the fact that I know that \( p \). Moreover, if such a mental state guarantees that what is known is the case, then \( p \) can’t be false. According to Wittgenstein, this means to assimilate ‘I know’ to the avowal [Äußerung] ‘I’m in pain’. For in the latter case, I can’t fail to know that I am in pain and my sincere avowal suffices to guarantee that I am in pain (OC 178).47

The possibility of being mistaken about knowledge, of ‘I thought I knew’ being a meaningful expression, is eliminated on this model. If my knowledge is a mental state then I will always have direct and infallible access to it and my sincere avowal of ‘I know’ will always be correct. The criterion for the meaningful use of ‘I know’ will be one that is privately available to the speaker, so they will be certain that they are using it

correctly. But as we have already seen, Wittgenstein believes that there is a public
criterion for the use of ‘I know’ that does not relate to a person’s mental state and that this
is shown by the phrase ‘I thought I knew’. For it is the case that we can believe we know
something but then later are shown to be wrong in our judgment. For Wittgenstein the
mental state of the person claiming to know is neither sufficient, because one can claim to
know and not know, nor is it necessary, because one could know without claiming it, for
knowledge.48

As we have seen, Wittgenstein suggests that Moore falls into this view of
knowledge as a mental state by making the utterance of ‘I know’ “as little subject to
doubt as ‘I am in pain’.”49 This treats ‘I know’ as just an expression of my internal state
of which I will always be correct in asserting. As Coliva notes, an indication that
Wittgenstein thinks Moore has employed this model is remark 6: “Now, can one
enumerate what one knows (like Moore)? Straight off like that, I believe not.—For
otherwise the expression ‘I know’ gets misused. And through this misuse a queer and
extremely important mental state seems to be revealed.”50 This enumerating ‘straight off’
seems to require the model whereby Moore can simply inspect his own mental state to see
what he knows, without having to fulfill any other criteria or considering the possibility
of doubt, as Coliva again writes of Moore: “For he seems to be assenting to each of his
truisms, thereby assuming them within his conscience, then exclude the fact that it would
be possible for him to doubt them and finally conclude that he therefore knows each of

them with certainty.”\footnote{Coliva, \textit{Moore and Wittgenstein}, 59.} Wittgenstein thinks that Moore is focused on his psychological lack of doubt, and so misses out on the logical criteria for the meaningful use of ‘I know’. And this is the importance of the phrase ‘I thought I knew’, for it shows that the psychological state of those making the claim ‘I know’ does not meet these criteria.

Thomas Morawetz says that with these remarks Wittgenstein is pointing out two fallacies around the use of ‘I know’. Morawetz writes: “The first is the view that the utterance ‘I know’ is like ‘I believe’ or ‘I think’ or ‘I surmise’ in that, said in appropriate circumstances and without deceit (including self-deceit), is ‘self-insuring’ and cannot be a mistake.”\footnote{Thomas Morawetz, \textit{Wittgenstein & Knowledge: The Importance of On certainty} (Amherst : University of Massachusetts Press, 1978), 87.} As we have seen, Wittgenstein believes that the correct use of ‘I know’ is framed in terms of an ability to show how it is that one knows. This is the claim one makes by saying ‘I know’. To conflate ‘I know’ and ‘I believe’ is to eliminate the distinction between knowing and thinking one knows. But as Wittgenstein says at remark 580: “It might surely happen that whenever I said ‘I know’ it turned out to be wrong (Shewing up).”\footnote{Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §580.} If Moore cannot give us the assurance of how he knows, we feel no reason to grant that he does know.

Morawetz identifies the second fallacy:

The second fallacy is that because the truth of \( p \) follows from the fact of my claiming to know \( p \), the truth of \( p \) is the cause of my claiming to know \( p \). The second fallacy appears plausible because, again barring deceit, I will not claim to know unless it \textit{seems to me} I know; knowing \textit{seems} a condition of my nondeceitful behavior of claiming to know. But this is again to forget the possibility of a mistake. Thinking that I know, rather
than knowing, is to be identified with my nondeceitful behavior of claiming to know.\textsuperscript{54}

Asserting $p$ appears to guarantee that I know $p$ because knowing $p$ seems to be the condition of asserting $p$. This model construes my knowing $p$ as being a necessary condition for my asserting $p$. Knowing $p$ seems like a necessary step in my asserting $p$, so I could not assert $p$ without knowing $p$. But the assertion of ‘I know’ alone is not evidence that a person does know. A person making a claim to know must be in possession of facts that show they are correct; the restatement that ‘I know’ without such facts cannot be a meaningful reply to a person that does not believe us. Wittgenstein makes this point at remark 520:

Moore has every right to say he knows there’s a tree there in front of him. Naturally he may be wrong. (For it is not the same as with the utterance “I believe there is a tree there”.) But whether he is right or wrong in this case is of no philosophical importance. If Moore is attacking those who say that one cannot really know such a thing, he can’t do it by assuring them that he knows this and that. For one need not believe him. If his opponents had asserted that one could not believe this and that, then he could have replied: “I believe it”\textsuperscript{55}. Again we see the way in which Moore’s use of ‘I know’ amounts to little more than ‘I believe’. But different commitments follow from the two statements: “If someone believes something, we needn’t always be able to answer the question ‘why he believes it’; but if he knows something, then the question ‘how does he know?’ must be capable of being answered.”\textsuperscript{56} This is why the counter-assertion of Moore to the skeptic that he does

\textsuperscript{54} Morawetz, \textit{Wittgenstein & Knowledge}, 88.
\textsuperscript{55} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §520.
know is inadequate: “Moore’s mistake lies in this—countering the assertion that one cannot know that, by saying ‘I do know it’”.\(^{57}\)

This shows us why Wittgenstein thinks Moore’s use of ‘I know’ is problematic. Without any grounds for his claims Wittgenstein believes that Moore does not *know* the common sense world view in this typical sense. What Wittgenstein is interested in is the objective use of ‘I know’, one that is different from the subjective certainty that is the basis of the normal sense of ‘I know’. Subjective certainty is the certainty that we have as a product of our subjective information, as Coliva writes “it is a function of a subject’s state of information.”\(^{58}\) This is the subjective certainty that we possess because of grounds and is capable of being mistaken. At remark 8 Wittgenstein writes that: “The difference between the concept of ‘knowing’ and the concept of ‘being certain’ isn’t of any great importance at all, except where ‘I know’ is meant to mean: I can’t be wrong.”\(^{59}\) Wittgenstein is interested in the ‘I know’ that expresses ‘I can’t be wrong’, the objective certainty that belongs to the logic of the language-game. As Coliva describes it: “A certainty which, in its turn, doesn’t depend on the infallibility of a subject, but on the logic of our language and of our practices of enquiry. Such a certainty, therefore, will be somehow grammatical and normative, rather than psychological.”\(^{60}\) If this kind of certainty is grammatical in nature, then ‘I know’ is inappropriate to describe it, as Wittgenstein writes:

\(^{58}\) Coliva, *Moore and Wittgenstein*, 75.
\(^{60}\) Coliva, *Moore and Wittgenstein*, 76.
If “I know etc.” is conceived as a grammatical proposition, of course the “I” cannot be important. And it properly means “There is no such thing as a doubt in this case” or “The expression ‘I do not know’ makes no sense in this case”. And of course it follows from this that “I know” makes no sense either.  

Both parts of ‘I know’ are inappropriate to describe this kind of certainty. The certainty is not the product of an individual’s position in relation to facts, but the proposition’s role in the language-game, so the ‘I’ is not important. Similarly the term ‘know’ is meaningless because it is not based on grounds that a person has and it is a certainty that has no doubt. We do not need to give grounds to convince someone that we know, because any one who participates in the language-game must share this certainty. It is a certainty that we demonstrate by our competent participation in our practices.

Wittgenstein’s suggestion is that those who participate and understand a language-game cannot have doubts at certain points: “When we say ‘Certain propositions must be excluded from doubt’, it sounds as if I ought to put these propositions— for example, that I am called L.W.—into a logic-book. For if it belongs to the description of a language-game, it belongs to logic.”  

This is the certainty that is embodied in the concept of the hinge proposition. The nature of hinge propositions and the certainty that they embody is what we will explore in the following chapters.

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Chapter 2

The nature of hinges: three interpretations

At remark 341 Wittgenstein writes: “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.”63 The image of ‘hinges or hinge proposition’ suggests propositions standing in place giving the rest of our thought and language support by their fixity. As we saw in the last chapter Wittgenstein believes that there is a form of certainty that ‘stands fast’ which cannot be classified as knowledge in the usual sense. The kind of certainty that stands fast for us and many others seems to be embodied in the idea of ‘hinge’ propositions. Because these propositions are described as standing fast and being exempt from doubts, they seem representative of the role this special kind of certainty plays. Wittgenstein’s description of hinges suggests he believed that our certainty in these propositions is an expression of their role in life and language. By understanding the role such propositions play we can gain a greater understanding of how Wittgenstein believed this form of certainty is lived out.

In this chapter I will examine the interpretation of two scholars, Crispin Wright and Hans-Johann Glock, who re-interpret hinge propositions as presuppositions that we have an unearned entitlement to. In chapter 3 I will examine the framework reading offered by the scholars Avrum Stroll and Daniele Moyal-Sharrock. Under their interpretation hinges are what they call a non-epistemic foundation or framework for the

rest of language. Finally, in chapter 4 I evaluate the interpretation offered by Rush Rhees and Meredith Williams, who treat hinge propositions as learned certainties that initiate us into a community, without which we could not carry on language. I hope to show that this final interpretation is the most accurate one.

**Hinges as presuppositions**

The first interpretation of hinges that I will discuss is the entitlement reading of *On Certainty*, found mainly in the Crispin Wright essay “Wittgensteinian Certainties”. Wright believes that we should see hinge propositions as occupying an essential role in the epistemic life of human beings, without which we could not rationally function. We have what he calls an ‘unearned warrant’ to presuppositions that make rational life possible for human beings: “that need to be made in living out our conception of the kind of world we inhabit and the kinds of cognitive powers we possess.”64 Hinge propositions serve as presuppositions that we are entitled to hold as a result of our limitations as human beings.

Wright frames these entitlements as a potential response to what he calls ‘I- II- III skepticism’. He describes this skepticism in the following way:

> Type II propositions can be justified on the evidence of type I propositions. The evidence provided by type I propositions for type II propositions is information-dependent, requiring *inter alia* collateral warrant for a type III proposition. So: type III propositions cannot be warranted by transmission of evidence provided by type I propositions for type II propositions across

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a type II to type III entailment. But: type III propositions cannot be warranted any other way. And: type III propositions could be false.65

In the case of Moore’s proof, this means that the initial claim that Moore is seeing his hand (type I) is supposed to be justify the claim that here is a hand (type II) but cannot do this without the additional warrant that there is an external world (type III), meaning that the type III proposition (which is supposed to be the conclusion of the argument) cannot be warranted by a transmission of the evidence in the type I proposition to the type II proposition entailing the type III proposition. The problem is that type III propositions cannot be warranted in any other way and could be false, meaning we cannot take it for granted.

In order for Moore’s initial experience of seeing his hand to serve as evidence that here is his hand and hence that the external world exists, he needs the information contained in the conclusion that the external world exists, but the existence of the external world is what the argument was meant to prove in the first place. As Wright phrases it: “the status of Moore's experience as a warrant for his original premise, ‘Here is a hand’, is not unconditional but depends on needed ancillary information....”66 Moore’s proof would then stand as a primary example of what Wright refers to as transmission failure, because the transmission of evidence from the premise across the entailment does not give us warrant for the conclusion, falling prey to this form of skepticism.

Wright is concerned with the circumstances under which an epistemic warrant for a premise transmits, or as the case may be fails to transmit, across an entailment to a

conclusion. He describes the conditions for transmission: “a particular warrant for the premises of an entailment is transmitted to its conclusion only when one's path to that warrant does not require picking up knowledge of the conclusion en route, or depend on some form of prior entitlement to it.”67 The skeptical challenge to Moore’s proof of an external world is that such a transmission does not occur, that Moore needs information contained in his conclusion to give him warrant for the use of his original premise as evidence.

This is where Wright turns to Wittgenstein’s discussion of hinges as a possible solution to this form of skepticism. He observes that in On Certainty Wittgenstein extends the notion of rule into empirical propositions. The notion is that mathematics and logic are rules or norms of enquiry and certain empirical propositions can also fall into this category. The proposition that ‘I have two hands’ can become a norm of our thinking:

> In normal circumstances, ‘I have two hands’ will function as a norm. My certainty that I have two hands will ‘stand fast’ above the flow of evidence making, e.g., the sight of my hands into a confirmation of the functioning of my visual system, rather than of their existence.68

On Wright’s reading this does not mean the norm is not empirically based, but that the norm is treated as a superior kind of evidence:

> The thrust is rather that if your certainty that you have two hands would dominate a sensory impression that represented them as missing, then you are implicitly prioritizing one kind of evidence—something like: your lifelong experience of yourself as handed, together with the absence from your experience of any worrying tendency of material objects abruptly and inexplicably to go missing—over another.69

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This priority of being handed over contrary evidence is part of the logic of the language-game, not justified by experience. These are what Wright refers to as ‘norms - in - context’ or standing certainties, “certainties one brings to any normal context, as contrasted with convictions acquired in a particular context.” These are the rules that govern enquiry, constituting what stands as a normal circumstance.

