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Is there a Problem of Demarcation for Hinges?

# Abstract

Hinge epistemology is sometimes taken to be exempt from many of the issues bedevilling regular epistemology because of its pre-epistemic status. That is, hinges are taken to operate beyond epistemic evaluation. In this paper, I go through different non-epistemic interpretations of what hinge epistemology is and in what sense hinges may precede epistemic evaluation. I argue that all these accounts have to deal with a certain extent of epistemic evaluation. Namely, a form of the historical *problem of demarcation* arises in hinge epistemology: of two incompatible hinges one may nevertheless be epistemically preferrable over the other although they both are pre-epistemic hinges.

# Introducing the cast

Ophelia thinks that the earth is flat. If you ask her why she does think so, she will not give reasons for why it is flat. Rather, she will give reasons for why she does not think it is round. She will point to the fact that photographs of the round earth stem from very few sources, mostly NASA. Especially NASA is not trustworthy, because it also faked the moon landings. Any arguments for the earth’s roundness, she dismisses as part of a vast conspiracy.

Ophelia has no sufficient or non-circular evidence that the earth is flat. She may adduce considerations that illustrate what she believes, but there is nothing there that entails the earth’s flatness without presupposing it or closely related propositions. For example, in a rejection of Newtonian gravity, she claims that people would fall off a round earth. They do not. Therefore the earth must be flat. This rejection of gravity already assumes that the earth is not round.

Additionally, she claims, Ophelia hasn’t seen any sufficient evidence convincing her that the earth is round either. Short of flying her across the South Pole, which she takes to be the bounds of our world, or shooting her to the moon, no amount of evidence might convince her. Even these attempts might fail and she might explain away those episodes as somehow fabricated. Consider what you would say if you joined your billionaire pal, flew 30 km into the air and the earth looked like a flat disk rather than an orb! You probably would not become a flat-earther, but think that your pal tricked you because you are certain that the earth is round.[[1]](#footnote-1)

There is a philosopher, who like Ophelia, was certain that no one has ever been to the moon. Although, Ludwig Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* (1969 – OC) was so with a different background in a different time (OC §106), notably before the Apollo Missions. I believe that Ophelia’s flat earth convictions nevertheless are of a kind with Wittgenstein’s certainty that no one ever has been to the moon. Wittgenstein would have taken someone who told him that he had been to the moon for either crazy (OC §281) or meaning something entirely different. (OC §106) Ophelia on the other hand, takes round earth denizens to be duped by a vast conspiracy.

Meanwhile, Wittgenstein’s certainty in the early 1950s that no one had ever been to the moon seems to be much less questionable and problematic than Ophelia’s contemporary certainty that Antarctica is a ring encircling the rest of this flat world. But what distinguishes Wittgenstein’s from Ophelia’s certainty? This issue is known as the problem of the criterion (Chisholm 1973) or the problem of demarcation (Laudan 1983).

Traditionally, the problem of demarcation is the question how we can distinguish scientific theories from pseudoscience, i.e. propositional structures that closely resemble regular theories but are not considered to be actually scientific. (Popper 1962) In Ophelia’s case, the question is not (only) about science, but rather about Wittgensteinian hinges or world pictures.

Hinges or world pictures are propositions that precede regular epistemic evaluation, e.g. justification or knowing, because they form the frame of reference on basis of which propositions are justified. Given this framework role, Wittgenstein argues (XXX), we need to be certain of these hinges. The question nevertheless arises, whether there is some way to tell which hinge certainties are better or worse. After all, something seems to be wrong with Ophelia, but what?

In this paper I will argue, that hinge epistemology, the field trying to spell out the late Wittgenstein’s epistemological insights into a systematic view, needs to resolve the problem of demarcation. This may seem surprising, because at first sight, the problem of demarcation seems to not be able to get a hold onto hinge epistemology because it rejects that hinges are subject to any kind of epistemic evaluation. On such a view either Ophelia does not actually possess hinge certainties about the flat earth, or her beliefs are no more problematic than Wittgenstein’s apparently reasonable hinge certainties about moon landings. I take the case of a flat earther like Ophelia to be sufficient to take a close look at how hinge epistemology deals and fares with such cases.

