

Typographical Notice

In quotations from Wittgenstein the bold font has been used to indicate emphases added by me to differentiate them from Wittgenstein's original italicized terms. Words in small caps refer to concepts.

1 Wittgenstein and the 'Social Turn' in Contemporary Epistemology

It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which only one person followed a rule. . . . To follow a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (usages, institutions)

(PI 199)

That's why 'following a rule' is a practice. And to *think* one is following a rule is not to follow a rule. And that's why it's not possible to follow a rule 'privately'; otherwise, thinking one was following a rule would be the same thing as following it.

(PI 202)

The last twenty years have witnessed a veritable 'social turn' in analytic philosophy. A key role has been played, in this context, by the rise of social epistemology. Virtually all presentations of social epistemology start with the claim that key to social epistemology is the repudiation of the kind of individualistic epistemology, which, since Descartes' *Meditations* and through Kant's maxim 'Think for yourself', has dominated philosophical debates. Individualistic epistemology considers subjects as autonomous inquirers, who acquire knowledge independently of their social and political contexts. It also enjoins them to embark in a process of examination of their own beliefs to determine which, if any, amount to knowledge or are indeed certain. The epistemic credentials of one's beliefs are then traced back either to sense data, manifested in one's private mental arena, or to a priori truths, knowable by reason alone independently of its material situatedness, like the Cartesian cogito, or the Kantian categories. Once again, these foundational items are either available only within the mind of each subject, and known to them in a privileged way, or are nonetheless independent from the interactions with one's peers and from the complexities of the social world in which one lives.

1.1 The Rejection of Individualistic Epistemology in the Later Wittgenstein

It is curious, and a sign of the deep erasure of (the later) Wittgenstein's ideas from many current debates in analytic philosophy, that in the context of the contemporary rejection of this overarching model, his views are not routinely

presented as the most radical break with all fundamental tenets of individualistic epistemology.

Many of Wittgenstein's insights prove to be fatal to key tenets of individualistic epistemology. For instance, his conception of meaning as use, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, stresses the ineliminable role of the community not only for language acquisition but also for determining rules, meanings, and, with them, the concepts which we deploy in thought (*contra* the Kantian transcendental model), and opens up to their cultural and historical variability (*contra* Kantian universalist pretensions). His rejection of the very possibility of a private language, whose meanings should putatively be private experiences, stands against the Cartesian model of the mental, as well as the empiricist appeal to sense data as the source of all our concepts. His rejection of the very idea that we may have privileged knowledge of our own mental states – due to their observation within one's own mental arena – and no knowledge of other people's mental states, goes against any form of solipsism; his emphasis on the instinctive and embodied expression of the mental, which is key for acquiring psychological concepts and the ability to attribute them to oneself and others, goes against individualistic models of self-knowledge and of knowledge of other minds. Finally, his rejection (mostly in the *Blue Book*¹) of the Cartesian idea of the self as a mental substance, and of the Kantian idea that the self is a mere condition of possibility of experience and thought, let alone a bundle of sensations or memories, as Hume and Locke respectively held, in favour of the idea that when 'I' refers at all, it refers to an embodied entity, are all further blows to essential tenets of individualistic epistemology.

Wittgenstein's later writings were also relevant for the development of disciplines in the social sciences. In anthropology, for instance, the *Remarks on Frazer's The Golden Bough* (1993) were crucial for the rejection of James George Frazer's positivistic methodology. Wittgenstein's *Lectures on Religious Belief* (1966), his several remarks in *Culture and Value* (1980) as well as in *On Certainty* (1969), inspired a new approach to the understanding and study of religion. His ideas contributed to the rejection of positivism in sociology, also thanks to Peter Winch's *The Idea of Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (1958); and, owing to Barry Barnes and David Bloor's (1996) *Scientific Knowledge: A Sociological Analysis*, they contributed to the development of the so-called 'strong programme' in the sociology of science. Finally, Wittgenstein's idea of language-games and rule-governed practices were key for the development of game theory.

¹ There is already a brief rejection of this idea in TLP 5.631.

1.2 The Rejection of Individualistic Epistemology in *On Certainty*

Yet, it is in *On Certainty* that the relevance of Wittgenstein's ideas to contemporary social epistemology becomes even more obvious.² For the key contention is that all inquiry revolves around 'hinges' (OC 341–343) – that is, propositions that have an empirical form and yet are removed from doubt and investigation. By staying put, they allow 'the door to turn'. That is, they allow us to form justification for, and possibly gain knowledge of ordinary empirical propositions. As he writes in those key passages:

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.

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

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.

For instance, it's only by taking for granted that the Earth has existed for a very long time that we can take fossils to bear on the determination of the age of the Earth. If we didn't take that for granted, then the presence of those fossils would have no bearing on the inquiry into the age of the Earth, as it would be compatible with the Earth's having popped into existence only recently, replete with everything we find on it.

