

## Is Wittgenstein a Foundationalist?

1. One of the oldest sceptical problems is that of the regress of justification. Suppose that knowledge is justified true belief: surely whatever justification we possess for a particular belief must itself involve knowledge. This simple observation seems to threaten us with a vicious infinite regress of grounds for grounds for grounds, and so on without end. The sceptical problem arises because it is not clear that the regress can be blocked in a satisfactory way. If at some point we refuse to think of new things to say, the sceptic will say we are just making an assumption, which is no basis for knowledge. If we find ourselves returning to something already said, he will say that we are reasoning in a circle, which is also no basis for knowledge. Call this unpalatable menu of options “Agrippa’s Trilemma.”

Traditional foundationalism tries to solve this problem by postulating epistemologically basic beliefs or terminating judgments. The defining feature of such beliefs or judgments is that they are justified without owing their justification to any inferential connections further beliefs. Traditionally, this is taken to imply that basic beliefs are intrinsically credible. As intrinsically credible, they constitute a stratum of basic knowledge on which all other knowledge depends.

It is not easy to make clear sense of the notion of intrinsic credibility. Furthermore, to the extent that we can make sense of it, we are bound to find that the class of basic beliefs is extremely restricted. We then face the problem of recovering a useful superstructure of knowledge, starting with this restricted basis. For example, we may need to show how knowledge of the external world can be based on experiential

knowledge (knowledge of how things appear). This constructive task is difficult to carry out, if it can be carried out at all.

For these reasons, traditional foundationalism finds few defenders today. Nevertheless, foundationalism responds to a genuine problem. More than that, it is far from clear that the usual alternatives to foundationalism are any more viable than foundationalism itself. Accordingly, Wittgenstein's sets of notes collected as "On Certainty" (Wittgenstein 1969) are of great interest. In these notes, Wittgenstein appears to advance the following views:

1. There are basic certainties, propositions or judgments that we do not and (in some way) cannot doubt but which are nevertheless not items of knowledge.
2. These basic certainties can be thought of "framework judgments" in the following sense: by lying "apart from the route traveled by inquiry", they constitute the framework within which practices of inquiring, justifying beliefs, arguing, asking for and giving reasons, making knowledge-claims, etc. take place.
3. In contrast to the basic propositions of traditional foundationalism, framework judgments are extremely heterogeneous. They include (among other things) elementary mathematical propositions ( $12 \times 12 = 144$ ) and simple recognitional judgments ("Here is one hand"); but also quite general claims about the world around us ("The Earth has existed for many years past", "Every human being has two parents").
4. Framework judgments are not certain because self-evident. Rather, their certainty accrues to them as a matter of meaning. Someone who doubted them could not learn the language-games in which they are embedded and thus could not express any judgments at all.

5. Knowledge-claims can be intelligibly entered only where questions of justification, evidence, doubt, etc. can arise. Since such questions cannot arise in connection with framework judgments, framework judgments are not (cannot intelligibly be supposed to be) known to be true. More generally, judgments that make justification possible are themselves outside the scope of justification. Our relation to framework judgments is thus wholly non-epistemic.

Here Wittgenstein seems to offer a way of fulfilling the foundationalist demand for terminating judgments while detaching the idea of such judgments from the idea of intrinsic credibility and thus from that of a restricted basis. This is an attractive prospect.

A natural way to think of the prospect Wittgenstein offers is this: Wittgenstein is not rejecting the idea of foundations for knowledge but pointing out that they are much more diverse and, in an important way, different in character than has traditionally been supposed. In other words, Wittgenstein is a foundationalist, albeit of a strikingly non-traditional sort. Avrum Stroll argues explicitly for this interpretation of Wittgenstein's views, though I think that echoes of such a reading can be found in other writers too (Stroll 1994, McGinn 1989, Wright 1985).

I want to suggest that it is a bad idea to think of Wittgenstein as any kind of foundationalist. If we associate Wittgenstein with foundationalism, we are almost certain to underestimate the radical character of his epistemological views. To be sure, the term "foundationalism" can be applied with some latitude. But there are limits.

Foundationalism is more than the view that there are certainties of some kind or other, so that scepticism goes wrong *somehow*. It is a theoretical position in epistemology involving distinctive commitments, methodological and theoretical.

Stroll accepts this point. He describes the structure envisaged by foundationalism by invoking the image of an inverted pyramid. Towards the pyramid's bottom point, we find a smaller class of basic judgments; the remainder of our beliefs and judgments belong to a superstructure resting on this basis (Stroll 1994, 143-4). We can abstract at least two theoretical commitments from this picture.

The first is to there being some theoretically specifiable way of partitioning our beliefs or judgments into basic and non-basic. That is, for an epistemological view to be worth counting as a version of foundationalism, it should provide some way, however vague, of delimiting the class of basic beliefs. The second commitment is to the independence of basic judgments. There would be no point insisting that the superstructure rests on the basis if, in order to entertain "basic" certainties, we had to know lots of other non-basic propositions to be true. If a philosopher rejects either of these commitments, there is little point in thinking of him as a foundationalist. Wittgenstein rejects both.

2. How is the class of basic beliefs or judgments to be specified? Traditionally, foundationalists have looked to the content of basic beliefs to effect this partition. Basic beliefs are beliefs involving basic propositions: for example, propositions about sense-data. Obviously, Wittgenstein has no sympathy with this approach: our diverse certainties are not associated with any particular kinds of content.

If we let the matter there here, however, we will miss the radical character of Wittgenstein's views. For Wittgenstein, certainties are not abstract propositions but judgments entered or presupposed in particular circumstances; and, as Wittgenstein insists repeatedly, these circumstances cannot be identified by any rule. For example:

25. One may be wrong even about “there being a hand here”. Only in particular circumstances it is impossible.—“Even in a calculation one can be wrong—only in certain circumstances one can’t.”

