

# On Wittgensteinian Hinge Epistemology: Coliva's Framework Reading

**Ricardo N. Henriques**

UNIVERSIDADE NOVA DE LISBOA

## RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar os principais argumentos da Epistemologia Dobradiça de Annalisa Coliva. Existem diversas leituras da metáfora de Wittgenstein sobre 'dobradiças'. Neste artigo, exploro uma dessas leituras (a leitura normativa, ou *framework*, desenvolvida por Coliva) e apresento os seus argumentos principais. Começarei por contextualizar o debate sobre epistemologia dobradiça na obra de Wittgenstein *Da Certeza*. A partir dessa contextualização, irei apresentar os argumentos de Coliva e a sua defesa da leitura normativa. Este artigo foi elaborado com vista a ser integrado como introdução de um debate mais alargado que estou a desenvolver na minha tese de doutoramento. Tentarei argumentar em favor da leitura de Coliva e de um entendimento das reflexões de Wittgenstein sobre dobradiças como reflexões em torno do seu papel normativo das regras.

**Palavras-chave:** Wittgenstein; Coliva; epistemologia; dobradiças; normatividade.

## ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to present the main arguments of Annalisa Coliva's hinge epistemology. There are several readings of Wittgenstein's metaphor of 'hinges'. In this paper I will explore one of them (the framework reading developed by Annalisa Coliva) and present its main arguments. I will start by contextualizing the debate of hinge epistemology within Wittgenstein's reflections on *On Certainty*. From there I will present Coliva's arguments and her defence of the framework reading. This paper is supposed to be an introductory part of a wider discussion I will develop in my PhD thesis. I will try to argue that one should follow Coliva's reading and understand Wittgenstein's remarks about hinges as remarks about their role as normative rules.

**Keywords:** Wittgenstein; Coliva; epistemology; hinges; normativity.

## Certainty, Doubt and Hinges

ON WITTGENSTEIN'S *On Certainty*<sup>1</sup> we are presented with a dialogical criticism of G. E. Moore's response to scepticism. One of the main criticisms Wittgenstein addresses to Moore is his misunderstanding of the different roles propositions play in the game of doubt. For Wittgenstein, a doubt can only be meaningful as long as it has, in its structure, propositions that are taken for certain, being thus exempt from doubt in that context. This certainty is not universally fixed, being dependent on the language game — a proposition may be taken for certain in one context but called into question in another. Certainty and doubt walk alongside each other, so to speak: there cannot be a doubt that calls everything into question, since for its own meaning it needs some propositions fixed. For Wittgenstein, Moore's answer is just a misunderstanding of the role that the proposition 'I have two hands' has: Moore is trying to state a proposition that is being taken for certain. This displacement is not free from consequences: some propositions with the status of certainty cannot be stated as empirical propositions, they are part of the very bedrock assumptions of our form of life. The mistake lies in trying to assume that they can be brought to a language game where they became empirical, and thus provable. The mistake is present in addressing the sceptical challenge of trying to prove these propositions. For Wittgenstein, these propositions have no meaning outside their role of certain assumptions, being unprovable or senseless if one attempts to justify them like an empirical hypothesis. Wittgenstein's dissolution of the sceptical problem relies, on the one hand, on a practical dissolution (by showing how one's universal sceptical doubt is at odds with the way one acts), and, on the other hand, on a logical dissolution (by showing the logical exclusion of doubt from foundational certainties).

These propositions that are fixed, and cannot be taken as empirical, provable, propositions, are the hinge propositions. They have the characteristics of a hinge: a fixed mechanism that allows movement

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<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein 2008.

precisely because it's fixed. Wittgenstein gives examples of these propositions: 'I have parents', 'I have never been on the moon', and Moore's own 'I have two hands' are some of them. These are part of the bedrock assumptions that govern our language games. They have a practical foundation, sustained by our shared praxis and form of life. It is not a 'seeing' but an 'acting' that grounds these propositions. These hinges are anchored to our human form of inhabiting the world, forming a deep and complex web of connections between propositions, actions, and assumptions.