The norm in context is the first classification of hinge propositions that Wright makes. Wright breaks down hinges into three classes of proposition:

1. Propositions (simple arithmetical equalities, ‘I have two hands’) which it is our practice, always or normally, to insulate from disconfirming evidence, and which thereby serve as, in effect, rules for the evaluation—redirection—of the significance of such evidence;
2. Propositions (‘My name is C.W.’, ‘This calculation is correct’) which are supported—by normal standards—an overwhelming body of evidence, whose significance would have to be overridden if they were doubted;
3. Propositions of type III (‘The earth exists’, ‘Physicals objects continue to exist when unperceived’, ‘The earth has existed for many years past’) to doubt which would have the effect of undermining our confidence in a whole species of proposition, by calling into question the bearing of our most basic kinds of evidence for propositions of that kind.

The second group of propositions, like ‘my name is Colin’, are supported by such an overwhelming body of evidence that to doubt it would be to put a whole network of other beliefs in question. The third propositions are those that are like the ‘type III’ propositions that are fundamental to a particular genre of empirical inquiry, such as history. A doubt about one of these propositions would prevent us from having confidence in propositions from a whole field of thought. All three kinds are united by being rules of evidence:

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71 Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” 42.
The cases are, however, unified—so I read Wittgenstein as suggesting—by their constituting or reflecting our implicit accepting of various kinds of rules of evidence: rules for assessing the specific bearing of evidence among a range of germane propositions, rules for assessing the priorities among different kinds of evidence, and rules for connecting certain kinds of evidence with certain kinds of subject matter.\(^\text{72}\)

These propositions are seen as rules that determine how we form knowledge. Wright sees Moore’s mistake as trying to articulate these rules as propositional knowledge:

One dominant theme of *On Certainty* is that some things that Moore misguidedly took himself to know are actually effectively the articulation, in declarative propositional garb, of such rules, our unhesitating acceptance of which allows for no defense in terms of the idea of knowledge.\(^\text{73}\)

Even more importantly these rules are groundless, something Wright recognizes as an explicit part of *On Certainty*. He quotes Wittgenstein as saying: “At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded.”\(^\text{74}\) He believes that such a statement is in danger of bringing us to a skeptical conclusion, for it is the very thrust of skepticism that our knowledge claims rest on groundless presuppositions.\(^\text{75}\) His suggestion is that Wittgenstein avoids a skeptical conclusion through the notion of rule:

In each of the three kinds of case that we have distinguished, it is the suggestion of *On Certainty* that a proposition’s ‘standing fast’ for us is to be attributed to its playing a role in or reflecting some aspect of the way we regulate enquiry, rather than being presumed—erroneously—to be an especially solid product of it. Sceptical argument purports to disclose a lack of cognitive pedigree in a targeted range of commitments. Rules, however, don’t need a cognitive pedigree.\(^\text{76}\)

\(^{72}\) Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” 42.
\(^{73}\) Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” 42.
\(^{75}\) Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” 42.
\(^{76}\) Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” 43.
Since the rules define the nature of the game they cannot be ‘wrong’. We may choose to use different rules, abandoning old ones in favor of the new, but we would not be doing so because one set of rules is right or wrong. This is suggested by Wittgenstein at remark 496: “This is a similar case to that of showing that it has no meaning to say that a game has always been played wrong.”

Wright rejects this solution. The rules of any given practice can only be excused from cognitive evaluation if the practice does not have an “overall point which a badly selected rule might frustrate.” But empirical enquiry does have a point: discovering the truth. Thus it would seem to be the case that our rules of enquiry, both norms-in-context and type-III proposition, do have a point that they must answer to and their usage should reflect this. Wright takes it that this is our intuitive view. We intuitively feel that there is a fact of the matter about such cases, saying of Wittgenstein’s approach to rules that: “the very capacity of scepticism to disturb shows that it is not our intuitive view.”

Wright’s goal is to offer an interpretation of On Certainty that will satisfy these intuitions and avoid joining a debate over the nature of meaning. This is the notion of entitlement or unearned warrant. He develops the notion of entitlement from remarks in On Certainty such as this:

One cannot make experiments if there are not some things that one does not doubt. But that does not mean that one takes certain presuppositions on trust. When I write a letter and post it, I take it for granted that it will arrive—I expect this. If I make an experiment I do not doubt the existence of the apparatus before my eyes. I have plenty of doubts, but not that. If I

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77 Wittgenstein, On Certainty, §496.
78 Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” 43.
79 Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” 47.
do a calculation I believe, without any doubts, that the figures on the paper aren’t switching of their own accord, and I also trust my memory the whole time, and trust it without reservation. The certainty here is the same as that of my never having been on the moon.\textsuperscript{80}

The primary lesson that Wright draws from this paragraph “is that one cannot but take certain things for granted.”\textsuperscript{81} In the course of any epistemic investigation we must take certain things on trust. This means we can have a warrant for certain propositions directly, without inference from other propositions, simply by exercising our basic cognitive abilities. This ‘unearned’ warrant is derived from their necessity in the course of forming any warrant:

Because they are needed to underwrite the validity of any warrant one acquires, the general constraint just stated places (specific forms of) such presuppositions beyond the range of what may be confirmed by inference from the proposition that one takes oneself to have warranted.\textsuperscript{82}

These presuppositions will include at any given time: “the proper functioning of the relevant capacities, the suitability of the occasion and circumstances for their effective function, and indeed the integrity of the very concepts involved in the formulation of the proposition in question.”\textsuperscript{83} Any cognitive achievement requires making presuppositions of some kind; Wright believes that this is a necessary truth of our limited cognitive capacity. Even if we choose to revise or investigate our presuppositions this process itself requires making new presuppositions. Thinkers must be willing to take what he calls “a

\textsuperscript{80} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}. §337.
\textsuperscript{81} Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” 48.
\textsuperscript{82} Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” 48.
\textsuperscript{83} Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” 48.
risk on the reliability of my senses, the amenability of the circumstances.”84 No enquiry can possibly investigate every presupposition we need to make without entering into an infinite regress of presuppositions.

A proposition P can function as such a presupposition: “if to doubt P would be a commitment to doubting the significance or competence of the enquiry.”85 There are two specific conditions that must be met for P to be this kind of presupposition:

(i) there is no extant evidence against P and (ii) someone pursuing the relevant enquiry who accepted that there is nevertheless an onus to justify P would implicitly undertake a commitment to an infinite regress of justificatory projects, each concerned to vindicate the presuppositions of its predecessor.86

These presuppositions are, according to Wright, different from what he has defined as hinges because of their context specific nature, but notes two points of analogy with the type III hinges:

First, both kinds of proposition articulate something a thinker must inevitably take for granted if she is to credit herself with the achievement of any warrants at all of a certain kind, the type III propositions conditioning the acquisition of defeasible inferential warrants while the context-specifics engage both the inferential and non-inferential case. Second, presuppositions of each kind will unavoidably lack earned warrant at the point at which they need to be made.87

Although Wright develops his notion of entitlements in a different way from Wittgenstein, he is clearly basing this notion on Wittgenstein’s concept of hinges. Wright assumes that although these presuppositions may change from context to context they

84 Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” 49.
86 Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” 51.
87 Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” 49.
play the same necessary role as type-III propositions do and both are the product of our limitations as human beings.

Because these presuppositions are not the same as the type III propositions Wright does not see them as a direct response to the I-II-III skepticism which initially motivated his discussion. Wright says:

> The problem with type III propositions is not that—like ‘my visual system is functioning properly on this occasion’—to accept that there is an onus to justify them in any particular context in which they are presuppositional would be to accept an infinite regress of similar justificatory obligations, but rather that, failing some independent response to the I-II-III argument, one has no idea how to justify them at all.\(^{88}\)

With the presuppositions that Wright has been discussing the problem is that accepting an onus to justify them leads to an infinite regress of justificatory projects. Type III propositions on the other hand are such that we do not even know how to begin justifying them. But Wright believes that the notion of presupposition can still be extended to the type III propositions: “the spirit of the foregoing ideas might foreseeably be extended to cover these special commitments.”\(^{89}\) The type III propositions will be part of what we will come to presuppose:

> And wherever such is indeed the justificational architecture, it will be plausible that a type III proposition—actually, a strengthened form of those illustrated earlier—will form part of the informational setting we presuppose in order for the relevant transition to rank as justified.\(^{90}\)

Wright believes that this focus on the role presuppositions plays in the formation of knowledge is the central message of *On Certainty*:

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89 Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” 51.
the insight that to be a rational agent pursuing any form of cognitive enquiry—whether within or outside one's own epistemic locality—means making presuppositions which—at least on the occasion—are not themselves the fruits of such enquiry and are therefore not known. 91

We have already seen Wright quote Wittgenstein at 337 of On Certainty as evidence for this idea in Wittgenstein’s thought. Wittgenstein’s suggestion at remark 344 also seems to echo Wright’s thought: “My life consists in my being content to accept many things.” 92

Hans-Johann Glock, in his essay “Knowledge, Certainty and Scepticism: In Moore’s Defence”, offers a similar interpretation of the role of hinges in our cognitive life. Hinges are propositions that can serve as knowledge without any proof or evidence. Glock says that although many philosophers accept that there are rational beliefs which are not based on evidence or proof this is usually thought to apply to statements like ‘A rose is a rose’. But Glock believes that it is part of On Certainty’s notion of hinge propositions that this can also apply to empirical statements, such as ‘here is my hand’. Because to lose certainty in such statements would be to cast all other knowledge into doubt, preventing me from continuing any rational thought, Glock says that we have “no sane alternative to accepting hinge propositions.” 93 And this defeats skeptical arguments because the “assumptions behind sceptical arguments are neither self-evident, nor evident to the senses or to memory, nor fundamental in any other respect.” 94 Our common sense

91 Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” 53.
92 Wittgenstein, On Certainty, §344.
beliefs are more rational than skeptical arguments, meaning that we have a claim to know them with certainty. ⁹⁵

Glock’s interpretation shares many qualities with Wright’s notion of entitlements. In both we are entitled to hold certain beliefs because they are required for rational life. In Wright’s view, we are rationally required to presuppose certain propositions if we are to gain any knowledge at all. It is our limitations as human beings that require us to take a risk on these propositions; the acquisition of knowledge can only be done from within these limitations. Similarly with Glock, because these kinds of propositions are necessary to the acquisition of any knowledge, we have a rational claim to know that they are true. So in both interpretations we have Wittgenstein contending that some propositions are so central to rational life that we have a claim to them either as presuppositions for which we have an unearned entitlement (Wright) or as a form of knowledge (Glock).

As I showed before, there are lines in *On Certainty* which appear to support this interpretation of hinges. Wright cites the remarks from 341 to 344 in *OC* as evidence for his view. At remark 342 Wittgenstein says “That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.” ⁹⁶ He agrees that it is part of the logic of our investigations that not every belief will be investigated. Wright quotes remark 163:

> We check the story of Napoleon, but not whether all the reports about him are based on sense-deception, forgery and the like. For whenever we test anything, we are already presupposing something that is not tested. Now am I to say that the experiment which perhaps I make in order to test the

truth of a proposition presupposes the truth of the proposition that the apparatus I believe I see is really there (and the like)?\textsuperscript{97}

Here again we see Wittgenstein emphasizing that in the course of our investigations we will have certainty in things that are not themselves the product of an investigation. Every test begins with what is not tested, and more importantly Wittgenstein is suggesting, like Wright, that this is unavoidable.

\textit{Criticism}

Despite apparent strengths, there are significant problems with both Wright and Glock’s view as an interpretation of \textit{On Certainty}. As both Wright and Glock admit, their interpretations deviate in important ways from Wittgenstein’s own ideas. Take for example Wright’s rejection of hinges as rules. He says that Wittgenstein avoids the consequences of groundlessness by treating hinges as rules which are not responsible to questions of truth. Wright is uncomfortable with this, believing it our intuition that even the most fundamental rules answer to truth in the right cases. But as he acknowledges, this contradicts one of the main ideas of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, namely that grammatical rules are prior to questions of true and false.

Wittgenstein rejected the idea that grammar can be justified by empirical reality, as P.M.S. Hacker writes: “After Wittgenstein returned to philosophy in 1929, one central preoccupation became the impossibility of justifying grammar \textit{as correct} by reference to reality, not because the justification is ineffable, but because there is no such thing as

\textsuperscript{97} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §163.
such a justification.”

Empirical truths cannot determine what our grammatical rules should be. Wittgenstein’s view is shown at 512 of *On Certainty*: “Isn’t the question this: ‘What if you had to change your opinion even on these most fundamental things?’ And to that the answer seems to me to be: ‘You don’t have to change it. That is just what their being ‘fundamental’ is.’” By claiming that the very rules of our grammar can be wrong, Wright is suggesting that doubt can go all the way down, that the grammar of language can itself be wrong. Wright, like Moore, takes seriously the notion that we could be wrong about the most fundamental beliefs, so we need special entitlements to the truth of hinge propositions to avoid skeptical conclusions.

