Wittgenstein on Knowledge (1949-1951)

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I want to characterize Wittgenstein's episte-mology, namely his *contextualism*, presented in his notes published under the title *On Certainty*. This characteriza-tion will be made in terms of a comparison with four control points in order to put into light the peculiarities of Wittgen-stein's epistemological position. The markers I will use for that purpose will give an indication of the level of concep-tual commitment toward four important epistemological theses: holism, internalism, fallibilism, and egalitarianism. These markers have been chosen in function of the power of discrimination they provide regarding the two main trends in the past 40 years (or so) of debate in contempo-rary epistemology, i.e., foundationalism and coherentism. Using these conceptual markers, one can easily distin-guish between strict foundationalism, which shows a low level of each markers, and strict coherentism, which shows a high level of each markers.

2. Holism

The first marker will enable us to evaluate the level of holism present in Wittgenstein's perspective. Holism will be taken here as a conceptual framework into which the properties of particular objects are determined by their belonging to a whole of some sort. In this case, the property of being an instance of knowledge for a given propositional belief will be determined by its relation to a background system of beliefs. About the necessity of such a relation, Wittgenstein is quite clear: "Our knowledge forms an enormous system. And only within this system has a particular bit the value we give it" (§ 410; § 432). Each token of knowledge (K-belief) is a point on this epistemic plan, and it is only in virtue of this holistic relation that one can make a difference between a mere belief and a K-belief. It makes no sense to assess the epistemic value of a propositional belief in isolation, since "what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)" (§ 141; § 274)[1]. Each part is strongly connected to the whole, so that only on the basis of the latter is the former possible. Wittgenstein applies this analysis to the counterparts of K-beliefs, i.e., doubts (D-beliefs). Doubts are also parts of a system, outside which they are simply meaningless (§§ 115, 126, 247). The overall balance of a particular belief system is primarily determined by the mutual influence of K-beliefs and D-beliefs, and the quantity of conceptual tension emerging from it. But, as in the case of the expres-sion of knowledge, the expression of doubt can only stem from a specific system, i.e., in the same way a belief that does not connect up with other beliefs (a fragment of a belief system) cannot be turned into a K-belief, such a belief cannot be turned into a D-belief either (§ 312; § 102).

This conception of a belief system suggests the idea that propositional beliefs can be differentiated in terms of their positioning within the propositional system or in terms of their epistemological function. Some beliefs stand in a special position, in that they escape doubt and act as *foundations* (§§ 89, 415, 449, 512). Wittgenstein sees such beliefs as "axis", "hinges", and even "axioms" (§§ 152, 341, 551). And, here, if the emphasis put by him on the systematic character of our beliefs might have pointed toward a coherentist position, now the insistence upon the necessity of basic beliefs tends to point toward founda-tionalism. Wittgenstein is at some extent in agreement with both positions, at least in what makes their respective specificity.

The epistemological function of these basic beliefs is to open a conceptual space for the deployment of a lan-guage-game and, by the same token, to provide a *world-picture*, as Wittgenstein calls it (§§ 95, 167). This concep-tual opening is nothing but a semantic move, for the boundary of this space is set by the *truth* of the basic beliefs: "[my picture of the world] is the inherited back-ground against which I distinguish between true and false" (§ 94). Basic beliefs serve as entry points for truth in the belief system (§ 83). They are methodologically immune to doubt, but if someone persists in extending his doubt to his basic beliefs, then he would simply lose his *epistemologi-cal yardstic*, as Wittgenstein underlines: "this statement appeared to me fundamental; if it is false, what are 'true' or 'false' any more?!" (§ 514). This is precisely where speak-ers of a language-game do meet: in their taking true a number of propositions. If they do not share that minimal requirement, they cannot take part to a common language-game[2] (§§ 80, 628).

How does one acknowledge the truth of these basic beliefs? In that regard, Wittgenstein does not follow the foundationalist line of thought. The truth of the basic beliefs cannot be grounded in the beliefs themselves (strict foundationalism) or in their cognitive source (reliabilism). These beliefs are declared true *for the sake of the game*; this is a methodological requirement. Their truth is what renders possible *action* in a language-game: "Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the lan-guage-game" (§ 204). Just like rules, these basic beliefs "form the basis for action" (§ 411) in permitting some moves and prohibiting others in a particular conceptual space (§ 95).