It is already clear that hinges have a structural role in our practices of language. However, it is not as well clear that hinges have a normative feature. But if we look attentive to Wittgenstein's remarks on rule following, we see that there is a clear similarity between his practical approaches regarding axioms and regarding the role that hinges play — namely their practical foundation (Wittgenstein 1975:202–203). I take it that this practical feature of rules and hinges is not something to be taken only in a descriptive sense. What I believe Wittgenstein is trying to draw our attention to is that our knowledge of the world, and also its structure and its justification system, is something grounded in the very way we, humans, inhabit the very same world. He is trying to make us see that ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' is true insofar as one is inside the paradigm that defines the system in which ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' is taken to be true. This clearly has similarities with Wittgenstein's idea that our system of enquiry is fundamentally based on assumptions that are intricate with our form of life. These assumptions impel us to certain directions of thought, allowing some doubts but denying the meaningfulness of others. This practical orientation of our enquiries can be seen, I believe, as more than descriptive, reaching a normative status, since it has a directional role in the very justifications and questions one can give and ask.

Hinges are also what allows for the distinction of contexts and of language games. Not only in their formal role (determining the context in which the meaning of a word or sentence should be taken) but also in their practical role of governing the appropriate description of an action. The uncovering of hinge propositions is not a mere theoretical exercise, but a practical investigation, bringing to the surface the

rules that govern the different practices. This structural role of hinges can be understood as normative since it determines in advance the meaning of propositions, and the actions to be carried aligned with the paradigm. Once again, the practical features of hinges are what makes them possible to be seen as normative.

## Hinge Epistemology

Hinge epistemology is a theory about justification (and knowledge) which gives centre-stage to Wittgenstein's notion of hinges. Here I will present the hinge epistemology developed by Annalisa Coliva (2016). According to Coliva, to fully understand Wittgenstein's ideas, it is necessary to take into account the context of his writings and their historical period. However, one cannot be stuck into the historical contextualization and lose the philosophical fruitfulness. This tension can be resolved by being explicit about the claims one wants to put forward: if it is an exegetical work, evidence and contextualization is needed; if it is a development of an idea, then it should be promptly stated. In trying to go beyond the exegesis and state clearly what hinges are, Coliva<sup>2</sup> makes a list of the features that can be used to identify such kind of propositions:

1. Neither true nor false.
2. Neither justified nor unjustified.
3. Neither reasonable nor unreasonable.
4. Therefore, they can neither be known or unknown.
5. They cannot sensibly be called into doubt.
6. Thus, finally, for these reasons, they aren't empirical propositions but rules.

For Coliva, these features of hinges are accounted differently in each of the four readings of *On Certainty*<sup>3</sup>:

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2 Ibid, p. 9

3 Ibid, p. 11

1. Therapeutic Interpretation (James Conant) — Skepticism is deemed utterly and radically nonsensical. Skeptical doubts are expressed outside any context of use: they are meaningless.
2. Framework Reading (Coliva and Danièle Moyal-Sharrock) — Hinges are rules which can't be subject to epistemic appraisal. Hence skepticism raises a doubt where doubt cannot rationally be sustained. Therefore, skeptical doubts are nonsensical not because they are meaningless but because they are raised where it makes no sense to raise them.
3. The Naturalist Reading (Peter Strawson) — Skeptical doubts are neither meaningless or irrational, just unnatural.
4. The Epistemic Reading (Crispin Wright and Michael Williams) — Hinges are not rules but propositions that, in context, cannot be evidentially justified.

In the framework reading of Coliva (2016) and Moyal-Sharrock (2016) hinges are certain because of their normative role that exempts them from doubt. If we maintain that hinges, while being rules, are still propositions — on a fairly relaxed notion of proposition — we could claim that, as such, they can be object of a propositional attitude of certainty which parallels the kind of attitude we bear to our most well-entrenched, yet fully explicit rules. We do accept them and hold them fast, we behave in accord with them, and pass them on to our children through education and training.

Coliva maintains one specific version of the framework reading (2016:13). First, hinges are not just meaning constitutive rules but rules of evidential significance as well. They are propositions that play a rule-like role and are therefore exempt from semantic and epistemic appraisal. They allow us to acquire and assess evidence in favour or against ordinary empirical propositions. That evidence is dependent on holding them fast, hence it cannot give them epistemic support. Therefore, hinges can't be justified. Some hinges are neither true nor false, while others are paradigmatically true and not possibly false.

