Judgement and Certainty

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1. Judgement, Assertion and Knowledge[1]

Judgement is the interiorisation of assertion: the inner notion of judgement is to be explained in terms of the outer notion of assertion. When someone asserts 'Snow is white', an interlocutor is entitled to ask 'How do you know?' If the asserter is not able to give grounds for his assertion, it has to be withdrawn. In an assertion an illocutionary claim that one has grounds is present; an assertion is thus a claim to knowledge. Not all occurrences of declarative sentences are asserted. In such cases the context should make it clear that the declarative is, for example, used to express mere opinion or conjecture. Whereas an assertion made is correct or incorrect, other uses of the declarative do not allow for this distinction. Just as for assertion, implicit in every judgement is a claim to knowledge; judgement is an epistemic notion.

The explanation of knowledge as justified true belief is standard. Some philosophers, though, explain knowledge as grounded or evident judgement. They rightly consider the notion of truth to be superfluous in their explanation of knowledge: groundedness ensures truth.

2. Subjective, Objective and Absolute Certainty

The explanation of knowledge as evident judgement may be elucidated in terms of subjective, objective and absolute certainty. A judgement's *objective certainty* may be explained either as its being grounded, or as the universal validity of the judgement. The former explanation is found in the article 'Gewissheit' in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (1974): certainty in the objective sense is the epistemic justification of what is known (*certitudo rei cognitae*). The latter explanation one finds in the corresponding article in Eisler's *Handwörterbuch der Philosophie* (1913): what stands fast for every possible judger is called 'objektive Gewissheit'. In the article 'certainty' in Baldwin's *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* (1901) the two explanations are combined: "an assertion is certain when its content is taken to be such that it must be asserted by all intelligences, i.e., when its truth is taken to be assured by universally valid grounds."

A judgement is *subjectively certain* (sure, *sicher*) when the judger is convinced of its correctness. A judgement's being subjectively certain may be the result of its being objectively certain. Knowledge entails belief in the sense of conviction. Subjective certainty may also obtain without objective certainty, in which case we have *mere belief*. Here (mere) belief is explained as a *deprived* judgement – a judgement for which we have no (epistemic) ground. Accordingly, belief is not apt for elucidating the concept of knowledge. Mere belief excludes knowledge.

A judgement is *absolutely certain* if it is excluded from error. The explanation of absolute certainty as indubitibility is less apt, because it seems to express a psychological impossibility. The concept of absolute certainty can be used only in a negative way: none of our judgements is absolutely certain, because the human judger is fallible.

Within the Cartesian tradition where knowledge is identified with absolutely certain knowledge, objective certainty is often identified with absolute certainty (infallibility) and undubitibility. This ideal of knowledge has brought the explanation of knowledge as evident judgement into discredit, because it leads to the problem of evidence: How can evidence be both epitemically accessible to the judger, and at the same time be a guarantee of infallible truth. The answer to the problem is that evidence is epistemically accessible to the judger, and there is no guarantee of infallible truth. Those who do not distinguish between objective and absolute certainty consider the explanation of knowledge as evident judgement to be merely subjective, for, pertaining to the evident judgement, there seems to be nothing left but subjective certainty. Given the distinction, the evident judgement, *i.e*. knowledge, can be both subjectively and objectively certain, without having to be absolutely certain.

3. Non-Epistemic Certainty

Declarative sentences, when used as assertions, can be considered as answers to a question. Implicit in a question is a presupposition, that itself can be considered as answer to a question. Not every presupposition is an answer to a question, though. When we have reached one of our *absolute presuppositions* (a term I borrow from Collingwood), such as *God exists*, there is no question to which this could be an answer. Absolute presuppositions are not answers to questions. Their expression as declarative is artificial, for they are neither true nor false. Instead of saying that a certain person believes *that* god exists, we should say that he believes *in* God (*fides*, *Glaube*). *God exists* is not a judgement; such an absolute presupposition is a *non-epistemic certainty*. It is a certainty, because we trust it; it stands fast for us. It is non-epistemic, because the judger cannot give a ground for it, and is not expected to be able to give such a ground. When someone utters a declarative with the intention to express a non-epistemic certainty, we cannot meaningfully ask 'How do you know?' The certainty of absolute presuppositions is prejudgemental; they make certain questions and answers (judgements) possible. Another example of such a certainty is belief in the evolution-theory. Such a certainty makes certain judgements possible, and it determines what counts as ground for a certain assertion. We learn these certainties from parents and teachers without questioning them.

