**Relativism and Hinge Epistemology**

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Hinge epistemology is a trend in contemporary epistemology, which takes its lead from Wittgenstein’s remarks in *On Certainty*. Among hinge epistemologists we can list Peter Strawson (1985), Michael Williams (1991),[[1]](#footnote-1) Crispin Wright (1985, 2004, 2014), Danièle Moyal-Sharrock (2005), Martin Kusch (2013, 2016a, b, 2017), Genia Schönbaumsfeld (2017), Duncan Pritchard (2016) and Annalisa Coliva (2010, 2015).[[2]](#footnote-2) Other contemporary epistemologists’ work bears on the status of “hinges”, but their views are more in keeping with G. E. Moore’s. Chief among them are James Pryor (2000, 2004), Christopher Peacocke (2004), Ernest Sosa (2013) and Ralph Wedgwood (2011, 2013). For them, hinges can be known either a posteriori or a priori. Hinge epistemologists, in contrast, deny that claim, or substantially reinterpret it, by maintaining that hinges enjoy a kind of non-evidential and non-inferential justification. Insofar as a posteriori knowledge depends on empirical evidence and a priori knowledge is taken to depend on inference, hinges would thus not be known in any traditional sense.

Different developments of Wittgensteinian themes often depend on dissimilar readings of *On Certainty*. On “framework” readings of *On Certainty* (McGinn 1989, Wright 1985, Moyal-Sharrock 2005, Coliva 2010, Pritchard 2016, Schönbaumsfeld 2017), hinges are not like ordinary empirical propositions, but more like rules.[[3]](#footnote-3) According to epistemic readings of *On Certainty* (Morawetz 1978, Pritchard 2001, 2011a, Williams 2004a, b, Wright 2004, Kusch 2016b), hinges may be non-evidentially justified and might even become the object of knowledge, if knowledge extends to propositions for which we do not possess evidential justifications.[[4]](#footnote-4) According to naturalistic readings (Strawson 1985 but see also Stroll 1994 and Moyal-Sharrock 2005), hinges are propositions we believe because of our upbringing within a community that endorses them and are thus “second nature” to us. Finally, according to therapeutic readings (drawing on Conant 1998, see Crary 2005, Maddy 2017), *On Certainty* contains no theory of hinges at all. Rather, its aim is to cure us from the kind of intellectual cramp that makes us think we could sensibly doubt them.

These different interpretations of *On Certainty* have led to different positions about the allegedly relativistic implications of that work. Clearly, if there is nothing substantive to be said about the status of hinges, they might vary for different people, but this would not by itself lend support to any relativistic view. Naturalistic readings could be more hospitable to relativism, inasmuch as “second nature” is a culturally inherited trait. Insofar as different cultures may pass on different hinges and yet may be considered to be on a par, a form of relativism would become more readily available. Yet, it is notable that no supporter of a naturalistic reading of *On Certainty* has proposed a relativistic interpretation of it. This is largely because they have focused on universal hinges like “There are physical objects”, “The Earth has existed for a very long time”, etc. Yet, in principle, and in keeping with the garden variety of hinges proposed in *On Certainty*, naturalistic readings could make room for relativism. Epistemic readings, in contrast, would be the least hospitable to relativistic interpretations. For if hinges are, if not known (*sic et simpliciter*), at least (minimally true and) non-evidentially justified, if there were a clash between them, it would be epistemically decidable. It is thus unsurprising that most scholars, who have supported an epistemic reading of *On Certainty*, have also argued against a relativistic interpretation of it.[[5]](#footnote-5) Lastly, framework readings could, in principle, be hospitable to a relativistic interpretation of *On Certainty*. For, if hinges are similar to rules, and are not propositions which could be true (or are only minimally so), and are neither non-evidentially justified nor known, if people held incompatible ones, there would be no way to epistemically resolve the issue. Yet, most contemporary supporters of a framework reading have not coupled it with relativism.

While none of the aforementioned contemporary practitioners of hinge epistemology has endorsed relativism, with the exception of Kusch, epistemic relativism, if not itself a theme in *On Certainty*, is at least an open issue. A whole generation of earlier interpreters has indeed read *On Certainty*, and Wittgenstein’s later works more generally, as supporting it.[[6]](#footnote-6) Several passages could be read as hinting at it, even if, as the numerous divergent interpretations mentioned so far show, they are not conclusive.[[7]](#footnote-7) The difficulty has to do with exegetical issues, but also with the very characterization of relativism used to establish whether Wittgenstein’s remarks would fall within it.