# 1st Act, Hinge Epistemology

The basic motivation for hinge epistemology is that evidentialism, understood as the claim that all our beliefs need to be supported either by evidence or be self-evident, is false. There is a certain class of acceptances or beliefs[[2]](#footnote-2), called certainties or hinges. These are simply accepted as certain without any kind of evidence weighing in on them except in a circular manner.

The initial motivation for this was anti-scepticism, or more precisely Wittgenstein’s unhappiness with Moore’s dogmatist solution to the sceptical problem. In his “Proof of an external world”, Moore (1939) argued that he knew just the things for which a sceptic tries to deny knowledge. His proof however satisfies few, because it begs the question against the sceptic.

Wittgenstein’s solution was that, rather than subscribing to Moore’s claims of knowledge, he argues that we are *certain* of those things. (OC §8) He then goes on to spell out what certainty is. It clearly is not the same kind of indefeasible self-evidence that Descartes was out for when he demanded certainty. (Descartes 1641)

Rather these certainties are the sort of thing we just take for granted. They are, according to Wittgenstein, so deeply rooted that it would not even make sense to doubt them. This is the second way he supports that we need and possess those certainties: it is impossible to be epistemically active, i.e. to believe things, investigate questions, plan, without taking certain things for granted. Even doubting needs to take certain things for granted, lest it lose essential traits of being genuine doubt. Thus even a sceptic cannot help but relying on such certainties. Would she stop, she would have to stop being epistemically active.

The key trait of certainties, I believe, is their *constitutive role*. Certainties are what make a proposition into a doxastically and epistemically efficacious reason for something. This is because certainties are held fixed so that they limit how other propositions can relate to each other. For example, if Newton’s axioms are certain and held fixed, then the fact that things do not fall off New Zealand is evidence for something different than if Newton’s axioms are replaced with the ancient atomist theory of a falling world.

A further important point is that communication and epistemic exchange, i.e. testimony, learning, questioning, etc. rely on shared certainties. Because certainties underly what and how we communicate. If we attempt to communicate about things about which we fundamentally disagree, but we have no shared conception at all, we are bound to fail and keep talking past each other. Thus, because we cannot help but relying on them, it is ok to be certain about some things.

This sketch of certainties has been neutral about whether the problem of demarcation gains any foothold with certainties. But it delivers the conceptual framework to construct the following argument:

1. Certainties precede epistemic evaluation.
2. Therefore, certainties are not subject to epistemic evaluation.[[3]](#footnote-3)
3. The problem of demarcation is a form of epistemic evaluation.
4. Therefore, certainties are not subject to the problem of demarcation.

The first thesis A) simply expresses a core-tenet of hinge epistemology. Coming before epistemic evaluation is what *makes* a certainty. In later chapters I will consider different ways of spelling this thesis out. The second thesis C) describes the problem of demarcation as an epistemological problem. A successful solution to the problem of demarcation tells us which of two alternatives is preferable and why it is so. If you stuck to your certainty after being presented with an epistemically better alternative, something would arguably be epistemically wrong with you.

# 2nd Act, WWLS (What Would Ludwig Say?)

One take[[4]](#footnote-4) on Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* is to read him as one would read a purely descriptive anthropologist. Wittgenstein does not do epistemology, trying to explain why or how we know or are justified. Instead, he describes how we believe things.

This is all he needs to do to, for example, undermine Moore’s proof. He shows to which linguistic confusion Moore is subject if he *claims to know* that “here is a hand”. (OC §12) According to Wittgenstein, Moore is merely *certain* that there is a hand.

Wittgenstein then does not try to ground our epistemology. Rather he studies the way we believe and do things, as well as how these beliefs and actions are related.

I want to say: it’s not that on some points men know the truth with perfect certainty. No: perfect certainty is only a matter of their attitude. (OC §404)

On this reading, he does not at all care about how our certainties might relate to the facts. The facts are only in the background and Wittgenstein is not interested in how our certainties relate to the world to which they refer. [EXPAND EXEGESIS]

If you gut your theory about certainties of their epistemic features, then the problem of demarcation disappears. Ophelia’s flat earth theory is not any worse than your round earth theory or Wittgenstein’s certainty that no one has been to the moon because they *mean* different things. They undergird different “forms of life” and relate differently – “For there is also something like *another* Arithmetic.” (OC §375) Epistemology and therefore the problem of demarcation begin elsewhere.

This gives us the **D**escriptive version of the argument:

AD) Certainties are pre-epistemic, *merely* doxastic mechanisms.

