

Survey of Modern Wittgensteinian Hinge Theories in Epistemology

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The following essay is a survey of uses of hinge propositions in epistemological theories. I shall begin by looking at the sceptical paradox which is the main antagonist in Epistemology. I will then move on to look at the origins of the idea of hinge propositions, which had their root in late Wittgenstein. Finally I shall look at the two most prominent modern theories utilizing hinges; those of Crispin Wright and Michael Williams. In addition, I shall cover some of the main problems concerning these theories, and some brief possible responses.

1.0 The Sceptical Paradox

There are many forms of the sceptical hypothesis (SH), but perhaps the most common, is the BIV argument:

- (1) It is possible that I might be a BIV being fed all my 'experiences' of the world.
- (2) It is impossible definitively to determine that I am not a BIV.
- (3) If I cannot definitively determine that I am not a BIV, then most, if not all, of my beliefs lack sufficient epistemic status.

Hence:

- (C) Most, if not all, of my beliefs lack sufficient epistemic status.

What we see as a consequence of the sceptical argument is the incompatibility of these three claims:

- (S1) We cannot know the refutations of SH
- (S2) If we are unable to know the refutations of SH, then it follows that we do not know 'everyday' propositions.
- (S3) 'Everyday' propositions are impossible to know

Following from (S2), knowledge is 'closed' under known entailment. Primarily known as the closure principle:

Closure for Knowledge: For all agents, Φ , Ψ , if an agent knows a proposition Φ , and knows that Φ entails a second proposition Ψ , then that agent also knows Ψ .

However, because closure permits (S2), it allows the sceptic to deny (S3) on the basis of (S1). The main force of this argument, which I wish to convey, is that due to the sceptic, we are unable to know everyday propositions.

1.1 Origin of Hinge Propositions

The idea of hinge propositions was originally published in Wittgenstein's final book, *On Certainty*, as a response to Moore's objection to scepticism:

- (1) I know that I have two hands.
- (2) If I know that I have two hands, then I know that there is an external world.

Hence:

(C) I know that there is an external world

Wittgenstein, drawing much from Hume, formed the idea of 'hinge propositions', in which there are particular propositions that one may believe but in addition, one may exempt from doubt. It is the belief in these particular propositions that enables one to begin one's scientific investigations. They are not supported by reasons. The propositions are indeed the framework on which such investigations begin. For, 'If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.' The sceptic, then, mistakes a hinge proposition for a normal (non-hinge) proposition, when she asks for reasons or justification. Taken in this light, hinge propositions can be considered to be propositions which one does not have direct grounds to believe, though they are believed, nevertheless because of their important role in scientific investigations or methodology. In Peter Strawson's words:

The correct way [of dealing with] with the professional skeptical doubt

is not to attempt to rebut it with argument, but to point out that it is idle, unreal, a pretence; and then the rebutting arguments will appear as equally idle; the reasons produced in those arguments to justify [our beliefs ...] are not, and do not become, our reasons for these beliefs; there is no such thing as the reasons for which we hold these beliefs. [...] We simply cannot help accepting them as defining the areas within which the questions come up of what beliefs we should rationally hold on such-and-such a matter.

The concept of a hinge proposition entails, for Moore, that he (perhaps like the sceptic) mistakes a hinge proposition for a proposition that is empirical. More explicitly: in claiming to know P, subject S implies that empirical grounds can be offered in support of P, and this justification is more certain than P. However, since there is no empirical evidence for Hinge Propositions, there can be no justification in resting on them.

Wittgenstein argues, then, for the revision of our understanding of the structure of reasons and empirical evidence, consequently implying that an assertion of a hinge proposition in the first-person is not conversationally apposite. This shows parallels to foundationalist epistemology, because the foundations of hinge epistemology are both self-justifying and not justified by anything else believed by a subject. Importantly, this also entails that doubts of hinge propositions are groundless, which means both the Moorean and the sceptic are misled by their claim to know and doubt, respectively, hinge propositions.

I have been dealing primarily with a minimalist interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks on hinge propositions, and, for the anti-sceptic to denounce the sceptic, a strong thesis of epistemological hinge propositions must be constructed for three reasons:

- 1) the minimal thesis tells us next to nothing about what the conditions for knowledge are, focusing instead on what the appropriate conditions are for claims to know (or claims to doubt).
- 2) the minimal interpretation of *On Certainty*, if understood as an anti-sceptical thesis, makes the mistake [...] of treating the sceptic as an embodied adversary, someone who is committed to making appropriate

claims about their epistemic position (and ours).

3) the minimal interpretation seems to favour a sceptical reading of our epistemic predicament over an anti-sceptical reading.

From here, I shall take these reasons into consideration and in section 2 move onto the more modern utilizations of hinge propositions.

2.0 Modern Hinge Theories

Under Richard Miller's interpretation of hinge propositions, 'epistemic rationality'—or one's rationality that allows for the most advantageous number of true beliefs—and hinge propositions can be used interchangeably. Thus, to believe in certain propositions may enable an individual to optimize their number of true beliefs even though the beliefs may not have reasons. Therefore, one can believe in a hinge proposition, which is groundless, but nevertheless, allows the individual optimal true beliefs. Miller's argument may be summarized as follows:

1) There are no grounds to support hinge propositions and we are compelled to believe them

2) Belief in hinge propositions is necessary for true beliefs. Hinge propositions are "epistemically indispensable resources".

