

Anti-Foundationalism Without Relativism: An interpretation of *On Certainty*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides an interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty*. *On Certainty* was intended as a response to the sceptic. Despite this, it seems that Wittgenstein's remarks, in particular the ones referencing the "groundlessness" of our epistemic practices, imply a kind of relativism. One of the interpretive challenges of this text is to figure out exactly how his view succeeds at being anti-sceptical despite this groundlessness. I argue that rational incommensurability on its own does not imply relativism. I critique a contextualist interpretation of *On Certainty* by Michael Williams. Williams argues that our epistemic practices are not system dependent, and that this provides a reason for Wittgenstein not being a relativist. I will argue that for Wittgenstein, our epistemic practices are system-dependent, but that we can avoid relativism by demonstrating that the charge of relativism falls outside of the bounds of what can be intelligibly thought.

## Introduction

In 1953 a series of notes written by Wittgenstein were collected and published under the name of "On Certainty". In these notes Wittgenstein makes a number of references to two essays by G.E. Moore, the first being "A Defence of Common Sense" and the second being "A Proof of the External World". In the latter, Moore, responding to the sceptic, famously utters "here is a hand" as part of his proof of the existence of the external world.<sup>1</sup> In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein is also deeply concerned with the problem of scepticism, but whereas Moore attempts to meet the sceptic head-on, it is clear that Wittgenstein is not responding in such a straightforward manner. He is not accepting the standard for knowledge assumed by the sceptic's challenge and then presenting a theory of justification which meets that standard. Wittgenstein's contribution to this dialectical engagement between the sceptic and Moore is to demonstrate that both parties share a common misconception about the structure of justification, meaning, and about the nature of scepticism as a philosophical problem. The fundamental interpretive challenge when it comes to *On Certainty* is to identify precisely what this common misconception is, and what exactly one is supposed to see with regard to both the sceptic's challenge and the nature of one's own beliefs once we have a correct account of our language and epistemic practices in view.

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein entertains a more general form of the sceptical challenge which is well articulated by the Agrippa's trilemma. Agrippa's trilemma begins with the seemingly innocuous suggestion that, for any conviction or claim to properly count as knowledge, any grounds which one might adduce in favour of it must itself also count as knowledge. If taken up this suggestion quickly results in three undesirable situations. Either we attempt to provide further grounds for the grounds already adduced, and grounds for those, resulting in an infinitely long chain of grounds; we provide a chain of grounds which at some point feature the conviction we originally sought to ground; or our chain of grounds terminates in some proposition which is itself ungrounded. Infinite regress, circular reasoning, and flat assertion supposedly exhaust the options available to us, and yet none seem consistent with the view that we possess true knowledge.

For Wittgenstein, certainty holds the key to combating the sceptic. His conception of certainty is, however, much different from the certainty generally talked about in theories of epistemological foundationalism. Traditionally, epistemological foundationalism takes the third option of Agrippa's trilemma and argues that the truth of our basic convictions is self-evident and that one can perceive their truth through some intuitive facility. These basic certainties are therefore ungrounded, but not in need of grounding. Wittgensteinian certainties are quite different. For Wittgenstein, genuine grounding can only occur if the proposition functioning as a ground is more certain than the proposition being grounded. It follows from this that the final grounds upon which our beliefs rest are those which are held to be the most certain, but which by definition, do not admit of any grounding themselves. In contrast to foundationalism, these are

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<sup>1</sup> Moore, "Proof of an External World".

not certain in virtue of some intrinsic quality they possess. Rather, they are certain in virtue of the peculiar logical role they play in a larger system of beliefs. The idea is that for any investigation to take place, there have to be some propositions which are exempt from doubt, propositions around which the rest of our investigations "hinge". That there are some propositions exempt from doubt is not just a practical but a logical necessity. Wittgenstein writes:

§342. It belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in deed not doubted.

These undoubted propositions also perform the function of providing the standard against which we might evaluate other potential beliefs. There are many suggestions that these propositions be viewed as essentially *normative*.

§98.... 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.

The upshot of this view is that any sceptical challenge or proposal aimed at undermining these certainties would, by definition, be less certain than (or at the very most, equally as certain as) these basic certainties are themselves. It would therefore be rationally justified to reject any sceptical proposal which is incompatible with the very hinge propositions which they seek to undermine. Further, according to Wittgenstein any doubting behaviour requires that some things are not doubted; that some things are held certain is a condition for thought and doubting in general.

§115. If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty.

§341. 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.

A universal doubt which affected our most basic certainties would defeat itself by removing the conditions for its own intelligibility. In this way Wittgenstein is able to combat the sceptic simply by illustrating our actual epistemic practices.

I provide this very brief and general sketch of Wittgenstein's argument to demonstrate that it generates an interpretive puzzle. Immediately the question arises as to how anti-sceptical this proposal really is. After all, Wittgenstein is admitting that our beliefs ultimately rest upon propositions which are themselves ungrounded. If we grant that basic certainties are necessary for thought, this certainly provides a warrant for holding some basic beliefs, but it is not a warrant which speaks for the truth of any belief in particular. This is why Wittgenstein says "I do not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness... it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, if our basic certainties are to be viewed as normative, i.e., as providing the rules and standards against which

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<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §94.

everyday empirical propositions are measured, it would seem that they are not truth-apt or open to verification and falsification in the same way that regular empirical propositions are. Hence, "If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not true, nor yet false."<sup>3</sup> It is hard to see how hinge propositions can be considered items of knowledge, on one hand because they lack real justification, and on the other because they potentially lack truth-value. It seems that Wittgenstein may have defeated scepticism at the cost of accepting a very substantial anti-realism.