This ignores Wittgenstein’s idea that at a certain point doubt no longer makes sense. At remark 312 he tells us that certain doubts are hollow: “Here it strikes me as if this doubt were hollow. But in that case—isn’t belief in history hollow too? No; there is so much that this connects up with.” The remarks in *On Certainty* reflect the idea not that we have to presuppose certain truths as the only plausible way to overcome skepticism but rather that certain doubts have no place in our life, that they have no meaning for us. Wright and Glock’s notion trades on the idea that doubts about what is most fundamental make coherent sense, but can be overcome by our entitlement to these presuppositions. This is something that Wright is explicit about in his essay:

Rather, what we should ideally like—as an insurance, if you will—would be a rebuttal of—or at least a ‘liveable’ accommodation with—sceptical

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doubt which avoids joining the debate at the deep theoretical level, leaving
the intelligibility of scepticism unchallenged.\textsuperscript{101}

Anyone who takes such an approach to \textit{On Certainty} is going to miss out on one of its
central ideas, which is not only that doubt is meaningless in relation to fundamental hinge
propositions, but that doubt itself can only make sense to us within a framework of
certainty. Return to the remark where Wittgenstein introduces the notion of hinges: “That
is to say, the \textit{questions} that we raise and our \textit{doubts} depend on the fact that some
propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.”\textsuperscript{102}

Wittgenstein notes that it is our \textit{doubts} that depend on hinges not just knowledge. Even
more clearly at remark 354: “Doubting and non-doubting behaviour. There is the first
only if there is the second.”\textsuperscript{103} Wittgenstein is asserting that certainty comes prior to
doubt. Doubts can only be meaningfully articulated in a language-game and our
language-games function by excluding certain doubts.

The way our relationship to these kinds of beliefs is characterized in this approach
is also highly problematic. Wittgenstein does not say that we make presuppositions
because we are rationally compelled to do so. Glock says that we have no sane alternative
to these hinges, but Wittgenstein routinely considers alternative beliefs to our own, such
as people who believe that they can go to the moon in their dreams.\textsuperscript{104} It is questionable
whether Wittgenstein would consider there to be a definition of sanity outside of the
language-game by which we could judge a set of beliefs. Wittgenstein emphasizes that

\textsuperscript{101} Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” 47.
\textsuperscript{102} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §341.
\textsuperscript{103} Wright, “Wittgensteinian Certainties,” §354.
\textsuperscript{104} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §667.
our opinions about what counts as reasonable or unreasonable can change over time: “But what men consider reasonable or unreasonable alters. At certain periods men find reasonable what at other periods they found unreasonable. And vice versa.”

Also problematic is the way Wright speaks of hinges as presuppositions that we are allowed to ‘help ourselves’ to. Wright’s language suggests that these entitlements are something we can deliberately choose given the enquiry we are undertaking. We could investigate these presuppositions if we so desired, as long as we realize we will have to make more presuppositions:

> wherever I achieve warrant for a proposition, I do so courtesy of specific presuppositions—about my own powers, and the prevailing circumstances, and my understanding of the issues involved—for which I will have no specific, earned warrant. This is a necessary truth. I may, in any particular case, set about earning such a warrant in turn—and that investigation may go badly, defeating the presuppositions that I originally made.

Although presuppositions are generally described as being necessary, individual presuppositions are described as something we could choose to give up and investigate. Presuppositions are presented as something that can change on the basis of the particular investigation, their status as presuppositions is contingent on the kind of investigation that we are doing at that time. But this is the opposite of the way Wittgenstein characterizes how we arrive at hinge certainty: “This doubt isn’t one of the doubts in our game. (But not as if we chose this game!)” We are taught not to doubt certain things; we do not believe them because we have decided to. That I am a human being or that I rely on my

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senses are not truths which are decided upon because of rational considerations or choice:

“Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination.”108 The hinges of our language are not a product of deliberation or decision. Wittgenstein specifically says that he wants “to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination.” 109 Wittgenstein views our basic certainties as something primitive that we take on without thought or reason. We approach this certainty not out of choice or rational thought but out of natural and learned instincts.

Given this, Wright’s statements that in making these presuppositions rational agents engage in a certain degree of risk is problematic. But Wright sees this as one of the direct lessons of Wittgenstein’s discussion of hinges: “The alternative ‘spin’ to be taken from On Certainty is that the concept of warranted belief only gets substance within a framework in which it is recognised that all rational thought and agency involves ineliminable elements of cognitive risk.”110 But given that Wittgenstein believes that doubt no longer has meaning when we reach the level of hinge certainty, it is not clear why he would feel that there is any risk: “I know that this is my foot. I could not accept any experience as proof to the contrary.—That may be an exclamation; but what follows from it? At least that I shall act with a certainty that knows no doubt, in accordance with my belief.”111 Here Wittgenstein denies that we possess any sense of doubt about our

111 Wittgenstein, On Certainty, §360.
most fundamental beliefs. In Wittgenstein’s view there is no apprehension experienced here, no sense of us having to take a risk that our foot may not be there.

In their interpretations of On Certainty Wright and Glock both seek to take philosophical lessons from Wittgenstein in combating skepticism. Wright sees hinges as ungrounded rules of evidence. Because he sees this concept as a problematic answer to skepticism he instead uses On Certainty to develop the notion of presuppositions which we are entitled to in virtue of our cognitive limitations. Although Wright separates these kinds of presuppositions from hinge propositions he essentially sees them as playing the same conceptual role. Glock similarly develops a notion of hinges as knowledge that we are entitled to because it is more rational than any alternative.

Yet in trying to develop their own responses to skepticism, both Wright and Glock take the wrong lessons from On Certainty. One of the main themes of On Certainty is not that we need presuppositions to guard against skepticism, but that hinge propositions are a point at which doubts have no meaning for us. It is part of Wittgenstein’s point that doubt itself occurs within a framework of certainty, and without this framework the concept of doubt loses all meaning. This is equally true when it comes to the groundlessness of our believing. Wright takes from Wittgenstein the idea of presuppositions that are groundless in the sense that we do not know them to be true, but whose truth is necessary to take a risk on if we are to gain any knowledge whatsoever. This is a truth that we must come to upon realizing that we are cognitively limited beings. But Wittgenstein does not see us as
having any sense of risk and limitation in our believing: “And indeed no one misses doubt here; no one is surprised that we do not merely surmise the meaning of our words.”

It is not a matter of us merely presupposing this truth in the face of the possibility of doubt; it is a matter of acting with complete certainty. This is also why Glock is wrong to construe this certainty as a form of knowledge. Wittgenstein wants to get at the directness of this certainty where we feel no doubt: “And yet this direct taking-hold corresponds to a sureness, not to a knowing. But don’t I take hold of a thing’s name like that, too?” The lessons Wright and Glock want to draw from On Certainty are about our entitlement to believe in certain propositions without evidence as a response to skepticism, but in doing so they miss many of On Certainty’s most central ideas, which are precisely that there exists a kind of certainty where we experience no doubt, where the very concept of doubt is itself dependent on this certainty.

\[^{112}\] Wittgenstein, On Certainty, §523.
\[^{113}\] Wittgenstein, On Certainty, §511.
Chapter 3

Hinges as foundations

In this next interpretation, hinges are understood to be foundations for all of our language and thought. These scholars believe that *On Certainty* offers a form of foundationalism, albeit of an unorthodox kind. This interpretation is developed primarily in the work of Avrum Stroll and Danièle Moyal-Sharrock, and is sometimes called the framework reading, because hinges are considered to be the framework for the rest of our language. They are a special kind of heterogeneous foundation which are not themselves known, but are prior to knowledge; foundations that allow the rest of language to function, but are not themselves part of the language. As with the Wright reading, without these foundations in place we could not have knowledge. They are grammatical rules at the boundary of our language, demarcating the bounds of sense. They are like a framework or scaffolding supporting the rest of our thinking giving it form and structure. This chapter will examine the multiple claims of these scholars, evaluating whether or not this is a plausible interpretation of Wittgenstein’s views.

To begin with it is a central part of this interpretation that hinges, when used in most contexts, are a form of nonsense. Danièle Moyal-Sharrock offers a complex distinction between what can meaningfully be said and meaningless articulations. To be nonsense is to be a form of words that has no sense when used in the course of language. These rules allow us to make sense but do not themselves make sense when articulated as propositions. Moyal-Sharrock says that “they do not bear saying within the stream of the
language-game but only in heuristic situations.”¹¹⁴ Hinges are part of what she calls the ‘logically ineffable’. She believes that Wittgenstein has a clear notion of sayability: “Sayability is a matter of having a use or a point in the game. In the stream of the language-game, only the propositional and expressive doppelgänger of a hinge can be meaningfully said, not the hinge itself.”¹¹⁵

A hinge is important to our language-game because it governs the language as a grammatical rule, but is not itself part of the language-game. Hinges can only be meaningfully formulated for heuristic value or in a circumstance where the words would not be fulfilling a hinge role, but what Moyal-Sharrock labels the “expressive doppelgänger.”¹¹⁶ Moore’s confusion is that “the ineffable—that which cannot be said—can nevertheless be spoken; that is: articulated in sentences (such as those expressing grammatical rules).”¹¹⁷ A hinge can literally be spoken, formulated in words, but not meaningfully said in the language-game in the sense of being descriptive or genuinely informative. The ability to vocalize a string of words is not the same as speaking meaningful sentences. To speak meaningfully is to express a proposition with a clear truth value or to speak expressively in a way that is not necessarily propositional.¹¹⁸

Hinges’ lack of sayability exemplifies the distinction between what is said and what is shown, a distinction revolving around what is effable in language and what is

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¹¹⁵ Moyal-Sharrock, Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 97.
¹¹⁶ Moyal-Sharrock, Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 97.
¹¹⁷ Moyal-Sharrock, Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 46.
¹¹⁸ Moyal-Sharrock, Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 46.
ineffable. What is effable has a clear use in the language-game, what is logically ineffable does not. As grammatical rules hinges fall into the category of the ineffably shown, that which has no meaningful use in our language-games even though they make such games possible. Hinges are not said in the course of the language, but are lived out by us. Moyal-Sharrock takes Wittgenstein’s statement that “it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game”\(^{119}\) to mean that our foundations are a way of acting rather than a kind of thinking. We represent our certainty in how we live: “Hinge certainty takes the form of spontaneous acting in the certainty of… an innumerable number of things. It is, as we have seen, much like an unselfconscious savoir-faire, a flawless know-how.”\(^{120}\) On this account Moore’s mistake is to take our hinges, which are enacted during the course of our life and are ineffable, and treat them as effable propositions.

That hinges are a form of nonsense when treated as philosophical propositions tells us much about the way this interpretation views the nature of hinges. Stroll says that what are called hinge propositions are not genuine propositions because: “Such concepts as being true or false, known or not known, justified or unjustified do not apply to them, and these are usually taken to be the defining features of propositions.”\(^{121}\) These features define what a proposition is; sentences that fail to meet these conditions are thus not


genuine propositions. Therefore the term hinge proposition is misleading because what play the hinge role are not propositions at all.

Stroll believes that in On Certainty Wittgenstein gives us both a propositional and non-propositional account of hinges. The first account of hinges as propositions is a response to Moore, but the second non-propositional account: “begins to develop gradually as the text was being written and comes to dominate it as it closes. On this view, there are several candidates for F, and all of them are non-intellectual.”122 F here is the foundations of thought and language that hinges are supposed to be. On this account Wittgenstein evolved to see hinges as taking a non-propositional, non-intellectual form. Their true form is as primitive ways of acting in which we demonstrate our certainty.

Moyal-Sharrock agrees with this assessment. If a sentence is a genuine proposition: “One must be able to conceive of a proposition’s content and of the negation of its content; it must be capable of being true and of being false—both possibilities must lie within the game.”123 Because of this condition the category of proposition: “cannot be consistent with accommodating rules, tautologies or anything else which is necessarily true within the propositional fold.”124 If hinges are rules they will fall into the list of the non-propositional.

The non-propositional nature of hinges has important consequences. Stroll believes this gives us a completely different form of foundationalism than any other in the history of philosophy. The traditional questions asked of foundationalism do not apply to

122 Stroll, Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty, 146.
123 Moyal-Sharrock, Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 35.
124 Moyal-Sharrock, Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 36.
non-propositional hinges. If \( F \) is the foundation of all other knowledge and does not depend on anything else, the question will be how we can know that \( F \) is true, and how do we know there is nothing more fundamental? If we reply that \( F \) is certain and that there is nothing more certain than \( F \), questions arise about how we can know these facts. It is Stroll’s contention that such questions do not arise for Wittgenstein’s foundationalism.

According to Stroll, the traditional foundationalists assumed that the question: “How do you know that that which stands fast for us is certain? Is always applicable.”\(^{125}\) They assume questions that can sensibly be asked about what rests on our foundations can be asked of the foundations themselves; the two are essentially of the same category, what serves as our foundation is itself a form of knowledge. Stroll contends that in Wittgenstein’s foundationalism this is not true: “One cannot sensibly ask of that which is certain whether it is known (or not known) or true (or false); for what is meant by certitude is not susceptible to such ascriptions.”\(^{126}\) As non-propositional rules, they cannot be thought of in terms of knowledge and this means the questions that typically arise about knowledge claims are not applicable to them. Because of this, Stroll believes that Wittgenstein’s form of foundationalism is radically different from all prior forms. According to Stroll, Wittgenstein embraced a non-propositional account of hinges because he thought describing our hinges in propositional terms would lead us to think of them in terms of knowledge, leading us to the typical questions that would arise if we thought of them in this way.

