**“I Know”, “I *k*now”, “I know”. Hinge epistemology, invariantism and skepticism[[1]](#footnote-1)\***

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**Abstract**: In this paper, I first present and discuss in some depth Wittgenstein’s radical form of contextualism about knowledge ascriptions (§1). Accordingly, though superficially similar, uses of “I know” can serve three fundamentally different functions: an ordinary, genuinely epistemic one; a grammatical, non-epistemic one; and a ‘philosophical’, nonsensical one (§§1.1-1.3). I then briefly present Wittgenstein’s anti-skeptical strategies (§2), and compare my reading of *On Certainty* with therapeutic ones (§3.1), and with contextualist ones, such as Travis’ and Williams’ (§3.3-3.3). On reflection, the ordinary use of “I know” turns out to be the only common ground between Wittgenstein’s position and contemporary contextualism regarding knowledge ascriptions. With respect to such a use, Wittgenstein was in fact an invariantist. I explore Wittgenstein’s invariantism in (§4). In closing (§5), I consider the relationship between my own version of hinge epistemology, contemporary contextualism and skepticism. While I do not follow Wittgenstein in his claim that skeptical doubts are nonsensical, I don’t think they pose a threat to our ordinary knowledge either. Yet, we do not have knowledge of hinges, since reasons for them would be circular. Hinges, rather, are rationally assumed, albeit without any justification, because they are constitutive of epistemic rationality. With that picture in hand, I then close by defusing the objection, raised by contextualists such as DeRose, that if we don’t have knowledge of hinges, we would have to condone abominable conjunctions such as “I know there is a hand here, but I don’t know I am not a BIV”.

1. **Wittgenstein’s contextualism**

In Coliva (2010) I have proposed an interpretation of Wittgenstein’s criticism of Moore’s use of “I know” in relation to his truisms and the premises of his proof, as well as a defense of Wittgenstein’s position against John Searle’s (1969) allegation that his remarks were based on an “assertion fallacy”, which rely on the decisive role of use in the determination of meaning.

Contrary to Moore and Searle, Wittgenstein did not think that different occurrences of “I know” would always have the same meaning or, indeed, that they would always have a meaning. That is, the same words, by occurring in different contexts of use would change their meaning for him, up to the point of losing it altogether, in some deranged circumstances. By contrast, for Moore and Searle they would always retain the same meaning and could at most be used to make assertions that, depending on the case at hand, would be felicitous or infelicitous. Wittgenstein was therefore a contextualist of sorts. Yet, his form of contextualism was utterly different from contemporary variants of it. Indeed, as we will see, by contemporary lights, his position would come close to invariantism. Still, before venturing into that issue, let us see in more depth what his contextualism amounted to.

* 1. **The ordinary use of “I know”**

As is well known, Wittgenstein accorded pride of place to ordinary language. By observing how we normally use “I know”, he identified several criteria that are operative in the ordinary (or empirical) use of “I know”, henceforth “I Know” with a capital ‘K’. According to him, only by conforming to these criteria would knowledge claims make sense, in the literal sense of having a meaning. Here they are:

1. knowledge claims make sense only when they are based on reasons,
2. and, in fact, on reasons that are either non-circular,[[2]](#footnote-2) or at least stronger than what they are supposed to ground;
3. they make sense only when it is possible to make an inquiry to confirmthat things are as one claims to know and yet the possibility that things may not be so is open;
4. and it is therefore possible to say “I don’t know”. Finally and surprisingly,
5. claims to knowledge make sense only when they are relevant within the communicative exchange.

To substantiate my interpretation, consider the following passages, in support of (i) and (ii):[[3]](#footnote-3)

Someone with bad sight asks me: “do you believe that the thing we can see there is a tree?” I reply “I *know* it is; I can see it clearly and am familiar with it”.—A: “Is N. N. at home?”—I: “I believe he is.”—A: “Was he at home yesterday?”—I: “Yesterday he was—I know he was; I spoke to him.”—A: “Do you know or only believe that this part of the house was built on later than the rest?” —I: “I *know* it is; I got it from so and so”. (OC 483)

In these cases, then, one says “I know” and mentions how one knows [*der Grund*], or at least one can do so. (OC 484)

One says “I know” when one is ready to give compelling grounds. (…) 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. (OC 243)

(…) If I say “I know that I have two hands” (…) I must be able to satisfy myself that I am right. But I can’t do that, for my having two hands is not less certain before I have looked at them than afterwards (…). (OC 245).

Here are some other passages that support (iii):

Only in certain cases it is possible to make an investigation “is that really a hand?” (or “my hand”). For “I doubt whether that is really my (or a) hand” makes no sense without some more precise determination. One cannot tell from these words alone whether any doubt at all is meant—nor what kind of doubt. (OC 372)

If I don’t know whether someone has two hands (say, whether they have been amputated or not) I shall believe his assurance that he has two hands, if he is trustworthy. And if he says he *knows* it, that can only signify to me that he has been able to make sure, and hence that his arms are e.g. not still concealed by coverings and bandages, etc. etc. My believing the trustworthy man stems from my admitting that it is possible for him to make sure (…). (OC 23)

Some well-known passages in OC speak in favor of (iv):

“I know that I am a human being.” In order to see how unclear the sense of this proposition is, consider its negation. At most it might be taken to mean “I know I have the organs of a human”. (E.g. a brain which, after all, no one has ever yet seen.) But what about such a proposition as “I know I have a brain”? Can I doubt it? Grounds for *doubt* are lacking! Everything speaks in its favour, nothing against it. (OC 4)

Finally, the following passages back (v):

My difficulty can also be shewn like this: I am sitting talking to a friend. Suddenly he says: “I knew all along that you were so-and-so.” Is that really just a superfluous, though true, remark? I feel as if these words were like “Good morning” said to someone in the middle of a conversation. (OC 464)

Thus it seems to me that I have known something the whole time, and yet there is no *meaning* (my emphasis) in saying so, in uttering this truth. (OC 466)

(…) Shouldn’t I be at liberty to assume that he doesn’t know what he is saying, if he is insane enough to want to give me this information? (OC 468).

