**Waismann on belief and knowledge**

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Waismann’s position with respect to belief and knowledge has been neglected for years, partly because it is contained in two incomplete, posthumously published papers – “Belief and knowledge” and “Two accounts of knowing” –, composed in English in the 1950’s and collected in his *Philosophical Papers* (1977); and partly because it is difficult to extract a clear view from the vast number of remarks he makes about the various and disparate uses we make of “belief”, “knowledge” and their cognates. This article intends to remedy the situation, to some extent, by focusing on these neglected papers and by comparing Waismann’s position with its closer kin, namely Wittgenstein’s. The affinity between them is both methodological and thematic, although ultimately there are definitely points of divergence too. The two papers are the topic of §§1-2, where I focus on belief and knowledge respectively. The comparison between Waismann and Wittgenstein is developed in §3, and some concluding remarks are put forward in §4.

1. **Belief**

“Belief and knowledge” contains a long and tantalizing discussion of various uses of the titular words, with special attention to “belief”. This is of course in keeping with Waismann’s idea, inherited from Wittgenstein, that words’ meanings and concepts have an open texture and cannot be defined through a set of necessary and sufficient conditions.

Waismann makes several observations about the linguistic meaning of “believing”. He notices that “believing” comes close to “thinking” and “supposing”, on the one hand, and to “having confidence” and “having faith”, on the other. In this latter sense, it is similar to “trusting”, “relying upon”, “giving credence (to a person or to her statement)”. These senses group themselves around the sense of “being of the opinion”, “holding true” and “accepting a statement as true”. Yet, he notices that even so, the meaning varies widely from “being convinced” to merely “having a certain (vague) impression”. Waismann also points out how the original meaning was the second, rather than the first, and how this original sense would often color uses of “believing” according to its later meaning, particularly in religious language.

Pursuing this survey of uses of “believing”, Waismann notices that believing is sometimes passive. This is the case when the acquisition of the belief and of the reasons in its favor happens without the subject’s paying too much attention to them. He exemplifies with the belief that the earth is round, which we have acquired in school without examining the reasons for it. Some other times, in contrast, believing is more active: a subject takes full responsibility for the formation of the belief and is able to produce several reasons in favor of it.

Waismann also notices that there are beliefs that are not fully under one’s conscious control, while others are, and that this distinction may sometimes be blurred. In this connection, it is not entirely clear what he has in mind: whether he thinks that the control would be voluntary and such as to produce belief at will, or whether he is merely rephrasing the point made previously that certain beliefs are formed by a subject by actively considering evidence for or against them, while others are absorbed in a more passive way, while also being oblivious to the reasons in their favor.

Waismann continues by noticing that while sometimes belief expresses full conviction, some other times it expresses hesitancy (this is a point that Wittgenstein made in his discussion of Moore’s paradox too, as we will see in §3). He thinks that this distinction accrues to one in meaning, rather than merely in tone or in the performative aspects of one’s assertion.

Waismann then points out that sometimes beliefs are fully verbalized, sometimes not and that one may or may not be able to provide reasons for them. Indeed, sometimes one would believe that *p* in spite of having evidence contrary to what one believes. In this connection, Waismann makes the sexist remark that this kind of belief is very common among women, who like to call it “intuition”. He then concludes that “everyone can see the marked difference between this type of believing and the more common one: for one thing, it is immune to reasoning (‘He doggedly believes that: you cannot talk him out of it’)” (Waismann 1977a, p. 170), while the common use of “believing” is intimately connected to the capability of giving reasons for what one believes.

He then moves on to notice that if believing is sometimes equivalent to having a feeling of conviction, it can be detached from its content and, indeed, it could have no content. Furthermore, there could be “half beliefs”. For instance, a scientist may work on the basis of certain assumptions, of which he could not tell “how far he believed them” (ivi, p. 171). Perhaps here Waismann is hitting on the difference between belief and credence, but the point isn’t developed further and it is difficult to extract a definite view.

