

# Forms of Knowledge and Attestation: Wittgenstein's Incomplete Paradigm of Certainty

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Imagine, Wittgenstein once suggested, that I have two friends who share the "same name", and imagine further that I were to write one of them a letter:

ich schreibe einem von ihnen einen Brief; woran liegt es, dass ich ihn nicht dem anderen schreibe? Am Inhalt? Aber der könnte für beide passen. (Die Adressen habe ich noch nicht geschrieben.) [...] Wenn mich nun jemand fragt 'An welchen der beiden schreibst du?' und ich antworte ihm, schließe ich die Antwort aus der Vorgeschichte? Gebe ich sie nicht beinahe, wie ich sage 'Ich habe Zahnschmerzen'? – Könnte ich im Zweifel darüber sein, welchem von beiden ich schreibe? Und wie sieht so ein Zweifelsfall aus? – Ja, wäre nicht auch der Fall einer Täuschung möglich: ich glaube dem Einen zu schreiben und schreibe dem Andern? Und wie sähe der Fall einer solchen Täuschung aus? (Wittgenstein 1967, § 7)

Wittgenstein's many questions are not easy to answer, especially considering what he implicitly presupposes. The epistemological difficulties explicitly mentioned and for which he attempts an answer are much more profound than they appear.

The difficulties start before we even try to answer the explicit question, "To which of your friends are you writing?" They start with his belief that he can, and indeed does, answer this question. This belief presupposes, moreover, that he *believes* he has – or better: *knows what it means* to have – "two friends" of "the same name" ("gleichen Namens"). This directly involves his belief that he *knows* that he is writing – or perhaps better: *knows what it means* to be writing – "one letter". Let us briefly investigate this.

Wittgenstein claims to have written *one* letter. It is important to understand that he claims to be able to have done this *before* addressing the envelope. It seems that a condition for these claims, indeed for the entire story Wittgenstein wants to tell here, lies in a further belief, namely, that the content of his letter could "fit" or make sense to "both" of his friends.

What exactly this "fitting" fully implies will need, of course, more explanation than Wittgenstein, or I, can give here. Perhaps it means something along the lines of the way that advertisements or mass mailings could be said to "fit" different people. A letter about a washing machine or a lottery ticket might fit me as well as it fits you, assuming it "fits" anyone at all. The criteria for determining in which way Wittgenstein's letter "fits" his friends can obviously be much different and much more complex than even the most clever marketing strategy. But they could also be very simple. When I write a letter to a friend describing the activities I undertook on the weekend, how do I know this "fits" many of my friends? What does it mean for any content, phrases, or descriptions to "fit" even one person (and, considering the variety of contexts in which we communicate: one particular person at one particular time)? Do the addressees have to be "interested" (and what exactly does that mean?) in what I have to say? Must they interpret the illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects of my letter in a particular way – does a mass mailing letter

"fit" those people who actually buy a washing machine better than those who do not, do my friends have to be pleased with my letter for it to fit? I do not want to attempt an answer to this conundrum here, since it is a peripheral, albeit important, element of my main topic.

In any case, let us now try to answer one of Wittgenstein's questions. If the letter really could be said to "fit" to either of two people, then *addressing* the envelope itself must be conceived as the last step in the language game of what it means to write *someone* a letter. I would like to claim that "writing a letter" involves a different degree of attestation than "writing *someone* a letter". A letter which is not written to anyone in particular can certainly still be called a letter (consider a message in a bottle, a plea for help, a poster, a wanted sign, etc.). But is that the same as writing a letter to a specific person – say, to a friend? Whichever way we will interpret whether and how a letter "fits" a person, *addressing it* concretizes the act; it is a way of saying: "I am speaking to you [Bertrand]". As I hope to show, Wittgenstein might *believe* that he is writing a letter to someone (say, Bertrand Russell), but he can't *know* to whom, because he has not yet *actually written* a letter to anyone without having first *attested* to this fact, either implicitly or explicitly.

A letter without an address is not yet a letter to someone, even if Wittgenstein claims to have already started the letter with a greeting (such as "Dear Bertrand"). To understand why his alleged belief that he is writing to one or both of his friends is not valid without attestation, it is important to understand how proper names work. In one important, albeit counterintuitive sense, one has to say that nobody has two friends of the same name.

Two people called "Ludwig" do not share the same name in at least this sense: Knowing what it means to successfully use the term "Ludwig" to refer to Ludwig is *radically different* than knowing what it means to use the term "horse" to refer to a horse. Being "called" Ludwig is much different than being (or being "called") a horse.

I *know* how to use "horse" to refer to a horse when I know that the sign "horse" can be used (in English) to refer to a horse (or: horses) and, most importantly, when I *know what horses are*. This latter bit of knowledge is based on criteria of descriptive-judgmental nature; it involves mastering (propositional) knowledge of the way the world is, the way things in the world are, and how we tend to differentiate and reify these various things under various conditions. It involves, in metaphysical language, the recognition of certain characteristics or qualia in certain entities as the condition to being able to recognize these entities as such; it involves *knowing* what characteristics belong to which entities as the basis for their being recognizable as such. This latter knowledge (e.g., what horses, donuts, daydreams, fairies, quarks, etc. are) is different from the knowledge I would like to dub an "axiom of reference", namely: mastering how to correctly use the term "horse" (in English). Mastering this bit of knowledge by no means needs to be in an explicitly propositional form. I would like to refer to this type of knowledge as being able to speak about things by using "concepts" or appellatives. Knowing how to use words like "horse"

implies mastering the (non-propositional knowledge) "axiom of reference" for appellatives, or  $A_1$ .

