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The Dynamics of Belief Systems: A Wittgensteinian view

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ABSTRACT: In On Certainty, Wittgenstein argues both that certain propositions belong to our “frame of reference” and are “exempt from doubt,” and that this “river-bed of thoughts” can change. Exploring this seeming contradiction, I argue that such changes can take place as the result of rational argumentation, although of a highly indirect nature, and suggest that something like this can hold for argumentation between cultures.

KEYWORDS: belief change, culture, epistemology, objectivism, On Certainty, paradigm, relativism, scepticism, system of beliefs, Wittgenstein

1. INTRODUCTION

A typical argument for relativism goes something like this:

(1) Systems of beliefs (cultures, scientific paradigms, traditions, etc.) contain less fundamental and more fundamental parts. The most fundamental parts are those which one cannot question without indirectly questioning the entire system of beliefs. For instance, the assumption that the earth is the centre of the planetary system was a fundamental part of Ptolemaian astronomy, and the law of gravity of Newton’s physics.

(2) The most fundamental parts of a system of beliefs can only be critically assessed, if at all, on the basis of something even more fundamental — some evidence which is valid independently of any particular system of beliefs; a paradigm- and tradition-neutral “Archimedean point.”

(3) However, there exists no such “Archimedean point”; all evidence is dependent on some system of beliefs.

(4) Therefore, the most fundamental beliefs within a system of beliefs cannot be critically and rationally assessed in any way. Consequently, what determines whether those fundamental presuppositions are accepted or not, is not a process of rational argument, but rather social and psychological factors.

Thomas Kuhn’s highly influential The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962) is one source of such arguments (although Kuhn himself does not consider himself a relativist).

A typical “objectivist” response is to question premise (3) and try to show that, after all, some propositions, observational data, values, principles of logic or truths of mathematics are valid independently of all particular system of beliefs. Drawing on some themes in Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, I would like to instead question premise (2). More precisely, I will explore the idea that the most fundamental parts of a system of beliefs can be critically assessed on the basis of less fundamental parts. It seems to me that Wittgenstein’s argument for this somewhat paradoxical claim indicates a possible analysis of the structure of systems of beliefs which transcends the ordinary objectivism–relativism dichotomy and provides new perspectives on the possibility of discussion and dialogue between cultures, paradigms, and other traditions, and of the possibility of revising beliefs within one’s own tradition, or system of beliefs, as the result of such discussion.

2. WITTGENSTEIN’S ON CERTAINTY

Consider the following passage from On Certainty (henceforth referred to as ”OC”):

If a blind man were to ask me “Have you got two hands?” I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don’t know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn’t I test my eyes by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? What is to be tested by what? (Who decides what stands fast?) (OC, p. 125)

Normally, observational data function as fundamental parts of our system of beliefs, in the sense that other, inferential and theoretical beliefs are tested by their agreement with observational data. Sometimes, however, the logical order gets turned around, and presumed observational data are tested by their agreement with well-established theoretical assumptions. If we observe or think we observe something which contradict our most well established theories, we question the observational data rather than the theories: we assume that the observer made a mistake, that there was an error in the instruments, or that some disturbing factor interfered with the observation. In fact, something very similar is one of Thomas Kuhn’s argument for the non-existence of an “Archimedean point”; if scientists are confronted with observational evidence which contradicts their paradigm, they can—legitimately—question the evidence rather than the paradigm.

Wittgenstein’s remark about the hand and the eyes occurs in a discussion of George Edward Moore’s attempt to disprove scepticism about the external world by simply holding up his two hands, saying “Here is a hand,” and “Here is another,” and concluding that at least two external objects exist and that the existence of many others can be proved in the same way. (Moore 1939) Thus, Moore seems to provide an objectivist reply to scepticism, which could also be a reply to relativism: there are pieces of observational evidence the validity of which is independent on inferential and theoretical assumptions, and therefore independent of any particular system of beliefs. In his discussion of Moore’s anti-sceptical argument, Wittgenstein argues both that Moore’s argument is mistaken for fairly obvious reasons, and that, nevertheless, there is something fundamentally right about it.

Wittgenstein points out that Moore’s alleged proof presupposes what the sceptic questions, namely, that his eyes, or visual perception, are reliable under the circumstances. If the reliability of my eyes, nerves and visual centra in the brain is
presupposed, I may question the existence of my hands and use my eyes to ascertain that they are there. But I can also question the trustworthiness of the eyes and, presupposing the existence of the hands, use them to check the eyes; if I see the hand in the normal way, I infer that my eyes are all right, but if I see something extremely improbable, such as live snakes crawling out of holes in the hand where my fingers used to be, then I conclude that for some reason my apparatus of visual perception is not functioning properly. The presupposition of the first inquiry can thus be made the object of another critical inquiry, in which that which was questioned in the first inquiry is presupposed and treated as unproblematic. (As an exegetical point, it may be noted here that Wittgenstein is reluctant to talk of “presuppositions”—see for instance OC, p. 153.)