Unlike Descartes, who in his *First Meditation* seeks to question all his prior beliefs to identify what withstands doubt and can serve as a secure foundation for the rational reconstruction of knowledge, Wittgenstein maintains that doubt arises only after belief³ (OC160) and does not serve as a means of attaining either knowledge or certainty. That is, rational doubt is possible, for Wittgenstein, only by taking hinges for granted. Thanks to them, we can then acquire reasons against specific j/k-apt beliefs – that is, beliefs that are either justified or known.⁴ Hyperbolic, global doubts are necessarily unmotivated by reasons, since they call into question the hinges that make it possible to acquire reasons for and against ordinary empirical propositions. Being unmotivated by reasons, they breach the criteria for meaningful doubt and are, in fact, a mere

² *Contra* Hertzberg (1988: 307–308) who, however, also points out the essential role of trust – and hence of our social interconnectedness – in OC, and stresses the deeply social dimension of Wittgenstein's reflections on meaning in PI, which are in the background of OC.

³ 'Belief' here is belief in hinges, which unlike 'j/k-apt belief', isn't supported by reasons and apt to become knowledge when true and justified.

⁴ 'Belief' is an umbrella term, which spans across beliefs that can be supported by reasons and become justified or known, up to beliefs that aren't so apt, and are mostly an expression of faith or trust. We will come back to this issue in Section 3.

illusion of doubt. As Wittgenstein puts it in OC (450): ‘A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt’.

Furthermore, the metaphysical possibilities raised by Cartesian sceptical scenarios are ultimately nonsensical for Wittgenstein (OC 383, 676), although certainly deserving of careful investigation (OC 37). Outside their ordinary employment, in contexts of sensory and cognitive disconnect, sentences like ‘It’s raining’ or even ‘I am dreaming’ cannot refer to events in the world, even if it is raining outside or one is indeed dreaming. Rather, they may only refer to the dream of the rain or to the dream of dreaming. Thus, the Cartesian sceptical hypothesis, encapsulated in the phrase ‘I am dreaming’, doesn’t express any truly conceivable possibility: if I am dreaming of it, it cannot describe the situation I am in, but, at most, only my dreaming of it, in which case it shouldn’t worry us any more than dreaming of the rain should worry us about getting wet.⁵ If, in contrast, ‘I am dreaming’ is thought of or asserted while being awake, it is false, and easily disproved by the application of ordinary criteria of verification.

Hinges, furthermore, have the form of empirical propositions, or, more precisely, are propositions about ordinary material objects (OC 401–402) or parts of physical bodies, like hands and feet, or tables and chairs; animals and plants, like cats and trees; chemical compounds, like water, as well as planets and celestial bodies like the Earth, the Moon, and the Sun. In some cases, they are propositions grounded in habit and memory, like ‘My name is . . .’, and they mostly depend on being enculturated within a certain form of life.

The relevance of this observation is that at the foundation of all our thinking, for Wittgenstein, there are neither propositions about sense data, contrary to the empiricists (OC 90, 426), nor solely a priori truths, let them be the Cartesian cogito, or logical or mathematical propositions (OC 303–306, 651), or a priori categories. Indeed, a key aim of *On Certainty* is to go past the received view and claim that just as we don’t call into doubt a priori truths, and keep them firm against all possible counterevidence, so we don’t call hinges into doubt and, at least in context, don’t admit of contrary evidence. As Wittgenstein writes in OC (340): ‘We know, **with the same certainty with which we believe any mathematical proposition**, how the letters A and B are pronounced, what the colour of human blood is called, that other human beings have blood and call it “blood”’.⁶

In both cases this is due, for Wittgenstein, to the role these diverse propositions play in our communal epistemic practices. As Wittgenstein writes in OC (655, 657):

⁵ Even more radically, for Wittgenstein, in the context of a dream, those words would only retain an appearance of meaning. This may escape notice because we tend to project it back from the contexts of their ordinary employment. (Cf. OC 10, 348).

⁶ We will return to Wittgenstein’s use of ‘I know’ and ‘to know’ in connection with hinges in Section 2.

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.”

The propositions of mathematics might be said to be **fossilized**. The proposition “I am called . . .” is not. But it too is regarded as *incontrovertible* by those who, like myself, have overwhelming evidence for it. And this is not out of thoughtlessness. For, the evidence’s being overwhelming consists precisely in the fact that we do not *need* to give way before any contrary evidence. **And so we have here a buttress similar to the one that makes the propositions of mathematics incontrovertible.**

Interestingly, moreover, the certainty enjoyed by our psychological avowals, for Wittgenstein, is not itself a function of a privileged and infallible access that subjects putatively have to their own mental states. Rather, it is the result of our communal, linguistic practice, in which subjects are accorded authority over their own mental states, at least *ceteris paribus* (i.e., provided there is no reason to suspect deceit or conceptual impairment). In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein writes (PI 247–248):

“Only you can know if you had that intention.” One might tell someone this when one was explaining the meaning of the word “intention” to him. For then it means: that is how we use it. **(And here “know” means that the expression of uncertainty is senseless.)**

The proposition “Sensations are private” is comparable to: “One plays patience by oneself”.