Waismann then considers the commonly held view that both belief and knowledge are dispositional, rather than episodic or occurrent. If so, he claims, it would make little sense to ask “When did you start/stop believing/knowing that *p*?”. Yet, if that is the test for determining whether belief and knowledge are dispositional, then it is not clear that they pass it. For instance, I stopped believing in Santa Claus when I was five years old, on a bus, while going to school, by reflecting on the presents I had received and my parents’ role in providing them. Yet, my belief in Santa Claus, up to that moment was dispositional because, had I been asked whether I did in fact have it, I would have answered in the affirmative, even if that belief might not have been in the forefront of my mind prior to being asked. Similarly, an amnesiac could say “After the accident, I stopped knowing my name”, or conversely, “Prior to the accident I used to know my name”, and even “I had known my name since I was a child and yet stopped knowing it after the accident”. That, however, doesn’t show that the knowledge they had wasn’t dispositional. Indeed, one would assume that the amnesiac would have known their name, prior to the accident, even if they weren’t continuously thinking about it, precisely because they could have told their name, if asked. Thus, Waismann doesn’t seem to propose a tenable criterion for demarcating dispositional beliefs (and knowledge) from non-dispositional ones. Yet, a better criterion was readily available to him. For, as he notices when he considers twists of phrase such as “I knew it all the time”, which he takes to express a dim awareness that something was the case, knowledge that *p* would be dispositional but not in the sense of being something one could produce if asked. Thus, he was aware of the more traditional criterion for dispositional knowledge (in this case), while thinking that some other dispositional uses of “to know” wouldn’t conform to it.

To be fair, Waismann recognizes the possibility of cases involving stopping believing in something or someone. However, he takes them to show that “there is an almost continuous line running from the one pole, the purely dispositional, to the opposite one, the purely episodic” (ivi, p. 172). Still, the possibility of determining when a belief stopped or started does not show that the belief held after or up to that point is not dispositional. Thus, it is not clear that Waismann has managed to establish the continuity between dispositional and occurrent beliefs, after all.

Interestingly, Waismann distinguishes further between a dispositional belief, like the belief that the earth is round, we assent to when the occasion arises, and what he calls “the ‘real’ or ‘live’ belief” (ivi, p. 172) that arises “when we are actually persuaded of the fact, ‘feel sure’ of it” (ibid.).

He then considers whether belief always leads to action and notices that it does not. One example he gives is belief in non-resistance. Yet, he immediately recognizes that that belief does “mold the whole conduct of a person or of a people” (ibid.). Thus, he proposes a better example; namely, the belief that Goldbach’s theorem is true. Only mathematicians would then do something with it. This observation then leads Waismann to distinguish between dynamic and non-dynamic beliefs, which amounts to the distinction between beliefs that are employed by subjects in various forms of reasoning as opposed to those that lie in a subject’s mind while being inert.

Waismann then addresses the issue of whether this proliferation of “senses of the verb ‘believe’” (ibid.) amounts to a multiplicity of concepts, or just of “sub-meanings” (ibid.). He favors the former option because the fact that they are all grouped together under one name, and that there aren’t different names in the language for all these different senses, is not a good reason, in his opinion, to say that there is just one single concept.