In the literature, writers are divided on exactly how to view our epistemic practices and the sceptic's challenge once taking stock of this groundlessness. Does Wittgenstein's proposal amount to anti-realism, and perhaps even epistemic relativism? It is certain that Wittgenstein is not accepting the sceptical scenario as stated by the sceptic (I am treating this as an immovable point around which the rest of my research will "hinge"). Given this, there seems to be two main ways of how to interpret Wittgenstein on the implications of this groundlessness. Either we take Wittgenstein as attempting to bolster our hinge propositions such that they amount to knowledge and are therefore rationally warranted and truth-apt; or, we take Wittgenstein as accepting that hinge propositions are not justified or truth-apt, but as placing substantial limitations on what can be meaningfully said when attempting to evaluate the truth of our hinge propositions. We can think of these two options as meeting the sceptic and evading the sceptic, respectfully. Much of the literature around *On Certainty* can be placed on either one side or the other of this line.

I will begin with Wittgenstein's account of the structure justification, highlighting what I take to be two distinctive features of this account; the genuine grounding condition and the "certainty-as-logical-role" feature. Next, I will demonstrate how these features interact to produce a certain kind of groundlessness. I will then look at rationally irreconcilable disputes as one potential route from groundlessness to relativism. There are a number of passages from *On Certainty* where Wittgenstein imagines disputes between individuals from radically different epistemic traditions. Although the responses to these situations are varied, the dominant response from Wittgenstein is to note the impossibility of any rational conversion. I will argue that rational irreconcilability on its own does not imply relativism. Next, I will critique a contextualist interpretation of *On Certainty* by Michael Williams. Williams argues that our epistemic practices are ultimately not system dependent, and that this provides as reason for Wittgenstein not being a relativist. I will argue that for Wittgenstein, our epistemic practices are system-dependent, but that we can avoid relativism through another means. I argue that Wittgenstein is not attempting to solve the problem by justifying our linguistic practices. Rather, Wittgenstein is illustrating the structure of these practices to show that the sceptic's challenge is ultimately unintelligible. Any attempt to articulate the charge of relativism would require

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* §205

“standing outside” of one’s language game. It would require thought which is unstructured by our basic convictions, which is ultimately not possible.

## Section 1

The two essential features of Wittgenstein's account of knowledge are 1) the genuine grounding condition, and 2) the "certainty-as-logical-status" condition.

### 1.1

Constitutive of the account of justification provided by Wittgenstein is the view that a proposition can be grounded by another proposition only if the grounding proposition is held to be more certain than the proposition being grounded. This is found in a cluster of passages in *On Certainty*, beginning with the very first:

§1 When one says that such and such a proposition can't be proved, of course that does not mean that it can't be derived from other propositions; any proposition can be derived from other ones. But they may be no more certain than it is itself.

I take §1 to be responding to the scenarios like the following: The proposition "the world has existed for many years before my birth" seems to be as certain as anything which can be adduced in support of it. Indeed, it is much more certain the proposition "Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49 BC". Nevertheless, the conditional statement "If Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49BC, then the world has existed for many years before my birth", which seems legitimate enough, demonstrates that the first sentence can be derived from the second when accompanied by an assertion of the antecedent proposition. Wittgenstein is saying that this kind of derivation must not be confused with actual grounding. While it might appear that Caesar having crossed the Rubicon in 49 BC provides a reason for believing that the earth has existed for at least a few thousand years, it is not actually grounding the latter proposition due to the relative certainty with which we hold the two propositions. The point is driven home in the next two passages:<sup>4</sup>

§243. One says “I know” when one is ready to give compelling grounds. “I know: relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth.... But if what he believes is of such a kind that the grounds that he can give are no surer than his assertion, then he cannot say that he knows what he believes.

§250 My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it. That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it.

These two passages clearly demonstrate the principle that I will refer to as the genuine grounding condition, which is a fundamental feature of Wittgenstein's account of justification. First off, I think this feature is what gives Wittgenstein's account the appearance of

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<sup>4</sup> This idea is also conveyed in §111 and §125.

foundationalism. The flow of justification only goes one way, from the most certain to the least certain; one could call this feature “uni-directionality.” It also never flows circularly, since it is impossible to imagine that one proposition is both less certain than and more certain than another. The flow of grounding is therefore also linear. These two features together give the appearance of a foundationalist account.