Rather hinges are what Stroll calls “a mode of acting.” Their origin: “stems from one’s immersion in a human community in which rote training and inculcation of habits create the substratum upon which the language game rests.” Human beings learn from their community how to live and act in the world. What serves as the foundation are not conclusions we have reached or self-evident truths, but a specifically human way of acting and thinking, ingrained in us as a foundation of learned habit.

Moyal-Sharrock goes into even greater detail about the nature of hinge certainty. She differentiates between objective certainty and objective certainties. Objective certainty “is a kind of certainty whose nature is foundational.” This objective certainty is a whole category of certainty, different from the certainty we have because of grounds or reasons. The objective certainties are what she calls “the ‘objects’ of that certainty, which I will call objective certainties, or hinges.” The objective certainties are the individual hinges that we possess, such as ‘I have a hand’ or ‘the external world exists’.

Moyal-Sharrock believes the first category of objective certainty has two different aspects. The first is: “a doxastic category; a kind of certainty whose status or role in our system of beliefs is described as foundational or basic. Here, the objective certainties, or basic beliefs, that makes up the ‘scaffolding of our thoughts’ are recognized to be rules of grammar.” This category encompasses the hinges which serve as the ‘scaffolding’ of thought in the form of grammatical rules. These foundations facilitate the rest of our life;

the rest of our thinking only makes sense in light of these rules. It is the foundation of a
world picture which we use in our daily life, exhibiting itself in everything we do.

Moyal-Sharrock believes there are six characteristics that define hinges:

1. indubitable: doubt and mistake are logically meaningless
2. foundational: they do not result from justification
3. nonempirical: they are not derived from the senses
4. grammatical: they are rules of grammar
5. ineffable: they cannot be said
6. enacted: they can only show themselves in what we say and do.132

All of our hinges are supposed to share these qualities. The concept of mistake does not
come into play with hinges. To be ‘wrong’ about a hinge is not to make a mistake: “This
means that when I believe that I am sitting in my room when I am not, I cannot be said to
be in the innocuous realm of mistakes.”133 A ‘false belief’ in this case can no longer be
described as a mistake, but a mental disturbance. Moyal-Sharrock quotes Wittgenstein
about this kind of situation: “I should not call this a mistake, but rather a mental
disturbance, perhaps a transient one.”134 Moyal-Sharrock describes: “a logical
incompatibility between being wrong or uncertain about certain statements—that is,
doubting, hesitating, verifying them—and the circumstances of oneself being normal.”135

If I were to doubt very basic things, such as the existence of my body, my ability to
understand the concepts or meaning of my words would be what is questionable.

132 Moyal-Sharrock, Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 72.
133 Moyal-Sharrock, Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 73.
135 Moyal-Sharrock, Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 74.
To be foundational is also to be a category where justification and proof are no longer applicable. We cannot provide grounds for our rules, because our rules are: “not susceptible of negation or disbelief, of doubt or mistake”\(^{136}\). It is not just that grounds cannot be given, but that any possible grounds for our hinges would add nothing to their certainty, as Moyal-Sharrock writes: “grounds would be useless; no surer than my ungrounded conviction.”\(^{137}\) This makes hinges “groundless by nature”\(^{138}\).

This includes any empirical basis for hinges. We do not arrive at our objective certainties on the basis of any observation or induction, experience cannot direct us to believe that the external world exists or that we have a body. Moyal-Sharrock quotes Wittgenstein in support of this idea: “No, experience is not the ground for our game of judging. Nor is its outstanding success.”\(^{139}\) Moyal-Sharrock believes that hinges can be described as being experiential but not empirical. Experience cannot serve as a genuine ground or justification for our certainty, but we may use our experiences as “an inarticulate, pervasive, nonratiocinated, lived confirmation of our certainty.”\(^{140}\) The experience we have of events recurring, such as water always boiling at the same temperature, helps confirm our certainty but does not ground it. Moyal-Sharrock calls Wittgenstein’s view “realism without empiricism”\(^{141}\). Our beliefs are conditioned by our

\(^{136}\) Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty*, 76.
\(^{137}\) Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty*, 76.
\(^{138}\) Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty*, 76.
\(^{140}\) Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty*, 82.
\(^{141}\) Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty*, 82.
experiences but not grounded in those experiences.\textsuperscript{142} We are conditioned to believe that water will always boil at 100 degrees Celsius, but our belief is not the product of any reasoning. We have already seen the last three qualities of hinges: grammatical, ineffable, and enacted. Hinges are enacted rules of grammar that determine the bounds of meaning and do not bear saying in the course of the language-game in their capacity as grammatical rules. This gives us a sense of the first aspect of objective certainty.

The second aspect of objective certainty is: “a kind of doxastic attitude, whose objects are foundational but (unlike the objects of ordinary belief) nonpropositional. This attitude is best described as a kind of know-how and its objects as belonging to grammar.”\textsuperscript{143} On the one hand we have a category of hinges and on the other an attitude that we exhibit toward this category of beliefs. Words that can be used to describe this attitude are trust, belief, relying on, taking hold, holding fast. But this attitude is not towards propositions, but grammatical rules or more specifically: “objects that are paradigms of our method of description. Such objects (states of affairs, individuals etc.) are, as much as samples or objects used in ostensive definitions, also part of grammar.”\textsuperscript{144} Grammatical rules in this view need not be something linguistic but can be related to objects or, as Wittgenstein explains at remark 603, experiences:

I am taught that under such circumstances this happens. It has been discovered by making the experiment a few times. Not that that would prove anything to us, if it weren’t that this experience was surrounded by others which combine with it to form a system. Thus, people did not make experiments just about falling bodies but also about air resistance and all

\textsuperscript{142} Moyal-Sharrock, \textit{Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty}, 82.
\textsuperscript{143} Moyal-Sharrock, \textit{Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty}, 53.
\textsuperscript{144} Moyal-Sharrock, \textit{Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty}, 55.
sorts of other things. But in the end I rely on these experiences, or on the reports of them, I feel no scruples about ordering my own activities in accordance with them.—But hasn’t this trust also proved itself? So far as I can judge—yes.¹⁴⁵

Experiences are something that we can also exhibit this kind of attitude toward, as something that we treat in the course of our life as absolutely reliable. In the sense described these experiences have become part of the grammar of our language.

This doxastic attitude is what Moyal-Sharrock calls an ‘ur-trust’, the most basic kind of trust we can exhibit. This trust is an ‘excluder concept’, a concept which excludes another concept rather than affirming one. In this case our trust excludes doubt as Moyal-Sharrock says: “Another way of putting it is that trust here is the default attitude, and any absence of it the exception. Here trust is, as it were, recessive—a background, default, unconscious certainty.”¹⁴⁶

Stroll and Moyal-Sharrock both emphasize this certainty as a primitive form of life. Stroll speaks of language as emerging from a ‘primitive state’ and says that Wittgenstein:

is stressing that the foundations of the language game do not arise from deliberation or the application of a theory but from much more primitive factors. And that is why they are not susceptible to epistemic evaluation. The language game in that sense has no justification; what supports it is beyond such assessments—it is just there like one’s life.¹⁴⁷

Prior to full language comes more primitive forms of life. Because they are not the product of deliberative thought they are not susceptible to such categories as justification.

¹⁴⁵ Wittgenstein, On Certainty, §603.
¹⁴⁶ Moyal-Sharrock, Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 62.
¹⁴⁷ Stroll, Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty, 143.
Justification comes later in more advanced language-games. It is primitive reactions and behaviors that both writers stress as the foundational framework of our language. It is because of this primitive, pre-linguistic nature that both writers describe hinges as non-intellectual and non-linguistic.

**Criticism**

This gives us a good sense of what the framework reading amounts to. The main scholars who subscribe to this interpretation, Avrum Stroll and Danièle Moyal-Sharrock, offer a detailed interpretation of the role of hinges. According to this interpretation, hinges function as the unreasoned, unjustified foundations of our language-games. All of our language-games are built upon a system of enacted, non-propositional grammatical rules. These rules are not the product of reasoning and are not a form of knowledge. We cannot meaningfully articulate these hinges except heuristically. Categories of true or false cannot be applied to them. They are an animal certainty exhibited in behavior.

Moyal-Sharrock and Stroll marshal a number of quotations from *On Certainty* to support their view. Stroll cites over seventy instances in *On Certainty* of foundationalist language. In all of these entries Stroll cites terms that explicitly invoke the concept of foundations in some way. In many of these passages, words such as ground, base, bottom, foundation, and basis are used.\(^{148}\) Stroll cites remark 162 as an example:

> In general I take as true what is found in text-books, of geography for example. Why? I say: All these facts have been confirmed a hundred times over. But how do I know that? What is my evidence for it? I have a world-

picture. Is it true or false? Above all it is the substratum of all my enquiring and asserting.\textsuperscript{149}

Here the foundational language comes in their being a ‘substratum’ of our enquiring and asserting. This is supposed to be the basis of the rest of my thinking because I trust in these facts and treat them as a certainty where we know no doubts.

It is undeniable that Wittgenstein frequently invokes the notion of foundation and bedrock to describe the role of these beliefs in our life. As we saw in the very remark in which he introduces the notion of a hinge, they are described as ‘supporting’ the rest of our thought. See also the description of a mathematical proposition at remark 655: “The mathematical proposition has, as it were officially, been given the stamp of incontestability. I.e.: ‘Dispute about other things; this is immovable—it is a hinge on which your dispute can turn.’\textsuperscript{150} The hinge here is treated as being an ‘immovable’ solid ground on which thought can rest, a logical support for the language-game without which it would collapse.

So Wittgenstein’s hinges do appear to be foundational in the sense that they are the bedrock of a certainty in which we carry on without doubt. He says at an earlier point in the remarks that when it comes to these propositions “regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our method of doubt and enquiry.”\textsuperscript{151} They also appear to be foundational in the sense that nothing justifies them. There is no necessary basis for holding fast to this

\textsuperscript{149} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §162.
\textsuperscript{150} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §655.
\textsuperscript{151} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §151.
belief. Our doubting and knowledge rest upon something which is ‘beyond doubt’, and not justified by other beliefs.

For Stroll, foundationalism entails more than this however. He believes there are nine strands that compose foundationalism: “(1) stratification, (2) aberrancy, (3) non-dependence, (4) particularism or methodism, (5) publicity, (6) negational absurdity, (7) absorption, (8) certitude, and (9) standing fast.” Stroll thinks that Wittgenstein’s work exhibits all nine strands. But some of these strands are problematic. Take the principle of non-dependence, which Stroll thinks is a necessary condition for any foundationalism. Foundations are not to be dependent on any other knowledge and this non-dependence is part of what gives them their foundational nature.

Yet despite the numerous examples of foundational images in On Certainty, there are also examples that reverse the foundational imagery. For example, Wittgenstein says at remark 248: “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.” Here the foundations are supported by the rest of the house as much as the foundations support the house. The suggestion here seems to be that our hinges are as much supported by the rest of our language-games as much as the foundations support them. Without the language-game there would be no ‘foundations’ or hinges. This is reinforced by the image at remark 152 where Wittgenstein describes hinges as an axis around which bodies rotate: “This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it

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152 Stroll, Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty, 148.  
determines its immobility.” These images indicate that hinges are held in place by everything else that goes on around them. It is the activity of the entire language-game which holds our hinges in place, giving them their status. The foundational status of hinges is dependent on the rest of our language; they do not possess this status outside of our language-games. These images seem to violate the principle of non-dependence that Stroll believes is essential to foundationalism.

The principle of stratification is also problematic. Stroll writes of this principle: “It is the notion that the epistemic corpus is not all of a piece but has within it different levels or strata.” But if we examine Wittgenstein’s metaphor of the river bed we see not clear stratification but rather the fluidity of hinges: “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.” Here we see that there is not an absolute distinction between what remains solid and what is fluid. The metaphor of fluidity suggests that there is no clear theoretical distinction between hinge (a rule of testing) and non-hinge (something to test by experience). It is only within the course of a practice that any distinction exists.

The primacy of practice is what the image of the axis that we saw earlier is meant to invoke. It is the primacy of language-games that Wittgenstein is focused on, not a set of grammatical rules which determine those language-games. In the *Philosophical Investigations* we see him urging us to: “Regard the language-game as the primary

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thing.” If non-dependence and stratification are essential to foundationalism then there are serious problems with the idea that Wittgenstein believed in full blown foundationalism as Stroll claims.

There are other aspects of the framework reading that are also questionable. Moyal-Sharrock interpreted hinges as grammatical rules which cannot be meaningfully said, but only shown in our action. We can literally verbalize hinges, but they are meaningless if said in their hinge role. She tells us that: “Rules (Tractarian, or (later) grammatical ‘propositions’) are ineffable; that is: they can be voiced, but (technically) not said. They cannot be said in the language-game, for they support the language-game.”