While a precise characterization of relativism would require no less than a book,[[8]](#footnote-8) we can at least distinguish two forms of relativism: one based on the idea of faultless disagreement and one centered on the idea of an unbridgeable distance between subjects who would hold different and incompatible hinges. The former is certainly more fashionable today and is a “stronger” notion of relativism than the latter.[[9]](#footnote-9) Key to it is the idea that relativism arises when people hold beliefs with contradictory propositional contents, which, however, are considered to be equally valid both by them and by third parties to their dispute, such that none of them is considered to have made a mistake in forming them. Examples are usually drawn from taste discourse, with pairs of beliefs like “Sushi is tasty” and “Sushi is not tasty”. In such cases, people who disagree and hold contradictory propositions, may recognize that their opponent is equally entitled to their view, while persisting in the disagreement.

This kind of relativism does not seem to be readily applicable to *On Certainty*. First, according to framework readings, hinges are not at all like “Sushi is (or isn’t) tasty”. Their role is not descriptive but normative, in that they determine the conditions of evidential significance – what may be counted as evidence for what – and, in some cases, the conditions of semantic significance.[[10]](#footnote-10) Second, on framework and most epistemic readings, hinges are not the content of an attitude of belief, if that is supposed to entail having evidence in favor of the proposition believed. According to one version of the framework reading, hinges, unlike “Sushi is (isn’t) tasty”, are not even propositions (Moyal-Sharrock 2005); and, according to Pritchard (2016), they are not the content of any propositional attitude – let it be belief, acceptance, or trust. Thus, on several prominent interpretations of *On Certainty*, there would be no room for genuine disagreement about hinges, let alone a faultless one. Nor does one get a sense that Wittgenstein is concerned with the idea that opposite parties to a debate would recognize the legitimacy of conflicting views; indeed, they would call each other “heretic” and “fool” (OC 608-612). The issue of whether their observers would be more even-handed is moot. The problem hinges on how to read those passages where Wittgenstein does recoil from that idea (OC 108-111, 286). In particular, whether they should be taken at face value or, as often happens with the later Wittgenstein, as claims he is bringing up merely for dialectical purposes. Conversely, the exegetical crux concerns the interpretation of those passages in which he does seem to suggest even-handedness, without ever actually stating it (OC 92, 238, 336, 608-612). Yet, overall, there is little room for this first kind of relativism in *On Certainty*.

The second kind of relativism, which, following Bernard Williams (1974-1975), we may call “relativism of distance”, does not frame relativism as centering on the idea of (faultless) disagreement. Rather, the key notion is that of “alternatives”, to borrow Carol Rovane’s terminology (2013). Accordingly, there may be areas of discourse, such as morals, in which more than one system of values is legitimate. On certain views, like Williams’, these different systems of values happen to be factually insulated from one another, because of temporal factors. Rovane, in contrast, considers the different moral codes a contemporary woman from rural India and an American woman from NYC may have. She concedes that while having different values they may engage in a meaningful conversation, which would disclose to them their deep differences (2013, 38-58.) Yet, she also holds that their beliefs would stand in no logical relation whatsoever. Due to their deep differences regarding what is good or bad, they would end up assigning different meanings to the corresponding terms, such that their respective claims “ɸ-ing is good” and “ɸ-ing is not good” would neither be compatible nor incompatible, because “good” would not mean the same in these two sentences. This view is highly problematical, however, for at least the following two reasons. First, because it would depend on a holistic conception of meaning which is difficult to defend. Often times parties to a moral debate do agree on some central uses of words such as “good” and “bad”. Secondly, if by “good” they mean different things, their claims are not incompatible. For, if A says “The bank is near”, while B says it isn’t, but they mean two different things by “bank” (i.e. the bank of the river (bankr) as opposed to the financial institution (bankfi)), then their claims are compatible. Hence, once the relevant disambiguation has occurred, subjects should agree, *ceteris paribus*, that bankr is near, while bankfi is not. In particular, they should each endorse both beliefs together. Thus, on Rovane’s rendition of relativism of distance, it would be difficult to understand why opposite parties could not embrace together what *prima facie* seemed to be remote alternatives. In fact, she seems drawn to the notion of incommensurability Donald Davidson (1973) warned us against long ago. Yet, it is not clear that she has succeeded in making it any more palatable. Furthermore, there is little in *On Certainty*, which resonates with the idea that people might hold incompatible hinges and thus end up assigning different meanings to the terms used to express them. For, on the one hand, the examples Wittgenstein uses are such that people seem to understand each other perfectly well when they use “Moon”, “rain”, “Earth”, and so on. On the other hand, even when he suggests that doubting of a hinge, like, for instance, “Here is my hand” (in a context where one holds up one’s hand in good lighting conditions), or “this is a physical object” (said while pointing at one), would cast doubt on what one means by “hand” or “physical object”, he does not seem to be drawn to conceptual relativity. Rather, he is concerned that doing so would annihilate meaning altogether. In other writings, he actually recommends revising the interpretation of their words to re-establish accord.[[11]](#footnote-11) In *On Certainty*, in contrast, he insists on the role that that proposition plays for us and makes it clear that by using it we would be giving a piece of instruction with respect to our basic categories (OC 36), which one has to accept to produce intelligible sentences at all.