This view can be illustrated by example. In the “The Foundations of Arithmetic”, Frege attempts to define our natural numbers. These definitions were intended to be foundational.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, the fruitfulness of this project would be measured by Frege’s ability to recover the basic properties of natural numbers, and this is because the properties of the basic numbers were held to be more certain than any potential definition of them. So although there is a sense in which the definitions were intended to ground our arithmetic practices, it is ultimately the properties of the basic numbers which ground the project, insofar as they were the measure of the validity of the definitions. The sense of grounding illustrated by this example corresponds closely with the sense of grounding featured in *On Certainty*. A slightly different example comes from Kant’s “Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals”. From his categorical imperative the implication was drawn that if a man armed with an axe were to come to your door and ask whether your children were home, you ought not lie about their whereabouts.<sup>6</sup> Who among us would actually believe that the categorical imperative is more certain than the proposal that this is *not* the right response to the situation described. The exception of course, being Kant, who took the fact that this particular prescription is implied by his moral system not to overturn an aspect of the system itself, but rather to overturn whatever view he may have previously had regarding the situation where a man with an axe arrives at one’s door. The moral intuitions were not the measure of the validity of his meta-ethical framework, and it is clear how Kant ordered the relative certainty of these propositions. These two examples demonstrate two things: firstly, that there is a sense in which our most certain convictions function to ground our thinking notwithstanding them being formally non-foundational; and secondly, it should be apparent that some ordering of the relative certainty of conflicting propositions is necessary for resolving that conflict.

## 1.2

The second important feature of Wittgenstein's theory of justification is the idea that the certainty with which we hold basic propositions is not due to something intrinsic to the proposition itself, but is due rather to the logical relationships it has to our other beliefs. This is made clear through a comparison with traditional foundationalism. The following is a kind of paradigm of foundationalism: in order for us to have any certainty that our beliefs about the

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<sup>5</sup> Frege, “The Foundations of Arithmetic”.

<sup>6</sup> Kant, “Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals”.



world are in fact true, we must begin from some set of indubitable first beliefs, and through a derivational process which preserves the epistemic status of these first beliefs, we can arrive at a more expansive set of beliefs which share in the certainty with which we held our first principles. Since these foundational beliefs are, definitionally, not grounded in any others, they must be considered intrinsically credible such that they do not require any further grounding. And this makes sense, considering that the origin of foundationalism is found in an attempt avoid a sceptical scenario. If our foundational beliefs relied on support from other less certain beliefs for their credibility, then there is no guarantee whatsoever that the entire system of beliefs was not radically mistaken or somehow in error. Wittgenstein is not concerned with combating the sceptic in this straightforward manner, and thus has no need to posit anything with intrinsic credibility and nothing which must correspond to a mind-independent reality. For Wittgenstein, our basic certainties “stand-fast” for us as a matter of the peculiar logical role that they play within our belief systems. This idea is expressed clearly in the following passages:

§144 The child learns to believe a host of things. I.e. it learns to act according to these beliefs. Bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed, and in that system some things stand unshakeably fast and some are more or less liable to shift.... What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it.

§341. 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.

§342. It belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in deed not doubted.

§343. 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.

Within our linguistic practices, there are some beliefs which, in virtue of their peculiar logical role, are an immovable part of the practice. It is necessary that some things stay put in order for any further investigations to be possible.<sup>7</sup> This metaphor of hinge propositions being "held fast" by what lies around them suggests that a new concept is required to make sense of the relationship between our other beliefs and the hinge propositions. A few passages from *On Certainty* introduce the idea of epistemic support:

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<sup>7</sup> Not all immovable beliefs or assumptions are foundational, nor are they always given explicit expression. For instance, if I was searching for my watch, I never considered that it could be in two different places at one time, or if I've ruled out with certainty the watching being in my drawer, that if I check back in a few moments it may have appeared there, or that the solid-state matter of which the watch is composed might have become momentarily unstable causing the watch to dissipate into the air. These kinds of immovable beliefs function to channel our investigations by providing where not to look, without actually grounding other beliefs in a foundational way. It should be clear from these examples that these “inquiry directing” propositions might never be expressed.

§141. When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)

§142. It is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another mutual support.

§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.

This metaphor of a foundations being "carried by the house" is interesting, albeit slightly obscure. The important question is how symmetrical is this relationship between the foundations and the rest of the house is supposed to be. If this relation were perfectly symmetrical then Wittgenstein's view would be essentially a coherentist view; there would be no reason to call one belief more basic than the other, and no reason to introduce a new concept of support. It might appear that passage §141 suggests exactly this reading, since if light dawns gradually over the whole, then perhaps we can only talk about the merits of a proposition in terms of its coherence with other beliefs, or as justification flowing from some property of a system of propositions itself to individual propositions.

It should however be obvious why this reading is incorrect, and why we cannot subsume this new epistemic concept under our previous concept of grounding. Namely, it is precluded by the genuine grounding condition. If it is true that in order for a proposition to genuinely ground another it must be more certain than the proposition which it is grounding, then in order for two propositions to ground each other, they would each need to be more certain than the other. Rather, we must conclude that there are propositions which are more certain than others, and when these are supported by other propositions, this support is not a form of justification but something else. This interpretation also saves us from a vicious circle. In virtue of their logical role, basic certainties function to test other propositions. This is why the conviction that one has two hands can be used to test whether or not one's eyesight is working properly, and not the other way around. On the other hand, basic certainties are supported by the various beliefs around them. Viewing this support as a form of justification would mean that one proposition is both a standard for evaluating beliefs and held on the basis of those beliefs. This circle disappears when support is viewed as something other than a form of justification.