BD) Therefore, certainties are not subject to epistemic evaluation.

CD) The problem of demarcation is a form of epistemic evaluation.

DD) Therefore, certainties are not subject to the problem of demarcation.

This anthropological take can also be seen in the debate on *deep disagreement*. Deep disagreement is disagreement about certainties. It is the kind of cases, where the argument has hit rock-bottom, both parties recognise that they fundamentally disagree about a certain thing, and that this question cannot be settled by any further considerations. This occurs just because certainties are not supported or defeated by any further reasons.

Because deep disagreement plays at this pre-epistemic level, epistemologists often argue that, differently from other disagreement, it does not give us a reason to reduce our confidence in a certainty. (Ranalli 2020) We do not need to take into account someone deeply disagreeing with us because we are *certain*. Wittgenstein takes this to be a clash of world pictures, and those who do not share one’s world picture are dismissed as “fools and heretics”. (OC §611)

However, a key role of certainties is *enabling us* to gain knowledge. Certainties are the foundation on which we build what we know. Without certainties we would be unable to know anything.[[5]](#footnote-5)

I would argue that this enabling role is what makes certainties epistemically valuable. Would they not enable epistemic activity, certainties would seem deeply problematic because certainties seem to be the very embodiment of dogmatism and close-mindedness. If we can point out that they are a “necessary evil” to get to the good of knowledge, this worry is alleviated.

If this is correct, then certainties derive value from the goodness of other epistemic states and processes—investigation, belief, knowledge, etc. Now these epistemic states *are* subject to evaluation. Investigations may lead nowhere, beliefs may be false, knowledge may not obtain. Consequently, it seems, particular certainties seem to derive value from the particular states they enable. (Wright 2004) But what is the value of a false belief? Arguably, it is negative. That is if a set of certainties leads to false beliefs, it does not seem to be as good as a set of certainties that leads to true beliefs or knowledge.

Consequently, there are better and worse certainties, and the problem of demarcation arises for them. The question, which certainties lead to knowledge and which don’t seems pertinent. Thus two opposing certainties are not necessarily created equal, and the question which one is better and how to tell which one may be better becomes pertinent. That is, the inference from AD to BD fails. This question is just the problem of demarcation. In sum, Wittgenstein’s putative descriptivism does not sidestep the problem; it just ignores it.

# 3rd Act, Whatever works

There’s another reading of Wittgenstein as a pragmatist. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein does manifest a pragmatist bent, in this spirit he quotes Goethe’s Faust as (mis)translating the Bible: “und schreibe getrost: Im Anfang war die Tat”. (OC §402) That is, he sympathizes with positing action as more fundamental than language or belief.

On this pragmatist reading, certainties are any presuppositions we take on board in order to execute some practical project.[[6]](#footnote-6) Like belief, action requires certainties.[[7]](#footnote-7) Given that acting is a fundamental constituent of human life—we cannot not act, lest we remain in a vegetative state—and we cannot act without certainties, we need certainties.

Thus, we may take on board any certainty, that is required to execute some practical project. If I want to climb onto the roof, I better be certain that ladders do not suddenly start melting. Probably, I never considered the possibility before—I did not need to. Ladders are good for climbing on roofs (so they do not melt spontaneously).

If action is what underlies our certainties—not investigation—then the problem of demarcation seems to lose its bite. A certainty is good, as long as it serves our practical purposes. The nature of the world does not enter into the picture as a bar of success.[[8]](#footnote-8)

APr) Certainties are exclusively practical doxastic mechanisms.

BPr) Therefore, certainties are not subject to epistemic, but only practical, evaluation.

CPr) The problem of demarcation is a form of epistemic evaluation.

DPr) Therefore, certainties are not subject to the problem of demarcation.

Such a pragmatism, however, opens the gate wide for parasitically successful projects. By parasitic success I mean that some practical projects are in no way connected to their success condition. Suppose that you actually lack the certainty that the ladder will not melt. In order to keep it from melting, you knock it with some particular rhythm, only then do you climb it. Success! The ladder didn’t melt, you’ve reached the roof—the knocking did its job. Instead of being certain that ladders do not melt, you may be certain that knocking keeps ladders from melting.

More broadly speaking, superstitions and magic work this way. We do something that most would agree is in no way connected to the actual project’s success. But actual success will be partially chalked up to the parasitic parts and certainties.