We are thus left with a relativism of distance similar to Bernard Williams’. When applied to knowledge and justification, and once embedded in a Wittgensteinian framework, it amounts to the claim that any epistemic judgement depends on a set of hinges, which may vary across time and space (factual relativism), or that could conceivably be (or have been) different (virtual relativism). Yet, any adjudication between different sets of hinges would always depend on embracing the same or different ones, and would thus never be objective – that is, independent of any hinges, or “unhinged”. Hence, one could never rationally go over to a different epistemic system, with its characteristic hinges, but could only convert to it.

Undoubtedly, some passages in *On Certainty* may be taken to instantiate this kind of relativism of distance (cf. OC 92, 238, 336, 608-612). Still, several other passages are much more guarded and seem to point in a different direction. The most telling one is OC 108:

“But is there then no objective truth? Isn't it true, or false, that someone has been on the moon?" If we are thinking within our system, then it is certain that no one has ever been on the moon. Not merely is nothing of the sort ever seriously reported to us by reasonable people, but our whole system of physics forbids us to believe it. For this demands answers to the questions "How did he overcome the force of gravity?" "How could he live without an atmosphere?" and a thousand others which could not be answered. But suppose that instead of all these answers we met the reply: "We don't know how one gets to the moon, but those who get there know at once that they are there; and even you can't explain everything." We should feel ourselves intellectually very distant from someone who said this.

According to Wittgenstein, we would need to be given evidence compatible with a set of beliefs about physics. Should that prove impossible, we would feel very distant from them. Yet, there is no parity claim being made here[[12]](#footnote-12) via the suggestion that, when we say that our system of physics is better than theirs – and Wittgenstein does say that (OC 286) –, we are only projecting our preference for it, while in fact the two systems are epistemically on a par.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Furthermore, relativism of distance would predict (or prescribe) a shrug of shoulders or recourse to coercive and completely a-rational means of conversion from one set of hinges to the other. Yet, Wittgenstein elaborates the consequences of this encounter differently. That is, he would ask perfectly rational questions. If answered, one would have good reasons to abandon one’s hinge. Key to this dynamics is the initial move of calling the hinge in question and, by so doing, demoting it from that role, to re-insert it into the category of empirical hypotheses and propositions, for or against which empirical evidence may be provided. Thus, at least in this case, we see how Wittgenstein is not recommending the kind of indifferent or squarely coercive attitude relativism of distance would command.[[14]](#footnote-14)