What makes sense is supposed to have a use in a language-game, but Moyal-Sharrock says: “although grammatical rules do some work, it is not work within the game; but work supportive of the game.”

But this misconstrues Wittgenstein’s notion of nonsense. As Edward Minar warns us: “The nonsensicality of Moore’s utterances is not a function of a misfit between pre-existing propositions and their present contexts.” Moyal-Sharrock suggests that there is an inherent conflict between rules and ordinary contexts, as if the very form of our rules is in a priori conflict with a context. Moyal-Sharrock’s reading is reminiscent of what

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James Conant calls the standard reading of nonsense in *On Certainty*. Here is Conant on the standard reading, using remark 10 of *On Certainty* as an example:

‘I know there is a sick man lying here’ is nonsense in this situation because the situation is *unsuitable* one for its use where unsuitable is taken to mean that the situation somehow does not ‘fit’ the *Satz*—or alternatively the *Satz* somehow does not fit into this context of use. We thus arrive at the outline of an account of what Wittgenstein means when he says of such employments of language that they are nonsense: they are nonsense because of an *incompatibility* between the *Satz* and the context of use: the *Satz* and the context do not *fit* together, they *clash*.\(^{161}\)

Here we can identify the outlines of Moyal-Sharrock’s understanding of hinges as nonsense. Hinges do not fit with the context of use; it is as if the hinge and context logically repel each other. As Conant says, this type of nonsense is: “not directed against the intelligibility of what is said, but against the intelligibility of the attempt to assert ‘it’ on such an unsuitable occasion.”\(^{162}\) Moyal-Sharrock’s interpretation is similar to the one Conant is criticizing. It suggests that certain sentences or propositions possess a meaning prior to any actual use. Indeed this interpretation introduces a gap between the meaning of a sentence and what an individual speaker is trying to do with the sentences, such that: “It can be perfectly clear what the meaning of a sentence is; yet a context-embedded utterance of it can fail ‘to be intelligible as the act of a human agent participating in a humanly recognizable form of life’.”\(^{163}\) We see this tendency with Moyal-Sharrock when she says: “We can use words; indeed, sentences; indeed, perfectly well-formed sentences,


\(^{162}\) Conant, “Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use,” 223.

\(^{163}\) Conant, “Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use,” 223.
and yet not be saying anything; not be making sense.” On this interpretation, the problem is the speaker who is trying to use a sentence in a place where it does not belong.

But as Conant points out, Wittgenstein’s complaint against Moore is the opposite: “That Moore fails to mean something fully determinate by his words because his words themselves fail to mean something determinate.” He quotes Wittgenstein at remark 387 of On Certainty: “I want to say: it made sense for Moore to say ‘I know that that is a tree’ if he meant something quite particular by it.” Here we see Wittgenstein saying that Moore’s words do not have a clear meaning, that he does not know what Moore is trying to say. Wittgenstein thinks that Moore is speaking outside of any normal context and because of this we do not know what is meant by his words. If his words had a clear context, if there was a language-game where his words played a familiar role, then we could understand what he is saying. The complaint here against Moore is not that his words have an established meaning that is wrongly employed, but they lack a particular meaning caused by the removal of these propositions from the normal context in which they have a meaning.

This reinforces the idea that these propositions are not to be seen as standing apart from the language-game. As Conant says: “What we are tempted to call ‘the meaning of a sentence’ is not a property the sentence already has in abstraction from any possibility of use which it carries with it—like an atmosphere accompanying it—into each specific

164 Moyal-Sharrock, Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 46.
166 Wittgenstein, On Certainty, §387.
occasion of use.”\textsuperscript{167} This kind of atmosphere is what Moyal-Sharrock projects onto hinges by suggesting that they are essentially grammatical rules which cannot be meaningfully said, as if there is a special status which clings to these sentences from one context to another, rendering them necessarily ineffable.

Similarly, that hinges must be non-propositional is also questionable. Despite the contention that Wittgenstein abandons the notion of hinges as propositions, we can see him relating the two concepts throughout the remarks. At remark 653 he writes: “If the proposition $12 \times 12 = 144$ is exempt from doubt, then so too must non-mathematical propositions be.”\textsuperscript{168} Three remarks later at 657 it is the proposition ‘I am called…’ which: “is regarded as \textit{incontrovertible}”\textsuperscript{169}. When Wittgenstein examines the concept of the proposition he discusses their fluid nature: “Here, one must, I believe, remember that the concept ‘proposition’ itself is not a sharp one.”\textsuperscript{170} Wittgenstein says in the prior remark: “But wouldn’t one have to say then, that there is no sharp boundary between propositions of logic and empirical propositions? The lack of sharpness \textit{is} that of the boundary between \textit{rule} and empirical proposition.”\textsuperscript{171}

This is because one of the central ideas found in \textit{On Certainty} is that seemingly empirical propositions can become rule-like: “Is it that rule and empirical proposition merge into one another?”\textsuperscript{172} He says this even more directly at remark 308: “This is, we

\textsuperscript{167} Conant, “Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use,” 241.
\textsuperscript{170} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §320.
\textsuperscript{172} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §309.
are interested in the fact that about certain empirical propositions no doubt can exist if making judgments is to be possible at all. Or again: I am inclined to believe that not everything that has the form of an empirical proposition is one.\textsuperscript{173} Wittgenstein is specifically interested in the possibility that judgments with the form of empirical propositions can come to play a very different role in the language. Wittgenstein is expanding the role of the proposition, not restricting it. The tendency of the framework reading to draw a priori constraints on what moves are possible or what can be propositional is a more general problem. As Meredith Williams writes:

When we focus on these two kinds of propositions that stand fast, we can see that it is a mistake (or misleading) to construe Wittgensteinian propositions that hold fast as either framework propositions, i.e., as setting a priori constraints on what moves can be made, or as foundational propositions, providing the epistemic base for moves within the game. Both analogies support Wittgenstein’s particularism and the view that such propositions are immanent in a practice, not the basis from which moves within a game are made or justified.\textsuperscript{174}

It is the particular moves in language that give our concepts meaning, not foundations outside of meaningful language.

The framework reading offered by Avrum Stroll and Danièle Moyal-Sharrock comes closer than the entitlement reading of Wright and Glock to understanding Wittgenstein’s position. It is correct that Wittgenstein frequently uses foundational metaphors to indicate the role hinges play. It is correct to note the emphasis Wittgenstein places on certainty as a practice and form of life rather than as philosophical or scientific

\textsuperscript{173} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §308.

\textsuperscript{174} Meredith Williams, \textit{Blind Obedience: Paradox and Learning in the Later Wittgenstein} (N.Y: Routledge, 2010), 259-60.
theories. Where it goes wrong is in suggesting that hinges can support the language-game from outside of those practices, determining the bounds of sense but not themselves making sense, that they are separable from the rest of our language-game and become a form of nonsense when uttered within it. Hinges are not something that can be separated from the language-game. It is the whole of our practices which give hinges their meaning. The issues of non-dependence and stratification that Stroll lists as necessary conditions of foundationalism are also quite problematic when we take in the whole of Wittgenstein’s remarks. If these points are true, Wittgenstein’s ideas do not sit so comfortably within the foundationalism these scholars have proposed.
Chapter 4

Hinges as learning and agreement

Finally I want to examine a third interpretation of hinges and On Certainty. This is an interpretation of hinges which exists primarily in Rush Rhees’ writings on On Certainty and in Meredith Williams’ book Blind Obedience. Both focus on the role of certainty in learning meaningful language. This is especially clear in Williams’ book where she places emphasis on the need for a learner to have certainty in a teacher. I will begin by looking at Rhees’ interpretation of hinge certainty in the book Wittgenstein’s On Certainty: There—Like Our Life. Rhees writes that the main theme of On Certainty is that we go on without reason: “This ‘going on without any reason’ underlies much of life and the language that we use. It is connected with what Wittgenstein says about induction, general laws and with what he says in other contexts: we go on like that without any reason.”175 What he is trying to bring out is Wittgenstein’s point that our practices go on unjustified. Our collection of practices is simply what we do; the world does not tell us to go on like this, it does not give us any justification for acting in this way. Central to this is the concept of the hinge proposition.

Rhees wants to emphasize the idea that philosophers in the past have been mistaken about the nature of doubt: “If you are going to talk about doubt, that only makes sense in a certain language-game, system, environment, etc.”176 Doubting and questioning only makes sense within the context of a language-game. And a language-game cannot

176 Rhees, Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 68.
carry on without our certainty in the practices and procedures that compose that game. Within a language-game certain doubts have no place, they are not countenanced. Rhees says of doubts about the existence of physical objects, that Wittgenstein: “does not know what ‘doubting’ is here, let alone grounds for doubt.”¹⁷⁷ The hinge propositions are such that: “One never considers doubt in connection with them.”¹⁷⁸ The example of the language-game involving the door that we used earlier when explaining the concept of a language-game serves as an example of where a doubt is excluded by the logic of the language-game. If the existence of the door does not stand fast for us, that language-game can no longer carry on as before because it would no longer make sense, it would be a way of speaking that had lost all plausibility and meaning. Rhees believes the question of how these propositions underlie speaking is one of the main preoccupations of On Certainty.

Although Wittgenstein was advancing these propositions as a kind of background, Rhees claims that Wittgenstein: “is not advancing complex hypotheses or logical principles on which the meaningfulness of the expressions we use rest.”¹⁷⁹ Although these hinges play a logical role, this role is not in any way uniform, it differs depending on the language-game. Rationality is itself defined by accepting these hinge beliefs, as it must be the case that: “we come to have certain convictions or beliefs.”¹⁸⁰ Wittgenstein is making

¹⁷⁷ Rhees, Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 69.
¹⁷⁸ Rhees, Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 70.
¹⁷⁹ Rhees, Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 79.
¹⁸⁰ Rhees, Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 78.
the case that someone who refuses to accept these beliefs cannot be a participant in our language-games. At remark 310 he writes:

A pupil and a teacher. The pupil will not let anything be explained to him, for he continually interrupts with doubts, for instance as to the existence of things, the meanings of words, etc. The teacher says ‘Stop interrupting me and do as I tell you. So far your doubts don’t make sense at all.’

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The child cannot participate in the language-game because of its doubts. The practice must be learned first before our doubts have any meaning. It would be as if one doubted whether an equation was correct before having even learned what calculating is. The practice must be laid down before our doubts can begin to make sense, for it is only within such practices that meaningful doubts can be formulated. It is a matter of learning examples of what count as correct and incorrect judgments. Once such examples are learned the concept of a mistake becomes meaningful. In the example Wittgenstein gave at remark 310, the pupil’s doubt cannot even be formulated because he doubts even the meaning of his words.

Taken together our hinges: “give us a system (not a formal system)—a whole lot of facts which together gives us the way we go about things.”

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This gives us what Wittgenstein calls a “picture of the world” as he calls it at remark 94, writing: “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

182 Rhees, Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 86.
183 Wittgenstein, On Certainty, §94.
I distinguish between true and false.”\(^\text{184}\) By not doubting certain empirical propositions we begin to form a system. In this way Rhees believes that these ‘nests of propositions’ form a background to the rest of our questions and doubts. As an example of this system formation, he cites remark 476 of *On Certainty*:

> Children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc., etc.—they learn to fetch books, and sit in armchairs, etc., etc. Later, questions about the existence of things do of course arise. “Is there such a thing as a unicorn?” and so on. But such a question is possible only because as a rule no corresponding question presents itself. For how does one know how to set about satisfying oneself of the existence of unicorns? How did one learn the method for determining whether something exists or not?\(^\text{185}\)

Here the child is learning to act without certain doubts. The child simply learn to act on books and chairs in adopting its picture of the world, it never has to think about whether these objects exist. And eventually the child will learn to ask questions from *within* this world view. And the questions it asks will make sense from within this world-picture.

This world-picture is exhibited in our language-game, giving our questions their meaning. If we lose our certainty in these propositions then we lose our entire sense of what is true or false. Rhees says that if:

> I came to doubt these things, I shouldn’t know what to believe—if *that* is doubtful I don’t know what is doubtful and what isn’t. If I doubted my name, it would be a collapse that would bring down all my measuring-rods with it—despite all this, it *would be an entire mistake to imagine that what Wittgenstein is saying is that these are principles which give language its sense.* Without the fixity of those propositions there could be no distinction between truth and falsity, but this does not mean that you could deduce what is true or false from these features.\(^\text{186}\)

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Here we see the idea that without these hinge certainties our very sense of what is trustworthy disappears. As we saw with the example of the child, a person who does not accept the hinge propositions cannot even begin to participate in our language-game, as a person who does not learn the rules of a game cannot play the game. The measuring-rods coming down is a situation where the very standards of judgments have lost their plausibility and we can no longer play the game of judging, as someone without certainty in their system of measurement can no longer measure. The standards of measuring, the measuring rods and the way we employ them, constitute the very concept of measuring. To lose trust in these standards would be to make the concept of measuring meaningless.