Without purporting to provide an exhaustive account of the differences between support and grounding, a few comments can be made. A can be said to ground B only if A is more certain than B. A might very well be derivable from B, but is not grounded by B. Support on the other hand is more than mere derivability. We can say that propositions B, C, and D all support A if they are individually dispensable but not collectively. In other words, when a number of convictions hold our basic certainties fast, any one of them can be discarded without our having to reject our basic certainties. That being said, if all of the convictions which support a basic

certainty were lost, there might no longer be any reason to maintain conviction in our basic certainty.<sup>8</sup>

From the above considerations we can extract one further feature of Wittgenstein's theory of hinge propositions, namely, that hinge propositions are not a homogenous class; they do not consist of a single type. Typically in epistemic foundationalism, since it is required that basic certainties are certain in virtue of some intrinsic feature they possess, basic certainties form a homogenous class (like sense perceptions) and that class is argued to be intrinsically credible. If, on the other hand, certainty is a matter of the logical relation between the proposition and the language game, and not a matter of the intrinsic credibility of the class that proposition belongs to, then there is no need to confine all basic certainties to a single type. Wittgensteinian certainties can be sense perceptions, empirical propositions, arithmetical propositions, claims like "My name is x...", etc.

## Section 2

There is a certain groundlessness which arises from Wittgenstein's views as I have articulated them in the previous section. If propositions are grounded by those which are more certain, then the most certain convictions cannot themselves be grounded. This is why "...giving grounds... justifying the evidence, comes to an end" and why "at the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded."<sup>9</sup>

One way of exploring the implications of this "groundlessness" is to consider two different "world pictures" with different basic certainties and which produce incompatible "true" propositions. If we imagine some belief which is obviously false in our world picture, but which in another world picture counts as knowledge, are we justified in calling that belief false? Of course, within our world picture, if all of the circumstances are right we would be entirely justified in calling it false. But what exactly can we mean by that designation? There seems to be two main impulses here, each which has its problems. On the one hand we can say it is an unproblematic fact that, for instance, some group is wrong in their view that some humans come from the moon. On the other hand, if we take seriously the idea that our world picture and linguistic practices are the elements in which our investigative practices have their life, then it seems you have to be operating within a linguistic practice or moving within a certain world picture in order to call any belief within it mistaken. If we take seriously the groundlessness of linguistic practices, as Wittgenstein urges us to do, then there is no sense in which our calling a belief false, which counts as true in another practice, has any "system-transcendent" meaning. It would be a case of using our language game to combat theirs. And yet, if we are truly entrenched in our own language game, how can we call a proposition like that anything but

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<sup>8</sup> Müller, "Moral Education", 211-212.

<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein, "On Certainty", §204 and §253.

false? And if we were aware of the ultimate groundlessness of our basic propositions and viewed our epistemic practices as ultimately no better than alternatives, it is hard to see how we could still view our beliefs as justified. Wittgenstein was clearly aware of the tension between these two impulses.

There are a number of passages in *On Certainty* which depict what I will call “inter-system disputes”. These passages are revealing when it comes to the implications of groundlessness, and the philosophical import of rationally irreconcilability. In her paper titled “The Question of Linguistic Idealism”, Elizabeth Anscombe provides a very careful analysis of these passages, and much of the following will be borrowed from her.<sup>10</sup>

The first scenario involves a savage tribe who captures Moore and who believe that he comes from somewhere between the earth and the moon.

§264 ... Moore tells them that he knows etc. but he can't give them the grounds for his certainty, because they have fantastic ideas of human ability to fly and know nothing about physics...

§286 We say: these people do not know a lot that we know. And, let them be never so sure of their belief they are wrong and we know it. If we compare our system of knowledge with theirs then theirs is evidently the poorer one by far.

In this case it seems that Moore cannot provide grounds for his belief that he did not come from somewhere between the earth and the moon because their system of belief is not sufficiently developed. A careful reader might detect a hint of “studied neutrality” here from Wittgenstein, in that he says only “*we say...*”. Despite this, a broad reading of this passage suggests that Wittgenstein is in this instance quite willing to call the tribe wrong in their beliefs.

The next scenario involves Wittgenstein talking to a tribe whose members believe that people sometimes go to the moon.

§108. "But is there then no objective truth? Isn't it true, or false, that someone has been on the moon?" If we are thinking within our system, then it is certain that no one has ever been on the moon...But suppose.... we met the reply: "We don't know how one gets to the moon, but those who get there know at once that they are there; and even you can't explain everything." We should feel ourselves intellectually very distant from someone who said this.

In this situation Wittgenstein is leaning more towards the second impulse...that is, to note the disagreement between himself and the tribe but to refrain from explicitly calling their view false. As Anscombe points out, there are relevant factual differences between the two cases. In the first, Moore cannot give grounds to the tribe. He cannot provide reasons for his belief because those reasons would be unintelligible to the tribe. In the second, the issue is that the grounds pass the tribe by and do not convince them. Their belief system might be well developed, they might even share some of our understanding of physics and astronomy. In this case the rational

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<sup>10</sup> Anscombe, “The Question of Linguistic Idealism”, 125-127.

irreconcilability stems not from an inability of the two parties to communicate (a lack of “overlap” or common ground), but rather, a belief system for which certain contrary evidence is of no force or effect.

Finally, we have a situation where Moore is talking to a king who believes that the world came into being with him:

§92...And if Moore and this king were to meet and discuss, could Moore really prove his belief to be the right one? I do not say that Moore could not convert the king to his view, but it would be a conversion of a special kind; the king would be brought to look at the world in a different way.