It is true that he holds that reasons and giving grounds come to an end (OC 110, 204), with the suggestion that, in such a predicament, one could not be moved by evidence to go over to a different system of beliefs with its characteristic hinges. Yet, even then, he doesn’t seem to lean towards a relativism of distance, which, to repeat, would predict either indifference or recourse to totally a-rational means of persuasion. Rather, he suggests that we might be moved to embrace this alternative epistemic system if it had certain explanatory virtues, like simplicity and the possibility of extending explanations across different domains (OC 92). Surely, all this would fall short of epistemic rationality, if that meant having evidence and reasons that would corroborate the likely truth of hinges. Yet, it would not be like coercion or indifference either. On a wider notion of rationality, this form of inference to the best explanation would count as a rational procedure after all. For these and further reasons I explored at length in Coliva 2010a, b, I still think that Wittgenstein was not an epistemic relativist, not even a relativist of distance.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Looking at contemporary versions of hinge epistemology, most hinge epistemologists today are not in favor of relativism. A key reason is that they focus on general and universal hinges like “There is an external world”, “Our sense organs are mostly reliable”, “We are not victims of lucid and sustained dreams”, “There are other minds”, “What has constantly happened in the past will keep repeating in the future”, or “We cannot be massively mistaken in our inquiries”. Thus, irrespective of how exactly they conceive of their nature and epistemic status, contemporary hinge epistemologists agree that there is no room for meaningful dissent about hinges, especially if we are interested in understanding the possibility of human knowledge. Given that aim, it is difficult to find people or communities that actually embrace hinges incompatible with the ones just mentioned. That is, none of these hinges seems to be subject to the kind of cultural variability we could find with respect to hinges like “Nobody has ever been on the Moon”, “The Earth is flat”, “I could make it rain”, or “The Earth has come to existence with my birth” (both held by a king of a “primitive” tribe), and the like.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Explanations of why hinges do not give rise to relativism vary. On an epistemic reading such as Wright’s (2004, 2014), we would have various kinds of rational entitlement to them, and we should further consider them as propositions to which we bear an attitude of trust. According to my own reading (Coliva 2015, 2017, 2019), they would be constitutive of epistemic rationality, and we should consider them genuine propositions, which are the object of an attitude of acceptance. According to Pritchard’s interpretation (2016), they would make the acquisition of knowledge possible in the first place, while we should consider them the content of visceral commitments. Nevertheless, the common theme running along these accounts is that hinges would be essential and universal components of human inquiry, for that inquiry would always depend on an amalgam of perceptual, inductive, testimonial and reasoning methods.

For similar reasons, if one were to extend hinge epistemology to the realm of morals and religion, the hinges one would have to recognize as constitutive of these domains would have to be general ones, which all parties to possible moral or religious disputes would embrace. Something like “unmotivated harm towards innocent creatures is wrong” or “God exists” would probably do, while “God is triune” or “good is maximized utility” would not. This would still leave room for disagreement in the application conditions of those hinges, for there may be a dispute about what counts as unmotivated harm or as an innocent creature, but that should not cast doubt on the legitimacy and universality of the relevant hinge. Furthermore, there could be meaningful disagreement about the beliefs made possible by the appropriate hinges in each of these domains (e.g. whether God is triune, or whether eating meat is morally permissible). Clearly, with “God exists”, we could have doubters and dissenters, but, in that case, they would refuse (or refuse to engage) in religious discourse and/or practices.[[17]](#footnote-17) Conversely, insofar as one were to engage in that kind of discourse or practice, and do so in more than a purely hypothetical or notional way, one would have to endorse that hinge.

Notice, however, that despite contemporary hinge epistemologists’ willingness to preserve the idea that hinges are truth-apt and propositional, their nature and role makes them such that, even if, *per impossibile*, we clashed about them, we would not have the normative trappings of disagreement. In particular, there would be nothing like offering evidence for or against them, at least in the following sense: that evidence could not rationally prove or disprove them because it would itself depend on taking them for granted. Thus, their willingness to recognize hinges’ propositionality and truth-aptness would not re-open the way to a kind of relativism based on disagreement intuitions.

In closing, let us consider the objection that, after all, even when we are dealing with the kind of general propositions contemporary hinge epistemologists are concerned with, it would still be possible to have different and incompatible ones.[[18]](#footnote-18) In an idealist or phenomenalist scenario, “there is an external world” would not be taken for granted. As remarked in Coliva (2015), however, phenomenalists could not make sense of the content of our perceptual experiences, which is as of objects with certain perceptual properties.[[19]](#footnote-19) Moreover, the view that in perception we just have a bundle of sense data, which need to be grouped together through the exercise of concepts to give rise to objects of perception, is definitely discredited.[[20]](#footnote-20) Indeed, nowadays it is the consensus view that we can perceive objects well before exercising concepts. Thus, this alternative, while conceivable, is not plausible as a reconstruction of human perception.

One may then wonder whether its intelligibility is all that matters in order to bring grist to the relativist mill. Notice, however, that one of the main motivations behind relativism is that, at least in some areas of discourse, it seems *prima facie* descriptively adequate. In the case of taste, it seems to capture the fact that when people disagree about the tastiness of a given food, none of them seems to have made a mistake, and they may agree to disagree. Moreover, when it comes to moral matters, we are all familiar with the sense of deep distance that encountering very different moral codes gives rise to. Thus, the appeal of relativism goes hand in hand with its *prima facie* capability to make sense of important aspects of human experience. If all we can claim for it is that it would be instantiated in some conceivable scenario, which, however, is at odds with human experience and what we know about it, then, while still a possibility, it would be supremely toothless. So, why bother?