(…) I am astonished; but later I realize that these words connect up with his thoughts about me. And now they don’t strike me as *meaningless* (emphasis mine) anymore. (OC 469).

* 1. **The grammatical use of “I know”**

Wittgenstein, however, recognized also a “grammatical” use of “I know”, henceforth “I *k*now” with an italicized ‘*k*’. Contrary to “I Know”, and as surprising as it may seem, for Wittgenstein “I *k*now” does not express the obtaining of an epistemic relation between a subject and a proposition, it isn’t based on grounds, and doesn’t express knowledge but objective certainty.[[4]](#footnote-4) Writes Wittgenstein:

If “I know etc” is conceived as a grammatical proposition, of course the “I” cannot be important. And it properly means “There is no such thing as a doubt in this case” or “The expression ‘I do not know’ makes no sense in this case”. And of course it follows from this that “I know” makes no sense either. (OC58)

“I know” is here a *logical* insight. Only realism can’t be proved by means of it. (OC 59)

I know that this is my foot. I could not accept any experience as proof to the contrary.—That may be an exclamation; but what *follows* from it? At least that I shall act with a certainty that knows no doubt, in accordance with my belief. (OC 360)

I should like to say: Moore does not *know* what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as also for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our *method* of doubt and inquiry. (OC 151).

Hence, to be more perspicuous, uses of “I *k*now” could be replaced by “Here I can’t be wrong” or “Here a mistake/doubt is logically impossible”,[[5]](#footnote-5) or, even, “I couldn’t admit any experience as proof to the contrary”.

Now, according to Wittgenstein, the fact that one can’t be wrong in these cases doesn’t depend on one’s privileged epistemic position, but on the role that the propositions one claims (grammatically) to know play in our language games.[[6]](#footnote-6) These propositions – like “Here is my hand”, “There are physical objects”, “I am a human being”, “The earth has existed for a very long time”, etc. – have a normative function, even when they are the content of a judgment and not the explicit statement of a rule. They determine what needs to stay put to be allowed to take various kinds of empirical evidence as evidence in favor of ordinary empirical propositions. For instance, only by taking for granted that there are physical objects can one take one’s sensory experience at face value as evidence in favor of “Here is a computer in front of me”. Analogously, it is only by taking for granted that here is my hand, that I can take my sensory evidence as being produced by the reliable workings of my sensory system. If I doubted of the former, I should also doubt of the latter, which is presenting to me that portion of the world as occupied by such an object. Similarly, it is only by taking for granted that the earth has existed for a very long time that I can take a fossil as evidence relevant to the determination of the specific age of the earth. If I didn’t take that for granted, then that fossil by itself would not play any evidential role, since its existence would then become compatible with the hypothesis that the world had just popped into existence a few minutes ago, replete with everything we find in it (including ourselves, our memories, etc.).

Since these propositions need to stay put in order for the door to turn, that is, in order for our epistemic practices to function as they do, Wittgenstein famously likens them to “hinges”. He writes:

That is to say, the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. (OC 341)

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are in deed not doubted. (OC 342)

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. (OC 343)

In context, however, hinges can also be used as explicit formulations of rules, e.g. when we use “This is a hand” as an ostensive definition of the meaning of the word “hand” in English; or “Here is a human being” said while pointing at myself to teach my three year-old kid the meaning of “human being”; or “This is a physical object”, said while pointing at a pen I hold in my hand, to explain to her the meaning of that expression. Here are some of Wittgenstein’s own examples:

“A is a physical object” is a piece of instruction which we give only to someone who doesn’t yet understand either what “A” means, or what “physical object” means. Thus it is an instruction about the use of words, and “physical object” is a logical [categorial] concept. (Like colour, quantity,...) And that is why no such proposition as: “There are physical objects” can be formulated. Yet we encounter such unsuccessful shots at every turn. (OC 36)

If I wanted to doubt whether this was my hand, how could I avoid doubting whether the word “hand” has any meaning? So that is something I seem to know after all. (OC 369)

But more correctly: The fact that I use the word “hand” and all the other words in my sentence without a second thought, indeed that I should stand before the abyss if I wanted so much as to try doubting their meanings - shows that absence of doubt belongs to the essence of the language-game, that the question “How do I know...” drags out the language-game, or else does away with it. (OC 370)

Hinges, that is, contribute to the determination of meaning in two ways. First, when we use paradigms to ostensively define the meaning of words. For the existence of the object must be taken for granted for this kind of definition to take place. Second, meaning is established not only by definitions, for Wittgenstein, but also by agreement in judgment. Thus, some of our judgements, such as “Here is my hand” (in Moore-like circumstances), must be taken for granted, in order for “hand” to mean what it does. That is, supposing we had ostensively defined “hand” as usual, in order for that word to have its ordinary meaning, its canonical applications should be agreed upon. That is why, we, as speakers of English, cannot sensibly revoke into doubt the judgement “Here is my hand”, made in a Moore-like context. If we did, it would no longer be clear that by “hand” we mean hand or anything else at all.

