

# Wittgenstein on the Structure of Justification: Breaking New Epistemological Ground

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I shall investigate Wittgenstein's view of the structure of justification comparing it to Foundationalism, Holistic Coherentism, and Contextualism. Remarks in *On Certainty* (1969) appear to commit Wittgenstein to each of these theories, and scholars have attributed each theory to him. I argue that Wittgenstein's remarks fit neither these theories, nor a sort of combination theory. Wittgenstein breaks new epistemological ground.

The issue of the structure of justification arises from the regress problem. An inferential belief gets its justification from other beliefs, producing a belief chain. This chain, or regress, either continues indefinitely or ends. If it continues indefinitely, then it either goes on forever (Infinetism) or circles back upon itself (Linear Coherentism)—two problematic positions I will not discuss. If the regress ends, it ends in beliefs that are directly or non-inferentially justified. The regress problem thus delineates three possible structures, and four possible theories, of justification: an infinite chain of beliefs (Infinetism), a circular chain of beliefs (Linear Coherentism), and a finite chain of beliefs (Foundationalism and Contextualism).

## 1. Foundationalism

For Foundationalists, justification is asymmetrical: basic beliefs justify inferential beliefs, but not vice versa. Foundationalists argue that only a finite chain that ends in a basic belief can justify an inferential belief. Every alternative leads to skepticism.

Wittgenstein has an asymmetrical theory of justification. Like contemporary Foundationalists and Contextualists, Wittgenstein distinguishes between two different types of beliefs, making one the foundation for the other. Avrum Stroll (2002 & 1994) and Roger Shiner (1980) argue that Wittgenstein is a kind of Foundationalist. David Annis (1978, foot note 3), Paul Moser (1985, chapter 2), and Louis Pojman (1999, p. 188) consider Wittgenstein a Contextualist.

Like Foundationalists and Contextualists, Wittgenstein believes the regress of justification ends in basic beliefs. The activities of science require that certain things go unquestioned or "stand fast." As Stroll points out (1994, p. 142), Wittgenstein uses explicitly foundational language in more than sixty passages (1969, 87-88, 94, 103, 110, 112, 162, 166, 167, 204-205, 211, 225, 234, 245-46, 248, 253, 295-96, 307-08, 337, 341, 343, 347-48, 353, 358-59, 370-71, 380, 403, 411, 414-45, 449, 474, 475, 477, 492, 509, 512, 514, 519, 558-60, 614, 670), all of which contain variations of the German words "Grund" ("ground", "base", "bottom", "foundation"), "Fundament" ("foundation", "basis"), or "Boden" ("ground", "soil"). These include:

"Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end" (OC 204).

"One cannot make experiments if there are not some things that one does not doubt... If I make an experiment I do not doubt the existence of the apparatus before my eyes. I have plenty of doubts, but not that" (OC 337).

"The *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted" (OC 342).

"If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put" (OC 343).

Foundationalists see basic beliefs as self-sufficient: each stands on its own without support from others. These basic beliefs support a large and complex structure of inferential beliefs much as the foundation of a building supports the superstructure.

Both critics (Stroll, 1994) and advocates of Foundationalism (Alston, 1976) argue that Foundationalism's primary problem is that there are too few basic beliefs to support the large, complex superstructure. Instead of a pyramid, Foundationalism actually has the structure of an inverted pyramid (Stroll 1994, p. 144) liable to topple over at any moment. Wittgenstein avoids this problem because his "basic beliefs" are numerous and interconnected, forming a strong, ample groundwork for our inferential beliefs.

## 2. Holistic Coherentism

Holistic Coherentists, such as Quine (1953), BonJour (1985), and Nelson (1993), reject both the distinction between basic and inferential beliefs and the linear notion of justification presupposed by the regress problem. They maintain that all beliefs are epistemically equal and derive their justification from their place in our belief system. They also argue that while justification may appear linear in a particular case, this appearance is misleading. It overlooks the essential role of the entire belief system in justification.

Wittgenstein often refers to our system of beliefs.

"All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place within a system. And this system is ... not so much the point of departure as the element in which arguments have their life" (OC 105).

"When we first learn to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions, (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)" (OC 141)

"It is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another mutual support. (OC 142)

"The child learns to believe a host of things. I.e. it learns to act according to these beliefs. Bit by bit there forms a system of what is believed..." (OC 144)

"Experience can be said to teach us these propositions. However, it does not teach us them in isolation; rather, it teaches us a host of interdependent propositions." (OC 274)

Were it not for the more than sixty foundational passages in *On Certainty*, scholars might take these holistic passages as evidence that Wittgenstein is a Holistic Coher-

entist. When considered in combination with the foundational passages, these holistic passages suggest that Wittgenstein has a sort of mixed theory. The problem of interpreting this combination of foundational and holistic passages has been discussed by a number of scholars, including Michael Williams (2001, p. 383) and Roger Shiner (1980).