3) Belief in hinge propositions are not detrimental in any form because belief in them involves no cognitive apprehension, and thus trust in them cannot lead away from a belief. No new evidence can count for or against a hinge proposition.

Therefore, it is epistemically rational to believe in hinge propositions, This theory faces a number of problems though, the most difficult of which is that the sceptic can simply propose an epistemic reality which does not entail belief in hinge propositions.

2.1 Wright's Theory

The subversion argument may be able to be saved, though, by Crispin Wright, whose anti-sceptical thesis originated from his arguments on 'McKinsey paradoxes', which involve the incompatibility of first-

person authority and semantic externalism . The logical structure of McKinsey paradoxes mirrors that of sceptical arguments, in that first person authority and externalism produce an implausible conclusion. The paradox moreover involves knowledge transfers across known entailments, which assume closure for knowledge. Wright argues that closure cannot be rejected, but rather rejects a similar principle of 'transmission'. Closure simply holds that knowledge transfers across known entailments, where transmission is stronger, insisting that 'what grounds the agent's knowledge of the antecedent proposition thereby grounds the agent's knowledge of the consequent proposition' . Closure does not demand the same kind of stress on the antecedent proposition. Wright summarizes the point as follows:

A valid argument is one thing. A valid argument with warranted premises is a second. But a cogent argument is yet a third: it is an argument, roughly, whereby someone could /should be moved to rational conviction of the truth of its conclusion—a case where it is possible to learn of the truth of a conclusion by getting warrant for the premises and then reasoning to it by the steps involved in the argument in question. Thus a valid argument with warranted premises cannot be cogent if the route to warrant for its premises goes—of necessity, or under the particular constraints of a given epistemic context—via a prior warrant for its conclusion. Such arguments, as we like to say, 'beg the question'. Say that a particular warrant, *w*, transmits across a valid argument just in case the argument is cogent when *w* is the warrant for its premises .

Thus, one can be warranted in believing the antecedent proposition, without being warranted in believing the consequent; moreover, the grounds for belief in the antecedent with a known entailment to the consequent does not entail that there is a warranted belief in the consequent. This ultimately results in Wright's proposal that there are hinge-like propositions that one is entitled to believe but for which one cannot suggest any evidence, which are specifically the anti-sceptical propositions. Closure is not the problem here, but transmission of warrant.

Why is it, however, that Wright is able to obtain this anti-sceptical conclusion rather than a sceptical conclusion that we cannot know

these hinge propositions, and if closure holds, then we know little, if anything? This regrettably is a difficult problem, though one can argue that even though hinge propositions have no grounds for our belief, we are warranted in believing them, as not believing in hinge propositions would result in most of our knowledge being called into question. Wright, though, is an epistemic internalist—'adequate reflectively accessible supporting grounds are essential to the possession of warrant or knowledge (at least as regards propositions which, like hinge propositions, are not "self-justifying" in the way that foundational propositions are taken to be on the classical internalist picture—i.e., by being self-evident, or incorrigible, and so forth)' .

We now see that unearned warrants, or those without supporting reasons, are the main problem for Wright, as according to internalists, those warrants are not genuine. Though Wright's response is that there are reflectively accessible grounds to support such hinge propositions, these reflective grounds are not epistemic, and thus, via internalism, they are not warrants at all. Wright's distinction between transmission and closure never contributes to the argument as according Wright's argument 'Knowledge is essentially to do with the possession of reflectively accessible reasons, and the structure of reasons is such that our believing is ultimately groundless'. Thus, Wright's theory is in danger of falling into a form of scepticism. In addition to these reservations about unearned warrants, I propose an additional reservation dealing with the structure of Wright's argument. Wright asserts that we must have a warrant for the conclusion of an argument, where transmission is a problem, but says that this warrant comes from somewhere else, specifically hinge propositions. Firstly, looking for warrant outside of a philosophical argument, I think, is in some form endorsing externalism, for if one cannot internally reflect to obtain warrant, then the warrant must come from an external source. Secondly, as hinge propositions have no reasons to support them, could they in fact be externalist elements? Hinge propositions are notions of the external world which are unknowable to us, but none the less are important in reasoning. Finally, if indeed, Wright is resting on elements that are externalist in nature, one might ask who declares that the person in question has a warrant for his belief. If hinges do not have reasons for us to rest our philosophical inquiry on, then surely someone must declare that an

individual is warranted in believing this hinge proposition. Wright's theory seems to rest on the subject, but would it also be important to ask whether an attributor would be in a better position?

Perhaps, what Wright needs is some justification for believing in hinge propositions beyond the mere assertion that, without them, our branching theories would fail to work properly. For example, in physics, there are many theories that have mathematically explained the workings of certain aspects of the universe (i.e. gravity) but which have been revised numerous times with the acquisition of new data. Thus, I believe it is not acceptable merely to stress that hinges are existent based on the problems we would encounter, were we not to believe in them. I will, though, set these thoughts aside, and move on to another epistemic theory utilizing hinge propositions.