Hinges, that is, play a normative role, while also being judgments, since they constitutively contribute to the determination both of meaning and of what would count as, for instance, normal conditions of perception, evidence for or against historical or geological specific judgments, normal conditions of human functioning, etc. For if those judgments were given up, one could no longer count on one’s perception, memories, or on apparent testimonies regarding the age of the Earth, to acquire evidence which could, in its turn, *disprove* those very propositions.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Finally, for Wittgenstein, the way in which we acquire hinges depends on what we have been drilled and taught to say (or think), either implicitly or explicitly, in the process of acquiring language, and of learning to take part in our various epistemic practices. That is why “I *k*now”, in connection with them, can also be glossed as “I have been drilled /taught to say/think thus-and-so”. Such an explanation, however, plays a causal role and it isn’t an epistemic reason which could sustain a genuine claim to knowledge.

* 1. **The ‘philosophical’ use of “I know”**

In the ‘philosophical’ use of “I know”, henceforth “I know” with an underlined ‘k’, the grammatical function is conflated with the empirical one, according to Wittgenstein. Like “I Know”, “I know” is taken to express the obtaining of an epistemic relationship between a subject and a proposition or a fact. Yet, like “I *k*now”, “I know” is taken to be indubitable. That is, “I know” straddles the ordinary and the grammatical use of “I know”, and it produces nonsense, for Wittgenstein, because no genuinely epistemic relation between a subject and a proposition (or a fact) is sure-fired, for him. Thus, when a philosopher like Moore says “I know here is my hand”, he is using “I know”’ in its ‘philosophical’ sense and is actually producing nonsense. This is not typically evident to philosophers, who, on the contrary, work on the assumption of semantic uniformity. That is, philosophers typically do not notice the difference between “I Know”, “I *k*now” and “I know”. Since they do not notice the difference, they are then confronted with the false problem of having to explain why one cannot go wrong epistemically speaking with respect to, for instance, there being one’s hand here. Since, in ordinary contexts that is certainly possible (in non-Moore like situations), the skeptical thought that we might be wrong anyway, even now that we are seeing our hand in optimal environmental and cognitive conditions, becomes salient. Yet, for Wittgenstein, that doubt too would be nonsensical, since it would straddle contexts. That is, it would depend on noticing that since in some contexts we might have gone wrong in our judgement “Here is my hand”, for instance after a car accident, we could be wrong even now, when in fact we are not in that kind of context.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Another way of putting the same point is to say that philosophers tend to project the meaning of “I Know”, to other uses of “I know”, which do not conform to those criteria. By running together contexts and criteria of use, they are in the grip of the illusion of producing sense and of being confronted with genuinely philosophical problems, when in fact they have just been deluded into the appearance of a problem brought about by a conceptual confusion, which ultimately resides in not seeing clearly the functioning of our language.

This kind of typically philosophical attitude needs therapy, according to Wittgenstein, but the therapy does not consist in condoning the use of “I know” in that connection – e.g. “I know there is my hand here” (in a Moore-like context), while simply adding the proviso that one does not mean to be doing any philosophy by speaking that way.[[9]](#footnote-9) Rather, the therapy consists in unraveling a particular way in which “I know” is sometimes used—that is, to express the impossibility of a doubt (“I *k*now”)—, and by providing a philosophical account of why, in such a case, a doubt and a mistake are impossible. To repeat: not because we are in a privileged epistemic position, but because of the role those propositions play, at least in context, for all of us.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Thus, according to Wittgenstein, the solution of many philosophical puzzles or paradoxes, including skepticism about the external world, about other minds, and the possibility of privileged self-knowledge, depends on developing a peculiar “philosophical” ear, which is capable of sensing the wrong note struck by the traditional philosopher. Furthermore, it requires a kind of “absolute ear” capable of noticing the differences between various uses of “I know”. Indeed, Wittgenstein thought of “I’ll teach you differences” from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, as a possible motto for the *Philosophical Investigations*. The differences he was alluding to were those that conceal themselves under identical words and expressions (“I know”, “is”, and many more, (cf. PI I, 116)). But you will also need to provide an explanation—in the sense of an elucidation, if you will—, which does not fall into the same traps as the ones offered by traditional philosophers, as to why, in our leading example – “I know there is my hand here” –, a doubt or a mistake are impossible.

To conclude, as is apparent, Wittgenstein’s contextualism is radical for at least the following reasons. First, because it attributes different meanings (or indeed a lack of meaning) to different uses of “I know”. Thus it differs from contemporary forms of contextualism, where only the ordinary use of “I Know” is recognized and a difference in standards is supposed to affect merely the semantic evaluation of occurrences of “I Know” or of “S Knows” in different contexts (of use or of assessment, depending on the form of contextualism at issue).[[11]](#footnote-11) Second, because his contextualism is meant to show that skepticism is actually nonsensical, rather than a genuine context with standards for knowledge that are impossible for us to satisfy.

Let us dwell a bit more on Wittgenstein’s reasons to deem philosophical doubts nonsensical.

1. **The nonsense of philosophical skepticism**

There are two strands to Wittgenstein’s argument in *On Certainty*, targeting two different forms of skepticism—Cartesian and Humean skepticism—respectively. Against the former, Wittgenstein’s views are quite bold. For he claims that if, in a dream, we uttered or entertained the words “I may be dreaming”, those words would have no meaning.

The argument “I may be dreaming” is senseless for this reason: if I am dreaming, this remark is being dreamed as well - and indeed it is also being dreamed that these words have any meaning. (OC 383)

“But even if in such cases I can’t be mistaken, isn’t it possible that I am drugged?” If I am and if the drug has taken away my consciousness, then I am not now really talking and thinking. I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming. Someone who, dreaming, says “I am dreaming”, even if he speaks audibly in doing so, is no more right than if he said in his dream “it is raining”, while it was in fact raining. Even if his dream were actually connected with the noise of the rain. (OC 676)

Hence for those words to have a meaning at all, they must be occurring outside a dream and, in their ordinary and only meaningful use, they could never be used to describe a possible state of affairs. Rather, they would be used to express something else, like, for instance, one’s surprise with respect to an unusual circumstance. Yet, if those words cannot be used to make a true assertion, their negation, for Wittgenstein, could not be used to that effect either. Thus, from the fact that there cannot be a genuinely descriptive use of “I am dreaming”, it does not follow that we can meaningfully assert the opposite. Rather, either we are using that phrase to emphasize that our experience, however unusual, is veridical; or else, we are hitting against a hinge-like use of it.