This mutual dependence between rules and games ties strongly the basic beliefs with the rest of the belief system itself, so that it is not possible to conceive them (and their truth) outside the (vague) boundaries set by the corre-sponding language-game. The basic beliefs are not only supporting the belief system, but they are supported by it as well: "And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house" (§ 248). This bi-directional relation of support is characteristic of a holistic system and remains incompatible with standard founda-tionalism[3]. For Wittgenstein, even in a paradigm of a foundationalist system (unidirectional) as an axiomatic system can one observe this mutual support that connects

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[1] "It isn't a proposition which I put against reality as a yardstick, it's a system of propositions" (*Philosophical Remarks*, § 82).

[2] The Davidsonian program of a theory of interpretation based on a theory of truth finds here an additional justification.
[3] For a non-strict foundationalist perspective on mutual support, see S. Haack (1993) and her crossword puzzle analogy.

axioms and theorems (§ 142)[4]. As a result, the Wittgensteinian analysis of the properties of a belief system exhibits a high level of holism.

3. Internalism

Another bone of contention between coherentism and foundationalism is the location of the source of epistemic normativity. And if the Wittgensteinian perspective had given the impression in the previous section to be more in line with the coherentist position – while not being reducible to it –, with respect to the internalist issue it shows more of a foundationalist trait. For Wittgenstein, the source of epistemic justification, namely the basis for the use of the K-predicate in a given context, cannot lie only inside one's own belief system: "When I ask 'Do I know or do I only believe that I am called...?' it is no use to look within myself" (§ 490). And the reason is that: "An inner experience cannot shew me that I *know* something" (§ 569). The notion of context puts into light the *environment* of the epistemic agent – as opposed to the notion of system within a strict coherentist framework –, and that involves not only a plurality of epistemic agents but also something that is partially shared by each and everyone of them. The use of the K-predicate is well regimented by the contextual rules that govern any particular language-game and these *practices* are exactly what is shared by a *community* of participants. In that perspective, to know something and to be acknowledged as such is a community affair, as Wittgenstein points out: "If someone says he *knows* something, it must be something that, by general consent, he is in a position to know" (§ 555). One cannot know alone[5]. Epistemic normativity, like linguistic normativity, can only take place, or emerge, within a common sphere of practices (§ 298). In that regard, the position of Wittgenstein shows a low level of internalism.

4. Fallibilism

Concerning the possibility of being wrong when using the K-predicate, Wittgenstein is affirmative: "It might surely happen that whenever I said 'I know' it turned out to be wrong" (§ 580). The main difficulty here consists in overcoming the apparent incompatibility between the meaning of the K-predicate and the acceptance of fallibilism. In order to see how the two claims are combined, we need to consider two distinct aspects involved in the problem: the factual one and the practical one. These aspects require a distinction between falsity and misuse. It is possible for a statement to be true and still to be result of a misapplication. For instance, "I believe my name is Y.B." is true – in fact, both the metastatement and the statement are true –, but the use of "I believe" instead of "I know" is incorrect in the language-game with people's name *under normal circumstances* (§§ 425, 622). And, of course, a statement may be the result of a correct use while still being false – only the statement in this case (§§ 12, 425). The use of the K-predicate does not ensure infallibility, but rather it allows a speaker to make the following inference: If Ks(*p*), then *p*. The inference may turn out to be invalid, and depending on the level of entrenchment of *p* in the system this could affect the boundaries of the language-game at stake.