Not only magicians but also cynics will be able to exploit parasitic success. Imagine that Ophelia is an extremely successful blogger, who earns a living by writing about the conspiracies that keep people deluded about our round earth. Part of her success stems from that she actually believes what she writes, it gives her an earnestness. Consequently, her parasitic success is all she needs to make her certainty acceptable.

This however introduces some of the most pressing examples of the demarcation problem. And it will simply let them pass. Certainties that clearly do not serve any purpose are okay, because it worked anyways!

This complaint may be a mere appeal to intuitions about what counts as reasonable and what not. We can however say more about the issue: imagine we disagreed about whether knocking does anything with the ladder. If I showed you how I climbed the ladder without knocking, you could chalk it up to my luck, cheating, or this particular ladder’s properties. As we mentioned before, Ophelia would do the same.

However, the disagreement does not seem to be actually relevant. Both our methods, knocking and not-knocking lead to success. Anything I tell you will not have to concern you. You may not care about whether you *really* need to knock. You are simply satisfied that your method works and do not need to care about whether it is somehow accurate or not. There is nothing to disagree about in that case, because both certainties are successful.

Disagreement also disappears if our pragmatic interests diverge: if your certainty that C is warranted by some project P, while my contradictory certainty not-C is warranted by some different project Q, we do *not* disagree about whether C. All that the certainty means is that I have a certain practical interest. By uttering C and not-C respectively we simply *express* divergent interests. But I cannot disagree about what your actual interests are; you will know better and *vice versa*. Consequently, disagreement about certainties is not possible.

Consider blogger Ophelia and Penelope, a sailor. Ophelia’s interest is to make a living by writing about the flat earth. Penelope’s interest is to make a living by sailing as quickly as possible from Tokyo to Manzanillo. Penelope better rely on a round earth, because otherwise she will make a detour. But Ophelia should also rely on a flat earth in order to make a living. In other words, they simply express their respective interests when talking about a round or a flat earth respectively.

A pragmatist theory that predicts that we cannot disagree about our certainties, because they only express our interests, is an error theory about what we can disagree about. We do not disagree about whether I am interested in Q. I want to preserve the possibility that we can disagree about some certainty C even with divergent interests.

To avoid an error theory, the pragmatist cannot now take a step back and claim that the disagreement is about which interests we *ought to have*. This would be a certainty that would have to be grounded in further interests about which we could, again, not disagree. If they grant a real disagreement (rather than divergence of interests) on this level, why would one not grant it for fundamental facts too?

Because deep disagreement about hinges is a real phenomenon, I do not think that pragmatism can avoid or solve the demarcation problem. It is for example not a mere misunderstanding or divergence in interests, when I disagree with you about whether there are moral laws.

# 4th Act, Animal Instinct

One can go even further than the pragmatist reading, and state that certainties are nothing but the preconditions of agency. Danièle Moyal-Sharrock (2004) defends this view of *On Certainty*, she calls these certainties *animal*—i.e. non-reflective—hinges.

Basically, she argues, hinges are so fundamental—acting precedes believing—that they are below epistemology. Their constitutivity makes them pre-epistemological in the sense that epistemological issues do not apply to it.

In that sense, they are primitive rules, not propositional, and therefore not truth-apt. Further they are beyond justification or warrant. They need to be such, in order to fulfil their role of enabling agency. Were they not primitive and unreflective, then agency would break down. The agent would get bogged down in unnecessary verification attempts and impractical doubts. For the most we act and believe without any doubt at all.

It is very easy to see, why these animal hinges would not be subject to the problem of demarcation. One way of putting the issue is the fact that animal hinges are not truth-apt. A primary motivation for the problem of demarcation is that of two incompatible alternatives at most one can be true. If animal hinges sidestep this by being beyond truth and falsehood, the argument will have a hard time getting off the ground.

Similarly, we can point to the fact that animal hinges are beyond epistemic evaluation. The problem of demarcation demands just that. If there is a class that falls outside epistemic evaluation, then it is not subject to the problem of demarcation.

In a way this argument is a spelling out of the naïve “Wittgensteinian” view I cited in AD). It gives an account of what pre-epistemic might mean.

AA) Certainties lack several features (truth-aptness, evaluation-aptness) necessary for epistemic evaluation.

BA) Therefore, certainties are not subject to epistemic evaluation.