Secondly, Coliva (2016:14) does not follow the ineffabilist claim that since hinges are not bipolar, they are not propositions, and therefore they can never be said in proper language-games. For Coliva,

this is not a correct reading of Wittgenstein. In her view, Wittgenstein broadens the notion of proposition. Hinges convey a certain picture of reality and properly give rise to a *Weltbild* — that is, to a world picture. Yet, they have a normative function, rather than a descriptive one. For they guide us in selecting what can be evidence for what. Thus, hinges guide us in the generation of justification for various kinds of ordinary empirical propositions.

Thirdly, Coliva (2016:14) holds that we do express hinges on various occasions and in doing so we do voice them as certainties in perfectly legitimate language-games. Like in the case of children when being taught. There can be a more preparatory or clarificatory language-game, but these are genuine, nonetheless.

Fourthly, Coliva (2016:14–15) thinks that the anti-skeptical strategy presented in *On Certainty* actually depends on an entailment between the irrationality of raising doubts with respect to rules, which, as such, cannot be subject to epistemic evaluation, and the semantic meaningless of those doubts. Skeptical doubts are ultimately nonsensical, devoid of meaning. However, we can also find the view that they are nonsensical because they are ill posed. They appear to make sense to us because we project meaning onto them from the circumstances in which doubts are raised meaningfully. Rules are what we can recognize post hoc as held fixed by our actual linguistic and epistemic practices.

Fifthly, Coliva (2016:15) holds that the title *On Certainty* is totally appropriate for two different reasons. First because this text deals with hinges, that is to say, propositions whose status of certainties depends on their role of basic rules of our conceptual scheme and epistemic practices. Their certainty is of a grammatical (even logical) nature, not of a psychological or animal one. The reason why we can't doubt them is that there can't actually be reasons to do so. For reasons for doubting would depend on accepting those very hinges, and a real doubt about them would deprive us of the possibility of actually making sense as we raise that very doubt. Second, there is also a sense in which our attitude with respect to them is rightly characterized as certainty, as opposed to knowledge. For we do implicitly accept them as rules: we hold them fast and behave in accord with them.

Finally, the framework reading is not committed with reading Wittgenstein as either a foundationalist or a relativist (2016:15–16). Hinges are such that we bear no epistemic relation to them and, without that much, it seems that there really is no room for foundationalism. Rules are entrenched in a practice that could have been different from what in fact is. It is metaphysically possible that our form of life had developed differently, thereby giving rise to different linguistic and epistemic practices. Wittgenstein was not an epistemic relativist, he simply pointed to the ungroundedness of our *Weltbild*.

## Conclusion

Hinges belong to logic: to the norms that regulate our investigations (Coliva 2016:17). It is part of it that certain propositions are exempt from doubt. Saying that it belongs to the logic of our investigations that certain propositions are not doubted simply means that it is a constitutive element of our empirical inquiries that, whenever evidence is collected for or against any empirical proposition, certain propositions have to be kept fixed. Hence, it is constitutive of empirical inquiries, and not just a fact about our nature or pertaining to pragmatics, that certain propositions are held fast. However, this does not mean that hinges are reasonable. They simply are a requirement to collect evidence for ordinary empirical propositions. It is a requirement of reason, not a product of reason. Hinges must stay put, and thus behave like rules, for us to be in a position to acquire evidence and therefore engage in the kind of practice that is constitutive of epistemic rationality itself. They don't express any epistemic relation between a subject and a proposition. Rather, they express the kind of certainty that says, 'here a doubt is impossible'.

The key idea is that justification and knowledge don't take place in a vacuum. They always depend on there being certain hinges, which, as such, can't themselves be justified or known. They are constitutive of the practice that in turn determines what being epistemically rational amounts to. Some of them can change in time, others we can't revise. That is not to say that they are metaphysically necessary

but only that they play such a fundamental role in our *Weltbild* that, from within it, we can't find any reason to doubt them.

To conclude, in Coliva's framework reading, the animal element is preserved in the sense that it is acknowledged that hinges are what they are in virtue of a human practice that has developed contingently, and not has a result of ratiocination (Coliva 2016:21). However, it is the normative element, which on her reading of Wittgenstein is the core aspect of *On Certainty*, that is given centre-stage insofar as certain unwarrantable propositions are allowed to play a constitutive role with respect to evidential justification and knowledge and, therefore, with respect to epistemic rationality itself.

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