The second strand to Wittgenstein’s argument is not targeting Cartesian skepticism, but Humean skepticism. The key aspect of this latter form of skepticism is that it demands an epistemic justification for our hinges, to acknowledge their being rationally held. Yet, for Wittgenstein, neither “Here is my hand” (in Moore-like circumstances), nor “There is an external world”, or “There are physical objects”, or any other presupposition of rational inquiry can actually be sustained by reasons. For it is only by taking them for granted that we could produce anything like epistemic reasons for or against ordinary empirical propositions. To repeat, I have to take it for granted that there is my hand here (in Moore-like circumstances), and that therefore there are physical objects, and that my senses are working reliably, to be within my rights in taking my sensory experience as justifying my belief that there is no glass of water on my desk at the moment; as well as to take that experience as a guide in my subsequent empirical inquiry aimed at determining where I might have left it. Yet, the fact that hinges lie beyond justification does not mean that they can be doubted. For doubts too should be based on reasons, but nothing we regard as a reason actually speaks against these hinges, nor could. Thus, their lying beyond justification makes them immune to sensible doubt as well.[[12]](#footnote-12)

1. **Some comparisons**
   1. **Therapeutic readings**

As the connoisseurs will have noticed, I have come close to so-called “therapeutic” interpretations of Wittgenstein’s thought,[[13]](#footnote-13) according to which Moore with his use of “I know”, and more generally philosophers, often tend to fall prey to an illusion of meaning. For they think they are making sense, when they employ certain words, and that they are therefore discovering deep philosophical truths (or problems), while they are in fact speaking nonsense. Yet, I think therapeutic interpretations of Wittgenstein’s thought are too partial. For they fail to see that while use comes first and determines meaning, it does so, for Wittgenstein, because it fixes the rules for the correct employment of signs and for the actual deployment of our epistemic practices. Thus, there is no opposition, in my view, between stressing the importance and primacy of use in the later Wittgenstein and his insistence on rules and grammar. When philosophers speak nonsense, they do so because they run against the rules of language, as well as of evidential significance, established by use and by our actual language games and epistemic practices.[[14]](#footnote-14) Furthermore, in my view, therapists tend to discard the important insights, contained in *On Certainty*, on the grammatical role of “I know”, which clarify the normative status of our certainties, viz. of those “hinge” propositions with respect to which “I know” may be used grammatically.

* 1. **Travis: Wittgenstein as a *contemporary* contextualist *ante litteram***

Semantic contextualist readings of *On Certainty* and of Wittgenstein’s observations on Moore’s use of “I know”, aim to interpret them as examples of *contemporary* contextualism *ante litteram*. Supporters of such a reading join therapists and myself in stressing the fact that Wittgenstein’s insistence on use has deep philosophical consequences. In particular, it entails that most philosophical employments of “I know” would actually fail to make sense (Travis 1989, 153). This, however, may suggest that there are more similarities between these “contemporary” contextualist readings of Wittgenstein and mine, than it is in fact the case.

Charles Travis, in his *The Uses of Sense* (1989), has argued that Wittgenstein held that “A knows that *p*” can express many different thoughts – viz. various truth-conditions – on different contexts of its use. However, he bases his interpretation on a passage where Wittgenstein is actually discussing a different example, i.e. “I’m here”.

Just as the words “I am here” have a meaning only in certain contexts, and not when I say them to someone who is sitting in front of me and sees me clearly,—and not because they are superfluous, but because their meaning is not *determined* by the situation, yet stands in need of such a determination (OC 348)

so too, the comparison goes, do the words “I know that that’s a tree” uttered when one is clearly in view of a tree (cf. OC 347). Travis’ idea is that, unless we look at context, the truth-conditions of a given utterance of those words are *underdetermined*. Hence, it is only by considering the context that we can find out which thought they express and establish whether they are used to express a truth or a falsity.

I find this suggestion odd for a number of reasons. First, I think Wittgenstein’s view is more radical than Travis makes of it. For in the passage quoted above Wittgenstein is saying that outside a specific context of use, those words have *no meaning*. Using a piece of classical semanticist’s terminology, I take that to entail that they don’t even have a role or a character. Therefore, they naturally fail to determine a thought, i.e. specific truth-conditions. Travis, on the contrary, seems to think that they have a meaning, on Wittgenstein’s view of the matter, while context has to be invoked in order for them to express a determinate thought, i.e. determinate truth-conditions. This, however, wouldn’t be very surprising, since in OC 348 indexicals such as ‘I’ and ‘here’ occur. It is indeed commonplace that context has to be invoked to determine what thought is expressed in each occurrence of their use. Yet, those words are typically considered to have an invariant meaning or character, or role, which, together with a context (formed by a subject, a place and a time), manages to express a determinate thought (that is, determinate truth-conditions), on each occasion of utterance. Yet, clearly, Wittgenstein’s remark is meant to make a stronger and surely more contentious claim.