Wittgenstein's position displays consequently a high level of fallibilism, which in turn entails a high level of

revisability. It may be the case that *in principle* "no statement is immune to revision", to recall the Quinean adage, but *in practice*, some statements must be protected against revision (or doubt) in such a way that a context for a definite language-game may be set (§§ 492, 497, 620). Wittgenstein illustrates this subtle balance and interaction between what actually can and what cannot be revised by means of an analogy with the relative flux of waters and the relative stability of the river-bed: "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. [...] 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" (§§ 97-99). This phenomenon of erosion occurs within any language-game quite naturally as a part of its normal life. The relation between what fixes the boundaries of a conceptual space and what is moving within it is dynamic and subject to change: "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" (§ 96). This important feature of Wittgenstein's contextualism enables him to escape the charge of relativism, because despite the acknowledgement of the relative process converting partially the stable into flux, and vice-versa, he claims that knowledge remains possible in as much the use of the K-predicate is conceived as being always contextualized.

5. Egalitarianism

The last control point will provide another perspective on the relation between propositional beliefs and a belief system. If the status of a propositional belief can be revised so that it can be at one point a "hardened proposition" and at another a "fluid proposition", does this imply that initially every proposition displays some kind of indifference to enter into one particular structure as opposed to another? One may approach this difficulty otherwise: can any proposition express something by its own semantic resources (conceived in isolation) about its own positioning in a given belief system[6]? Is the overall belief system initially an *egalitarian* system, where each particular belief has an equal epistemic status? Here again, the solution to this difficulty will indicate the relative position of Wittgenstein's perspective on a scale that goes from strict foundationalism to strict coherentism. It is no surprise that Wittgenstein expresses the need for restriction: "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" (§ 98). This stand suggests that propositions of one language-game cannot be exported to another without some epistemic alteration, but that within the same language-game a given proposition may be equally available to occupy different positions (or functions). And even considering the latter case, Wittgenstein shows some hesitation: "Isn't what I am saying: any empirical proposition can be transformed into a postulate – and then becomes a norm of description. But I am suspicious even of this. The sentence is too general. One almost wants to

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[4] This is an interesting echo of a Tractarian intuition about the number of axioms required in a formal system (§§ 6.127, 6.1271).
[5] This parallels the private language argument (*Philosophical Investigations*, §§ 243-315).

[6] So, in that respect, no proposition would have any special epistemic status over the others. That is a Tractarian idea: "All propositions are of equal value" (§ 6.4).

say 'any empirical proposition can, theoretically, be transformed...', but what does 'theoretically' mean here? It sounds all too reminiscent of the *Tractatus*" (§ 321). This hesitation might be better understood as an implicit reiteration of the recognition that there is something wrong in thinking that a proposition can be conceived in isolation of a system in such a way that it could be seen as indifferent toward possible uses. This is an extrapolation we cannot make, a proposition (or a set of propositions) we cannot conceive, this is simply an illusion. The epistemic status (or function) of a given proposition is revisable but only within the limits of the context the proposition belongs to. As a consequence, Wittgenstein's conception displays finally a low level of egalitarianism.

6. Conclusion

Now, considering the results of the four conceptual markers, we end up with a high level of holism and fallibilism, and a low level of internalism and egalitarianism. This puts Wittgenstein's contextualism somewhere between a coherentist position and a foundationalist one. An interesting aspect of the Wittgensteinian analysis is that in a certain way it makes justice to the two apparent incompatible intuitions behind coherentism and foundationalism[7]: the intuition that the epistemic value of a propositional belief comes from its position (or function) within a belief system, and the intuition that some propositional beliefs have to assume a foundational function in order to make possible and to specify a particular belief system. This, as it stands, is an important contribution to contemporary epistemology.

Another aspect of this contribution consists in the rejection of some sort of Tractarian program extended to epistemology. In the same manner Wittgenstein had abandoned (1929) the project of finding the general form of a proposition, we are invited to abandon our quest for a general form of knowledge. There is no such a thing as a unique model of epistemic justification that would apply to each conceptual domain. And very much like the notion of language in the *Philosophical Investigations* has been approached by means of analogies with games, forms of life, family resemblances, the notion of knowledge should be approached with the aid of analogies with world-pictures, mythologies, and in particular contexts, as Wittgenstein remarks: "Only the accustomed context allows what is meant to come through clearly" (§ 237).

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[7] In a different manner than S. Haack (1993) does, for instance.