CA) The problem of demarcation is a form of epistemic evaluation.

DA) Therefore, certainties are not subject to the problem of demarcation.

But this is not the last word, as Moyal-Sharrock herself cites Wittgenstein:

“In certain circumstances a man cannot make a mistake. … If Moore were to pronounce the opposite of those propositions which he declares certain, we should not just not share his opinion: we should regard him as demented.” (OC §155 as cited in Moyal-Sharrock 2004, 73, 135, 174–75)

There is then a question of demarcating which certainties are “demented” or pathological and which are not. We then have the question what makes a hinge pathological and what does not. I will argue that there are no epistemologically neutral ways of cashing out this notion. Consequently, pathological certainty just stands in as a proxy for epistemically bad certainty.

The most straightforward reading of the passage is deeply unsatisfying although probably in keeping with Wittgenstein’s own take: a hinge is pathological if and only if it is incompatible or straight-out contradictory with his community’s hinges. (OC §281) This is a very common and popular criterion. It is one of the marks of delusion according to the ICD-11 (WHO 2018) too.

This is a bad idea. On this view, all world-changing discoveries and innovations must, at a certain point have counted as pathological. Consider how Georges Lemaître’s suggestion of a Big Bang was received. While not deemed pathological, he was suspected of being religiously deluded, which amounted to the same in the positivist 1920s.

Pathology of belief warrants dismissal of an idea, but we most certainly ought not dismiss successful innovations. It does not help to claim that discoveries, differently from delusions, are supported by evidence because even a deluded subject may cite some sort of evidence. Certainties determine what is evidence for what. Consequently, we need a different criterion to demarcate crazy hinges from non-crazy ones.

A more promising criterion is one of functionality: a hinge is non-crazy if and only if it allows an agent to successfully navigate the world. However, I fear that this boils down to pragmatism again. The most straightforward reading of “successful navigation of the world” is the ability to satisfy one’s interests. But what if one’s interests are what we would call pathological?

A second difficulty arises from the possibility that some hinges may seem crazy to us, but they do not hinder the agent from leading a normal life. Delusions can be of this innocuous sort. Someone may be convinced that they have a radio in their head, while this conviction does not interfere with their everyday life. Still, we would consider such a certainty to be pathological. What else would it be? Essentially, highly functioning but still pathological cases would not count as pathological anymore.[[9]](#footnote-9)

I suggest, that whatever solution we might find for pathological hinges is the solution that the problem of demarcation looks for. Delusions and many other pathologies are essentially an alienation from how things are. Epistemic criteria seek to secure access to how things are, and therefore we do need some epistemic evaluation to characterise them. Consequently, also making hinges animal does not avoid the problem of demarcation.

# Last Act

Hinge epistemology has an anti-epistemological bent. That is why the question arises whether there even is a problem of demarcation for hinges. I have examined the reasons why different non-epistemic readings of hinge epistemology would take certainties to be exempt from the problem of demarcation.

In each case, I have argued, that the problem of demarcation or an analogous problem remains. Further this problem cannot be resolved by the means that those theories themselves have at their disposition. Consequently, hinge epistemologists need to propose an account of how different certainties are to be epistemically evaluated,[[10]](#footnote-10) unless they want to fall back into some form of idealism. Hinge epistemology is not beyond epistemic evaluation, it is a proper part of the classical epistemological project.

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1. Thanks to Ian Ground for making this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I use a deflationary notion of “belief”. Essentially, I take beliefs to be generic doxastic states. I.e. accepting or taking something to be true in its most general sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Accounts that reject this premise, arguing that there is a different kind of epistemic evaluation. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I am not laying any claim to an orthodox reading of Wittgenstein, I suspect he followed different argumentative strands without settling for one. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This point has some similarities to Annalisa Coliva’s (2015) account: she argues that hinges enable the possession and exercise of rationality. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is a decidedly Jamesian pragmatism. Wittgenstein struggled with this appearance in *On Certainty* (OC §422). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. And be it simply in virtue of the fact that actions require some beliefs. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Our certainties need to track some of the world’s features relevant for action, but they do not need to accurately represent them in order to permit successful action. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I do not believe that highly functional patients necessarily need treatment, but I think it is essential to recognise the category as a phenomenon. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. There have been a few attempts, notably (Wright 2004; Pedersen 2006; Briesen 2012; Lynch 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)