Second and connectedly, the only kind of “contextualism” envisaged by Wittgenstein concerns the fact that in different contexts “I/A know(s) that *p*” could actually *mean* different things. In particular, either an epistemic relationship between the subject and “p”; or else, a grammatical remark where no epistemic property is attributed to a subject. Alternatively, those words would fail to mean anything at all, when they are used by philosophers such as Moore, irrespective of all criteria that govern their employment in the ordinary and in the grammatical case. Furthermore, it is to be stressed that only in the first case could those words express a Fregean thought, i.e. something susceptible of being either true or false. For in the second case, the role of the ascription would be that of expressing a rule, hence nothing which could either be true or false, according to Wittgenstein;[[15]](#footnote-15) and, in the third, those words would fail to have a meaning altogether and would then express no Fregean thought at all.

Lastly, contrary to Travis (1989, 156-66), I find no suggestion in Wittgenstein that, depending on various factors, such as our practical interests and world-involving conditions, an utterance of “I Know” could actually express different truth-conditions. Let us illustrate this idea with a classic example. Consider a subject who needs to deposit a check in the bank by Friday. Now, depending on whether it is a matter of urgency or not and, therefore, on whether certain defeaters are salient to the case, an ascription of knowledge to her (either made by the subject herself or by a third party) regarding whether the bank is going to be open on Fridays, could be either true or false. However, as remarked, given the textual evidence at our disposal, there are no hints of this sort in *On Certainty*. For Wittgenstein doesn’t discuss such a kind of case and isn’t so much interested in knowledge *per se* as in certainty. Thus, if it makes sense to describe Wittgenstein’s position in these anachronistic terms, it turns out that he was more of an *invariantist* with respect to knowledge ascriptions than a contemporary contextualist. That is, while a contextualist in his own way, he was not leaning towards anything resembling contemporary contextualism about knowledge ascriptions. I will return to Wittgenstein’s invariantism in the following (sect. 4).

* 1. **Williams**

Following Michael Williams (2004a, b), one might think that though a semantic invariantist with respect to knowledge ascriptions, Wittgenstein was after all an *epistemological* contextualist. For, allegedly, he pointed out that “Here is my hand” could be the object of a genuine claim to knowledge in some cases and could thus be supported by grounds, while it would fail to be so in different ones. On such an epistemological contextualist reading, in the latter case the relationship between the subject and the proposition would still be epistemic, though non-evidential. Hence, the subject would actually *know* that there is a hand in front of her, for she would be *entitled*—i.e. non-evidentially justified—to take that *truth* for granted, though she couldn’t articulate reasons in its favor such as to ground an eventual claim to knowledge. She would be non-evidentially justified because no reasons to the contrary could be produced and because to take that much for granted would be necessary to gather any evidence in favor of other propositions. Writes Williams:

Holding some particular propositions fast need not be a matter of credulity: to hold them fast is reasonable. So while *they* are (in one sense) ungrounded, *we* are justified in cleaving to them. In this way, they can be the objects of beliefs that are true (in a deflationary sense of ‘true’) and justified (though not derived from evidence). Thinking of ‘justified true belief’ in this second way, even basic certainties can amount to knowledge” (2004b, p. 280).

Yet, I find William’s suggestion misleading for several reasons. First, Wittgenstein was not at all in favor of non-evidential justifications for hinges. Consider the following passage, which, ironically, is often appealed to by supporters of such an epistemic reading of Wittgenstein’s remarks, in which he is actually denying that we are non-evidentially justified, by way of pragmatic considerations, to believe them:

But it *isn’t* (my emphasis) 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* (my emphasis) stay put. (OC 343)

Wittgenstein’s point, that is, is not that the impossibility of an investigation into the presuppositions of each inquiry would make inquiry impossible and that provides us with an un-earned justification to believe them. Rather, his point is that it belongs to the logic of inquiry – and it is therefore a grammatical remark about “inquiry” – that its hinges be held fast, even if they are not justified and justifiable, evidentially or otherwise.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Second, Williams’ suggestion is misleading because, on Wittgenstein’s view, in a Moore-like case “Here is my hand” would be a “hinge” and hence a rule.[[17]](#footnote-17) If so, it would simply fail to be in the business for epistemic justification and assessment.[[18]](#footnote-18) As Wittgenstein puts it, these propositions lie “*beyond* being justified or unjustified” (OC 359, my emphasis). Thus, I think Wittgenstein didn’t even argue that the nature of *justification* varies depending on context. That is, he did not argue for the view that in some cases our justification is earned through empirical or a priori work, while sometimes it is unearned. Rather, he argued for the view that, in certain cases, propositions that, in different circumstances, may really be subject to verification and control, would fail to be so, as their *status and role* would be different in those different contexts. To repeat, in some contexts they wouldn’t be genuinely empirical propositions but rules and would thus be unsuitable for epistemic support, no matter how non-evidential that might be. In their connection, the use of “I know” could therefore sensibly be taken only as grammatical, according to Wittgenstein, and, as we have seen, such as to fail to attribute any epistemic property to the subject at all.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Finally, there isn’t anything that suggests that knowledge, for Wittgenstein, is to be understood somewhat in an externalist spirit and that it can be attained even if one is in no position to produce reasons for one’s own true beliefs. In fact, the idea that Wittgenstein would allow for the possibility of knowledge even when no reasons can be produced in favor of one’s claim is based on disregarding the distinction between ordinary and grammatical uses of “I know” he draws in *On Certainty*. As we saw (sect. 1.2), for Wittgenstein, only grammatical uses of “I know” are not backed by reasons. Furthermore, for him, they actually don’t express an epistemic relation between a subject and a proposition. Rather, they express a kind of certainty, which would be more perspicuously expressed by saying “Here a doubt is (logically) impossible”. Thus, we do not have anything in *On Certainty* resembling the externalist idea that, even if we cannot produce reasons in favor of knowledge claims regarding hinges, we would know them nonetheless. Rather, we have the suggestion that the use of “I know” in their connection is a misleading expression of the kind of certainty that characterizes them. Namely, a certainty that has nothing subjective or psychological about it, but which depends on the role hinges play in the relevant epistemic practices.