Both subjective certainty and non-epistemic certainty are convictions, but they are of a different type. Non-epistemic certainties are not judgements, because they are themselves not answers to questions. We cannot meaningfully doubt whether God exists, because such a doubt presupposes that 'God exists', or 'God does not exist' expresses a judgement. Subjective certainties *are* judgemental. Because declaratives standardly express epistemic certainties, one is allowed to ask 'How do you know?' If it turns out that the person that has subjective certainty cannot give an (epistemic) ground, and thus expresses a mere belief, we may still ask 'Is it true?', or 'How *can* it be known?' We need an antecedent notion of non-epistemic

[1] I thank Göran Sundholm for comments on this paper; more on the first section in Sundholm 1999.

certainty against the background of which such questions, and thus, judgement and knowledge, are possible.

4. Wittgenstein on Judgement, Knowledge and Certainty

Wittgenstein's use of *Gewissheit* and *Sicherheit* is not systematic. Section 308 in *On Certainty* is crucial for understanding his ideas on judgement and certainty:

'Knowledge' and 'certainty' ('*Sicherheit*') belong to different *categories*. They are not two 'mental states' like, say 'surmising' and 'being sure' ('*Sichersein*'). […] What interests us now is not being sure but knowledge. That is, we are interested in the fact that about certain empirical propositions no doubt can exist if making judgements is to be possible at all. Or again: I am inclined to believe that not everything that has the form of an empirical proposition *is* one.

What does it mean that knowledge and certainty belong to different categories? In *On Certainty* we do not find anything like the standard definition of knowledge as justified true belief. We do find elucidations of uses of 'I know …'. Assertions that start with 'He knows …' are more complex, because they entail 'I know …'. Wittgenstein's primary interest is a first person concept of knowledge rather than the customary third person concept of knowledge. 'I know' often means that I have the proper grounds for my assertion (18; isolated numbers refer to sections in Wittgenstein 1969), and what is a proper ground is determined by the language game in question. A first person concept of knowledge presupposes a language game that belongs to a community. Giving and asking for grounds happens within a system that is a complex of language games (105). Wittgenstein's elucidations of the first person concept of knowledge are a variant of the explanation of knowledge as grounded judgement. Wittgenstein rejects the idea that knowledge is a mental state (308). By saying 'I know' I do not say that I am in a special state (588). Its use is the same as the use of 'That is' (588). We may express this point by saying that 'I know' makes explicit the knowledge claim contained in an assertion.

Certainties that are Wittgenstein's focus do not belong to the same category as knowledge because they are not judgemental certainties. Asking and giving grounds do not apply to them. In certain contexts empirical sentences may be used to express such certainties; the most famous one being Moore's 'Here is a hand'. Although we can imagine a context in which one's utterance of the declarative 'Here is a hand' is used as an assertion, and is thus true or false, for Wittgenstein the sentence is of interest in so far as it expresses a *norm* (167): this is what we call 'a hand' (cf. Stroll 1994 and Kober 1996). This way we learn how to categorise. Certainties, unlike axioms, we do not learn in isolation; they are part of a world-view that, as a whole, is an unquestioned foundation, a background against which we can distinguish between true and false (94). A certainty like *here is a hand* thus plays the same role in relation to judgement as the certainty *God exists* mentioned in the former section. Another example of a certainty is that what has always happened, will happen again (135) – we did not learn it as a principle, rather we act intuitively in accordance with it; without it assertions about the future would be impossible.