This conclusion is not without problems, though. First, it is important to note that it somehow spoils the ideas of family resemblance and open texture. Key to these notions is considering one single concept – let it be game, or belief – as covering, and possibly extending to new cases, which do not share a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, but only similarities along different dimensions. Of course, sometimes the extension to new cases may result in a splitting of concepts, but this is not usually the case. Secondly, if we are faced with a plurality of concepts, then it is merely an accident, and a confusing one at that, that in English (or in other natural languages) there is only one term for them. For that may engender a lot of potential confusion and ambiguity, similar to the ones which would occur if two people quarreled over whether the bank is near, while talking about two different things: the bank of the river, and the financial institution, respectively. Furthermore, as Waismann himself noticed at the beginning of his paper, these various senses are united in being forms of “holding true”, or of “being of the opinion”. Thus, there seems to be something in common between them, their differences notwithstanding. It would thus seem more appropriate to hold that belief comes in different species: as a disposition *vs*. as a commitment (as some contemporary theorists would put it[[1]](#footnote-1)); and, in the latter case, that it depends on a subject’s judgment that *p*, based on reasons for or against it. Further distinctions would not multiply species of belief but would only differentiate among them, introducing differences *per accident*. For instance, only dispositional beliefs may (sometimes) be unconscious; and only non-dispositional ones may be *actively* utilized in reasoning. Yet, if unconscious reasoning was allowed for, also dispositional beliefs could figure in reasoning. Furthermore, only non-dispositional beliefs may be accompanied by distinctive feelings (although they need not be so accompanied), either of confidence, or of hesitancy. Still both species of belief may have a beginning and an end, of which one may or may not be fully aware. Thus, the central distinction would then be between beliefs as dispositions *vs.* as commitments, with the other features attaching to one, or the other, or both, in a non-constitutive manner. It would then be an issue to be further investigated whether belief-in would be a sub-species of belief-that or a different concept (and state) altogether.

Regarding the latter, Waismann considers “believing-in” as tantamount to “trusting”. Interestingly, however, he notices that that in the locution “I believe you” the two forms of believing – believing that what you have said is true and believing in you, in the sense of trusting you – mingle together. At any rate, “believing-in” is said to be the primary sense of the verb and to encapsulate its “non-intellectual” sense (ivi, p. 174). The distinction between believing-in and believing-that might parallel the distinction between knowing-who and knowing-that, that is the distinction between propositional knowledge and objectual knowledge. Yet, Waismann does not pursue the comparison.

This section of the paper closes with the remark that that believing-in comes close to the (non-religious) sense of having faith in something or someone and that it therefore expresses a person’s attitude towards someone or something. The briefly introduced topic of a person’s attitude is not developed further, though (or, as the editor notes, the discussion may have gone lost).

1. **Knowing**

Knowledge and “knowing” are the focus of the last section of “Belief and knowledge” and of the whole of “Two accounts of knowing”. We will consider these papers in turn.

* 1. **Knowing in “Belief and knowledge”**

In “Belief and knowledge”, Waismann starts out with what we might call the paradox of ignorance: the less one knows the more ignorant one is, and yet, the more one knows the more ignorant one still is, because one realizes how many things one ignores.

Clearly, this paradox is only apparent. Surely, as Waismann recognizes, it is a truism that the less one knows the more ignorant one is. Evidently, however, the more one knows the less ignorant one is, since there are more things that one knows than before. Still, more knowledge comes with the realization that there are so many things – many more than one would have thought before acquiring such knowledge – that one ignores. Thus, knowledge acquisition diminishes ignorance and makes one (more) aware of the amount of things one still ignores. More knowledge, therefore, not only makes one less ignorant but also makes one knowledgeable about one’s ignorance, in a way in which having less knowledge actually prevents one from knowing even that much.

Waismann then considers whether there is a difference in kind or merely in degree between belief and knowledge. He notice that, talking loosely, there isn’t much of a difference and he expands on various cases in which pragmatic considerations would make one choose “knowing” rather than “believing”. For instance, since “knowing” conveys conviction and assuredness, while “believing” conveys hesitancy, people of power – e.g. politicians, doctors, etc. – tend to use the former rather than the latter. Loose talk, however, is perfectly fine for Waismann, given the pragmatics of communication. Here, then, he seems to think that the distinction between “believing” and “knowing” would be merely performative and would not accrue to a difference in meaning or in kind between the corresponding psychological states or properties.