Hence, all we get from these and other key passages in *On Certainty* is the idea that justification and knowledge do not take place in a vacuum. They always depend on there being certain hinges, which, as such, cannot themselves be justified or known, yet allow us to acquire evidence for or against ordinary empirical propositions. They are therefore constitutive of the practice that in turn determines what being epistemically rational amounts to. Some of them can change in time – “Nobody has ever been on the Moon” is no longer a hinge for us – and according to context – sometimes “Here is my hand” is an empirical proposition we subject to verification and control. Yet, there are several of them we simply cannot revise, e.g. “The Earth has existed for a very long time”, “There are physical objects”, etc. on pain of giving up all our system of beliefs. This is not to say that they are metaphysically necessary but only that they play such a fundamental role in our *Weltbild* that, from *within it* – as we in fact are – we can’t actually find any reason to doubt them.

1. **Wittgenstein’s invariantism**

What, on reflection, the preceding shows is that the ordinary use of “I know” is the only common ground between Wittgenstein’s position and contemporary contextualism. With respect to it, it turns out that Wittgenstein was in fact an invariantist. Reasons for knowledge claims may be good or bad, but when they are bad, knowledge does not obtain and one’s claim to knowledge is simply false. Reasons can also be stronger or weaker and it may be an open issue how strong they need to be in order to make one’s true belief knowledgeable. Yet, even in this case, there is no play made with the idea that different contexts raise or lower standards such that one’s identical reasons may suffice or fail to suffice for knowledge. Thus, Wittgenstein’s and contemporary contextualism about knowledge are actually completely different and pass each other by.

However, I would like to inquire a bit deeper into Wittgenstein’s account of “I Know” to forestall a possible of misunderstanding of his views, which I find problematic and which, alas, is gaining currency in contemporary discussions of skepticism. Namely, that Wittgenstein’s views on the matter if not already committed to it, are at least compatible with epistemic disjunctivism.[[20]](#footnote-20) Accordingly, he would be committed to or at least in favor of the idea of the factivity of reasons (and not just of knowledge). That is, the idea that, in good case scenarios, when we do perceive objects in our surroundings, then the fact itself and not its perceptual representation would be our reason for holding “p” true. Consider the following passage in *On Certainty*, in which Wittgenstein seems, strikingly, to be discussing *ante litteram* disjunctivism:

“I know” has a primitive meaning similar to and related to “I see” (“wissen”, “videre”). And “I knew he was in the room, but he wasn’t in the room” is like “I saw him in the room, but he wasn’t there”. “I know” is supposed to express a relation, not between me and the sense of a proposition (like “I believe”) but between me and a fact. So that the fact is taken into my consciousness. (Here is the reason why one wants to say that nothing that goes on in the outer world is really known, but only what happens in the domain of what are called sense-data.) This would give us a picture of knowing as the perception of an outer event through visual rays which project it as it is into the eye and the consciousness. Only then the question at once arises whether one can be certain of this projection. And this picture does indeed show how our imagination presents knowledge, but not what lies at the bottom of this presentation. (OC 90)

Wittgenstein was struck by the fact that in German the verb for “to know” is “wissen”, which has the same root as the Latin “videre” that obviously means “to see”. He also recognized the factivity of “to know”. For instance, in OC 178, he writes

the wrong use made by Moore of the proposition “I know...” lies in his regarding it as an utterance as little subject to doubt as “I am in pain”. And since from “I know it is so” there follows “It is so”, then the latter can’t be doubted either.

Taking knowledge to be akin to seeing, together with its factivity, produces a captivating “picture”, as he calls it. Namely, a picture according to which knowledge would consist in taking outer facts into one’s consciousness. Yet this is just a picture, and a bad one at that, for Wittgenstein. For we do not take outer facts into consciousness; nor do we have knowledge only of inner facts, since the latter, being mental in nature, might be thought of being taken in consciousness directly. In fact, it is safe to say that for Wittgenstein there are no facts – outer or inner – prior to their being conceptualized in certain ways. Hence, it is only thanks to pertinent hinges that our perceptual experiences can be taken to bear onto physical objects and thus give us access to what we thereby categorize as outer facts. Furthermore, our knowledge, as fallible as it is, just consists in having true beliefs supported by defeasible reasons. Indeed, it is of the essence of knowledge, for Wittgenstein, that it be defeasible and this can be so only if knowledge does not depend on or entail having factive reasons for the propositions known. As he writes in OC 12,

‘I know’ seems to describe a state of affairs which guarantees what is known, guarantees it as a fact. One always forgets the expression ‘I thought I knew’.

Disjunctivism, with its insistence on factive reasons, is forgetful of this grammatical fact, as Wittgenstein would consider it. For, saying that one does know that *p*, iff one has factive reasons for *p* – viz. because one has taken in the very fact that *p* – excludes the possibility of being wrong – that one’s reasons may not be conclusive – and that *p* isn’t the case. Yet Wittgenstein insists that it is only when that possibility remains open that we do have, and are allowed to claim, knowledge. When that possibility is not open, then we are actually stumbling on something categorially different. Namely, a hinge, and our use of “I know” in that connection would actually not be the ordinary but the grammatical one, in which no epistemic relation obtaining between a subject and a proposition is expressed.