This case is similar to the second tribe, in that the issue is not an inability to provide grounds, but rather a belief system which seems impenetrable to reasons. In this case Wittgenstein says that only a “conversion” is possible, and by “conversion” Wittgenstein means something a-rational.<sup>11</sup>

Given the analysis of certainty in the first part of this paper, it is easy to see how some disagreements would be, in principle, irreconcilable. For instance, many hypothetical inter-system disputes would have the following formal structure:

- 1) If we say that belief p is grounded by a further belief q, then: (i) q is known better than p, and (ii) q stands in a particular relation to p such that one believes p on the basis of q.
- 2) From this it follows that, for any belief r, if no other belief is known better than r, then r cannot be grounded.
- 3) One cannot rationally transmit r; one cannot provide reasons for r being true.

In situations like these, when the disagreement is at the foundational level, there is nothing external to either linguistic practice from which to point to as the grounds to resolve the disagreement. As we saw in the analysis of grounding and support, the most one could do is provide all of the supporting propositions and evidence they have in an attempt to induce the other to their side. But this conversion would not strictly speaking be a rational conversion. Whether another belief system is penetrable is contingent on the standards of justification they are committed to, and for any conversion to be a rational one, the force of reasons would need to be appreciated by both sides.

The question is whether we can accept the groundlessness of our epistemic practices without collapsing into pure relativism. To put it differently, is there room between rational irreconcilability and the view that all belief systems are equally valid? If two belief systems are incompatible with one another in that they each produce “true” propositions which cannot both be true, and reason cannot provide grounds for one over the other, then any claim favouring one over the other would appear unjustified. Now if the foundationalist paradigm were true, then there would theoretically never be the kind of rational irreconcilability that you see following

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<sup>11</sup> Wittgenstein, “On Certainty”, §92 and §612.

from Wittgenstein's view. One could point to the self-evident grounds and then work their way up. Put differently, with enough "time and good will" anyone can be convinced of anything which is in fact "rationally justifiable".<sup>12</sup> The lack of external grounding of our linguistic practices is what leads to this problem, and yet to levy this particular criticism against Wittgenstein would be to merely insist on foundationalism.

I think it would be wrong to conclude from the above scenarios that there is no truth to the question of whether the earth came into existence with the birth of the king, or whether humans can travel to the moon. Wittgenstein begins that second scenario by asking "But is there then no objective truth? Isn't it true, or false, that someone has been on the moon?". It is interesting that this question is posed, and then evaded rather than answered. These scenarios show that in some situations reason will not be able to convince; there is a gap between reason, and belief and action. It will always be possible to create hypothetical situations, like the King who was taught that the world came into existence with his birth, where one party is impenetrable to reason. This suggests that there are limits to reason and to argument, but does it lead to the conclusion that there are no truths? Not necessarily. When confronted with the second tribe, Moore must simply "go his own way", but that does not mean that he is obliged to conclude that there simply is no truth to the matter. In fact, as I hope to show later on, it might not even be possible for Moore to come to this conclusion. So of course we can imagine a situation where there is some rationally irreconcilable dispute, and only persuasion is possible. After all, "reasons come to an end" and "at the end of reasons is persuasion".<sup>13</sup> But that persuasion might still either be progress or regression, an intellectual accomplishment or an intellectual failure.<sup>14</sup> The fact of potential rational irreconcilability demonstrates only that argumentation has limits; it does not demonstrate that issue about which there is disagreement has no answer.

### Section 3

I have tried to show that there is room between anti-foundationalism and relativism. In his paper "Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism is not Relativism", Michael Williams argues for a similar position. Williams articulates a view that he calls "Epistemic Realism", which he defines as the view that standards of justification "reflect an autonomous domain of epistemic facts".<sup>15</sup> Epistemic Relativism, on the other hand, consists of three separate propositions: *system-variability* says that epistemic systems vary from culture to culture or within single cultures from one historical epoch to another; *system-dependence* says that a belief's epistemic status is not an intrinsic property but depends on the believer's epistemic system; and *system-*

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<sup>12</sup> Williams, "Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism is not Relativism", 108.

<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein, "On Certainty", §612.

<sup>14</sup> Anscombe, "The Question of Linguistic Idealism", 131.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, "Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism is not Relativism", 98.

*equality* says that no epistemic system is superior to another.<sup>16</sup> Arguing for epistemic relativism, therefore, requires that one demonstrate that a belief's epistemic status is entirely dependent on standards of justification and that there are, either in principle or as a matter of fact, different epistemic systems, each of which is, "from a metaphysical point of view, as good as any other."<sup>17</sup> Williams argues that there is room between these two positions, and that Contextualism can occupy this middle-ground. He argues that "methodological presuppositions do not create hermetically sealed disciplines" and that "justificatory frameworks...are essentially penetrable. They can be discredited from without as well as from within".<sup>18</sup> In essence, Williams denies the *system-dependence* condition.