On Certainty contains reflections on knowledge, certainty, and doubt. Wittgenstein distinguishes a core of what (in OC, p. 96) he calls “hardened” propositions from propositions that are not hardened but “fluid.” The former, he claims, are “exempt from doubt” (OC, p. 88 and other remarks); one “cannot doubt” them. (OC, pp. 331, 394) Among these are “My name is L. W.,” “I have two hands” and “Water boils at 100°C.”

We know, with the same certainty with which we believe any mathematical proposition, how the letters A and B are pronounced, what the colour of human blood is called, that other human beings have blood and call it ‘blood’. (OC, p. 340)

One’s attitude towards such propositions can be expressed by one’s saying “‘Nothing in the world will convince me of the opposite!’ For me this fact is at the bottom of all knowledge. I shall give up other things but not this” (OC, p. 380).

The exemptness from doubt of hardened propositions shows itself, among other things, in the way evidence against them is treated.

If something happened (such as someone telling me something) calculated to make me doubtful of my own name, there would certainly also be something that made the grounds of these doubts themselves seem doubtful, and I could therefore decide to retain my old belief. (OC, p. 516)

Despite their indubitability, however, Wittgenstein does not think of the hardened propositions as constituting anything like an “Archimedean point.” On the contrary, he argues that they are “groundless” in a way that sets them off from the supposedly paradigm-neutral observational data or culturally neutral values, and he recognises that—paradoxically—mistakes about them are imaginable despite their indubitability.

Wittgenstein talks about “the groundlessness of our believing” (OC, p. 166) and states that “justification comes to an end.” (OC, p. 192. Cf. also OC pp. 212, 563, and other remarks) “The language-game,” he says, “is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there—like our life.” (OC, p. 559) In other words, there can be no justification for our system of common sense beliefs as a whole, no “proof of an external world.”

But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false. (OC, p. 94)

‘We could doubt every single one of these facts, but we could not doubt them all.’ Wouldn’t it be more correct to say: ‘we do not doubt them all’. Our not doubting them all is simply our manner of judging, and therefore of acting. (OC, p. 232)
In P. F. Strawson’s words, the propositions (or beliefs, or quasi-beliefs) belonging to the “frame of reference,” or “world-picture,” are “outside our critical and rational competence in the sense that they define, or help to define, the area in which that competence is exercised” (Strawson 1985, p. 19).

Despite this, Wittgenstein maintains that the possibility of mistakes about hardened propositions cannot be excluded.

Would it not be possible that people came into my room and all declared the opposite [of the proposition ‘I am now living in England’]?—even gave me ‘proofs’ of it, so that I suddenly stood there like a madman alone among people who were all normal, or a normal person alone among madmen? Might I not then suffer doubts about what at present seems at the furthest remove from doubt? (OC, p. 420)

If someone tells me his name is N. N., it is meaningful for me to ask him ‘Can you be mistaken?’ That is an allowable question in the language-game. And the answer to it, yes or no, makes sense. — Now of course this answer is not infallible either, i.e., there might be a time when it proved to be wrong […] (OC, p. 596)

In sum, Wittgenstein maintains a position which differs from both objectivism and relativism as ordinarily conceived. An objectivist might argue against relativism that certain propositions are impossible to be mistaken about. A relativist might argue against objectivism that systems of beliefs are groundless and that mistakes about them are possible (at least, that is, if the notion of a mistake can be made sense of without any particular system of beliefs being assumed). However, maintaining both that “hardened” propositions are indubitable, groundless, and fallible seems incompatible with both positions in this dispute. But perhaps the solution of the problem lies precisely in such a third position “beyond objectivism and relativism.” (Cf. Bernstein 1983) If so, Wittgenstein’s analysis may provide useful clues.

In what follows, I will I argue

(i) that the possibility of mistakes about hardened proposition, despite their indubitability, is a consequence of Wittgenstein’s explanation of how and why hardened propositions are exempt from doubt,
(ii) that another consequence of the same analysis is that systems of beliefs can change as the result of rational argumentation, although of a highly indirect nature, and that consequently
(iii) the groundlessness of hardened propositions does not exclude the possibility of rational argumentation about them between cultures.

If I am right, Wittgenstein’s analysis indicates a way to reconcile insights from relativist arguments like those of Kuhn with a rejection of relativism itself.

3. SYSTEMS OF BELIEFS, MISTAKE, AND CHANGE IN BELIEF

My first claim is thus that the possibility of mistakes about hardened propositions is—somewhat paradoxically—a consequence of Wittgenstein’s explanation of how and why such propositions are exempt from doubt. An important theme in On Certainty is that “[a]ll testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already
within a system” (OC, p. 105), and the absence of doubt with regard to hinge propositions has to do with their special role in this system of beliefs.

Experience can be said to teach us these propositions [that if someone’s arm or head is cut off, it will not grow again]. However, it does not teach us them in isolation: rather, it teaches us a host of interdependent propositions. If they were isolated I might perhaps doubt them […] (OC, p. 274)

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. (OC, p. 108)

Wittgenstein also remarks that if someone questioned my belief that my name is such—and—such, then “[…] I should straightaway make connexions with innumerable things which make it certain.” (OC, p. 594). For example, I would point to the facts that I have had that name my whole life and that everybody has called me by it (OC, p. 598).