Wittgenstein says that we may be convinced of the rightness ('Richtigkeit') of a world-view by its simplicity and symmetry (92). If our world-view thus changes it may be called a *conversion*. Wittgenstein prefers the religious term 'belief' to any psychological term for these certainties (459). Rightness as it is used here is essentially different from judgemental truth. Criteria for rightness can be applied only to a *complete system*, like the criterion of coherence and pragmatic criteria.

How does Wittgenstein's notion of certainty relate to the epistemic notions of certainty explained in the second section? *On Certainty* contains two passages where the term 'objective certainty' is used. Wittgenstein gives (270) a general quotation "I have compelling grounds for my certitude (*Sicherheit*)". After the quote he adds that these grounds make the certainty objective. In the same passage he expresses the idea (273) that we may dispute whether something *is* certain: "when something is *objectively* certain". At first sight this seems to be in accordance with the epistemic meaning of the term 'objective certainty'. But the examples Wittgenstein gives of objective certainties do not confirm such an accordance: that if someone's arm is cut off it will not grow again, and that if someone is beheaded is dead and will never live again. Such certainties are *presupposed* when we make judgements. Wittgenstein considers these certainties to be objective in the sense that one has learned them from others (275). It is the certainty we share with all who take part in our language games in which our experience is embedded.

In the other passage, Wittgenstein contrasts objective and subjective certainty (194):

With the word "certain" ("*gewiss*") we express complete conviction, the total absence of doubt, and thereby we seek to convince other people. That is *subjective* certainty.

But when is something objectively certain? When a mistake is not possible. But what kind of possibility is that? Mustn't mistake be *logically* excluded?

What does Wittgenstein mean when he says that error is excluded? He adds that the error has to be *logically* excluded, where 'logic' has a special meaning in *On Certainty*. Logic concerns the general rules of language. 'This is a hand' in the proper context is an explanation of the word 'hand'. It is a rule for the use of this word prior to any of its applications. Error is excluded because questions of truth and falsity do not arise. This kind of certainty does not belong to a category where error applies, because it is *prejudgemental*. In this sense Wittgenstein's notion of certainty is far apart from the notion of absolute certainty in the traditional, epistemic sense: absolute certainty in the traditional sense is *judgemental*.

The first half of section 194 shows that Wittgenstein explains what he calls 'subjective certainty' as conviction; it is the absence of doubt, he adds. The context does not determine whether 'subjective certainty' means epistemic subjective certainty as explained in section 2. Wittgenstein's term 'subjective certainty' should be read as personal prejudgemental certainty, a notion that stands in opposition to public prejudgemental certainty ('objective certainty' in Wittgenstein's sense). Because prejudgemental certainty is determined by a language-game, and thus learnt from others, the notion of public certainty is prior to that of personal certainty. What Wittgenstein calls 'subjective certainty' is not to be identified with epistemic subjective certainty. Wittgenstein contrasts prejudgemental certainty with a state of being sure (308), and he explicitly says that a feeling of being sure is irrelevant to the certainties that interest him (524). Epistemic subjective certainty *is* a psychological state; the feelings that accompany this state in certain circumstances are not accidental. The criterion by which we can determine

whether something is a certainty, according to Wittgenstein, is not whether we have a special feeling, but whether there is a distinction in acting with language. Wittgenstein's distinction between subjective and objective certainty concerns exclusively a contrast on the level of prejudgemental certainty. He elucidates his notion of certainty by using terms that come close to subjective certainty in the epistemic sense, such as 'conviction' and 'to stand fast for us'. But, for Wittgenstein, if something stands fast for us, we are not expected to be able to give any epistemic ground. Wittgenstein's notion of certainty is prejudgemental, whereas the epistemic notion of subjective certainty concerns judgement. His notion of certainty is thus essentially different from the epistemic one. Prejudgemental certainties cannot be expressed by declarative sentences; they can only be shown by a practice, a way of acting and living.

Literature

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