The concept of what counts as a good reason to believe is not the origin of our certainty but belongs to this certainty. We accept this as a good reason because it is our practice to take this as a good or compelling reason. Rhees gives an example of a physiologist:

> Or think of the sentence ‘Every man has a brain’, and suppose I asked a physiologist how he knows this. He might point to specimens he had dissected. To go on to ask how he knows that what he found in these cases shows anything about mine would be empty and senseless. For him it is so. This is the way he acts, the way he carries out his research; and above all: that is what he calls an answer to such a question.\(^{187}\)

Here we see quite clearly the idea that our concept of a good reason belongs to the world-picture we employ. Rhees is concerned to show that Wittgenstein thinks it is our practice that this a compelling reason to believe and we have certainty in this practice but there is no justification for the whole practice. The concept of a justification only makes sense in

\(^{187}\)Rhees, *Wittgenstein’s On Certainty*, 64.
the context of our practices. We might be persuaded that the physiologist’s way of thinking is correct; we may come to believe him when he says we should accept that this specimen is evidence, but there is nothing about the world telling us it must be so, or justifying his decision to use his specimen as a compelling reason.

Rhees considers Wittgenstein’s example of Lavoisier. Wittgenstein writes:

Lavoisier makes experiments with substances in his laboratory and now he concludes that this and that takes place when there is burning. He does not say that it might happen otherwise another time. He has got hold of a definite world-picture—not of course one that he invented: he learned it as a child. I say world-picture and not hypothesis, because it is the matter-of-course foundation for his research and as such also goes unmentioned. 188

Rhees wants to make the point that the world-picture is not something that precedes Lavoisier’s experiments; his conducting experiments in this way are his world picture:

It is not that he first sees the world-picture and then makes experiments. No, the world-picture is making experiments in that way. Lavoisier does not invent the picture; it is not personal to him and it is not an hypothesis. The whole use of hypotheses and finding supporting or conflicting evidence is part of what he is calling a world-picture. 189

The world picture here is not an idea in our minds but a way of acting and seeing the world that we exhibit in doing things like making experiments and drawing conclusions in the way we do. And the important thing is that we do not need reasons for going on in this way. There is no sense to asking which world-picture is correct. Hinges are not foundations that can show us that our language-game is true. Questions about what is true or false make sense within the world-picture, but the questions make no sense in relation to the entire language-game:

189 Rhees, Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 88.
To ask ‘Are we right in thinking in terms of the world picture that we do; in representing the world as we do; in speaking as we do; in looking on this as speaking or as language (saying something);—would be somewhat analogous to: ‘Are we right in calling this red?’; or in closer analogy: ‘Are we right in understanding the word “red” as we do?’

Our language-game, like our calling this colour red, cannot meaningfully be called correct, it is simply how we have come to act and think.

Hinge certainties are not something separate from the rest of our language. Rhees insists that we are “talking of something involved in our thinking.” There is no sense in which either facts about the world or logical rules determine our way of speaking: “What makes a language-game is not ‘certain facts’ but our never calling in question certain facts.” Our language is not grounded in a set of facts that would give us reason for speaking as we do. Nor could language be based on a set of rules alone: “Apparently ‘to establish a practice’ and ‘to teach judgments’ come to much the same. And the emphasis is on ‘not just rules, but examples’— for the reasons that the examples are applications of the rules, or are judgments.” Rules are insufficient for a language, they will always leave loopholes and gaps open. What we must learn are individual judgments, examples of what is to stand as correct in the course of a practice. This means coming to have serious convictions and beliefs about what is the case.

Rhees speaks of hinges as having a logical role, but it is not as a logical foundation: “When he speaks of their logically peculiar role of empirical propositions,

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this is not to be equated with providing a logical foundation for language. “Such a foundation if it were to exist would be superfluous. The logical foundation would not make us any more certain: “The so-called logical foundation would not add anything. That is how science goes on—it is natural to them, and to us for that matter.—The certainty with which they go on.” We do not need logical grounds to determine our thought, what we need is to learn a way of thinking, a world-view, that convinces us to think like this, as Wittgenstein says: “If someone asked us ‘but is that true?’ we might say ‘yes’ to him; and if he demanded grounds we might say ‘I can’t give you any grounds, but if you learn more you too will think the same.’

The issue of doubt is an important distinction between Rhees and other interpretations. Moyal-Sharrock emphasizes in her reading that it is not the case that in relation to hinges “doubt is simply not practiced or not necessary, but that it is logically impossible.” But Rhees explicitly rejects an interpretation of Wittgenstein where he is proposing a special class of propositions that are impossible to doubt. Not doubting hinge beliefs is an essential feature of our practices, but it is only a practice that this (for example the existence of my hand) is not doubted rather than that. These kinds of doubts are meaningless in the context of our language-game, but there is no necessity to this.

For Rhees, the idea that doubt about hinges is impossible is the greatest misunderstanding of On Certainty:

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195 Rhees, Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 79.
196 Rhees, Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 81.
198 Moyal-Sharrock, Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 73.
This is the misunderstanding which is *most commonly* made by people who read *On Certainty*. Another version of it is: ‘When Wittgenstein says that there are certain propositions which have the form of empirical propositions, which are 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.\textsuperscript{199}

Rhees’ main point is that it is an essential part of our practices that they are not grounded by any kind of necessity which could determine the possibilities for the language-game. These non-existent grounds include the grammatical rules that the framework interpretation believes serve as the foundation of language. Wittgenstein’s clearest statement of this is at remark 232: ‘‘We could doubt every single one of these facts, but we could not doubt them *all.*’ Wouldn’t it be more correct to say: ‘we do not doubt them *all.*’ Our not doubting them all is simply our manner of judging, and therefore of acting.’\textsuperscript{200} Here we see two important points: first what is not doubted is determined by the logic of our practices, not something transcending those practices; secondly there is a link between judging and acting. Judging is a kind of acting. Our certainty maybe something that we live out, as the framework interpretation says, but this should not be thought of as necessarily primitive, as if our certainty must come prior to any thought. To say that our certainty is embodied in how we act is not to say that it is not also embodied in how we judge, for judging itself is a form of acting.

\textsuperscript{199} Rhees, *Wittgenstein’s On Certainty*, 92.
Rhees states that we can most clearly see the role of hinge propositions in our language if we contemplate what would happen if we were to lose our certainty in them. He describes a scenario where we are torn away from the sureness of the language-game:

If I saw no street, but green pastures, when I opened the door, I should not say ‘After all I was mistaken’, and I should not try to think what the explanation could be—because here I should not know what was MEANT by an explanation. (Or in other words: I’d no longer know what was meant by ‘revising my judgment’.) We might say: ‘There is no move I could make’ (I should not ever know what to ask). Which is the sense of: ‘I could not continue the language game’.  

Rhees is examining a situation where our concepts seem to lose their meaning. Here the concept of what an explanation means rests on our ability to fit this event in with our understanding of the world. Rhees is trying to describe a case where that world picture, and the concepts that come with it, no longer applies. The concept of an explanation belongs to the language-game, thus to lose the sureness of the language-game is to lose the concept of what an explanation could even be.

Rhees is concerned to show that Wittgenstein is not trying to prophesize about our mental state if such an event were to take place. He is trying to elucidate the relationship between the sureness we have in our language and the meaningful employment of concepts like explanation. Rhees quotes Wittgenstein, at remark 492:

“Do I know or do I only believe…?” might also be expressed like this: What if it seemed to turn out that what until now has seemed immune to doubt was a false assumption? Would I react as I do when a belief has proved to be false? or would it seem to knock from under my feet the ground on which I stand in making any judgments at all?—But of course I do not intend this as a prophecy. Would I simply say “I should never have

201 Rhees, Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 119.
thought it”—or would I (have to) refuse to revise my judgment—because such a ‘revision’ would amount to annihilation of all yardsticks?\textsuperscript{202}

It is important that Wittgenstein is emphasizing that \textit{all} yardsticks would be annihilated. Wittgenstein describes us holding fast not to a single proposition but several: “What I hold fast to is not \textit{one} proposition but a nest of propositions.”\textsuperscript{203} Wittgenstein speaks quite frequently of our beliefs forming a system: “It is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another \textit{mutual} support.”\textsuperscript{204} For Wittgenstein what stands fast for us does so as a whole, not as individual parts. The discussion of a system is meant to bring out the interconnection of our certainties, as Wittgenstein says: “If I wanted to doubt the existence of the earth long before my birth, I should have to doubt all sorts of things that stand fast for me.”\textsuperscript{205}

What stands fast is not tied to what \textit{I} do or do not know but to anyone who understands our practices, something Wittgenstein makes clear: “But it isn’t just that \textit{I} believe in this way that I have two hands, but that every reasonable person does.”\textsuperscript{206} For Rhees, it is exactly this sort of rationality that is the key to carrying on language: “This sort of ‘rationality’ belongs to what makes it possible for us to speak with one another and understand one another.”\textsuperscript{207} This kind of rationality is tied up with a shared sense of the obvious.

\textsuperscript{202} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §492.
\textsuperscript{204} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §142.
\textsuperscript{205} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §234.
\textsuperscript{206} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §252.
\textsuperscript{207} Rhees, \textit{Wittgenstein’s On Certainty}, 120.
This is an essential part of participating in a language. This would even be true of people who do not share a common language, but communicate only through gestures. In order to communicate with gestures we would need to have an interpretation of this gesture, a hypothesis about what it means. We may do things to test whether this hypothesis is correct, but this too depends on certainty in the practices of judging and speaking: “But you can only describe it in that way by depending on or appealing to meanings which are not a matter of conjecture. Conjectures of this kind presuppose carrying on language which is not conjecture. That is a requisite of carrying on language at all.”

He believes that Wittgenstein’s main philosophical interest is what is required for us to speak meaningfully. The main question becomes: how are we capable of carrying on a meaningful language at all? We see evidence in On Certainty for this: “I really want to say that a language-game is only possible if one trusts something.” Wittgenstein says about feelings of doubt in speaking: “The accompanying feeling is of course a matter of indifference to us, and equally we have no need to bother about the words ‘I am sure that’ either.—What is important is whether they go with a difference in the practice of the language.” Here Wittgenstein is emphasizing that a doubt is only relevant insofar as it affects the practice of the language-game. What is not involved in our practices is of little importance.

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Rhees, Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, 123.


Wittgenstein, On Certainty, §524.
Rhees is concerned to show that with its focus on language, the remarks of *On Certainty* are largely a reflection on logic. Rhees writes that Wittgenstein is describing what belongs to the language-game and what belongs to the language-game is part of logic. This is what it means to say that a doubt or mistake is logically excluded. It is excluded by the grammar of a language-game. This is why Rhees writes: “When faced with a choice between ‘but we cannot’ and ‘but we do not’ he prefers the latter because ‘could’ and ‘could not’ would not have a clear meaning here; they seem to presuppose some kind of system.”

211 ‘Could’ and ‘could not’ presuppose a system of possibility outside of our language-game that determines what it makes sense for us to say. This is exactly the kind of system that Wittgenstein wants to deny exists.

It is because of this focus on language and meaning that Rhees connects *On Certainty* with much of what Wittgenstein wrote before. As Rhees notes, many of the basic themes in the remarks that compose *On Certainty* are a continuation of earlier ones. Rhees cites the possibility of language, the formation of concepts and the relation of thought and language, as themes that are carried on from earlier work. Rhees cites two passages which illustrate these connections to earlier work, from remarks 312 and 313 of the work now titled a “Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment” (formerly titled *Philosophical Investigations* part II, as Rhees cites it):

312. It’s possible to imagine a case in which I could satisfy myself that I had two hands. Normally, however, I can’t do so. ‘But all you need do is to hold them up before your eyes!’—If I am now in doubt as to whether I

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have two hands, I need not believe my eyes either. (I might just as well ask a friend.)\textsuperscript{212}

313. This is connected with the fact that, for example, the sentence ‘The Earth has existed for millions of years’ makes clearer sense than ‘The Earth has existed for the last five minutes’. For I’d ask anyone who asserted the latter: ‘What observations does this sentence refer to; and what observations would count against it?’—whereas I know to what context of ideas and what observations the former sentence belongs.’\textsuperscript{213}

Both remarks reference themes that Wittgenstein returns to in \textit{On Certainty}. The first remark makes reference to the possibility of doubt about the existence of his hands. We see him ask a question he would ask again in \textit{On Certainty}: What grounds for the existence of my hands would give me greater certainty than we already possess? There seem to be no grounds we could produce that give us this greater certainty, and so our certainty is not based on grounds. Remark 313 examines the way certain beliefs do not connect up with our world-picture. We again see the idea that a certain kind of doubt is excluded from our world-picture or language-game, that as a serious doubt it is not plausible to us. This illustrates Rhees’ point that \textit{On Certainty} is not a wholly new topic, but represents a development of previous themes and ideas.

This gives us a good sense of what Rhees believes are the most important aspects of \textit{On Certainty} and its approach to hinge certainty. Meredith Williams emphasizes a very similar approach in her book. She specifically examines the role of certainty in learning


\textsuperscript{213} Wittgenstein, “Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment,” xi, §313.
language. This is “the certainty and trust that is part of any language-game.”