Still, he thinks that different uses display a difference in kind between the two. To establish the point, he mentions a number of linguistic constructions in which the two terms are not interchangeable. For instance, he claims that it is fine to say “I strongly believe”, while “I strongly know” is not acceptable. In contrast, it is proper to say “I know accurately/for certain/officially”, while it is improper to say “I believe accurately/for certain/officially”. Now, linguistic intuitions may diverge. For instance, it seems perfectly acceptable to talk of “accurate beliefs”, or to say that someone officially believes that *p*, thereby suggesting that they may in fact think otherwise, unofficially, as it were. Linguistic usage changes over time, and from one language to the other and linguistic intuitions may diverge among speakers. The issue is not so much at first order – that is, about which linguistic uses are correct and which aren’t. Rather, it is methodological. In particular, piling up merely linguistic observations in hopes to establish the difference in kind between knowing and believing seems methodologically moot.

Things do not get any better when Waismann considers some interrogative forms. He says that it is correct to ask “How do you know?” but not “How do you believe?”, while you may ask both “How can you know (or be sure)?” and “How can you believe?”, thereby suggesting that one finds the other person’s belief odd or improper. Again, it may well be the case that, linguistically speaking, one form is more correct and idiomatic than the other (in particular that the linguistically prevailing question would be “Why do you believe?”). The point, rather, seems to be that both for knowledge and belief, with their attendant claims to knowledge and belief, it is legitimate to ask which reasons one has in support of either. Thus, once again, the methodology employed by Waismann to establish the difference in kind between knowing and believing is controversial.

He then considers embedding and claims that it is fine to ask “I know that I know/believe that p”, but that it is not correct to say “I believe that I believe that *p*”. This observation is contentious. First, because one may have a different linguistic intuition (and Waismann himself has a quote from H. Spencer which contains the latter locution). Secondly, and more importantly, because if knowledge entails belief, from the fact that it is correct to say “I know that I believe that *p*”, it follows that one believes that one believes that *p*. Once more, it is the methodology employed by Waismann to be problematic, rather than his linguistic intuition(s) as such.

Furthermore, according to Waismann, asking someone if they are sure that they believe that *p* would lure them “into the wrong sort of response” (ivi, p. 177). Namely, one that requires introspection. And so would asking someone how they know that they believe that *p*. The echo of Wittgenstein’s idea that this kind of questions would border nonsense (at least in the normal run of cases) is very strong.[[2]](#footnote-2) Yet, there is nothing in the way of an elaboration of the reasons why it would be so. Finally, the paper closes with the observation that it is possible, according to Waismann, to have contradictory beliefs. Yet it is impossible to know whether he would have condoned the corresponding self-ascription, since the remainder of the discussion is lacking.

* 1. **Knowing in “Two accounts of knowing”**

In “Two accounts of knowing”, Waismann starts out by considering cases of knowing that may be considered also cases of believing. He makes two examples. One involves soldiers that little by little realize that they have been encircled by enemies. At first, they may have that impression, then they form the belief and then develop knowledge of it. The other example concerns the causes of strange cases of blindness in children that were taken to depend on the lack of oxygen, when in fact, little by little, it was discovered that it was actually exposure to too much oxygen that had caused them. In these and other examples, according to Waismann, knowing is a limiting case of belief. That is, belief glides into knowledge.

As we have just seen, in this case Waismann thinks that knowing and believing would be on a continuum with knowing being a limiting case of believing. To see Waismann’s point, I think it is useful to consider the analogy with the case of an ellipsis and a circle. Surely, they are called differently. Yet, geometrically speaking, they are the same kind of curve. Simply, in a circle the points occupied by the two foci of the ellipsis coincide. In that sense, then, a circle is a limiting case of ellipsis. In the case of belief and knowledge, knowledge would therefore be a limiting case of belief in the sense that it would just be, or fundamentally be, a belief with the attributes, not shared by all non-limiting cases of belief, of being true and justified (assuming something along the tripartite conception of knowledge is a viable account of the latter).