What is not clear from such passages is the extent and nature of the system. For while the Holistic Coherentists maintain that all of our beliefs form a giant network, Wittgenstein maintains that our "foundational beliefs" form a system of their own that supports our inferential beliefs. Thus, Wittgenstein both maintains the hierarchy of beliefs characteristic of Foundationalism (and Contextualism) and characterizes basic beliefs as interdependent and mutually supporting rather than as epistemically self-sufficient. This sets Wittgenstein's theory apart from Foundationalism, Holistic Coherentism, and combinations of the two, such as Susan Haack's *Foundherentism* (1999).

### 3. Contextualism

Because Wittgenstein stresses the importance of context, scholars such as David Annis (1978), Paul Moser (1985), Laurence Bonjour (1985), and Louis Pojman (1999) have seen Wittgenstein as a Contextualist who maintains that our inferential beliefs are supported by contextually basic beliefs, i.e., beliefs that are basic in some contexts, but not in others—a position which seems to open the door to relativism. Annis, for example, argues that a belief is contextually basic for a person relative to an appropriate objector group at a specific time if that group lets the person hold the belief without supplying reasons. In different contexts, different beliefs are basic, but there is no general epistemic criterion for justifying beliefs independent of those arising from social practices and social approval (1978). I maintain that Wittgenstein is not a Contextualist and therefore not subject to the charge of relativism.

The one passage most frequently cited as evidence of Wittgenstein's Contextualism is OC 235: "At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded." (See also OC 10, 27, 155, 250, 255, 334-35, 348, 423, 553, 554, & 622.)

Such remarks may seem to leave Wittgenstein open to the charge of relativism, for a proposition that is certain in one context may be uncertain in another. Nonetheless, Wittgenstein is not a Contextualist because unlike Annis, Wittgenstein has not only a notion of particular contexts, but also a notion of a very general context. Wittgenstein maintains that criteria function only given certain very general facts of nature (including facts about human behavior) and certain human customs or general practices. He calls this general background context "our inherited background" or "world picture" (OC 167) and insists that it is necessary for inquiry. Moore's propositions in "A Defence of Common Sense" belong to this world picture (1959). At this level of generality, certainty is absolute. There is room for fluctuation, but not for doubt.

### 4. Wittgenstein's River Analogy

In *On Certainty* 94-99, Wittgenstein compares our system of beliefs to a river. The flowing waters represent our empirical inquiries. These involve forming hypotheses, making predictions, gathering data, performing experiments, doubting, checking, and giving grounds. In contrast to the flowing water are the hard banks and sandy bottom of the river. These are necessary for its existence. Without the hard banks guiding the course of the water, there would be no river.

The river's bed and banks represent our foundational beliefs, which Wittgenstein calls our "picture of the world" and "the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false" (OC 94). Foundational beliefs have the "form of empirical propositions" (OC 96), but their function is logical. Unlike fluid empirical beliefs, basic beliefs have become hardened and function as channels guiding the flow of empirical beliefs (OC 96). One advantage of this metaphor over others, such as the pyramid, is that it is essentially dynamic: the water is constantly flowing. Change is an integral part of the metaphor. The relationship between the water and the bank also changes over time. Fluid beliefs harden, and hard beliefs become fluid (OC 96). This does not mean that all beliefs are equally revisable; however, for some basic beliefs are more solid than others.

"And the bank of the river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited" (OC 99).

Let us consider one example of a belief that changes its status: Wittgenstein example "I have never been on the moon". In 1951, this was certain within their system of beliefs; a human going to the moon was considered physically impossible. Since 1951, that once solid belief has become fluid. Humans have been to, and walked on, the moon. Consequently, asking whether someone has been to, or walked on, the moon today in 2003 makes sense in a way it did not in 1951. This belief seems to have shifted from being part of the riverbank to being part of the sand of the riverbed that has been carried along by the water.

Wittgenstein's account is beginning to sound like Quine's view that all beliefs are in principle revisable. I think Wittgenstein would reject this comparison, for while he allows some basic beliefs to become empirical and vice versa, he insists that at any given time both types of beliefs are necessary for the river to exist.

"But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of one from the other" (OC 97).

The movement of the water represents everyday science: formulating hypotheses, making predictions, gathering data, testing hypotheses, and correcting mistakes. A shift of the riverbed itself represents a truly dramatic change, perhaps a paradigm shift.

## 5. Conclusion

I have argued that Wittgenstein's views on the structure of justification cannot be categorized as Foundationalist, Holistic Coherentist, or Contextualist. Wittgenstein's remarks fit none of these theories, nor can they be seen as an attempt to develop some sort of combination theory. Consequently, Wittgenstein has given us a novel model of the structure of our belief system.

Finally, I want to mention a point for which I have argued elsewhere (2002). Wittgenstein's view differs from the three individualist theories discussed here in that his theory is communal. The traditional theories maintain that the belief system of the individual is primary. Whatever beliefs the community may have are secondary to those of its individual members. Wittgenstein, like many contemporary feminist epistemologists (Nelson, 1993 & Longino, 1993), maintains that the belief system of the community is primary.

"We are quite sure of it does not mean just that every single person is certain of it, but that we belong to a community which is bound together by science and education" (OC 298).

Before we can be trained in science, we must be trained in the more basic practices of language use, inquiry, etc. Through this more basic training, children unconsciously absorb the inherited background beliefs of their community, which function as the "matter of course foundation" for scientific inquiry (OC 167).

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