2.2 William's Theory

Williams looks to rectify Wright's problems by turning to an externalist view of hinge propositions, which also draws from newer inferential contextualism; which differs from subject contextualism (put forward by Keith DeRose) where the standards of knowledge are set by the conversational contexts of the attributor's context, but rather the subject's context sets the epistemic standards. In each context, there will be epistemic standards that cannot be challenged, and the rest of the beliefs in the epistemic context will be tested relative to the hinge propositions held in that particular context. However, Williams claims that different beliefs in different contexts play the role of a hinge proposition, which reflects movement between the epistemic contexts.

Williams's thesis separates itself from other contextualist theories on these claims:

- 1) "Methodological Necessities" are held to be true in the want of any supporting grounds.
- 2) There is no 'hierarchy' of contexts.

Semantic contextualism generally states that sceptical hypotheses are more demanding than 'normal'. However, Williams asserts that all contexts are separate from one another. A sceptical context has the hinges

of an assumption that knowledge is context invariant, i.e.: knowledge of the world is unattainable under philosophical investigation. Both of these claims appear controversial to me, as certainly necessity is always controversial in post Quinian philosophy, but more troubling is Williams's lack of a hierarchy of contexts. Certainly there are contexts, such as a philosophical one or sceptical one, which are more pressing, and thus involve more justification or pedigree. Williams, though, retains closure: normal contexts allow subjects to know hinge propositions presupposed. However, the main problem faced by Williams here is one that plagued DeRose and Lewis as well, in which any mention of the hinge propositions changes the epistemic context to a philosophical one, in which different hinges would be found to hold. In the sceptical context, the Sceptical Hypothesis (SH) holds, though Williams claims that some anti-sceptic propositions are unattainable in sceptical contexts but he holds closure, allowing for these propositions to be known in normal contexts. Thus a subject can have normal knowledge and have knowledge of denials of SH.

Williams's thesis, though, has more problems: most notably perhaps is the fact that subjects know tacitly the context's hinges due to the externalist nature of the thesis. Moreover, Williams is moving to reject epistemological realism, but merely asserts that it is ambiguous. According to Williams, realism is embedded in sceptical contexts, and thus we should ignore the sceptical context all together. In the sceptical context there is not only a lack of justification, but also there is a case for beliefs to be false. However in the normal contexts, only the former holds. However, Williams, at times, wants to hold that there are true conclusions relative to a sceptical context.

Williams's problems with his theory, namely the problem of not being able to assert one's knowledge (which is the same problem plaguing other forms of contextualism), leads me to believe that the incorrect move, for Williams, was to endorse contextualism. However, Subject Sensitive Invariantism does not deal with the sceptical problem very well, I feel perhaps an SSI theory that introduces hinge propositions may prove more effective. In SSI, one's warrant for belief changes with context, instead of one's knowledge. Thus, perhaps we can have knowledge of many things, however warrant changes with the context, diminishing

the amount of things we know in more challenging contexts (perhaps representing the further one goes from the basic hinge propositions). In other words, the closer to basic hinges we are, the more warrant we have for believing a proposition, but the more or complex the belief, the more warrant needed, as it is further from the hinge.

This essay has merely been a survey of the recent work in epistemological discipline on hinge theories. All I have attempted to show is that the modern theories do in fact face many problems, but there, perhaps, is hope to challenge the sceptic by combining the hinge theories with other modern disciplines in epistemology, such as Subject Sensitive Invariantism, or other forms of Contextualism.

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Notes

1. Pritchard Pg 2

2. Strawson, P.F., *Skepticism and Naturalism*, The Woodbridge lectures, 1983, Columbia University Press, New York 1985

3. pg 12 Pritchard, Duncan *Investigating On Certainty: Essays on Wittgenstein's Last Work*, (eds.) D. Moyal-Sharrock & W. H. Brenner, (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2005)

4. Pg 12, Pritchard, Duncan *Investigating On Certainty: Essays on Wittgenstein's Last Work*, (eds.) D. Moyal-Sharrock & W. H. Brenner, (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2005)

5. McKinsey paradoxes argue that first-person authority and semantic externalism are incompatible because combining the two results in a conclusion that one can have a priori knowledge of empirical facts.

6. Pg 12, Pritchard, Duncan *Investigating On Certainty: Essays on Wittgenstein's Last Work*, (eds.) D. Moyal-Sharrock & W. H. Brenner, (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2005)

7. Pg 58, Wright, C. (2003a). 'Some Reflections on the Acquisition of

Warrant by Inference', *New Essays on Semantic Externalism and Self-Knowledge*, (ed.) S. Nuccetelli, 57-78, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

8. Pg 18, Pritchard, Duncan *Investigating On Certainty: Essays on Wittgenstein's Last Work*, (eds.) D. Moyal-Sharrock & W. H. Brenner, (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2005)

9. Pg 18, Pritchard, Duncan *Investigating On Certainty: Essays on Wittgenstein's Last Work*, (eds.) D. Moyal-Sharrock & W. H. Brenner, (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2005)