The issue with this line of reasoning, as a matter of Wittgenstein interpretation, is that Wittgenstein seems highly committed to something like what the system-dependence condition says. Wittgenstein says that "What counts as an adequate test of a statement belongs to logic...it belongs to the description of the language-game", and the "language-game is so to say something unpredictable... it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there—like our life."<sup>19</sup> Wittgenstein seems clearly committed to the view that the rules which are constitutive of our language-games, in which our epistemic practices are embedded, are not subject to verification or falsification in the same way as are propositions which arise within our language-games. Williams is correct when he points out that there is no way of providing, specifically, all and only those grounds which would count as acceptable for each type of assertion.<sup>20</sup> <sup>21</sup> If this were the case, then expanding knowledge would become a mechanical process and all "justified" beliefs would be pre-determined by the rules of the justificatory process set out. One would need only to look at a particular assertion, apply the standards of justification pertaining to the kind of assertion that it is, and then identify whether or not the particular assertion meets those standards. It should be clear that this is not what Wittgenstein is proposing. By no means can our epistemic practices be simplified to the testing of arguments against standards of justification. But Williams thinks that epistemic systems are essentially penetrable from without, and specifically, that reasons can do the job of penetrating an epistemic system from without. Thus, he is committed not only to a view of epistemic systems, but also to a certain view of reasons such that they can fulfill this function. Namely, that while reasoning *is* contextual, it is not system-dependent in any absolute sense. In this discussion Williams is keeping separate the issue of epistemic relativism from relativism in general. But for Wittgenstein the two are much more closely linked. We should view our epistemic practices as just one form of a language-game (or a number of language-games), and if linguistic meaning in general is dependent on our language-games, it is hard to see how reasoning in particular would

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

<sup>17</sup> Coliva, "Was Wittgenstein an Epistemic Relativist?", 1.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, "Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism is not Relativism", 107 and 108.

<sup>19</sup> Wittgenstein, "On Certainty", §82 and §559.

<sup>20</sup> Williams, "Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism is not Relativism", 106.

<sup>21</sup> Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism", 724.

not be. But William's position seems to require that argumentation and reasoning are "system-transcendent."

One of the merits of this view is that it avoids the issue of the framework itself being ungrounded, and the line of reasoning which ends up in our hinge commitments being neither justified nor truth-apt. The issue is that it is inconsistent with much of what Wittgenstein says in *On Certainty*. As Wittgenstein claims in many places, our utterances derive their sense from our shared linguistic practices. An utterance is only a doubt, or an assertion, because of the context of use in which the utterance is made. This applies to phrases of the form "I know that p". According to Wittgenstein, "I know..." means that one is prepared to provide grounds for that assertion, and that those grounds are of the kind that they are generally accepted as grounds for that kind of claim. In a hypothetical simple language game where there is only a small set of possible grounds for assertions of the kind being made, "I know" can be replaced by one stating on what grounds they know, and no loss of meaning has occurred.<sup>22</sup>

§550... 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.

§551... If one does answer this question, one must do so according to generally accepted axiom. This is how something of the sort can be known.

§82. What counts as an adequate test of a statement belongs to logic. It belongs to the description of the language-game.

§117. When I say "Nothing speaks for, everything against it," this presupposes a principle of speaking for and against. That is, I must be able to say what would speak for it.

As already indicated, §550 and §551 do not imply that there is a way of providing, specifically, all and only those grounds which would count as acceptable for each type of assertion. There is no reason to think that the justificatory process can be reduced to a rule or set of rules. Although standards of justification, according to Wittgenstein, belong to the rules of the language game, they are not so limited. It is still open-ended as to what things will count as justification. It is not, however, so open-ended that justification becomes essentially private. Norms governing ground-giving are still the shared property of the language game itself and all of those participating.

What these passages do demonstrate is that providing grounds for and doubting claims which arise within the scope of the linguistic practice is categorically different from providing grounds for and doubting the linguistic practice itself. I want to suggest that "practice-internal" doubts can be met by the claimant providing grounds according to generally accepted axioms constitutive of the linguistic practice itself. On this level, in fact, one can be certain about a

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<sup>22</sup> Wittgenstein, "On Certainty", §564.



belief if that belief is supported in the correct way by the rest of the linguistic practice. "External" doubts aimed at the practice itself cannot be responded to in the same way. This is because the language game is not itself grounded. It is neither reasonable nor unreasonable, it "is there—like our life."<sup>23</sup> From these passages we can conclude that epistemic practices are one form of linguistic practice, or, "language-game", that those language-games provide the framework for all doubting, asserting, and grounding, and that the framework itself is not grounded. The line of reasoning offered by Williams avoids relativism but only by denying the system-grounding condition. Since I take Wittgenstein's assertions about language-games to imply the system-grounding condition, the question arises as to how this view does not also imply relativism.

Although not in the same terms, Wittgenstein raise this exact question in the context of a discussion around "mistake":

§425 It would not be surmise and I might tell it to someone else with complete certainty, as something there is no doubt about. But does that mean that it is unconditionally the truth? May not the thing that I recognize with complete certainty as the tree that I have seen here my whole life long—may this not be disclosed as something different? May it not confound me?

And nevertheless, it was right, in the circumstances that give this sentence meaning, to say "I know (I do not merely surmise) that that's a tree". To say that in strict truth I only believe it, would be wrong. It would be completely misleading to say: "I believe my name is L. W." And this too is right: I cannot be making a mistake about it. But that does not mean that I am infallible about it.