It is a grammatical remark, for Wittgenstein, and therefore an outcome of our linguistic practice, that people are accorded authority over their own mental states, which, in turn, are conceptualized in such a way that they are not taken to be intersubjectively manifest. Consequently, ‘Only you can know . . .’ with respect to them is a grammatical remark that reminds us that, in virtue of that very practice, a third party’s doubt or uncertainty about the fact that one is in pain, or has a certain intention, when one avows those mental states, is excluded from the language-game, at least *ceteris paribus* (i.e., if there is no reason to think they may be deceitful or conceptually impaired).

Once more, this should make us realize that the various items that traditional epistemological projects have posited as sitting at the foundations of all human knowledge and as inherently certain, are in no way special. All certainties – also the ones that have long been thought to be the outcome of individualistic investigations and to pertain to private realms, like the mental, or to be accessible only by means of a priori reflections, like mathematical ones – are in fact a function of the role they play within human linguistic and epistemic practices.

Thus, as we saw, hinges are typically acquired through enculturation within a shared form of life and are by no means the outcomes of solitary inquiry, contrary to the tenets of individualistic epistemology. Hinges, however, are many and diverse, for Wittgenstein. As he writes: ‘And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited’ (OC 99).

Hence, some hinges stay put over time and cultures. For instance, we take it for granted that the Earth has existed for a very long time, and that it was inhabited by our ancestors well before us. Of course, the precise age of the Earth has been a topic of heated debate, but not the hinge proposition that the Earth has been existing for a long time.

Some other hinges, however, may and do change over time (OC 96–98, 336). Thus, what we consider to be justified/able (and therefore known/able) is not given once and for all but inextricably depends on our historical, and social situatedness. One of Wittgenstein’s examples is ‘Nobody has ever been on the Moon’,⁷ and he considers examples of propositions which used to play a hinge-like role – for example ‘The Earth is flat’ – for which contrary evidence was either ignored or explained away, that no longer play a hinge-like role for us. Writes Wittgenstein (OC 96–97):⁸

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

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

Still, according to Wittgenstein, and contrary to W.v.O. Quine’s (1951) later rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction in ‘Two dogmas of empiricism’, at every moment or relative to any given context, we may distinguish between propositions that play a hinge-like role and those which don’t, even though at a different time, or in a different context, the former may become empirical ones, and the latter may be hardened into rules. As he writes (OC 98):

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.

⁷ OC was composed between 1949 and 1951, thus about twenty years before the moon landing.

⁸ In Coliva (2025), I distinguish between *de jure* and *de facto* hinges. Some of the differences between these two kinds of hinge are discussed in Section 2.

Yet, to reiterate, hinges are typically acquired by being part of a linguistic and epistemic community. We don't have them thanks to the pursuit of a personal quest for certainty, let alone one that accords pride of place to the deliverances of introspection or of purely a priori reasoning. On the contrary, as Wittgenstein puts it, they are the 'inherited background' against which we distinguish between true and false (OC 94). Thus, neither inquiry nor knowledge would be possible for isolated subjects. Clearly, then, the rejection of the main tenets of individualistic epistemology, with its psychologistic or purely a priori underpinnings, is an overarching theme of Wittgenstein's later philosophy and particularly of *On Certainty*. To repeat, for him, at the foundations of our thinking and inquiring there are, rather, propositions about material objects, which are susceptible to change over time, and which are part of an inherited world-picture (*Weltbild*, OC 93–95, 162, 167, 233, 262).

1.3 Wittgenstein and the Critical Dimension of Social Epistemology

So far, we have considered, in very general terms, the contribution of Wittgenstein's later writings to anti-individualistic epistemology. There is, however, another aspect to the 'social turn' in contemporary analytic philosophy: a growing focus, particularly led by feminist epistemologists, on social structures and differences, especially those related to power and privilege.

In this connection too, the later Wittgenstein has – perhaps surprisingly – something to teach us. I say 'perhaps surprisingly' because his 'quietism' – that is, the view that in philosophy we cannot advance theses and that 'all *explanation* must disappear, and description alone must take its place' (PI 109) – is often considered to make his views unserviceable in the context of politically charged issues, characteristic of feminist epistemology, or within the contemporary wave of 'ameliorative' projects in philosophy of mind and language.

However, thanks especially to Naomi Scheman's pioneering work (Scheman 2011, but see also Scheman and O'Connor 2002, Code 1991, Tanesini 2004, O'Connor 2008, Ashton 2019, and Laugier, Provost, and Trächtler 2022), Wittgenstein's ideas have been rallied to the feminist cause. More recently, thanks to Anna Boncompagni's work (2019, 2024 a, b), as well as to Danièle Moyal-Sharrock and Constantine Sandis (2004) and Coliva (2025a, d, 2025), *On Certainty* and some ideas in the later Wittgenstein have been brought to bear on various forms of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), and on discussions about gender and trans identities (Stoljar 1995, 2011, Hay 2020, Coliva 2025a).

More generally, the later Wittgenstein continuously asks us to imagine *alternative* practices, epistemic or otherwise. Consider the famous case of the