For Williams this kind of certainty: “is characterized negatively, as pertaining to that which is not open to doubt, not subject to mistake, not in need of evidence.” This is the bedrock certainty that is laid down for us in the course of being initiated into a practice and community. To have a doubt about these “bedrock certainties indicates an abnormal situation or even mental disorder, not poor epistemic habits.” We see an example of this at remark 304 of On Certainty: “But nor am I making a mistake about twelve times being a hundred and forty-four. I may say later that I was confused just now, but not that I was making a mistake.” Here we see the idea that not all mistakes are of the same kind. One kind of error may go beyond what is understood to be just a mistake; it represents someone losing their grip on what we define as correct judging. Wittgenstein writes: “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.”

A mistake is an error that that can be understood and resolved in the context of our language-games. What is described here as a mental disturbance is one that cannot be fitted in with everything else we know, that cannot be understood by the normal standards of the language-games. Wittgenstein notes the difference: “If I merely believed wrongly that there is a table here in front of me, this might still be a mistake; but if I believe

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214 Williams, Blind Obedience, 254.
215 Williams, Blind Obedience, 254.
216 Williams, Blind Obedience, 254.
218 Wittgenstein, On Certainty, §74.
wrongly that I have seen this table, or one like it, every day for several months past, and have regularly used it, that isn’t a mistake?”\textsuperscript{219}

This connects with something Rhees noted, which is that for Wittgenstein rationality is connected with having certainty in various judgments, as he says at remark 219: “There cannot be any doubt about it for me as a reasonable person—That’s it—”.\textsuperscript{220} A person learns these judgments and in the process becomes a competent participant in the language-game, so as Williams writes: “Wittgenstein ties certainty to how we learn to participate in language-games.”\textsuperscript{221}

She breaks this certainty into two categories:

Propositions like “this is a hand” or “this is red” said of a British pillar box or “Napoleon was exiled to Elba” look like straightforward empirical propositions but are not. They are normative, that is, they stand as exemplars or paradigms within a language-game. And (ii) there are propositions that are “held fast” by how we judge and act. These include “the earth has existed since long before my birth” or “human beings are conscious.” These are not exemplars that might be used in teaching the child; rather they are implicit in all the things we do.\textsuperscript{222}

The first group of propositions appears to be empirical but is not. Rather they are judgments that are meant to be taken as exemplars of correct judgments, standing fast as correct for participants in the language-game. As we saw earlier, Wittgenstein believes that what appear to be empirical propositions can actually play a normative role in the language-game. What is significant is that: “these judgments of color, calculation and even historical fact need to be accepted at face value by the novice, whether the initiate

\textsuperscript{219} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §75.
\textsuperscript{221} Williams, \textit{Blind Obedience}, 254.
\textsuperscript{222} Williams, \textit{Blind Obedience}, 254.
learner is just acquiring color terms, or the advanced novice, the pupil just learning mathematics or history.” Williams explains: “Part of learning is accepting such paradigmatic judgments as certain, thus constraining the range of acceptable moves within the language-game. These judgments set standards for judging.” Without accepting these judgments as standards we cannot learn what things are to be called or how to calculate; we cannot learn what kinds of judgments are to be considered correct and rational. It is a form of learning that is premised on a basic, essential trust.

Williams believes that these paradigmatic judgments are necessary for the initiate learner: “Since initiate language learning involves recognitional skills, all language-learning games make use of paradigmatic judgments.” To support this she cites On Certainty 455: “Every language-game is based on words ‘and objects’ being recognized again. We learn with the same inexorability that this is a chair as that $2 \times 2 = 4$. Here we see the importance of the ability to follow norms of judging as a requisite for participation in a language-game. We must not only be able to follow norms of judging and recognition but view them as inevitable and necessary. The initiate is taught that this is called a ‘chair’ with the same necessity that $2 \times 2 = 4$. We are taught that we must reach a certain result otherwise we have made a mistake. These judgments serve as norms that guide the initiate’s action. They must act with certainty in recognizing that $a$ is the same

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223 Williams, Blind Obedience, 254.
224 Williams, Blind Obedience, 254-5.
225 Williams, Blind Obedience, 255.
type of object as $b$. She calls this process “calibrations of the child.”\textsuperscript{227} For the initiate learner the situation is such that “believing is prior to knowing.”\textsuperscript{228}

Williams recognizes, like Rhees, that Wittgenstein believes this kind of certainty is necessary to our life as language users. She writes of this certainty: “Believing with certainty is unavoidable and should not be mistaken for our being irrational or gullible. We cannot be anything but subject to norms including Wittgensteinian certainties. The alternative is death or madness.”\textsuperscript{229} The beginnings of language are marked by what Williams calls the “innocence of the novice.”\textsuperscript{230} This innocence necessitates a trust that must precede knowing, as Wittgenstein writes: “The child, I should like to say, learns to react in such-and-such a way; and in so reacting it doesn’t so far know anything. Knowing only begins at a later level.”\textsuperscript{231} The child is adopting a way of thinking by learning to react in ways that are directed by the teacher. It is once a background of such norms has been laid down that the child can then go onto justify their claims and be said to possess knowledge. And part of this background is constituted by propositions which appear empirical but have the character of normative judgments that stand fast.

This is why Wittgenstein speaks of a certainty which precedes both knowing and doubting. The novice has no resource but to accept what they learn at face value because it has not learned the practice by which meaningful doubts are articulated. We see this same idea reiterated in other places in Wittgenstein’s thought, such as in Zettel, 410: “A

\begin{small}
\textsuperscript{227} Williams, \textit{Blind Obedience}, 255.
\textsuperscript{228} Williams, \textit{Blind Obedience}, 255.
\textsuperscript{229} Williams, \textit{Blind Obedience}, 255.
\textsuperscript{230} Williams, \textit{Blind Obedience}, 255.
\textsuperscript{231} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §538.
\end{small}
person can doubt only if he has learnt certain things; as he can miscalculate only if he has learnt to calculate. In that case it is indeed involuntary.”\textsuperscript{232} The concept of miscalculating is coupled with the technique of calculating, there is no miscalculating unless there is an established technique in which we can go wrong.

We see this in Rhees’ writing when he spoke of us coming to have ‘serious convictions or beliefs’. These convictions require not just rules but examples. As Rhees says examples are necessary to “continue the game of judging.”\textsuperscript{233} We see the similarity in Rhees and Williams’ interpretation when Rhees speaks of the necessity of agreements in judgments or “agreement in the lives of people.”\textsuperscript{234} What does ‘agreement in the lives of people’ mean? Rhees writes: “The difference between ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ depends on the fact that most people who have been taught in that way will say, ‘The book is red’.”\textsuperscript{235} Rhees cites Wittgenstein from the \textit{Philosophical Investigations}:

\begin{quote}
It is not only agreements in definitions, but also (odd as it may sound) agreement in judgments that is required for communication by means of language. This seems to abolish logic, but does not do so. —It is one thing to describe methods of measurement, and another to obtain and state results of measurement. But what we call “measuring” is in part determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement.\textsuperscript{236}
\end{quote}

We are able to communicate because we have learned to react in the same way and to say the same things. Our practices can only make sense because there is consistency and

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{233} Rhees, \textit{Wittgenstein’s On Certainty}, 122.
\textsuperscript{234} Rhees, \textit{Wittgenstein’s On Certainty}, 122.
\textsuperscript{235} Rhees, \textit{Wittgenstein’s On Certainty}, 122.
\end{footnotes}
uniformity in our judgments. In *The Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* we see much the same thing: “It is essential to calculating that everyone who calculates right produces the same pattern of calculation. And 'calculating right' does not mean calculating with a clear understanding or smoothly; it means calculating *like this.*”\(^ {237}\) A practice requires that people act in the same way over time:

> It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which only one person followed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood, and so on.—To follow a rule, to make, a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (usages, institutions). To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to have a technique.\(^ {238}\)

Meaning is tied to practice, to a learned technique of acting. But if there is to be such a practice, we need to have a concept of what counts as acting and judging in accord with a practice. This agreement in judgments could not exist without the exemplary judgments that give us norms of judging. They ‘calibrate’ the novice in teaching them the correct judgment. These create what Williams calls the: “cognitive background without which knowledge and hypothesis, and doubt are impossible.”\(^ {239}\) It is against this background that we can sensibly ask questions and raise doubts, as Wittgenstein says in *Zettel:* “To begin by teaching someone ‘That looks red’ makes no sense. For he must say that spontaneously once he has learnt what ‘red’ means, i.e. has learnt the technique of using the word.”\(^ {240}\) Doubting and questioning can only make sense when we have a grasp


\(^{239}\) Williams, *Blind Obedience*, 254.

on meaning. In order to have such a grasp we need to learn the techniques of use that give these concepts meaning. For example, the practice of using colour names is first established, demonstrating how to apply colour terms to things in the world, teaching us the concept of colours. It is in the course of learning the practices of use that it is established what counts as correct and incorrect usage of colour terms. By learning the meaning of these words we are learning rules for their application. It is only in the context of such rules that we can be said to go wrong or right in our use of these terms.

Williams believes that Wittgenstein also describes a second kind of proposition, those that ‘hold fast’. She includes in this group statements like ‘I have never been to the moon’ and ‘the earth existed long before my birth’. There are two important distinctions between these and propositions of the first type: “First they are not themselves norms; and secondly they are or can become associated with some world-picture.”

She calls these kinds of propositions the: “source of world-pictures that become insinuated into language-games awaiting ‘discovery’ by a philosopher or other reflective thinker.” These propositions are the background of certainties implicit in all of our practices. These propositions may never be taught explicitly, but are part of the: “the implicit background that ‘emerges’ with any dynamic language-game.” This background is also part of what any novice must learn. These propositions do not:

name an entity or positive force that explains the rotation of the bodies around it. It characterizes the relation of what we say and do to what is logically and explanatorily implicit whether or not we make that content

241 Williams, *Blind Obedience*, 257.
242 Williams, *Blind Obedience*, 258.
explicit. This is a logical point about the background and its structure of certainty.\textsuperscript{244}

The suggestion is that as part of our explicit learning we are also implicitly learning a background of certainties. We see this tendency quite explicitly in \textit{On Certainty}:

\begin{quote}
A child learns there are reliable and unreliable informants much later than it learns facts which are told it. It doesn’t learn at all that the mountain has existed for a long time; that is, the question whether it is so doesn’t arise at all. It swallows this consequence down, so to speak, together with what it learns.\textsuperscript{245}
\end{quote}

The existence of the mountain is something that goes without saying; it does not need to be made explicit, it is the unspoken background of certainty that make questions and doubts about the mountain sensible. It is within such bedrock certainties that our questions and doubts have their life.

These propositions are not the kinds of framework rules that Moyal-Sharrock and Stroll suggested. The concept of the framework reading, which posits that hinges are a framework of grammatical rules that determine which linguistic moves are permissible, gets Wittgenstein’s view backwards. Rather, it is the particular moves that end up defining the rules of our game. Williams describes it this way: “concepts or rules are the abstractions from the particular applications and judgments we make.”\textsuperscript{246} The particular practices that we have determine what stand fast for us, rather than what stands fast determining our practices.

\textsuperscript{244} Williams, \textit{Blind Obedience}, 259.
\textsuperscript{245} Wittgenstein, \textit{On Certainty}, §143.
\textsuperscript{246} Williams, \textit{Blind Obedience}, 260.
The metaphor of the framework reading suggests that the hinges provide an external structure to our language. But Wittgenstein emphasizes the way the certainty develops through our particular experiences with a practice: “We got to know the nature of calculating by learning to calculate.”247 The nature of the practice is revealed to us in the course of actually doing the practice. There is no sense to the idea that we can find an external structure that will ground our way of thinking and speaking and show us what we are to do. The practice must at some point stand on its own: “Not only rules, but also examples are needed for establishing a practice. Our rules leave loop-holes open, and the practice has to speak for itself.”248 To learn a practice means learning examples of correct actions and judgments that show us how to proceed. At some point we will always run out of reasons and we will only have the practice itself to rely on.

This interpretation of hinges focuses on the necessity of this kind of certainty in the use of language. Rhees focuses on the fact that language requires an agreement in judgments among people and that which is not conjecture in language; Williams writes about the role of exemplary judgments and the formation of norms in learners. The most important factor is the emphasis they place on the role that hinge certainty plays in giving us norms of judging and acting as part of being in a community of speakers. Hinges are judgments that have themselves become norms of judging. We swallow these judgments down in the course of learning a language-game. They grant us the standards of correct judgment and agreement that are central to our shared language. The foundationalism of

the framework reading also recognizes the importance of hinge certainty in language, yet misconstrues the actual role Wittgenstein believes they play. “Hinges” are not something separate from the language-game, they are implicit in them. The norms of our judging are not separate from our actual judgments. Learning to judge is learning the normative standards of judging.

*On Certainty’s composition and its impact on our interpretation*

Finally I want to address the question of how the nature of *On Certainty’s* composition should affect our interpretation of its content. Many have referred to *On Certainty* as a ‘work’, suggesting that it is a unified, standalone text. Moyal-Sharrock writes of *On Certainty*: “There is now a dawning acknowledgment that Wittgenstein was the author of three, not two great works: *On Certainty* is Wittgenstein’s third masterpiece.”249 This directly puts *On Certainty* on the same level as Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations* as an intentionally created finished or near finished work. But other scholars have called this classification into question.