Wittgenstein seems to be making two – apparently – contradictory assertions. On the one hand, he is saying that it is right, in certain circumstances, to assert a proposition with total certainty. On the other hand, he is saying that it is possible that one might come to realize they were wrong about that very assertion. Does being certain not rule out the possibility of error? And does saying that one is fallible about something not mean that they have accepted the possibility of error? On the face of it, it seems that one can rule out the possibility of being wrong about a proposition while accepting the possibility that they are wrong. If we can get a handle on this enigmatic passage, then we might have a clearer idea of how to resolve the larger interpretive puzzle of groundlessness. To say that one is not infallible about some proposition is to point to the lack of determinate external grounding. The foundations for belief do not go so far back, and do not terminate in such infallible propositions, as to exclude the possibility of error, or to exclude, for example, the possibility that an evil genius is deluding one about the true nature of reality. And yet Wittgenstein believes that this kind of groundlessness is consistent with certainty, and with an anti-sceptical position.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, §559.

From the brief discussion of language-games, I concluded that epistemic practices are one form of language-game, that these language-games provide the framework for all doubting, asserting, and grounding, and that the framework itself is not grounded. It is therefore possible that the linguistic practice is flawed in such a way that certainties arise which are nonetheless proven false in the future. In this sense, in the right circumstances one can be certain about a proposition, but due to the lack of external grounding for the game itself, one might still come to realize in the future that that belief was false. This is because there is no guarantee that the rules for the game provides one with epistemically perfect contact with the world. Thus, the possibility of error cannot be ruled out despite the claim itself satisfying the criteria, which are constitutive of the linguistic practice in which it arises, for "certainty". Now it just so happens that this situation very rarely arises. It is a contingent fact of the world that this sequence of events, where one (rightly) holds a belief with certainty only to discover at some future time that their belief is false, rarely occurs. This would be like coming to realize that  $2+2$  equals something other than 4. If this sequence of events did occur often, then that would require a change in our linguistic practices.<sup>24</sup>

The above characterization of “internal” and “external” doubts provides some insight into how Wittgenstein would respond to certain challenges. I want to suggest that a doubt about a basic certainty or “hinge-proposition” would be akin to doubting the language-game itself. That challenge could not be met by providing grounds, since certainties are by definition not grounded. One could provide support for that basic certainty, but that support would not rationally compel the sceptic to accept the truth of the claimant’s claim. For instance, if during the course of some discussion someone raised doubt as to whether some tree in front of them really was a cherry tree, and not an apricot tree, then the claimant could respond by providing their reasons for thinking that it is in fact a cherry tree. Perhaps they have a depiction of a cherry tree in a bottony textbook which matches the tree in question. This would be a practice-internal question. If, on the other hand, the sceptic doubted whether the object in front of them was a tree at all, this would be an occasion where the claimant could not provide any grounds for that object being a tree, because that it is a tree is as certain as anything which might be adduced in favour of it. Since doubting requires that some beliefs are not doubted, a doubt which targets one of those beliefs would remove the condition for any doubting or asserting behaviour whatsoever.

If we return again to the question of relativism, we can ask whether the possibility of error for propositions we hold to be certain amounts to an essential concession to the sceptic. The following passage is relevant here:

§191. Well, if everything speaks for an hypothesis and nothing against it—is it then certainly true? One may designate it as such. —But does it certainly agree with reality, with the facts? — With this question you are already going round in a circle.

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<sup>24</sup> Anscombe, “The Question of Linguistic Idealism”, 133.

Wittgenstein is saying that a question that arises within an up-and-running language game is intelligible. The further question, or trying to step out of the language game to see whether some belief which we call true is *actually* true, means nothing. It is merely a repetition of the first question, disguised as something else. This is why “‘I know’ does not tolerate a metaphysical emphasis”.<sup>25</sup> The solution to this puzzle is to illustrate to the sceptic the structure of our epistemic practices, and to show that certain doubts rest on incorrect views about the structure of reasons. A few passages later Wittgenstein says the following:

§199 The reason why the use of the expression ‘true or false’ has something misleading about it is that it is like saying ‘it tallies with the facts or it doesn’t’, and the very thing that is in question is what is ‘tallying’ here.

I think we can safely attribute to Wittgenstein the following claim: asserting that some proposition is true, where “true” means something like correspondence with reality, does nothing to improve one’s position from an epistemic point of view. When asserting a non-hinge proposition, one can provide everything that speaks for a proposition, and once that is completed, all they can do in response to the further question of whether that proposition is actually true, is restate everything which speaks for it. In these cases use of the phrase “I know” applies and correctly means “I am prepared to provide grounds”. Since hinge propositions are not grounded, “I know” means something quite different when attached to a hinge proposition, and means something more like “doubt is not possible here.” These are the circumstances where talk of certainty is appropriate. Certainty is logical (or grammatical), which is why it is compatible with the possibility of realizing in the future that one was mistaken about some thing they were certain about.

#### Section 4

I began this essay by suggesting that Moore and the sceptic seemed to share a common misconception about the nature of reason-giving. That mistake is in requiring that we can provide a theory of justification such that, when viewed globally, shows that our whole methodology is justified. All investigations occur within an already up-and-running linguistic practice, and it is futile to suppose that we can provide some grounds for the practice itself. I also suggested at the beginning that there are two main ways of maintaining an anti-sceptical position despite the groundlessness implied by Wittgenstein’s account of reason-giving and hinge-propositions: we can either attempt to provide external justification, or we can accept that there are limits on the intelligibility of global sceptical claims. It should be clear, based on the preceding investigation, that we ought to interpret Wittgenstein’s thought as falling within this second camp.

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<sup>25</sup> Wittgenstein, “On Certainty”, §482.