One implication of this is that hardened propositions are fundamental to our system of beliefs in a way that other propositions are not; it is a characteristic of a hardened proposition that, if it were doubted, then the entire system of beliefs would be indirectly affected by the doubt.

But what could make me doubt whether this person here is N. N., whom I have known for years? Here a doubt would seem to drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos. That is to say: If I were contradicted on all sides and told that this person’s name was not what I had always known it was (and I use ‘know’ here intentionally), then in that case the foundation of all judging would be taken away from me. (OC, pp. 613-614)

Giving up a hardened proposition is thus in effect to give up our whole system of beliefs: “I cannot depart from this judgment without toppling all other judgments with it.” (OC, p. 419)

Why, then, are hardened propositions excluded from doubt? The reason is not that they are based on something more fundamental or certain—as we have seen, Wittgenstein maintains that they are groundless—but rather that they are supported by other propositions. These, in turn, are not beyond doubt

Bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed, and in that system some things stand unshakeably fast and some are more or less liable to shift. What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it. (OC, p. 144)

I do not explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast for me. I can discover them subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates. This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility. (OC, p. 152)

The second of my three claims above was that this analysis implies that hardened propositions, and thereby entire systems of beliefs, can change as the result of rational argumentation despite the fact that there is nothing more fundamental than the hardened propositions which can constitute evidence for or against them. If hardened propositions are excluded from doubt by the fact that they are “held fast” by other, “fluid” propositions, then if the fluid propositions on which a certain hardened proposition
depends (and which depend on it) are given up, then the latter can change its status and become fluid, open to questioning in the same way as other empirical propositions.

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid. The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river—bed of thoughts may shift. (OC, pp. 96-97)

Apparently without intending to do so, Wittgenstein provides a striking example, namely, the proposition “I have never been on the moon.” Writing around 1950, Wittgenstein considers this a matter beyond doubt and impossible to be mistaken about. His explanation of why this is so is in accordance with his analysis of the relation between the indubitable and the dubitable.

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. (OC, p. 108)

Today, developments in physics and technology have provided answers to these questions, and the proposition “No-one has been on the moon” is no longer indubitable. Thus, the indubitability of hardened propositions is relative to one’s present system of beliefs, so that if one revises that system (in ways that one cannot now predict), then what is now indubitable may become open to doubt. (Wittgenstein seems to be implying this when, reflecting on the possibility of doubts concerning one’s having two hands, he says that “So far I have no system at all within which this doubt might exist” (OC, p. 247, my emphasis)).

The last of my three claims above was that the groundlessness of hardened propositions does not exclude the possibility of rational argumentation about them between cultures. Indeed, it seems to me that Wittgenstein’s analysis suggests an explanation of how there can be critical inquiry—of a highly indirect kind—concerning the things that “stand fast” for us. If the special status of hardened propositions depends on other, fluid propositions within the system of beliefs, and if these can be subjected to doubt and investigation and be revised in the light of empirical evidence, then, it seems, one can argue rationally against a hardened proposition in an indirect way, namely, by presenting evidence against the fluid propositions that “hold it fast.” For example, it seems quite conceivable that someone should have presented plans for a space vessel to Wittgenstein which would have convinced him that the proposition “I have never been on the moon” was not indubitable after all, at least not for the reasons he mentions.

3. CONCLUSION

What all this suggests, I think, is an understanding of the logical structure of systems of beliefs similar to Thomas Kuhn’s theory of the development of scientific paradigms, only without the relativistic idea that paradigm shifts cannot be processes of rational argumentation. In periods of normal science, the core elements of the paradigm “stand fast,” so that any contradiction between paradigm-induced predictions and actual observations are ascribed to the influence of disturbing factors, malfunctions in measuring instruments, etc. However, in periods of scientific revolution, the paradigm
itself becomes questioned and alternatives are searched for. When a received paradigm is
given up, it is not a simple matter of disproving it; that would require a basis of
paradigm-neutral observations or theoretical principles. However, this does not mean that
there cannot be reasons for giving it up, so that what happens must similar to a religious
conversion, as Kuhn famously contends. (Kuhn 1970, chapter 12) It can, at least in
principle, be a process of slow undermining of the paradigm, in which the “fluid”
propositions which holds it in place as “hardened,” or beyond doubt, are questioned and
revised in essentially the same way as those which once excluded from doubt the
proposition “No-one has ever been on the moon.” For instance, the geocentric hypothesis
in astronomy would not be directly falsified by simple observation of planetary orbits;
instead, what takes place is a much more indirect process of critically questioning, one by
one, crucial presuppositions in the arguments for geocentrism, such as underlying
presuppositions about the laws of motion. And something very similar, I surmise, can
take place in the case of cultural, non-scientific traditions.

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