Then Waismann turns to cases in which knowing and believing come apart. Interestingly, he makes examples that are very close to Wittgenstein’s in *On Certainty*.[[3]](#footnote-3) Waismann, however, does not mention Wittgenstein and it is unclear whether the two actually exchanged ideas on what, after Wittgenstein, are called “hinges”. The examples considered by Waismann are “I know where I spent the summer of 1936” and a married man’s knowledge of the fact that he is in fact married.

In either case, challenges and doubts would be out of place for Waismann. The difference between belief and knowledge is thus manifested in the person’s whole behavior. Says Waismann:

In the one case I am stubborn, impervious to argument, unwilling to listen, obdurate; in the other I am not. This, I submit, is the real point that marks the difference between knowing and believing, or being ever so sure, and the rest – a point, however, that refuses to come out either in language or in law. In behaving as obstinately as I do in the example imagines – am I unreasonable, I wonder? Not a bit: I have a perfectly good right to brush aside such aspersions for what they are. (Waismann 1977b, p. 184).

Thus, in those cases in which knowledge differs from belief in kind, not just in degree, doubt is excluded. Interestingly, moreover, while Waismann acknowledges that in general everyone could be mistaken, when specific examples are considered, doubt and the possibility of being wrong are actually excluded. He claims:

All philosophers’ talk cannot in the least shake the fact that I know this [e.g. that I am married] as definitely as anything *can* be known. (ibid.)

Thus, philosophical skepticism is impotent with respect to a large number of everyday certainties, as we might call them, once again following Wittgenstein. Indeed, according to Waismann, everyday instances of indubitable knowledge are widespread among the community. He writes:

Every one of you knows hundreds of facts about which there is not the least doubt – facts such that he is married, what his name is, etc. What, a mistake? *What is certain* if these things are not? They are, in a very real sense, the *prototype* of all certainty. (ibid.)

Being so widespread, these certainties may be taken to constitute common sense, as we may add. Doubting them, according to Waismann, would be based on a mistaken piece of reasoning. Namely, one that starts from the correct premise that “a statement *of this sort*, a statement *in every respect like this one* is (generally speaking) exposed to doubt” (ibid.) and arrives at the conclusion that “*this* quite particular concrete statement, and of *these* quite particular concrete circumstances” (ibid.) is exposed to doubt. The problem in this reasoning would be similar to the one that would affect the following inference: “Women, in general, are … *La donna è mobile*: so this particular woman is …” (ibid.). Apart from the sexist nature of the example used by Waismann for comparative and explanatory purposes, the mistake is one of improper generalization. If many or most *Fs* are *Gs*, it does not follow that all *Fs* are *Gs* and therefore that even this particular *F* is *G*.

Finally, Waismann concludes this incomplete paper with an observation strikingly reminiscent of Wittgenstein, which is worth quoting in full:

In this sense, then, there are particular concrete statements which are true beyond doubt, ‘incorrigible’. (But they are very different from those mostly put forward as candidates, e.g. ‘Here is something red’. To be married has, under the proper circumstances, much more claim to being indubitable than ‘sense-datum statements’). And this, I submit, is an aspect of ‘knowing v. believing’ that is no less worthy of our attention than the difference in performatory function – if there is any. (ibid.)

Clearly, the idea that certainty actually extends beyond the mind, and in fact that what happens in the latter is less certain than what lies beyond it, is a strongly anti-Cartesian claim. A claim that Wittgenstein too makes, at least to some extent. As we will see, however, the similarity between Waismann and Wittgenstein is more apparent than real. For, according to Wittgenstein, certainty belongs to both claims about one’s mind and about hinges, and manifests itself in the fact that doubts and requests of reasons in favor of the relevant claims would be nonsense. Yet, for him, also claims to *knowledge* with respect to them would be nonsense. On the contrary, for Waismann they would make sense, apparently.