A disjunctivist might reply that her position is compatible with Wittgenstein’s because one might altogether lack factive reasons, contrary to one’s initial belief. Hence, one might say “I thought I knew”. This, however, would simply mean that one didn’t have knowledge in the first place. It would not mean that one’s reasons, when one *does* know, are defeasible. For, according to disjunctivists, either we have perceptual reasons, and, in that case, they reach all the way down to facts, and cannot be defeated by any increment in information; or else, we don’t have perceptual reasons at all. Yet, the gist of OC 90 is that when genuine knowledge occurs – that is, when “I know” expresses a genuine epistemic relation (and is thus a case of “I Know”) – then reasons must be defeasible. If they weren’t, given that for Wittgenstein knowledge is factive, knowledge and our knowledge-claims would then become infallible. Yet, it they were so infallible, they could not be genuinely epistemic. Thus, either they would amount to nonsense or could only be reinterpreted as grammatical. For, as we saw in §1.3, straddling contexts and taking knowledge claims to be epistemic and infallible at once is what, for Wittgenstein, produces nonsense.

1. **Hinge epistemology vs. contemporary contextualism vis-à-vis the skeptical challenge**

In closing, let me turn to the relationship between invariantism about “I Know”, skepticism and my own version of hinge epistemology. The key point is that while I do not follow Wittgenstein in his claim that skeptical doubts are nonsensical, I don’t think they pose a threat to our knowledge either.

Contrary to contemporary contextualists, I make no play with the idea that Knowledge ascriptions are context-dependent, such that, when the stakes are low, we have Knowledge of the first premise and of the conclusion of the following argument:

1. Here is my hand;[[21]](#footnote-21)
2. If there is my hand here, I am not a BIV;
3. I am not a BIV.

Whereas, when produced in the philosophical context, where standards for Knowledge go up and we are required to exclude the negation of (3) in order to have Knowledge of (1), we end up having Knowledge of neither.

Rather, on my view, thanks to empirical evidence and to the relevant hinges such as “There is an external world”, “My sense organs are generally reliable”, “I am not a BIV”, etc. we can have Knowledge of ordinary empirical propositions. This is indeed the gist of what I call the moderate account of perceptual justification. Namely:

**Moderate conception of perceptual justification**: in order to have a perceptual justification for P (e.g. “Here is my hand”) you need a hand-like experience, no defeaters, and to assume Q (“There is an external world”, etc).[[22]](#footnote-22)

Hence, if we possess perceptual justification and our belief is true, then we also have knowledge of ordinary empirical propositions.

Yet, on my account, we do not have Knowledge of hinges, since reasons for them would be circular. Hinges, rather, are assumed and are assumed rationally, albeit without any justification, because they themselves are constitutive of epistemic rationality. Elsewhere,[[23]](#footnote-23) I have developed the details of the argument. In short, just as the constitutive rules of a game are part of the game even if they are not moves within it, so hinges, while neither justified nor justifiable (and therefore knowable), are part of epistemic rationality because they make it possible to acquire justification and knowledge for ordinary empirical propositions, as well as to raise motivated doubts about them. Amongst hinges, besides “There is an external world” and “My sense organs work mostly reliably”, there are also anti-Cartesian ones such as “I am not a BIV”, or “I am not a victim of a lucid and sustained dream”. Since the very possibility of any empirical inquiry hinges on – pun intended – taking for granted that we are acquiring information through our senses about our surroundings and that we are cognitively well-functioning, hinges are constitutive of epistemic rationality itself.

A note-worthy consequence of my position is that rational justification does not transmit across known entailment, when the conclusion of the argument is a hinge. For it is only by presupposing the conclusion that one can have a perceptual justification for the premise. Yet, since the premise can be justified and known while the conclusion, if it is a hinge, never is, this also entails that the Closure Principle does not hold unconditionally. That is, when the premise is something like “I have hands” and the conclusion is “There is an external world”, or “I am not a BIV”, one may have justification and knowledge of the former, and know that the premise entails the conclusion, and still have no justification or knowledge of it.[[24]](#footnote-24)

As is well known, DeRose has raised an objection against those who, like me, end up denying Closure. Namely that if we don’t have Knowledge of hinges, while retaining Knowledge of ordinary empirical propositions, we would have to condone abominable conjunctions such as “I Know there is a hand here, but I don’t Know I am not a BIV”. The *prima facie* force of this objection is, in my view, due to a failure of appreciating the role that hinges such as “I am not a BIV” actually play in the practice of providing reasons for, and Knowledge of ordinary empirical propositions. Surely, then, we do not Know them, yet they play a positive constitutive role with respect to epistemic rationality. As I have argued at length elsewhere, we do not Know them but we (skeptics and non-skeptics alike) are mandated by epistemic rationality itself to accept them,[[25]](#footnote-25) since they are constitutive of epistemic rationality itself. Indeed a skeptic’s mistake, in my view, depends on concluding that since they are not sustained by epistemic reasons, they fall outside the scope of epistemic rationality altogether, when in fact they are within it since they are its constitutive elements. To repeat, just as rules are part of a game, so those hinges the assumption of which is constitutive of epistemic rationality are part of epistemic rationality itself. Therefore, we are mandated to accept them by epistemic rationality itself, and not just in virtue of pragmatic considerations. Hence, in my view, the skeptic’s mistake depends on holding on to

Epistemic RationalitySk: a proposition is epistemically rationally held if and only if there is an evidential justification for it.

Instead of embracing the correct, extended characterization of epistemic rationality. Namely,

Epistemic RationalityExt: a proposition is epistemically rationally held if and only if either there is an evidential justification for it, or, while being unjustifiable, it needs to be assumed in order to have epistemic justifications.

Now, as Harman and Sherman (2011) notice, *prima facie* abominable conjunctions can always be produced when one is dealing with neighboring notions, which only philosophical analysis can tease apart. The neighboring notions here at play are belief and assumption, on the one hand, and being justified (which I take to be a necessary condition for Knowledge) and being rationally mandated, on the other. Thus, armed with such an analysis, we can then counter the objection with the following, non-abominable conjunction “I Know I have a hand, and although I don’t Know I am not a BIV, I am rationally mandated to assume that I am not”.