Brian Bruce Rogers provides evidence that the remarks in *On Certainty* were not a sustained, continuous project, but were written over a long period of time and interspersed with remarks on other topics. He writes that *On Certainty* should not be seen as a unified work but a compilation of three separate parts: “(1) remarks 1-65, with which

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Wittgenstein was somewhat dissatisfied, 2) remarks 66-299, with which he was very dissatisfied, and 3) 300-676, which he considered to be better quality than other writings he had produced over the past two years.\(^\text{250}\) Rogers produces evidence that Wittgenstein was less satisfied with the notes that make up roughly the first half of the book than he was with those in the book’s second half. The three sections were composed during different periods over a nearly two year span and were not clearly separated from remarks on other topics, such as colour and psychology. Rogers writes:

> It is clear from these considerations that *On Certainty* is a compilation of texts selected not by Wittgenstein himself but by his editors, since the strings of remarks comprising this book were neither consistently marked off from other discussions nor expressly indicated to count as a single investigation.\(^\text{251}\)

This challenges the notion that Wittgenstein ever intended *On Certainty* to be considered a separate work as it exists today. On this account, the book that exists now is largely a creation of its editors, who took disparate remarks on the subject of certainty and shaped it into a single book.

Rogers believes that these considerations should change our interpretation of the remarks in *On Certainty*. His suggestion is that each of the three sections represents a different part of Wittgenstein’s thought. It is an assumption of this interpretation that Wittgenstein was aiming at purely therapeutic, non-theoretical goals in his later


\(^\text{251}\) Rogers, *Philosophical Method*, 88.
philosophical work. Rogers thus believes we should evaluate these different sections according to the extent that they achieve this therapeutic goal:

My thesis is that many of the remarks in Part 3 of the book exhibit qualities that Wittgenstein desires in a therapeutic philosophy, that Part 2 often fails to achieve these characteristics by providing what appears to be a theoretical response to the philosophical problems in question, and that Part 1 displays these qualities only to a limited extent.253

On this reading, the first two sections, and particularly the second section from remarks 66-299, is of lesser value than the third, because this third section better exhibits the anti-theoretical, therapeutic qualities that Wittgenstein was aiming for in his later career. Rogers believes that Wittgenstein fell into theorizing in the second section of remarks by introducing the notion of hinge propositions, an idea he then calls into question in the third section of remarks, thus living up to the therapeutic goal. Rogers describes the thematic development of the remarks in this way:

Although in Part 1 Wittgenstein announces his intentions to give a therapeutic response to Moore, he tends to argue in Part 2 that Moore’s statements are inappropriate because they are among a special class of propositions that, according to the theory presented there, lack sense. However, in Part 3 Wittgenstein personally engages with Moore, attempting to lead Moore to a frame of mind in which he does not feel compelled to make these philosophical assertions by exploring a number of ways in which his statements could be given an understandable non-philosophical use. In these latter remarks Wittgenstein also begins to call his own prior theoretical claims from Part 2 into question, wondering if—like Moore’s statements they too in fact lack the determinate senses provided by everyday contexts.254

252 Rogers, *Philosophical Method*, 127.
253 Rogers, *Philosophical Method*, 127.
Rogers believes that Wittgenstein begins the first set of remarks with the therapeutic goal of expunging “bewitching propositions”\textsuperscript{255} but that this goal was not realized until the third set of remarks. He believes that there is a shift in the second section of the text from merely attempting to eliminate problematic propositions to the more theoretical task of identifying a special class of propositions: “distinguished by their justificatory roles and their status of nearly universal acceptance.”\textsuperscript{256}

Rogers interprets these propositions in largely the same way as Moyal-Sharrock and Stroll do, as a systematic foundation for reasoning.\textsuperscript{257} The major way in which Rogers deviates from them is his belief that in the third section Wittgenstein disavows this theorizing and returns to therapy. He sees in the third part of the book a move away from the skeptic and back to Moore. Wittgenstein’s goal in this third section, according to Rogers, is to remind Moore of the ordinary usage of these propositions with the purpose of showing that we do not know the meaning of a proposition apart from their actual context of use.\textsuperscript{258} Wittgenstein’s goal is apparently to show that Moore is in a state of confusion over the idea of meaning and its relation to usage. This is the supposed therapeutic goal of the third part of the remarks that make up \textit{On Certainty}.

Rogers is very likely correct that \textit{On Certainty} was not intended to be a single, sustained work. Yet in tracing how \textit{On Certainty} came to be, I believe Rogers goes wrong in his interpretation of how its various remarks should be read. Let us begin by looking at

\textsuperscript{255} Rogers, \textit{Philosophical Method}, 134-5.
\textsuperscript{256} Rogers, \textit{Philosophical Method}, 139.
\textsuperscript{257} Rogers, \textit{Philosophical Method}, 142.
\textsuperscript{258} Rogers, \textit{Philosophical Method}, 145.
what Rogers has demarcated as the first section, remarks 1-65 of *On Certainty*. In this section Rogers claims Wittgenstein is mostly dedicated to critiquing Moore’s use of ‘I know’ and expunging certain propositions, and that it is less therapeutic than later sections. Well, Rogers is certainly correct to note that Wittgenstein does spend much of the opening remarks criticizing Moore; he seemingly fails to notice that themes we see in later remarks can also be seen in earlier ones. At remarks 38 and 39 we see Wittgenstein focusing on our practices as being the primary thing in which we possess certainty:

38. Knowledge in mathematics: Here one has to keep on reminding oneself of the unimportance of the ‘inner process’ or ‘state’ and ask “Why should it be important? What does it matter to me?” What is interesting is how we use mathematical propositions.259

39. *This* is how calculation is done, in such circumstances a calculation is treated as absolutely reliable, as certainly correct.260

Here we see ideas that will emerge throughout the remarks of *On Certainty*, namely the primacy of practice and the focus on particular judgments. These remarks touch upon the primacy of acting as the source of meaning and certainty, with remark 39 specifically touching on the fact that treating this calculation as absolutely reliable is part of the nature of calculating itself. At remark 44 we again see the focus on particular judgments and not just rules as central to learning a practice: “the answer is that we did not learn this through a rule, but by learning to calculate.”261 Again this comment exhibits both the groundlessness and the particularism (the focus on particular judgments) that we spoke of before—themes that would become important in later remarks are apparent early on.

More important are the claims Rogers makes about the second and third sections, particularly the claim that the second section is theoretical in introducing the notion of the hinge proposition and that the third section is more therapeutic in rejecting this theoretical notion and focusing instead on Moore’s use of language. But if we examine the later section closely, we see that this assertion does not hold up. First of all the very notion of a hinge does not appear in *On Certainty* until remark 341. All of the direct references to hinges are after the point which Rogers claims Wittgenstein began disavowing the notion. We have already seen numerous examples throughout the full range of *On Certainty*’s remarks that support the notion of a certainty which stands fast for us and many others as part of the practice of our language-game. Speaking of this kind of certainty at 359: “But that I want to conceive it as something beyond being justified; as it were, as something animal.” At 375:

> Here one must realize that complete absence of doubt at some point, even where we would say that ‘legitimate’ doubt can exist, need not falsify a language-game. For there is also something like another arithmetic. I believe that this admission must underlie any understanding of logic.  

At remark 411:

> If I say “we assume that the earth has existed for many years past” (or something similar), then of course it sounds strange that we should assume such a thing. But in the entire system of our language-games it belongs to the foundations. The assumption, one might say, forms the basis of action, and therefore, naturally, of thought.

At remark 450 we explicitly see the connection between hinge certainty and learning the

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language-game:

I want to say: our learning has the form “that is a violet”, “that is a table”. Admittedly, the child might hear the word “violet” for the time in the sentence “perhaps that is a violet”, but then he could ask “what is a violet?” Now this might of course be answered by showing him a picture. But how would it be if one said “that is a…” only when showing him a picture, but otherwise said nothing but “perhaps that is a…”—What practical consequences is that supposed to have? A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt.265

We see a similar emphasis on the relation of what stands fast to the nature of the language-game in his discussion of names even later in the book, at remark 579: “It is part of the language-game with people’s names that everyone knows his name with the greatest certainty.”266 Again at 594: “My name is ‘L.W.’ And if someone were to dispute it, I should straightaway make connexions with innumerable things which make it certain.”267 We see the absence of doubt as part of the language game emphasized until nearly the last remarks in On Certainty, at remark 625:

But does that mean that mean that it is unthinkable that the word “green” should have been produced here by a slip of the tongue or a momentary confusion? Don’t we know of such cases?—One can also say to someone “Mightn’t you perhaps have made a slip?” That amounts to: “Think about it again”.—But these rules of caution only make sense if they come to an end somewhere. A doubt without an end is not even a doubt.268

These ideas certainly connect thematically with remarks we see in the supposedly theoretical section, at remark 254: “Any ‘reasonable’ person behaves like this.”269 About learning and certainty, 160: “The child learns by believing the adult. Doubt comes after

266 Wittgenstein, On Certainty, §579.
Remark 283 is another example of an earlier theme echoed later on: “For how can a child immediately doubt what it is taught? That could mean only that he was incapable of learning certain language games.” This parallels a remark from 522: “We say: if a child has mastered language—and hence its application—it must know the meaning of words. It must, for example, be able to attach the name of its colour to a white, black, red or blue object without the occurrence of any doubt.”

In both cases we have Wittgenstein describing the necessity of certainty in learning and carrying on with a language-game. In the remarks a child is depicted as developing mastery of language if he acts without doubt in making a judgment. It is a certainty in judgments that are essential to the game. This is a theme that reemerges consistently in On Certainty; it is a prevalent idea in both the second and third section of remarks. Although it may be true that the third section includes a greater focus on Moore’s use of language than the second, it can hardly be called a disavowal of the earlier remarks. The lack of a sharp boundary between rules and empirical propositions is also found in the earlier and later remarks. At remark 52 and 318 we find Wittgenstein speaking of their being a lack of sharpness between the empirical and the rule-like.

Compare:

52. This situation is thus not the same for a proposition like “At this distance from the sun there is a planet” and “Here is a hand” (namely my own hand). The second can’t be called a hypothesis. But there isn’t a sharp boundary line between them.

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318. ‘The question doesn’t arise at all.’ Its answer would characterize a method. But there is no sharp boundary between methodological propositions and propositions within a method.\(^{274}\)

Once again this is an example of an idea that first emerges in the supposedly more theoretical remarks that is echoed in the later remarks which, according to Rogers, disavow the earlier sections.

Rogers is likely correct in his description about *On Certainty* being a collection of remarks written over a long period, interspersed among other topics rather than a unified work. However, I do not agree with Rogers that we should see *On Certainty* as possessing deep thematic differences across the various remarks. Although the various sections may possess different points of emphasis or concern, many of the same basic ideas and themes reappear across the remarks. The concept of the hinge proposition and the notion of what stands fast cannot be described as only belonging to one section and then being rejected later on. Throughout the remarks in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein is concerned with the idea that something must stand fast us in the course of our language-game; that our language-game depends on a shared sense of what is not open to doubt. This is a theme that unites the remarks in *On Certainty*.

Conclusion

I believe that the understanding of On Certainty offered by Rush Rhees and Meredith Williams is the most persuasive analysis of Wittgenstein’s version of certainty. In Moore’s essay he sought to defend common sense propositions about the existence of minds and bodies and knowledge of the external world. Wittgenstein believed that Moore’s attempt to describe these propositions as knowledge is wrong because they do not conform to a correct definition of knowledge. Rather they represent a certainty in judging and acting that precedes knowing. This is a certainty that manifests itself as a trust in exemplary judgments and an implicit world-picture. These are propositions that no longer play an empirical role, but have actually come to stand fast for us as part of the very grammar of our language. Wittgenstein sees here a merging of the concept of rule and empirical proposition, what appear to be empirical propositions can actually come to play a normative role in guiding how we are to speak and judge.

What the interpretations of Williams and Rhees show is how Wittgenstein believed that this form of certainty is part of the nature of carrying on a language. He showed that the certainties Moore had enumerated were central to us, but in a way that is different than Moore had believed. Wittgenstein’s central idea is that our language can only go on in a context of shared certainties, where people share a sense of the obvious. To speak meaningfully is to become a master of a technique. We learn to develop a certainty in techniques that must precede both doubt and knowledge. It is within a background of such techniques that these concepts have their meaning. Perhaps most
importantly, these techniques have no justification, there is no reason for our speaking and acting in this way.

Finally, this interpretation can be applied to the whole of *On Certainty*, not merely portions of it. Themes of the connection between learning and certainty, the importance of what stands fast, that a doubt that doubts everything is not a real doubt, the concept of empirical proposition can merge with the concept of a rule; these resurface throughout the whole of the remarks. Right until the very end of the remarks Wittgenstein is concerned with what stands fast for us and many others. As we also saw, these ideas are not contained in *On Certainty* alone, but are echoed in many of Wittgenstein’s other texts as well. Thus I believe that it is not correct to say that Wittgenstein rejected his ideas about certainty. Rather, the latter remarks represent a further working out of ideas introduced earlier. The concern with what stand fasts in is one that remained.
Bibliography