**3. Waismann and Wittgenstein. A comparison**

It is worth considering the relationship between Waismann’s and Wittgenstein’s views. As we saw, there is a strong similarity with respect to the idea that concepts typically are not definable through a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions; instead, they are identified through family resemblance, for Wittgenstein, and have an open texture, for Waismann, that allows us to extend them to new cases. Similarly, both Waismann and Wittgenstein think that meaning is determined by use and thus tend to consider what mainstream philosophy of language would take as differences in tone (to use Frege’s terminology), or in the pragmatic aspects of an expression, as accruing to differences in meaning. Such a view is not just a difference between their view of meaning and what is nowadays the dominant view in philosophy of language, but is also a difference they have with respect to their contemporaries, like G. E. Moore, in Wittgenstein’s case,[[4]](#footnote-4) and Austin in Waismann’s case.

Still, as we saw, Waismann seems more prone than Wittgenstein to multiply meanings and concepts, especially in his treatment of “believing”. As noted, this move is problematic and at odds with the idea that one and the same concept can be applied to new and rather different cases, thanks to a varying set of similarities the latter would share with already accepted instances of it. Furthermore, in the specific case of “believing” Waismann himself recognizes that different uses of that verb share a common core meaning, which is the one of “holding true” or of “being of the opinion”.

More local similarities between Waismann’s and Wittgenstein’s treatment of “believing” consist, for instance, in emphasizing the fact that some uses of “believing” can express hesitancy. This was a key element in Wittgenstein’s treatment of Moore’s paradox.[[5]](#footnote-5) For Wittgenstein thought the paradox would actually amount to a contradiction, since asserting or judging “I believe that *p*” is, in his view, tantamount to asserting or judging “p”, just in a tentative voice, so to speak. “I believe that *p*, but it isn’t the case that *p*” would therefore be equivalent to “p and not-p” (*ditto* for “I don’t believe that *p* but it is the case that *p*”, which would be equivalent to “not-p and p”).[[6]](#footnote-6) Thus, for better or for worse, Wittgenstein is explicit that in those cases the assertion “I believe that *p*” is equivalent to the assertion of “p” and puts this (problematic) insight to use in his treatment of Moore’s paradox. By contrast, Waismann is not explicit about that and his observation is not put to further use. If that may be a sign of prudence on Waismann’s part, it also makes it for a philosophically less interesting analysis.

Waismann’s discussion of “believing-in” (in the sense of trusting someone/something) is more detailed than Wittgenstein’s in the *Philosophical Investigations*. However, while Wittgenstein puts it to philosophical use, especially in *On Certainty*, to characterize the kind of attitude we bear to some “hinges”, Waismann confines himself to noticing this particular use of “believing”, without applying it to interestingly new cases, or without using it to tackle substantive philosophical issues. Thus, for Wittgenstein we believe-in, or trust, in many facts we have been taught as children (OC 159), like that we have a brain, that we had great-grandparents, etc. And our trust comes from believing the adult who passed these facts on to us (OC 160), let it be a parent or a teacher. When schooling is concerned, this kind of trust or belief-in would concern text-books too (OC 162, 265, 599). Both the relevant adult and text-books exert, for Wittgenstein, a kind of authority on us (OC 161), which is conducive to the acquisition of a world-picture that will determine the “hinges” we will then hold on to in the acquisition of evidence for or against ordinary empirical propositions. This kind of belief in the authority of parents, teachers and text-books does have the dual aspect Waismann interestingly points out (cf. §1) of being belief-in the person who tells us something and of believing the content of what they tell us. But it is only in the context of a richer philosophical discussion that this point becomes relevant. Here is Wittgenstein:

509. I really want to say that a language-game is only possible if one trusts something (I did not say "can trust something").

510. If I say "Of course I know that that's a towel" I am making an utterance. I have no thought of a verification. For me it is an immediate utterance. I don't think of past or future. (And of course it's the same for Moore, too.) It is just like directly taking hold of something, as I take hold of my towel without having doubts.