26. But can it be seen from a rule what circumstances logically exclude a mistake in the employment of rules of calculation?

What use is a rule to us here? Mightn’t we (in turn) go wrong in applying it?

(Wittgenstein 1969, 5.)

Here Wittgenstein echoes a central theme from his “Philosophical Investigations”: language-use cannot be guided by explicitly formulated rules, for such rules would themselves be open to misinterpretation or misuse. At bedrock level, the rules of our language-games must exist implicitly in practice. He continues:

27. If, however, one wanted to give something like a rule here, then it would contain the expression “in normal circumstances”. And we recognise normal circumstances but cannot precisely describe them. At most, we can describe a range of abnormal ones.

29. Practice in the use of the rule also shows what is a mistake in its employment.

(Wittgenstein 1969, 6.)

It is not just that in practice the boundary between a certainty and a hypothesis is vague—though this is also true—it is that, at a general theoretical level, it is unspecifiable in principle, however vaguely.

The foundationalist, with his picture of the inverted pyramid, thinks that there is a theoretically specifiable distinction between basic and non-basic judgments. For the epistemologist, basic and non-basic judgments belong to distinct fundamental theoretical kinds, as perhaps do acids and alkalis for a chemist. But the analogy is imperfect: we can

state a criterion for a substance's being an acid (being a proton-donor), which is exactly what we cannot do for a contextual certainty. This is the first reason for not thinking of Wittgenstein as a foundationalist. His views represent a rejection of the kind of theoretical understanding that foundationalists have aspired to. For Wittgenstein, knowledge and justification are not objects of theory to anything like the extent that has been traditionally supposed.

Now Stroll, who is a subtle and attentive reader of Wittgenstein's text, is aware of these tendencies. But he explains them by finding in "On Certainty" two kinds of foundationalism (Stroll 1994, 155f.). The first kind identifies the foundations of knowledge with a class of basic judgments. But this gives way to a second kind in which the foundation of knowledge is not judging at all but acting. For example:

204. Giving grounds,...justifying the evidence, comes to an end;--but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.

However, this passage should not be taken to treat acting as something distinct from judging, on which judging can then be seen to rest. Human practices are shot through with conceptual understanding. Actions are not movements but belong to the conceptual order. Speaking and acting are interwoven, neither resting on the other. But this is not the main point. The main point is that judging *is* acting. Judging, unguided by articulated rules, is a practice. The contrast in the passage just cited is not between acting and judging but between acting and seeing. Certainties are not certain because transparently true (to the eye of the mind) but because of the role they play in language-games. They are certain because they are treated as such. But this is not a matter of making

assumptions. They would not mean what they do, and the language-game in which they are embedded might not exist at all, if they were treated as open to doubt.

Someone might object that we can specify the class of basic certainties in a more abstract way. For example, they going wrong with respect to such a judgment cannot intelligibly be thought of as a mistake. Such abstract characterizations will not yield a checklist of criteria for identifying basic certainties. But it does illuminate in a general way their capacity to play distinctive role in practices of inquiry and reason-giving.

In the light of this objection, let us turn to the second question: the interdependence of basic and non-basic judgments. Wittgenstein's conception of meaning-as-use—which underwrites his account of basic certainties as judgments that play a meaning-constitutive role in our language games--implies a limited semantic holism. Practices must be mastered whole: basic certainties are held in place by things around them. Thus:

140. We do not learn the practice of making empirical judgments by learning rules: we are taught *judgments* and their connection with other judgments. A *totality* of judgments is made plausible to us.

141. When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition but a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.) (Wittgenstein 1969, 21.)

The italicisation of “believe” is significant. The infant who can reliably produce the vocable “Mama” when its mother appears does not yet believe that her mother is present. She does not believe *anything*. Isolated from their place in the larger game, such “basic” judgments lack the significance that will come to have. Initially, they lack semantic content altogether. Meaning (as use) depends on the connection of judgments with other

judgments. The metaphor of the pyramid elides this essential semantic inter-dependence of certainties and non-certainties. To be sure, there may be a limited epistemic asymmetry within particular language-games--limited because the plausibility of judgments, as well as their content, can derive from the way they are connected with other judgments, the connected judgments offering each other mutual support (142). But there is little point to thinking of the game as a whole as resting on anything.

Let us return to where we began. Taking the regress problem at face value, and agreeing that an infinite regress of reasons is unacceptable, we seem to be left with two choices: we can argue that there are terminating judgments that are not mere assumptions; or we can argue that there is a kind of mutual support that does not reduce to simple circularity. Thus the Agrippan trilemma appears to define the space of theoretical options, with the foundationalist choosing the first option and the coherence theorist the second.

In the picture Wittgenstein is suggesting, which he shares with Sellars (Sellars 1963, 164-70) both foundationalism and its traditional rival, the coherence theory, go badly wrong. Foundationalists think that, if there is to be non-inferential entitlement to particular propositions, there must be a freestanding stratum of basic knowledge on which all other knowledge rests. The semantic inter-dependence of basic and non-basic judgments entails that there is no such stratum. The coherence theory, recognising semantic inter-dependence, concludes that no epistemic entitlements are genuinely non-inferential. But semantic inter-dependence is compatible with justificational asymmetries, with the result that both the foundationalist and the coherentist pictures of

knowledge must be set aside. Wittgenstein's aim is thus not to answer the trilemma by choosing one of the options it presents but to reject the range of choices on offer.

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#### References

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