This axiom of reference is different for propria:  $A_2$ : I know how to use "Ludwig" to refer to Ludwig when I know that the sign "Ludwig" can be used (in English) to refer to Ludwig; but, most importantly, I must also *be familiar* with Ludwig, I must know *who* he is, and this means, quite simply, that I know that a certain reliable entity has been dubbed "Ludwig". I cannot *know* what "a Ludwig" is or what "Ludwigs" are, since they will all share different characteristics. The only characteristic which one Ludwig may share with another for certain is that they were both dubbed "Ludwig".

There is, in other words, no such thing as "a Ludwig", since *knowing* what a Ludwig is would be identical to knowing that a specific entity has been dubbed "Ludwig" in an appropriate naming situation. The crux here is that this "knowledge" is not of any characteristics an entity may or may not possess; I identify Ludwigs *not* according to any characteristics the basis of which qualifies them as Ludwig, but because of my familiarity with name-giving and spatio-temporal reification of those named entities. Upon entering a room, I cannot know which of the entities, if any, are called Ludwig – the paperweight on the desk, the lamp, or any one of the people in the room may or may not be called Ludwig. I might (correctly) assume that certain (very contingent) onomastic customs in many of our cultures cause exemplifications of the species *homo sapiens sapiens* of the male gender and with certain (difficult to generalize) ethnic ties to the German culture to be dubbed "Ludwig" more often than other entities. But unless I know *whether* they were *named* Ludwig, I cannot know *who* a particular entity is. I might guess as to who is named Ludwig, but I will more often than not be wrong, and likewise, upon hearing "Ludwig", I will not know *what* that entity is (Allport 1979, Kaplow 2002). Mastering  $A_2$  is similar to mastering the axiom  $A_1$ , but successfully using  $A_2$  involves the antecedent reification of entities (or better: events) without necessary recourse to particular characteristics. I can know *who* something or someone is (I can know "Ludwig is 42 years old") without knowing *what* Ludwig is at all. *Knowing who* takes recourse to familiarity (knowledge, if you will, of contingent socio-onomastic affairs), while *knowing what* involves descriptive-judgmental interpretation (Abel 1999). Using lingual signs *proprially* (as proper names) thus means knowing how I can use contingently homonymic or homographic signs to refer to a particular entity the reification of which may be completely independent of the criteria used in applying that sign to the entity.

One can thus have two (or more) friends to whom one can successfully refer by using homonymic signs, each of which functions *proprially*. This means that the story told in my opening quotation is not a good, coherent, story. If Wittgenstein believed the story he told was good, he was, in at least this sense, fooling himself – that he really could have been writing a letter to one of his two friends of the same name. Writing "Dear Bertrand" at the top of his letter does not mean that Wittgenstein necessarily wrote the name of a particular friend; he has written a sign which does not yet function completely *proprially*; he does not yet know to whom he is writing. The categories of "content" and of "fitting" are relevant to *knowing what* characteristics the addressee (whoever he might be) might have, but these are not enough to *know who* he is.

Wittgenstein, in writing the "name" of his friend(s), was using a homographic *placeholder* for a "real" proper name (a sign used truly *proprially*, for one individual). *Knowing to*

whom he is writing entails writing the proper name, and this will entail a certain degree of *attestation*. By attesting – by making explicit the speech act: "I am hereby writing a letter to you, Bertrand", and addressing this at one particular person named Bertrand – Wittgenstein must write the address and stand to his commitment that he is writing a letter, if that is in fact what he is doing, *to one particular friend*.

This can be understood analogously to how a signature is used. I attest that the letter I have written is mine by explicitly consummating the speech act: "I, Ian Kaplow, have written this." The name written at the bottom of a letter attests to the identity of the author; the form of attestation here also does not primarily involve *knowledge* (although it can, such as when someone wants to determine whether a letter has been forged and the attestation of the name is challenged). My signature attests to my identity. But what is this? I can never completely describe *what* I am (although many descriptive judgments can never exhaust my identity. Knowing *who* I am – that is, having acquaintance with me – can be summed up perfectly in being acquainted with my name. My signature attests to my identity in much the same way as my name attests to me as reliable object.

The address on a letter is a form of counterpart to the author's signature. It is a way of contextualizing the homonymic sign, such as "Bertrand" in "Dear Bertrand", into a proprium. Two people named Bertrand will not have the same name because they have different signatures (no matter how "similar" these might appear graphically).

Writing a letter contains a myriad of epistemological presuppositions, none of which are met in Wittgenstein's brief thought experiment. Just as exclaiming "Two beers, please!" does not necessarily entail ordering two beers (such as when, for example, I shout this while driving my car alone down a deserted highway), writing a number of meaningful phrases and precluding these with a greeting (such as "Dear Bertrand") does not necessarily entail writing *someone* (such as Bertrand) a letter.

Thus, to answer Wittgenstein's question, I would attest that before an addressee has been determined, before a name is used *proprially* and not just as a placeholder, before a counterpart-signature has been written, that Wittgenstein has not yet written a letter *to someone* and thus cannot have been "deceived" ("getäuscht") one way or another. Knowing to whom he is writing cannot lie only in particular "intentions", no matter how concrete or diffuse these might be (Wittgenstein 1984). Knowing to whom he is writing – or, contrarily, failing to know – will not primarily involve knowledge of characteristics, or knowing what criteria might make his contents "fit" certain people. Wittgenstein can be in "doubt", but not primarily because of lack of knowledge – rather, because of lack of attestation.

Understanding what it means to be certain (to have a lack of doubt) will not only entail differentiating between the different forms of *knowledge* I sketched here (knowledge of who-familiarity, knowledge of what-characteristics, knowledge of the different axioms of reference), but of *attestation* as well: attestation to the addressed proprium and its counterpart, the signature.

## Literature

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