511. And yet this direct taking-hold corresponds to a sureness, not to a knowing. But don't I take hold of a thing's name like that, too?

Thus, Wittgenstein is contrasting this kind of believing-in, or trusting, with knowing, and is claiming that our attitude to hinges is of that kind, rather than a type of knowledge (cf. also OC 599, 600, 604, 668). By contrast, Waismann’s observation is not put to any further use and indeed, as we shall see, it is not used to demarcate certainty from ordinary knowledge.

With respect to “knowing”, it is worth keeping in mind that Wittgenstein’s idea, according to which, in relation to one’s psychological avowals, it would not make sense to claim knowledge, was well known and highly influential since the 1930’s. Thus, Waismann’s observation that asking someone how they know what they believe (or feel) would lure them into the wrong kind of response – that is, one in which would invite some kind of introspection – is not only similar but also surely indebted to Wittgenstein. As noted, however, Waismann does not expound on the reasons why “I know I believe that *p*”, or “I know I am in pain” would be nonsensical (in the normal run of cases). He seems content merely to notice the linguistic impropriety without elaborating on its potential philosophical significance, save for the parenthetical remark that condoning it would invite the thought that knowledge of one’s mental states is obtained through introspection. By contrast, for Wittgenstein, asking someone whether they are sure that they believe that *p*, or how they know that they believe that *p*, would border nonsense because one could just repeat one’s statement “Of course I am sure, for (or because) I believe that p”. By so doing, one wouldn’t be offering any independent reason for one’s initial claim “I believe that *p*”. Thus, for Wittgenstein, asking those very questions would betray one’s obliviousness to the fact that it is constitutive of the language game in which we express our beliefs (and further mental states) that people are recognized as authoritative with respect to them at least in the normal run of cases.[[7]](#footnote-7) Again, Wittgenstein’s elaboration may be challenged. Yet, it is philosophically rich. Waismann, in contrast, contents himself with some sketchy remarks on the linguistic impropriety of certain linguistic constructions and, even if he notices that they may invite introspection, he does not elaborate the point any further.

Wittgenstein’s discussion of “I know” in relation to psychological avowals paves the way to his observations regarding “I know” in relation to hinges in *On Certainty*. What emerges in either case is that “I know” has three main functions. First, it may express an epistemic relation between a subject and a proposition, such that a subject has a true belief and reasons she can produce in favor of that proposition. Secondly, it may be a grammatical remark that can be used to teach children, or to remind speakers and philosophers of the fact that in some cases doubt is excluded – e.g. with regard to one’s occurrent avowals of sensations or with respect to hinges. Thirdly, it may be used in philosophical contexts, in connection to avowals or hinges, to make the point, against skeptics, that we do have knowledge of our mental states or of hinges, and yet are actually incapable of providing (non-circular or stronger) reasons for the content of avowals or for hinges. In this third case, the use of “I know” is nonsensical, according to Wittgenstein.

Waismann’s position is only superficially similar to Wittgenstein’s. Surely, he is interested in “knowing” in relation to hinges and thinks that in that case it is categorially different from “believing”. Like Wittgenstein, he thinks that, in the case of hinges, doubt and mistakes are excluded and that no amount of philosophical skepticism could change that. However, he does not distinguish clearly between what we may call “the empirical”, “the grammatical” and “the philosophical” use of “I know”. In particular, he does not point out that in connection with hinges, the use of “I know” would be grammatical (at most) and could actually be more perspicuously replaced with “it stands fast form me and for many others that”, or with “here a doubt/mistake is logically impossible”, etc. (OC 21, 454). If anything, it expresses, for Wittgenstein, a kind of objective, grammatical certainty with respect to the proposition that is said to be known. Compare with the remark “I know I am in pain”, directed at someone who is annoyingly probing us when we are clearly suffering. The remark is there meant to silence the interlocutor, by reminding her that doubting and questioning are out of place, not because we are in a superior epistemic position, but because this is how the language game with psychological avowals works. That is, subjects are granted authority over their mental states, in the normal run of cases.