Thus, according to my own version of hinge epistemology, one can retain invariantism about Knowledge, as well as Knowledge of ordinary empirical propositions, without having to embrace infallibilism. By going constitutivist about hinges, one will not be making them the object of Knowledge. Yet, such a “skeptical” solution is in fact also a powerful “undercutting” solution to skepticism. For, ultimately, it shows that the skeptical paradox, in either of its forms, rests on a narrow and mistaken account of epistemic rationality.

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1. \* I would like to thank Christos Kyriacou and Genia Schoenbaumsfeld for very helpful comments on previous versions of this paper. While elements of disagreement may remain, I have learnt a lot from them. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One might say that given that foundationalism and coherentism involve some inherent circularity (and infinitism is implausible), some circularity in reasoning is inevitable. Maybe so but notice that the kind of circularity in question would be one in which the existence of physical objects needs to be presupposed in order to have a perceptual justification for “here is a hand”, say. Hence, using that justified premise to try and get a justification for “there are physical objects” with a Moore-style proof would be epistemically bad. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. To avoid unnecessary repetitions, I will expand on the non-circularity requirement in the following. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For Wittgenstein ‘know’ is a family resemblance concept. Important remarks on this can be found both in *On Certainty* and in *Philosophical Investigations* (Cf. §78, 246-7). I have addressed the issue in Coliva 2020b. He also distinguished between objective and subjective certainty. The former, which is the object of *On Certainty*, is not an epistemic category, for him, but a grammatical one; the latter, in contrast, is a psychological category and has no special philosophical relevance, for him (cf. especially OC 194, 270, 273; see also 15-16, 203). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In the later Wittgenstein, the adjective “logical” is often synonymous with “grammatical” and should not be conflated with the contemporary understanding of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Notice that a grammatical role or function in OC is neither epistemic nor pragmatic, but constitutive of a practice and/or meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As remarked in Wright (1985) and in Moyal-Sharrock’s (2005), in *On Certainty* the notions of a rule, as well as that of grammar, are extended to cover not only linguistic norms but also those which we may call “norms of evidential significance”. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I am not considering here a Cartesian skeptical scenario for that is dealt with differently by Wittgenstein. See sect. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This is the gist of therapeutic proposals. In this vein, Penelope Maddy (2017, p. 200) takes Wittgenstein to be proposing a “sadly crimped view” of philosophy, which would consist simply in bringing us back to common sense, and the ordinary use of “I know”, after catching the philosophical disease. In Coliva (2020b), I contend that therapeutic readings have arguably misunderstood the aim and scope of “therapy” in Wittgenstein’s later writings. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Actually, in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein had already developed several of these considerations regarding various uses of “I know”. One should read the passages on the possibility of knowing other minds and the impossibility of self-knowledge understood as a sure-fired way of epistemically knowing one’s own sensations and on-going propositional attitudes in light of this tripartite distinction. For a discussion, cf. Coliva (2010, ch. 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, for an example of the former option DeRose (1995); and MacFarlane (2014) for an example of the latter. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a fuller treatment of Wittgenstein’s anti-skeptical strategies, see Coliva (2010, chapter 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cf. Conant (1998). OC 347-360 is a sequence of passages that clearly brings out Wittgenstein’s resolute attitude towards philosophical uses of “I know” and towards philosophical forms of doubt. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Notice that this is entirely compatible with the fact that these practices may change due to social pressures of various nature (e.g. scientific, political, etc.). Wittgenstein’s descriptivism, therefore, need not be in the service of the defense of any *status quo*. It is just that these changes are not typically brought about by philosophy itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. At least according to standard “framework” interpretations of Wittgenstein’s views, such as McGinn (1989), Moyal-Sharrock (2005), Coliva (2010). Alternatively, grammatical uses would still be truth-apt, but their truth would neither depend on their correspondence with a certain state of affairs, nor on there being conclusive evidence in their favor. I have dealt at length with these issues in Coliva (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. I have discussed Williams and Wright’s epistemic readings of *On Certainty* at length in Coliva 2019, 2020a. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Further reasons of discontent can be found in Coliva 2010, chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Unsurprisingly Travis (1989, pp. 234-5) and Williams (2004a, b) deny, citing no passage in *On Certainty*, that hinges are norms. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Williams simply ignores Wittgenstein’s suggestion that there are “grammatical” uses of “I know” and takes them to show that Wittgenstein favored an *externalist* view of knowledge, whereby one may have knowledge of P even if unable to articulate grounds in its favor, provided one were entitled to it. Another possible source of Williams’ confusion is the fact that sometimes Wittgenstein considers practical, non-propositional knowledge for which it is obviously unnecessary to be able to offer reasons, which would prove that one knows. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Pritchard (2016) and Schönbaumsfeld (2017) and in conversation. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Notice that I allow for fewer hinges than Wittgenstein and, like contemporary epistemologists, I regard “Here is my hand” as an ordinary empirical proposition. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For a defense of the moderate account as opposed to the liberal and conservative ones, endorsed by Pryor (2004) and Wright (1985, 2004) respectively, see Coliva (2015, chapters 1-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The details of the argument are presented in Coliva (2015, chapter 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For the details of my position on Transmission Principles and Closure, see Coliva (2015, chapter 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Acceptance is preferable to belief in this context because acceptances, contrary to beliefs, can be in good standing even if they are not supported (nor are they supportable) by reasons. For a more thorough treatment of this aspect of my proposal, see Coliva (2015, chapter 2). Notice that, in my view, acceptance is a propositional attitude of holding true without epistemic reasons in favor of the proposition so accepted, and it is also fully compatible with strong commitment to the truth of what is accepted. In short, it is a categorial acceptance rather than a hypothetical one. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)