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1. Williams rejects the attribution, but Williams 1991 sparked an interest in Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* within mainstream epistemology. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also Coliva & Moyal-Sharrock 2016 for essays devoted to this trend. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Moyal-Sharrock 2005 radicalizes the claim by denying that they are propositions *at all* and by maintaining that, as such, hinges are manifested only in action. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Morawetz 1978 and Pritchard 2001, 2011a maintain the possibility that hinges be known, if knowledge is conceived, externistically, as not requiring being able to offer rational corroboration. This interpretation finds little support in *On Certainty* and Pritchard has abandoned his earlier views. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A notable exception is Kusch 2016b, but it is not clear how he would square epistemicism about hinges with relativism. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Phillips 1977, Rorty 1979, Lukes 1982, Haller 1995 Hintikka & Hintikka 1986, Gullvåg 1988, Grayling 2001, Vasiliou 2004. Glock 2007 and Hacker 1996 attribute to Wittgenstein a view that comes close to conceptual relativism. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Other earlier anti-relativist interpretations are Bambrough 1991, Blackburn 2004, Luckhardt 1981, Marconi 1987, O’Grady 2004, Rhees 2003, Schulte 1988, Williams 1974-5, von Wright 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Baghramian and Coliva 2019, chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Kölbel 2002, McFarlane 2014, though he is critical of the idea of faultless disagreement. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See OC 369, cf. also 114, 126, 370, 456. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is indeed what he invites us to do in the celebrated passages about odd wood-sellers in Wittgenstein 1978, §150. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Contra* Kusch 2013 (cf. also 2016a). Kusch prefers to talk of “symmetry” rather than parity. Yet symmetry consists in the prohibition to rank epistemic systems or practices, and this comes close to a parity claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See also Williams 2007, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Bernard Williams 1974-1975 is skeptical that relativism of distance would be applicable in the scientific domain. (cf. also Williams 2007, Rovane 2013, Kusch 2016a, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Two further characteristic moves Wittgenstein makes and that sit badly with relativism are (i) “containment” and (ii) “translation revision”. (i) consists in allowing for the possibility that different systems of justification with their characteristic hinges might be applicable to *different* domains; and (ii) consists in revising translations (including homophonic ones), when persisting in the old ones would force us to conclude that the other party holds totally irrational beliefs (from our own point of view). (ii) is similar to Quine’s and Davidson’s recourse to the principle of charity as a guiding maxim of radical translation/interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Kusch 2016a allows that when it comes to these general hinges there is universal agreement, but he contends that there are many more hinges, which are subject to cultural variability. Yet, as we have seen in our discussion of Wittgensteinian hinges, it is not clear that a wider set of hinges would automatically translate into a more hospitable attitude towards epistemic relativism. Williams (1991, 2007) allows for a wide variety of hinges, endorses “hinge contextualism”, and argues that it is not a form of epistemic relativism. According to most contemporary hinge epistemologists, these differences would be more doxastic than about hinges properly so regarded. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The absence of epistemic evidence for God’s existence (either a posteriori or a priori), together with the fact that positing its existence would not be compatible with the best explanations we have of physical phenomena, inclines atheists to treat it as a hypothesis that has no evidence in its favor. Indeed, even the Roman Catholic Church, in *Fides et Ratio*, defends God’s existence on purely existentialist grounds. For it claims that it is only by assuming it that our lives would have a meaning. The considerations Catholicism marshals in favor of God’s existence are not epistemic in nature and yet can move people to embrace that hinge. This might count as a form of relativism of distance (xf. Kusch 2011), but I will have to defer its discussion to another occasion. Pritchard 2017 extends hinge epistemology to the religious domain. He thinks of hinges, including religious ones, as basic a-rational commitments. Being a-rational, Pritchard argues, there can be no evidence for or against them. Yet, it seems difficult to reconcile this reading with the kind of epistemic anti-relativism Pritchard (2011b) defends. In particular, that a theist and an atheist do have *other* hinges in common and can thus converse, seems irrelevant *vis-à-vis* their different attitudes with respect to the hinge “God exists”. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ashton 2019 presses this point against me. I have responded in Coliva 2019. Here we look at case (i) in which people would use the same methods and embrace different hinges. The other possibilities are (ii) different methods, same hinges; and (iii) different methods and different hinges. I discuss (i) in Coliva (2015, ch. 4, 2019), and (ii) in Coliva 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Cf. Burge 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For a more extended discussion, See Coliva 2015, 2016, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)