Similarly, Waismann, contrary to Wittgenstein, is silent on the very status of “hinges” and seems to think of them as ordinary empirical propositions, which, however, and for unexplained reasons, cannot be doubted, or with respect to which one cannot be mistaken, at least not in the normal run of cases. More specifically, for Wittgenstein there is a difference *in kind* between various statements that are only superficially similar insofar as they concern everyday issues (“I am married”, “I live in the US”, “I spent last summer in Italy”, etc.) and objects in our surroundings (“Here is my hand”, “Here is a tree”, etc.). That is, hinges, while having the form of empirical propositions (cf. OC 96, 308, 401-2), play an altogether different role and are actually more similar to rules (cf. OC 95) of evidential significance (cf. OC 1, 93, 185, 337, 346, 416, 419, 506), or, sometimes, to meaning-constitutive ones (cf. OC 114, 126, 369-70, 456, 522-3). In Waismann’s writings, this difference in kind is not clear. For he takes these statements to belong to the same general category as those which are dubitable, while having also some unspecified characteristics that set them apart from those, thus making doubt about them rationally ungrounded. In other words, while for Wittgenstein hinges are categorially different from empirical propositions (cf. OC 98, 309), for Waismann there doesn’t seem to be a difference in kind. Rather, they seem to lie on a continuum, with “hinges” being a limiting case of empirical propositions.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Yet, in both writers, there is a strong anti-Cartesian sentiment and a clear opposition to traditional epistemological foundationalism, which emerge in relation to the claim, they both make, that philosophical skepticism is impotent against ordinary certainties and that the latter are no less secure than propositions about sense data traditional foundationalists usually put at the basis of all knowledge (cf. OC 90). As we saw, moreover, they are equally against introspectionism, thus favoring an anti-Cartesian account of the epistemology of the mind.

**4. Conclusion**

Fine-grained linguistic distinctions are important to make us better aware of the complexity of belief, knowledge and, as we may add, certainty. In this respect, they are surely methodologically important, for philosophers tend to build their theories based on a limited stock of examples. Waismann is clearly an acute observer of these differences and has a talent not just for exposing them, but also for seeing when different uses overlap (e.g. his insight that in “I believe you”, believing-that and believing-in overlap). He also at times utilizes these observations to make interesting philosophical points, which could have momentous philosophical consequences. For instance, as we saw, he thinks of knowing, at least in some cases, as a limiting case of believing and not as a distinct kind of (mental) state. This claim could have dramatic implications against knowledge-first epistemologies, for example. He also came close to Wittgenstein’s groundbreaking views regarding “I know” when used in relation to hinges (and avowals). These philosophical points are not very developed, though, and, oftentimes, Waismann’s acute linguistic observations are not put at the service of any overarching philosophical analysis. Yet, no doubt, reading Waismann could teach contemporary epistemologists a lot, as it would give them a lot of food for thought, to be developed in philosophically rich and unorthodox ways.

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1. See Bilgrami 2006, Coliva 2016, Moran 2001 and Scanlon 1998. The distinction would thus be between those beliefs which are the result of a subject’s conscious judgement, for which she can provide reasons, and those which are more passively acquired, may be unconscious, and are held with no reason in their favor, perhaps in deference to the community from which one acquired them. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See §3 for a discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See §3 for a discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a discussion of, for instance, the difference between Wittgenstein’s conception of meaning and G. E. Moore’s with special reference to uses of “to know”, which is pertinent to the topic of these papers, see Coliva 2010, chapter 1 and pp. 208-210. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cf. Wittgenstein 1953, II, xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wittgenstein’s account of Moore’s paradox is altogether problematical. For a discussion, see Coliva 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a discussion, see Coliva 2016, chapter 6, and Coliva 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a more comprehensive analysis of Wittgenstein’s views on hinges, see Coliva 2010, chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)