Frege has a passage where he seems to be wrestling with a very similar problem as the one which confronts Wittgenstein:

The question of why and with what right we acknowledge a law of logic to be true, logic can only answer by reducing it to another law of logic. Where that is not possible, logic can give no answer. If we step away from logic, we may say: we are compelled to make judgements by our own nature and by external circumstances; and if we do so, we cannot reject this law — of identity for example; we must acknowledge it unless we wish to reduce our thought to confusion and finally renounce all judgement whatever. I shall neither dispute nor support this view; I shall merely remark that what we have here is not a logical consequence. What is given is not a reason for something's being true, but for our taking it to be true. Not only that: this impossibility of ours of rejecting the law in question hinders us not at all in supposing beings who reject it; where it hinders us is in supposing that these beings are right in so doing, it hinders us in having doubts whether we or they are right. At least this is true of myself. If other persons presume to acknowledge and doubt a law in the same breath, it seems to me an attempt to jump out of one's own skin against which I can do no more than urgently warn them. Anyone who has once acknowledged a law of truth has by the same token acknowledged a law that prescribes the way in which one ought to judge, no matter where, or when, or by whom the judgement is made.<sup>26</sup>

In this passage Frege is articulating something which is simultaneously anti-foundationalist and anti-relativist, and it suggests a way of reading Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty*. Relativism requires that we can conceive of different, incompatible and equally valid belief systems. Despite the groundlessness of our linguistic practices, these conditions are not all met. If we take Frege's example of the law of identity, one cannot actually conceive of a system of thought that did not hold this law. There is a sense in which we can conceive of the mere possibility of thought without the law of identity, but we cannot simultaneously view such a system as equally valid. I suggest we apply this same reasoning to hinge propositions in general. I have advanced an interpretation of hinge-propositions which take them to be propositions which are held most certain, which provide the framework for our investigations, and which are not subject to justification. Anyone who has adopted some hinge proposition has in the same breath accepted a norm which "prescribes the way in which one ought to judge, no matter where, or when, or by whom the judgement is made."<sup>27</sup> In other words, they have taken a proposition as *true* notwithstanding its lack of grounding.

If ever we come across a radically different system, we cannot view it as equally "valid" or as equally good as our own. If we ever did manage to think through an epistemic system and see it as equally good as our own, it would only be because we brought it into the framework of our own system, rendering it no longer truly distinct. In my view, this amounts to the claim that the system-equality and system-variability conditions are mutually exclusive. Epistemic relativism is impossible for us to think since we are truly entrenched in our own epistemic

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<sup>26</sup> Frege, "Basic Laws of Arithmetic", 15.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*

frameworks, and from that standpoint, it is not possible to see equally good and truly distinct epistemic systems. Thus, one defending this interpretation of Wittgenstein, as I am, must simply point to the structure of our own reason-giving practices, point to groundlessness of those beliefs which ground the rest of our beliefs, and refrain from making any kind of equal validity claims which we simply cannot make. As Wittgenstein says, “the *difficulty* is to realize the groundlessness of our believing” (my emphasis).<sup>28</sup> He is not here simply repeating the same thought that reoccurs in *On Certainty*, that our basic convictions which ground the rest of our thought are themselves ungrounded. Rather, he is pointing out that making this claim without simultaneously attempting to break-free from one’s framework is extremely *difficult*. This groundlessness can only be identified from within, it is discovered when the “spade is turned”.<sup>29</sup> At an earlier section of this paper I considered the philosophical implications of rational irreconcilability, and concluded that while we can imagine scenarios where another group believes something that we hold to be certainly false, the fact of our inability to ground our belief does not impose any obligation on us to accept their belief as equally valid. I even suggested that we might not be able to view such a belief as equally valid. Frege seems to share this view. When Frege talks about the law of identity he says that we are not hindered in imagining other people who reject it, but we are hindered in viewing them as correct in doing so. It is important to point out that when we imagine others who reject it, what we imagine is the “mere metaphysical possibility”.<sup>30</sup> The norms governing our own epistemic practices preclude our imagining *in detail* a world picture as radically different as one which, for example, does not include the law of identity.<sup>31</sup> In other cases, like in the case of the King who believed the world began with his birth, it is more plausible to say that we imagine in detail a radically different world picture. But in those cases, we certainly are precluded from viewing such a picture as equally valid as our own.

This reading of *On Certainty*, which takes our linguistic practices as providing the framework for all asserting, doubting and justifying activity, provides as answer to the sceptic. Doubts internal to the language-game can be met by providing the appropriate grounds according to the rules of that language-game. Any doubt which tries to take as its target the framework itself would fail for unintelligibility, since it is the framework which makes utterances intelligible. At the same time, in virtue of being the most certain, the hinge-propositions which function as the framework for our linguistic practices would by definition be at least as certain as the doubt itself, and in almost all cases more certain. This interpretation also fends-off relativism to the extent that relativism requires one can conceive of different equally valid world pictures. If we take seriously our entrenchment in our own world picture, we cannot imagine any such thing, notwithstanding the groundlessness we perceive in our own.

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<sup>28</sup> Wittgenstein, “On Certainty”, §166.

<sup>29</sup> Wittgenstein, “Philosophical Investigations”, §217.

<sup>30</sup> Coliva, “Was Wittgenstein an Epistemic Relativist?”, 20-22.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*

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